

100 feared dead in Tanzania ferry disaster

REUTERS, Dar Es Salaam

At least 100 people are feared drowned after a ferry capsized on the Kilombero river in central Tanzania, the BBC quoted the country's state radio as saying late on Thursday.

The ferry, owned by the Tanzania Roads Company, is reported to have been carrying about 150 people when it sank, according to the acting police commander of Morogoro region, the BBC quoted state radio as saying.

The accident happened at around 1100 GMT on the Kilombero River, some 180 miles west of Dar es Salaam, an area recently hit by torrential rains, the report said. The cause of the accident has not yet been established.

Four killed in strike-hit Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Four people were killed in militant attacks yesterday in Indian Kashmir where a violent one-day strike to protest the "subjugation" of Muslims in the Middle East and Afghanistan rocked the summer capital, Srinagar.

Muslim separatist militants hurled a hand grenade into the bunker here of the federal Central Reserve Police Force, killing a constable and injuring 11 others, five of them seriously, a police spokesman said.

One of the injured later died in hospital.

The congested area was sealed off and searches launched to track down those involved in the attack. However, no one was arrested.

Two hours later suspected militants hurled another hand grenade at a neighbouring police station, which exploded short of the target, injuring a civilian, police said.

A Kashmir-based pro-Pakistan militant group, the Islamic Front, claimed responsibility for both incidents which came as life was paralysed by a one-day strike called by al-Umar Mujahedin, another Muslim group that favours Kashmir's accession to Pakistan.

Meanwhile, police also used batons to disperse a pro-freedom protest demonstration by several hundred Muslims in Pulwama township, 40 kilometers southeast of Srinagar.

Muslim militants attacked a security camp Friday in the southern border district of Rajouri, killing a security officer and injuring two others, a defence spokesman said.

The incident took place around 5:00 am yesterday when a group of militants attacked a Border Security Force (BSF) camp with "rockets and automatic weapons," the spokesman said.

One militant was killed in retaliatory BSF fire.

13 lawmakers kidnapped in Colombia

AP, Bogota

Suspected rebels dressed in military uniforms burst into a provincial parliament building in the city of Cali on Thursday and kidnapped 13 lawmakers, the army said.

One of the legislators and four aides who were also kidnapped were later rescued by the army, according to Fernando Cardenas of the army's anti-kidnapping unit.

The kidnapers cut the throat of a police officer inside the parliament building, apparently to avoid alerting other authorities with a gunshot, according to radio news reports. Police confirmed the officer died. Two soldiers were injured in the rescue operation on the outskirts of Cali, Colombia's third-largest city and the capital of Valle de Cauca state.

During the rescue attempt, fighting broke out between rebels and government forces and a television crew was caught in the middle. A driver from RCN Television was killed and a cameraman was injured, station officials confirmed.

18 killed in van-truck collision in Kolkata

REUTERS, Kolkata

A head-on collision between a van and a truck killed at least 18 people on the outskirts of the eastern Indian city of Kolkata yesterday, police said.

The accident happened on a bridge in Howrah, just outside the capital of West Bengal state.

"Eighteen people died on the spot when the van they were travelling in collided with a truck coming the other way," a police officer told Reuters.

Further details were not immediately available.

250 Palestinians killed in Jenin camp: Israeli army

Palestinian ready to die defending Jerusalem: Arafat

AFP, Jerusalem

As the dust settled on the bloodiest battle of Israel's West Bank campaign, controversy grew yesterday over the deaths of at least 250 Palestinians in the Jenin refugee camp and Palestinian claims of a "massacre."

With the death toll still in dispute, the Palestinian Authority asked for an international inquiry on Jenin and invited visiting US Secretary of State Colin Powell to inspect the camp for evidence of Israeli army brutality.

A senior army official told AFP under condition of anonymity that Israel "estimates the Palestinian losses at about 250 dead" in the camp, where Israeli forces lost 23 soldiers in fierce street fighting.

His statement came amid contradictory Israeli accounts of the nine-day-long Jenin battle, which ended Thursday and which the Palestinians are offering as proof Israel's army was running out of control on the West Bank.

The confusion began when Israeli General Ron Kitrey acknowledged for the first time that it was "very likely that several hundred Palestinians were killed in the fighting, but there is nothing to the Palestinian allegations of a massacre."

