



TEHRAN (Press TV) - The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) says its observers have witnessed heavy shelling in the volatile eastern Ukrainian village of Shyrokyne despite a ceasefire.

"On April 26, the SMM (Special Monitoring Mission) observed what it assessed to be the most intense shelling in Shyrokyne... since fighting began in the area in mid-February 2015," the OSCE said in a report on Monday.

"For the last 12 hours, and ongoing at the time of this report, the SMM has observed sporadic to continuous exchanges of fire involving small arms, machine gun, rocket propelled grenade and automatic grenade launcher," the report added.

The OSCE also reported the movement of tanks and armored personnel carriers through the areas controlled by pro-Russia forces fighting the Ukrainian government in the east.

KHARTOUM (AFP) - Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir was elected to another five years in office, results showed Monday, despite international war crimes charges and a vote marred by low turnout and an opposition boycott.

Bashir, 71, took more than 94 percent of the vote in the election held earlier this month, the electoral commission said, prompting the opposition to reject the result as a "joke".

National Electoral Commission chief Mokhtar al-Asam announced Bashir's victory to a Khartoum news conference to cries of "Allahu akbar!" (God is greatest) from the long-serving president's supporters.

Only little-known candidates had run against Bashir and his closest competitor -- Fadl el-Sayed Shuiab of the small Federal Truth Party -- took just 1.43 percent of the vote.

Bashir's ruling National Congress Party also dominated results in simultaneous parliamentary elections, taking 323 of 426 seats.

LOME (AFP) - Togo's incumbent President Faure Gnassingbe appeared set for a third term after a weekend election, with partial results issued on Monday giving him a strong lead.

A victory in Saturday's vote -- described by regional monitors as "free and transparent" overall -- would extend his family's rule of almost 50 years over the tiny west African nation.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) said Gnassingbe had won 62 percent of the vote, far ahead of his nearest rival Jean-Pierre Fabre, who took 32 percent with about 12 percent of ballots counted.

Up to around 55 percent of the country's 3.5 million voters turned out on Saturday, according to the CENI, which has five days to announce the final outcome.

Turnout was significantly lower than in 2010, when nearly two thirds of registered voters took part.

Nepal Earthquake: Rescuers Struggle to Reach Villages as Toll Tops 3,800

BAHAKTAPUR, Nepal (CNBC) — Rescuers struggled to reach Nepal's more rural communities on Monday to assess the damage from a devastating earthquake that has left more than 3,800 people dead.

The 7.8-magnitude earthquake struck Saturday, killing thousands and flattening centuries-old buildings in the capital city of Kathmandu. The tremor also sparked a deadly avalanche on Mount Everest.

Kathmandu residents were continuing to sleep outside following two days of powerful aftershocks. The official death toll jumped above 3,800 on Monday, with more than 7,100 others injured, according to Nepal's National Emergency Operation Center. Aid agencies warned that figure could leap higher once rescuers make it to isolated rural communities.

"Villages in the areas affected near the epicenter are literally perched on the sides of large mountain faces and are made from simple stone and rock construction," Matt Darvas, a Nepal-based worker with the Christian charity-World Vision, said in a statement from the group.

Darvas said such villages are "routinely affected" by landslides and that it's not uncommon for entire village of 200, 300 or even 1,000 people to be "completely buried" by rock falls.

"We are slowly hearing reports that this may have been the case in villages in the Kaski and Gorkha regions," he added.

The International Organization for Migration said on Twitter that aerial and satellite surveillance showed "whole towns" had been flattened.

Around eight miles from Kathmandu in the ancient city of Bhaktapur, funeral pyres burned as groups of women wailed and mourned the dead.

Many buildings inside the town were damaged, with armed police working to dig people out of collapsed structures. Ganesh Pradhan was watching as police dug through the rubble of his home.

"This is my house. I ran out without thinking to rescue myself," he told NBC News. "I thought that was a natural instinct. I lost my 21-year-old son now they're trying

to dig out my mother-in-law — but she's dead."

As the death toll mounted, authorities were struggling over a lack of food, water and medical supplies. UNICEF said some 940,000 children were living in areas severely affected by the earthquake and that the children were particularly vulnerable to waterborne diseases.

