

Trapped Russian miners rescued

AFP, Moscow

Eleven of the 13 miners trapped underground for more than five days in southern Russia were brought out alive on Wednesday, even as an explosion at a different mine in the country's Far East killed five workers.

Rescue teams at the Zapadnaya mine in the Rostov region also found the body of one miner, while the remaining worker remained missing and was feared dead.

Meanwhile at another mine thousands of kilometers (miles) away in the Russian Far Eastern region of Primorye, a powerful explosion believed to have been caused by methane gas killed five miners, local officials said.

The first of the miners rescued from the Zapadnaya pit -- faces blackened, wrapped in blankets -- walked out of the mine into the crisp sunshine and a jostling crowd of relatives, medical personnel and journalists.

Some smiled and made victory signs.

They were immediately put into ambulances and taken to the hospital.

Of the 11 found alive, two were

said to be in serious condition, Russian television reported.

Rescue teams discovered the miners early Wednesday, hours after entering the tunnel where they had taken refuge after freezing water from an underground lake flooded Zapadnaya late Thursday afternoon.

The rescuers were led to the men after reading a message that they had scribbled on the wall of the main shaft, indicating where in the winding tunnels they planned to take refuge from the numbing water.

A total of 71 men were working at the mine at the time of the flooding at 1300 GMT Thursday. Twenty-five managed to scramble to the surface right away and 33 were lifted to the surface on Saturday.

Over four days, rescuers used drills to bore through an estimated 60 metres (190 feet) of coal and rock, while at the same time filling the main shaft with concrete blocks, metal rods and rock to try and stem the rising water.

The accident was the second at the mine this year. Water flooded the mine in February but there were no people underground at the time.

Forecast hope for California fires

Up to 50,000 flee homes as raging fires kill 18

AFP, Los Angeles

Firefighters battling huge forest fires in southern California may be helped by lower temperatures and light rain forecast for the next few days.

Reinforcements are also expected to arrive from the neighbouring states of Arizona and Nevada.

More than 11,000 firefighters were still battling catastrophic wildfires in California that have killed at least 18 people, destroyed 2,000 homes and forced tens of thousands into shelters.

The sky over the second largest city in the United States, Los Angeles, was painted an eerie hue of orange as a thick pall of smoke from fires burning over 200,000 hectares (500,000 acres) of the state blocked out the sun.

Giant plumes of smoke stretched miles up into the sky and were visible from space as up to 50,000 more residents of mountainous

areas east of here fled their homes as flames exploded through fire cordons.

"This may well be the worst disaster the state has faced," outgoing California Governor Gray Davis said of the 14 fires, many of which are now thought to have been sparked by arsonists.

"I expect the cost in the next few days to near two billion dollars," he said, adding that the figure included loss of infrastructure, relief and firefighting efforts.

The governor's Office of Emergency Services said the fires had burned at least 217,200 hectares (543,000 acres) in the south of the most populous US state and had killed at least 16 people in California.

A further two died in Mexico after the flames jumped the international border at San Diego, and officials in California said more dead were certain to be found in the disaster zones when the flames clear.

Nine major infernos were blazing around the southern city of San Diego, in Los Angeles' suburban San Fernando Valley and in a popular mountain area in San Bernardino County, 80 kilometers (50 miles) east of here.

"It's a rolling disaster that's just growing in size, its overwhelming," said Patty Roberts of the OES, which is coordinating fire data.

But fire officials in San Bernardino County ordered a new wave of mandatory evacuations of up to 50,000 from mountain-top towns the eight-day-old blaze exploded into new territory towards the popular big bear vacation area.

That fire has chewed up 33,200 hectares (83,000 acres) of forestland, with officials in the area that worse was likely to come.

And thousands of residents near San Diego were also ordered out of their homes too as three major fires chewed up around 120,000 hectares (300,000 acres) around the fire besieged city of 1.2 million people.



PHOTO: AFP
The remains of a charred truck is seen on Tuesday in Waterman Canyon, California. At least 18 people have died in a wave of wildfires that has destroyed 2,000 homes in southern California and spread into neighboring Mexico.



PHOTO: AP

For relatives of the trapped miners, the six-day wait for news proved almost unbearable -- until most of the 13 were found alive yesterday.

Study estimates 13,000 Iraqis died in war

AFP, Washington

An estimated 13,000 Iraqis, including as many as 4,300 non-combatants, were killed during the major combat phase of the war in Iraq, a research group found in a study made public Tuesday.

The Project on Defense Alternatives said its estimate was based on a review of US combat data, battlefield press reports, and Iraqi hospital surveys. The study covered the period from March 19 to the end of April.

The Pentagon has refrained from making estimates of Iraqi dead in either the 1991 Gulf War or the latest conflict.

The study, authored by Carl Coneta, found that deaths of Iraqi civilians who did not take up arms in the fighting was as high or higher than in the 1991 Gulf War despite advances in precision weaponry.

"On the Iraqi side, a review and analysis of the available evidence shows that approximately 11,000 to 15,000 Iraqis, combatants and non-combatants, were killed in the course of major combat operations," the study said.

