

Office inferno kills at least 59 in Vietnam



Smoke billows from the six-storey Saigon International Business Centre as a fire rages on in Ho Chi Minh City on Tuesday. State media says more than 100 people have died after a fire broke out at the office block heavily populated by foreign companies.

AFP, Ho Chi Minh City

Rescuers said yesterday that they had pulled 59 bodies from the smoking ruins of an office block in Vietnam's commercial capital, as state media said over 100 people died in a fierce fire that ripped through the complex.

Some 500 people were inside Ho Chi Minh City's seven-storey Saigon International Business Centre, home to many foreign companies, when the blaze erupted on Tuesday and scores are still missing.

Diplomats told AFP that at least two Britons, one American and a Croatian were among the dead, and other foreign nationals were feared to be among the missing.

Eyewitnesses described how terrified workers leapt to their deaths from the roof to escape the searing heat as the city's firefighters battled in vain to bring the fire under control.

Nguyen Thanh Tai, vice-chairman of the city's People's Committee, told reporters the official death toll stood at 59 but that it was expected to rise substantially.

Another city official said the building had been one large bank before it was partitioned into scores of separate offices, and that the dividing walls had collapsed and trapped many people inside.

The Ho Chi Minh City-based Tuoi Tre newspaper and the Lao Dong daily both put the death toll at over 100, adding that the blaze began in the popular Blue discotheque in the complex.

Investigators and rescue workers could be seen sifting through the charred hulk of the building in the centre of the booming southern city, which has become a magnet for foreign investment.

Local residents said the fire was triggered by an electrical fault, but city officials said that more time was needed before disclosing their initial report into the cause.

Eyewitnesses described how some people were killed after jumping from windows to escape the flames.

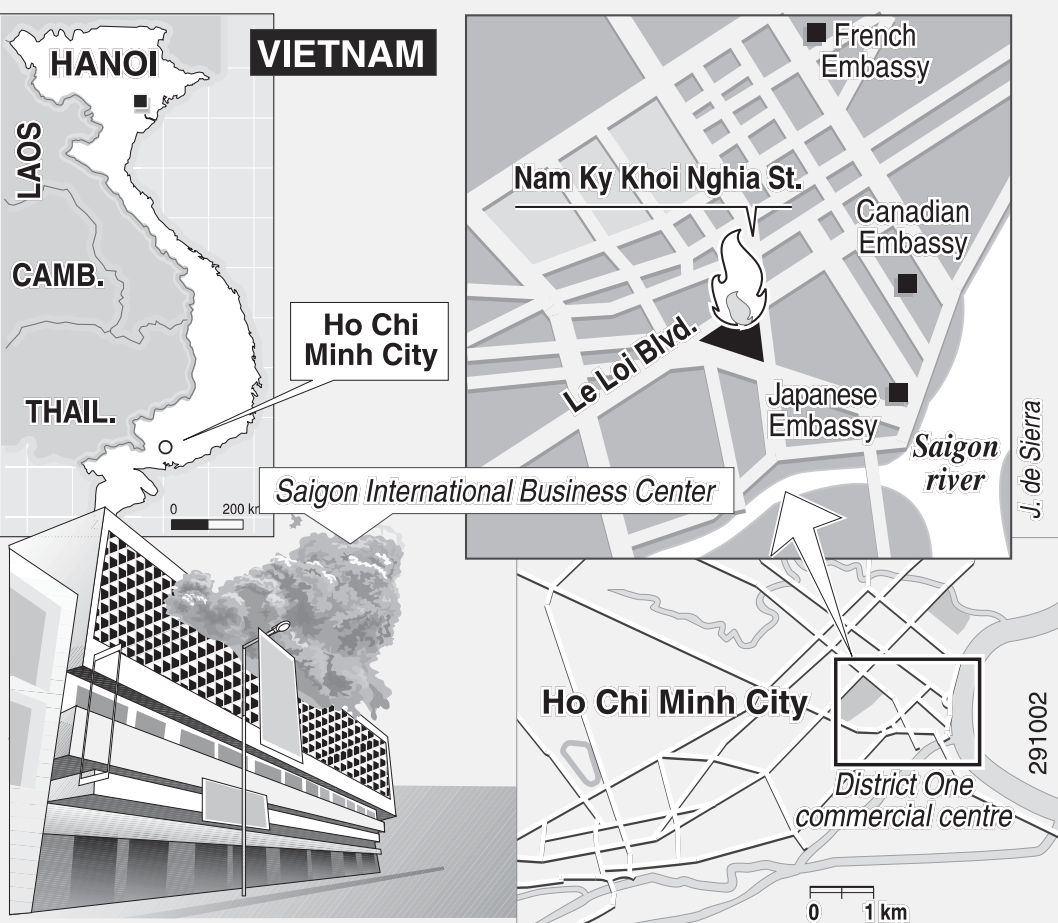
"It was horrible. People were jumping from both sides of the building. I saw many of them lying on the ground burnt and bloody," said Tran Minh Chinh, a shoe repairman.

