

500 Dead in Nigeria Religious Violence

Nigeria's government sent in troops to the flashpoint northern Jos region on Monday after attacks by machete-wielding gangs on Christian villages that officials say killed at least 500 people.



Under fire for failing to prevent another outburst of sectarian violence only weeks after hundreds died in Muslim-Christian clashes, authorities said they had arrested scores of people in connection with the attacks, AFP reported.

Witnesses described how the mainly women and children victims in Sunday's three-hour systematic orgy of violence were caught in animal traps and fishing nets as they tried to flee their attackers, who hacked them to death.

The official death toll was initially put at a little over 100 but Dan Manjang, an advisor to the Plateau state government, said it had shot up.

"We have been able to make 95 arrests but at the same time over 500 people have been killed in this heinous act," Dan Manjang said.

Government-run radio also reported that 500 people had been slaughtered in a raid on three villages on the fringes of Jos, capital of Plateau state.

Socialist MPs Furious Over India Women Bill

India's government introduced a bill to parliament on Monday that would reserve one-third of the legislature's seats for women, angering socialist lawmakers who tore up papers and tried to tear out microphones.

The protests stalled debate and voting on the proposal until at least Tuesday. The bill has faced strong opposition since it was first proposed more than a decade ago, with many political leaders worried that their male-dominated parties would lose seats under a female quota system, AP reported.

But Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's government, which was reelected last year, is confident it has enough support this time and presented the bill to parliament on International Women's Day.

The bill is an attempt to correct some of the historical mistreatment of women in this South Asian country. Most Indian women receive far less education than men and are weighed down by illiteracy, poverty and low social status.

On Monday, a UN report said 96 million women in Asia have "disappeared" because of a gender gap that deprives them of access to health care and good nutrition, including about 43 million in India. Sex-selective abortions were also blamed.

The socialist groups argue that a portion of the women's quota should be set aside for minorities and lower castes, which have been socially and economically disadvantaged as well.

Myanmar Unveils Election Law

Myanmar's military government on Monday unveiled long-awaited laws for elections later this year but gave no immediate date for the country's first polls in two decades, state media said.



Junta supremo Than Shwe promised the elections in 2008 as part of his so-called "roadmap to democracy" but critics say the vote will be a sham if pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi remains under house arrest, AFP reported.

"The laws were enacted by the State Peace and Development Council and the details of the laws will be published in tomorrow's newspaper and also will be published as a book," state television and radio said, referring to the junta by its formal title.

It was unclear if a date for the election would be included in the details to be released later. Analysts have predicted the polls will take place in October or November.

Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) has not yet decided whether it will take part in the elections and has said it will wait until it sees the laws. The party was not immediately available for comment.

Lanka Urged to Reconcile With Tamils

Indian foreign secretary Nirupama Rao urged Sri Lanka's leaders to open a new era of stability after the island's civil war by bringing minority Tamils into mainstream society, officials said Monday.

Rao, on a visit to Colombo, told President Mahinda Rajapakse that the defeat of Tamil Tiger separatist rebels last year could lead to a lasting solution to decades of ethnic conflict, AFP said.

Sri Lanka had "a historic opportunity to initiate a process of political reconciliation where all communities in Sri Lanka can live in peace and harmony," Rao said in a statement.

Rajapakse came to power in 2005 promising to address Tamil demands for greater autonomy, but he later ordered the massive military offensive that crushed the Tigers.

Since then, the president has publicly committed himself to reconciliation though he has yet to implement recommendations of an all-party panel he set up to address grievances of the ethnic Tamil minority.

Rao also welcomed Sri Lanka's moves to grant freedom of movement to tens of thousands of war-displaced Tamil civilians who were held in military-run camps.

India, with its large Tamil population in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, shares close cultural and religious links with Sri Lanka.

In Focus

Bewildered Berlusconi

> By Amir Nourbakhsh

Among European countries, minus the pathetic Greek economy, the next crisis-stricken economy to stumble will be Italy. Concurrent with the waves of strikes and closures that have hit Athens, Rome is also the scene of protest rallies by furious workers and social activists who see no light at the end of the tunnel under Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Economic data about the poor performance of the Berlusconi government is understandably bad news for most if not all Italians.

Based on figures released by Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), GDP in early 2010 fell by almost four percent, which is unprecedented in the past 40 years.

Amid this, Italian newspapers have highlighted a report by the central bank which says employment conditions are critical and warned that more than 600,000 people lost their jobs in the past two months.

> Fortunes Fade

Observers believe that the critical conditions are signs also of Berlusconi's mismanagement and fading fortunes. Interestingly, one Italian analyst, in describing the current conditions of Berlusconi's government, says his European friends have left Italy to its own devices and allowed Berlusconi to drive in a state of intoxication!

Perhaps if Italy had a powerful government like a few others in Europe, it could have overcome the crisis without loss of face.

The main problem is that Rome's economic crisis is tied to a bigger crisis which stems from the political decline of the ruling establishment.

At the time when Rome more than ever needs calm and moderation, its rulers routinely pursue aggressive policies at the national and international levels. Time magazine has characterized Berlusconi as the most controversial political figure in Europe.

He is in regular confrontation with workers and retirees over wages and taxes and has also crossed swords with lawyers and judges over upholding the rule of law and civil liberties. Not to mention that he also has picked up fights with European governments and Islamic states, such as Iran.

