

At least 12 killed in bus accident in France

AFP, Poitiers

At least 12 people of Moroccan origin living in Belgium were killed and 38 others injured, 12 seriously, when their bus crashed on a highway in western France, local authorities said.

A judicial inquiry was opened into the accident, which occurred near the town of Lige, just south of Poitiers, said Karen Teillard-Mege, a spokeswoman for the Vienne administrative region.

The bus was taking some 50 holidaymakers from Brussels to Algerias in the south of Spain where they were to take a ferry to Tangiers. They had stopped off in Paris to pick up a passenger.

The bus crashed through the security barrier that separates the four-lane highway and flipped over, an AFP reporter said.

There were contradictory reports about the reasons for the crash, which occurred during a storm. Some said the luggage trailer had been too full, while others said the driver had been speeding.



South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki-Moon lays a flower down during the funeral service for South Korean Kim Sun-Il (pictured R) who was killed by Iraqi militants on Tuesday. It was organised at a hospital in Busan, about 420 km (262 miles) southeast of Seoul yesterday.

S Korea firm on more troop dispatch

AFP, Seoul

South Korea condemned the "inhuman" beheading of a Korean hostage in Iraq but said it would never bow to terrorism and would still send thousands of extra troops to the war-torn country.

President Roh Moo-Hyun denounced the killers of Kim Sun-Il, 33, in a brief televised statement as his stunned nation went into mourning.

"We strongly condemn terrorism and we will sternly combat it in cooperation with the international community," said Roh.

"Terrorism is an inhuman crime," he said following a meeting of cabinet ministers and ruling party legislators. "We must never allow it to achieve its purpose."

The militants said Sunday they would head Kim in 24 hours unless Seoul agreed to cancel the deployment of more than 3,000

troops to northern Iraq announced just last Friday. The deadline expired shortly after 1600 GMT Monday.

In graphic pictures aired on the Arab satellite channel Al-Jazeera, a terrified and trembling Kim was shown kneeling in an orange jumpsuit in front of masked gunmen, one of whom was armed with a large knife.

Kim's body was found by the US military Tuesday dumped on the road from Baghdad to Fallujah, the foreign ministry said. CNN TV network quoting a senior coalition official in Iraq said the severed head found with the body had been booby-trapped with explosives.

South Korea already has over 600 military personnel deployed in Iraq, and Roh said the larger troop dispatch scheduled to begin in August would go ahead.

"I have repeatedly stressed that the dispatch of troops is not to

engage in hostile activities against Iraq and other Arab countries but to help reconstruction and reconciliation," Roh said.

South Korean television showed Kim's grief-stricken father, mother and other relatives weeping and hugging one another in their home in the southern port city of Busan as they learned the news.

"Bring back my brother, bring back my brother," wailed younger sister Kim Jong-Sook.

World leaders denounced the killing and US President George W. Bush vowed that Islamic militants would fail to "impose their dark vision" on the world.

Secretary of State Colin Powell praised Seoul's resolve on the troop dispatch, which will make South Korea the third largest coalition partner in Iraq after the United States and Britain.

Iran may free UK detainees today

REUTERS, Tehran

The release of eight British military servicemen held in Iran after they entered Iranian waters is likely to be delayed until today, Iran's Arabic-language Al-Alam satellite television said.

"Taking decisions on releasing the detained (British) troops is likely to be delayed to Thursday as there is not enough time, because the delegation will arrive late tonight to the region," the channel said quoting one of its correspondents.

A delegation of British diplomats has already arrived in the area.

The report also said the three British boats and the equipment in them would stay in Iranian naval custody.

British diplomats landed in Khuzestan in southwest Iran yesterday for the handover and were headed to Bandar Mahshahr, a petrochemical centre.

"We have just landed in Ahvaz," a diplomat said, speaking from the provincial capital of Khuzestan, the oil-rich province on the Iraqi border. They were arriving from the Iranian capital Tehran.

Family of South Korea hostage blame govt

BBC NEWS ONLINE

The family of the South Korean hostage beheaded in Iraq has accused the government of betrayal for failing to secure his release. The parents of Kim Sun-Il, distraught over their son's grisly death, have expressed anger over the government's determination to send an extra 3,000 troops to Iraq.

Kim had been working in Iraq as an interpreter for a South Korean supplier to US troops before his kidnap in Falluja on 17 June. The 33-year-old had been in Iraq for just over a year, and was planning to return home in July for his father's 70th birthday.

"My poor son was killed by the government," said Mr Kim's mother, Shin Young-Ja, after returning home from hospital where she was taken suffering from shock.

"The cursed government kept declaring it stood firm on its deci-

sion to send troops while claiming it was doing its best to save him," she said.

The hostage's father, 69-year-old Kim Jong-Kyu, said the government had not been sincere with them and blamed the foreign ministry for failing to prevent his son's death. "I want to bury him in the foreign ministry building. That is all I want from this government," he said.

The family had urged Seoul to put their son before troop deployments. Kim's mother has said she last heard from her son in April when he reassured her he was safe and well.

