



Indian children paddle a raft through floodwaters at Kalgachia in Barpeta district in India's northeastern state of Assam



The torrential rains have struck communities in India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan-administered Kashmir



Pakistani Kashmiri walk along a damaged road following heavy monsoon rains in Neelum valley near the Line of Control in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir

Monsoon wreaks flood havoc across South Asia

New Delhi

Torrential monsoon rains swept away homes and triggered landslides across South Asia, affecting millions of people and claiming at least 180 lives, officials said Tuesday.

The monsoon is crucial for irrigation and groundwater supplies in the impoverished region -- home to a fifth of the world's population -- and brings relief after the unforgiving summer.

But the downpours -- which stretch from June to September -- can turn deadly and have wreaked havoc again this year across India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan-administered Kashmir, with

people, dwellings and boats in remote low-lying areas washed away.

In Mumbai, a building collapsed in a crammed neighbourhood, killing two people and trapping more than 40 following heavy rains in the city.

At least five children drowned in Bangladesh Monday, taking the toll in the country to 34, including 18 hit by lightning and seven who drowned after their boat capsized in choppy waters in the Bay of Bengal.

Hundreds of thousands have been marooned by floodwater in the country's north, with one of the major Himalayan rivers, the Brahmaputra, over a metre (40 inches) above the "danger level", officials said.

In Nepal,

at least 78 people have died and 16,000 families displaced, although flood waters have started receding. Images showed rescuers using inflatable dinghies to evacuate families trapped in flooded houses.

Health experts have warned of possible outbreaks of waterborne diseases and called for international help.

"The ground floor of our house was completely submerged," Rajaram Yadav, 45, told AFP from a district near the border with India.

"Our family and some neighbours survived by staying at the top floor for two days. Most one-floor mud houses in the areas

have been severely damaged."

Red alert

Nearly 50 people have been killed in India, with two eastern states -- Assam and Bihar, which borders Nepal -- bearing the brunt of the deluge.

Authorities in Assam declared a red alert Monday as the flood situation turned critical, with villages cut off by surging waters and a major highway submerged.

Photos showed residents crammed in boats carrying their belongings to safer areas in Morigaon, one of the worst-affected districts, and just the roofs of submerged homes above water.

So far 11 people have died in the state and some 83,000 people displaced by flooding.

Authorities also scrambled to reach animals marooned by the deluge at the state's World-Heritage listed Kaziranga National Park, which is home to two-thirds of the world's one-horned rhinos.

In Bihar, 25 deaths were reported, with 2.5 million residents affected.

Among the dead were three children who drowned as they went to check the rising water level in a canal.

Two others died while playing near a ditch filled with floodwater, the Press Trust of India reported.

Further northwest, in the Pakistan-administered part of the Kashmir region, flash floods killed 23 people and damaged 120 houses, with the water and power supplies crippled.

The United Nations said Monday it "stands ready to work with the authorities in the affected countries as they respond to the humanitarian needs resulting from this ongoing monsoon season".



Indian men catch a tree in the flooded Manas river, following heavy rainfall in Baksa district of Assam, in the North-Eastern states of India.

Italy seizes Qatari army missile from far-right sympathisers

Rome

Italian police seized an air-to-air missile, machine guns and rocket launchers during raids sparked by an investigation into far-right extremist groups on Monday, that authorities said was almost without precedent.

Police arrested three people, including Fabio Del Bergiolo, 50, a former candidate for the neo-fascist Forza Nuova party, whose home was found to contain a huge stash of arms as well as neo-Nazi propaganda and Hitler memorabilia.

"During the operation, an air-to-air missile in perfect working order and used by the Qatari army was seized," police said of the 245-kilogramme (540-pound) Matra missile.

They also found automatic assault rifles that they described as "latest generation" among the cache.

"This is a significant seizure, with few precedents in Italy," said Turin police commissioner Giuseppe De Matteis.

The missile, 3.54 metres (more than 11 feet) long was made in

France and Del Bergiolo had been hoping to sell it for 470,000 euros (\$529,000), according to Italian media reports.

The missile was "without explosive charge, but re-armed by people specialised in the field," police said.

"For now, nothing leads us to suspect" an active plot to use the weapons, said counter-terrorism official Eugenio Spina.

The other arrests were a Swiss national, 42, and an Italian, 51, accused of holding and marketing the missile, which was found by police at a warehouse near the small Rivanazzano Terme airport in the Pavia province.

'Extremely dangerous'

The Mantra Super 530 F was a modernisation of the R530 missile that went into service in 1980, and has a range of 25 kilometres (15 miles), with an explosive charge of 30 kilos.

"It is extremely dangerous and risky to turn it into a missile to fire from the ground, unless you have good engineers and equipment," a missile expert who

asked not to be named said.

Similarly, because of its age, it is "extremely unlikely that it can be used, but its use can be changed," he added.

The raids were the result of a police probe into Italian extremists known to have fought against pro-Russian rebels in Ukraine.

Messages intercepted by the police led them to investigate Del Bergiolo, who had sent photographs of the missile for sale through the Whatsapp messaging service.

They put him under surveillance before raiding his home and finding a stash of weapons including a Scorpion machine gun, 306 firearm parts and 20 bayonets.

His collection included street signs from the Nazi era, including one reading "Adolf-Hitler Platz".

Trafficking war weapons

Police in Pavia also found the cockpit of a military plane.

The Digos law enforcement agency, which deals largely with



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terrorism and organised crime, led the operation from Turin with assistance from police in Forlì, Milan, Novara and Varese.

"We have some idea about what the seized equipment could be used for, but will not speculate," De Matteis told reporters.

The Forza Nuova party released a statement Monday distancing itself from Del Bergiolo.

Police have carried out several raids in recent weeks on far-right targets around Turin, with a man arrested earlier this month for advocating fascism and possessing illegal weapons.

While Italy's far-right interior minister Matteo Salvini was uncharacteristically quiet following the raid, the opposition centre-left Democratic Party (PD) urged the country's populist government to do more to tackle right-wing extremists.

"The far right in this country trafficks weapons of war, and even missiles. It's an incredible, very serious event," said Maurizio Martina, the PD's former party head.