The Palestinians had earlier claimed that 500 people were killed by the Israelis in the impoverished refugee camp, which the Israeli's claim housed dozens of wanted Palestinian militants.

But an Israeli army spokeswoman issued a swift denial of Kitrey's state-

ment, saying the general had misspoken and that the Palestinian death toll, while high, could not be measured in the hundreds.

Kitrey's comments "refer to casualties, those killed or wounded. There is no clear number as to how many were killed," she said.

Another senior Israeli official said Palestinian claims that a "massacre" had been committed in the Jenin camp was "a shameful lie."

Indeed, the Israeli army and government now appear sensitive to all information concerning Jenin, which remained closed off to the world's media while the army pounded the region from the air and ground.

Meanwhile, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat pledged Thursday night by phone at a rally in Cairo that the Palestinians were willing to die to defend Jerusalem.

"We will defend the Arab nation. We will defend the holy Christian and Muslim sites and we will die defending Jerusalem," Arafat said, who addressed by phone a 2,000-strong rally at Cairo's Coptic cathedral.

"The occupation has crossed all limits. It is not only an aggression against our children and our wives but also against our churches and mosques, said Arafat, who has been trapped by Israel in his headquarters in the West Bank city of Ramallah since March 29.

The rally was attended by Christian Coptic leader Pope Shenuda III and Sheikh Mohammad Sayyed Tantawi, head of the Al-Azhar institute, the highest authority in Sunni Islam.



Palestinian women shout with a baby in their arms in front of the hospital of the West Bank town of Jenin on Thursday. A last pocket of 36 hardcore Palestinian militants holed up inside the Jenin Palestinian refugee camp in the northern West Bank surrendered to Israeli troops, bringing to an end the bloodiest battle of Israel's two-week storming of the Palestinian self-rule area.

PHOTO: AFP

UN okays world's first permanent war crimes tribunal

AP, United Nations

Despite vehement U.S. opposition, the world's first permanent war crimes tribunal will come into force on July 1, after receiving more than the 60 needed ratifications Thursday from U.S. allies and nations around the globe.

Hundreds of supporters of the court rose to their feet in a standing ovation after 10 nations deposited their ratifications of the Rome treaty, which establishes the International Criminal Court.

But the U.S. seat in the crowded chamber was empty. The United States boycotted the ceremony, just as it has not attended meetings preparing for the court's operations since last year.

"Those who commit war crimes, genocide or other crimes against humanity will no longer be beyond the reach of justice," U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said in a video statement from Rome. "Humanity will be able to defend itself responding to the worst of human nature with one of the greatest human achievements: the rule of law."

Many countries and organizations have campaigned for years for the court to fill a gap first noticed in 1948, after the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials of German and Japanese war crimes during World War II. Since then, laws and treaties have outlawed geno-

cide, poison gas and chemical weapons, among other things but no mechanism has held individuals criminally responsible.

The United States has been the only vocal opponent of the permanent court, fearing its citizens would be subject to frivolous or politically motivated prosecutions. Washington has campaigned unsuccessfully to exempt U.S. soldiers and officials from the court.

Former President Clinton signed the treaty during his administration, but the United States has refused to ratify it. Two weeks ago the Bush administration said it was considering "unsigned" the treaty to stress that it won't be bound by its provisions.

"I urge all those states that have not yet done so to sign and ratify the Rome Statute as a matter of priority," U.N. Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson told a meeting in Geneva on Thursday.

After the ratifications were submitted, a U.N. legal official announced the court would come into force on July 1.

The court is expected to become operational soon after the states that ratified it meet in early 2003 to select a prosecutor and judges, said Philippe Kirsch, chairman of the commission preparing for the court's operation and Canada's ambassador to

Sweden.

The court will step in only when countries are unwilling or unable to dispense justice themselves for the most serious crimes committed by individuals: genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. It will have jurisdiction only over crimes committed after the treaty enters into force.

Cases can come to the court through a state that has ratified the treaty, the U.N. Security Council, or the court's prosecutor, who must get the approval of a three-judge panel.

The 1998 Rome treaty has been signed by 139 countries and supporters have pledged to keep campaigning to make it universal.

