Cyclone lashes India's business capital; 100,000 evacuated

June 3 2020, by Rafiq Maqbool, Emily Schmall and Aniruddha Ghosal

A fisherman's family seals up their window before cyclone Nisarga makes landfall in Mumbai, India, Wednesday, June 3, 2020. A storm in the Arabian Sea off India's west coast intensified into a severe cyclone on Wednesday, gathering speed as it barreled toward India's financial capital of Mumbai. Nisarga was forecast to drop heavy rains and winds gusting up to 120 kilometers (75 miles) per hour when it makes landfall Wednesday afternoon as a category 4 cyclone

near the coastal city of Alibagh, about 98 kilometers (60 miles) south of Mumbai, India's Meteorological Department said. (AP Photo/Rajanish Kakade)

A cyclone made landfall Wednesday south of India's financial capital of Mumbai, with a storm surge threatening to flood beaches and low-lying slums as city authorities struggled to contain the coronavirus pandemic.

Live TV coverage showed inky black clouds framing the sea on India's western coastline. Trees swayed wildly as rain pounded the coastal towns and villages of the central state of Maharashtra.

In the state capital, Mumbai—home to Bollywood, India's largest stock exchange and more than 18 million residents—high winds whipped skyscrapers and ripped apart shanty houses near the beach.

Mumbai hadn't been hit by a cyclone in more than a century, raising concerns about its readiness.

Some 10,000 city-dwellers were evacuated from their homes, municipal officials said. With powerful storms a rarity, there were no preexisting cyclone shelters, and many of the city's large and sturdy buildings had already been converted into COVID-19 isolation or treatment facilities, National Disaster Response Force spokesman Krishan Kumar said.

"We moved people to other strong buildings where there is a supply of water," he said.

In the hours before the storm hit India's shores, drivers and peddlers deserted Mumbai's iconic Marine Drive, fishermen yanked their nets out of the wavy Arabian Sea and police shooed people away from beaches.

Marine Drive wears a deserted look before cyclone Nisarga makes landfall in Mumbai, India, Wednesday, June 3, 2020. A storm in the Arabian Sea off India's west coast intensified into a severe cyclone on Wednesday, gathering speed as it barreled toward India's financial capital of Mumbai. Nisarga was forecast to drop heavy rains and winds gusting up to 120 kilometers (75 miles) per hour when it makes landfall Wednesday afternoon as a category 4 cyclone near the coastal city of Alibagh, about 98 kilometers (60 miles) south of Mumbai, India's Meteorological Department said. (AP Photo/Rajanish Kakade)

Homes in city slums were boarded up and abandoned, and municipal officials patrolled the streets, using bullhorns to order people to stay inside.
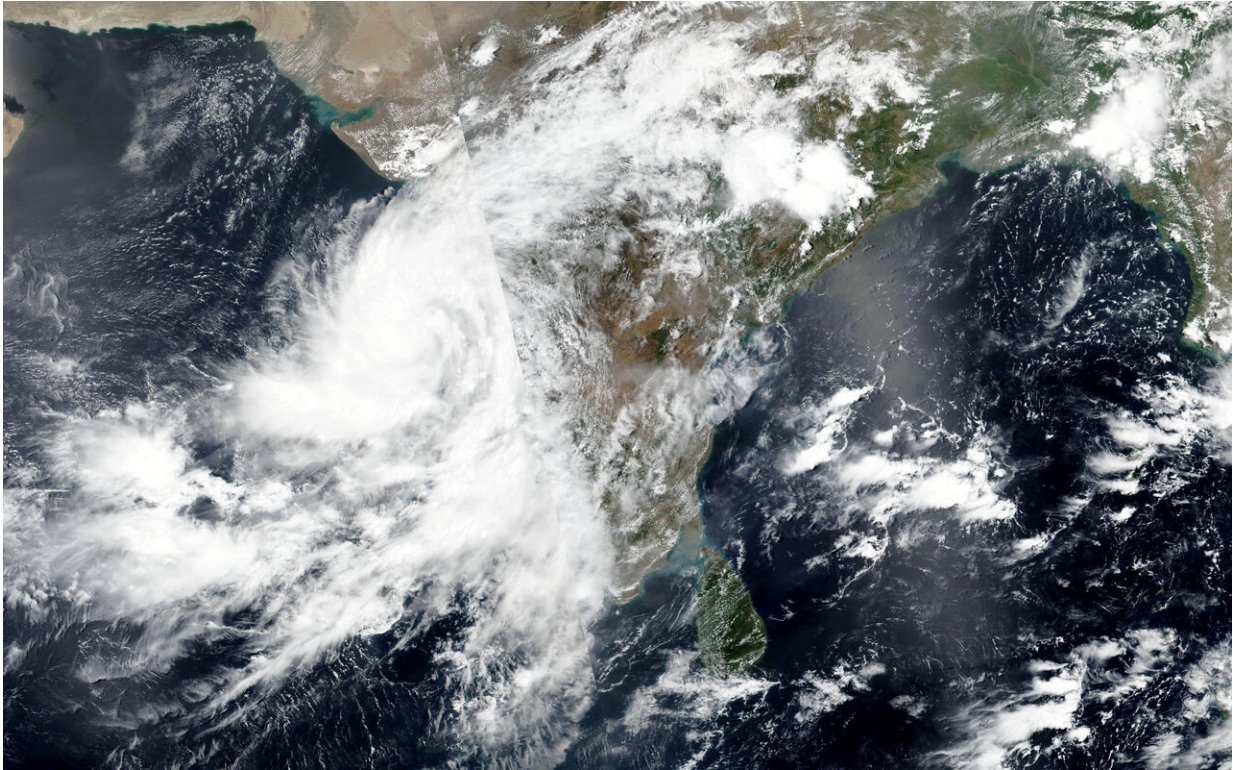
Cyclone Nisarga was forecast to drop heavy rains and sustained winds of 100 to 110 kilometers (62 to 68 miles) per hour through Wednesday afternoon after slamming ashore near the city of Alibag, about 98 kilometers (60 miles) south of Mumbai, India's Meteorological Department said.

