

Top Army officials consulted before opening cantonment roads: Nirmala Sitharaman

Agency
New Delhi, June 6

Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman today said Army Chief Gen Bipin Rawat and top brass of the force were consulted before the government decided to allow civilian access to roads in military cantonments across the country. The minister was speaking in the backdrop of a country-wide signature campaign against the government decision launched by wives of Army officers. At a press conference, Ms Sitharaman said a total of 850 roads were closed in various cantonments, out of which 119 were blocked without following laid down procedures and now some of them have been opened. The Defence Ministry last month had decided to allow civilian access to the roads in 62 cantonments after Ms Sitharaman held a meeting on May 4 with a group of MPs, elected office-bearers of cantonment boards and Army officials. A large section of Army officials and their families have expressed strong

reservations over the decision to reopen all roads in cantonments to civilians, citing security concerns. Veterans and wives of armed forces personnel have been agitating on the issue.

"119 roads were blocked without following laid down procedure. Out of them 80 roads have been opened while 24 are remaining closed. We have partially opened 15 roads," she said. "I met the wives of the Armed Forces personnel and heard their concerns which were largely about the security. I fully appreciate that," she said.

Ms Sitharaman said the defence ministry held a series of meetings with all stakeholders including the Army before deciding to open up the roads for civilians. The defence minister said that before the May 4 meeting with elected representatives, she held four meetings with senior Army officials. She said five other meetings were held some including with Gen Rawat and Vice Chief of the Army Staff on the issue. "The order by the ministry of defence addresses traffic related issues. Places where

unit lines exist or where families of our servicemen are living, we are cautious about its security," said Ms Sitharaman.

She said, "If you (army) decide to close the roads based on intelligence input, you are welcome to do so. But follow due procedure." A country-wide signature campaign against the government decision has been launched by wives of Army officers. They say they would meet the defence minister urging her to reverse the cantonment board decision.

The MPs and elected officials of cantonment boards had strongly pitched to allow civilians unhindered access to the roads.

The ministry had said that it was decided that a simplified detailed standard operating procedure will soon be issued to address the needs of the local public and the military establishment.

However, families of Army officers feel the decision may expose the cantonments to security risks as military bases have recently been targeted by terrorists in Jammu and Kashmir and other areas.

'Nobody is left': Guatemala volcano ravaged entire families

Agency
Guatemala, June 6

Lilian Hernandez wept as she spoke the names of aunts, uncles, cousins, her grandmother and two great-grandchildren, 36 family members in all missing and presumed dead in the explosion of Guatemala's Volcano of Fire.

"My cousins Ingrid, Yomira, Paola, Jennifer, Michael, Andrea and Silvia, who was just 2-years-old," the distraught woman said, a litany that brought into sharp relief the scope of a disaster for which the final death toll is far from clear. What was once a collection of verdant canyons, hillsides and farms resembled a moonscape of ash, rock and debris on Tuesday in the aftermath of the fast-moving avalanche of super-heated muck that roared into the tightly knit villages on the mountain's flanks, devastating entire families.

Two days after the eruption, the terrain was still too hot in many places for rescue crews to search for bodies or increasingly unlikely with each passing day survivors. By afternoon a new column of smoke was rising from the mountain and Guatemala's disaster agency said volcanic material was descending its south side, prompting an evacuation order and the closure of a nearby national highway. Rescuers, police and journalists hurried to leave the area as a siren wailed and loudspeakers blared, "Evacuate!"

The new evacuation order set off a panic even in areas that were not under it. Dozens of people could be seen walking down roadsides carrying children or a few belongings beside paralyzed traffic in parts of Escuintla township south of the volcano.

A lucky few, like retiree Pantaleon Garcia, was able to load his grandchildren into the back of a pickup with a jug of water and some food, to go to stay with relatives in another town. "You have to be prepared, for the children," he said. Even in more distant central Escuintla, which hosts most of the shelters for those evacuated from other areas, businesses were closed as people left. On Sunday, when the volcano exploded in a massive cloud of ash and molten rock, Hernandez said her brother and sister ran to check on their 70-year-old grandmother on the family's plot of land in the village of San Miguel Los Lotes.

