



Villagers search for relatives among the dead at the Willis Pierce Memorial hospital premises at Wai, in Satara yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Search for missing at India's temple stampede scene

AGENCIES, Wai

Dazed relatives on Wednesday searched for near and dear ones missing after a stampede at a hilltop Hindu shrine in Maharashtra killed at least 340 pilgrims, mostly women and children, and hundreds injured on Tuesday, with the authorities still unable to say what caused the tragedy.

However, official figures put the death toll at 258.

Grieving relatives began to assemble at Wai from different parts of the state to collect dead bodies or search for the missing ones. Police sources say hundreds were still missing.

Officials say while 60 percent of bodies have been identified, many more were lying unclaimed at government hospitals in Satara and Wai. "It is difficult to identify the bodies as in some cases entire families have perished," said a district official, adding many were charred beyond recognition.

Kalawati Shinde has come from Satara town looking for her sisters' family soon after hearing the news of the stampede. She could manage to trace her seven-year-old niece at a Wai hospital. Other family members are feared killed.

"My sister was her with her family, including in-laws. I have not been able to locate their bodies. I really don't know how the child escaped unhurt. I am absolutely shocked," said Shinde.

The state government has ordered a judicial inquiry into the stampede, one of the worst incidents of its kind in recent years, as confusion still persists on what led to the stampede.

Six bus-loads of injured were rushed to hospitals in Wai, Satara and other hospitals in neighbouring areas, district officials said at the site adding that the exact number of injured could not be ascertained immediately.

Till late on Tuesday night, bodies were being brought to hospitals. Most of the victims died of suffocation after being trampled over, doctors in hospitals said.

There are conflicting versions as to how the stampede took place. While officials said an electrical short circuit and a resultant explosion in a nearby transformer with loud bang led to panic among devotees, some witnesses said the coconut-breaking ceremony made the ground outside the temple doors slippery because of which some dancing pilgrims fell and were trampled by hordes of devotees.

Satara Police Superintendent CP Kumbhar said that news of people getting trampled or agitated the devotees in the long queue who turned violent and torched shops and pandals on the narrow route leading to the temple atop a hill.

The fire caused the gas cylinders, used for cooking as well as for lighting, to explode, adding panic among the pilgrims.

As the fire quickly spread, panicky devotees, numbering between 250,000 and 300,000, ran down the narrow path from the hill shrine, trampling large numbers, mainly women and children.

Many survivors complained of poor arrangements, saying policemen just did not know what to do and that it took a long time before bodies could be transported to hospitals in the region.

This was the second major temple disaster in the state after August 27, 2003 when 41 people were killed in a stampede while taking a dip at Kumbh Mela at Trimbekshwar near Nasik.

Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh, who visited the site, along with Deputy Chief Minister RR Patil, announced ex-gratia of Rs one lakh to the next of kin of those killed and Rs 25,000 to seriously injured in the mishap.

Israel sets diplomacy with Palestinians

Both sides discuss summit soon

AGENCIES, Jerusalem

Israeli and Palestinian officials held talks Wednesday aimed at arranging a summit between their two leaders, as they resumed ties for the first time since Mahmud Abbas took over as Palestinian Authority president.

"We discussed in great depth and detail several political and security issues, mainly preparations for a summit between the Palestinian and Israeli leadership," Palestinian negotiations minister Saeb Erakat told AFP.

"We agreed to hold another meeting next week to make further preparations for the summit," he said after the talks in Jerusalem with Dov Weisglass, a senior adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Contacts were renewed at the request of Sharon after "positive developments in the Palestinian Authority and efforts to prevent terror, violence and incitement", a statement from Sharon's offices said.

It stressed that any progress would be "dependent on comprehensive Palestinian activity against terror, violence and incitement".

Although the statement did not detail what was discussed, it said a second meeting would take place next week to continue security contacts ahead of the planned Sharon-Abbas meeting.

Sharon froze all contacts with the Palestinian Authority on January 14 after a suicide bombing in Gaza that killed six Israelis, casting a shadow over Abbas's inauguration the following day.

