

Mystery shrouds identity of Pope's 'secret' cardinal

AFP, Vatican City

Pope John Paul II will take a secret to the grave when he is buried on Friday the identity of the last cardinal he named in 2003, which he said at the time he wanted to keep close to his heart.

In Vatican parlance, that secrecy is known as "in pectore". In layman's terms, it means 'nobody else knows'.

The Vatican on Monday said that the Pope had left no special instructions to his successor about the identity of the cardinal. Not even the new cardinal knows, and as the Pope is now dead, the honour that was his to bestow could have died with him.

Some Vatican watchers suspect that he may have left a note identifying his choice, who, once named by the Vatican, would automatically join the College of Cardinals which will elect his successor.

The mystery stems from October 2003 when John Paul II nominated 31 cardinals at a consistory, which coincided with the 25th anniversary of his election as Pope, saying he was keeping the identity of one a secret, without revealing why.

China execution highest in world: Amnesty

AFP, Geneva

China accounted for about 90 percent of the 3,797 legally sanctioned executions in the world last year in 25 countries, the human rights group Amnesty International said Tuesday.

The London-based group said in its data on the use of the death penalty in the world that the real figure in China was likely to be far higher than its estimate of 3,400 executions there.

Overall, Amnesty's estimates marked a sharp rise over the 1,143 executions it had recorded in the world the previous year, largely due to its revised estimate for China.

Amnesty had accounted for 726 people executed in China in 2003 based on "public reports".

In March 2004 a delegate at the National People's Congress said that "nearly 10,000" people are executed each year in China, according to the human rights group.



An estimated 100,000 mourners are lining up to file past the body of Pope John Paul II at his lying-in-state in St Peter's Basilica yesterday in the Vatican City.

Iraqi army general kidnapped in Baghdad

REUTERS, Baghdad

Gunmen kidnapped an Iraqi army general in western Baghdad, police said on Tuesday, the latest insurgent abduction of a top Iraqi official.

Police said Brigadier General Jalal Mohammed Saleh was pulled from his car. He was the commander of a special armored division, one of the first armored units in the re-formed Iraqi army.

Insurgents have kidnapped several leading Iraqi officials and military officers. Some have been killed, with video footage of their deaths posted on the Internet.

In another incident, a car bomb exploded near an Iraqi army patrol close to Baghdad's international airport on Tuesday, killing one civilian, police said.

The thunderous explosion shook buildings in the airport and was

heard across the southwestern part of the capital.

Insurgents fighting to overthrow Iraq's US-backed government are increasingly targeting Iraqi convoys and checkpoints with suicide car bombs.

US officers say this shows that insurgents are finding it harder to attack better protected targets.

Meanwhile US and Iraqi troops battled dozens of insurgents in a remote part of Iraq east of Baghdad on Monday and two American soldiers and an Iraqi soldier were killed in the fighting, the US military said on Tuesday.

"Coalition forces and Iraqi army soldiers encountered and attacked terrorist forces in a remotely populated region east of Baghdad at about 4 p.m. (0800 EDT) on April 4," a US military statement said.

"Two battalions from the Iraqi army had been conducting an independent cordon and search operation in eastern Diyala province. The mission to search for weapons cache sites in the area uncovered dozens of terrorists and a firefight ensued."

The statement said US troops moved in to back the Iraqi forces, and called in air support. The area was still being searched on Tuesday, it added.

Recent weeks have seen a number of large-scale engagements between US soldiers and guerrillas -- an unusual development as insurgents generally favor hit-and-run attacks.

On Saturday, more than 40 US soldiers and 12 prisoners were wounded when insurgents attacked Abu Chraib jail west of Baghdad with suicide bombs, mortars and small arms fire. The battle raged for around an hour.

Poland to celebrate huge mass in honour of pope

AFP, Warsaw

Some 200,000 people from around Poland were expected to converge on the Polish capital Warsaw Tuesday for an open-air mass in memory of native son, Pope John Paul II, who died Saturday, aged 84.

Cardinal Jozef Glemp returned to Warsaw on Monday evening from Argentina to celebrate the mass, the Polish news agency PAP said.

The service will be held at the capital's central Pilsudski Square, where John Paul II celebrated a historic mass on his first visit to his native land as pope in 1979, when the country was still in the grip of communism.

At that mass, the pope urged his compatriots to "have no fear" and uttered a phrase that was to be interpreted by many Poles as an exhortation to stand up to communism.

"May the spirit come and renew the

face of this land," said John Paul II.

Since then, Poland has shed communism and its centrally planned economy, and joined the European Union and NATO. Its economy is one of the healthiest in Europe, completing the renewal some say was prophesied by the pope.

The 1979 phrase is to be inscribed on a memorial to John Paul II which Warsaw city council has decided should be erected in Pilsudski Square.

National railway company PKP at midnight began selling half-price tickets to Warsaw for anyone wishing to attend Tuesday's mass.

