

Train crash kills 4 as blizzard hits Japan

REUTERS, Tokyo

An express train running behind schedule in blustery winter weather derailed in northern Japan, killing four people and injuring 32, police said yesterday, and it was unclear if others remained trapped in the wreckage.

The train left the tracks and crashed into a farm building after apparently encountering high winds near a bridge over a river in Yamagata prefecture late on Sunday.

"It felt as though I was lifted from my seat, and then everything went black," one survivor told state broadcaster NHK.

"The wind was terrible. There was rain at the windows and flashes of lightning," he added.

The six-carriage train was carrying 44 passengers and two crew members, Kyodo news agency said.

Police said it was not clear whether anyone remained trapped under the overturned carriages, and it may not be possible to check until snowstorms in the area abate.

Hope, sorrow and fear of another monster wave

REUTERS, Banda Aceh

Mourners across the world gathered yesterday along ravaged Indian Ocean coastlines to remember thousands who died in last year's tsunami, one of the world's most horrific disasters.

A year on, a huge recovery operation has brought hope to hundreds of thousands of survivors. But the sorrow, pain and trauma from one of nature's most ferocious episodes remains strong -- along with fears that monster waves could come again.

"We think about the lost lives, lost property and lost jobs," said 19-year-old Kanagalingan Janenthra in Sri Lanka's eastern town of Batticaloa. "We are in fear. Some of us think it might come again."

Survivors, friends and relatives

joined national leaders and foreign dignitaries for memorials in the worst affected countries of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand.

"In this wide open space ... under the blue sky, we stand together as God's children," Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said in a flattened coastal suburb of Banda Aceh, capital of Indonesia's Aceh province after leading a minute of silence.

"It was under the same blue sky exactly a year ago that mother earth unleashed the most destructive power among us."

The tsunami left about 230,000 dead or missing in 13 Indian Ocean countries -- nearly three quarters of them in Aceh, on the northern tip of Sumatra -- and made 1.8 million homeless.

Some women cling desperately to hope their children somehow are still alive.

"In my heart, I still believe they are alive," said Yasrati, 38, who placed smiling photographs of her 13-year-old daughter and 5-year-old son in a local newspaper. "They are still somewhere, I don't know where but I can still feel it."

"This is my instinct as a mother."

A 9.15 magnitude undersea earthquake off Sumatra triggered tsunami waves up to 10 metres (33 feet) that smashed into shorelines as far away as East Africa, sweeping holidaymakers off beaches and erasing entire towns and villages.

In southern Thailand, people from many parts of the world joined Thais in remembering the 5,395 known dead and nearly 3,000 listed as missing.

"I just want to cry. I find it hard to believe the whole thing," Australian Joy Vogel said at Khao Lak beach, clutching a wedding photograph of her daughter, who was three months pregnant when the tsunami snatched her and nearly 2,200 foreigners.

"But I feel all the tsunami people who died are with us. The essence of my daughter lives on," she said by a police patrol boat that was swept two kilometres (one mile) inland and has become a tsunami memorial.

Some foreigners were upset by a crowd of photographers preventing them laying down flowers at a memorial ceremony on Phuket island, Thailand's tourist mecca.

"We don't care about the pictures in the paper," one woman shouted angrily.



PHOTO: AFP

An Indian girl orphaned by the December 2004 tsunami weeps during a function organised to pay homage to the victims of the tragedy at Nagapattinam some 350km south of Chennai yesterday.

Christmas blaze kills 26 in China

AP, Beijing

A fire at an unlicensed bar killed at least 26 people and injured eight in a Chinese city near Hong Kong, the government said yesterday.

The fire broke out at 11 p.m. on Sunday in Zhongshan, which abuts the former Portuguese colony of Macau west of Hong Kong, the official Xinhua News Agency said.

It said the cause of the blaze was under investigation.

"This small bar is an illegal business inside a restaurant," said an official in the propaganda office of Zhongshan's Communist Party branch.

"The bar owner has been detained for investigation," said the official, who would not give his name.

Police and fire officials in Zhongshan refused to release any information.

Zhongshan is part of the booming Pearl River Delta region around Hong Kong whose factories form the heart of China's export-driven manufacturing industries.



PHOTO: AFP

A Swedish national with a Thai mourner release a traditional Thai offering to the dead along with other people in the sea at Khuk Khak beach during the first anniversary of the tsunami in Thailand's southern Phang Nga province yesterday.

US eyes big Indo-Pak arms sales in 2006

REUTERS, Washington

The Bush administration is manoeuvring to balance possible big new US arms sales to archrivals India and Pakistan in the New Year.

In the past week, US Vice President Dick Cheney and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld have made separate visits, not announced in advance, to Pakistan, a key ally in the US-declared war on terrorism.

Islamabad will make up its mind in the coming year on a US offer to resume F-16 fighter aircraft sales after a 16-year break, Foreign Minister Khurshheed Kasuri was quoted by the Associated Press of Pakistan as saying after Cheney left.

Earlier this month, Air Force Lt. Gen. Jeffrey Kohler, head of the Pentagon's Defence Security Cooperation Agency, said he expected Pakistan to modify buying plans because of the Oct. 8 earthquake that killed more than 73,000 people.

"I think that what we were ready to do right before the earthquake is probably going to have to change," Kohler said in a Dec. 7 interview with Reuters in Washington.

"We'll get back with Pakistan early in the new year and see what they want to do," he added. Before the temblor, Pakistan had asked about buying as many as 75 new F-16C/D models and 11 refurbished F-16s, Kohler said in May.

The single-engine multi-role F-16 is built by Bethesda, Maryland-based Lockheed Martin Corp. New purchases would boost a fleet of about 32 F-16s acquired before Congress cut off sales in 1990 over Pakistan's nuclear programme.