"She said that it was God's will, she was not going to flee," Hernandez said. "She was unable to walk. It was hard for her to get around." Her brother and sister made it to safety, but their grandmother has not been seen again. Hernandez and her husband, Francisco Ortiz, survived because they moved out of Los Lotes just two months ago to begin a new life on a small plot of land. The couple has been staying at a Mormon church in the nearby city of Escuintla and going to a morgue there to await news.

So far only the body of one relative, her 28-year-old cousin, Cesar Gudiel Escalante, has been recovered and identified. "The people ended up buried in nearly 3 meters of lava," Ortiz said. "Nobody is left there."

Other families experienced similar tragedies. As President Jimmy Morales toured the area and met with survivors on Monday, a woman begged him to help her loved ones in Los Lotes. "Mr. President, my family is missing. Send a helicopter to throw water over them because they are burning," she said. "I have three children, a grandchild, and all my brothers, my mother, all my family are there. ... More than 20 have disappeared."

The fast-moving flows with temperatures as high as 1,300 degrees Fahrenheit (700 Celsius) and hot ash and volcanic gases that can cause rapid asphyxiation caught many off guard.

On Tuesday, it was clear that the official death toll was sure to climb and fears spread that anyone still stuck in the buried houses was dead and would remain entombed there. Guatemala's National Institute of Forensic Sciences raised the death toll Tuesday evening to 75. The institute said that 23 of those recovered bodies had been identified.

At a roadblock, Joel Gonzalez complained that police wouldn't let him through to see his family's house in the village of San Juan Alotenango, where his 76-year-old father lay buried in ash along with four other relatives.

"They say they are going to leave them buried there, and we are not going to know if it's really them," the 39-year-old farmer said. "They are taking away our opportunity to say goodbye."

A spokesman for Guatemala's disaster agency, Conred, said that once it reaches 72 hours after the eruption, there will be little chance of finding anyone alive. "We don't rule out the possibility of some person alive, but the condition in which the homes are makes that possibility pretty unlikely," said the spokesman, Juan Sanchez, adding that some

of the ash was still at temperatures between 750 and 1,300 degrees Fahrenheit (400 and 700 degrees Celsius).

In the devastated town of El Rodeo, gray soot coated trees and homes and an ash-covered deer lay dead in the debris. Rescuers wearing hard hats, masks and goggles used shovels to dig through homes, unearthing at least one body burned beyond recognition.

Amid the destruction, there was one glimmer of hope: The rescue of a black-and-white dog found alive in a home where four people lay dead. "He is called Rambo," said volunteer firefighter Sergio Vazquez, who carried the dog on his shoulders to safety. "It may be that this dog no longer has a family." Vazquez had no explanation for how the dog survived while the people died. Sanchez, the Conred spokesman, said many dogs and cats had been rescued with burns on their paws from the mud and ash, some blinded from the volcanic gases.

"Animals have a different sort of resistance ... and different behavior when it comes to finding refuge," Sanchez said.

Only 17 of the bodies recovered so far have been identified due to the extreme heat that charred their features and burned off fingerprints, and authorities hope other means such as DNA testing can help. Authorities say at least 46 people were injured in the eruption, and 12 shelters were housing 1,877 people.

The Guatemalan military said a U.S. Air Force plane was flying in Tuesday to take about a half-dozen children who suffered burns for treatment in Galveston, Texas. Lacking electricity in the hardest hit areas, emergency crews were carrying out rescue efforts during daylight hours and calling them off for safety reasons when darkness fell.

As dawn broke Tuesday, the volcano continued to rattle with what Guatemala's Volcanology Institute said were eight to 10 moderate eruptions per hour vastly less intense than Sunday's big blasts.

