

Victims were 'frozen solid' before Cyprus plane crash

REUTERS, Athens

Most of the bodies recovered from the Cypriot plane that crashed into a mountain near Athens with 121 people on board were "frozen solid," a Greek Defence Ministry source said yesterday.

"Autopsy on passengers so far shows the bodies were frozen solid, including some whose skin was charred by flames from the crash," the source, with access to the investigation, told Reuters.

Early indications suggest the 115 passengers and six crew were dead or unconscious when the Helios Airways Boeing 737 plunged to earth on Sunday. There were no survivors.

Rescue workers recovered the pilot's body and said they had also found the plane's black box flight recorders, including the one that records pilot conversations, crucial to determining the cause of the worst air disaster in Greece and the worst involving a Cypriot airline.

Indonesia inks Aceh peace pact

AP, Helsinki

The Indonesian government and Aceh rebels yesterday signed a peace treaty to end nearly 30 years of fighting in the oil- and gas-rich province that killed 15,000 people.

The signing ceremony in Helsinki followed seven months of talks mediated by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, who spurred the two sides to agreement to help international aid reach the Aceh region, which was devastated by last year's tsunami.

The pact gives amnesty to members of the Free Aceh Movement, also known as GAM. It was signed by Indonesian Justice and Human Rights Minister Hamid Awaluddin and Malik Mahmud, an exiled rebel leader who was briefly jailed in Sweden last year after Indonesia accused him of terrorism.

The accord, which became possible after GAM agreed to disarm and to renounce a demand

for full independence, will be overseen by monitors from the European Union and Southeast Asian countries.

The peace process was initiated by Ahtisaari, a former peace broker in the Balkans and Namibia, after he was approached by the Indonesian government to help find a solution to the conflict.

GAM leaders, who have been living in exile in neighbouring Sweden for decades, also backed the choice of Ahtisaari and joined in the talks that were held at a secluded manor house outside the Finnish capital.

A previous truce ended after only six months in 2003, when the Indonesian army expelled foreign observers, declared martial law, arrested rebel negotiators and mounted an offensive in which more than 3,000 people died.

Hostilities in the area broke out in 1976. Although many Acehnese wanted an end to the bloodshed, there was general support for independence because of

abuses. Human rights groups accuse Indonesia's army of executions, disappearances, torture and rapes.

Aceh, once an independent sultanate, was invaded in 1870 by the Dutch, who attached it to their East Indies colony, which gained independence as Indonesia in 1949.

After the December tsunami, which killed 130,000 people in Aceh alone, aid workers poured into the formerly closed province, leading to international pressure on Jakarta to halt the violence particularly from the United States and the European Union.

Pieter Feith, the Dutch diplomat who will head the EU's monitoring activities in Aceh, on Monday expressed optimism that the new agreement would be more solid than the 2003 truce that quickly collapsed.

"We don't have a guarantee that all of this will be smooth riding," Feith told reporters in Brussels.



Indonesian students and people from Aceh cheer in a street in Jakarta yesterday as delegates of the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) sign a historic peace agreement in Helsinki, Finland.

'Britain ordered assassination of Netaji'

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Kolkata

The British Foreign Office had in March 1941 ordered the assassination of freedom revolutionary Subhash Chandra Bose after his escape from house arrest in Kolkata, an Irish scholar said.

Eunan O'Halpin of Trinity College, Dublin, made the stunning revelation on Sunday evening while delivering the Sisir Kumar Bose lecture at the Netaji Research Bureau.

A history professor, O'Halpin said the British Special Operation Executive's plan to assassinate Bose, popularly known as "Netaji" (the leader), on his way to Germany was foiled as he changed his route and went via Russia.

O'Halpin said he had handed over the classified documents backing this to Krishna Bose, a former MP and wife of Netaji's nephew Sisir Bose who drove him out of Kolkata on the wintry night of January 17, 1941 in secrecy.

Israel starts Gaza pullout

AFP, Neve Dekalim

Israel began its historic operation yesterday to pull out of the Gaza Strip after 38 years of occupation, meeting anger and defiance from settlers being uprooted from their homes.

Thousands of Israeli police and soldiers poured into Gaza to inform Jewish settlers they had 48 hours to leave or be forcibly evicted after their continued presence was declared illegal at the stroke of midnight.

"This is breaking our hearts but it is vital for the future of the democratic state of Israel," Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz said.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, the

hawkish former general who is presiding over the first ever Israeli pullout from occupied Palestinian territory, was due to address a nation of people who appear divided as never before by his disengagement plan.

But even before the pullout began in earnest, hopes that it could lead to a real breakthrough in the peace process were dashed as Palestinians denounced a pledge by Mofaz that Israel would keep hold of its West Bank settlement blocs.

Sharon's cabinet also Monday gave its final approval for the evacuation of the main Gush Katif settlement bloc, home to 15 of the 21 Jewish communities that have sprung up in Gaza since its 1967

capture by Israel.

