



A city bus after it ploughed into a pedestrian underpass in western Moscow yesterday, killing five people. It was not immediately clear what caused the accident as authorities said they were looking into several possibilities, including a technical malfunction.

PHOTO: AFP

20 killed in Philippines bus crash

Victims were on way to Christmas mass

AFP, Manila

Twenty pilgrims from the same extended family were killed yesterday in a head-on bus collision while travelling to Christmas Day mass in the northern Philippines, police said.

A small bus taking the group to a dawn church service crashed into a larger bus in the town of Agoo killing 20 on board, including six children, police said.

The nine other occupants of the small bus were injured, as were 17 travelling on the bigger bus, according to an updated tally released by regional police.

"They (the family) were trying to catch a mass in Manaoag," Agoo police officer Vanessa Abubo told AFP, referring to a northern Philippine town near Agoo with a famous Catholic church.

The centuries-old Our Lady of Manaoag church is a popular pilgrimage site in the mainly Catholic nation, featuring an icon of the Virgin Mary which the faithful say performs miracles.

Agoo police chief Roy Villanueva told Manila radio station DZMM by telephone that the smaller vehicle had left its lane to overtake a third vehicle.

Authorities are investigating whether the driver, who Abubo said was among those killed, had fallen asleep or was under the influence, Villanueva added.

Agoo is located 200 kilometres (125 miles) north of Manila. The pilgrims had come from the town of Bauang, an hour's drive from Manaoag, police said.

Melting ice cap

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at the height of the Cold War in 1967.

The base became home to the world's first mobile nuclear generator when it opened its doors to 200 soldiers in 1959, and included a 3km network of tunnels buried within the icecap.

However even the government of Denmark - which owned the site at the time - was not informed of the true purpose of the facility: Project Iceworm, which aimed to fire nuclear missiles through the ice tunnels at countries in the Soviet Union.

The US military hatched a secret plan to build a vast network of tunnels

Venezuela releases 36 political opponents from jails

AFP, Caracas

The Venezuelan government has released fewer than half of the 80 jailed political opponents it promised to free over Christmas as a goodwill gesture, human rights observers said on Sunday.

"Thirty-six political prisoners have been released since yesterday," Alfredo Romero of the rights group Foro Penal said on Twitter.

Delcy Rodriguez, president of the Constituent Assembly and head of its Truth Commission investigating protests against President Nicolas Maduro's government, said on Saturday that Christmas was "a moment of reconciliation" and promised to free 80 inmates.

Those jailed had been arrested during demonstrations demanding that Maduro step down. Mass street protest began in 2014, when 43 people were killed in clashes, and have continued sporadically ever since with 125 dead earlier this year.

Among those freed was Alfredo Ramos, mayor of the northwestern municipality of Iribarren, who was arrested in late July and handed a 15-month sentence.

"I feel happy for my freedom," Ramos told journalists upon his release. "It was a hard test, quite difficult."

But he also lashed out at his sentence.

"It was an arbitrary, unjust detention -- I committed no crime," he added.

Opposition forces accuse Maduro of dismantling democratic institutions and setting up the Constituent Assembly to rubber-stamp his policies.

One non-governmental group has put the number of "political prisoners" at 268. The government has disputed that label, insisting that all are being held for acts of violence, conspiracy or treason.

150 trapped in French ski lifts

AFP, Lyon

Around 150 skiers in the French Alps were rescued after being trapped for several hours when their ski lift broke down on Sunday.

The rescue operation lasted about two hours, Franck Lecoutre, head of the tourism office in the Chamrousse ski resort, near Grenoble, told AFP.

"They will all be in time for Christmas Eve," he said, noting that no one had been hurt. The weather was clear for the rescue operation.

The breakdown, whose cause was unknown, occurred around 1400 GMT on the ski lifts which link the resort of Chamrousse, located at 1,650 metres (5,400 feet) above sea level, with the summit of Croix Chamrousse at 2,250 metres. The weather was clear.

The incident affected 70 gondolas, each capable of carrying 10 people, rescuers said.

The operation involved two helicopters, with rescuers lowered on top of the gondolas to help the trapped skiers descend to the slopes with the help of ropes, David Gendre, a member of the rescue team, told AFP.

The Croix de Chamrousse ski lift was set up in 2009 to replace a cable car and two chair lifts.

The waste is buried beneath ice 35 metres thick, but a study in the journal Geophysical Research Letters suggests global warming could cause the complete melting of the ice within 75 years.

The study claims the secreted waste could become a source of tension between the US, Greenland and Denmark and poses a "multinational, multi-generational" problem.

In response, the Pentagon has said the US government will "work with the Danish government and the Greenland authorities to settle questions of mutual security".

"judicial coup" for his judgment and they were hatching a conspiracy to scrap the whole verdict through filing the review petition.

