

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

Shelling kills at least 9 in Somalia

MOGADISHU: An exchange of mortar shells between Somali government forces and rebels killed at least nine civilians and injured 14 others, a human rights group said on Monday.

The clashes started late on Sunday and continued on Monday morning, the Elnati Peace and Human Rights Organisation said.

"These casualties are from the overnight shelling. We are still monitoring Monday's casualties. The shelling was terrible," said Ali Yasin Gedi, Elnati's vice chairman.

Residents said government shells targeted houses occupied by Islamist al-Shabaab rebels in the north of Mogadishu. Washington says the group is al-Qaeda's proxy in the region.

"We saw al-Shabaab carrying their dead and injured in a minibus. But we do not know the exact figure of the deaths," Hassan Nur, a resident, told Reuters.

"The government shells almost levelled houses that housed local and foreign al-Shabaab people."

Government and al-Shabaab officials could not be immediately reached for comment.

Somalia has not had an effective central government for close to two decades and the international community and neighbouring countries are worried about the threat posed by al-Shabaab insurgents now controlling a large part of the country and fighting its fragile government.

The near-daily clashes have killed at least 21,000 people since the start of 2007.

For weeks, the government has been promising to launch an offensive against al-Shabaab and another rebel group, Hizbul Islam, which both want to impose a harsh version of sharia law.

A government official who wanted to remain anonymous told Reuters the pro-government Abu Sanaa Waljamaana militia was meeting a government delegation in neighbouring Adis Ababa.—Reuters



JERUSALEM: Palestinian schoolgirl evacuated during clashes between Palestinians and Israeli forces following an arrest operation at the Shufat refugee camp here on Monday.—AFP

Michael Jackson's doctor charged in singer's death

LOS ANGELES: Los Angeles prosecutors charged Michael Jackson's personal doctor on Monday with involuntary manslaughter in the singer's death last year.

Dr. Conrad Murray has been a focus of investigations for months, since the coroner's office ruled that Jackson's June 25 death was a homicide by drug overdose.

Murray was at Jackson's rented Los Angeles house at the time of his death and was the man who, according to police affidavits, administered the powerful anaesthetic propofol to the 50-year-old singer to help him sleep.

The coroner's report in August said Jackson's death was caused principally by propofol and the sedative lorazepam. A cocktail of other painkillers, sedatives and a stimulant were also found in his body.

The charge of involuntary manslaughter alleges Murray "did unlawfully, and without malice, kill Michael Joseph Jackson," said a statement from the Los Angeles District Attorney's office.

Murray is expected to make an initial appearance in court in Los Angeles later on Monday.

He could face up to four years in prison if convicted, the district attorney's office said.

The doctor has repeatedly insisted he did nothing wrong and has told investigators he was not the first doctor to give Jackson propofol, according to court records.

Murray, a cardiologist, was hired in May 2009 to care for Jackson while the entertainer prepared for a series of 50 comeback concerts in London.

aimed at reviving a career sidelined by his humiliating 2005 trial and acquittal on charges of molesting a 13-year-old boy.

The self-styled King of Pop died of sudden cardiac arrest after a late night rehearsal in Los Angeles for the planned concerts.

His death prompted a worldwide outpouring of grief for the singer, who started his career as a child and whose 1982 album "Thriller" remains the world's best-selling album.

Murray was an immediate focus of police investigations into Jackson's death. Authorities found bottles of propofol in Murray's doctor's bag and on the bedside table of Jackson's home, according to court records unveiled last year.

They also searched Murray's offices in Las Vegas and Houston, Texas.—Reuters

Israeli police raid east Jerusalem refugee camp

JERUSALEM: Israeli security forces Monday raided a Palestinian refugee camp in an area east of Jerusalem, arresting 11 people in an operation police said was aimed at putting "some order" in the area.

Dozens of police and border police forces in jeeps entered the densely populated Shuafat camp in the north of occupied and annexed east Jerusalem after midnight, witnesses and police said.

Eleven Palestinians were arrested on suspicion of tax evasion, debts to the municipality as well as involvement in criminal activities and violent disturbances, police spokesman Shmuel Ben Rubi said.

