

Christmas Day fire kills 25 in Philippines

AFP, Manila

Twenty-five Christmas shoppers were killed, including a pregnant woman and two babies, when a fire swept through a packed store in the central Philippines, the Office of Civil Defence said yesterday.

The fire struck the Unipak General Merchandising Store in Oremoc city, some 550km southeast of Manila, on Monday when the predominantly Catholic Philippines was celebrating Christmas Day.

Initial investigation said the seven-hour fire was caused by a "tracer bullet toy gun" fired by a shopper that hit a pile of fireworks sold at the store, Oremoc police chief Manuel Cubillo said.

The store was not licensed to sell fire-crackers, which are traditionally used to greet the New Year here.

The fire quickly engulfed the front portion of the store, trapping panicked shoppers, Cubillo said.

He said 25 people perished in the fire, including a pregnant mother and her four-year-old son. The Office of Civil Defence in Manila said the casualties included two babies.

Pakistan to fence, lay mines on Afghanistan border

Afghans net Pakistani 'suicide bomber'

AP, AFP, Islamabad/ Khost

Pakistan will fence and land mine parts of its border with Afghanistan to prevent cross-border militancy, the Foreign Ministry said yesterday.

The announcement comes amid growing international criticism of Pakistan over alleged infiltration of Taliban and al-Qaeda militants from the country's border regions into Afghanistan.

"In keeping with our policy to prevent any militant activity from Pakistan inside Afghanistan, the Pakistan army has been tasked to work out modalities for selectively fencing and mining the Pakistan-Afghanistan border," Foreign Secretary Riaz Mohammed Khan told a news conference.

Islamabad also will deploy additional paramilitary troops at the frontier, Khan said.

Pakistan was taking the mea-

sure on its side of the border and agreement with Afghanistan to do so was not required, he said. There was no immediate reaction from Kabul.

Afghanistan, hit by the worst upsurge in violence since the Taliban regime's ouster five years ago, has rejected previous offers from Islamabad to fence and mine the rugged frontier. It is populated on both sides by Pashtun tribespeople with strong family and clan ties.

Khan did not say how much or exactly where the 1,510-mile poorly demarcated border would be fenced, and he gave no start date.

He said in places where the frontier is fenced, there will be designated places for people to cross.

Khan also gave no details on how many extra troops would be deployed there. Pakistan has about 80,000 forces in its northwestern tribal regions

bordering Afghanistan.

The allegations of cross-border attacks by Taliban-led rebels have caused bitterness between the neighbours and sparked criticism from Western nations supporting a Nato security force in Afghanistan that is struggling to rein in the insurgents.

Earlier Afghan authorities Tuesday said that they had arrested a Pakistani national who had allegedly been providing suicide bombers to the Taliban in eastern Paktika province.

The man, whose name was not revealed, was "in charge of recruiting suicide bombers and equipping them," provincial governor, Mohammad Akram Khipolwak told AFP.

He was arrested from Bermal district in the bordering Paktika province on Monday, the governor said.

He gave no further details saying that the case was under investiga-

tion.

Afghan government officials frequently blame Pakistan for a surge in Taliban-led violence including the increase in suicide bombings in Afghanistan.

Pakistan firmly denies helping the Taliban and points to the fact that it has 80,000 troops along the border with Afghanistan, hundreds of whom have died fighting pro-Taliban militants.

The governor also said that police raided a suspected Taliban compound in the same district and seized a bomb-fitted motorbike. However the owner of the motorcycle fled before the raid, he added.

Some 4,000 people, including 1,000 civilians, have died this year in insurgent violence that has made 2006 Afghanistan's bloodiest year since the fall of the Taliban five years ago.



A firefighter, standing in front of dozens of burnt bodies, tries to douse the fire at the scene of a pipeline explosion at Abule Egba in Lagos yesterday. The blaze at a vandalised oil pipeline Tuesday in Nigeria's commercial capital Lagos killed several hundred people.

27 quake survivors killed in Indonesian landslide

AFP, Jakarta

At least 27 people who escaped a deadly earthquake were killed and six remained missing in a landslide that buried dozens of houses on the Indonesian island of Sumatra, reports said yesterday.

The landslide Sunday night hit the remote highland subdistrict of Muara Sipongi in North Sumatra province, which was struck by an earthquake a week ago. Those killed had returned to visit their homes after a week living in camps.

"Until this afternoon (Tuesday), we have evacuated 27 bodies from the landslide," local police chief Rudi Sumardiyo told AFP from the town of Panyabungan.

"We have to stop evacuation efforts because it rained very hard in the area. It is still raining now," he said.

Six people were still missing, based on reports from families, said Sumardiyo.

Residents had visited their homes after last week's quake despite warnings that it was still dangerous.



