

At least 8 killed in Mogadishu blast

AFP, Mogadishu

At least eight people were killed and 28 wounded Tuesday apparently by a hand grenade in the capital Mogadishu where Somalia's transitional prime minister was addressing a large crowd, police and witnesses said.

Prime Minister Ali Mohamed Gedi, on his first visit to the lawless city in the Horn of Africa country since taking office last year, was unhurt by the explosion in a stadium.

He appeared to want to continue speaking but was immediately whisked away from the site by his security team, according to an AFP correspondent on the scene.

Several thousand Somalis who were attending the speech fled the stadium in panic as the dead and wounded, several of whom suffered serious injuries, were taken to local hospitals, police and witnesses said.

"At least eight of (the 28 wounded) are in very critical condition," said Abdi Hassan, a senior Mogadishu police official, adding that the explosion was believed to have been caused by a hand grenade.

The explosion occurred as Gedi continued his maiden tour of the capital that began on Friday in a bid to overcome a bitter dispute over when and where his transitional government should relocate to inside Somalia from exile in Kenya.



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani rescue workers pull a body from the rubble of a collapsed four-story ice cream factory in Lahore yesterday. Multiple gas blasts tore through tenements and an ice cream factory in the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore, killing more than 20 people and trapping several others, police said.

Many British voters still undecided: Poll

Iraq continues to haunt Blair

AFP, London

Just 48 hours before Britain's general election, a poll showing more than a third of voters have yet to make up their minds caused fresh jitters for his Labour Party.

Blair remains the favourite to triumph in the election on Thursday, but repeated controversies over the war in Iraq and other issues have ensured the campaign is anything but a victory parade.

Having spent last week forced to deny he lied about advice on the potential illegality of the March 2003 conflict, Blair found himself savagely criticised late Monday by the widow of the latest British soldier killed in Iraq.

Asked in an interview whether she blamed the prime minister for the death of her husband, Anthony John Wakefield, 24, who was killed earlier that day by a roadside bomb

in southern Iraq, Ann Toward replied: "Yes."

She said she wanted to say to Blair: "You should not have sent the troops over, you should not have done that."

"If it was not for Mr Blair's actions, my children would still have their father today and I really do blame him for that," Toward told the ITV News channel.

Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, on BBC television Tuesday, said he understood the Wakefields' feelings -- "our thoughts must be, initially, with them -- but defended Blair for taking the country to war."

"At the end of the day, we wanted the security of Britain and the British national interest to be advanced," he said. "Iraq, of course, being a democracy means that the Middle East is a safer place."

While Iraq is seen as unlikely to

prompt many voters to change sides, Labour strategists fear the repeated bad publicity might further disillusion core supporters, causing them to stay at home on Thursday.

With backers of the main opposition Conservative Party and the smaller Liberal Democrats likely to be more motivated, the cumulative effect could be a nasty surprise for Blair, his aides say.

Nonetheless, opinion polls have consistently tipped Blair to earn a third stint in Downing Street, where he has been in residence since 1997.

The Labour Party holds a commanding lead among people who say they are absolutely certain to vote, a poll in Tuesday's Financial Times newspaper said, winning 39 percent of the support among this group.

12 killed in fight with US forces in Iraq

US F-18 jet crashes, pilot killed

REUTERS, Baghdad

US forces killed 12 people and wounded two others, including a six-year-old girl, in a firefight and bombing close to the Syrian border on Monday, the US military said in a statement on Tuesday.

It said six soldiers of the US-led coalition in Iraq were wounded in the fight against suspected members of al Qaeda's wing in Iraq, which is headed by Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Coalition forces followed a truck which drove to a small camp from a suspected insurgent location at the town of al Qaim, 200 miles northwest of Baghdad and 1 mile from the Syrian border, the US military said.

The truck was loaded with material from a shed and tent at the camp and several adult males also boarded the truck before it headed back toward al Qaim, the statement said.

"Before the occupants in the vehicle could reach their destination the commander of the operation decided to interdict the vehicle; upon stopping the truck, the suspected insurgents opened fire on Coalition forces," it said.

"A firefight ensued with nine enemy adult males killed in action and one enemy wounded."

The US military said a six-year-old girl "sustained a minor injury to her right calf and to her head" and a suspected insurgent was also

wounded.

A US military spokesman told Reuters the wounded girl and suspected insurgent were taken to a coalition medical facility and that the girl would be treated by a female doctor.

All of the nine men killed were heavily armed with assault rifles and hand grenades, the US military said.

Three more people were killed by a coalition airstrike on the camp. Coalition forces found fake identification cards, foreign currency and other things which the U.S. military said linked the people at the camp and on the truck to Zarqawi's network.

The US military has found the body of the pilot of a Marine F-18 jet that crashed in Iraq but a second F-18 is still missing, a US military spokesman said on Tuesday.

There were no indications that the plane had come under hostile fire and it was not clear if the two aircraft had collided, the spokesman said.

"We have not found the second pilot," he said. "The planes were flying too high to be shot down."

The US military lost contact with two Marine Corps F/A-18 Hornet aircraft in Iraq on Monday night, a statement said. The planes were from the USS Carl Vinson, the military said.

A heavy sandstorm and lightning hit central Iraq on Monday night.

Iran vows to resume nuclear activities

REUTERS, Tehran

Iran reiterated on Tuesday it would shortly resume sensitive nuclear work that could be used to make atomic arms, despite the risk of being sent to the UN Security Council.

In a deal with Britain, Germany and France last November Tehran agreed to suspend all nuclear fuel-related activities while both sides tried to negotiate a long-term solution regarding Iran's atomic ambitions.

