

15 killed in UK train crash

AFP, AP, London

At least 15 people died and 50 were injured Wednesday when a high-speed passenger train slammed into a freight service near the northern English town of Selby, emergency services said.

Dozens of people were also feared trapped in the wreckage of the passenger train, a spokesman for North Yorkshire Fire Service said.

He confirmed at least 15 people had died, but added: "There will be others, definitely."

Up to 50 people were injured, 30 of them in a serious condition, the ambulance service said, as more than 100 fire workers poured into the scene with cutting tools in a bid to extract victims from the twisted wreck spread over the tracks and a neighbouring field.

A spokeswoman for rail infrastructure firm Railtrack described the crash scene on the busy East Coast main railway line as "absolute devastation".

North Yorkshire's fire service said over 140 people were involved in the accident, the latest in a series of deadly accidents on Britain's crumbling privately run rail service.

Nine coaches of the 4:45 am (10:45 BST) train from Newcastle in north-east England to London, which is operated by rail firm GNER, derailed in the

crash at 6:12 am (12:12 BST), the company said.

A spokeswoman for Railtrack said the details of the crash were still unclear, but that it is thought the accident was caused by a vehicle running off a bridge on the M62 motorway and derailing the freight train, which in turn was hit by the passenger service.

Weather conditions were described as "atrocious" at the time of the crash. Emergency services from across the region were arriving at the scene to help in the rescue effort.

With four fatal crashes in as many years, Britain's creaking, privatised rail system has been vilified for running late, crowded services and accused of putting profits ahead of safety.

Prior to Wednesday's crash, accidents and derailments have killed more than 40 people in the past three years, 31 of them when two trains collided west of London's Paddington terminus on October 5, 1999.

In October 18, 2000, a train came off the rails at Hatfield north of London, killing four and prompting a costly nationwide overhaul that caused even greater delays on the rail network.

Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair has pinned the blame for the chaotic railways on the wide-ranging privatisation and under investment by previous Conservative governments.

13 civilians killed in Aceh

AFP, Banda Aceh

At least 13 civilians have been killed in fresh violence in Indonesia's Aceh province despite a ceasefire between the government and separatist rebels, residents and hospital staff said Wednesday.

Eight bodies bearing torture marks and gunshot wounds were brought into the Langsa hospital in East Aceh on Wednesday, hospital director Azwan Hakmi Lubis said.

A witness who refused to give his name said the eight had been taken in by police before they were found dead. He added that two other captured people were killed.

Koreans say goodbye amid uncertainties

AFP, Seoul

Elderly Koreans who met relatives on the other side of the Cold War frontier this week for the first time in 50 years said tearful goodbyes Wednesday not knowing if they would see their loved ones again.

"Mother, please live long so that we can meet again," said Cho Ki-Un, 67, one of 100 North Koreans who travelled to Seoul on Monday, as he bade farewell to his 86-year-old mother Kim Mae-Wol.

"Don't worry son, I will live to 200 years," cried out the sobbing mother as she embraced her son.

Japan loses centenarian twin icon

AFP, Tokyo

Gin Kanie, the remaining sister of Japan's oldest and most celebrated centenarian twins, died on Wednesday at the age of 108, her family said.

She died at her home in the central Japanese city of Nagoya. The celebrity twin had spent most of her time at home since she lost her sister Kin Narita in January last year.

Kanie became bedridden in April. She stopped taking food on Saturday and her condition deteriorated Tuesday night.



PHOTO: AFP

The scene near Selby, north Yorkshire on Wednesday where a number of people died when a high-speed mainline train smashed into a freight service. The collision on the East Coast main line happened after the freight train was derailed when a car slid off a motorway bridge in the snow. At least 15 people are feared dead and around 60 injured, according to latest reports.

No-confidence motion against Mori soon

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's largest opposition party plans to submit a motion of no-confidence against unpopular Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori if a former key member of his party is arrested, news reports said Wednesday.

Prosecutors are expected soon to decide whether to arrest Masakuni Murakami, a former ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) heavyweight, who resigned his parliamentary seat last Thursday over his links to a scandal-tainted foundation.

Murakami, 68, was one of the five senior LDP lawmakers who decided behind closed doors last April to appoint Mori to the top job following the death of former premier Keizo Obuchi.

