

34 killed in
Turkish military
plane crash

AP, Yagmurlu

The Turkish military suffered a major blow when 34 officers and soldiers from the elite Special Forces were killed here in a plane crash: It was the military's worst air disaster as well as the single biggest loss for Turkey's Special Forces.

The officers and soldiers were killed Wednesday when their transport plane crashed into an apricot and beet field in this southeastern village, some 660 kilometres southeast of Ankara.

The commandos of the Special Forces are highly regarded among Turks for their successful battles behind enemy lines against Kurdish rebels, and for their capture two years ago of rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan.

Military experts were studying data from the plane's black box to determine the cause of the accident. One military official blamed technical malfunction.

Private CNN-Turk television said the pilot lost control of the CASA CN-235 at 5,000 metres and that the aircraft fell into a steep dive.

134 immigrants
arrested in
Indonesia

AP, Jakarta

Police have arrested 134 suspected illegal immigrants they believe were bound for Australia: immigration officials said yesterday.

The suspects, who were mostly from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq, were detained on Wednesday in the South Sulawesi provincial capital of Makassar, said immigration official Harsoyo.

He said the refugees, who included women and children, intended to leave for Australia from Bau Bau, a port town on the southern side of island.

Thousands of illegal immigrants have been arrested in recent years trying to sneak into Australia. Many come on old, unsafe boats run by gangs of smugglers. Some vessels are lost without trace.

Israel steps up attacks against Palestinians

Helicopter gunships pound Gaza, West Bank

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel intensified its armed campaign against the Palestinians with helicopter attacks and raids into Palestinian areas, saying it will hold on to some territory indefinitely "for military reasons."

In what have become systematic operations under hardline Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, the Israeli army continued its bombardments Thursday, shelling the Khan Yunes refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip, wounding four Palestinians, hospital officials and witnesses said.

Troops also staged a brief new raid into an area under Palestinian control, destroying houses in the town of Qarara near Khan Yunes, the Palestinian Wafa news agency said.

Late Wednesday, Israeli helicopter gunships pounded Palestinian security buildings at another Gaza refugee camp and in the West Bank town of Jenin, wounding 14 civilians, security and medical sources said.

Israeli forces also conducted five raids into Palestinian land in Gaza in violation of the 1993 autonomy accords and international law, Palestinians said.

But unlike past incursions, which ended within hours, the Israeli army announced it planned to stay indefinitely in some captured houses.

"This is part of an ongoing mission to try to hit those who engage in terror

directly ... in order to protect Israeli citizens and soldiers from multiplying attacks," said a close aide to Sharon, Avi Pazner.

"There is no miraculous potion here. You have to administer this medicine day after day after day for it to work," he told AFP.

He said diplomatic efforts were now taking a "backstage" role, even though Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said Wednesday that the Mitchell report into the seven-month cycle of deadly violence could serve as a launchpad for resuming moribund negotiations.

"Not that I have any doubt that the moment will come when they will be renewed but the dynamic of the situation is such today that the struggle against terrorism has to take precedence," Pazner said.

The Palestinians accused Israel of "terrorising" the population with its invasions.

"All of these acts prove Israel's intentions to reject every effort that may help improving the peace process. The daily killings of Palestinians are a phenomenon of Israeli occupation," Palestinian national security commander Haj Ismail told Voice of Palestine radio.

"Such acts will strengthen our determination and challenge until ending Israeli occupation and establishing our independent Palestinian states with Jerusalem as its capital," he added.



PHOTO: AFP

Relatives of Palestinian Burhan Fahim Al-Shashir mourn during his funeral in the West Bank village of al-Ram on Wednesday. Al-Shashir, 31, was shot dead on the edge of the West Bank town of Ramallah during confrontations between stone-throwing Palestinians and Israeli troops.

India 'not averse' to including Pakistan in peace talks

AFP, Srinagar

success," Pant said.

The Indian official did not elaborate on the measures to be initiated by Islamabad.

In the past, New Delhi has urged Islamabad to stop its support to "cross-border terrorism" in Kashmir. However, the subject is not mentioned in the letter.

Pant stated New Delhi's position in a two-page missive to Kashmir political leader Shabir Shah in response to clarifications sought by him on an Indian offer for negotiations with Kashmiri groups announced last month.

