

16.04.2010

Storm toll reaches 128

CYCLONE STRUCK Thousands left homeless in five Bihar districts

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PATNA/KARANDIGI (NORTH DINAJPUR):

The toll in the devastating storm that lashed Bihar, West Bengal and Assam on Tuesday, climbed to 128 on Thursday.

With 26 more deaths reported from Purnia, Kishanganj, Araria and Supaul, the toll in Bihar touched 80 in Bihar. Officials, however, said the toll was likely to cross the 100 mark, as debris was still being removed at different places.

The toll rose to 44 in West Bengal as five more bodies were recovered in North Dinajpur district.

Altogether 39 people have

PRIME MINISTER MANMOHAN SINGH ON THURSDAY ANNOUNCED A COMPENSATION OF Rs 1 LAKH EACH TO THE KIN OF THOSE KILLED IN THE STORM ON TUESDAY MIDNIGHT, ACCORDING TO A PRESS INFORMATION BUREAU RELEASE IN PATNA

died in Purnia, 33 in Araria, five in Katihar, two in Kishanganj and one in Supaul.

The storm left behind a trail of death and destruction. Several houses were flattened, crops damaged and thousands of trees uprooted.

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■ A boy tries to remove tin sheets from a tree in cyclone-hit Chota Suar village, 450 km from Kolkata, on Thursday.

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ANUPAM NATH/AP PHOTO

Storm toll now reaches 128

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In Araria, 41,771 rural houses in four blocks of Jokihat, Forbesganj, Araria and Raniganj have been completely damaged together with 545 urban dwellings. "The extent of damage in Purnia will be assessed only by Friday," District Magistrate N Saravana Kumar said.

Tin roofs, used in houses, were cited as the main cause for heavy casualty in the gale-affected districts. "People in these eastern districts use tin sheets to construct roofs to withstand excessive rainfall that takes place in these areas. The tin roofs inflicted griev-

ous injuries to people, leading to deaths in many cases. Where people fixed tin sheets with nuts and bolts, it did not cause any harm, but wherever they were loosely tied, it caused heavy damage," said Minister of State for Disaster Management Devesh Chandra Thakur.

He blamed the metrological department for not providing any advance warning about the gale.

"We didn't get any information from the Met office. Had we got prior information, we would have definitely warned the people and minimised the extent of damage," Thakur said.

Altogether 35 families were

handed over a cheque of Rs 1.5 lakh in Purnia, while 17 family members of those killed were given cheques in Araria on Thursday.

"We have started providing temporary shelters to all those whose house have been damaged. Chief Minister, Nitish Kumar has already announced to provide Indra Awas units to below poverty line (BPL) families and one quintal of foodgrains to all affected families," the minister said.

Deputy Chief Minister Sushil Kumar Modi on Thursday visited the affected areas and instructed the officials to provide relief to affected families on a war footing. He said near-

ly 80,000 houses were either completely or partially damaged in Araria and Purnia districts. Maize and sunflower crops were also affected in the storm and the State government would seriously mull over providing compensation to farmers as per the provisions, he added.

Reports said life in these four districts was slowly limping back to normal as the district administration stepped up the relief and rehabilitation operations.

In West Bengal, five more deaths were reported on Thursday from Raiganj and Kaliaganj in North Dinajpur district, Additional District

Magistrate, Pijush Kanti Dutta said.

More than one lakh dwellings were destroyed, rendering about two lakh people homeless in the district.

Asked about the Rs 2 lakh compensation announced for the next of kin of the dead by West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee on Wednesday, Dutta said it would be given as early as possible.

Meanwhile, storm-victims blocked a national highway on Thursday in protest against the West Bengal government's failure to provide relief to them even 36 hours after the havoc had been wreaked.