

US chopper crash kills 6 in Afghanistan

AP, Bagram

A US Air Force helicopter on a mercy mission to help two injured Afghan children crashed in south-eastern Afghanistan, killing all six people on board, the US military said Monday.

The HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter from the 41st Rescue Squadron at Moody Air Force Base in Georgia was on its way late Sunday to pick up the children, who had suffered injuries to the head, said Army spokesman Col. Roger King said. It was not clear how they had been injured.

"You think about the sacrifice these guys made, especially in this case where you've got military personnel who are conducting a flight that's basically a humanitarian mission," King added. "They're trying to go out and save some Afghan kid's life - it's wrenching."

The remains of the six people on board - all Air Force members - have been recovered and were to be flown to Bagram Air Base and prepared for transfer back to the United States, King said.

"The investigation will probably bear out as to whether weather played any part in it."

There were thunderstorms in the area when the helicopter went down, King said.

King said the area is not considered a hostile region, and there are few US military operations there.

Press officer Master Sgt. Richard Breach said the cause of the crash was being investigated but: "This is not believed to be the result of enemy action."

160 feared dead in DR Congo shipwreck on border lake

AFP, Bujumbura

As many as 160 people are missing and feared drowned after a boat transporting up to 200 people from Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to Burundi across Lake Tanganyika sank, officials in the two countries said Monday.

"The M/V Kashowgwe, having left from the DRC town of Kalemie, near Uvira, capsized off Nyanza-Lac (in southeast Burundi)," Burundian army spokesman Colonel Augustin Nzabampematold AFP.

"There were 41 survivors, thanks to boats from Burundi that immediately went to their rescue. The others have not been found," he added.

Gunmen kill 24 in Kashmir

PTI, AFP, Srinagar

In a first major strike after Mufti Mohammed Sayeed government came to power, about 15 heavily armed terrorists gunned down 24 Kashmiri pandits, including 11 women and two children, in a village in Pulwama district in wee hours of Monday.

The terrorists dressed in army uniform descended in Nandimarg village, 75 km from Srinagar in Shopian area where Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad terrorists are active, disarmed the local police saying that they were searching for terrorists and after assembling the villagers fired indiscriminately killing 24 people on the spot, official sources said.

The massacre came a day after the killing of Hizbul Mujahideen leader Abdul Majid Dar and at a time when the Mufti government was trying to persuade Kashmir Pandits to return to the Valley.

No organisation has so far claimed responsibility for the killings and security forces have launched a massive operation in the area to nab the terrorists.

The massacre prompted Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee Monday to call an emergency session of his cabinet security committee, a government official said.

The gunmen rounded up the villagers before spraying them with automatic weapons and fleeing into nearby forests, he said. Among the dead were 11 women and two children.

Amjrum said the militants overpowered six policemen protecting the village, which is situated on a hillock, and snatched their weapons before launching the raid.

A wounded survivor, Chundi Lal, 58, said the gunmen had knocked on his door late Sunday night and ordered him and his wife out, saying they were conducting a search operation for rebels.

Lal said he feigned death after being shot by holding his breath until the gunmen had left.

As news of the massacre spread, people began arriving in the village Monday in droves, weeping, wailing and cursing the killers.

The security forces have launched a major operation to hunt down the gunmen, A.K. Suri, a senior Kashmir police official, told AFP.

The massacre is the latest in a series of mass killings in the disputed state in the past year. The most serious incident, the killing of Indian soldiers and their families in Kaluchak on May 14, brought India and Pakistan to the brink of war.

India accuses Pakistan of sponsoring the militants who have been

carrying out a 14-year insurgency against Indian rule in Kashmir, while Pakistan says it merely provides moral support.

India says more than 37,500 people have been killed in the unrest since 1989, although the separatists put the death toll twice as high.

Muslim-majority Kashmir is divided between Indian and Pakistani controlled zones, and is claimed in full by both countries.

Sunday's killing comes amid a surge of bloodletting in Kashmir in the past week and is the second largest attack on non-Muslim Kashmiris in the region.

A total of 37 Sikhs were gunned down in the town of Chattisinghpura on March 20, 2000, on the eve of a visit to India by then US President Bill Clinton.

The violence has intensified since the onset of spring, with police saying routes used by militants to infiltrate Indian Kashmir from the Pakistani zone of the divided state which had been snowbound were now opening up again.

On March 17, militants launched an attack on a police post in which 13 people were killed, ending a relative lull that had marked the winter months.

In the week that followed, at least 38 people died in violence,

mostly rebels killed by police.

Some civilians have also been killed by the rebels, including senior Muslim rebel leader Abdul Majid Dar who was shot dead at point blank range at his brother's house in the northern Kashmiri town of Sopore on Sunday.

The Nadi Marg killings will come as a major blow to attempts by Kashmir Chief Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, who took office in November, to lure Kashmiri Hindus back to the restive state.

Some 200,000 Hindus fled Kashmir in 1990, soon after the insurgency began.