"We need to call Mori to account if one of the five members is arrested," a senior official of the

opposition Democratic Party said, according to Jiji Press news agency.

Murakami, who is suspected of receiving bribes from KSD, a mutual aid foundation for owners of small and medium-sized industrial businesses, testified before parliament as a sworn witness on Wednesday.

Following the testimony, senior officials of the justice ministry were expected to make a final decision on whether to arrest Murakami on suspicion of receiving 72 million yen (626,000 dollars) in bribes from KSD, newspapers said.

On Monday, Mori apologised for the widening bribery scandal involving key members of his party as an opinion poll showed his public support had fallen to a new low of 6.5 percent, the lowest since he took office in April.

"We need to take the case seriously," Mori said. "As president of our party, I want to apologise to the people."

Mori has been savaged by the media and opposition leaders for continuing to play golf after learning about a submarine tragedy off Hawaii that left nine Japanese missing presumed dead.

Mori survived a non-confidence motion in December after some coalition members dropped their earlier threat to vote for the motion at the eleventh hour.

Mori's LDP has only succeeded in winning its coalition partners' promise to vote against a new no-confidence motion as long as deliberations are under way on a budget bill scheduled to pass through parliament in March.

His premiership can be secured only with the support of coalition partners New Komeito and the New Conservative Party. The LDP is the largest single party in the lower house, but is still short of a majority in the lower chamber.

China ratifies UN rights convention

AFP, Beijing

China's legislature Wednesday ratified the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights but placed reservations on allowing free trade unions, state press reported.

The covenant was passed by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress after a visit by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson ended Tuesday.

Robinson had urged the Chinese parliament to ratify the covenant without reservations on Article Eight which pertains to the establishment of free trade unions.

Fresh tremor rocks north India

AP, New Delhi

A mild tremor created panic among residents of north India on Wednesday, just one month after India's worst earthquake in 50 years led more than 19,000 people dead.

New Delhi's meteorological office said the epicentre of the magnitude 4.7 temblor was 70 kilometers north-west of New Delhi, in Haryana state.

There were no immediate reports of casualties or damage.

The quake was felt in the Indian capital also.

An earthquake of 4.7 magnitude had shaken India's remote northeast and neighboring Bhutan on Tuesday, but there were no reports of damage or injuries.

The January 26 quake of 7.7 magnitude devastated the Kutch district of western Gujarat state.

Kumaratunga pledges her remaining eye

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who lost an eye in an assassination bid, was to pledge her remaining eye for transplant after her death yesterday, officials said.

Kumaratunga would sign papers donating her left eye as part of a campaign to encourage the donation of 100,000 eyes, said Ariya Rubasinghe, the director general of her secretariat.

"The donation of the president's eye coincides with the 100,000-eyes programme as well as the war-heroes month," Rubasinghe said.

Kumaratunga lost her right eye when a woman suicide bomber detonated explosives at an election campaign rally here on December 18, 1999.

Buddhists in Sri Lanka have a practice of donating their organs, which they believe gives them good karma, or merit, in their next reincarnation.

Sri Lanka's eye donation society, which collects the corneas, said they had given 2,900 eyes to 158 cities in 62 countries since the first batch of six eyes were sent to Singapore in 1954.

Putin blasts US attempt to revise ABM treaty

AFP, Seoul

President Vladimir Putin urged the international community Wednesday to join Russia in thwarting any US attempt to revise a treaty banning Washington and Moscow from building up large-scale missile defence shields.

"The Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty signed in 1972 is the core backbone of global security," Putin said in a speech at South Korea's parliament before ending his three-day state visit here.

"All international security treaties" were based on the 1972 accord, he said, implicitly denouncing the new administration of US President George W. Bush which is pushing ahead with plans to deploy a National Missile Defence (NMD) system.

"Any attempts to violate this treaty will lead to a complete collapse of the entire system of strategic stability. As many South Koreans do, we, Russians, are concerned over the bid to deploy arms in the space in the future."

Putin's speech followed a joint communique Tuesday with South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung which said the ABM treaty should be preserved and strengthened as a "cornerstone" of stability.

Britain pledges continued involvement in Asia

AFP, Singapore

Britain on Wednesday pledged continued diplomatic and military support for Asia, where ethnic tensions and territorial disputes have cast a shadow over political stability.

