

Egyptian Copts and police clash

BBC ONLINE

Egyptian Coptic Christians angered by a deadly bombing at a church in Alexandria have clashed with police for a second day.

Hundreds demonstrated in Alexandria, Egypt's second city, and Cairo, the capital, calling for better protection for Christians.

In Cairo, protests were reported at St Mark's Coptic cathedral and elsewhere.

Meanwhile, police were holding several people for questioning over Saturday's bombing, which left 21 dead.

There was no evidence that they were directly linked to the attack, officials said.

No-one has claimed responsibility for the bombing, which happened in the early hours of Saturday, though analysts say suspicion is likely to fall on Islamist radicals inspired by al-Qaeda.

Officials initially thought the attack was caused by a car bomb, but later said it was a suicide bomber standing in a crowd.



PHOTO: AFP
The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Fuad Twal, centre, leads a special mass held at the Holy Family Church in the Palestinian West Bank city of Ramallah on Sunday to commemorate the victims of the New Year bomb attack against a Coptic church in the Egyptian port city of Alexandria.

Kabul urges Tehran to lift tanker blockade

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan yesterday urged Iran to lift a ban on hundreds of fuel tankers crossing into its territory, accusing Tehran of stalling on a pledge to resolve the situation.

Despite an agreement reached between Tehran and Afghan Vice President Mohammad Qasim Fahim last week, hundreds of trucks are still being prevented from crossing the border, Kabul said.

"Today the problem was discussed in the cabinet meeting," President Hamid Karzai's spokesman Waheed Omer told a press conference.

"Afghanistan's cabinet expressed regret that despite efforts, despite the vice president's visit to Iran and despite it appearing that the problem was solved, it has not been," Omer said.

Tehran had said the ban was imposed because it believed the fuel carried by the tankers was being used to supply US and other international troops fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan.

AFGHAN VIOLENCE

'2010 the bloodiest year on record'

REUTERS, Kabul

The number of Afghan police killed during 2010 fell about seven percent to 1,292, the government said yesterday, despite violence spreading across the country as the war entered its tenth year.

Foreign military and civilian casualties are at record levels despite the presence of about 150,000 Nato-led troops, with 2010 the bloodiest year on record since the Taliban were ousted by US-backed Afghan forces in late 2001.

Ministry of the Interior spokesman Zemari Bashary said 2,447 Afghan police were wounded, while 5,225 insurgents were killed and 949 wounded. He said the government did not have a toll of insurgent casualties for 2009.

There was a total of 6,716 security incidents in 2010, such as ambushes, roadside bombings, suicide bombings and rocket attacks, Bashary said.

The Taliban are at their strongest since they were ousted after they refused to hand over al Qaeda militants, including Osama bin Laden, after the September 11, 2001, al Qaeda attacks on the United States.

The insurgency has spread out of its traditional strongholds in the south and east over the past two years into once peaceful areas of the north and west. The north in particular has become a deadly new front in the war.

The Interior Ministry said 2,043 civilians were killed and 3,570 wounded but it

again did not have a toll for 2009. The United Nations has said 2,412 civilians were killed and 3,803 wounded between January and October last year -- up 20 percent from 2009.

The Defence Ministry said 821 Afghan soldiers were killed last year. It also did not have a toll available for 2009.

Brigadier General Josef Blotz, a spokesman for the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), said the high number of casualties among Afghan security forces "is a testament to their sacrifice, to their efforts, to their commitment, they're fighting for their country."

He also noted the high number of civilian casualties.

Blotz said a surge in the number of foreign troops fighting in Afghanistan last year had led to an expected upturn in violence "but obviously this is a necessary step, a necessary phase in the overall strategy."

"Before it gets better, unfortunately it has to get worse and this is what we saw toward the end of 2010," he said.

Foreign forces suffered record deaths in 2010, with 711 troops killed, roughly two thirds of them American, according to monitoring website www.iCasualties.org. It was by far the deadliest year of the conflict for foreign troops, up from 521 deaths in 2009, previously the worst year of the war.