Shops in the capital, which are usually open for more than 12 hours a day, seven days a week, have posted notices to say they would be shutting their doors at 4:30 pm (1430 GMT) to allow staff to attend the service, which was due to start at 5:00 pm.

Warsaw's biggest taxi company, MPT, has offered to transport handi-

capped and elderly people to the mass for free.

Workers at Telekomunikacja Polska called off a strike over job cuts scheduled for Tuesday, and traders and officials at Warsaw's bourse, the biggest in the former communist bloc and one of the most lively in Europe, would mark a moment of silence in honour of the pope.

Meanwhile, pilgrims were beginning to leave the four corners of Poland for Rome, to attend the pope's funeral on Friday.

Some 200 people left Wadowice, the town where the pope was born Karol Wojtyla on May 18, 1920, "guided by our hearts", on four buses bound for Rome.

"I feel the need to be near the pope," said retired electrician Stanislaw Rajski.

"I went to Rome four times to meet the pope and I can't imagine not being with him now," he said.

Chinese net portals ban tributes to pope for second day

AFP, Beijing

Chinese Internet portals again Tuesday banned prayers and other comment on Pope John Paul II in what appeared to indicate government concern that his death might stir up too much religious fervour.

Popular portals Sina.com and Sohu.com's on-line discussion forums were flooded with messages of condolence over the weekend, but all messages had disappeared since Monday.

Sohu.com confirmed the company had censored the comments, but denied it was an order from the government.

"Religious issues are special. We are afraid of problems arising," said a Sohu official.

"We're afraid people who don't understand religion will make unreasonable remarks," he said.

"It's forbidden, the leaders from the top have forbidden it," one editor at Sina.com, the biggest Chinese portal, told AFP, without specifying whether the order came from the management or the government.

Analysts said the order had likely come from the government and indicated its concern Pope John Paul II's death might become a trigger point for a religious revival.

Footage of 'public executions' in N Korea shown on BBC

PTI, London

The BBC has broadcast harrowing footage that purportedly shows people being publicly executed by a firing squad in North Korea for trying to flee the totalitarian regime.

The pictures, filmed in secret just over a month ago in towns near the North Korean border with China, were obtained by the British broadcaster and shown on television late last night.

"Those who are to be executed are brought in a vehicle, they are gagged and half dead," one North Korean defector, Kim Young Soon, told the BBC.

"Then they say you are being judged in the name of the people because you tried to escape. They fire a single shot and say you are being shot because you are an enemy of the people, then these people fall and die on the spot," she said, speaking through a translator.

In an exclusive report, the BBC showed shaky footage of prisoners standing in a field as an off-screen voice gave the order to take aim and fire.

"Aim at the enemy. Single shot. Fire. Fire. Cease firing," the voice commanded, according to subtitles.

Up to 1,000 local townspeople are forced to watch the executions and told that they too will be shot if they try to leave, said Kim Young Soon.

British govt condemned over torture-obtained intelligence

AFP, London

An influential group of British lawmakers roundly criticised the government on Tuesday for refusing to say whether it made use of intelligence obtained through torture, calling it "surprising and unsettling".

Prime Minister Tony Blair and his ministers should "give straight answers" on the issue, the House of Commons foreign affairs committee said in a toughly-worded report.

The government has repeatedly condemned the use of torture by other nations investigating terrorism, but has also pointedly refused to rule out using information obtained by such means if it could save lives.

Last year, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw told a separate committee of MPs that the government could not ignore intelligence gained overseas by torture if the information could save thousands of people from a terrorist attack.

Such arguments were "compelling", the foreign affairs committee report acknowledged, but insisted that a clearer policy was needed given that Britain is signed up to the United Nations Convention against Torture.

"We recommend that the government set out, in its response to this report, a full and clear explanation of how its policy on the use of evidence gained under torture is consistent with the United Kingdom's interna-

tional obligations," it said.

In a swift response to the report, Straw said the MPs had made unfair inferences.

"We positively reject this suggestion that British policy in any way condones or encourages torture," he said in a statement.

"I would like to make clear that the British government is vehemently opposed to torture as a matter of fundamental principle."

In their report the MPs also called for the government to speak out more forcefully against the United States' continued detention without trial of terrorism suspects in Guantanamo Bay, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Troops defuse powerful landmines on Kashmir bus route

AFP, Srinagar

Indian troops Tuesday defused two powerful landmines on the highway to be used by a landmark bus service set to be launched this week to link divided Kashmir, police said.

The discovery of the landmines on the heavily-patrolled highway near Palhalan comes before the Thursday start of the bus service between Indian Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar and Muzaffarabad, the capital of the Pakistani zone.

"Troops detected two roadside landmines buried under soil at Palhalan which were defused later," a police spokesman said. "The mines were very powerful. They weighed 70 and 60 kilograms (154 and 132 pounds) each. The troops have averted a major tragedy."

