

## At least 37 Chinese fishermen feared dead in accidents

AFP, Beijing

Up to 37 Chinese fishermen are feared dead in a string of accidents happening in the days leading up to Christmas, state media and officials said yesterday.

More than 50 fishing boats sank when a tornado ripped through southern Guangdong province over the weekend, the China Daily reported.

Sixteen fishermen were confirmed dead and 10 remained missing, an official at the Zhanjiang Disaster Prevention Command Post told AFP.

"We have recovered 16 bodies and 10 are still missing," she said. "The rescue work is still going on and we haven't given up hope of finding them alive."

The paper reported that more than 220,000 residents in the cities of Zhanjiang, Leizhou, Lianjiang and Suixi County were affected by the whirlwind.

In the eastern part of the country, 11 fishermen were feared dead ten days after their vessel went to sea and subsequently disappeared, the Yangcheng Evenings News said.

Vessel No. 2122 left Qidong port, just north of Shanghai, on December 15, and contact with it was lost six days later, the paper reported.

Rescuers searching for the vessel on Monday found equipment from the vessel as well as personal belongings of its crew, leading them to conclude that the boat had probably sunk, the paper reported.

## Strong quake shakes buildings in Taipei

AFP, Taipei

An earthquake measuring 5.4 on the Richter scale rattled Taiwan yesterday, shaking buildings in the capital, seismologists said.

There were no immediate reports of casualties or damage.

The quake struck at 3:29 pm (0729 GMT) with its epicentre 11.2 kilometres (6.7 miles) northeast of Nanao, a coastal town in the north-eastern Ilan county. It originated 57 kilometres under the seabed.

Taiwan, frequently rocked by earthquakes, was hit by a powerful quake measuring 6.8 on the Richter scale on September 16, but there were no casualties or damage.

A tremor of the same magnitude on March 31 killed five people in Taipei.

## Fire sweeps through medieval castle in Belarus

AFP, Minsk

A major fire swept over the roofs of Belarus's most spectacular medieval castle at Nesvizh, prompting five hours of frantic struggle, officials said early Wednesday.

The fire, which claimed 200 square meters of the roof, was apparently caused by negligence of builders working to restore the castle, police said.

"This is a tragedy, but luckily the fire did not seriously damage the castle," which had been built by the magnat Radziwill family in the 16th century and which boasts a large collection of paintings and books, the museum's chief Valery Stolyarchuk said.

# Pope urges world to avert war in Iraq

REUTERS, Vatican City

Pope John Paul, in his Christmas Day message to the world, urged the world to avert a conflict in Iraq and appealed for peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

In his appeal, his first public reference to the crisis in Iraq, the pope said believers in all religions should build peace.

Looking frail but resplendent in gold vestments, the 82-year-old Polish pontiff said they were called on "in the Middle East, to extinguish the ominous smoldering of a conflict which, with the joint efforts of all, can be avoided".

The Vatican believes that any action in Iraq must be approved by the United Nations.

The message of hope was echoed by Christians at church services around the world, even as the United States stepped up preparations for war in Iraq and worshippers in Asia were nervous over possible fresh acts of terror by Islamic militants.

In Iraq, the country's Christian minority put on a brave face to celebrate Christmas but there was little joy.

The mood was sombre as President Saddam Hussein, in a Christmas message to Iraqis, warned the drums of a US-led war against Iraq were beating louder.

In Bethlehem, traditional birthplace of Jesus, hundreds of Palestinians made their way through rain-swept streets to mass at the Church of the Nativity in Manger Square, a brightly-lit centre of festivities in happier days.

An Israeli army pullback to the outskirts of the Palestinian-ruled West Bank town failed to bring much joy to residents who had been largely confined to their homes under military curfew during a month-long reoccupation.

Palestinian President Yasser Arafat was but a ghost of Christmas past at Midnight Mass in Bethlehem, his empty chair a symbol of holiday gloom for Palestinians in a town ringed by Israeli armour.

Israel for the second year barred him from making the short trip from his battered headquarters in Ramallah. It accuses Arafat of fomenting violence in an uprising for statehood, an allegation he denies.

In Latin America, several thousand people opposed to Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez prayed for peace during an open-air mass in Caracas as a strike kept a stranglehold on the nation's vital oil industry.

Christians in Muslim countries in Asia flocked to churches for services that passed off peacefully despite concerns over bomb attacks. Police had considerably tightened security in the run-up to Christmas.

In Indonesia, Christians packed churches across the world's most populous Muslim nation.

