

## Twenty-two people killed in Russia bus accident

AFP, Moscow

At least 22 people died and six were injured when a train collided with their bus in Russia's southern province of Krasnodar on Friday, prosecutors said.

"The number of dead has already reached 22," the Russian prosecutor general's office said in a written statement.

The casualty figure could rise further as a spokeswoman for Russia's emergency situations ministry said up to 40 people may have been on the bus.

The bus belonged to Russky Standart, a vodka producer, and was transporting factory workers, according to prosecutors.

"According to preliminary information the driver of the bus failed to let the train pass at an unguarded railway crossing," said the prosecutors' statement.

An emergency situations ministry official said the cause of the crash may have been thick morning fog in the area.

Prosecutors have opened a criminal inquiry into the accident.



A TV grab from Russian NTV channel taken yesterday shows wreckage of a bus after it collided with a train at the crossing in Russia's southern province of Krasnodar. At least 22 people died and six were injured when a train collided with their bus in southern province of Krasnodar, prosecutors said.

## Guantanamo tribunal told to call prisoner with respect

REUTERS, Guantanamo Bay

The presiding officer in the closely watched case of a Canadian teenager facing a murder charge before a US war crimes tribunal ordered lawyers on Thursday to show greater respect to the defendant by calling him "Mister Khadr" rather than "Omar."

Toronto-born Omar Khadr, who is accused of killing a US Army medic in Afghanistan when he was still 15, is one of two Guantanamo prisoners attending pre-trial hearings before a military tribunal this week at the remote, and controversial, Guantanamo base in Cuba.

The Pentagon went ahead with the hearings even though courts have halted the trials of other Guantanamo detainees pending a US Supreme Court ruling on whether President George W. Bush had authority to establish the tribunals to try foreign terrorism suspects after the September 11 attacks. The court will hear arguments in the case in March.

## Families seek lost ones after hajj stampede

AFP, Mina

Stricken families were hunting for their loved ones Friday after a stampede that killed 345 Muslims at the hajj, a disaster Saudi authorities have blamed on unruly pilgrims.

In the absence of an official list of casualties, families continued to seek news of their missing relatives among the dead and wounded of the worst stampede during the Muslim pilgrimage since 1,426 pilgrims were killed in 1990.

At least 345 people were trampled to death and almost 300 injured Thursday as they tripped over luggage in a scramble to hurl pebbles at symbols of Satan on the last day of the annual pilgrimage, Saudi officials said.

At least 30 Pakistanis, 26 Indians, four Chinese and two Indonesian nationals were among the victims crushed to death in the stampede in Mina, east of the holy city of Mecca, according to their foreign ministries.

Riyadh blamed the stampede

on unruly pilgrims from outside officially-sanctioned operators.

But some witnesses said police triggered the chaos by suddenly blocking the entrance to a bridge, and others reported panic among pilgrims about when they should perform the last rite of hajj in which some 2.5 million took part.

Saudi Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz said in remarks published Friday by the Saudi-owned Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper that the stoning ceremony had been taking place for several days without problems.

"But what happened is that more than 12 people were carrying a large amount of baggage on their backs, so when it became too crowded they fell on the ground one on top of the other," he said.

"People kept falling one on top of the other until about 300 people died," he said.

"Our pilgrim brothers are forbidden from carrying baggage and workloads on their shoulders during the stoning ritual."

On Thursday, Saudi Health Minister, Hamad bin Abdullah Al-Maneh said the stampede was caused by "unruly pilgrims, and a problem of luggage."

Interior ministry spokesman Mansur Al-Turki also said the accident occurred "because of the luggage that fell and led to a rush at the eastern entrance of the Jamarat bridge," where the pilgrims stone the three pillars.

The stoning of Satan is the riskiest episode of the hajj as the pilgrims jostle to make sure their pebbles touch the pillar while the weaker ones risk being trampled on by the masses.

The latest tragedy comes days after 76 people were killed when a hostel in the heart of Mecca collapsed last week.

Almost 60,000 security, health, emergency and other personnel were involved in organising this year's hajj, trying to prevent the deadly incidents that have marred it in recent years from being repeated.