The EU trio have warned Iran, which says its nuclear program will never be used to make bombs, that they would back U.S. calls to send Iran's case to the Security Council for possible sanctions if it resumed sensitive nuclear work.

Mohamed ElBaradei, head of the U.N.'s nuclear watchdog, also urged Iran at a conference on nuclear proliferation in New York on Monday, not to "take a unilateral decision to initiate any activities that are currently suspended."

But Tehran, unhappy with the slow pace of its talks with the EU trio, said it was sticking by its decision to resume some enrichment-related work.

"We will definitely restart some activities," Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi told a weekly news conference.

Iranian officials have suggested Iran will probably resume work at the Isfahan Uranium Conversion Facility, where uranium is processed into uranium hexafluoride gas.

It would, however, maintain its freeze on actual enrichment of that gas, a process which can be used to make bomb-grade material.

"Right now the issue of resuming enrichment is not on the table. We don't want to do that now," Asefi said.

He said Iran had warned that even that suspension was not indefinite. "(Enrichment) suspension is voluntary and temporary ... With or without an agreement (with the EU trio) it will resume one day," he said.

EU diplomats said Iran has used such tactics before, resuming sensitive nuclear work in 2003 in a bid to provoke a "controlled crisis" and squeeze more concessions from the Europeans at the negotiating table.

Tehran is betting that a resumption of uranium processing, but not enrichment itself, will strengthen its bargaining position without provoking the EU trio to back Washington's call for Security Council referral, the diplomats said.

US soldier pleads guilty to abuse charges

AP, Fort Hood

Pfc. Lynndie England took responsibility for the smiling, thumbs-up poses she struck for photographs taken at Abu Ghraib prison camp, which made her the face of the prisoner abuse scandal.

Now, with the sentencing phase in her military trial set to begin Tuesday, England's goal is to minimize the punishment.

England, 22, pleaded guilty Monday to seven counts of mistreating prisoners, saying she let her comrades talk her into going along with the abuse.

The charges carry up to 11 years in prison, but prosecutors and the defense reached an agreement that caps the sentence at a lesser punishment, the length of which was not released. She will get the lesser of the military jury's sentence or the term agreed on in the plea bargain.

LIBERATION OF BANGLADESH

Gen Aurora, the man who helped make it happen

TNN, New Delhi

The man who forced Pakistan to surrender in the 1971 Bangladesh War is no more. Lt Jagjit Singh Aurora, General Officer Commanding (GOC), Eastern Command

led the Indian forces and routed the Pakistani army in one of the swiftest operations ever and forced Lt Gen A K Niazi, chief of Pakistan's Eastern Command, to surrender just within two weeks of the war starting.

Lt J S Aurora said later that the "turning point" came after Indian troops crossed the Meghna River even though the Pakistanis had blown up a strategic bridge.

"We knew the Pakistani forces would destroy bridges. They thought they had cut us off after they blew up a bridge over the Meghna River. But we took them by surprise and crossed it at night with the help of the local people. That was the turning point," Lt Gen Aurora would reminisce later on the war.

The war to liberate Bangladesh started after Indira Gandhi decided to help the Mukti Bahini, the Bangladesh freedom fighters, in

their armed struggle against the excesses of the west Pakistan authorities.

Pakistan started attacking the Mukti Bahini camps inside Indian territory. It got bolder and on 3rd December 1971, around 5.40 pm, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) led coordinated air strikes against nine Indian airfields in the Western sector.

The air strikes were followed by a massive attack on the strategic Chhamb sector in the north while the Indian Army went on the offensive in the East. By late that night Pakistan and India were locked in a fierce combat.

Two weeks later on 16 December 1971, Dhaka fell to the Indian army and the war was over. India took 93,000 Prisoners of War and Bangladesh was born.

"We did not want to be the first to strike, so this suited us. When the Army Chief (Field Marshal Manekshaw) called me up to break the news, I told him, 'Let us get going but keep a bottle of whiskey for me to drink to Yahya Khan when the war gets over,'" said the General recollecting the first few moments after the war broke out.

Both armies were ready on the morning of 4th December 1971. Indian army outnumbered the Pakistani forces and the only plan General Niazi had was to delay the Indian advance.

And his proud claims that he would take the battle into India was shattered after the Indian army ran the Pakistani forces in just two weeks.

General Aurora said smart strategies were responsible for the Indian victory. "Pakistan did not have enough forces to defend its eastern wing. Secondly, most East Pakistanis opposed the west's rule. This helped us train the Mukti Bahini," said the General.

A resigned Niazi signed the instrument of surrender with General Aurora on December 16, 1971, at Dhaka.

"I was a happy man. I knew that I had him (Niazi) there. He asked for peace. West Pakistanis had also sent a message through the US that they want to surrender. I sent Niazi the surrender documents. The rest is history," said Lt J S Aurora.



PHOTO: AFP

Some hundred people with their mouths gagged attend a rally yesterday in southwestern French city of Toulouse, on the World Press Freedom Day in support of a French daily Liberation journalist Florence Aubenas and her guide Hussein Hanoun who have been held hostage in Iraq since January, 2005.

Co-founder of Greenpeace dies

BBC NEWS ONLINE

Canadian co-founder of the Greenpeace environmental group Bob Hunter has died aged 63 after battling prostate cancer.

He helped to launch Greenpeace in 1971 and went on to draw global attention, with campaigns against nuclear testing and pollution of the world's oceans.

Hunter was also well known for his work as a journalist and author.

"Bob was an inspirational storyteller, an audacious fighter and an unpretentious mystic," Greenpeace Canada Chairman John Doherty said.