With their homes either destroyed, or fearful of more aftershocks, around 30,000 people were living in makeshift shelters in government-provided camps, according to the British charity Oxfam.

The charity said that damage to roads and infrastructure was making it extremely difficult to reach out to communities outside the Nepalese capital.

"At the moment, all the death count reports are coming from Kathmandu Valley. Sadly, I fear that this is only the beginning," Oxfam's Nepal Director Cecilia Keizer said in a statement.

The top official for Gorkha district — where the quake had its epicenter — said his region was in desperate need of help.

"Things are really bad in the district, especially in remote mountain villages," Uday Prasad Timalina told The Associated Press by telephone. "I have had reports of villages where 70 percent of the houses have been destroyed."

Around 90 percent of Nepal's 100,000-soldier army was helping with the rescue operation, spokesman Jagdish Pokhrel told the AP.

As international organizations warned of urgent aid needs, some of the aircraft carrying much-needed supplies from overseas were forced to turn back because of congestion on the tarmac at Kathmandu's airport.

India's Defense Ministry spokesman Sitanshu Kar on Twitter that two planes carrying communications equipment, water and personnel were forced to turn back to India.

In Kathmandu, men and women dug through the rubble with their bare hands to search for survivors and bodies.

Sarella Tiwari told NBC News she "used to hang out" with her friend at the very spot where she was now digging.

Europe's Police Crack Massive Horsemeat Trafficking Ring

THE HAGUE (AFP) - Police from seven European countries detained 26 people in a crackdown on a horsemeat trafficking ring two years after a tainted meat scandal that rocked the continent, the EU's judicial agency Eurojust said Saturday.

Eurojust said in a statement that the swoop by hundreds of police and judicial officials "succeeded in stopping an organized criminal network involved in trade in illegal horsemeat."

The operation involved officers and the judiciary in France, Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Britain, the European Union agency said.

Eurojust did not say where the 26 suspects were arrested but the Dutch public prosecutor's office said three were arrested in the Netherlands. France had requested the trio's extra-

dition, the prosecutors added.

The animals involved were used for recreation as well as for racing, meaning they could have been injected with drugs including antibiotics, according to Belgian public television provider RTBF.

Abattoirs in the south of France were used, French and Belgian sources said. Veterinary services were examining over 200 horses recovered during the police raids.

French authorities estimate that between 2010 and 2013 some 4,700 horses unfit for human consumption were slaughtered for the food trade, Eurojust said.

Dozens of commercial and private premises were searched in the raids and more than 800 horse passports seized along with medication, microchips and computer equipment.

US Directly Backed Chechen Rebels: Putin

TEHRAN (Press TV) - Russian President Vladimir Putin has accused Washington of directly offering logistic support to militants operating in North Caucasus.

Putin said in a documentary, which was broadcast Sunday on Rossiya 1 television, that Russian intelligence sources have found evidence of US assistance to the militants in early 2000s.

"Once our special services documented what were simply direct contacts between fighters from the North Caucasus and representatives of US special forces in Azerbaijan," Putin said in the documentary titled "President," marking 15 years since he first became head of state.

Noting that American forces even helped in transporting the militants,

Putin said he had informed the US president at the time about the meddling activities and that then US president had responded by telling him, "I'll kick their ass."

"But within 10 days ... my subordinates, the FSB (Russia's intelligence service) heads, received a letter from their colleagues in Washington saying, 'We have had and will have relations with all the opposition forces in Russia and we consider we have the right to do this and we will do this in the future,'" Putin said.

Although the Russian head of state did not identify the US president during the televised documentary, it was Bill Clinton that headed the American government at the time.

As prime minister from 1999, Putin initiated the second Chechen War, which did not formally end until 2009. The first Chechen war, which began in 1994, came to an end after the withdrawal of Russian troops in 1996, leaving the restive region with de facto independence.

Putin further insisted that governments should never cooperate with "terrorists," adding, "Absolutely not, never and nowhere. You mustn't even try to use terrorists to solve transitory political and even geopolitical tasks."

"Because if you support them in one place, they will raise their head in another place and they will definitely strike those who supported them yesterday," he added.