Sabretooth cats threatened most human ancestor

BBC ONLINE

Humankind's oldest known ancestor probably lived in fear of several large sabretooth cats that roamed the same ancient lakeside habitat in Africa.

Palaeontologists have identified two new sabretooth species among fossils unearthed at Toros Menalla in Chad.

In 2001, a team unearthed remains of a seven million-year-old human-like creature - or hominid - known as "Toumai" at the central African site.

Its discoverers argue that Toumai is the oldest hominid known to science.

The fossilised skull of Toumai (which means "hope of life" in the local Dazaga language of Chad) was found in the Djurab desert by a team led by Michael Brunet of the University of Poitiers, France.

The position of a hole at the bottom of the skull called the foramen magnum suggests that Toumai (Sahelanthropus tchadensis) walked upright - an important signature of the human lineage.

The brainstem enters and exits the skull through this hole; in great apes, it is positioned more towards the back of the skull. But in hominids - including Toumai - it is

placed more towards the front of the skull.

The ancient fossil caused a worldwide sensation when it was unveiled in the pages of Nature journal in 2002.

However, the interpretation of Toumai as a human relative is controversial. The skull was distorted and, if any other parts of the skeleton happen to exist, none has yet been published in the scientific literature. It is also older than the date when genetics says that the human and chimp lineages diverged.

PREDATOR'S PLAYGROUND Nevertheless, palaeontologists have been busy studying the abundant fossil material unearthed at the site, steadily building a picture of the environment in which Sahelanthropus eked out its existence.

In Late Miocene times, this area of Chad must have had a lake, because palaeontologists have found the fossilised remains of fish, amphibians and crocodiles.

But they have also found evidence of grasslands, gallery forest and a desert.

Researchers have discovered the fossilised remains of a wide variety of carnivorous mammals at Toros Menalla.

'Door to dialogue open'

REUTERS, Seoul

South Korea said yesterday it was open to dialogue with Pyongyang if it was ready to dismantle its nuclear facilities, as the US envoy for North Korea prepared to travel to the region to discuss how to reduce tensions.

North Korea has also signalled willingness for dialogue after a year of confrontation.

A breakthrough may prove elusive with both Seoul and Washington saying that before they head back to the negotiating table they want to see proof of North Korea's seriousness to eventually disarm -- something a number of analysts do not believe Pyongyang would ever do.



PHOTO: AFP
South Korean soldiers fire 155 mm howitzers near the demilitarised zone separating the two Koreas in Cheorwon, northeast of Seoul, yesterday. South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak, reached out to North Korea, saying Seoul was open to talks and offering closer economic ties despite high tensions on the peninsula.

Australian floods submerge towns, coal exports hit

REUTERS, Gracemere

Military aircraft ferried supplies to an Australian town slowly sinking beneath swollen rivers yesterday, as record flooding in the country's northeast severed roads and ports, curtailing coal exports and devastating farmland.

Floods submerged the Capricorn Highway, the major traffic artery through Queensland state, and poured into homes in the sinking town of Rockhampton, sending furniture and refrigerators cascading down torrents of floodwater.

Rockhampton, a community of 77,000 just off the Pacific coast and 600 km (370 miles) north of the state capital Brisbane, was accessible mainly by emergency services boats.

Rescue workers escorted stranded patients out of hospitals, police ordered reluctant residents to leave their homes, and electricity company teams made their way up to abandoned homes to ensure power was switched off.

Snakes slithered their way across the waterlogged highway a few km outside the devastated town.

Resident Reg Wilson said police gave him little choice but to leave his home.

"A policeman came along in a car with a gun on his hip who said 'You be out of here by five o'clock or else'," he said. "When a man with a gun talks to you like that, you get out."

Flooding covering a vast area has caused more than A\$1 billion (\$1 billion) in damage, forced some 200,000 residents from their homes and hit commodity exports that are a mainstay of the Australian economy.

Coal is Australia's number one export earner, accounting for \$55 billion of export revenue each year.

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