Shah, who heads the pro-independence Democratic Freedom Party (DFP), had earlier sent two envoys to New Delhi to

clarify India's official position on the talks before engaging in a dialogue.

Copies of the letter were circulated among journalists by Shah's aides. Pant's missive was delivered by a special emissary on Tuesday.

"It is only in an atmosphere of peace that an agreed solution for the Jammu and Kashmir problem can be evolved. An agreed solution should, indeed, be the end result of a dialogue," Pant's letter said.

Pant also said that "at this stage", the Indian government was "keen to understand the concerns of all sections of the people" of the Indian-administered part of Kashmir.

He proposed a new meeting with Shah as all issues "are not amenable to summary disposal through an

exchange of letters."

"We should move ahead in search of peace and of an agreed and peaceful solution."

So far, Shah has been the only Kashmiri separatist leader who has shown interest in New Delhi's offer for talks which was announced four months after India's unilateral ceasefire in Kashmir. The "suspension of combat operations" is due to expire at the end of the month.

The All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC), Kashmir's main alliance of separatist political groups, had rejected India's offer for talks arguing that any dialogue on Kashmir's future must include

Pakistan.

8 students killed in school fire

REUTERS, Seoul

A fire at a South Korean boarding school killed eight students as they were cramming for college entrance exams, rescue officials said yesterday.

More than 20 students were hurt in the blaze which began yesterday in a makeshift room on a roof at the college in Kwangju city, around 30 km south of the capital Seoul, media reports said.

"We are not sure yet, but we believe either a burning cigarette or sparks from electrical wiring led to the fire," said Cho Kyung-Hyun, an official at the Hanam Fire Department.

Cho said an investigation had begun.

China charges US scholar with spying for Taiwan

AFP, Beijing

The others are: Li Yaping, Gao Zhan, Qin Guangguang and Wu Jianmin. Of these, only Gao has been formally charged, also with spying.

Li's father is a former top Communist Party theorist who was jailed for supporting the 1989 pro-democracy movement, according to a former colleague.

China's foreign ministry refused to confirm or deny Li's formal arrest, but a spokesman said the Chinese judicial authorities were handling the case in accordance with the law.

"Regarding the question of Li Shaomin, we have in accordance with the relevant provisions of the consular agreement informed the US side," ministry spokesman Sun Yuxi told reporters.

"As far as the specifics and details are concerned, since the investigation is still on the way, we are not in a position to disclose them," he said.

The spokesman said the United States would continue to push for his speedy release.

Li has been in detention since February 25 when he was picked up in the southern city of Shenzhen, just north of Hong Kong, and detained without explanation.

He is one of five US-based Chinese scholars or Chinese-born US citizens to be detained or arrested by the Chinese authorities in recent months.

Gao's son, a US citizen by birth, and her husband were separately detained for nearly a month, causing an uproar in Washington.



PHOTO: AFP

Britain's Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott (white shirt) is assaulted by a protester (striped shirt) as he arrives at the Little Theatre, in the North Wales seaside resort of Rhyl on Wednesday, where he was to address a Labour Party rally. According to television pictures, Prescott was struck by an egg but instead of hurrying away he struck one of the demonstrators in the face. The protester then hit back, showing his hand in the deputy premier's face and wrestling him down on to a low wall.

Labour Party retains lead in opinion poll

AP, London

New polls published yesterday gave Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour Party a commanding lead three weeks before a general election, but the party faced a media battering over several rough-and-tumble encounters with protesters.

Blair was harangued by an angry voter during a visit to a hospital Wednesday, while Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott punched a demonstrator after being struck with an egg.

A week into the campaign for the June 7 election, Labour is maintaining its lead in opinion polls.

A poll by MORI for Thursday's edition of The Times newspaper gave Labour 54 per cent support among decided voters, to 28 per cent for the Conservative Party and 12 per cent for the Liberal Democrats.

Pollsters questioned 1,109 adults in person on Tuesday.

A Gallup poll in the Daily Telegraph showed Labour with 48 per cent support, the Conservatives 32 per cent and the Liberal Democrats 13 per cent.

Gallup interviewed 1,331 adults by telephone on Monday and Tuesday.

The margin of error for both polls is plus or minus three percentage points.