"It appears from the government's present activities and 94 points mentioned in the review petition that they [government] want to operate the whole judiciary for their own interest and the court has to deliver judgments as per the government's expectations."

Zainul also said the government tried to frighten the other judges by forcing the former chief justice to leave the country.

SCBA Secretary AM Mahbub Uddin Khokon also spoke at the press conference.

Six killed

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target of the attack but it happened on the main road."

The health ministry confirmed the death toll but put the number of wounded at one.

An AFP reporter at the blast site said the attack happened outside the main entrance to an NDS compound. Security forces have swarmed into the area, closing off the main road leading to the building.

Ambulances were seen leaving the scene, apparently taking casualties to hospitals in the city.

"Our initial information shows a blast took place near an intelligence headquarters in Shash Darak neighbourhood of Kabul," deputy interior ministry spokesman Nasrat Rahimi told AFP.

The Islamic State claimed the attack in a statement via their Amaq propaganda arm. It was the latest claimed assault by the Middle Eastern jihadist group in Kabul, which in recent months has become one of the deadliest places in the war-torn country for civilians.

Security in the city has been ramped up since May 31 when a massive truck bomb ripped through the diplomatic quarter, killing some 150 people and wounding around 400 others -- mostly civilians.

IS has expanded its presence in Afghanistan since it first appeared in the region in 2015.

It has scaled up its attacks in Kabul, including on security installations and the country's Shia minority.

Last week's attack on the intelligence training centre triggered an intense hours-long gunbattle which killed the two militants in an assault that was also claimed by IS.

The resurgent Taliban are also stepping up assaults on security installations.

On Friday, in an attack claimed by the Taliban, a suicide bomber drove an explosives-packed Humvee into a police compound in the southern province of Kandahar, killing at least six officers and destroying a building.

Afghan forces, already hard-hit by desertions and corruption, have seen casualties soar to what a US watchdog has described as "shockingly high" levels since Nato forces officially ended their combat mission in 2014 and began a training and support role.

Morale has been further eroded by long-running fears that the militants have insider help -- everything from infiltrators in the ranks to corrupt Afghan forces selling equipment to the Taliban.

3 Kuet teachers

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Abdullah Al Bari of mechanical engineering and Hasan Ali of energy science and engineering.

According to the Syndicate decision, they cannot perform any administrative work or supervise any research and their promotion will remain suspended until further notice.

The Kuet authorities have also formed a three-member probe committee headed by Prof Dr Bashudeb Chandra Ghosh of electrical & electronic engineering to further investigate the matter.

Allegations were brought against the trio that they published two technical papers in the International Journal of Mechanical Engineering (vol-2, issue-1) and ICMIME in 2013 by copying from a foreign research.

The results of their papers were 100 percent similar to the research published in Mitsubishi Motor Technical Review in 2004 (vol-16), insiders say.

Queen praises terror-hit London, Manchester in Christmas message

AFP, London

Britain's Queen Elizabeth II will praise the "powerful identities" of London and Manchester in responding to terrorist attacks this year, during her annual Christmas message yesterday.

She will also pay a personal tribute to the "support and unique sense of humour" of husband Prince Philip, who retired from solo public duties earlier this year.

"This Christmas, I think of London and Manchester, whose powerful identities shone through over the past twelve months in the face of appalling attacks," the 91-year-old monarch was to say in the pre-recorded televised message, according to extracts released beforehand.

London suffered two deadly terror attacks, while 22 people -- including children -- were killed during an attack at Manchester Arena following a performance by US singer Ariana Grande.

Flanked by pictures of great-grandchildren George and Charlotte in her Buckingham Palace home, the Queen will say: "We think of our homes as places of warmth, familiarity and love... there is a timeless simplicity to the pull of home."

The world's longest serving monarch will then praise her 96-year-old

husband, saying: "I know his support and unique sense of humour will remain strong as ever as we enjoy spending Christmas with our family, and look forward to welcoming new members into it next year."

Prince Harry's bride-to-be Meghan Markle is to become the first fiancée to spend Christmas with the British royal family -- a move hailed as a sea change in the monarchy's traditionalist attitude.

The US actress will join the royals at Sandringham, the Queen's private estate in Norfolk, eastern England, where the royals traditionally spend their winter break.

It is understood that Harry and his fiancée will stay with Prince William and the Duchess of Cambridge Kate at Anmer Hall, their home in the Sandringham grounds, rather than in the main house.

Markle will have to adjust to the royal family's idiosyncratic ways and customs, engrained in centuries of tradition.

The royals exchange gifts on Christmas Eve, in keeping with German practice.

Markle is reportedly an animal lover but will have to put up the with royals' tradition of going out shooting on Boxing Day.

ME needs Two-state

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Middle East conflict and other world flashpoints in his "Urbi et Orbi" (to the city and the world) address, four days after more than 120 countries backed a UN resolution urging the United States to reverse its decision on Jerusalem.