The mood was festive but tinged with sombreness in the wake of the violence that has bedevilled Indonesia, such as church bombings two years ago that killed 19 people and the Bali bomb attacks in October that left almost 200 dead, mostly foreigners.

## Seventeen dead in prison riot in Guatemala

AFP, Guatemala City

Rioting prisoners hacked 17 fellow inmates to death, decapitating and mutilating several of their bodies, during a bloody prison riot that also left more than 40 people injured, authorities said.

In the space of a few hours late Monday and early Tuesday, the Pavoncito penitentiary outside this capital that houses some 1,100 inmates, most of them gang members, turned into a killing ground.

Penitentiary system director Irma Arriaza said authorities did a headcount on Tuesday after the prisoners allowed them inside the compound, and found the badly mutilated bodies of 14 prisoners.

"The faces of many of them were destroyed, their hands and feet mutilated and their bodies burned," said fire spokesman Emilio Najera, who described for reporters the macabre scenes in which machetes were used to mutilate many of those killed.

An AFP photographer said many of the bodies had been hacked in half and some had been buried.

Two of the other three fatal victims died of severe burns at the San Juan de Dios hospital in the capital, he added.

Among the 40 to 50 people injured were a number of anti-riot police, the photographer added.

Deputy interior minister Alfredo Caceres said the riot was triggered by a vendetta, as inmates demanded the transfer out of their facility of prison gang leader Cesar Beteta Raymundo, a convicted kidnapper accused of abusing fellow inmates and blackmailing prison guards.

Angry inmates broke into prison offices, armed themselves with machetes and took after Beteta and his cohorts, authorities said.

"Cesar Beteta was decapitated and his stomach was pierced with a machete," the AFP photographer said.

"Prisoners passed his head around like it was a trophy," he added. "Then they stuck it on the end of a stick. All around us there was the stench of burning bodies."

Television journalist Rolando Santis described the scenes as he

entered the prison with authorities in the early hours of Tuesday as "worse than a horror movie."

Prison authorities blamed the riot, in part, to prison overcrowding and deteriorating living conditions.

"The prison system is overwhelmed. The entire staff should be replaced, but it takes a long time. Half the guards at this prison (Pavoncito) have been working here all their lives," said Interior Minister Adolfo Reyes.

He blamed the riot at Pavoncito to rampant corruption among the prison workers.

Corrupt prison guards were also found to have been behind the massive breakout of 78 dangerous inmates from the Escuintla maximum security prison, also outside the capital, in June 2001.

A United Nations panel investigating prison conditions throughout Latin America found that between 1992 and 1999, inmate population increased 155 percent in Costa Rica, 113 percent in Nicaragua, 90 percent in Honduras and 3 percent in Guatemala, far outstripping available prison space.

## Hamas militant killed by Israeli soldiers in West Bank

AFP, Jerusalem

A member of the Islamic radical movement Hamas was killed and another wounded Wednesday during an exchange of fire with Israeli soldiers in the northern West Bank town of Nablus, Israeli military and Palestinian medical sources said.

The two Palestinians opened fire from a house on an Israeli patrol, which responded by attacking the building, the sources said. Automatic weapons were found on the site and the wounded Palestinian was arrested, they added.

The Palestinian sources said the dead was Ibrahim Abu Awash, a militant on Israel's wanted list.

His death raises the toll from more than two years of the Palestinian uprising to 2,786, including 2,056 Palestinians and 681 Israelis.



An Iraqi Christian girl holds up a candle in front of a banner reading in English "Peace" during Christmas eve mass at the St. Rafeal church in Baghdad. UN weapon experts set off on Christmas eve for a new search across Iraq in the hunt for the country's elusive arsenal.

# Little cheer for Iraqi Christians for Xmas

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraqi Christians put on a brave face to celebrate Christmas yesterday but there was little joy as the shadow of war with the United States loomed large.

Members of the minority Christian community held mass in churches across Iraq, sang carols to celebrate the birth of their savior and prayed for peace.

But with President Saddam Hussein, in a Christmas message to Iraqis, warning that the drums of a U.S.-led war against Iraq were beating louder, the mood was sombre.

"We are celebrating Christmas like any other people in the world and we are praying for peace to all," Maria Mardic told Reuters.

Some said they were celebrating Christmas as an act of defiance.

"We celebrate Christmas and practice our normal life despite the American threats and the embargo," a restaurant owner in Baghdad said.

But the fear of what might be around the corner was all too clear.