The Panun Kashmir, an organisation of Hindu migrants, expressed shock over Sunday's massacre and urged Indian Kashmir's governor to intervene with Sayeed to prevent the relocation of migrants currently living in camps in southern Kashmir and in New Delhi.

Sayeed had been seeking to relocate Kashmiri Hindus -- known as pandits -- back to their homes in the northern Kashmir valley.

Meanwhile, condemning the "ghastly" killing of 24 Kashmiri Pandits in Jammu and Kashmir, the United States on Monday said the global war on terrorism will not be won until such atrocities end against all countries.



A Kashmiri woman is comforted as she weeps over bodies of killing victims in Nadi Marg, some 54 km from Srinagar on Monday. Suspected Kashmiri militants dressed in army uniforms gunned down 24 civilians as the troubled region reeled from a new upsurge of violence.



(R-L) Best Actor Adrien Brody ("The Pianist"), Best Actress Nicole Kidman ("The Hours"), Best Supporting Actress Catherine Zeta-Jones ("Chicago") and Best Supporting Actor Chris Cooper ("Adaptation") pose with their Oscars at the 75th Academy Awards in Hollywood, California on Sunday.

Anti-war speeches mark Oscar

'Chicago' bags best picture award

REUTERS, AFP, Los Angeles

Some said it with tears, some said it with flowers, some stars let their peace pins do the talking, and one pulled no punches.

They might have taken the glitz out of Sunday's Oscars but in the end there was no distancing the biggest show in Hollywood from the real drama on the other side of the world.

Maverick director Michael Moore, director of the documentary "Bowling for Columbine," issued the bluntest denunciation of the war against Iraq from the winner's podium before an estimated audience worldwide of 1 billion people.

"We live in a time where we have a man sending us to war for fictitious reasons. Whether it is the fiction of duct tape or the fiction of orange alerts, we are against this war, Mr. Bush. Shame on you, Mr. Bush," shouted Moore, wagging his finger to a mixed reception of boos and cheers from the celebrity audience.

His outburst shattered the restraint that had marked the Oscar ceremony where stars such

as Colin Farrell, Salma Hayek and Julianne Moore wore discreet peace pins or peace doves on their gowns and tuxedos but otherwise kept their opinions largely to themselves.

Some of Hollywood's most strident anti-war campaigners, including Barbra Streisand, Susan Sarandon and Richard Gere prompted surprise by sticking to the official Oscar script.

But Adrien Brody, while overcome with joy at his surprise best actor win for the Holocaust drama "The Pianist," said he was also filled with sadness.

"My experience in making this film made me very aware of the sadness and the dehumanization of people at times of war and the repercussions of war. Whether you believe in God or Allah, may he watch over you and let's pray for a peaceful and swift resolution," Brody said to warm applause.

Frank Pierson, the president of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, had struggled for a week with the dilemma of whether Sunday's show should go on in the midst of a controversial war.

Pierson told the audience simply: "To all of our men and women overseas, God speed and let's get you home soon. To the Iraqi people, I say, let's have peace soon and let you live without war."

Chris Cooper, winner of the best supporting actor for "Adaptation," said tearfully: "In light of all the trouble in this world, I wish us all peace."

Spanish director Pedro Almodovar, winner of the original screenplay Oscar for "Talk to Her" dedicated his award to "all the people that are raising their voices in favor of peace, respect of human rights, democracy and international legality."

Nicole Kidman, winner of the best actress Oscar for "The Hours," answered the question that had been on the minds of dozens of celebrities, and their critics, all week.

AFP adds: "Chicago," the steamy jazz-age tale of murder and passion, dominated Sunday's 2003 Oscars with six awards in a show fraught with dramatic upsets and overshadowed by the war raging in Iraq.

With Oscars vying for the spot-

light on his 75th birthday with the conflict in the Gulf, fugitive director Roman Polanski scored one of the biggest upsets by winning best director for his Holocaust drama "The Pianist."

Polanski's film was the surprise second-best performer of the evening, winning three Oscars for the night.

Australian star Nicole Kidman and newcomer Adrien Brody also caught Hollywood off guard by beating the favourites in their categories to take the dual best actor statuette -- Brody making Oscars history in the process by besting four previous Oscar winners and becoming the youngest-ever winner his category.

The fate of this year's Oscars hung in the balance up until the last minute, amid fears that the US campaign in Iraq could derail the ceremony, but in the end Tinseltown's biggest show went on as planned, packed with stars, drama and tension.

US will not attack North Korea after Iraq: South

REUTERS, Seoul

South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun sought to calm fears that the communist North might be the next US war target after Iraq, dismissing what he called "inaccurate and groundless" speculation.

North Korea has warned that war over its suspected nuclear ambitions is imminent and some South Korean news media have stirred the pot with speculative reports promptly denied by Roh's month-old government.

"The president expressed concern about inaccurate and groundless speculation that the United States could strike North Korea once the war in Iraq ends," chief presidential spokeswoman Song

Kyung-hee told a regular news conference.

Song quoted Roh as telling presidential secretaries: "In every meeting that I have had with responsible U.S. officials, they told me 'Iraq is a different case from North Korea and we want a peaceful resolution of the problem.'"

