

World leaders praise pope as a force for peace

REUTERS, London

World leaders mourned Pope John Paul II on Saturday, many hailing him as a force for peace across the globe while others credited him with a major role in the fall of the Iron Curtain.

From Brazil to the Philippines, South Africa to Germany, Roman Catholics prayed, wept and hugged each other in grief when news flashed across the globe of the death of the Pope, who led the Church for 26 years — the third-longest pontificate.

"The Catholic Church has lost its shepherd. The world has lost a champion of human freedom and a good and faithful servant of God has been called home," President Bush said at the White House with his wife Laura beside him.

"We're grateful to God for sending such a man ... a hero for the ages," said Bush, who went to war in Iraq despite the Pope's opposition but who as a Christian shared other views with him. He ordered US flags to fly at half-mast as a mark of

respect.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said the Pope was a man of peace. "He ... (was) extremely concerned about the world we lived in, and like me, he also felt that in war, all are losers," said Annan.

Lech Walesa, who led Poland's Solidarity movement which won power after a decade of struggle and hastened the collapse of the whole Soviet bloc, said Polish-born John Paul inspired the drive to end communism in Eastern Europe.

"(Without him) there would be no end of communism or at least much later and the end would have been bloody," Walesa said.

Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev said the Pope was "humanitarian number one on the planet." Russian President Vladimir Putin said John Paul's "spiritual and political legacy have been deservedly valued by humanity."

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, whose country was once divided by the Iron Curtain, said: "By his efforts and through his impressive

personality, (the Pope) changed our world."

In the Pope's homeland, Poles wept and prayed in silence after his death, church bells tolled across the country and sirens wailed in the capital Warsaw.

"This is a terrible shock, I don't know what to say. He meant everything to us," said Maria Drapa, one of thousands who held a vigil in the Pope's hometown of Wadowice.

In Madrid, several thousand people, mostly young, gathered in a square, holding candles, singing hymns and playing tambourines in front of pictures of the Pope. In Cologne, a heavily Catholic German city, hundreds packed its cathedral.

Israelis and Palestinians alike paid respects to the Pope, whose millennium pilgrimage of peace to the Holy Land stood in stark contrast to violence that has raged in the years since.

Bells tolled at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the traditional birthplace of Jesus, after news of his death.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas described John Paul as "a great religious figure who devoted his life to defending the values of peace, freedom, justice and equality for all races and religions, as well as our people's right to independence."

Rabbi Marvin Hier, founder of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles, said: "No Pope did more for the Jews." On his Holy Land visit in March 2000, the Pope prayed at Jerusalem's Western Wall and asked forgiveness for Catholic sins against Jews after 2,000 years of Christian-Jewish hostility.

"There is a shattering difference between the Catholic church of 20 to 50 years ago to today," said Bobby Brown, the World Jewish Congress's Israel-based international director.

Church bells rang out for the Pope in communist Cuba as authorities allowed Catholics to mourn a man they praised for standing up to neoliberal capitalism. Cubans filled churches for services for the only pontiff to set foot on the island.



Tens of thousands of faithful attend a mass one day after Pope John Paul II died in the southern city of Krakow in Poland where the Holy Father was residing as Cardinal. The 84-year-old pontiff, who battled crippling illness for months, passed away late Saturday in his private apartment at the Vatican. John Paul II was the first non-Italian pope in four-and-a-half centuries, and the first from Eastern Europe.

LAST MESSAGE

'Love converts hearts, brings peace'

AFP, Vatican City

An aide to Pope John Paul II has read out the dead pontiff's last message to pilgrims, in which he said "love converts hearts and gives peace," at a special mass in his memory in St Peter's Square.

Humanity "sometimes seems lost and dominated by the power of evil, selfishness and fear," said the message, read to a crowd of over 100,000 by Archbishop Leonardo Sandri.

Sandri, who had become the pope's spokesman at public liturgies as the frail pontiff's voice failed, said he was reading the message with "nostalgia".

The huge crowd burst into tumultuous applause as the pope's portrait was shown on giant screens erected around the square while the message was read out.

On hearing the message, many people broke into tears.

"To humanity, which sometimes seems to be lost and dominated by the power of evil, selfishness and fear, the risen Lord gives the gift of his love which forgives, reconciles and reopens the soul to hope," said the message.



Nuns from the Missionaries of Charity Order take part in a prayer to pay homage to Pope John Paul II, in The Mother House in Kolkata yesterday. The nuns of the home founded by Mother Teresa were joined by some hundred volunteers from the Missionaries of Charity as they held condolence prayers for Pope John Paul II.

Asian leaders salute his legacy

AFP, Manila

In packed churches across the Philippines, hidden underground congregations in China and the quake-hit ruins of the Indonesian island of Nias, Catholics in Asia Sunday mourned Pope John Paul II.

In the Philippines, where his 1981 visit is credited with sowing the seeds of the movement that ousted dictator Ferdinand Marcos, church bells tolled and parishioners wept openly.

In Vietnam, Asia's second largest Catholic congregation with some eight million believers, churches were packed.