The treaty needed to be ratified by 60 nations to come into effect. Ten countries submitted their ratifications Thursday: Bosnia, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Congo, Ireland, Jordan, Mongolia, Niger, Romania and Slovakia putting the total number at 66. All 10 nations will go down as number 60 to spread the honor.

Richard Dicker, director of the International Justice Program at Human Rights Watch, said "signs are good" that between 90 and 100 countries will have ratified the treaty by early next year.

"The International Criminal Court is potentially the most impor-

tant human rights institution created in 50 years. It will be the court where the Saddam Husseins, Pol Pots and Augusto Pinochets of the future are held to account," Dicker said, referring to Iraq's president, Cambodia's late Khmer Rouge leader, and the former Chilean dictator.

Kirsch said he believes that once the court shows it will act in "a very judicial and nonpolitical way," there will be less opposition.

"In my view, given the United States' tradition of commitment to international justice, it is a matter of time before there is some form of cooperation developing between the United States and an institution of this importance," he said.

In the past 50 years, more than 86 million civilians died in some 250 conflicts around the world, and more than 170 million people were stripped of their rights, property and dignity, according to the Coalition for the International Criminal Court, which represents some 1,000 organizations and legal experts.

"Most of these victims have been simply forgotten and few perpetrators have been brought to justice," the coalition said.



PHOTO: AFP

East Timor independence leader Xanana Gusmao points as he speaks to his supporters during his last campaign for presidency election in Dili yesterday. Gusmao, the charismatic former guerrilla commander, seems certain to sweep to victory in the April 14 poll against his sole challenger Amaral for the presidency of the world's newest nation.

Secularism at risk under BJP rule: Sonia

AFP, Guwahati

Opposition leader Sonia Gandhi warned yesterday that India's secular image was being sullied by the "communal politics" of the Hindu nationalist-led coalition government.

In an address to her Congress party's 14 state chief ministers, Sonia said the sectarian violence in Gujarat -- which has so far claimed more than 800 lives -- was testament to the communal bias of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's BJP party.

"The fact that Gujarat continues to burn is a most dangerous assault on our secular polity and an India that is not secular will simply not

survive, let alone progress," she said.

The Congress has been at the forefront of a campaign seeking the dismissal of Gujarat's BJP chief minister, Narendra Modi.

"The federal government, ruled by the BJP, sees nothing wrong in a chief minister whose law and order administration is so infected by the politics of communalism that it victimises officials who took a courageous stand against communal violence," she said.

Calling upon the Congress-ruled states to take a pledge to ensure the safety of all Indians irrespective of their faith, Sonia said the events in Gujarat had shaken India's image as "a land in which people of differ-

ent faiths life harmoniously with each other."

The Congress president also dwelt on other issues ranging from AIDS eradication to child labour, rural development and solving insurgencies in the northeastern region.

"We cannot afford to rest on our laurels and the Congress governments must continue to stand out as ever-expanding silver linings in the dark clouds created by the BJP," Gandhi said.

The high-level Congress party conclave came as the party rides high after routing the BJP in state elections and municipal polls in New Delhi.

US asks Prabhakaran to give up violence

AFP, Colombo

The United States yesterday welcomed the support of Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebel chief for a Norwegian-backed peace bid, but urged him to abandon violence "unequivocally".

A statement from the US embassy here praised Velupillai Prabhakaran's "commitment to peace and a negotiated political settlement". expressed Wednesday at his first press conference in 12 years inside rebel-held territory.

"We also welcome his acknowledgement that the questions of Sri Lankan (minority) Muslims must be resolved alongside those of the (minority) Tamil people," it said, while stressing the need for Prabhakaran's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to lay down their arms.

"We have long believed that violence cannot achieve the Tigers' stated objectives, and urge Mr. Prabhakaran to abandon its use unequivocally," the statement said.

In his rare press conference, Prabhakaran had declared himself

committed to Norway's peace process even though he was not ready to give up arms immediately.

The rebel leader said conditions were still not right for the LTTE to abandon its policy of independent statehood and added that it would only consider renouncing violence once a "permanent solution" had been reached to the Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict.

More than 60,000 people have been killed in the LTTE's long-running battle for an independent state called Eelam in the island's north-east.