"Of the total number of Iraqi fatalities during the relevant period, approximately 30 percent (or between 3,200 and 4,300) were non-combatant civilians -- that is civilians who did not take up arms," the report said.

Talks can resolve boundary issue with China: Vajpayee

PTI, Kohima

Maintaining that dialogue is the only way to resolve the boundary issue with China, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on Wednesday said, "Things are moving in the right direction" on the Sikkim front.

"Dialogue is the only way to solve the boundary question. As far as Sikkim is concerned, things are moving in the right direction", he said at a press conference before leaving for New Delhi at the end of the three-day visit to Nagaland.

On the border issue, he said talks were going on with China and both sides had appointed representatives to carry out discussions. Both sides had already met once and the next meeting was being planned.

Militant killed by Israeli fire in Gaza

AFP, Gaza

A Palestinian militant from the hardline Islamic Jihad group was killed by Israeli army fire Wednesday at dawn east of Gaza City, Palestinian security sources and medics said.

The security sources said another man accompanying him was arrested by the army.

They identified the slain Palestinian as Mohammed Awad, 26, who they said was active in the radical group's military branch, the Jerusalem Battalions.

Israeli military sources confirmed

the casualty but could not immediately establish whether the men were armed and preparing an attack or were just attempting to cross into Israel.

"In the early morning hours, forces identified two suspicious characters traveling in an area forbidden to Palestinians near the Nahal Oz kibbutz," the sources said.

They said the two had penetrated half-way into the 300-meter (yard) wide buffer zone between the collective farm, which is just inside Israel, and the Gaza Strip.

Mahathir chairs his last cabinet meeting

BERNAMA, Putrajaya

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad yesterday chaired the 883rd weekly Cabinet meeting, his last before stepping down as the Prime Minister on Friday.

Dr Mahathir chaired his first Cabinet meeting on July 22 1981 following his appointment as Prime Minister on July 16.

Present was his successor, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who is scheduled to be sworn in as the fifth Prime Minister of Malaysia at the Istana Negara on Friday afternoon.

Iran rules out immediate dialogue with US

AFP, Tehran

Iran's government said yesterday that it would not share its intelligence on al-Qaeda with the United States, and told Washington that it needed to see "practical steps" before it could consider resuming dialogue.

"We don't have any relations or links with the US or its security services. So there is no reason to cooperate with them by giving them information," government spokesman Abdollah Ramazanzadeh told reporters.

The United States has

demanded Iran turn over detained senior members of al-Qaeda, but Iran has said the men -- whose names have not been disclosed -- could be tried in its own courts.

Ramazanzadeh also responded to comments Tuesday by US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, who said Washington may hold limited talks with Tehran -- lumped into an "axis of evil" by US President George W. Bush.

"We are expecting practical steps by the US. You can't threaten from one side and block our assets... and then request discussions," Ramazanzadeh said.

"We have to see practical steps," he emphasised. "The discussion here is what the US will do in practice in order to gain our trust."

First and foremost, Ramazanzadeh said the United States "should stop accusing us".

"They have levelled false accusations against us one too many times. They have to put a stop to it," he said, even though he asserted that Iran's "being or not being in an axis of evil has no meaning to us."

He also repeated a previous demand that the US unfreeze Iranian assets that were blocked after the 1979 Islamic revolution.

UN at odds over human cloning

AFP, United Nations

After Iraq and the West Asia, the United Nations is now divided again over another life-and-death question -- whether human beings should be cloned in the name of medical research.

Supporters say limited cloning could help treat killer diseases like AIDS while opponents argue the freedom to manufacture embryos in a laboratory opens an ethical minefield on the cutting edge of modern science.

The two competing visions will face off as early as this week if backers of "therapeutic cloning" push a vote in the UN General Assembly that will spell out society's willingness to take the task of creation into its own hands.

Costa Rica, the United States, the Philippines and more than 50

other nations, backed by the Vatican, want a worldwide convention banning all forms of human cloning by next year.

Their proposal says the cloning of human beings is "morally repugnant, unethical and contrary to respect for the person and constitutes a grave violation of fundamental human rights."

Lined up against them are Belgium, Britain, China and a sizeable minority of other nations which believe limited cloning "opens up prospects for the improvement of the health of individuals and mankind as a whole."

Supporters of therapeutic cloning say their proposal safeguards the sanctity of human life but gives countries the latitude to police themselves and decide individually where the boundaries should lie.

Attacks won't force us out of Iraq, says French NGO

AFP, Paris

A French aid agency helping to repair water treatment plants in Iraq said it intended to stay in the country despite the latest deadly bombings, including a massive blast at the premises of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Baghdad.

The Solidarites agency, which has staff working in the regions of Hillaal and Diwaniyah, said late on Tuesday that it was seeking to boost security for its members, but would not pull out.

"We have decided, with our team on the ground, to continue our humanitarian activities," the group said in a statement.