## German leader seeks better ties with US

AP, Washington

New German Chancellor Angela Merkel is seeking to improve her country's relations with President Bush, buoyed by an emerging accord designed to halt Iran's nuclear program.

While Merkel has indicated Germany will not always agree with the United States, her White House meeting Friday comes on the heels of a decision by European allies to confront Iran an approach that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice endorsed.

Their unity was as tight as their disagreement over Iraq was wide when Gerhard Schroeder was Germany's chancellor. An election in September put Merkel at the head of a closely divided coalition

government.

Schroeder's opposition to the US-led war that deposed Iraqi President Saddam Hussein so divided the German's relationship with Bush that the president refused at times to speak to Schroeder on the telephone.

Merkel, by contrast, is more in tune with Bush's conservative politics. Departing for Washington, she said she expected "a first visit that will take place in a friendly atmosphere, one of partnership, and an open one."

Iran is one area where Merkel and Bush are closing ranks. Lining up with Britain and France, Merkel's coalition government concluded Thursday that negotiations with Iran were at a dead end and their effort to stop Iran from

making nuclear weapons should go to the UN Security Council.

Merkel, making her first comments in Washington at a dinner Thursday night, said Iran had "crossed the red line" by resuming its nuclear activity, and the United States and Europe must continue to face down the Iranians together.

Rice said earlier: "It is very clear that everyone believes a very important threshold has been cleared." She said she was sending senior aides to Europe to plan strategy with the allies.

Besides meeting with Bush, Merkel scheduled a session with members of Congress and planned to attend a ceremony at the newly renovated headquarters of the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

## Manmohan to meet pro-independence Kashmiri leader

AFP, New Delhi

Indian premier Manmohan Singh will hold talks at the weekend with pro-independence Kashmiri separatist Saajad Lone on the future of the disputed region, media reports said Wednesday.

The talks, at Singh's invitation, will take place in New Delhi on Saturday, newspapers said, quoting official sources.

The Kashmiri leader confirmed he would attend. "The fact that the process has started is a victory in itself. There are bound to be problems and there are bound to be speed-breakers, but it has to go on," Lone was quoted as saying by newspapers.

The invitation follows Singh's

decision to meet all Kashmiri separatists from the Indian-administered zone to try to end unrest in the region after an Islamic insurgency erupted in 1989. It has claimed at least 44,000 lives since then.

India accuses Pakistan of fomenting the insurgency in Kashmir, which has been the trigger of two of their three wars since 1947.

Pakistan denies the charge but admits extending moral, political and diplomatic support to Kashmiris waging what it terms a "freedom struggle".

India and Pakistan both claim the scenic Himalayan region in its entirety but administer it in part.



A Palestinian Muslim pilgrim Mohammed al-Farrah, whose wife Majida was wounded in the stampede at the eastern entrance of the Jamarat bridge, where the pilgrims stone three pillars symbolising the devil in the valley of Mina, east of the holy city of Mecca, talks on a mobile phone with a relative outside the al-Aam hospital Thursday night.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel talks with former US Secretary of state Colin Powell (R) during a dinner reception Thursday night in Washington DC.

## Clinton announces AIDS drug initiative

REUTERS, New York

Former US President Bill Clinton announced on Thursday an initiative with nine drug companies he would cut the cost of HIV/AIDS testing and treatment in 50 developing countries and help save hundreds of thousands of lives.

The agreement between the Clinton Foundation and the drug companies aims to halve the cost of HIV/AIDS diagnosis and lower the price tag of second-line anti-retroviral (ARV) drugs by 30 percent or more.

"This is only the first step," Clinton said. "We expect to lower the cost of more second-line drugs later this year."

Clinton said the deal with the nine companies was a "step in the right direction" but admitted he would like to see more of the

world's biggest drug companies on board. The deal Clinton announced involves smaller companies.

"This agreement today can help to save hundreds of thousands" of lives, Clinton said.

First-line drugs are used in the earliest stage of treatment. When patients become resistant to first-line treatment, more-expensive second-line drugs are given.