A woman swims across floodwater in Langkat, Riau island Monday. Indonesian troops and volunteer rescue workers were attempting to evacuate thousands of people trapped by flash floods which have killed nearly 100 people and forced more than 140,000 to flee their homes on the island of Sumatra.

Somalia fighting kills more than 1,000

Says Ethiopian premier

AFP, Mogadishu

Fighting in Somalia over the past week has left more than 1,000 people dead and 3,000 wounded, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi said yesterday.

"Unfortunately it appears, according to reports that we are receiving, there have been heavy casualties on the other side," Meles told a press conference in Addis Ababa.

"We got reports of more than 3,000 wounded in a Mogadishu hospital. Those who died are well over 1,000," the prime minister said.

"Some are Somali but a significant number of them are not Somali. We regret the death of Somalis, the others are not so much regretted," he added.

Earlier, the International Committee of the Red Cross more than 800 wounded had been reported at hospitals the agency was in contact with. Thousands have fled their homes, the

agency's spokeswoman Antonella Notari said in Geneva.

"Thousands of people are fleeing their homes in the combat zone," she said.

The refugees for the moment appear to be remaining in Somalia. "We have little indications about border crossing to Kenya and Ethiopia," the spokeswoman said.

"The ICRC appeals to all the combatants to respect civilians and medical personnel and especially the wounded or captured fighters."

Heavy fighting between Islamist force and an allied Somali government-Ethiopian troops erupted last week at the expiry of a Islamist deadline for Ethiopian soldiers to pull out of the country.

The Islamist movement has retreated from the frontlines in south and central Somalia, but vowed to wage a long-term war against Addis Ababa, which it accused of invasion.

Iran House mulls limiting IAEA cooperation

Defiant Tehran heading towards industrial scale uranium enrichment

AFP, Tehran

The Iranian parliament yesterday started debating a bill that would require the government to reduce its cooperation with the UN nuclear watchdog after the sanctions imposed on the Islamic republic.

The latest text of the bill says that the government must "revise its cooperation" with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) after the UN Security Council voted to penalise Iran over its contested nuclear programme.

Parliament had decided to debate the bill as a matter of "urgent priority" but speaker Gholam Hossein Hadad Adel said that there would be no vote today owing to the large number of MPs wishing to speak.

"Numerous MPs have been registered to speak. We will continue the debate on Wednesday," he said.

During the session, deputies asked for changes to toughen up the bill, such as by explicitly banning UN inspectors from visiting Iran's nuclear sites.

The current wording of the bill gives the government a free hand to "revise" its cooperation with the UN nuclear agency as it sees fit, possibly by limiting inspections.

After weeks of diplomatic wrangling, the UN Security Council on Saturday adopted a resolution, which imposes restrictions on Iran's nuclear industry and ballistic missile programme.

The United States accuses Iran of seeking to develop a nuclear weapon, a charge vehemently denied by the Islamic republic, which says it only wants to provide energy to a growing population.

Meanwhile, Iran yesterday maintained its defiance of UN sanctions over its nuclear programme, declaring it was heading towards enriching uranium on

an industrial scale and mulling a reduction of cooperation with the UN atomic watchdog.

The deputy foreign minister said Iran would announce a major step forwards towards industrial-scale enrichment of uranium to coincide with the celebrations for the 28th anniversary of the Islamic revolution in February.

"During this (Iranian) year's revolutionary celebrations, the first phase of nuclear fuel production to meet industrial needs will be launched," First Deputy Foreign Minister Mehdi Mostafavi said in Saudi Arabia, where he is attending the hajj pilgrimage, according to the official IRNA news agency.

His comments were an apparent reference to Iran's plan to install 3,000 uranium-enriching centrifuges by March next year, which would be a major step up from its current declared line-up of two 164-centrifuge cascades.

36 Iraqis killed in blasts

US toll crosses Sept 11 count with 6 more deaths

AP, Baghdad

At least 36 Iraqis died yesterday in bombings, officials said, including a coordinated strike that killed 25 in western Baghdad. Separately, the deaths of six US soldiers pushed the American toll beyond the number of victims in the Sept 11, 2001, attacks.

The three coordinated car bombs in western Baghdad injured at least 55 people, a doctor at Yarmouk hospital, where the victims were taken, said on condition of anonymity because of safety concerns. The attacks occurred in a mixed Sunni and Shia neighbourhood.

In separate attacks, a bomb exploded in a central Baghdad market, killing four people and wounding 15 others, police said. Two roadside bombs targeted an Iraqi police patrol in an eastern neighbourhood of the capital, killing four policemen and injuring 12

people.

In Kirkuk, 180 miles north of the Iraqi capital, another roadside bomb killed three civilians including an 8-year-old girl and wounded six other people, police said.

The US military on Tuesday announced the deaths of six more American soldiers, pushing the US military death toll since the beginning of the Iraq war in March 2003 to at least 2,978 five more than the number killed in the Sept. 11 attacks in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania.