The world's fourth largest economy and permanent member of the UN Security Council can play an important role in the resolution of international disputes, Defence Minister Geoffrey Hoon said.

Hoon, addressing a gathering of military attaches and defence analysts in Singapore, said it was reassuring that economic success has brought unprecedented stability to many parts of Asia.

"But there remain significant security challenges in this part of the world. It is in all our interest that they should be resolved without the need to resort to force," he said.

Execution of Iranian diplomat's murderer sparks violence

Police, extremists exchange fire in Pak Punjab

AFP, Jhang

At least five people were injured when Pakistani police and religious extremists exchanged fire here Wednesday as violent protests broke out against the execution of a Sunni prisoner.

This town in central Punjab province was under virtual police siege as the body of Sunni Muslim extremist Haq Nawaz, who was hanged earlier Wednesday for the 1990 murder of an Iranian diplomat, arrived for burial.

"There has been an exchange of

fire between protestors and police and several people have been injured," a local police officer told AFP.

Police denied unconfirmed reports that said two people had died in the shooting but conceded that they were being targeted from rooftops and the house of the arrested leader of Sunni radical group Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP).

Residents said police used batons and tear gas to control angry crowds who tried to break into a mosque ahead of Nawaz's funeral

later Wednesday in Jhang, his hometown and SSP headquarters.

Armoured vehicles were patrolling the streets and shops and markets were closed as residents observed a strike to protest against the execution.

Residents said the town had been "virtually sealed" by police, while officials said army units were on alert.

Security was tightened across the country ahead of the execution, especially at Iranian representative offices and certain mosques controlled by SSP.



PHOTO: AFP

Activist from a radical Islamic group, Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) throws a burning tyre during a protest demonstration in Rawalpindi on Tuesday against the Wednesday's execution of one of group's activist., Haq Nawaz, who was condemned to death for the murder of an Iranian diplomat Sadiq Ganji in Lahore in 1990

Britain's lower house okays ban on fox hunting

AFP, London

Britain's lower house of parliament approved a controversial ban on fox hunting early Wednesday, but the debate was overshadowed by the foot-and-mouth crisis gripping the countryside.

The ban, which had been fiercely opposed by most country dwellers, was passed by lawmakers in the House of Commons by 319 votes to 140—a comfortable majority of 179.

The bill will now go on to the upper chamber, the House of Lords, which has to approve it before it can become law.

It is widely expected that the ban will become bogged down in the House of Lords, where pro-hunting conservatives are in the majority.

Police disarming Dayaks

Madurese refugees face grim future

AFP, Palangkaraya

Indonesia's police chief on Wednesday flew to the Borneo town of Sampit where a shootout between police and army troops marred the evacuation of thousands of Madurese settlers fleeing savage attacks by native Dayaks.

Police in this provincial capital 220 km north of Sampit said meanwhile they were disarming marauding Dayaks burning and looting houses abandoned by fleeing Madurese settlers.

"We have confiscated 1,053 weapons, including swords, spears and axes," police spokeswoman Andi Selvy told AFP by telephone.

She said 20 people had been detained as suspects in the violence and police had shot dead two Dayaks in Palangkaraya who were trying to loot a Madurese house on Tuesday.

"The measure is in line with the shoot-on-sight order which has been in place for several days. The rioters were shot because they ignored the warning shots," Selvy said.

She said the bodies of the two Dayaks were among seven brought to Palangkaraya general hospital on Tuesday. The other corpses, beheaded, were those of a Madurese family of five.

More than 400 people have been killed, many beheaded, in 10 days of clashes between settlers from Madura island off Java and Dayak tribesmen. Most of the dead were Madurese.

Selvy however put the death toll at 300.

The police spokeswoman said

Palangkaraya was calm Wednesday as rain drenched the city, halting the burning and looting spree.

Police chief General Suroyo Bimantoro, accompanied by several staff members, left the provincial capital by helicopter for Sampit.

Bimantoro declined to comment on the shootout between mobile brigade police and army troops at Sampit's river port on Tuesday which left at least three police, three soldiers and three refugees wounded, according to a local doctor.

The port has in the past week been the only safe evacuation port for tens of thousands of Madurese fleeing the bloody attacks and beheadings by Dayaks rampaging through parts of Central Kalimantan province.