"God has taken with him Pope John Paul II. Let us pray for his eternal rest," said Catholic priest Dang Duc Ngan during mass at St Joseph's Cathedral in Hanoi.

In South Korea, home to four million Catholics, special altars were set up for people to mourn the pope, who visited the country in 1984 and 1989.

The state-controlled Catholic Church in China offered "grave

condolences", even though it does not recognise the Vatican and Beijing broke diplomatic ties with the Holy See in 1951.

In Taiwan, off the southeastern Chinese coast, flags were to fly at half mast to honour the pontiff.

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi sent a message of condolence expressing "his greatest respect for the feat achieved by the late pope's efforts towards world peace."

In India, where the pope visited in 1986 and 1999, President Abdul Kalam said he was "deeply saddened at the passing away of Pope John Paul II."

"He was a great, great visionary. He did so much for the humanity," added Sister Nirmala, the head of the Catholic Missionaries of Charity founded by the late Nobel laureate Mother Teresa.

Mainly Muslim Indonesia, Bangladesh and Malaysia as well as predominantly Buddhist Thailand and Sri Lanka also paid tribute to the late pontiff.

No clear front-runner to succeed pope

AP, Vatican City

The intense guessing game over who will be the next pope has only one certainty: the cardinals must decide whether to follow John Paul II with another non-Italian or hand the papacy back to its traditional caretakers.

The Polish-born John Paul was the first non-Italian pope in 455 years and brought a new vitality to the Vatican, challenging parochial attitudes throughout the church. One view holds that the papal electors will want to maintain the spirit by recognising the Roman Catholic centres of gravity outside Europe in Latin America and Africa.

Another theory suggests that the Italians will press to reclaim the papacy after John Paul's 26-year reign the third-longest in history. There is no clear favourite when the 117 cardinals begin their secret conclave later this month.

But names often mentioned as

"papabile" the Italian word for possible papal candidates include Cardinal Francis Arinze, a Vatican-based Nigerian, and Brazilian Cardinal Claudio Hummes.

Arinze, 72, converted to Roman Catholicism as a child and shares some of John Paul's conservative views on contraception and family issues. But he brings a unique element: representing a nation shared between Muslims and Christians at the time when inter-faith relations assume growing urgency. If elected, he would be the first black pope of modern times.

Hummes, 70, is archbishop of Sao Paulo, Brazil, and urges more attention to fighting poverty and the effects of a globalised economy. His supporters note that Brazil's role as a Latin American political and economic heavyweight could help the Vatican counter the popularity of emerging evangelical churches in the region.

Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez

Maradiaga of Honduras, the 62-year-old archbishop of Tegucigalpa, is also mentioned as a possible candidate. But he could be too much of a break for Vatican conservatives. He has studied clinical psychology and has a dynamic, outspoken style.

Among Italians, Cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi, the archbishop of Milan, is a moderate with natural pastoral abilities and an easy style that appeals to the young. But Tettamanzi, 71, is not considered widely travelled and some critics believe he could impose too strong an Italian outlook.

Other Italians widely mentioned as possible candidates include: Cardinal Angelo Scola of Venice, 63, who is relatively young and brings a cosmopolitan flair from his city, a historic cultural crossroads; and Giovanni Battista Re, 71, who has served as president of the Vatican commission for Latin America since 2001.

He survived series of assassination bids

AFP, Vatican City

Pope John Paul II endured several assassination attempts during his 26-year papacy, although only one came close to killing him.

On May 13, 1981 he was hit by three bullets fired by Mehmed Ali Agca, a 23-year-old Turk, but survived after a five-and-a-half hour operation and was able to leave hospital three weeks later.

He had already been targeted a month earlier while on a visit to Pakistan. On February 16, 20 minutes before he arrived in a stadium in Karachi to celebrate mass, a man died when a grenade he had intended to throw at the pope exploded in his pocket.

On May 13, 1982, a Spanish fundamentalist priest, Juan Maria Fernandez Krohn, attacked the pope with a knife as he visited the shrine of Fatima in Portugal.

On June 20, 1983, police in Rome arrested a Pole carrying a knife as he waited along the route the pope was due to follow.

On May 6, 1984, in the South

Korean capital Seoul, a young Korean attempted to attack the pope with a pistol which on examination proved to be a toy.

On September 17, 1984, Toronto police arrested a man carrying a knife and a stolen invitation to a reception in the pope's honour.

On December 13, 1984, Venezuelan police in Caracas arrested a suspected far-right militant found to be carrying weapons and a detailed account of the sites due to be visited by the pope during his visit the following month.

On September 29, 1990, Ivory Coast president Felix Houphouet-Boigny said opposition parties had organised a plot against the pope during his visit to Yamoussoukro a few days earlier, but gave no proof.

On April 12, 1997, on the eve of a papal visit to Sarajevo, explosives hidden along the route the pope was due to follow were defused following a tip-off.

The pontiff received numerous death threats prior to his pastoral visits outside Italy.