The milestone came with the deaths of the three soldiers Monday and three more Tuesday in roadside bomb attacks near Baghdad, the military said.

President Bush has said that the Iraq war is part of the United States' post-Sept 11 approach to threats abroad. Going on offence against enemies before they could harm Americans meant removing the Taliban from power in Afghanistan,

pursuing members of al-Qaeda and seeking regime change in Iraq, Bush has said.

Democratic leaders have said the Bush administration has gotten the US bogged down in Iraq when there was no evidence of links to the Sept 11 attacks, detracting from efforts against al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups.

The AP count of those killed includes at least seven military civilians. Prior to the deaths announced Tuesday, the AP count was 15 higher than the Defence Department's tally, last updated Friday. At least 2,377 died as a result of hostile action, according to the military's numbers.

British soldiers were on alert for reprisals a day after they raided a police station in the southern city of Basra, killing seven gunmen in an effort to stop renegade Iraqi officers from executing their prisoners.

Silence, tears as Asia remembers tsunami

REUTERS, Ulee Lheue

Thousands lit candles, visited mass graves and observed two minutes of silence yesterday two years after a tsunami pulverised villages along Indian Ocean shores and killed or left missing about 230,000 people.

At a mosque in Ulee Lheue, Aceh, the Indonesian province worst hit by monster waves that came rolling out of the sea on a bright Sunday morning, Imam Usman Dodi told worshippers the tsunami was a religious warning.

"Please forgive the people who have left us for their wrongdoing," the imam prayed, returning to a sermon some religious leaders preached after a disaster that killed or left missing 169,000 people in northern Sumatra. Half a million were also made homeless.

The seaside mosque in Ulee Lheue became an icon of one of history's worst natural disasters.

It was the only building left standing after a magnitude 9.1 earth-

quake ruptured the ocean floor off the tip of northern Sumatra, triggering waves that slammed into the coastlines of a dozen Indian Ocean nations at the speed of a freight train.

Former US Presidents Bill Clinton and George Bush visited the town and helped raise hundreds of thousands of dollars in rebuilding projects.

In stark contrast to Aceh, where the disaster led to a landmark peace settlement of a three-decade insurgency, commemorations in rebel-held areas of Sri Lanka were muted.

A resurgence in Sri Lanka's two-decade civil war has forced thousands of Tamils, including tsunami survivors, to flee homes and camps for the second time in two years.

"There isn't much to show for by way of reconstruction. There isn't much to commemorate when you have barely moved an inch," said a Western aid official involved in the tsunami relief.



Sri Lankans light candles to pay their respect to the victims of the 2004 tsunami at Telwatta in Peraliya in the Southern Province yesterday. Sri Lanka paid emotional tribute to an estimated 31,000 people killed by the Asian tsunami exactly two years ago with a two-minute silence and coast-to-coast candlelight vigils.

Timor PM sends Christmas message to 'brother' Laden

AFP, Dili

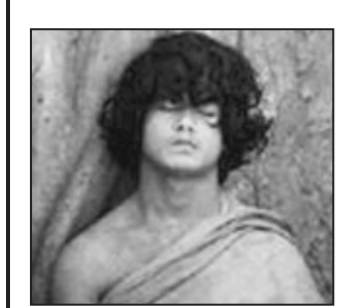
East Timor Prime Minister Jose Ramos-Horta said yesterday he hoped Osama bin Laden had tuned in from his mountain hideout to hear his Christmas message of peace directed at the feared terrorist leader.

Ramos-Horta's message to the elusive September 11 mastermind was broadcast on the BBC.

"It occurred to me that a man who is one of the most feared and detested on earth by some and admired by others, might tune into the BBC and hear my message," he said.

The BBC had asked a variety of world leaders and personalities to send a seasonal greeting to the person of their choosing.

"Wole Soyinka (Nigeria's first Nobel laureate) understandably gave his message to the people of Darfur, and Bishop Desmond Tutu to fellow Nobel Peace Laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi," Ramos-Horta said.



Nepal's mystery 'Buddha boy' reappears

REUTERS, Kathmandu

A mysterious teenaged boy believed by some to be a reincarnation of Lord Buddha has reappeared in eastern Nepal after vanishing for nine months, a witness and a television channel said on Monday.

Sixteen-year-old Ram Bahadur Bamjon was spotted on Sunday by villagers in the remote and dense forests near Piliwa village in Bara district, 150 km east of Kathmandu, local journalist Raju Shrestha, who visited the boy, told Reuters.

Israel okays WB homes for Gaza settlers

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel's defence minister has approved plans to turn a former army base in the occupied West Bank into a settlement for 30 Jewish settler families evacuated from the Gaza Strip last year, Israel Radio said yesterday.