"We want to put some order into this village," he told AFP, adding the operation would last "as long as necessary."

Local incidents told AFP that the arrest raid also targeted Palestinian workers from the West Bank who live in the area without permits.

Palestinian youths pelted police jeeps with rocks throughout the operation and clashes erupted in the afternoon as police dispersed the crowds with sound grenades and rubber bullets.

East Jerusalem Palestinians hold Israeli ID cards and are allowed to work in the country, while West Bank Palestinians require work permits from the state.—AFP

Yemen Qaeda wants Red Sea blocked

DUBAI: The Yemen-based wing of al Qaeda, in a recording posted on the Internet on Monday, called on Somali insurgents to help gain control over a narrow strait at the mouth of the Red Sea to block US shipments to Israel.

The wing's deputy leader, Sa'eed al-Shehri, urged Somalia's al-Shabaab Islamist insurgents to help return the Bab al Mandab strait, which separates Yemen from the Horn of Africa, "to the lands of Islam."

"At such a time the Bab (al Mandab) will be closed and that will lighten the noose on the Jews (Israel), because through it America supports them by the Red Sea," Shehri said in the audio recording posted on a website often used by Islamist groups.

"(Due to the) maritime importance of Bab al Mandab, this would be a great victory," said Shehri, whose group claimed responsibility for a failed bombing of a US plane on Dec. 25.

The area across the strait from Yemen is far from al-Shabaab's territory which extends from the southern Somali port of Kismayu to the central town of Baidoa and parts of the capital Mogadishu.—Reuters

US rule directs banks to share data abroad

WASHINGTON: A US financial crime agency has adopted a rule allowing local, state and foreign police agencies to seek information from American banks, despite opposition from industry groups.

The rule broadens one adopted by the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN), a division of the US Treasury Department, after the Sept. 11 attacks. That original rule allowed FinCEN to require financial institutions to search their records to determine whether they maintained accounts or conducted transactions with individuals that federal law enforcement agencies suspect, "based on credible evidence," have engaged in terrorist activity or money laundering.

FinCEN had said it wanted to expand the rule because of its success in helping track terrorist financing and major money laundering cases and to satisfy treaty obligations with the European Union. FinCEN, established in 1990 to provide and analyze financial intelligence, administers the Bank Secrecy Act. The act requires financial institutions to submit reports to the government aimed at preventing money laundering.

The agency said on Friday that expanding the rule to foreign law enforcement agencies would "greatly benefit the United States by granting law enforcement agencies in the United States reciprocal rights to obtain information about matching accounts in EU member states."

More than half a dozen financial trade groups and associations, including the American Bankers Association and the Credit Union National Association, opposed the expanded rule as too burdensome and intrusive.

In a 13-page letter, ABA Vice President Robert Rowe called it "precautionary and unfounded" and said it represented a "dangerous broadening" of the information-sharing process.

"There is absolutely no indication that the extraordinary power available under the 314(a) data-match program was ever intended by Congress to be put at the service of foreign countries," he wrote, referring to FinCEN regulations that are part of the USA Patriot Act of 2001.

But FinCEN said the same vetting process currently used for federal law enforcement requests would be applied to requests made by foreign, state and local police agencies. Among other things, FinCEN said it will require them to certify that, in the case of money laundering, the matter is significant and they have not been able to obtain the information they seek through traditional methods of investigation.

And foreign law enforcement requests will be required to submit their requests to a federal law enforcement attaché.

In a statement, FinCEN Director James Freis said that while the searches requested of financial institutions were simple and sought very limited information, "the threads they provide are crucial to investigations and are often the key to weaving together successful cases."

FinCEN began processing requests under the old rule in November 2002. As of June 2009, it had processed 988 requests submitted by 22 federal agencies, according to FinCEN. Of those, 302 cases were related to terrorism or terrorist financing and 686 related to money laundering. FinCEN said that 54 percent of the requests had contributed to arrests or indictments.—Reuters

servers, five computers and a car.