Security contacts were resumed last week, leading to an agreement for the deployment of some 2,500 Palestinian security forces in the Gaza Strip with orders to prevent

attacks by Palestinian militant groups on Israeli targets.

A Sharon-Abbas meeting would be the first top-level talks between Israel and the Palestinians in four years.

Earlier Israeli Prime Minister Sharon approved a start to diplomatic talks with the Palestinians in response to a lull in militant attacks secured by their new leader Mahmud Abbas, officials said yesterday. The decision came hours before senior US diplomat William Burns was to arrive on a fresh White House mission to revive a "road map" peace plan envisaging a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip co-existing with a secure Israel.

Israeli Vice Premier Shimon Peres said the new diplomatic contacts aimed initially to coordinate with Palestinians a planned Israeli pullout from occupied Gaza this year. Sharon has cast the plan as "disengagement" from four years of conflict.

Saddam eligible, but can not vote for technical reasons: Report

AFP, Dubai

Saddam Hussein and his senior aides detained in Iraq have the right to vote in Sunday's elections but they cannot cast their ballots for technical reasons, an election official was quoted as saying Wednesday.

"Legally, former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein and his aides have the right to vote as long as they are not on trial... But they can't stand as candidates because they are being prosecuted for war crimes and crimes against humanity," Abdel Hussein al-Hindawi, president of the electoral commission charged with organising the elections told Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper.

However, Saddam and his aides "cannot" exercise their right to vote because the election commission does not have the time or the means to set up ballot boxes in prisons, he added.

"Due to time constraints, the commission cannot install ballot boxes to allow prisoners to take part in the elections," Hindawi said.

Tigers recruited 40 child soldiers since tsunamis: UNICEF

AFP, Colombo

Tamil Tiger rebels have recruited at least 40 child soldiers since tsunamis devastated Sri Lanka's coastline and killed nearly 31,000 people, the United Nations children's fund said Wednesday. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had taken three children from a relief centre for survivors while others had been recruited from areas of the northeast by the guerrillas, UNICEF said.

"We have 40 cases of confirmed child recruitment since the tsunamis," UNICEF spokesman Geoffrey Keele said. "We had hoped that with such a disaster the LTTE would have ended this practice. But unfortunately not."

A child as young as 13 was among the 22 boys and 18 girls recruited by the Tigers despite repeated international condemnation of the practice. Most of them were aged between 15 and 17.

Keele said UNICEF was involved in extensive post-tsunami relief operations and had hoped the Tigers would stop taking children into their ranks.



Sri Lankan woman Anuska sits among the rubble of her house at Seenigama village, some 90 km south of Colombo, yesterday exactly a month after deadly tsunami struck causing widespread destruction.

PHOTO: AFP

India honours widow of murdered Australian missionary

AFP, New Delhi

India Wednesday conferred a prestigious civilian honour on Australian Gladys Staines, a social worker and widow of missionary Graham Staines who was killed by a Hindu mob along with their two sons in 1999.

It was one of two Padma Shri awards given to foreigners this year, with the other going to author and former British Broadcasting Corporation correspondent Mark Tully.

The award is given for "distinguished service... in any field," the home ministry said. When contacted in Australia, Staines, 54, told the Press Trust of India news agency she was "absolutely overwhelmed and stunned by the news".

"But I am feeling very humbled at the same time. It's a rare honour and a humbling experience." Staines and her husband Graham had spent more than 30



PHOTO: AFP

Gladys Staines, widow of slain Australian missionary Graham Staines, leaves a court after making her deposition in the capital of the Indian state of Orissa, Bhubaneswar on 12 June 2002.

years working with leprosy patients in Baripada district in the eastern state of Orissa.

In January 1999 Graham and his two sons Philip, 10, and Timothy, eight, were burnt to death by a mob of Hindu fanatics who accused him of forcibly converting poor Hindus to Christianity.

The three were asleep in their jeep when the attack took place.

They tried to escape the flames but the mob -- led by principal suspect Ravindra Pal, alias Dara Singh, and armed with axes -- prevented them.