> Recurring Scandals

When the rightist government came to power two years ago, most Europeans said Berlusconi replacing Romano Prodi would only make a bad situation worse. Now those doubts have turned into stark realities as seen in recurring demonstrations in Rome and the political and moral scandals visiting the embattled prime minister.

Italy has been known also as a land of unstable governments. After World War II 62 governments have come and gone in that country. But politicians in Rome insist despite the systemic ruptures in the ruler-ship, the foundations of economic and administrative power have been maintained. Now it seems that Berlusconi has done a terribly wonderful job at exposing the true worth of those foundations.

Berlusconi's predecessors had traits that relatively helped contain harm to Italy's status on the international scene.

For example, Prodi was an economist and was often labeled as an "economic architect" in Italy and Europe. In the world of diplomacy he was respected for his independent and clean foreign policy.

However, Berlusconi has followed an entirely different course of action. He is normally compared to French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

The billionaire of Milan, like the chief in Elysee, is more adventurous and unreasonably ambitious, to say the least.

Miliband Hails Iraq Invasion, Attacks UN

Britain's decision to back the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 earned it "respect" among states in the Middle East and it must not be scared of similar "engagement" in the future, Foreign Secretary David Miliband said Monday.

Giving evidence to the public inquiry into Britain's role in the US-led conflict, Miliband insisted that despite all the violence, Iraq now had the potential to be an example to the region on "democracy and human rights".

Miliband acknowledged the domestic and international opposition to the war but said many Arab countries respected Britain more for acting on Iraq's violation of UN resolutions on its weapons of mass destruction.

"I do think people in the region do respect those who are willing to see through what they say they favor," he said.

"Even those who disagree with it (the war) would say to me, 'you've sent a message that when you say something you actually mean it. And if you say something's a last chance it really is a last chance'."

He added: "In the Arab world today, I don't believe that the Iraq decisions have undermined our relationships or our ability to business. Some of our ambassadors say we are in a stronger position."

Miliband said that even US critics of the invasion accepted Britain had been a "staunch ally", and any divisions in the United Nations -- which failed to agree on a second resolution authorizing war-- had blown over.

The inquiry was set up to learn the lessons of the conflict, and although Miliband admitted these were numerous, he urged the panel not to conclude that the idea of such military action was a bad idea.

"The wrong lesson would be that Britain should leave international engagement to others, that the world is just so complicated and so dangerous that we're better off retreating into ourselves," he said.

While the Iraq war had caused difficul-



The 2003 invasion of Iraq, was led by the United States, alongside the United Kingdom and smaller contingents such as Australia, Denmark and Poland.

ties and killed many, it has also created opportunities for the people there and the region, he said, noting moves to improve human rights and the elections that took place on Sunday.

> UN Failures

The "successive failures" of the United Nations to follow through threats to Saddam Hussein weakened it ahead of the Iraq war, Miliband said.

The UK foreign secretary said scope for action against him had become "severely limited" by "feeble follow-through".

Miliband told the inquiry that international agencies thought Saddam posed "the material to be a danger".

But he said he disagreed with former US Vice-President Dick Cheney that Iraq was an "epicenter of terrorism".

The US-led coalition which launched an invasion of Iraq in March 2003 did so without a further UN resolution explicitly backing the action.

The inquiry heard that Saddam had faced 14 resolutions since the Persian Gulf War of 1991, including sanctions, no-fly zones and a naval embargo.

Miliband said: "The sanctions had shown its own severe limitations. The record since 1991 had shown severe limitations in the UN's willingness to follow through on the demands it had made.

"The longer the UN fails to impose its

will, the harsher the measures required when it does impose its will."

Miliband also said: "The authority of the UN, I think, would have been severely dented if the hypothetical case that you are putting - that we had marched to the top of the hill of pressure and then walked down again without disarming Saddam - then I think that would have been really quite damaging for any of the multilateral aims that we have that need to be pursued through the UN."

He told the inquiry: "The fact that the argument was made very clearly, notably in this country, that feeble follow-through undermines strong words, I think, is significant."

Suicide Bomber Kills 13 in Lahore

A suicide car bomber devastated offices used to interrogate suspected militants in Lahore on Monday, killing up to 13 people in the latest attack on Pakistan's cultural capital.

According to AFP, Pakistan's Taliban faction claimed responsibility for the attack after the bomber tried to ram a car packed with up to 600 kilograms (1,300 pounds) of explosives into the investigations unit in the country's second largest city.

There were scenes of panic as volunteers and rescue workers dug with bare hands under the collapsed two-

storey building and a severely damaged Muslim seminary, searching for survivors with the number of wounded at 65.

The blast underscored the rampant insecurity in nuclear-armed Pakistan, an ally in the US-led war on Al-Qaeda and eight-year conflict against the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan despite a recent lull in violence.

A wave of suicide and bomb attacks across Pakistan have killed more than 3,000 people since 2007. Blame has fallen on Taliban and Al-Qaeda-linked militants bit-

terly opposed to the government's alliance with the United States.

"We had just assembled in our classroom when it looked as if hell had broken with a huge blast," Noor Mohammad, a student at the seminary told AFP.

A thick pall of smoke accumulated outside the window as wood panels broke into pieces, hitting and wounding students.

"There was panic as students, many of them carrying their injured friends, rushed to the exit in a bid to find a safe place," Mohammad said.