Shin Young-ja told Yonhap news agency on Monday her son's life should come before any plan to send troops.

"I used to think in the past the troop dispatch had to take place even when my son was in Iraq, but now, in such a situation, I think my son must be saved first," she said.

5 rebels killed, 23 injured in fresh Kashmir violence

AFP, Srinagar

Indian troops shot dead five Islamic militants in restive Kashmir, three of them near the de facto border with Pakistan, while 23 people were injured in a rebel grenade attack, police said yesterday.

Three of the rebels were killed when they entered the Indian zone of disputed Kashmir in Karnah sector of northern Kupwara district overnight, a police spokesman said in Srinagar, the Kashmiri summer capital.

Another two militants were killed during an encounter with counter-insurgency troops inside Kupwara district overnight, police said.

Meanwhile, 22 civilians and a policeman were injured when a grenade hurled by suspected militants at a passing security

patrol in southern Bijbehara town Wednesday missed the target and exploded among a crowd of pedestrians, police said.

"Seven of the injured are critical," a police spokesman said.

The killings along the Line of Control (LoC) came ahead of a visit to the de facto border Wednesday by a six-member delegation of European Union parliamentarians.

"They have left for the LoC this morning where they will be appraised of the latest situation by field commanders," Indian army spokesman Colonel Mukhtair Singh told AFP.

During their three-day stay in the region, the team will be meeting separatists, officials and members of civil society.

Last week five militants were killed along the LoC in Kupwara district when they infiltrated into

Indian Kashmir from the Pakistani zone of the scenic region.

"By killing three more militants along the Line of Control another attempt by militants to infiltrate into our side has been foiled," the police spokesman said.

Infiltration has come down marginally since India and Pakistan announced a ceasefire in November last year and began fencing the border.

This year troops have foiled 20 attempts by rebels to cross into Indian Kashmir, killing some 50 rebels, the military says.

Islamic rebels are fighting to secede Kashmir from India and join it with neighbouring Pakistan or remain independent.

More than 40,000 people have died since the beginning of a 15-year-old anti-Indian insurgency in the region. Separatists put the toll between 80,000 and 100,000.



An injured Kashmiri woman cries as she is carried out of an ambulance upon arrival at a Srinagar hospital following a grenade attack in Bijbehara, some 40 kilometres South of Srinagar, yesterday.

Saddam letter tells of high morale

REUTERS, Washington

Former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein says his spirit and morale are high and asks relatives to "say hello to everyone" in the only message he has sent to his family since his capture last December, Newsweek magazine reported Tuesday.

The message addressed "to my daughter" was delivered to Saddam's eldest daughter, in Amman, Jordan, after representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross visited him on February 21, Newsweek said, citing one of 20 lawyers retained by

the family.

The heavily censored letter was shown to Newsweek by one of the lawyers, Mohammed al Rushadan, according to an article posted on the magazine's website.

The letter, apparently in Saddam's handwriting, reads in part: "In the name of God the Merciful... To my small family and my big family, salaam alekum... As for my spirit and my morale, they are high, thanks to greatness of God. And say hello to everyone," the report said.

US military authorities censored nine of the 14 lines written on a

standard "family message form" provided by the ICRC, Newsweek said.

"Two-thirds of it are blacked out," Rushadan was quoted as saying. "There are only 17 words you can read, there's not enough to understand the meaning very well."

Rushadan also produced what the ICRC calls a "capture card." It was apparently signed by Saddam and dated January 21. The card lists Saddam's occupation as "President of the Republic of Iraq" and his rank as "Field Marshal." It noted he was in "good health" and "slightly wounded."

India, Pakistan agree to reopen Mumbai and Karachi consulates

AFP, New Delhi

India and Pakistan have agreed to reopen consulates after a decade in their largest cities Bombay and Karachi, in the latest thaw in tensions between the rival neighbours, a report said yesterday.

Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh told The Hindu newspaper that he and his counterpart Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri in talks during an Asian conference in Qingdao, China, agreed to the reopening in principle but no dates were set.

The consulates in the two port cities would make travel easier for members of families split during the subcontinent's partition in 1947 and who now can only seek visas at embassies in New Delhi and Islamabad.

The Bombay and Karachi consulates were shut down in 1994 amid a round of bilateral disputes including the Pakistani government's requests to take charge of the Bombay home of the country's founder Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

Singh said the Jinnah House issue did not figure in his talks with Kasuri.

India and Pakistan had withdrawn their ambassadors from each other's capitals and sent a million troops to their borders after the Indian parliament was attacked in December 2001 by Islamic militants allegedly backed by Pakistan.

Envoys were reappointed and the countries resumed bilateral talks, including over disputed Kashmir, after India's then prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee offered Pakistan a "hand of friendship" in April 2003.

The peace process has continued after Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist lost elections this year to a left-leaning coalition, with the two countries set for a new round of negotiations this weekend on easing tensions.

India and Pakistan agreed Sunday to set up a hotline to avoid nuclear confrontation and continue a ban on nuclear tests.

