

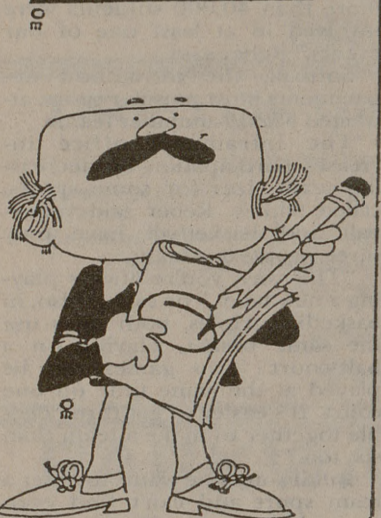
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World and Nation

Rescuers offer 'very little hope' in oil rig disaster

ABERDEEN, Scotland (AP) — Rescuers abandoned hope Thursday of finding more survivors of an explosion and towering fire that consumed the Piper Alpha platform and killed up to 166 people in the world's worst oil rig disaster.

Ships continued combing the North Sea's frigid waters, but when asked whether the rescuers had given up hope, Energy Department minister Peter Morrison said: "To be honest, yes. At this stage there is very little hope indeed."

The rig owners said the probable cause of the conflagration was a gas leak, which a survivor said was "screaming like a banshee" seconds before the blast Wednesday night.

Officials said 65 rig workers survived, 16 bodies had been recovered and 150 people were missing, including two lifeboat men who vanished into the flames while on a rescue mission.

Survivors told of having to choose between trying to survive the flames in hopes aid would come and plunging 150 feet into a blanket of burning oil that covered water cold enough to kill.

"It was a case of fry and die or jump and try," said Roy Carey, 45, who jumped.

Rescue pilots described flames up to 400 feet high. The fire still flickered nearly 24 hours later.

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's government promised "a very, very deep and far-reaching inquiry."

Questions arose about safety standards in the high-risk industry, and opposition politicians claimed safety was neglected.

Occidental Petroleum, owner of the Piper Alpha platform, said it believed a gas leak was to blame, but days or weeks would be needed to determine what caused and ignited it.

Occidental said the three-quarters of the 649-foot-high rig was destroyed.

Derek Ellington, a 45-year-old rigger, said he was in a workshop near the control center when he heard the scream of "two gas leaks almost simultaneously, and about 30 seconds later there was the first explosion. It wiped out the control room and that was it. Our nerve center was gone."

Andrew Sneddon, a university lecturer on offshore engineering in Aberdeen, said: "We can only assume there was a leak of some sort. Basically, you are sitting on top of two highly flammable products — oil and gas. A leak or a spill is a potential hazard. It is extremely difficult to say what could have set it off."

The number of men still missing and the dim prospects for finding them alive seem certain to make the Piper Alpha explosion the worst oil rig disaster, surpassing the 123 deaths when the Alexander L. Kielland platform capsized in Norway's North Sea waters in March 1980.

World briefs

Secretary urges need for drought bill

WASHINGTON (AP) — Agriculture Secretary Richard E. Lyng met with six farm-state governors Thursday and emerged saying the need for legislative action to provide drought relief has now become urgent.

"There's a need to do something, it would probably take legislation to do that and there's a need to do it with some urgency," Lyng told a news conference following the session with governors and key lawmakers.

Lyng's call for swift action was in marked contrast to past remarks that Congress should hold

off on fashioning a drought relief package until it is certain of the extent of the damage wrought by sizzling temperatures and a shortage of rainfall in the Farm Belt.

Participants in the meeting at offices of the National Governors' Association said they reached broad agreement on almost all fronts. They said farmers need more assurance that Congress will act this year and that therefore bill drafting should begin quickly.

Bill-drafting sessions could start as early as next week in both the House and Senate Agriculture committees, said the chairmen of those panels.

Mourners gather for dead in Tehran

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — Pallbearers Thursday paraded 76 flag-draped wooden coffins through Tehran's streets, where thousands of mourners shouted their anger at the United States for shooting down an Iranian jetliner and killing all 290 people aboard.

"No compromise! No surrender! Fight with America!" shouted waves of marchers, who carried wreaths, anti-American posters and golden-framed photographs of the victims.

The mass funeral started with a fiery speech from Iran's president, Ali Khamenei, who mocked

American statements on the incident and calling for revenge.

"The case is not closed in the opinion of those who are seeking retribution," he said, referring to a remark by President Reagan that no more could be said about U.S. responsibility after one of its missile cruisers shot down the Iran Air jetliner over the Persian Gulf on Sunday.

Of the 290 people on the jet, 66 were children. There were 38 foreigners aboard.

Not all the bodies were in Tehran. Some were still in a refrigerated warehouse the gulf port city of Bandar Abbas, where relatives tried to identify loved ones.

Infant health goals won't be met

ATLANTA (AP) — Most of the nation's top goals for babies and pregnant women — including a hoped-for reduction in the infant mortality rate — will not be met by the 1990 target date, federal health officials said Thursday.

"It's certainly sobering and concerning," said Dr. Ann Koontz, a specialist with the Health Resources and Services Administration in Rockville, Md. "This indicates that we have some significant problems relating to

maternal and infant health."

The government in 1979 published its 1990 health objectives for the nation, including 13 top-priority goals relating to pregnancy and infant health. Only three of those 13 goals are likely to be met, the national Centers for Disease Control said Thursday in its weekly report.

The CDC, using National Center for Health Statistics data, projects that the infant mortality rate — infants dying before age 1 — will be 9.1 per 1,000 live births.

Demonstrator killed in ethnic turmoil

MOSCOW (AP) — The first death of a demonstrator in a monthlong ethnic dispute was reported Thursday in the southern republic of Armenia, whose residents continued a strike that has devastated the area's economy.

The government newspaper *Izvestia* said a resident of the Armenian capital of Yerevan, Kh. Zakharyan, was seriously wounded on a highway Tuesday and died later in a hospital. It said a criminal investigation had begun.

Izvestia reported that a "major part" of Armenia's industry, construction and transportation remained idle Thursday.

The Armenian press agency said Zakharyan was hit by a plastic bullet fired by Soviet forces shortly after thousands of demonstrators mobbed Yerevan's international airport on Tuesday to demand that aviation workers join the strike.

The report Thursday was the first of Soviet forces using guns against demonstrators since the peaceful protests in Yerevan began in February. It was also the first indication that troops patrolling the area are armed with rounds designed to be non-lethal.

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