"In accordance with the implementation of the disengagement plan 2005 law and following the decision of the Israeli government, you are required to leave your home and the Gaza Strip today, Monday 15/08/05," said southern regional commander General Dan Harel in letters delivered to the settlers by police and soldiers.

The officers had to temporarily abandon efforts to deliver the eviction notices at the largest of the settlements, Neve Dekalim, after a hundreds of people blocked their entrance chanting "Soldier, policeman - refuse the orders."

But they then sneaked around to the back, where they began delivering

the notices door-to-door.

Settler leaders have vowed to keep the campaign to thwart the pullout free of violence, but were unable to prevent youths smashing car windows and setting fire to mounds of tyres after the midnight order came into force.

"This is not what we planned but we cannot control these young people," one of the main leaders of Yesha, Shaul Goldstein, told AFP.

"This activity undermines our struggle."

The operation, the first time Israel has withdrawn from Palestinian land seized in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, could have a lasting impact on the Middle East conflict and reshape Israel's political landscape.

Last dance in Mumbai bar

AFP, Mumbai

Shutters in dance bars in the Indian city of Mumbai will be pulled down for good yesterday, bringing to an end a business which has become synonymous with the city's vibrant nightlife and famous Bollywood.

Legislation to ban the bars passed by the western Indian Maharashtra state's assembly earlier this year becomes effective from August 15, India's Independence day.

The 700 or so establishments employ more than 75,000 women who entertain customers with Bollywood-style song-and-dance routines and get showered with cash in return.

Colombo to honour truce Slain Lankan FM cremated

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's assassinated foreign minister was given a state funeral yesterday as Colombo vowed to honour a truce despite blaming Tamil Tiger rebels for the murder and demanding a review of the peace process.

The coffin of Lakshman Kadirgamar was taken for cremation at the Independence Square park where President Chandrika Kumaratunga made an unannounced appearance and joined foreign dignitaries for the ceremony.

Thousands of police and heavily armed soldiers cordoned off the park where Kadirgamar was to be cremated at sunset on a wood pyre

covered with white cotton sheets according to Buddhist funeral rites.

His coffin, draped with the Sri Lankan Lion flag, was taken in an open hearse along the mile-long route to the cremation site.

Cabinet ministers and foreign delegations from 12 countries were in attendance, with six of them -- Bangladesh, India, Nepal, the Maldives, Pakistan and Norway -- represented at ministerial level.

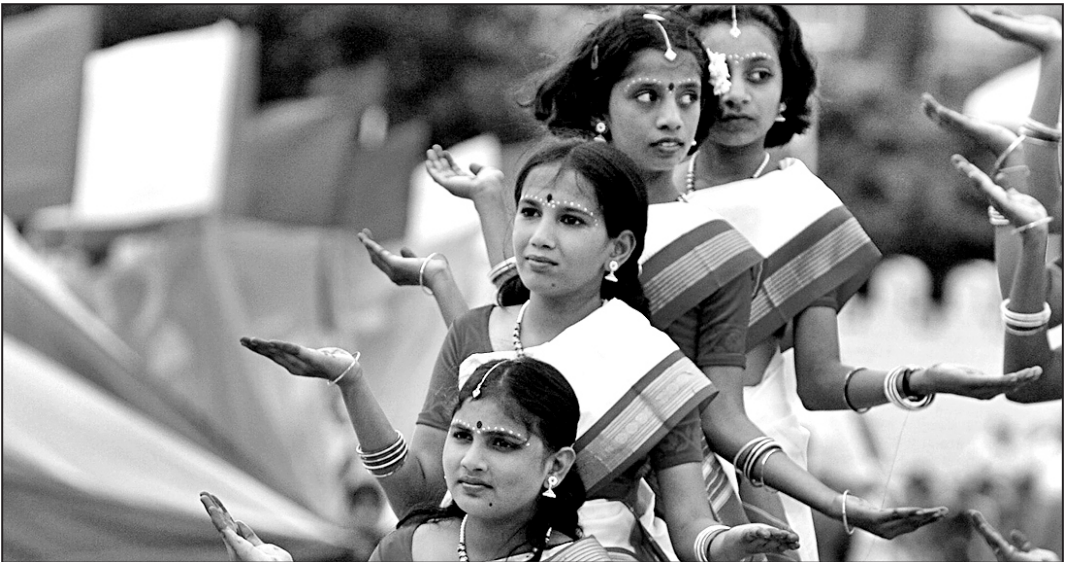
Kumaratunga responded to Kadirgamar's murder Friday by imposing a state of emergency that allowed police and security forces to detain scores of people in and around the capital. However, investigations have made little headway,

officials said.

"I will redouble the efforts of my government for the devolution of power (with minority communities) based on dialogue, dialogue with all parties," Kumaratunga said in a televised speech on Sunday night.