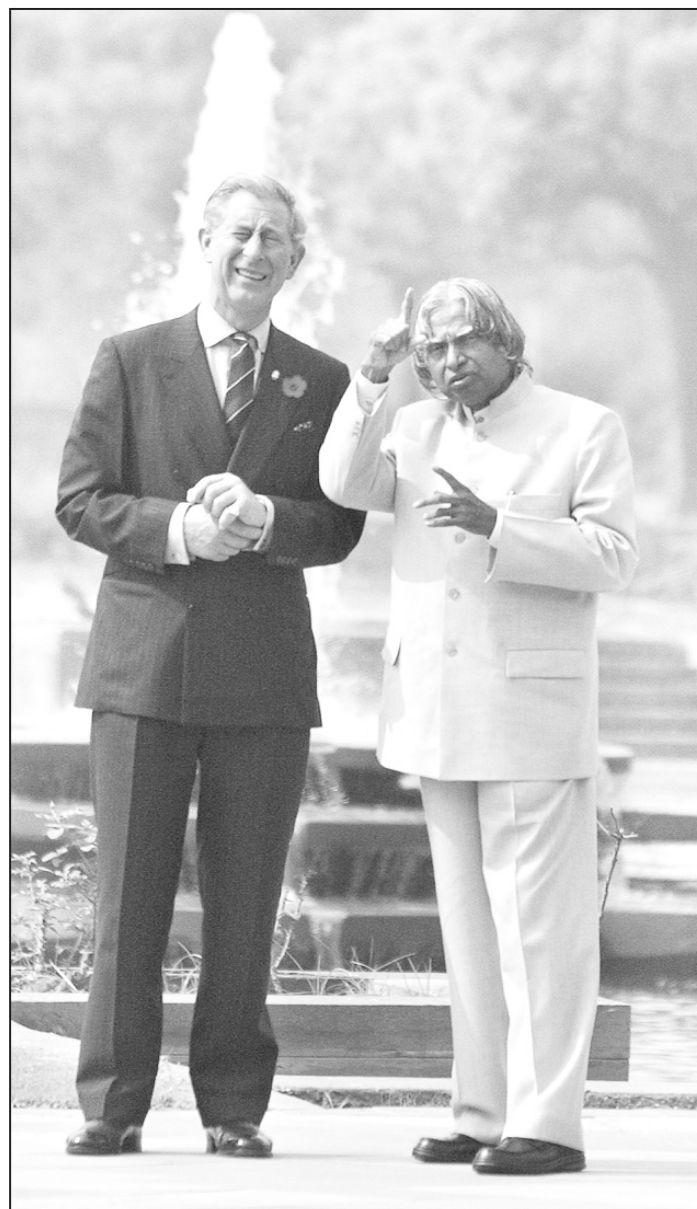


PHOTO: AFP

Indian President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam (R) and Britain's Prince Charles (R) visit the Mughal Garden at the Presidential palace in New Delhi yesterday. Prince Charles is in India for a nine-day visit, some 11 years after he travelled to the subcontinent with his then wife Diana, Princess of Wales.

Bush hosts Ramadan dinner at White House

AFP, Washington

US President George Bush hosted a Ramadan dinner late Tuesday with US Islamic leaders, as the White House was besieged with demands to fire an army general whom made comments some say makes the US-led war on terror out to be a war on Islam.

General William Boykin's comments surfaced two weeks ago, in which he likened the US battle against terror to a battle between Christianity and the Muslim world,

placing the Bush administration in an uncomfortable position.

Bush invited Muslim leaders to an Iftar, the evening feast that breaks the dawn-to-dusk fast Muslims observe during the month of Ramadan. He organized the first White House Iftar after bin Laden and al-Qaeda launched the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington.

"America is a land of many faiths and we honor, and welcome and value the Muslim faith," Bush said in opening remarks before the meal.

UK opposition leader fights for his job

BBC ONLINE

Iain Duncan Smith is fighting for his political life as Conservative MPs prepare to decide his future in a confidence vote.

He began his last-ditch effort to save his job by saying the public would wonder "what in hell's name" the Tories were doing if they plunged themselves into a leadership contest at a time when they should be taking on the "failing" Labour government.

Mr Duncan Smith insisted he was "going to fight" for the British

people and said he could not walk away from the confidence vote because he was "not a quitter".

The secret ballot lasts from 1530 to 1830 GMT on Wednesday with a result expected about half an hour after voting ends.

If he fails to get a majority of the votes he would lose his job, and be ruled out of the ensuing leadership contest.

On Wednesday, Mr Duncan Smith was in bullish mood, insisting he "welcomed" the opportunity to clear the air, but warning that if his colleagues opted for a new leader, it

would take time for him or her to learn the ropes.

He said the choice was between him taking the party to the next election as "a unified force", or the Conservatives plunging themselves "into a war of words" with a leadership challenge and "losing the opportunity to beat the government at their most critical and vulnerable time".

Mr Duncan Smith said he had ignored the continued vilification of his character in the media because he believed what he was doing was right.