ASEAN Warns Chinese Actions 'May Undermine Peace' in S. China Sea

KUALA LUMPUR (AFP) - Chinese island-building efforts in the disputed South China Sea, where airstrips are being built on coral reefs, risk undermining "peace, security and stability" in the region, Southeast Asian leaders warned at a regional summit on Monday.

Beijing's assertion to almost the entire strategic body of water -- also claimed in parts by several Asian nations -- has set off alarm bells with its neighbors and beyond as China stakes its claim with growing boldness.

A statement to be issued at the close of the one-day summit notes "serious concerns" over land reclamation on reefs whose sovereignty is contested, which has triggered fears of tightening Chinese control of the seaway.

"We share the serious concerns expressed by some leaders on the land reclamation being un-

dertaken in the South China Sea, which has eroded trust and confidence and may undermine peace, security and stability," said the statement by summit chair Malaysia, seen by AFP.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member-states Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei claim parts of the sea, which is rich in energy reserves, fishery resources, and is a vital conduit for much of world trade.

But Beijing says nearly all of it is "indisputable" Chinese maritime territory.

Satellite photos released earlier this month provided fresh evidence of the scale of the Chinese program, depicting a flotilla of Chinese vessels dredging sand onto a feature known as Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands.

Other photos showed a runway and ship harbor taking shape on

Fiery Cross, also in the Spratlys, which was little more than a reef when work began late last year.

Similar work is taking place at a handful of other sites, according to defense analysts, who say the construction drive will give China a permanent forward presence far out at sea from which to project its growing power.

The closing statement by Malaysia -- which holds the rotating chair of 10-member ASEAN this year -- instructs the region's foreign ministers to "urgently address this matter" under dialogue mechanisms set up between the bloc and China.

But it stopped somewhat short of a call by the Philippine foreign secretary, who on Sunday challenged ASEAN to "finally stand up" to Beijing and demand an immediate end to the reclamation.

Boko Haram Slaughtered Civilians in Weekend Attack: Witness

KANO, Nigeria (AFP) - Boko Haram gunmen massacred residents who tried to jump into Lake Chad seeking safety and burnt others alive after overpowering soldiers in a weekend attack in the restive region, a witness said Monday.

The military and a local official in Niger had previously confirmed the April 25 raid by the Islamists on Lake Chad's Karamga island.

An official in the town of Diffa said the Nigerien army suffered "very heavy" casualties, but precise figures were not immediately available.

Umar Yerima, a Nigerian fisherman living on the targeted island confirmed that troops "were caught off guard" and suffered major losses.

"After finishing with the soldiers, (the Islamists) turned their guns on residents," Yerima told AFP by phone, adding that he was "among the lucky ones" who managed to flee.

"Some sought to escape by plunging into the lake but gunmen stood on the shore shooting them..."

"They would aim their gun from the edge of the lake and shoot any head that emerged from the water, shouting Allahu Akbar," he further said. "They burnt the entire village and went on a shooting spree. Many residents were burnt alive in their homes."

Yerima said he managed to stay out of site by hiding in the long grass that lines the water's edge.

After launching the attack shortly before sunrise, the gunmen remained on a rampage until roughly midday, withdrawing when a military jet began bombarding the area.

It was impossible to estimate the death toll, Yerima told AFP, but said he believed the number was "huge" and that he saw the Islamists kidnap a number of women and children as they fled.

Boko Haram has been hit hard by a four-nation offensive launched in February by Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon, with much of the fighting concentrated in the Lake Chad area.

While the militaries involved

have claimed major successes, including the recapture of a series of towns and villages held by the Islamist rebels, experts believe Boko Haram fighters have carved out new hiding spots in remote enclaves.

The Nigerien military said the Islamists stormed Karamga on motorized canoes after setting off from a base elsewhere on the lake.

The Boko Haram conflict has killed more than 13,000 people since 2009, mostly in northern Nigeria, but the fighting has increasingly spread to neighboring states since 2013.

Despite the apparent gains made the multi-national offensive, security experts say Boko Haram has the capacity to regroup and have urged the region's forces to maintain military pressure.

Nigeria's president-elect Muhammadu Buhari takes office on May 29 and has vowed to fight Boko Haram more effectively than the country's outgoing leader, Goodluck Jonathan.