"I am going through the motions

here," said a man who identified himself only as Marwan.

"I know it is Christmas but it doesn't feel like Christmas. All what we can think of is the looming war."

The United States has threatened to lead a military coalition to disarm Iraq if it does not obey UN resolutions. It is building up its forces in the Middle East as UN weapons inspectors looking for alleged banned weapons.

Iraq denied it has any nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.

"We want to live in peace and these things spoil our lives and take away the joy of Christmas," Anglican priest Kram Mahni told Reuters.

"We pray to the Lord to halt this war and let us live in peace together, Christians and Muslims, in Iraq," he said at Baghdad's Anglican church.

Flower shops and restaurants in the posh Karradah neighbourhood of Baghdad were decorated for the occasion. Santa Claus made several appearances in the area and his portraits joined pictures of Saddam on some shop windows.

Christians number about 1.5 million out of a total Iraqi population

of about 23 million, the vast majority of them Muslims. The colourful mosaic of Christian sects includes Chaldeans, Copts, Roman and Melkite Catholics, Maronites and Greek Orthodox.

Among the most prominent Iraqi Christians is Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz.

In his Christmas message, Saddam said the festive season this year was marked by special circumstances "created by the powers of evil and darkness to spread chaos and create states of destabilisation and tension" in many parts of the world.

To achieve the goal of controlling the wealth of countries, he said the "forces of evil" resort to "various ways and means of lies and deception, fabrication and false accusation, as well as threats and military aggression."

"It is in this context that the American-Zionist campaign against Iraq is being launched while the tone of a threatened, large-scale military aggression against our peace-loving people is growing louder," he said.

## 7 injured in Indian church attack

### Another church attack foiled in Islamabad

AFP, West Bengal

Seven people were injured when men disguised as worshippers threw bombs at a midnight Christmas service yesterday in eastern India after robbing the priest, police said.

Up to 20 assailants dressed in white to blend in with the faithful packed in with more than 1,000 others at the Catholic church in Maliapota, some 45 kilometres (30 miles) northeast of Calcutta as Christmas prayers were set to begin.

The attackers stormed up to the head priest and forced him at knifepoint to take them to his chambers, said Narayan Chandra Ghosh, deputy inspector general of police for West Bengal state.

"They threatened those assembled with dire consequences if they showed any resistance," Ghosh told AFP.

After robbing some of the worshippers, the men fled the church and threw a number of bombs.

"At least six people were injured in the explosions," he said.

The priest, identified as Ibrahim, suffered a knife wound to his hand,

Ghosh said.

The thieves made off with money from the church's vault and some of the worshippers' cash and gold jewellery, he said.

Police were called in but arrived too late to catch the attackers. Later, four people were detained for interrogation over the incident, Ghosh said. Their identities were not released.

After a panic, the 1,000 worshippers resumed Mass and villagers ringed around a hastily called-in police patrol to guard the church.

AFP from Islamabad says, an attack on a church in the Pakistani capital was foiled when police recovered a bag of grenades and ammunition that was apparently to be used by extremists according to police.

The bag was found on Christmas eve some 100 metres (yards) from the St. Thomas church in Islamabad, where Western and Pakistani worshippers were due to gather for Christmas services.

"We have launched an investigation and no arrests have been made so far," police officer Abdul Razzaq

told AFP.

City police chief Syed Kaleem Imam told the Daily Times that "anti-state elements" had placed the bag near the church, which has been under tight security in the run up to the holiday.

Authorities had been tipped off to the bag in advance, he added.

Worshippers were evacuated from the church Tuesday, and police eventually found the bag which contained two grenades and about 30 rounds of ammunition, Razzaq said.

Members of the church downplayed the threat of the attack, however.

"We received an anonymous call yesterday that a bomb had been planted in the church. Authorities were informed, security people rushed over here and searched the premises but nothing was found," the wife of Father Nadeem Kamran told AFP. She said Christmas services continued Wednesday amid tight security.

## Japanese escapes from Indian jail by sedating jail guards

AFP, Jodhpur

A Japanese man arrested in India for carrying false documents escaped his jailers by offering officers fruit juice laced with sedatives, police said yesterday.

Oikoye Shoehchi, who was arrested in August for allegedly holding fake passports and traveller cheques, tricked police by complaining of a stomach ache and winning a trip to the hospital two days ago, a police spokesman said.

At the Sawai Mansingh hospital in Jaipur, the state capital of the western desert state of Rajasthan, Shoehchi offered policemen the laced juice on Christmas Eve and fled the scene, the spokesman said.