Companies from Australia, Britain, Belgium, Germany, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand and the United States had offices in the centre.

US giant American International Assurance (AIA) had an office on the second floor of the building.

Nguyen Thi Ngoc Ha, who was attending a training course organised by AIA on the fifth floor, said more than 140 people were in the class but was unsure of their fate or that of an American man running the course.

Tower block fire leaves scores dead



30 die in Chinese coal mine fire

AFP, Beijing

Thirty miners have died in a fire at a coal mine in south China, officials said yesterday, just a week after an explosion at another coal mine killed at least 36 people.

The miners had been confirmed as dead after a fire broke out at the Ertang Coal Mine in Nanning, the capital of Guangxi region, said an official with the Nanning city Production Safety Bureau.

Five miners survived the blaze which began in the early hours of Tuesday, said the official, who gave his name as Zhou.

The state-run Xinhua news agency said faulty equipment appeared to be to blame for the fire.

"Initial investigations show that when the 35 miners were working... an electricity transformer suddenly caught fire, setting alight wooden pillars," the report said.

"The area where the miners were working quickly filled with poison gas."

Nanning mayor Lin Guoqiang has ordered all the city's coal mines to close down as a safety precaution, the China News Service said separately.

The news comes just a day after it was announced that almost 100,000 people had died in China so far this year in work-related accidents, five percent up on the same period of 2001.

Of these, almost 4,500 were killed in the notoriously deadly coal mining industry, according to the State Administration of Work Safety.

This figure is likely to be an underestimate. According to foreign experts and other official statistics, around 10,000 miners -- the great majority coal miners -- die in China each year.



Rescuers carry a body from the Ertang Coal Mine in Nanning, the capital of Guangxi region, on Tuesday. Up to 30 miners have died in a fire at a coal mine in south China Guangxi region.

Sharon govt set to crash over settlement budget

Palestinian gunman kills three in Jewish settlement

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's coalition government looked set to collapse yesterday as the centre-left Labour party prepared to bolt his national unity government in rebellion at spending on controversial Jewish settlements.

Labour, the key partner in the right-leaning coalition, warned it would pull its five ministers from the government unless the right-wing Sharon drastically cuts the 2003 budget's 150-million dollar allotment to Jewish settlements in the occupied territories.

However, the two sides made a last-minute stab at forging a compromise as the parliament vote was delayed by from noon to 4:00pm (1400 GMT).

Violence continued meanwhile in the West Bank, where a Palestinian gunman killed two girls and a woman in a settlement attack before being shot dead himself.

With Labour out of the government, Sharon is expected to ask

President Moshe Katsav to dissolve parliament and call elections within 90 days, some nine months earlier than scheduled.

Labour wants the money re-routed to social spending and job creation. The current budget proposal foresees cuts of 1.8 billion dollars, much of it from social services.

Labour Transport Minister Ephraim Sneh confirmed that Labour's five ministers -- including party chief Defence Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres -- would resign before the vote, expected at around midday (1000 GMT).

Labour already voted against the budget when it went before the cabinet in July.

Ben Eliezer, who asked Sharon to meet and discuss an election date, faces a three-way battle in his party next month to choose its prime ministerial candidate, with a defeat likely at the hands of his left-leaning rivals.