Black Hawk Safety Net was founded in 2005 and headquartered in Nanchang city in Henan province which neighbours Hubei.

The China Daily quoted anonymous Black Hawk Safety Net members saying users learned how to hack into the financial accounts of others and steal funds, through courses that cost between 100 and 2,000 yuan.

The reports said authorities began investigating the company last year after finding evidence that three of its customers were involved in a 2007 cyber-attack that disrupted web services in the Hubei city of Mianyang.

The reports gave no further information on any cyberattacks linked to the company.

Google said in January it would no longer abide by Chinese government censorship and was mulling leaving the country with the world's largest number of online users, citing cyberattacks on it and more than 20 other companies.—AFP

BEIJING: Police in central China have shut down a hacker training company that taught thousands of people how to launch cyberattacks and provided them with spy software, media reports said Monday.

The reports come amid growing accusations of organised computer hacking originating from China that has chilled ties with the United States, and follow Google's threat last month to quit the Chinese market over cyberattacks.

Police in Hubei province shut down Black Hawk Safety Net and arrested three people, the state-run Xinhua news agency said, calling the operation China's "biggest hacker training website."

The company openly offered downloads of hacker tools and trojan software to 12,000 VIP members and 170,000 others who had registered for free membership.

The Legal Daily newspaper said on its website that the company was shut down in November and that police had frozen more than 1.7 million yuan (250,000 dollars) in assets and confiscated nine web

whole series of hurdles to a swift reconciliation, first of all external influence and concerted pressure from the United States," he said, which he said was using "various means" to scuttle the efforts.

Meshaal did not elaborate, but said portions of an Egyptian-drafted reconciliation deal had been charged without consultation with Hamas and that the group would not sign it unless they were restored.

Meshaal blamed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for what Hamas has called a collapse of indirect talks to exchange captive Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit for some of the more than 7,000 Palestinians in Israeli jails.

"The reason is the game Netanyahu is playing," Meshaal said through an interpreter. Israel has demanded that dozens of Palestinians imprisoned after being convicted of involvement in lethal attacks be deported upon their release.—Reuters

Hamas leader says US blocking Palestinian unity

MOSCOW: Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal on Monday accused the United States of undermining Palestinian unity efforts and said he saw no chance for peace in the Middle East under Israel's current leadership.

Shunned in the West because his Islamist group refuses to recognise Israel — a position he said stands — Meshaal used a hospitable Russia as a platform to blame Washington and Israel's hardline government for a lack of progress.

His remarks underscored barriers on the road to Palestinian reconciliation and to renewing Middle East peace talks.

Hamas wants a reconciliation deal with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' rival Fatah movement "as fast as possible", Meshaal told a news conference after meeting Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who invited him to Moscow.

"Unfortunately, there are a woman and a toddler on the back of an old truck. When we entered Zambia, the security forces arrested us and sent us to a prison near the border, where we tilted land on government farms every day for six months," he said. After half a year in jail, the teenager was released.

He arrived in Cape Town, via Mozambique, 10 months after leaving his hometown of Kismayu. "South Africa is not my destination. I am now planning to continue to Miresoseta, USA," he said.—Reuters

Top Canadian military official charged with murder

TORONTO: The commander of a major military base in Canada who once flew dignitaries around the country has been charged with first-degree murder in the deaths of two women and in the sexual assault of two other women.

Ontario Provincial Police Det. Insp. Chris Nicholas said Monday that Col. Russell Williams, 46, was arrested Sunday in Ottawa.

Williams was appointed as the base commander of Canadian Forces Base Trenton in Trenton, Ontario last July. Trenton is Canada's largest air force base and is providing logistical support for Canada's missions in Haiti and Afghanistan.

Williams is charged with the first-degree murder of Jessica Lloyd, 27, of a Belleville, Ontario, resident whose body was found earlier Monday, and Marie Cornea, a 38-year-old corporal found dead in her Brighton, Ontario, home in November.

