

# Migrant boat sinks off Indonesian coast

## 200 asylum-seekers feared dead

AFP, Watulimo

More than 200 people were feared dead after a heavily overloaded boat packed mostly with Afghan and Iranian asylum-seekers sank off Indonesia en route to Australia, rescuers said yesterday.

Australia's government called the sinking "a terrible tragedy", but came under pressure from campaign groups which said its tough approach to refugees was partly responsible for such disasters.

The fibreglass boat had a capacity of 100 but was carrying about 250 people when it sank on Saturday, 40 nautical miles off eastern Java, in heavy rain and high waves, Indonesian officials said.

Thirty-three survivors were plucked from the shark-infested waters, officials said, after the vessel sank along a well-worn -- and occasionally lethal -- route from Java to Australia's remote Christmas Island.

Officials said there was little hope of finding any other passengers alive, which would make the sinking Indonesia's deadliest migrant boat accident.

Officials said the accident was the "worst disaster involving migrant boats" to date.

National Search and Rescue Agency spokesman Gagah Prakoso earlier said "it's very likely they have all drowned."

Bad weather, strong winds and waves of up to five metres hampered rescue efforts yesterday, with 300 rescuers including navy and police officers deployed to comb the sea for bodies.

Survivors were floating in the sea for six hours before fishermen rescued them, survivors and officials said.

Survivors interviewed by AFP and local officials said that most of the passengers came from Afghanistan or Iran, and they had paid agents between \$2,500 and \$5,000 to seek asylum in Australia.

Others claimed to be Iraqi, Pakistani, Turkish or Saudi nationals, and that their papers were lost at sea.

Thousands of asylum-seekers head through Southeast Asian countries on their way to Australia every year and many link up with people-smugglers in Indonesia for the dangerous sea voyage.



PHOTO: AFP  
An activist of Nepali Congress Party chants anti-government slogans in Kathmandu yesterday protesting the death of a senior leader of the party. The Nepali Congress Central Working Committee has declared a countrywide general strike today amid warning from US that it may reinstate travel warning there if political situation remains like this.

## Russian oil rig sinks in sub-zero condition

### 4 dead, 49 missing

AFP, Vladivostok

The toll rose to four dead and 49 missing after a Russian oil rig sank off the coast of Far Eastern Sakhalin island in freezing cold water yesterday, federal officials said as rescue helicopters were pulled to shore for the night.

The Kolskoye oil rig platform with 67 on board was 200 kilometres from shore when the accident occurred at 0145 GMT amid high winds and in temperatures of minus 17 degrees Celsius.

Two of the rescued people suffered from exposure and another two had minor injuries, the regional emergency officials said.

The potential death toll of 53 comes five months after 122 people drowned in the Volga river when the overcrowded pleasure boat Bulgaria sank in stormy weather.

# Iraqis to face many wars as US war ends

AGENCIES

A long war, that sits comfortably alongside the greatest military blunders in history -- the charge of the Light Brigade, the Dieppe Raid, Pearl Harbour, the German invasion of the Soviet Union, Vietnam -- has ended.

As US troops complete their withdrawal from Iraq, more than eight years after the invasion that ousted Saddam Hussein, they leave behind a country still facing a litany of challenges.

For the Iraqis, moving into a new era of, at best, fragile democracy and tenuous security, having suffered perhaps many tens of thousands of deaths, the car bombs and the blast walls, the vicious sectarian cleansings, the millions of refugees and internally displaced persons, the shredding of their economy and society... the question must be asked: Was it worth it?

And with the US withdrawal,

the country's ever latent political crisis opens up again deepening a fear of chaos that may engulf the country.

Yesterday, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki called on lawmakers to withdraw confidence from one of his deputies, Saleh al-Mutlak, a Sunni Arab who described Maliki on television as "worse than Saddam Hussein".

Maliki's push for the ouster came a day after the deputy prime minister's parliament bloc said it was boycotting parliament in protest at the premier's alleged centralisation of power.

Mutlak told CNN on Tuesday that Washington was leaving Iraq "with a dictator".

And in a separate interview with his own Babiliyah satellite television channel, Mutlak charged: "Maliki is worse than Saddam Hussein, because the latter was a builder, but Maliki has done absolutely nothing."

On Saturday, Iraqiya, which

emerged as the largest bloc in March 2010 elections and has 82 lawmakers in the 325-seat parliament, issued a statement saying it was suspending its participation in parliament to protest Maliki's centralisation of decision-making.

Many believe the problem is just the beginning of a crisis in a country which is already burdened with mistrust and decline of moral values.

And its only a tip of an ice berg, some say.