At Alibag, visuals shared on Twitter by India's disaster agency showed toppled carts, roads scattered with fallen trees and tin roofs ripped apart.

The state of Goa, south of Maharashtra, already had received 127 millimeters (5 inches) of torrential rain—about a week's average, the agency said.

Some 100,000 people were evacuated from low-lying areas in Maharashtra and neighboring Gujarat, according to the Press Trust of India news agency. Both states, already among the hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic, activated disaster response teams, fearing extensive flooding could further impair overwhelmed health systems.

This Tuesday, June 2, 2020, satellite image released by NASA shows Cyclone Nisarga roaring toward the western coast of India. The cyclone is forecast to make landfall Wednesday, June 3, 2020, afternoon on the country's west coast near Mumbai, a coastal city home to 18.4 million people and known for the Bollywood film industry. Mumbai hasn't been hit by a cyclone in more than a century, raising concern about its readiness. (NASA Worldview, Earth Observing System Data and Information System (EOSDIS) via AP)

"If hospitals and clinics are damaged by the cyclone, the city won't be able to cope with the large number of COVID-19 cases, and social distancing measures will become virtually impossible to follow," Bidisha Pillai, chief executive of Save the Children in India, said in a statement.

Some 200 COVID-19 patients in Mumbai were moved from a field hospital built beneath a tent to another facility to avoid the risk of strong

wind gusts, officials said.

S.N. Pradhan, director of India's National Disaster Response Force, said that evacuations were nearly complete and that social distancing norms were being followed in cyclone shelters.

"Let us fight this danger like we are standing up to the corona pandemic and are on our way to defeat it. Likewise, we will prevail over this situation too!" Maharashtra's top official, Chief Minister Uddhav Balasheb Thackeray, tweeted.

Fishermen pull their nets out of the Arabian Sea in Mumbai, India, Wednesday, June 3, 2020. A storm in the Arabian Sea off India's west coast intensified into a severe cyclone on Wednesday, gathering speed as it barreled toward India's

financial capital of Mumbai. Nisarga was forecast to drop heavy rains and winds gusting up to 120 kilometers (75 miles) per hour when it makes landfall Wednesday afternoon as a category 4 cyclone near the coastal city of Alibagh, about 98 kilometers (60 miles) south of Mumbai, India's Meteorological Department said. (AP Photo/Rajanish Kakade)

The cyclone also threatened to worsen prospects for an economic turnaround as a nine-week coronavirus lockdown began to ease this week. India has reported more than 200,000 cases and 5,800 deaths due to the virus, and epidemiologists predict that the peak is still weeks away.

Maharashtra, which accounts for more than a third of India's cases, has seen the rate of infection slow in recent days, below India's national average.

Some special trains departing from Mumbai that for weeks have carried millions of economic migrants who lost their jobs in the lockdown were rescheduled, and newly restored domestic airline travel was postponed.

Nisarga comes just two weeks after Cyclone Amphan tore through the Bay of Bengal on India's east coast and battered West Bengal state, killing more than 100 people in India and neighboring Bangladesh.

