

India braces for cyclone, puts navy on alert

May 1 2019



Indian Navy personnel, like these pictured providing assistance after a flood in 2018, are on standby as the nation braces for the severe Tropical Cyclone Fani

India deployed emergency personnel Wednesday and ordered the navy on standby as it braced for an extremely severe cyclonic storm barreling towards the eastern coast.

Tropical Cyclone Fani, located in the Bay of Bengal and packing wind speeds up to 205 kilometres (127 miles) per hour, is expected to make landfall at Odisha state Friday.

Authorities have also ordered the evacuation of thousands of people from coastal districts likely to bear the brunt of the storm.

The neighbouring coastal states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have also been put on high alert.

India's National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) said sea conditions were "phenomenal" over the west-central Bay of Bengal area.

"Fishermen are advised not to venture into these areas," NDMA warned on Twitter.

The office of the state's special relief commissioner said local authorities had been told to identify "all vulnerable people... and shift them to multipurpose cyclone/flood shelters".

"Arrangements have already been made for free kitchen, safe drinking water, lighting, health and sanitation," it said in a statement.

Local media reports say there are over 850 shelters in the state that can accommodate around one million people.

H.R Biswas, director of the meteorological centre in state capital Bhubaneswar, said at least 11 districts would be affected by severe rainfall.

"We have suggested people to stay indoors," he told reporters.

The coastal town of Puri, 62 kms (40 miles) from Bhubaneswar, has

also been placed on high alert.

Puri is home to Shree Jagannath, one of Hinduism's holiest temples, which receives millions of pilgrims each year.

The government also advised the pilgrims to leave the holy town, if possible, and to reschedule any non-essential travel in the region.

India's weather department, in an advisory, asked all fishermen in the state to return to shore by late Wednesday.

The department warned of "potential threat of flying objects ... Extensive uprooting of communication and power poles ...Disruption of rail, road".

One local agency said that it had kept around 300 boats and crew on standby for rescue or relief work in the next 48 to 72 hours.

The Odisha chief minister's office said that around 800,000 people will be evacuated from the state's coastal areas by Thursday morning.

"He (the chief minister) emphasised that special care should be taken to safely evacuate pregnant women, children, old and differently abled from vulnerable areas," his office said Twitter.

"About 800,000 people will be evacuated and sheltered in cyclone centres, schools and other safer places," the statement added.

Voting restrictions eased

India's election commission has eased its restrictions in Odisha's coastal districts to allow the state authorities to carry out swift relief and rehabilitation work.

The rules, which apply during elections, suspend certain powers of the incumbent government to announce new schemes or take fresh administrative decisions.

Odisha, which has a population of around 46 million, has already voted in India's ongoing election, which started on April 11.

The seventh and final phase of voting will be held on May 19, with counting and results due May 23.

Odisha had to evacuate some 300,000 people last October when its coastal districts were battered by cyclone Titli, with winds up to 150 kms (95 miles) per hour and heavy rains.

At least two people were killed in the cyclone.

Storms regularly hit eastern and southeastern India between April and December. In 2017, Cyclone Ockhi left nearly 250 people dead in Tamil Nadu and Kerala states.

Odisha's worst-ever cyclone, in 1999, killed over 8,000 people.

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