In May, the Pentagon told Congress it was proposing to let Pakistan buy 300 AIM-9M-1/2 "Sidewinder" heat-seeking, air-to-air missiles and 60 Harpoon missiles with a combined value of up to \$226 million.

Separately, the United States is poised to push in the new year for

major arms sales to India, a hedge against China's growing regional military clout and influence.

The Bush administration is weighing, among other things, whether to let India buy a state-of-the-art radar system as part of a US bid for a potential \$5 billion contract to supply 126 multi-role fighters, Kohler said in the interview.

The possible supply of Active Electronically Scanned Array Radar, or AESA, would boost US prospects against expected competition from Sweden, France and Russia. The technology is meant to let US fighters detect and destroy enemy aircraft at significantly longer ranges.

An Indian purchase of either the F-16 or the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet built by Boeing Co., the other US fighter on offer, would cement a sea change in US-Indian bilateral ties since the end of the Cold War.

Violence kills 2 GIs, 18 Iraqis

REUTERS, AFP, Baghdad

At least 18 Iraqis and two US soldiers were killed in violence in Iraq yesterday and Sunday while fresh street protests over election results kept up tension that has soured the mood after a peaceful ballot 10 days ago.

Guerrillas killed 10 members of the Iraqi security forces in separate attacks north of Baghdad on Monday, officials said.

In an early morning attack in Buhriz, about 60 km from Baghdad, guerrillas opened fire on a check-point, killing five Iraqi policemen and wounding three others, police said.

They said six guerrillas were killed when police officers returned fire.

In the village of Dhabab, some 100 km from Baghdad, five soldiers were killed by gunmen while leaving for work or during their morning routine, the army said.

In Baghdad itself, a civilian was killed and at least six policemen wounded, as four separate bombings targeted police patrols.

A university professor, Nofal Ahmed, was killed by gunmen outside his home.

Two US soldiers were killed on Christmas day in separate attacks in Baghdad, according to the US military.

The two were killed in separate roadside bomb attacks on their patrols.

A US soldier was killed in a rocket-propelled grenade attack near Kirkuk on Saturday and troops marking Christmas had no respite on Sunday; an Abrams tank, the giant bulwark of American armoured might, was left in flames after a dawn attack in eastern Baghdad -- witness said a roadside bomb blasted it.

A US military spokesman confirmed an attack on a tank and the military said later a US soldier had been killed when his vehicle was hit by an explosive device in Baghdad, though it was not immediately clear whether it was the same incident.

TOP COMMANDER ADMITS Iraqis want US out 'as soon as possible'

AFP, Washington

The top US military commander admitted Sunday that Iraqis wanted US and other foreign troops to leave the country "as soon as possible," and said US troop levels in Iraq were now being reassessed on a monthly basis.

The admission by Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Marine General Peter Pace followed a decision by the Pentagon to reduce the current level of 160,000 soldiers in Iraq by two army brigades, which amounts to about 7,000 soldiers.

"Understandably, Iraqis themselves would prefer to have coalition forces leave their country as soon as possible," Pace said in a Christmas Day interview on Fox News Sunday.

"They don't want us to leave tomorrow, but they do want us to leave as soon as possible."

Some US foreign policy experts have expressed concern that a new Iraqi government emerging from the December 15 parliamentary elections could ask American troops to leave, but officials have dismissed that forecast as unrealistic.

However, an opinion survey conducted in Iraq in October and November by ABC News and a pool of other US and foreign media outlets showed that despite some improvements in security and living standards, US military operations in the country were increasingly unpopular.

Two-thirds of those polled said they opposed the presence of US and coalition forces in Iraq, up 14 points from a similar survey taken in February 2004.

Nearly 60 percent disapproved of the way the United States has operated in Iraq since the war began in March 2003, with most of those expressing "strong disapproval," the poll found.

When asked to suggest a timing for the US pullout, 26 percent said US and other coalition forces should "leave now," while 19 percent opted for a withdrawal after the Iraqis formed a new government based on the results on the December 15 election.

Maoist killings fall during Nepali truce

AFP, Kathmandu

The number of people killed by Maoist rebels has dropped in the past three months during a unilateral ceasefire, but abductions have risen, a human rights group in Nepal said yesterday.

"From the Maoist side, the number of killings has fallen, most of the killings have been on the part of the state," said Kundan Aryal, general secretary of the Informal Service Centre (INSEC) citing a report.

"Though the number of killings from the Maoists has gone down, there has been a rise in the incidents of abduction," the report said.

From September to early December, state security services reportedly killed 62 alleged Maoists while the rebels were responsible for 13 deaths and nearly 8,800 abductions, according to the INSEC report.

That compares to 483 people killed by both sides from June to August, the report said.

The rebels, fighting to install a communist republic in Nepal, announced a three-month unilateral ceasefire in September and extended it by a month in December.

Last month, the Maoists and leading political parties announced an agreement to pressure King Gyanendra, who seized power in February, to restore democracy, which included the rebels laying down their arms.

The government has dismissed the ceasefire.

More than 12,000 civilians, Maoists and security personnel have died in Nepal since the rebels began their "people's war" in 1996.

Some 2,000 students took to the streets of Kathmandu Sunday to protest against the king as well as the massacre this month of 11 people by a soldier.

The demonstrations were called by an alliance of eight student unions.

"Our protest is against the massacre of 11 people at Nagarkot (on the outskirts of Kathmandu) and autocracy in Nepal," said the general secretary of the Nepal Students Union, Badri Pandey.

"We are also protesting against the undemocratic moves of the king," he added.