

Police, soldiers fire at each other as refugees board escape boat

Civil emergency on Borneo possible

AFP, JAKARTA

A gunfight erupted between Indonesian police and soldiers overseeing the departure of refugees from the carnage in the Borneo town of Sampit Tuesday, leaving at least six wounded, a hospital source said.

A local journalist reported that a refugee was killed in the crossfire, but hospital staff could not confirm any deaths from the shootout.

"We treated six troops, some police, some soldiers," a worker at the Sampit Public Hospital told AFP by phone.

The shots were fired as 5,000 refugees, settlers from the island of Madura south of Borneo, jammed aboard a passenger vessel at the town's river port.

Police blamed the shootout on a "misunderstanding."

"There was a misunderstanding in organising the refugees. I think they (police and soldiers) were too excited," national police spokesman, Inspector General Dede Widayadi, told AFP.

"There were injuries but that's normal. You play with guns and you get shot."

Another local journalist said the misunderstanding

arose when a police officer was barred from bringing a group of refugees into the port in a private vehicle.

Officers guarding the port were only allowing marked police or military vehicles into the port area, the journalist said.

The Madurese refugees were fleeing more than a week of savage ethnic cleansing by indigenous Dayaks, in which more than 400 people have been killed.

Meanwhile, Indonesian security chiefs said Tuesday they were still assessing whether to declare a civil emergency on Borneo, where more than a week of ethnic carnage has claimed at least 400 lives.

Chief security minister, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said he was still waiting on assessments from local authorities.

"We've haven't had an update yet from Palangkaraya or Sampit, but after discussions with the military commander this morning, there are no indications that the situation has worsened," the SCTV network showed Yudhoyono telling journalists.

National police chief Suroyo Bimantoro told journalists he would visit the worst-hit Borneo towns of Sampit and Palangkaraya to judge for himself the need for a civil emergency.



Pakistani military ruler Gen. Pervez Musharraf (2nd R) is being shown Prophet Mohammed (SM)'s sword at Cairo's Al-Hussein Mosque on Monday. Musharraf visited the Egyptian capital after attending the D8 summit on Sunday.

Mysterious disease claims 36 lives in West Bengal

DPA, New Delhi

At least 36 people have died due to a mysterious illness in India's eastern state of West Bengal during the last fortnight, press reports said yesterday.

Reports quoting state officials said all the deaths took place in the Siliguri area bordering Nepal.

Some 19 people infected with the undiagnosed disease have been admitted to Siliguri hospitals.

The Times of India newspaper reported that the federal government has sought help from American experts to identify the disease.

Federal Health Minister CP Thakur said Monday that scientists of the National Institute of Communicable Diseases and the National Institute of Virology have

collected samples from patients for clinical investigations.

The illness which causes vomiting, delirium and coma within three days was first reported on February 5. Nine patients were afflicted and six of them died later.

So far 62 people were reported to have been afflicted by the disease and 36 of whom have died. Thakur said while most of the affected people were from Siliguri town, reports of infection were also coming from nearby rural areas.

Meanwhile West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee claimed that doctors managed to contain the disease through a change of antibiotic medicine.

He said while the disease was yet to be identified it was almost certainly water-borne.



Madurese refugees arrive in Surabaya carrying their belongings on their heads as they disembark from the KM Binaya passenger ship during a mass evacuation from the riot-torn city of Sampit in central Kalimantan on Tuesday. Thousands of desperate Madurese refugees fled this Borneo town after a week of ethnic bloodshed between Dayaks and Madurese migrants which so far has left some 400 dead.

Security alert ahead of execution in Pakistan

AFP, Lahore

Two people were injured in a bomb blast here Tuesday as a security blanket was thrown across Pakistan on the eve of the execution of a Sunni extremist who murdered an Iranian diplomat.

Police said the bomb exploded in one of this eastern city's most crowded markets, slightly injuring two people and heightening fears of a violent sectarian backlash against the execution expected Wednesday morning.

Armoured personnel carriers were patrolling the area around Mianwali Jail in central Punjab province.

'Syria to place Iraqi pipeline, revenue under UN control'

AFP, Brussels

Syria has pledged to put its controversial pipeline from Iraq under the control of the United Nations, US Secretary of State Colin Powell said here Tuesday.

The scheme will allow the United Nations to supervise Baghdad's exports and place oil revenue under the control of the UN oil-for-food programme, he said.

Powell said Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad had assured him three times in the course of a one-hour meeting late Monday in Damascus that his country did not want to violate UN sanctions on Iraq, which prohibit Baghdad from exporting oil outside the auspices of

the programme.

"The president said to me, in response to my query, that it is his plan to bring the pipeline and what is going through the pipeline, and revenues generated in that pipeline to be under the same kind of control as other elements of the sanctions regime," Powell said.

"I found that to be a very important statement on his part and we have passed that information to (US President George W.) Bush and he is likewise pleased," Powell said.

"I have high confidence that this will work out because we went back to this three times with the president and there was solid agreement," Powell told reporters accompanying him to Belgium after leaving Syria.