Williams is also charged with forcible confinement, breaking and entering and sexual assault after two women were sexually assaulted during two separate home invasions in the Trenton, Ontario area in September of 2009.—AP

Britain's ITV fined over killing a rat on TV show

SYDNEY/LONDON: British broadcaster ITV pleaded guilty to animal cruelty and was fined by an Australian court on Monday after a rat was killed and eaten on the reality TV show "I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here."

Italian chef Gino D'Acampo and British actor Stuart Manning were originally charged with animal cruelty last December after an RSPCA complaint over an episode filmed in Australia that involved killing and cooking a rat.

But Sky News reported on Monday that ITV admitted its production staff had given the go-ahead to a request to kill the rat and the broadcaster pleaded guilty to the charge.

The court was told that the rat took a minute-and-a-half to die after being stabbed with a knife when the magistrate said caused unnecessary pain to the animal.

ITV was fined A\$3,000 (\$2,600) and ordered to pay A\$2,500 in costs.

RSPCA Chief Inspector David O'Shaunessy said all animals are protected under the Cruelty to Animals Act in the state of New South Wales.

"An animal was inflicted with unnecessary pain and distress. Had the circumstances been different and the rat killed outright we wouldn't be talking about it here today," he told Sky News.

A spokesman for ITV said the broadcaster had apologised for the mistake which led to the incident.

"The production was aware that killing a rat could be an offence, criminal or otherwise, in New South Wales, and accepts that further enquiries should have been made," a spokesman said.—Reuters

Hong Kong girl survives mother's suicide fall

HONG KONG: A four-year-old girl survived a fall from a Hong Kong shopping mall balcony when her mother leapt to her death, in the latest in a string of murder-suicide attempts, police said Monday.

The young girl was hurt by her 41-year-old mother from the mall's seventh floor on Sunday afternoon, but landed in a net below and suffered no serious injuries, police said. However, the mother crashed through the net — intended to prevent rubbish falling on pedestrians below — and was pronounced dead at the scene.

Media reports said horrified onlookers screamed as the girl — suspended four storeys above the ground — began climbing near the hole left by her mother's fall.

But the kindergarten pupil managed to climb to safety with the help of a shopper at the mall in Shun Shui Po, a low-income neighbourhood in the city's Kowloon district, reports said.

The family had been eating lunch at the mall, and some reports said there was a heated argument between the child's parents shortly before the incident.—AFP

Dubai closes top deck at world's tallest tower for repairs

DUBAI: The breath-taking view from the top of Dubai's Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest high-rise, has been closed to the public due to problems with power supply, the tower's management said in a statement.

"Due to unexpected high traffic, the observation deck experience at the Burj Khalifa... has been temporarily closed for maintenance and upgrade," the statement said. "Technical issues with the power supply are being worked on." It added, without specifying when visitors could expect to ascend again for a panoramic view of Dubai.

The glistering concrete, glass and steel pinnacle rising 828 metres (2,717 feet) out of the desert sands was inaugurated just over a month ago in a lavish ceremony and international media coverage. The observation deck on the 124th floor, called "At the Top," was the only part of the Dubai icon that was open to the public.—AFP

British minister denies ignoring Iraq war legal advice

LONDON: Britain's foreign minister during the Iraq war denied Monday he had ignored advice that the 2003 invasion was illegal, in his second appearance before the public inquiry into the conflict.

Jack Straw said he read "with great care" an opinion given by the chief legal advisor to the Foreign Office at the time, Michael Wood, two months before war — but rejected it because it contradicted previous advice.

"I took a very close interest in the question of the lawfulness of any military action in which the United Kingdom might be involved," said Straw, who is currently justice minister in Prime Minister Gordon Brown's government.

In his first appearance last month, Straw said he only "reluctantly" came around to back the invasion of Iraq in March 2003, accepting it was inevitable after Iraq rejected a final chance to disarm outlined in UN resolution 1441.

However, when he gave evidence to the inquiry a few days later, Wood threw into doubt Straw's version of events, saying the minister had ignored his warnings that a second UN resolution authorising force was needed. Straw confirmed he received Wood's advice on January 24, 2003 — two months before war — which said acting without a second resolution "would amount to a crime of aggression."