"Let us pray that the will to resume dialogue may prevail between the parties and that a negotiated solution can finally be reached, one that would allow the peaceful coexistence of two states within mutually agreed and internationally recognised borders," he said, referring to the Israelis and Palestinians.

"We see Jesus in the children of the Middle East who continue to suffer because of growing tensions between Israelis and Palestinians," he said in his address, delivered from the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica to tens of thousands of people.

It was the second time that the pope has spoken out publicly about Jerusalem since Trump's decision on December 6. On that day, Francis called for the city's "status quo" to be respected, lest new tensions in the Middle East further inflame world conflicts.

Palestinians want East Jerusalem as the capital of their future independent state, whereas Israel has declared the whole city to be its "united and eternal" capital.

Francis, leader of the world's 1.2 billion Roman Catholics, urged people to see the defenceless baby Jesus in the children who suffer the most from war, migration and natural calamities caused by man today.

"Today, as the winds of war are blowing in our world ... Christmas invites us to focus on the sign of the child and to recognise him in the faces of little children, especially those for whom, like Jesus, 'there is no place in the inn,'" he said.

OPEN HEARTS FOR REFUGEES

Francis, celebrating the fifth Christmas of his pontificate, said he had seen Jesus in the children he met during his

3 BSF men

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claimed they had mistakenly crossed the border while chasing a group of Bangladeshi cattle smugglers amidst dense fog, he further said.

However, it is not a good practice that trained forces like BSF would make mistakes like trespassing into another country, he observed.

The BGB strongly protested against the trespassing and BSF offered apologies during a company commander level flag meeting.

BSF Assistant Commissioner Amrit Proshad led Indian side and BGB Company Commander Subedar Abu Taleb led BGB members at the meeting.

Locals said the trespass created panic among them.

The BSF men attempted to raid a cattle shed around 7:30am, said Shamim Sheikh, councillor of Haripur Union Parishad.

In the face of protests, the BSF men threatened to arrest the locals, he added. At this stage, the locals called BGB.

The BSF men challenged BGB members when they arrived on the scene, pointing guns towards them. In response, the BGB also challenged the BSF men pointing their guns, he said.

However, the BSF members realised their mistake and surrendered to the BGB members half an hour later, said the UP member who visited the area hearing the incident.

recent trip to Myanmar and Bangladesh, and he called for adequate protection of the dignity of minority groups in that region.

More than 600,000 Muslim Rohingya people have fled mainly Buddhist Myanmar to Bangladesh in recent months. The pope had to tread a delicate diplomatic line during his visit, avoiding the word "Rohingya" while in Myanmar, which does not recognise them as a minority group, though he used the term when in Bangladesh.

"Jesus knows well the pain of not being welcomed and how hard it is not to have a place to lay one's head. May our hearts not be closed as they were in the homes of Bethlehem," he said.

He also urged the world to see Jesus in the innocent children suffering from wars in Syria and Iraq and also in Yemen, complaining that its people had been "largely forgotten, with serious humanitarian implications for its people, who suffer from hunger and the spread of diseases".

He also listed conflicts affecting children in South Sudan, Somalia, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Ukraine and Venezuela.

At his Christmas Eve Mass in St Peter's Basilica on Sunday, Francis strongly defended immigrants, comparing them to Mary and Joseph finding no place to stay in Bethlehem and saying faith demands that foreigners be welcomed.

Sixth Bengal

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the festival will continue from 7:00pm to 5:00am every day and feature the most prominent Eastern classical musicians in the world. This year's festival is dedicated to eminent litterateur Professor Emeritus Dr Anisuzzaman.

At the opening ceremony tonight, Finance Minister AMA Muhith will inaugurate the festival, where cultural affairs minister Asaduzzaman Noor will be present as a special guest. Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Harshvardhan Shringla, Barrister Fazle Nur Taposh, Abahani Limited Chairman Salman F Rahman and Square Group Chairman Anjan Chowdhury will also be present.

The festival will open with a joint performance by Dr. L Subramaniam's Carnatic (South Indian classical) violin with the Astana Philharmonic Orchestra's western classical music.

The five night-long bonanza will see legends of Indian classical music perform, including Pandit Jasraj, Pt. Hariprasad Chaurasia, Pt. Shiv Kumar Sharma, Dr. L Subramaniam, Pt. Ajoy Chakraborty, Ustad Rashid Khan and Vidyan Vikku Vinayakram, among many others performing a wide array of music and dance. Bangladeshi artistes including Firoz Khan, Gazi Abdul Hakim, students of Bengal Parampara Sangeetalay and Government Music College will also perform on the same stage.

The festival is presented by Square and organised by Bengal Foundation, with support from BRAC Bank. Channel i is the broadcast partner. Blues Communications will be the event management company, with cooperation from Perfect Harmony, Singapore.

For detailed coverage of the festival, including the schedule of performing artistes, please see the Arts & Entertainment page (Page 9).