North Korea -- branded by Washington as part of an "axis of evil" with Iraq and Iran -- is locked in a standoff with Washington and Seoul over its suspected nuclear ambitions and has for weeks insisted nuclear war could break out at any moment.

On Saturday, North Korea postponed working-level economic talks with the South in a move triggered by erroneous

reports that Seoul had raised the alert status of its military after U.S.-led forces launched military strikes against Iraq.

Spokeswoman Song came under fire over the weekend for a statement last week that South Korea had raised its defense readiness one notch to "Watchcon 2" after the Iraq war started.

The remark was widely reported in South Korea, even though the defense ministry denied any change from the normal "Watchcon 3."

Roh's national security adviser, Ra Jong-yil, was quoted by Yonhap news agency on Monday as saying he sent a message to North Korea explaining the spokeswoman's error.

'Laden may be in Pakistan'

REUTERS, Islamabad

Osama Bin Laden, suspected architect of the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, may have fled to Pakistan to evade the US-led manhunt, the Asian Wall Street Journal quoted President Pervez Musharraf as saying.

In an interview published on Monday, Musharraf for the first time moved away from his position that the world's most wanted man and the leader of the Al-Qaeda network could not escape notice inside Pakistan, the Journal said.

Military operations in Afghanistan would have dispersed Bin Laden's retinue, and forced his much-reduced group to flee into the lawless tribal areas on Pakistan's border with Afghanistan, the Journal reported Musharraf as saying.

"If he is relegated to that position, where his group is forced or divided into small packets, now a small packet with him coming on our side (of the border) and now hiding in one area, a house or a room, is a possibility," the newspaper quoted Musharraf as saying last week.

"So therefore, as the environment keeps changing, one has to keep evaluating what are the possibilities," he was quoted as saying.



"The possibility is there."

Some of the most important members of Bin Laden's Al-Qaeda network have been captured in Pakistan including Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the suspected mastermind believed to have put together the September 11, 2001, attacks, who was arrested in the central city of Rawalpindi last month.

Musharraf had long maintained that Bin Laden and his entourage of bodyguards were in Afghanistan and could not be in Pakistan because such a large group could not fail to attract attention.

War-weary Chechens approve constitution

AFP, Grozny

Despite fears of terror attacks Chechens turned out en masse Sunday and voted overwhelmingly to approve a new constitution that aims to end a brutal three-and-a-half year war by cementing the separatist republic as a part of Russia, partial results showed.

The constitution was approved by 95.5 percent of voters, while 4.1 percent voted to reject it, a Chechen election commission official told the Interfax news agency.

Two other laws on electing a president and a parliament for the republic were approved by 96 percent of voters.

The results came from nine polling stations, including two in the capital Grozny.

Turnout was nearly 80 percent two hours before polling stations closed at 8:00 pm (1700 GMT), said the election official.

As voting progressed smoothly during the day officials expressed confidence the measures would be approved by voters.

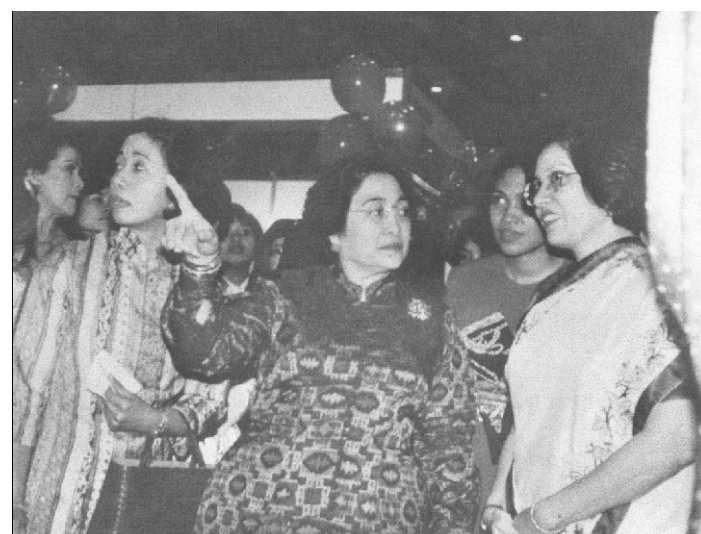
"There were no attacks on any of the polling stations," said Chechen election committee chairman Abdul-Karim Arsanhanov.

Every voter coming out of polling booths in Grozny told journalists they supported the constitution.

Malika Bangayeva, 52, said she cast her ballot for the constitution "so that our lives could get better," but admitted she did not know what she was voting for.

"I didn't read (the draft constitution), I just cast a ballot," she said. "I trusted them -- they said on television that we should vote, so I voted."

Some 30 foreign observers oversaw the voting while the pan-European Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) sent four experts to Chechnya and Ingushetia -- where Chechen refugees were also voting -- to monitor the process.



Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri is seen visiting a Bangladesh stall at the 3-day International Bazaar at Jakarta Convention Centre recently. Bangladesh Ambassador to Indonesia Nasim Firdaus is seen next to Megawati.