

Sectarian murders rock Nigeria

Riot death toll hits 138

REUTERS, Onitsha

At least 138 Nigerians died in five days of rioting by Muslims and Christians across Africa's most populous nation, where uncertainty over the political future is exacerbating ethnic and religious tensions.

In mainly Christian Onitsha in the southeast, at least 85 people were killed in two days of mob violence, human rights group the Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO) said on Thursday.

Christian youths rampaged through the streets attacking Muslims with cutlasses and setting fire to them with petrol to avenge the killing of at least 46 people, mostly Christians, by Muslim mobs in the north.

"Dead bodies were littered in various parts of Onitsha. We counted 60 on Tuesday and 25 on Wednesday," said Emeka Umeh, head of CLO in Anambra state, where Onitsha is located.

"The majority of victims were Hausas but some Ibos were killed too," Umeh said. He gave a detailed breakdown of numbers of bodies sighted in specific areas.

The Hausa are the main ethnic group in northern Nigeria and most of them are Muslims, while the Ibo are the dominant tribe in the south-east and they are almost all Christians.

The Anambra police commissioner declined to give a death toll, but he said about 11,000 people, mostly Hausas, had fled their

homes and were camping in army barracks or police stations, too frightened to venture out.

Nigeria's 140 million people are split roughly equally between Muslims in the north and Christians in the south, though sizeable religious and ethnic minorities live in both regions.

Thousands of people have been killed in religious violence since the restoration of democracy in 1999, and killings in one part of the country often trigger reprisals elsewhere.

The killings in Onitsha started when news emerged of Ibo deaths in the north. On Wednesday the tit-for-tat violence spread to Enugu, another Ibo city in the southeast, where seven people were killed.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi Shias carry placards that read: "No for terrorism," during a demonstration yesterday in Baghdad to protest against the bombing of the holy shrine of Imam al-Hadi in the city of Samarra. Gunmen have killed at least 130 people in Iraq in sectarian violence that flared after the bombing of a revered Shia shrine and reprisal attacks on Sunni mosques.

3 Afghan cops captured with 800kg heroin

AFP, Kandahar

Afghan authorities have arrested three policemen for allegedly smuggling nearly 800 kilograms (1,760 pounds) of heroin in a police truck, a governor said yesterday.

The policemen were seized while on duty at the weekend after security forces in the southern city of Kandahar found the heroin in a police pick-up vehicle, Kandahar province governor Asadullah Khalid said.

"We've arrested three highway policemen who were smuggling drugs into Kandahar," he told AFP. The men had been sent to the capital Kabul and were being questioned, he said.

There have long been allegations that senior government officials are involved in the lucrative drugs trade in Afghanistan, which produces nearly 90 percent of the world's illegal opium, the raw ingredient of heroin.

While low-ranking policemen and government workers have been charged for involvement in the business, there have been no arrests of senior figures with authorities saying they do not have enough evidence to take action.



PHOTO: AFP

Rescuers walk outside the collapsed market in Moscow yesterday. The snow-laden roof of a Moscow food market collapsed before dawn as traders toiled inside, killing at least 44 people, injuring 29 and trapping some others in the wreckage.

5 Palestinians killed by Israeli troops

AFP, Nablus

Five Palestinians were killed and six wounded by Israeli troops yesterday in the deadliest clashes in the West Bank since last month's election victory for the radical Islamists of Hamas.

The men died amid heavy shooting in the Balata refugee camp after more than 30 Israeli army jeeps and four bulldozers piled into the area adjoining the flashpoint city of Nablus.

Three of those killed were members of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs

Brigades, a radical faction loosely affiliated to Palestinian Authority president Mahmud Abbas's Fatah party, who engaged in a gunbattle with Israeli troops while holed up in a house, medical sources said.

Medical sources named the dead men as 32-year-old Hamudeh Shtewi, Mohamad al-Surakji, 20, and Mohamad Abu Khamis, 32.

Two other Palestinians, one of them a teenager, were fatally shot earlier in what was the second deadly Israeli military operation in the area since Sunday.

Britain's anti-terror drive increasing torture risk: AI

AFP, London

Leading human rights group Amnesty International (AI) blasted Britain for increasing the risk of security suspects being tortured due to its measures designed to clamp down on extremists.

AI released a report, which it said exposed the damaging effect of Britain's anti-terror policies on human rights.

AI Secretary General Irene Khan said: "There is now a dangerous imbalance between draconian actions the UK is taking in the name of security and its obligation to protect human rights.

"These measures tarnish the UK's image and its ability to promote human rights abroad."

Prime Minister Tony Blair's government has attempted to give police and prosecutors tougher tools to confront terrorism in the wake of the London bombings in July, which killed 56 people including four suicide bombers.

In the past five years, parliament has adopted three anti-terrorist laws, in 2000, 2001 and 2005. A fourth piece of legislation, put forth since the London bombings, is under discussion.

The report attacked Blair's government for detaining foreign security suspects "for years on the basis of secret evidence".

The group said: "These people are effectively being persecuted, with devastating consequences for the men and their families."

Khan said: "Most worrying of all has been the effort of the UK government to weaken the absolute ban on torture."

AI criticised Britain for seeking "diplomatic assurances" from countries "known to have a record of torture" in order to be able to deport foreign security suspects to those states.

Agreements have already been reached with Jordan, Libya and Lebanon.

Armed gang steals \$44m in British depot raid

AFP, London

The manhunt was on for an armed gang yesterday who disguised themselves as police officers and stole what could be a record 40 million pounds from a security depot in southeast England after abducting its manager and his family.

Police said the perpetrators were "highly sophisticated" and had planned their audacious raid in detail, subjecting their hostages to a "terrifying ordeal".

The Bank of England said that at least 25 million pounds (37 million euros, 44 million dollars) had been taken.

But unconfirmed reports said that the final figure could be up to 40 million pounds -- which would make it, by far, the biggest cash heist in British history.

The manager of the Securitas main cash depot in Tonbridge, southeast of London, was pulled over while driving on Tuesday evening by what he believed was an unmarked police car, Kent Police said.