Despite the tragedy Staines stayed on in India with her daughter, overseeing the completion of a hospital for leprosy patients in Orissa. She left for Australia only last year.

In September 2003 Singh and 17 others were sentenced to death by a local court. Immediately after the verdict Staines said she had forgiven the killers.

Bush seeks \$80b for military operations

REUTERS, Washington

President Bush on Tuesday asked for more than \$80 billion in new funding for military operations this year in Iraq and Afghanistan, shattering initial cost estimates and pushing the total for both conflicts to nearly \$300 billion so far.

The money -- which the White House acknowledged would push the federal deficit to a record \$427 billion -- will be used in part to repair and replace equipment for US troops and to equip three new Army brigades.

Bush said the extra money would accelerate the training of Iraqi forces "so they can assume greater responsibility for their own security." The cash shows "our resolve is firm," he said after insurgents declared all-out war on the Iraqi elections.

The \$80 billion request will push funding for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan to a record \$105 billion for fiscal year 2005 alone, including \$25 billion in emergency spending already approved. The new money will supplement the

Pentagon budget, which already totals more than \$400 billion.

Military operation in Iraq alone already cost more than \$1 billion a week.

The nearly \$300 billion total is almost half what the United States spent for the entire Vietnam War, in 2005 dollars.

The request will be submitted to Congress early next month, and is expected to be approved despite lawmakers' concerns about record federal budget deficits and complaints that Bush and his top advisers initially underestimated the costs.

Before the invasion, then-White House budget director Mitch Daniels predicted Iraq would be "an affordable endeavor," and Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz assured Congress: "We are dealing with a country that can really finance its own reconstruction and relatively soon."

When then-White House economic adviser Lawrence Lindsey estimated Iraq costs at \$100 billion to \$200 billion, he was derided by administration colleagues and later lost his job.

A MONTH AFTER TSUNAMI Prayers, fear, anguish in affected countries

REUTERS, Banda Aceh

Indonesian schoolchildren wept and prayed for thousands of missing classmates as debris-littered schools reopened in devastated Aceh province on Wednesday, a month after the Asian tsunami.

Hundreds of Sri Lankan mourners dressed in traditional white gathered in Colombo's Independence Square for a silent vigil at the moment the tsunami struck on Dec. 26, leaving nearly 300,000 dead or missing around the Indian Ocean from Somalia to Thailand.

Indian police used loudspeakers to dispel rumours that another tsunami would strike, a month to the day after the first giant waves were triggered by a magnitude 9 earthquake off Indonesia's Sumatra island.

Teachers and students hugged and cried together as damaged schools in Indonesia's Aceh province, at the northern tip of Sumatra island, opened their doors. Books and desks dried in the open air.

"I'm glad to be back, but I'm also sad because many of my friends are

not here. I don't know where they are," said Aceh schoolgirl Eva Wahyuni, fighting back tears.

Only 300 of the nearly 900 students enrolled before the tsunami turned up for class. Authorities in Aceh, which was home to most of Indonesia's more than 220,000 dead and missing, say the tsunami killed 45,000 schoolchildren and more than 2,300 teachers and administrators.

In India's ravaged southern state of Tamil Nadu, coastal villages appeared to have overcome fears of another tsunami. Children played on beaches and relief workers helped fishermen move hundreds of damaged boats.

"I think the tsunami won't come again but I always keep an eye on the sea to ensure that it is normal. I wouldn't go near the sea alone," said Thankaraj, who sat with a group of fishermen in the shadow of a badly damaged boat at Nagapattinam's harbour.

Authorities used public address systems, radio and television to ease fears another tsunami would lash the area on Wednesday.

In one of the few formal commemorations for the dead, Sri Lankans gathered in Colombo at 9:36 a.m., the moment the tsunami struck the island.

But the worst affected, living in tents among the ruins of homes along Sri Lanka's southern, eastern and northern shores, did not join in. Displaced families near the southern town of Galle knew nothing of plans for a nationwide minute's silence.

In southern Thailand, where thousands of tourists and locals were killed by the tsunami, people remain jittery.

A deeply superstitious people, Thais have reported hundreds of ghost sightings, in particular the restive spirits of tourists crying out to locals, or summoning taxis.