Police said they have contacted the Japanese embassy in New Delhi and authorities in neighbouring states.

## FBI alert on possible airline bomb threat

REUTERS, Washington

The FBI said it was reminding law enforcement officials of what it called terrorists' continued interest in bringing down airliners with explosives hidden in shoes and clothing.

"The FBI possesses no information to indicate a specific plot to use concealed explosives against commercial airlines," the bureau said in a weekly advisory sent to authorities nationwide Monday. "However, law enforcement should remain alert to the possibility."

The alert was tied to the first anniversary of a Dec. 22 plot by Richard Reid, a British citizen, to blow up a transatlantic flight to the United States using explosives hidden in his shoes, said Bill Carter, an FBI spokesman.

The bulletin, a summary of information culled from counterterrorism investigations and analysis, said terrorists had a

"continued interest in targeting airlines by concealing explosives in shoes and clothing."

Reid was overpowered by passengers and crew aboard a Paris-to-Miami American Airlines flight after he was spotted trying to ignite a fuse in his shoe. The flight was diverted to Boston, where Reid was taken into custody.

On Oct. 4, Reid pleaded guilty to all charges against him, identifying himself as a member of al-Qaeda, widely held responsible for the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States.

Asked about his decision to plead guilty, Reid explained, "I know at the end of the day that I done the actions." He said he was dedicated to Osama bin Laden, the al-Qaeda leader.

French antiterrorist police on Nov. 22 arrested six suspected guerrillas allegedly connected to Reid. Five of them were identified as Pakistani, including Kamel Din, leader of a mosque in Faubourg Saint Denis, a district of northern Paris.

# Environment to be another victim of Iraq war

AFP, Washington

Conflict in Iraq would be a new stain on the country's Gulf coast already spotted with oil wells and still recovering from the 1991 Gulf War.

"Today Saddam could deliberately create another catastrophe if attacked," said Jonathan Lash, president of the World Resources Institute, an environmental group.

"In fact, what many recall as a short-lived conflict resulting in the liberation of Kuwait was an environmental disaster, one from which the region and its people have yet to recover," he added.

In 1991, Iraqi troops fleeing Kuwait set fire to 732 oil fields. Between four and six million barrels of oil a day – or 10 percent of the world's daily oil consumption – went up in smoke, sending 500 million tonnes of carbon into the atmosphere.

According to the institute, deposits of oil, soot, sulphur and other black acids were found in samples taken

from farms up to 2,000 kilometres (1,250 miles) away in Iran.

The Iraqis also dumped between six million and eight million barrels of oil into the Indian Ocean, according to US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration estimates.

The oil slick killed 25,000 birds coating the shoreline with a thick black goo that destroyed the fragile marine ecosystem, which already was one of the world's most polluted.

The oil that did not burn formed giant black puddles destroying farmland for generations. In southern Kuwait, a muddy lake 800 meters (2,625 feet) long and up to five meters (16.4 feet) deep in some places contained nine times the contents of the Exxon Valdez.

One of the oldest and richest ecosystems in the world is found in Iraq's Chatt-el-Arab region where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers meet to form the "Fertile Crescent." It is on these ancient farmlands that some

archaeologists believe civilisation was born.

Destroyed during the eight-year war with Iran, followed by the Gulf War and the Shiite rebellion, these Mesopotamian marshlands have been practically dried out by Baghdad's water policies over the last decade.

The Iraqis have built more than 30 dams along the Tigris and Euphrates, redirecting 90 percent of marsh waters primarily to facilitate military access to the Iranian border zone just east of the Bassorah-Baghdad highway.

Once a region spotted with reeds and lakeside villages, the "land between the two rivers" is now an expanse of semi-desert.

It is a catastrophe deemed by the United Nations Environment Programme as "one of the worst engineered disasters of humanity," comparable to the drying out of the Aral Sea or the deforestation of the Amazon.



German soldiers carry the coffin of their colleague, Thomas Schiebel at Kabul Military Airport, during a memorial service before taking the seven bodies back to Germany. Seven German soldiers died in a helicopter crash in Afghanistan last Saturday.



A surf lifesaver (C) has his photo taken with British tourists celebrating Christmas Day in the middle of the Australian summer on Coogee Beach in Sydney, December 25, 2002. Sydneysiders and tourists traditionally flock to the surf and sand on Christmas Day with a seafood picnic and plenty of cold beer.