Washington has for months suspected that Syria was importing Iraqi oil illegally through the pipeline at below market prices and using it to make up for a shortfall created by selling domestically pumped oil abroad.

The US State department has repeatedly asked Damascus for an explanation of the sharp increases in sales of its domestic oil abroad which came amid reports that Iraqi oil was flowing through the pipeline.

However the only response it had received, until Powell's brief stop in Syria on Monday, was that the pipeline was being tested, an explanation that US officials said had become increasingly difficult to believe.

India successfully test fires Akash missile

AFP, New Delhi

India on Tuesday successfully test-fired its home-made multi-target surface-to-air missile "Akash", the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported.

The missile weighing 650 kilograms (1,430 pounds) was fired from a mobile launcher at 12.36 pm (13:06 BST) in the eastern state of Orissa, PTI quoted defence sources as saying.

Akash has a range of 25 kilometres (15.5 miles), can deliver 55 kilograms (121 pounds) of explosives and has the capacity to strike several targets simultaneously.

Data regarding the missile flight test collected from different telemetry stations and tracking radars were being analysed by India's Defence

Research and Development Organisation, PTI said.

The last test launch of the missile was conducted on July 5, 2000.

Akash is one of the missiles being developed by the Indian defence establishment under its indigenous Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme (IGMDP), launched in 1983.

India has already inducted the short range surface-to-surface Prithvi missile with a range of 150 kilometres to 250 kilometres (93 to 155 miles) into service.

The Prithvi is capable of carrying a one-tonne nuclear or conventional warhead.

Japan speeds up search for new leader

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's ruling coalition on Tuesday sought to speed up the search for a successor to beleaguered Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori as his public support sank to another new low.

As calls for Mori's resignation grew within the coalition government, former prime minister Ryutaro Hashimoto acknowledged at a news conference that "the situation is very severe."

"Considering these opinions, we have to think about how to organise the convention" to be held by Mori's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) on March 13, Hashimoto said.

The convention is widely seen as a key event, where Mori is expected to be pressed openly to step down by party members now campaigning for his resignation ahead of an upper house election in July.

Hashimoto, state minister in charge of administrative reform, is a possible contender to replace Mori, who has been under fire over gaffes

and scandals.

Economy, Trade and Industry Minister Takeo Hiranuma called for a general election to choose a new leader.

"When the time is ripe, we have to call general elections," Hiranuma told a separate news conference.

Chikara Sakaguchi, a state minister in the Mori cabinet and senior official of the New Komeito Party, the LDP's key coalition partner, moved closer to demanding Mori's resignation in urging him to accept the criticism.

Fresh opinion polls showed Tuesday public support for Mori plunged to devastating one-digit levels in February.

The nationwide survey by the Sankei Shimbun newspaper found the approval rating dropped to 6.9 percent in the month, down sharply from 18.2 percent in the previous survey in December.

It was the lowest approval rating since Mori took office in April last year.

Asia stained by HR abuse: US

AFP, Washington

The United States on Monday chided Asian governments for allowing human rights abuses to run riot across the region, and bemoaned stifled freedoms from Afghanistan to China and Myanmar to North Korea.

Asian nations dominated the annual survey of human rights performance issued by the State Department -- which is likely to infuriate many regional governments.

Amidst the damning assessments, the report did note some progress, notably by Pakistan on press freedom and a slight easing of some conditions in Vietnam -- but the overall picture was deeply unflattering.

China's "poor" human rights record got worse during 2000, with political and religious freedom suffocated in a climate of severe repression, the report said.

Beijing's communist rulers targeted any "person or group perceived to threaten the government," said the survey, which con-

demned the government's tough line on religious groups not sanctioned by the state.

Hundreds of members of the banned Falungong spiritual movement were detained, sentenced to hard labour or incarcerated in mental institutions, it claimed.

"Various sources report that approximately 100 or more Falungong practitioners died as a result of torture and mistreatment in custody."

"Credible" reports were cited, suggesting that China committed "numerous serious human rights abuses in Tibet including instances of torture, arbitrary arrest, detention without public trial, and lengthy detention of Tibetan nationalists."

Two nations well used to US attack, Afghanistan and Myanmar, faced severe criticism.

"The Taliban continued to commit numerous serious and systemic abuses," said the survey, which accused the ultra-fundamentalist militia of carrying out summary justice, and of inflicting political and targeted killings of opponents, under the "strict and oppressive

order."

In a 20,000-word chunk of the report devoted to Myanmar, allegations were detailed of political repression, torture, forced labour, rape and other human rights abuses.

Reports of a tentative dialogue between democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the junta amounted to "hopeful signs" said acting Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, Michael Parmly.

But he deplored the government's "extremely poor human rights record and longstanding severe repression of its citizens."

In Vietnam, to which former president Bill Clinton paid a groundbreaking visit last year, the record remained "poor" although there had been some measurable improvements, the report said.

It cited a slight relaxation on freedom of expression, and the tolerance of several "sit-in" demonstrations in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.

As violence intensified in Indonesia, President Adurrahman

Wahid's government was branded "ineffective" in containing ethnic, religious and political strife but praised for moving the country away from authoritarian rule.