The government's peace secretariat chief Jayantha Dhanapala suggested however that there would have to be a change in dealing with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

"Jayantha Dhanapala noted that in the light of the assassination, there would have to be a serious review of certain policies and procedures followed up to now in relation to the peace process," the foreign ministry said.



Indian schoolgirls perform a routine during a ceremony for the country's 58th Independence Day celebrations in Bangalore yesterday. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said that peace talks with neighbouring Pakistan over Kashmir had achieved "some success", as the nation celebrated its independence amid high security.

India upbeat over peace talks with Pakistan

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said yesterday that peace talks with nuclear-armed rival Pakistan over Kashmir had achieved "some success", as the nation celebrated its 58th anniversary of independence amid high security.

However Singh in a 90-minute address also warned that security forces will deal with armed insurgents in the Himalayan territory with an "iron hand."

"There seems to be some success in our search for peace and harmony now," Singh said from behind a bullet-proof screen at the Mughal-built Red Fort in New Delhi.

"The composite dialogue process with Pakistan is continuing," he said of peace talks, which

began in January 2004 and aim to resolve all differences, including the festering dispute over Kashmir.

"As a result, we have been able to reopen the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad highway which was a long-pending demand of the people and restarted the bus service on this route, a step which has been widely welcomed.

"Talks are also going on to open similar links from points in other states," Singh said of the first bus service in 50 years between the two divided zones of Kashmir which began in April.

The comments came less than a week after India and Pakistan agreed to give each other advance notice of the testing of ballistic missiles and to set up a hotline to prevent an accidental nuclear conflict.

US Senators demand Rumsfeld's head

AFP, Washington

A top aide to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, head of the al-Qaeda operation in Iraq and accused of masterminding high-profile suicide bombings in the country, has been killed by Iraqi security forces, defence officials have confirmed.

But the battlefield success hardly impressed two leading US senators, who on Sunday questioned the Pentagon's handling of the situation in Iraq and said they no longer had confidence in Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Abu Zubair, also known as Mohammed Salah Sultan, was gunned down in the northern city of Mosul Friday, when he got caught in

an ambush set up by Iraqi security forces, the officials said, confirming a report by Mosul police.

No other details of the operation were provided. But officials pointed out Abu Zubair was wearing a suicide belt filled with metal pellets when he was killed.

It was not immediately clear whether the suspect intended to become a suicide bomber himself or the belt was to be used by somebody else.

Abu Zubair was wanted for his alleged role in, among other things, organising a bombing attack on an Iraqi police station in Mosul last month, in which five policemen were killed, according to the defence officials.

They noted that Abu Zubair's death followed the capture of three bombmakers and six foreign fighters by US and Iraqi security forces last week.

"Abu Zubair's death, as well as recent captures of terrorists in northern Iraq, is making a difference in coalition and Iraqi security forces efforts to disrupt terrorists operating in this part of the country," Colonel Bill Buckner, a spokesman for the multinational force, told reporters.

He expressed confidence that bombings and other insurgent attacks "will not prevent Iraqi democracy."

Japan apologises for WWII invasions

AP, Tokyo

Asia commemorated the 60th anniversary of Japan's World War II surrender yesterday by honouring the dead and searching for reconciliation. Japan's leader tried to salve wounds by apologising for the "great damages and pain" it inflicted on its neighbours.

With ceremonies and protests, the region memorialised the end to a conflict that killed millions of soldiers and civilians from the jungles of Burma to the glistening beaches of the Pacific and the sprawling cities of Japan and Korea.

Anger mixed with sorrow amid rekindled tension between Tokyo and the countries its Imperial Army invaded decades ago.

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi expressed "deep reflections and heartfelt apology" for the Tokyo's wartime colonisation and pledged that his country would never forget the "terrible lessons" of the war, which ended Aug. 15, 1945.

"Our country has caused great

damages and pain to people in many countries, especially our Asian neighbours, through colonisation and invasion," Koizumi said in a statement. At a ceremony shortly thereafter, Koizumi and Emperor Akihito son of wartime Emperor Hirohito bowed before an altar of chrysanthemums at a nationally televised service for the nation's estimated 3 million war dead.

Japan's relations with some of its Asian neighbours are at the lowest in years in part because of disputes about whether Japan has properly atoned for its past aggressions. The issue has contributed to opposition to Tokyo's bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

Fueling the grievances are Koizumi's controversial visits to Tokyo's Yasukuni war shrine and his government's approval of history textbooks that critics say whitewash wartime atrocities such as the Rape of Nanjing, in which Japanese troops massacred as many as 300,000 people while taking the Chinese city in 1937.



Indian commuters ride on hand-pulled rickshaws on Kolkata street yesterday as the West Bengal government prepares to outlaw the practice. Since the end of the 19th century, rickshaw-pullers have been plying Kolkata's narrow lanes, a practice that Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya yesterday called "inhuman."