Govt has eased norms, provided funds to promote startups: PM

Agency
New Delhi, June 6

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday said the government is taking several steps to promote young entrepreneurs in the country, adding that startups are no longer confined to big cities. Smaller towns and villages too are emerging as vibrant startup centres, the Prime Minister said while interacting with young entrepreneurs from across the country, including cities like Dehradun, Guwahati and Raipur.

He also said that along with Make in India, Design in India too is important for startups. "Adequate capital, courage and connecting with people

are required for excelling in the startup sector," he said.

Modi added that there was a time when startups meant only digital and technology innovation but now things are changing and we are seeing startups in various other fields, including agriculture. "We have started an Agriculture Grand Challenge. We invite more youngsters to ideate on how to transform our agriculture sector," he added.

The government has launched the Startup India Action Plan to promote budding entrepreneurs in the country. The plan is aimed at giving incentives such as tax holiday, inspector raj-free regime and capital gains tax exemption, Modi said.

"Our startups are growth engines. Today's big companies were startups at some point. I urge the people of India to keep innovating," he added.

He also said that the youth in India is now creating jobs and the government is committed to harnessing the demographic dividend. Commenting on the issue of fund availability for startups, Modi said the government has created a Rs 10,000 crore Fund of Funds.

He also said startups can sell their products to the government and it has eased public procurement norms for them.

India has distinguished itself in the global startup ecosystem, the Prime Minister added.

India will pose tough challenge: NZ coach

Agency
Mumbai Jun 6

New Zealand coach Fritz Schmid admitted that it will be a big challenge for his boys to face India in their bid to keep their final hopes alive.

"We have to do everything to recover quickly. Unfortunately, the calendar has given us less days and we face the hosts on the last day, which is difficult. We saw India in the first two games and it will be a big challenge," Schmid told reporters after his side defeated Chinese Taipei 1-0 in their Intercontinental Cup game here last night.

For the Kiwis, Myer Bevan scored in the 36th minute, when he calmly slotted the ball into the right-corner of the box to give 'All Whites' match-winning 1-0 lead at the Mumbai Football Arena here. About the game, Schmid described his opponents as tough and said they took the game away via a penalty.

"Today was very tight and defensive as the opponent was difficult. It was tough but at the end we took it away with a penalty. We had opportunities in both halves but the penalty might have made it easier," explained Schmid, adding that he was proud of his boys. Meanwhile, losing coach Gary White said that to lose

the game via a dodgy penalty frustrated him.

"It was a great battle and to see my U-23 (boys) fight like that shows the great future of Chinese Taipei side. To lose (the game), by a dodgy penalty, frustrates me," White said.

"The officiating was totally unfair and for the game to be decided on a penalty was frustrating. The referees were okay, but had lapse in concentration. This is a friendly where everyone has to learn," he signed off.

Army foils infiltration bid along LoC, three militants killed

Agency
Srinagar, Jun 6,

The Army today foiled an infiltration bid along the Line of Control (LoC) in Macchil sector of Jammu

and Kashmir, killing three militants.

Troops noticed suspicious movement along the LoC in Macchil sector in Kupwara district and challenged the

infiltrators, an Army official said.

Three militants were killed in the ensuing gunfight, he said, adding search operations were on in the area.

CBI questions Chidambaram in INX Media money laundering case

Agency
New Delhi, June 6,

Former Finance Minister P Chidambaram is being questioned by the CBI in INX Media money laundering case. He reached CBI headquarters in New Delhi this morning.

CBI had summoned him last month to appear before it today. His questioning is in connection with alleged irregularities in the clearance of foreign investment in INX media. The Congress leader was called last month for the questioning in the case but he sought another date to

comply with the CBI notice. Chidambaram's alleged role has come under the scanner of investigating agencies in connection with the Foreign Investment Promotion Board clearance of 305 crore rupees given to INX media during the UPA rule. Chidambaram's son Karti was arrested in the case.

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