A settler official said fewer than 20 families had been waiting to move into Maskiot, in the Jordan Valley, under a months-old government promise to build the first permanent housing in the West Bank for Gaza evacuees.

The radio said Defence Minister Amir Peretz gave the final go-ahead for the construction of 30 homes in Maskiot, a former army base that currently houses a military academy for high school students.

The Defence Ministry had no immediate comment on the report. A US-backed Israeli-Palestinian peace plan known as the "road map" calls for a halt to settlement construction in the West Bank, land Palestinians want for a state.

A regional council official in the

Jordan Valley said building work in Maskiot would begin in two weeks, the radio said.

The 30 families lived in two of the 21 settlements Israel dismantled in the Gaza Strip in 2005 under a "disengagement plan" promoted by former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, the report said.

Some 8,500 settlers were pulled out of the Gaza Strip, along with Israeli troops, after 38 years of occupation.

Emily Amrusy, a spokeswoman for the Jewish settler's umbrella YESHA Council, said 42 of the 1,700 families evacuated from the Gaza Strip had moved to the West Bank and were living in temporary housing.

"The explanation (for the low numbers) is that most of the families wanted to live in southern Israel to be close to working places and relatives," she said.

She said the government had promised to build "a neighbourhood" for Gaza evacuees in Maskiot and they planned to move into caravans at the site to await the construction of permanent housing.

Nepali king forced to cancel holiday

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's isolated King Gyanendra has cancelled a planned holiday after the prime minister advised him against travelling outside the capital due to fears it could spark trouble, a newspaper said yesterday.

The monarch, accompanied by his wife, Queen Komal, was planning to spend a month in his palace in Hetauda, 50 km south of Kathmandu, starting this week.

It would have been the first major trip by the king outside the capital since April. In the past, such visits were an opportunity for him to meet supporters and loyalists.

However, Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala feared there could be clashes this time between the monarch's supporters and those opposed to him, the Kathmandu Post newspaper reported.

"I talked to him about the visit. It is Kamal Thapa's place. So I thought anything could happen there and asked the king to cancel the visit," Koirala was quoted as saying by the daily.

Thapa was interior minister during the violent pro-democracy

campaign in April, which led to King Gyanendra handing power back to political parties.

Thapa was accused of using strong-arm tactics to curb the demonstrations during which at least 22 people were killed.

Supporters and opponents of the monarch have clashed elsewhere across the Himalayan country over the past few weeks but the trouble has been sporadic.

Last year, the king fired the government, jailed politicians, suspended civil liberties and took absolute control saying he was acting to crush an anti-monarchy Maoist revolt which has killed more than 13,000 people since 1996.

The king, traditionally considered an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu, was stripped of all powers including his control over the army after he stepped down.

The Maoists signed a landmark peace deal with the government last month and are preparing to join an interim administration to oversee elections to a special assembly that will draw up a new constitution and decide the fate of the monarchy.

UN slams Lanka warring parties over slow tsunami recovery

AFP, Colombo

The United Nations slammed Sri Lanka's warring parties for stalling tsunami reconstruction efforts yesterday as the island marked the second anniversary of the disaster.

The outgoing UN Secretary General Kofi Annan blamed both Colombo and the Tamil Tiger rebels for the violence that has slowed rebuilding after the December 26, 2004 tsunami that killed an estimated 31,000 people in the island.

In a statement, he said the conflict between the government and rebels had made reconstruction even more difficult in the mainly Buddhist nation.

"No one could have prevented the tsunami's wave of destruction. But together we can stem the tide of conflict, which threatens once again to engulf the people of Sri Lanka," Annan said.

Peacebroker Norway tried to arrange a sharing of the huge foreign aid for reconstruction between the government and the Tigers, but the Supreme Court shot down the idea last year, saying it violated the constitution.

Since then, the two sides have escalated attacks against each other, with both blaming the other for the rising violence that has virtually halted all reconstruction work in the embattled northeast.

Rebel areas suffered the most damage in the tsunami. More than two-thirds of reconstruction in the northern and eastern regions, mostly held by the Tigers.

In contrast, Indonesia, which suffered the biggest losses, was praised by Annan, who noted a spirit of solidarity in troubled Indonesia's Aceh province following the disaster, which killed 220,000 people around Asia.

"Alas, in Sri Lanka, that spirit has not been sustained. Instead, the spiral of tension and open conflict, which had wrought so much misery and destruction over the years, has resumed," Annan said.

"I am deeply disappointed by this turn of events. Let me remind all parties of their obligation to respect human rights... and particularly to protect and allow access to the civilian population."

President Mahinda Rajapakke, who last year admitted reconstruction was too slow, led the nation Tuesday in remembering tsunami victims.

He observed a moment's silence at his office here and was due to unveil a statue of Buddha at the site where 1,000 passengers died when their train was wrecked by the tsunami.

Sri Lanka also declared Tuesday "national safety day".