Grieving Poland seeks comfort in prayer

AFP, Warsaw

Poland yesterday mourned the death of its most beloved son, Pope John Paul II, with thousands in the overwhelmingly Roman Catholic country flocking to places of worship seeking to ease their grief through prayer.

Alerted by the slow tolling of church bells just before 10:00 pm (2000 GMT) Saturday, by mobile telephone SMS messages, or even the wail of what sounded like an air raid siren, people left their homes, night spots and workplaces to converge on churches to pray for "their" pontiff.

John Paul II, 84, died at 9:37 pm in his private apartment at the Vatican. On hearing the news, Wieslaw Wykret, 45, set off on foot from the village of Zagornik for Wadowice, 10 kilometers (six miles) distant. Four hours later, he had arrived in the southern town where the pope was born Karol Wojtyla on May 18, 1920.

"I came in spite of illness," he told AFP in the early hours of Sunday at Wadowice's Notre Dame basilica, a

stone's throw away from the house where Wojtyla was born.

Poles admired the pope for embracing the weaknesses of mankind as he battled with illness in the latter years and especially months of his life.

They revered him also for his role in helping free them and much of the rest of central and eastern Europe from communist rule.

Polish Nobel peace laureate and former president Lech Walesa urged the world not to "waste" one of the most important achievements of John Paul II — that of reuniting Europe.

"During the pontificate (of John Paul II), the era of huge divisions, of communist systems, was relegated to the past," said Walesa, who founded the communist bloc's first free trade union, Solidarity, in 1980 — two years after Wojtyla was elected pope.

"A new era has been inaugurated — that of globalisation and an enlarged European Union," he said.



A Nepalese policeman (L) looks towards line of slowly moving traffic on the Dhading Highway, some 16km west of Kathmandu yesterday, on the second day of a 11-day nationwide strike called by Maoist Rebels. The Maoist rebel blockade paralysed the main entry point to Nepal's capital with hundreds of trucks and buses stranded awaiting security checks and armed escorts.

UN troops kill 38 militias during Congo raid

REUTERS, Kinshasa

UN troops killed up to 38 militia fighters during a raid by hundreds of peacekeepers backed by helicopter gunships in the Ituri district of eastern Congo Saturday, a UN military source said.

"It was serious fighting and 38 militiamen were killed," the source told Reuters. The clash came a day after a UN deadline expired for voluntary disarmament by militias, who have killed hundreds of civilians in the mineral-rich region.

Earlier, the UN mission in Congo said South African, Bangladeshi and Pakistani peacekeepers exchanged fire with gunmen as they searched two militia camps 25 miles southwest of

Bunia, capital of Ituri.

"The provisional information we have is that 18 militiamen were killed in today's operation," Kemal Saiki, a spokesman for the UN mission told Reuters.

"Our troops do not fire unless fired upon so the militia obviously shot first," he added.

The military source said many weapons and lots of ammunition were seized in the raid. The UN mission had given militias in Ituri until April 1 to hand over their weapons and promised to strike at those who failed to comply in a lawless frontierland where hundreds of civilians have been killed this year.

Over 8,000 of the estimated 15,000 fighters in the region have so far surrendered their weapons.

Syria to complete Lebanon pullout by April 30

REUTERS, Damascus

Syria will withdraw all its troops and intelligence agents from Lebanon by April 30, UN envoy Terje Roed-Larsen said yesterday.

"Foreign Minister Shara also informed me that all Syrian troops, military assets and the intelligence apparatus will have been withdrawn fully and completely latest by April 30, 2005," Roed-Larsen said at a joint press conference with Syrian Foreign Minister Farouq al-Shara.

"Syria has agreed that subject to the acceptance of the Lebanese authorities a UN verification team will be dispatched to verify the withdrawal."

Roed-Larsen was speaking after talks with President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus.

Syria, under intense international pressure, began pulling out its forces from its neighbour last month in line with a UN Security Council resolution adopted in September.

Snap polls a possibility as Chnadrika at odds with Marxist allies

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga could call a snap election before the end of 2005 because of friction with her Marxist allies over economic reforms and peace talks with Tamil rebels, analysts said yesterday.

Under the island's constitution, Kumaratunga is now allowed to sack parliament and call an early election following the passing at midnight Saturday of the first anniversary since her coalition government gained control of the legislature.

Analysts say Kumaratunga may take the chance because she believes her handling of the December 26 tsunami relief operations is widely appreciated in the country. Nearly 31,000 Sri Lankans died in the tsunamis and one million were initially made homeless.

The president may call an early

election to see if her party can rule without the help of the Marxist JVP, or People's Liberation Front, which opposes peace talks with the Tamil Tiger rebels and plans to sell or privatise state-owned companies, a source close to her Freedom Alliance party said.

"She can go before the people to seek a fresh mandate to carry out the reforms and enter talks with the Tigers," the source said. "But it will be a high risk enterprise."

Political and military analyst Harry Gunatillake said Kumaratunga's own political career was at stake as her second and final six-year term as president was drawing to a close.

"The president can call a quick general election," Gunatillake said. Kumaratunga was sworn in for a second and final term in December 1999.