## THE COSTS OF IRAQ WAR

### ► HUMAN COST

Since the US invasion in March 2003, at least 126,000 Iraqi civilians were killed in the war, according to Boston University professor Neta Crawford. In addition, another 20,000 Iraqi soldiers and police were killed, along with more than 19,000 insurgents. United States lost 4,474 troops, of which 3,518 died in combat. Britain was next, with 179 troops killed. Nearly 32,000 American troops were also wounded. The United Nations estimates that

1.75 million Iraqis were made refugees by the war.

### ► FINANCIAL COST

The Pentagon has spent nearly \$770 billion since 2003 on operations in Iraq. The World Bank estimates that Iraq's GDP fell by 41 percent in 2003.

### ► OTHER LOSSES

Around 60 percent of the Iraqi National Archives went missing, were damaged or were destroyed.

## PROBLEMS THAT IRAQ WILL FACE

### ► DISPUTED TERRITORIES

Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region in the north wants a swathe of oil rich territory stretching from the border with Iran to the Syrian frontier to be incorporated into its three-province area.

### ► INSURGENTS AND AL-QAEDA

The Sunni insurgency has dramatically declined since violence peaked in 2006 and 2007. However, attacks, kidnappings and executions remain common. Al-Qaeda, though weak, remains a threat.

### ► RELIGIOUS TENSIONS

Many Iraqis accuse the US of bringing sectarianism to politics, a dimension they say was largely absent under Saddam. The Shia-led government has accused Sunni Arabs, who dominated Saddam's regime, of plotting to overthrow it.

### ► SYRIA CRISIS

Iraq shares a long border with Syria. A potential fall of Syria's minority Shiite Alawite regime could push refugees across the frontier, threatening to raise tensions between Iraqi Sunnis and Shiites.

### ► IRANIAN INFLUENCE

Iran is widely believed to exert major influence on the government, and has been accused by Washington of training and equipping Shia militias in the south of Iraq, charges Tehran denies.

### ► INSTITUTIONAL CORRUPTION

Institutions are weak and rife with graft, with Iraq rated the eighth-most corrupt country in the world by Transparency International. The security forces, while largely able to maintain internal security, are unable to defend borders and will not be fully capable until 2020.

### ► ENERGY

Though oil production and exports, which account for the vast majority of government income, are rising, no law has yet been approved to regulate the industry.

### ► SOCIAL PROBLEMS

Nearly a quarter of Iraq's population lives in poverty. The status of women in society has deteriorated markedly since 2003. Iraq also has about 1.75 million refugees and internally displaced persons.

## NEWS IN brief

### Israel to expand settlements

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's Ministry of Construction and Housing published yesterday a tender for over a thousand housing units for construction in east Jerusalem and the West Bank, the ministry's website said.

The new units, put on the market for contractors and entrepreneurs, include 500 units in the east Jerusalem neighbourhood of Har Homa and more than 500 in two West Bank settlements, with 348 in Beitar Illit and 180 in Givat Ze'ev.

### Yemeni general backs peace deal

REUTERS, Sanaa

A dissident army general said yesterday he backed a peace accord signed last month, lending support to efforts to pull Yemen from the brink of civil war, as officials said ten Islamist militants died in attacks by government forces in the south.

General Ali Mohsen's announcement came one day after both his forces, and troops loyal to outgoing President Ali Abdullah Saleh, began withdrawing from the capital Sanaa as part of the Gulf-brokered peace deal.

If the deal goes according to plan, Saleh will become the fourth Arab ruler brought down by mass demonstrations that have reshaped the political landscape of the Middle East.

### Occupy Wall Street arrests in NY

AFP, New York

Police made several arrests Saturday at a protest in New York marking three months of demonstrations by the Occupy Wall Street movement.

The demonstrators were arrested when they tried to enter private grounds belonging to a church near Zuccotti Park, which the movement was occupying until police evicted them in November.

Local media said between 35 and 50 people were arrested. But police declined to provide their own estimates.

### Kuwait to hold polls on Feb 2

AFP, Kuwait City

Kuwait will hold parliamentary elections on February 2, official media reported yesterday, the fourth poll in under six years for the OPEC Gulf state seeking stability.

The move comes just four days after Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad Al-Sabah swore in a new cabinet with only minor changes to the government that resigned in November over allegations of corruption.

Kuwait has been rocked by political turmoil since Sheikh Nasser Mohammad al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, 71, was appointed prime minister in February 2006.

## Czech revolution icon dies at 75

AFP, Prague

Former Czech president and hero of the Velvet Revolution Vaclav Havel, who steered his country to independence from Soviet rule in 1989, died yesterday at the age of 75, his office said.

Havel died in his sleep at dawn after a lengthy illness, his secretary Sabina Tancevova said.

Havel, president of Czechoslovakia from 1989 to 1992 and of the successor Czech Republic from 1993 to 2003, had long battled poor health, partly caused by the five years he spent in communist jails.