Hundreds of Acehese demonstrated in Jakarta on Wednesday to demand the Indonesian government allow foreign troops that responded to the tsunami disaster to stay in Aceh. Officials have said they expect most foreign troops to leave by late March.

Annan questioned in oil-for-food probe

REUTERS, United Nations

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan was on Tuesday questioned for a third time by the commission investigating the scandal-tainted Iraq oil-for-food program, a UN spokesman said.

Annan has appointed Paul Volcker, the former chairman of the US Federal Reserve, to lead a probe of the \$67 billion program, set up in late 1996 to allow civilian goods into Iraq in an effort to ease the impact of UN sanctions.

"He has met more than once for an extended period of time with Mr. Volcker and his investigators," UN spokesman Fred Eckhard said in answer to queries.

He originally said two interviews took place last year but later updated the information, saying the latest round was on Tuesday afternoon and lasted one hour and 35 minutes. Previous interviews were conducted on Nov. 9 for one hour and 45 minutes and on Dec. 3 for 25 minutes.



PHOTO: AFP

Flowers have been put on one of the portraits of a former prisoner in an exhibition in the former Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, one day before the ceremonies marking the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp.

World leaders to mark 60 years of liberation of Nazi camp

AFP, Auschwitz

World leaders began converging on southern Poland for two days of emotional events marking the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the biggest Nazi death camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau, where more than one million people died.

On Thursday, world leaders from 44 countries including Russian President Vladimir Putin, his French counterpart Jacques Chirac, and the president of host nation Aleksander Kwasniewski, will stand alongside survivors of the camp and soldiers of the Soviet Red Army in a solemn tribute to the victims of Auschwitz.

Late Tuesday US President George W. Bush urged Americans to observe the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the camp, saying the Holocaust showed "evil is real, but hope endures."

"It is a sobering reminder of the power of evil and the need for people to oppose evil wherever it exists. It is

a reminder that when we find anti-Semitism, we must come together to fight it," he said.

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder has also warned Germans to be vigilant against the rise of neo-Nazis and voiced his shame at the horrors unleashed by the Nazi regime when more than six million people, mainly Jews, died in death and concentration camps.

"I express my shame over those who were murdered, and before those of you who have survived the hell of the concentration camps," he said.

And he warned: "That anti-Semitism still exists is not to be denied. It is the duty of all of society to fight against it."

German President Horst Koehler will also be at the main ceremony which will begin amid tight security on Thursday at 2:30 pm (1330 GMT) at the memorial erected at Birkenau to the memory of at least 1.1 million men, women and children who died at the camp.

Most of them were Jews sent to their deaths immediately on arrival at the Nazi death factory.

Because many of the victims were "selected" by the SS for immediate extermination in specially built gas chambers, they were never registered at Auschwitz, making it impossible for historians to say precisely how many people died here. The death toll is believed to be as high as two million.

The memorial at Birkenau lies between two of the gas chambers in which victims were killed, and at the end of the train track that brought them to the camp.

During the main ceremony, world leaders will hand center stage to survivors of camp, including former Polish foreign minister -- Auschwitz prisoner number 4427 -- Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, who will give a speech on behalf of the tens of thousands of Poles who died at the camp, not counting the hundreds of thousands of Polish Jews.

Britons freed from Guantanamo face more questioning

BBC NEWS ONLINE

UK anti-terror police are expected to begin questioning four Britons released from US custody at Guantanamo Bay. Moazzam Begg, Martin Mubanga, Feroz Abbasi and Richard Belmar were held for three years, accused of al-Qaeda links.

Police said they had a duty to investigate the men, who were arrested on their return to the UK. But Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir John Stevens said evidence obtained by MI5 while the four were in Cuba was "absolutely inadmissible in UK courts."

In an interview with the Independent, Sir John said his officers would have to find other evidence before the suspects could be tried in the UK.

He told the newspaper: "If an admission is made, it is a totally different ball game... it could be used as evidence." "The options are: if there is enough evidence they will be charged. If not they will be released as soon as possible."