

## Russian chopper crash kills all 15 on board

AFP, Moscow

A Mi-8 transport helicopter crashed in Russia's Siberia yesterday killing all 15 people on board, Russia's emergency ministry said.

The three crew and 12 passengers on board the helicopter were killed when it crashed in forest in western Siberia's Tyumen region, an emergency ministry spokesman said.

"The helicopter started spinning around then fell to the ground and exploded," the spokesman told AFP, quoting a witness at the scene.

The stricken helicopter was lying on its side in flames some 90 km from the settlement of Raduzhnoye, the Interfax news agency said.

The helicopter was one of two on a mission to survey the region's dense forest, a spokeswoman said earlier.

Those on board the second helicopter had landed nearby and were attempting to help at the crash scene.

Meanwhile rescuers and medics were on their way to the scene.

A commission has been set up to investigate the crash, ITAR-TASS news agency said.



PHOTO: AFP

**US soldiers board a chartered jetliner at Osan Air Base in South Korea yesterday for a flight to Kuwait. Hundreds of US soldiers left for Kuwait, the first major airlift in the planned redeployment of American troops from South Korea to Iraq.**

## US allies in Iraq 'won't yield' to kidnappers

BBC ONLINE

The US says all 32 countries in the multinational force in Iraq have agreed not to give in to the demands of hostage-takers.

"We are united in our resolve to make no concessions to terrorists," the state department announced.

This is a clear message to militants that seizing foreigners to put pressure on governments to withdraw their troops will not work, correspondents say.

Six Jordanian and Turkish hostages were released earlier on Wednesday.

The US announcement came as UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said the force would be used to guard UN personnel and property when they returned later in August.

Staff were withdrawn last year after two suicide bomb attacks on their headquarters.

About 20 other foreign nationals are still being held captive in Iraq.

There has been a dramatic upsurge in kidnapping in recent weeks as militants try to exert emotional pressure on foreign governments to pull out, and on overseas

companies to stop doing business in Iraq.

While several private firms have agreed deals to secure the release of their employees, the US said countries in the multinational force would not yield.

State department spokesman Richard Boucher said the idea for a common policy statement on hostage-taking was first proposed by Bulgaria.

The US had then followed it up with each of the other governments in the multinational force and reached an agreed principle to be expressed by individual nations in their own words.

The coordinated campaign aims to signal to terror groups that there would be no "weakening of resolve", the US statement read by Boucher said.

Countries with troops in Iraq or whose nationals have been working for companies supplying the US military have been particular targets.

As well as sending a clear message to militants, it is also a response to the Philippines which withdrew its own troops early to ensure the safe release of one of its nationals, says the BBC's Jill McGivering in Washington.

That move angered the US and increased pressure on other members of

the multinational force facing similar demands, she reports.

"We are committed to making sure that the perpetrators of terrorists acts against our citizens and soldiers are brought to justice," the US statement said.

"We understand that conceding to terrorists will only endanger all members of the multinational force, as well as other countries who are contributing to Iraqi construction and humanitarian assistance," it said.

Meanwhile, four Jordanian lorry drivers have been freed in Falluja, apparently after a group of Iraqis stormed the place where they were being held and set them free.

Two Turkish drivers, Abdulrahman Demir and Said Unurlu, were also released by militants from Tawhid And Jihad who said their haulage firm had agreed to stop work in Iraq.

Tawhid And Jihad earlier announced it had shot dead another Turkish lorry driver, Murat Yuce.

The four Jordanians have been named as Ahmad Abu Jaafar, Mohammad Ahmad Khleifat, Khaled Ibrahim Masoud and businessman Ahmad Tayseer Sunokrot.

## Yemen army attack on rebels: 42 killed

AFP, Sanaa

About 42 people were killed and 80 wounded in 24 hours as army forces battled their way through a key stronghold of a rebel Muslim preacher in northwest Yemen, military sources said yesterday.

Army forces launched a fresh offensive late Tuesday on the mountainous Maran district of Saada province where Hussein Badr Eddin al-Huthi and thousands of his supporters are besieged, they said.

The casualty toll was from both sides, they said, while a medical source in the area told AFP that "many" of the dead and wounded were from the army.

A military source, asking not to be identified, said about 30 Huthi militants surrendered on Thursday, a day after 20 others gave themselves up to the advancing army.

Witnesses told AFP that the army crossed Al-Sharaf mountain before advancing half-way across Al-Hikmi mountain, the highest peak in the Maran area and a key stronghold of Huthi and his followers.

They said the army was using tanks, armored vehicles and cannons in the offensive, while the militants were putting up fierce resistance with sniper fire, machine-guns and rocket-

propelled grenades.

The military sources said the army expected an early end to the rebellion after the advances made by the army in the latest offensive.

The onslaught came after the failure of new mediation efforts to negotiate the surrender of Huthi and his followers, the sources added.

The mediation efforts had been carried out by a group of opposition leaders, clerics and tribal chiefs at the behest of Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

A previous mediation effort on June 28 led by MPs, including one of Huthi's brothers, was abandoned after the preacher refused to surrender.