Police officers patrol a deserted beach before Cyclone Nisarga makes landfall in Mumbai, India, Wednesday, June 3, 2020. A storm in the Arabian Sea off India's west coast intensified into a severe cyclone on Wednesday, gathering speed as it barreled toward India's financial capital of Mumbai. Nisarga was forecast to drop heavy rains and winds gusting up to 120 kilometers (75 miles) per hour when it makes landfall Wednesday afternoon as a category 4 cyclone near the coastal city of Alibagh, about 98 kilometers (60 miles) south of Mumbai, India's Meteorological Department said. (AP Photo/Rajanish Kakade)

A woman watches waves splash on shores of the Arabian Sea in Mumbai, India, Wednesday, June 3, 2020. A storm in the Arabian Sea off India's west coast intensified into a severe cyclone on Wednesday, gathering speed as it barreled toward India's financial capital of Mumbai. Nisarga was forecast to drop heavy rains and winds gusting up to 120 kilometers (75 miles) per hour when it makes landfall Wednesday afternoon as a category 4 cyclone near the coastal city of Alibagh, about 98 kilometers (60 miles) south of Mumbai, India's Meteorological Department said. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

A man sit on a bench as it rains by the shores of the Arabian Sea in Mumbai, India, Wednesday, June 3, 2020. A storm in the Arabian Sea off India's west coast intensified into a severe cyclone on Wednesday, gathering speed as it barreled toward India's financial capital of Mumbai. Nisarga was forecast to drop heavy rains and winds gusting up to 120 kilometers (75 miles) per hour when it makes landfall Wednesday afternoon as a category 4 cyclone near the coastal city of Alibagh, about 98 kilometers (60 miles) south of Mumbai, India's Meteorological Department said. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

A man takes a photograph of a woman by the shores of the Arabian Sea in Mumbai, India, Wednesday, June 3, 2020. A storm in the Arabian Sea off India's west coast intensified into a severe cyclone on Wednesday, gathering speed as it barreled toward India's financial capital of Mumbai. Nisarga was forecast to drop heavy rains and winds gusting up to 120 kilometers (75 miles) per hour when it makes landfall Wednesday afternoon as a category 4 cyclone near the coastal city of Alibagh, about 98 kilometers (60 miles) south of Mumbai, India's Meteorological Department said. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

A fisherman walks with his belongings on the shores of the Arabian Sea in Mumbai, India, Wednesday, June 3, 2020. A storm in the Arabian Sea off India's west coast intensified into a severe cyclone on Wednesday, gathering speed as it barreled toward India's financial capital of Mumbai. Nisarga was forecast to drop heavy rains and winds gusting up to 120 kilometers (75 miles) per hour when it makes landfall Wednesday afternoon as a category 4 cyclone near the coastal city of Alibagh, about 98 kilometers (60 miles) south of Mumbai, India's Meteorological Department said. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

A dog sits by the door of a house whose residents have been evacuated, by the shores of the Arabian Sea in Mumbai, India, Wednesday, June 3, 2020. A storm in the Arabian Sea off India's west coast intensified into a severe cyclone on Wednesday, gathering speed as it barreled toward India's financial capital of Mumbai. Nisarga was forecast to drop heavy rains and winds gusting up to 120 kilometers (75 miles) per hour when it makes landfall Wednesday afternoon as a category 4 cyclone near the coastal city of Alibagh, about 98 kilometers (60 miles) south of Mumbai, India's Meteorological Department said. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

Fishermen load their nets onto a boat to keep them safe by the shores of the Arabian Sea in Mumbai, India, Wednesday, June 3, 2020. A storm in the Arabian Sea off India's west coast intensified into a severe cyclone on Wednesday, gathering speed as it barreled toward India's financial capital of Mumbai. Nisarga was forecast to drop heavy rains and winds gusting up to 120 kilometers (75 miles) per hour when it makes landfall Wednesday afternoon as a category 4 cyclone near the coastal city of Alibagh, about 98 kilometers (60 miles) south of Mumbai, India's Meteorological Department said. (AP Photo/Rafiq Maqbool)

Such storms are less common in the Arabian Sea than on India's east coast, and usually form later in the year. But Nisarga may represent the ways in which the warming of oceans due to climate change is already altering lives, experts said.

The frequency of cyclones in the Arabian Sea is predicted to increase, said Adam Sobel, a climate scientist at Columbia University.

The temperature of the top layer of the sea, from which the cyclone draws its energy, is "unusually high," said K.J. Ramesh, former chief of India's Meteorological Department. Much more frequent and intense cyclones have been appearing over a shorter time in recent years due to climate change, he said.

"Forecasting such storms becomes a challenge," he said.

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