Czech Prime Minister Petr Necas paid tribute to Havel. Havel was born in Prague on October 5, 1936 into a wealthy family which lost its assets as the communists took power in 1948.

He established himself as a leading figure on the scene of the Czechoslovak theatre of the absurd in the 1960s, before being banned from theatres after the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

He was responsible for drawing up Charter 77, a 1977 manifesto challenging the communists to live up to their international promises to respect human rights, and he kept fighting the regime which earned him five years in prison.



Vaclav Havel

## Hamas, Fatah begin key unity talks in Cairo

AFP, Cairo

The rival Palestinian movements Fatah and Hamas began meeting in Cairo yesterday to discuss ways of implementing a stalled reconciliation deal, an official said.

Delegates from the two factions met "to prepare for the comprehensive dialogue" which is to take place on Tuesday in the Egyptian capital, Azzam al-Ahmed, head of the Fatah delegation told AFP.

Hamas chief Khaled Meshaal and Palestinian president and Fatah chief Mahmud Abbas were to hold talks on Thursday to discuss ways of implementing a landmark reconciliation deal between their rival movements which was signed in May but which has never got off the ground.

## Third day of violence rocks Cairo

AFP, Cairo

Clashes between demonstrators and police rocked central Cairo on Sunday, in the third straight day of violence which has left 10 people dead and some 500 wounded.

Demonstrators hurled stones and pieces of metal over a concrete wall erected by police on a wide avenue leading from Tahrir Square, focal point of the protests, to the seat of government, where clashes erupted early Friday, an AFP journalist reported.

A group entered the premises of the nearby Institute of Egypt, which was set alight the previous day, to recover ancient manuscripts, some of which were burned.

## PRISONER SWAP Israel to free 550 to complete deal

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel was yesterday preparing to release 550 Palestinian prisoners who will be freed after nightfall to complete a swap deal which brought about the release of captive soldier Gilad Shalit.

The release operation was to take place late in the evening, when the prisoners would be bussed to drop-off points near the West Bank city of Ramallah and along the Gaza border.

The Israel Prisons Service said the prisoners would depart from Ayalon prison near Tel Aviv at 7:00pm and would be released to the West Bank, Gaza Strip, east Jerusalem and the Jordan border three hours later.

Unlike in the first stage of the deal, which saw the release in October of 477 Palestinians including hundreds serving life for killing Israelis, Sunday's operation will not include anyone "with blood on their hands," officials on both sides said.

The Israel Prisons Service said 41 of those to be freed would be returned to their homes in Gaza, two to Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem, two to Jordan and the remainder to the occupied West Bank.

The names of the prisoners to be released were selected by Israel, and none of them belong to Hamas or Islamic Jihad. Israeli officials said priority had been given to members of Abbas's secular Fatah movement.

## Toxic liquor leaves village of widows

AFP, Sangrampur

They are already calling it the "widow village".

In the space of just a few short days, the close-knit community of Sangrampur in eastern India -- along with a number of smaller surrounding villages -- has been devastated by a case of mass poisoning from toxic, home-brewed alcohol.

So far 170 people have died, almost exclusively men, most of whom were the sole breadwinners in families that were already struggling with life on the poverty line.

"At the moment, it feels like all roads lead to the burial ground," said Abdul Mannan Gayen, who lost two sons and has a third battling for his life in hospital along with more than 100 other critically ill villagers.

Illegal, home-distilled liquor, or "hooch", has been brewed in such places for decades, catering to an impoverished male clientele of labourers, farmers and rickshaw drivers unable to afford branded alcohol.

On Tuesday evening, the half-litre measures of hooch -- costing as little as 10 US cents -- were drunk and shared as they are most evenings.

By Wednesday morning, local hospitals

were already struggling with the chronically sick and dying and the next few days saw the death toll rise inexorably from 50 to 100, to 150 and beyond.

Those who died, died painfully, wracked by cramps, vomiting and diarrhoea -- leaving behind wives and children who now face a perilous future.

"We're ruined," said Roserana Naskar, whose husband died Wednesday after drinking from the toxic batch of methanol-laced alcohol at the home of a relative who was celebrating the birth of his second son.

Newly-married and now widowed Anwara Bibi, 23, said she had no choice but to return to her father's house just months after leaving it to start a new life with

her husband, a tailor. "My life has been taken away," she said. Amid the grief, there was also intense anger.

Methanol, a highly toxic form of alcohol used as an anti-freeze or fuel, is often added to bootleg liquor in India as a cheap, quick method of upping the alcohol content.

Equally toxic, social workers say, is the collusion of local police and politicians who take a sizeable cut of the profits for turning a blind eye to the "hooch" cottage industry.



A widow of the tragedy

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