One of the MPs involved in the abortive effort, however, accused elements of the army of undermining efforts to resolve the crisis peacefully.

The Yemeni president has accused Huthi and his supporters of being "foreign agents" seeking to foment sectarian strife, and has promised the preacher a fair trial if he surrenders.

But Huthi told AFP last month that the conflict was a result of his anti-US stand and accused Saleh of seeking "to please the United States at the expense of his own people".

## Freed Britons allege 'systematic brutality' at Guantanamo

AFP, London

Three British prisoners released from Guantanamo Bay levelled accusations of systematic abuse Wednesday in a lengthy report that civil rights groups said exposed the military facility as "a legal black hole."

The 115-page report detailed incidents of sexual and religious humiliation, as well as brutal interrogation methods that induced false confessions.

"What this shows is that you can't trust at all the information coming out of Guantanamo," said Michael Ratner, president of the Center for Constitutional Rights.

"This is a chilling, chilling document ... of what can happen when an administration decides to leave law behind and run an interrogation camp that they say is a law-free zone," Ratner said.

Asif Iqbal, Ruhul Ahmed and Shafiq Rasul, from Tipton in England, were detained in Afghanistan in November 2001. They were released without charge in March after more than two years in custody -- most if it at the US

military base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Copies of the report were sent Wednesday to Senator John Warner, chair of the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

Rasul and Iqbal detailed their confinement in open cages in the sweltering Cuban heat, with many prisoners suffering bites and stings from the snakes and scorpions allowed to roam the cells.

The men also claimed to have been beaten, shackled in painfully contorted positions, forcibly injected with drugs and deprived of sleep.

At one point, Iqbal said he was coerced by a female interrogator into admitting that he was one of the people shown in a videotape listening to a speech from Osama bin Laden.

"She said to me, 'I've put detainees in isolation for 12 months and eventually they've broken. You might as well admit it now so that you don't have to stay in isolation'," Iqbal said.

"I was going out of my mind ... Eventually I just gave in and said, 'OK it's me'," he added.

## Israel moves to expand settlement defying US

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel has begun work on a major expansion of its biggest West Bank settlement in a move certain to draw concern from a visiting White House envoy yesterday, officials said.

New construction would link Maale Adumim to Jerusalem and could cut Palestinians off from the city they seek to share as the capital of a future independent state. It would flout a US-backed "road map" for peace.

News of the project drew fury from Palestinians, who suspect Israel will strengthen its hold on big chunks of the West Bank while trying to distract attention with a plan to uproot smaller settlements in the occupied Gaza Strip next year.

Political sources said Sharon recently put into action a decade-old plan to develop 3,750 acres of West Bank land linking Maale Adumim to Jerusalem. Some roads had already been marked out and sewage pipes laid, they said.

The latest storm over Maale Adumim followed revelations this week that Sharon had approved 600 new housing units for the suburban-style settlement. The details of the new expansion looked

much bigger.

Maale Adumim's mayor said house building in the new area could begin in mid-2005, just as Sharon is due to begin removal of Gaza Strip settlements under a plan to "disengage" from almost four years of conflict with the Palestinians.

Maale Adumim already has nearly four times as many residents as the 8,000 Jews who would leave the Gaza Strip.

"Within about half a year the planning in the Construction and Housing Ministry will be completed, such that the residential blueprint can be submitted to the defense minister for approval," Mayor Benny Kashriel told Maariv newspaper.

The United States has criticized the plan for building more houses at Maale Adumim and asked Israel to abide by an undertaking not to expand settlements on land it captured from Jordan and Egypt in the 1967 Middle East war.

White House envoy Elliot Abrams would raise the issue with Sharon aides on Thursday, US officials said. All settlement expansion is meant to be halted under a peace "road map" that has been stymied by violence. The international community regards the settlements as illegal. Israel disputes this.



PHOTO: AFP

**A Palestinian family sits on the rubble of their home destroyed by the Israeli army in the northern Gaza Strip town of Beit Hanun yesterday. The Israeli army left a trail of devastation in Beit Hanun after a five-week siege and occupation of the Gaza Strip's traditional breadbasket which failed to put a halt to rocket attacks by Palestinian militants.**

## 9 dead in riding school fire in France

AFP, Chambéry

Seven teenagers and two adults were believed to have died yesterday when a fire swept through a riding school in the Savoie department of southeast France overnight, police said.

Emergency workers picking through the debris of the buildings had discovered the remains of at least three bodies and were awaiting the completion of their task before officially confirming the toll.

One woman teacher was taken to hospital suffering from severe burns.

The fire broke out at around 3.30 am at the Les Bauges riding school near the village of Lescheraines, and swept through the wooden building where the victims were sleeping. The blaze was brought under control after three hours.

"All theories are possible: recent construction work, a cigarette, a storm," said state prosecutor Caroline Contran who was to open a judicial inquiry.