BJP resolution skips Hindutva issue

PTI, Mumbai

Skippping core Hindutva issues, the draft political resolution before the BJP national executive yesterday focussed its attack on Congress president Sonia Gandhi accusing her of belittling the office of Prime Minister by the way Manmohan Singh was appointed to the top post.

Meeting for an introspective session after the shocking defeat in the Lok Sabha election, the leaders took up for discussion the draft resolution which expressed confidence in the leadership of former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and senior leader LK Advani. It noted that the party has grown under the statesmanship of Vajpayee.

Addressing the gathering, Advani asked partymen to take along the Sangh Parivar to widen the party base.

The resolution also proposed to launch a campaign against the

Congress-led UPA government accusing it of soft pedalling the issues of terrorism and infiltration that is posing a grave threat to the country's security and integrity.

Notwithstanding the demand of the members at the executive exhorting the party to get back to aggressive Hindutva, the resolution skipped the core Hindutva issues like Ram Janmabhoomi, abrogation of Article 370 and Uniform Civil Code. The resolution is expected to be adopted without any major changes. If at all, the changes will be minor in nature, highly-placed sources said.

Directing its attack on Sonia Gandhi, the resolution accused the Congress of blemishing the system of governance by creating two power centres in which Prime Minister Manmohan Singh plays second fiddle to "super Prime Minister" Sonia Gandhi.

"For the first time in the country's history, we do not have an elected Prime Minister, but a

selected Prime Minister bereft of real authority. The Congress party and its allies are systematically diluting the dignity and honour of the office of the Prime Minister," the four-page draft resolution said.

"The BJP wishes to alert the entire political class in this country that the belittling of the high office of the Prime Minister, and the emergence of an extra-constitutional power Centre in the person of Sonia Gandhi and the new phase of the Congress party's craven surrender, yet again, to dynasticism are ominous developments in our democracy," the resolution said.

The party also expressed its concern over the rise of Communists as the "third power centre" in the ruling establishment. "It is now clear that, although the ruling UPA is numerically led by the Congress party, it is ideologically and programmatically led from outside by CPI(M), which also holds the veto power and the rope to the guillotine."

US bids for war crimes immunity

AFP, United Nations

Facing strong opposition here stoked by the prisoner abuse scandal in Iraq, the United States made a bid to get one final year of immunity for US troops from prosecution for war crimes.

Washington presented a draft Security Council resolution last month to renew the immunity already in place that shields US forces from the reach of the International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague.

But the renewal that the United States had been hoping would be automatic ran into problems after

revelations that the US military abused and possibly tortured detainees at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad.

On Tuesday, the United States offered a compromise that would make this the final one-year exemption, although it was not immediately clear if that would be enough for wary fellow nations on the council.

"The United States is the biggest provider of global security and we have special concerns in this area," US deputy ambassador James Cunningham said.

"We agreed to the change because the members of the coun-

cil are becoming increasingly uncomfortable," he told reporters. "We are willing to take this step to preserve council support and to provide a year to phase out this arrangement."

Diplomats said they would wait for reaction from their capitals on Wednesday before taking any decision, although some suggested the US move was insufficient.

The compromise was offered after it became clear that Washington did not have the nine votes needed on the 15-member council on the initial resolution, which would have allowed the exemption to be renewed again in future.

Russia attack toll stands at 92

AP, VLADIKAVKAZ, Russia

A nighttime attack this week in the Russian republic of Ingushetia by militants near the border of war-ravaged Chechnya killed 92 people and wounded 120, a local legislator said yesterday.

Among the dead were 67 members of law enforcement agencies, said the legislator, who is a member of the regional government commission investigating the assault. He spoke on condition of anonymity.

The regional branch of Russia's Federal Security Service received information about the movements of an armed group about 30 minutes before the start of attacks late Monday night, the ITAR-Tass news agency quoted the deputy of the regional branch, Andrei Konin, as saying.

"But we did not expect such breadth simultaneous attacks on 15 sites," Konin told ITAR-Tass.

An Ingush policeman who identified himself only by his first name, Musa, said the attacks appeared to be timed around the changing of the guard at the Kavkaz checkpoint, the biggest army and police traffic stop on the main

highway between Chechnya and Ingushetia, shortly before midnight Monday.

Many soldiers were killed in ambushes, while police and other law enforcement officials were shot and killed after being called to work after an alert was issued, Musa said. The officials were stopped at checkpoints set up by the gunmen, who checked their identification papers. He said the gunmen disarmed and tied up some traffic policemen but spared their lives.

Flags flew at half-staff and all entertainment television programs in Ingushetia were canceled, as a three-day mourning period began yesterday.

On Tuesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Ingushetia and said a regiment of Interior Ministry forces would be stationed there permanently, raising the Kremlin's troop commitment to the troubled Caucasus region.

The coordinated assaults by heavily armed fighters on police and border guards facilities in the main Ingush city of Nazran and several smaller settlements were a graphic demonstration of Russian forces' vulnerability to guerrillas.