Pakistan made strides towards a freer press and Karachi's violent streets claimed fewer victims in 2000, but its human rights record remains "poor," the department said.

The country's military leader General Pervez Musharraf was censured for failing to hand back power to a civilian administration, as well as for subjecting members of previous governments to "incommunicado detention."

North Korea was still guilty of suppressing almost all the fundamental human rights of its citizens and the report said its record was little changed -- despite the government's diplomatic drive out of isolation over the last year.

India was praised for generally tolerating the basic rights of citizens, though the report said politics and wider society was still challenged by extra-judicial killings, arbitrary arrest and poor prison conditions.

Labour says 'yes' to Sharon

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ariel Sharon begins negotiations Tuesday to woo religious and right-wing nationalist parties into his coalition government after securing the backing of the vanquished Labour party.

Labour's central committee voted Monday after a stormy meeting to join a unity government with the Sharon's right-wing Likud after a five-month-old Palestinian uprising, overcoming the fierce opposition of many lead-

ing party doves.

"One obstacle towards national unity has been lifted," said Sharon's spokesman, Raanan Gissin.

"But we must also reach an accord with our allies in the national camp, and the prime minister-elect hopes to wrap up these discussions by the end of this week or the start of next week," Gissin said.

Two-thirds of Labour's central committee voters supported forming a coalition with Likud after a rousing appeal by Israeli elder statesman Shimon Peres, tipped as foreign minister under Sharon.

Blast in Lankan cracker factory

AFP, Colombo

At least three workers were killed and another four critically wounded when their fire cracker manufacturing plant caught fire and exploded in north-western Sri Lanka Tuesday, police said.

The privately-owned fire-works factory in Negombo, 40 km north of the capital Colombo, was devastated after the explosion, police said adding that the cause of the fire was under investigation.

Four people have been killed and 11 injured in separatist-linked violence in India's restive Kashmir state, police said Tuesday.

Suspected militants shot two men in a vegetable market in the Kashmiri summer capital Srinagar early Tuesday morning.

Police sources said one of the victims was working as an informant for the security forces.

4 more killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

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New proof of life on Mars

AFP, Washington

New elements examined on the Martian ALH-84001 meteorite indicate that at one point life existed on the red planet, NASA said in a study to appear Tuesday the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

"The chains we discovered are of biological origin," said Imre Friedmann, a researcher at NASA's Ames Research Center in California.

Scientists observed magnetite crystals, an iron oxide, strung in chains like a "string of pearls," which they say are formed only by once-living organisms.

"Such a chain of magnets outside an organism would immediately collapse into a clump due to magnetic forces," Friedmann said.

The researchers said the chains, probably formed inside organic material, served as "compasses" for their host organisms and were

preserved in the meteorite long after the organisms themselves decayed.

The scientists were able to see the tiny chains inside the 1.8-kilogram (four-pound) meteorite without destroying them using a special technique. Their flexibility and uniformity are further evidence they are of biological origin.

The meteorite was formed by a collision between an asteroid and the planet some 3.9 billion years ago, and was propelled toward Earth by another collision, the researchers said, around 13,000 years ago and discovered in 1984 in Antarctica.

"Until now, studying life has been like trying to draw a curve using only one data point -- life on Earth," Friedmann said. "Now we have two data points to draw life's curve."

A second research group from the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration has published a study to appear simultaneously in the same journal, highlighting the similarities between the Martian

magnetite crystals and crystals formed inside magnetotactic bacteria present on Earth.

However, the researchers from NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas, led by Kathie Thomas-Keprta compared the crystals but not the chains they formed.

The Ames study determined that the crystals were of similar size and shape, they did not touch each other and that the chains they formed were curved: additional signs, the researchers said, of a biological origin.

They also deduced from their great concentration in a small, two-kilo (4.5 pounds) meteorite that they must have been rather widespread on the surface of Mars.

And since Earthly bacteria that use magnetic forces require some oxygen, researchers said their presence on the meteorite denotes that 3.9 billion years ago there were plant-like organisms using photosynthesis on Mars.

Asian sex workers to gather in Kolkata

AFP, Kolkata

More than 20,000 sex workers from across Asia will gather in the eastern Indian city of Kolkata Saturday to demand greater respect for their profession.

"It will be a three-day 'Millennium Meet' for sex workers," said Mrinal Kanti Dutta, programme director of STD (sexually transmitted diseases) and HIV Intervention Programme in the eastern state of West Bengal.

Putul Singh, a sex worker associ-

ated with the event, said the aim was to bring sex workers "under one umbrella" and promote themselves as an important section of the working class community.

"We also want to convey the message that we are an inseparable part of society," she said.

The event to be held at the sprawling Salt Lake Stadium in Calcutta will bring together sex workers from Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Japan.



Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (R) gestures towards Mohammed VI, King of Morocco (C), and Indian President K. R. Narayanan (L) as they pose during a welcoming ceremony at the presidential palace in New Delhi on Tuesday. Mohammed VI is on an official six-day visit to India, during which he will meet Indian leaders and visit Jaipur and the Taj Mahal.