He read this "with great care, and gave it the serious attention it deserved", before replying: "I note your advice, but I do not accept it."

Straw explained Monday that there was a "striking contrast" between this memo and one Wood wrote in December which set out a balanced view stating both why a second UN resolution was needed, as well as why it was not.

The inquiry, which began in November, heard from former prime minister Tony Blair on January 29. The probe's chairman has said Blair could be called to testify again, while Brown is also due to appear in the next month or two.—AFP

British minister denies ignoring Iraq war legal advice

LONDON: Two more British soldiers were killed in Afghanistan at the weekend, bringing the country's death toll there to the same as the 1982 Falklands war, the Ministry of Defence said Monday.

The soldiers from the Royal Scots Borderers, 1st Battalion The Royal Regiment of Scotland were killed by an explosion in Sangin in Helmand Province on Sunday, taking the British death toll in Afghanistan to 255 since 2001.

"They were on a foot patrol bringing security to local people... when the explosion caught them... Two of our comrades have been cruelly taken from us, but their bravery and fortune will not be forgotten," said a spokesman.

The politically symbolic toll comes as Prime Minister Gordon Brown battles to persuade a sceptical British public that the Afghan conflict is worthwhile, and as he struggles to avoid defeat in elections due by June.

Britain ousted Argentinean forces from the Falkland Islands, known in Spanish as the Malvinas, in a 74-day war that left 649 Argentines and 253 Britons dead.

Then premier Margaret Thatcher's popularity surged as a result.

The latest British deaths in Afghanistan came as Britain braced for a surge in casualties in a major assault against Taliban-led militants in southern Afghanistan. Troops from Britain, which has 9,500 service personnel in the country, will take part in Operation Mullahkarak ("Together") in Helmand province and the assault is expected to be launched within days.

Reports say up to 4,000 British troops may be involved. The two soldiers killed Sunday were not part of Operation Mullahkarak, the MoD said. More than 110,000 international troops are in Afghanistan fighting the Taliban-led insurgents under US and NATO command, with another 40,000 arriving as part of a counter-insurgency strategy designed to bring an end to the war.—AFP

Thousands flee south every year from Somalia, Ethiopia

NAIROBI: At least 17,000 illegal migrants from the Horn of Africa leave their countries for South Africa annually, most of them transiting through Kenya, a top UN official said on Monday.

Tal Raviv, a regional programme officer at the UN's International Organisation for Migration (IOM), told Reuters that conflict and poverty were forcing Ethiopians and Somalis to undertake risky trips to better places.

"The journey is made possible because of limited border controls all the way to South Africa, but also the fact that you can easily get fake documents and pay bribes to move from one place to another," she said.

IOM's 2009 report estimates that sneaking Ethiopians and Somalis into South Africa was a \$40 million business.

Police in Kenya's north eastern region said they have stepped up measures to curb human smuggling. "We have also sacked some of the corrupt officials who have been taking money from illegal migrants," said James Ole Seriani, north eastern province commissioner, in a telephone interview from the eastern town of Garissa.

Kenya officially closed its 680 km (420 miles) border with Somalia in 2007 fearing the threat from heavily armed militants.

But it has allowed thousands of refugees from Somalia to enter and live in sprawling refugee camps near the border.

IOM's 2009 report said organised criminal groups of human smugglers located in eight African countries facilitate the illegal movement.

A 17-year-old Somali boy who travelled from the southern Somalia town of Kismayu to South Africa's Cape Town last year described the journey as risky. Fearing forceful recruitment by al-Shabaab hardline insurgents, the teenager, who asked not to be named, said he travelled in a group of 75 Somalis including a 60-year-old

woman and a toddler on the back of an old truck. When we entered Zambia, the security forces arrested us and sent us to a prison near the border, where we tilted land on government farms every day for six months," he said. After half a year in jail, the teenager was released.

He arrived in Cape Town, via Mozambique, 10 months after leaving his hometown of Kismayu. "South Africa is not my destination. I am now planning to continue to Miresoseta, USA," he said.—Reuters