Sharon, on the other hand, looks

set to win a run-off in his Likud party against rival and former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

A poll published Tuesday in the daily Yediot Aharonot showed Likud would increase its seats from 19 to 29 in elections held now, while Labour's share would be slashed from 26 to 21.

Analysts say Sharon could put together a new coalition with Labour after elections in three months, although Ben Eliezer's rivals who are likely to replace him have been vocal in their criticism of collaborating with the right-winger.

As the issue of Jewish settlements was set to bring down the government, a Palestinian gunman launched a bloody attack on one of them, killing two girls and a woman in Hermez in the northern West Bank late Tuesday.

The Palestinian crept into the settlement and opened fire on two girls, one of whom was aged 14, who were sitting outside their house.

A woman who heard the shooting

came out of her house and fired at the Palestinian with a pistol, but he got away and entered another house where he shot at a couple, killing the woman and wounding her husband.

Settlers and soldiers who arrived on the scene shot dead the Palestinian who was armed with an automatic weapon, the sources said.

Foreign ministry spokesman Yonathan Peled said Sharon's security cabinet met early yesterday to null Israel's response, but did not say what it might be.

Hermez, where some 300 Jews live, lies between the Palestinian towns of Jenin and Nablus.

The latest deaths bring the toll of two years of the Palestinian uprising, or intifada, to 2,629 people, including 1,943 Palestinians and 637 Israelis, with the balance made up of foreigners.

It was the second attack on a West Bank settlement in 48 hours.

DPRK offers nuke hopes in talks with Japan

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

North Korea held out hope of an end to its nuclear weapons programme but demanded Japan return five kidnap victims after talks on normalising ties between the two countries ended without progress yesterday.

"If the Americans will help our country and promise not to attack us we can solve the nuclear problem," said North Korean official Pak Ryong Yon, reading from a prepared statement.

International demands that North Korea end its quest for nuclear weapons have been top of Tokyo's agenda in the two-day talks in the Malaysian capital, along with the North's kidnapping of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s.

On the abduction issue, Pak demanded that Tokyo return five Japanese victims of the kidnapping programme who are currently in Japan for what was initially supposed to be a two week stay. Tokyo has indicated that it wants them to stay permanently.

"Please send them back to North Korea as promised," said Pak.

The North Korean official blamed Japan's preoccupation with the nuclear and kidnapping

issues for a lack of progress on normalising ties.

"North Korea wants to normalise ties first and then we can proceed to negotiate about the abduction and security problems, but Japan wants to discuss the abductions and security first before normalisation, so therefore we have not reached any conclusion from this meeting," he said.

"For us it is normalisation first as this would naturally lead to solving of the abduction and security problems."

No decision had been taken on when any future meetings would be held, he said, but described the Kuala Lumpur meeting as "a deep and sincere conversation with Japan".

Earlier, there were signs that tempers were becoming frayed during the first attempt in two years to normalise diplomatic relations between the historic foes, with each side pressing a totally different agenda.

Japan wanted to concentrate on the nuclear issue and North Korea's abduction of at least 13 Japanese citizens to help its spies perfect their cover. Pyongyang says the five currently in Japan are the only survivors and called the issue "almost settled".

Tamil Tigers in Thailand for 2nd round of peace talks

AFP, Bangkok

Tamil Tiger rebels arrived in here yesterday for a second round of peace talks with the Sri Lankan government which will focus on securing aid to help rebuild the shattered island nation.

In a sign of the growing trust between the two sides, the rebel delegation travelled together for the first time through the Colombo airport which its suicide fighters bombed 15 months ago.

Nine members of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) took the same flight as Sri Lanka's top negotiator, GL Peiris, ahead of the start of the Norwegian-backed peace talks Thursday, diplomats said.

The LTTE's chief negotiator Anton Balasingham said confidence in the Sri Lankan government was growing since their first formal meeting at a Thai naval base six weeks ago.

However, the LTTE's problems with the island's second largest minority, the Muslims, remained.

The diplomats said the Tigers had upgraded their negotiation team by sending Karuna, their top military wing leader for the multi-ethnic eastern province, to meet a Sri Lankan Muslim minister here.