Palhalan is 25 kilometers (15 miles) north of Srinagar.

On Monday, Indian authorities successfully completed a practice

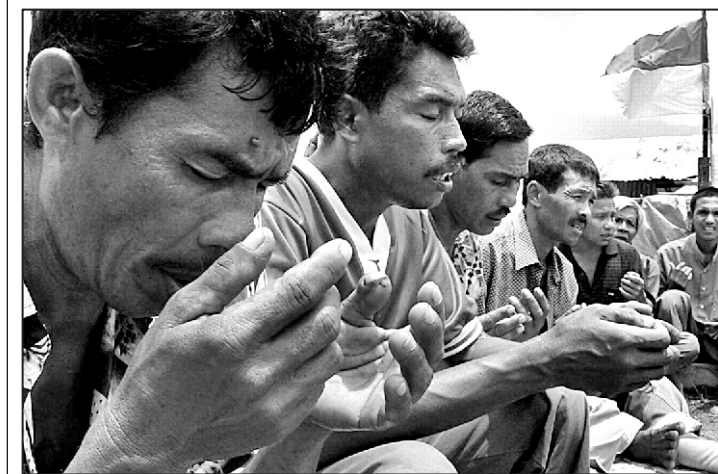
run of the bus service over the same route.

Militant groups fighting a 15-year Islamic insurgency in Indian Kashmir that has left thousands dead, earlier this week labelled the bus a "coffin" and urged Kashmiris to shun the service.

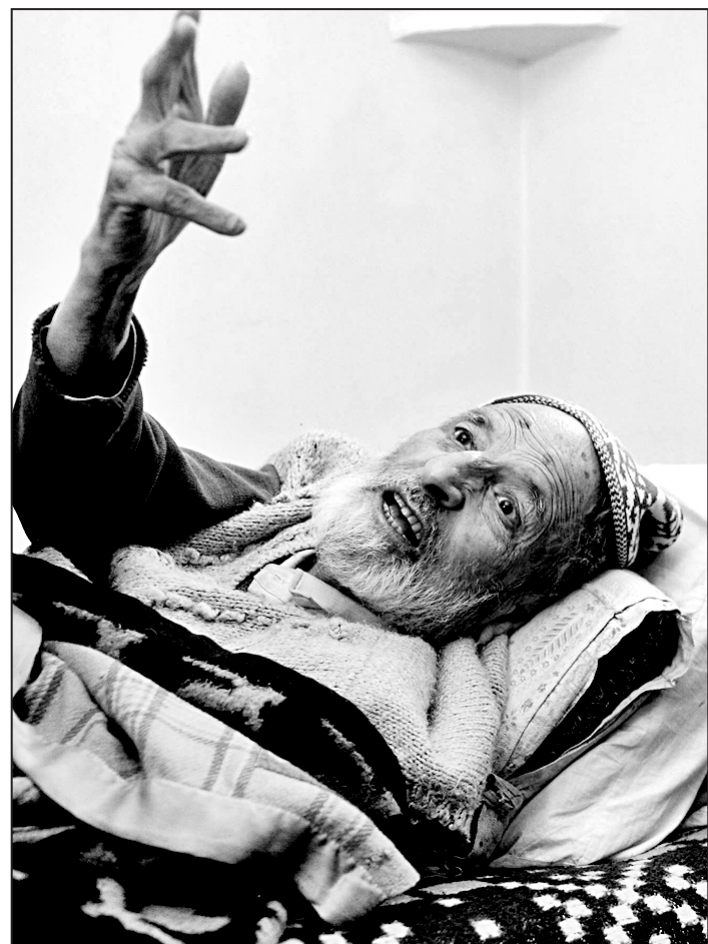
The road is used daily by hundreds of civilian and military vehicles to move and police maintain round-the-clock surveillance of the road.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will flag off the bus from Srinagar's Sheri-Kashmir Cricket Stadium on Thursday, while the prime minister of Pakistan's sector, Sikandar Hayat, will simultaneously inaugurate the service in Muzaffarabad.

The bus has also been hailed as a way of reuniting families divided after the partition of the state in 1947 by a de facto ceasefire border known as the Line-of-Control.



Acehnese people pray during a mass prayer to mark 100 days after the 26 December 2004 quake and tidal wave disaster, at Kampung Baru village in Aceh Besar.



In this picture taken 22 March 2005, 82-year-old Kashmiri Abdul Gani Mir gestures during an interview with AFP at his home in Srinagar. Mir wants to drive a bus one more time between Srinagar, the summer capital of the Indian zone of the Himalayan region, and Muzaffarabad in the Pakistani sector -- something he last did before war severed the link in 1947. Mir used to pilot the 19-seater buses plying the route from Srinagar, through Muzaffarabad and on to Rawalpindi, adjoining the Pakistani capital Islamabad.