Some quarter of a million people already benefit from first-line treatment resulting from Clinton Foundation agreements announced in 2003, the former president said.

Clinton said up to 1 million people could receive first-line treatment at reduced cost through the new initiative by the end of the year.

## EU meets on asylum, immigration

AFP, Vienna

European justice ministers examined on Friday ways to harmonise EU asylum laws and better protect immigrants heading for Europe before they reach the continent, rather than waiting until they arrive.

At the start of two days of talks in Vienna, the ministers thrashed out a plan for a common asylum system aimed at stopping would-be immigrants from repeatedly applying to stay in Europe.

According to the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), Austria, the current EU president, recognised more than 50 percent of asylum seekers as refugees in 2004 compared to only 0.3 percent in Greece.

"Consistency between member

states is essential when asylum seekers are unable to choose the country where they wish to make their claim and where a refusal of asylum in one member state means expulsion from all," ECRE said.

The ministers wrapped up the first phase of their common asylum programme in December by adopting a text aimed at standardising the way refugee status is granted around the 25 member bloc by 2010.

But little has been done concretely to implement it so far, in part because the ministers have to agree unanimously on what action to take.

Indeed the plan has already been criticised by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres, also taking part in the talks, as "the lowest common

denominator of national policies" and threatening the rights of asylum seekers.

The justice and interior ministers, meeting in the Hofburg imperial palace complex, will also debate how the EU can help stop people trying to flee their homelands or aid those caught in transit en route for Europe.

Almost 30,000 people tried to illegally enter Italy and Spain alone in 2005.

Europe's struggle with the problem was highlighted in September when African immigrants tried to break into the Spanish urban enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla on the north African coast from Morocco in hope of a better life across the Mediterranean Sea.

## Peace monitors warn of war in Sri Lanka

AFP, Colombo

A packed army bus narrowly escaped a mine blast in Sri Lanka on Friday as truce monitors pointed the finger at Tiger rebels for a wave of deadly bombings and urged action to halt a return to war.

Military officials said the bus in eastern Trincomalee avoided the full impact of the blast while two more "surface-mounted" mines were found in the district a day after a similar bomb killed 10 sailors.

The attack at Thambalagamuwva came as the Norwegian-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) questioned denials from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) that they were behind the bombings.

But the mission also faulted Colombo for not acting against paramilitary units who target mainstream LTTE cadres.

The blast Thursday in the northern district of Vavuniya raised to 76 the number of security personnel killed since last month. Nearly another 50 people have been killed in violence in the island's troubled north-east regions.

"Various actors in the international community have blamed the LTTE for attacking government troops but the LTTE has continuously denied any involvement," the SLMM said in a statement.

"The LTTE claims that 'the People' are behind the attacks on the military," it said. "SLMM finds this explanation unacceptable. It is

safe to say that LTTE involvement cannot be ruled out..."

The monitors said they found the LTTE's "indifference to these attacks worrying."

The SLMM urged immediate action to stop the slide into full-scale fighting which halted in February 2002 following a Norwegian-brokered truce.

"Killings and serious attacks continue and the situation is getting worse," the SLMM said. "It is our assessment that if the parties don't react immediately, they risk going back to war."

The situation was also fuelled by "alternative armed elements" which operated freely in the island's embattled eastern region.

"These forces have destabilised the ceasefire and are one of the major reasons for increased tension between the parties," the SLMM said.

"We therefore urge the government of Sri Lanka to face up to its responsibility to disarm these other armed groups so that the rule of law can be reinstated in the affected areas."

The monitors said the two sides needed to come up with firm confidence-building measures with the "truthful aim of reaching a peaceful solution."

"Actions speak louder than words, and we feel that we need to see more commitment from the two parties if war is not to break out in Sri Lanka."



A navy sailor keeps watch outside the main morgue where the bodies of nine sailors killed in a mine attack on Thursday were brought in the capital Colombo yesterday. The government blamed the rebel Tamil Tigers for the latest mine attack that killed 10 sailors and wounded 12, marking an upsurge in violence despite a truce.