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Panic claims 41 lives in Mexico

'Avalanche of people' crushes Ash Wednesday worshipers

CHALMA, Mexico (AP) — At least 41 Ash Wednesday worshipers suffocated or were crushed to death when a tightly packed crowd began pushing and shoving in a church famed for a religious icon believed to have miraculous powers.

Thirteen of the victims were children. At least 21 people were hospitalized with injuries suffered in the panicked crush of about 3,500 people at the Sanctuary of Our Lord of Chalma, 40 miles south of Mexico City, officials said.

The confusion and stampede apparently started when street vendors inadvertently blocked a narrow alley leading to the church, according to a statement by the state of Mexico government in Toluca.

People coming in and out of the church became frantic at the congestion and began pushing and shoving, the statement said.

"There was an avalanche of people," said Maria Velazquez, who lost her 9-year-old niece in the tragedy. "We were leaving and those that were coming in squashed the people leaving."

"Some people were trampled and others suffocated inside the church in the atrium," state spokesman Carlos Mota said.

Mota authorities had trouble finding enough ambulances to carry the injured to hospitals.

Hours after the disaster, people continued to pour out of the church. A file of young men carried 40 empty coffins through the narrow streets to a school, where the bodies were laid out in a courtyard under blankets and shawls.

Identification tags scrawled on notebook paper were pinned on the bodies.

"I came on a bus. I will be going back with the hearse," said Juana Patina, 56, whose sister-in-law Perfecta Rojas, 40, was killed.

Gov. Ignacio Pichardo Pagaza immediately gave orders for a second street to be constructed to the hilltop sanctuary, which draws pilgrims from all over the nation who pray before an icon of the crucified Jesus.

Some believers say prayer before the icon can cure the sick and lead to other miracles.

Candida Arenillas, 51, said she visited the shrine from a village in neighboring Puebla state, with an older relative and an 11-year-old child. The older woman was killed in the crush, she said.

When Spanish priests arrived in Chalma in 1537, they found Indians worshiping the god Tezcatlipoca in a cave. A band of Roman Catholic hermits moved into the cave in 1623 and built a chapel nearby. Such usurpation of pagan rituals by the church was common in colonial Mexico.

Work on a larger sanctuary began in 1680. It has been rebuilt and renovated several times since.

Allied bombs kill civilians, refugees; Iraq maintains communications links

DHAHRAN, Saudi Arabia (AP) — Allied warplanes, in a pinpoint bombing that sent shock waves far beyond Iraq, destroyed an underground shelter in Baghdad on Wednesday, and officials there said 500 civilians were killed. The United States called it a military command center, not a bomb shelter.

By nightfall, 14 hours after the pre-dawn attack, crews were still pulling charred bodies, some of them children, from the demolished structure, an Associated Press correspondent reported from Baghdad. Distraught relatives crowded the smoke-filled streets.

"We don't know why civilians were at that location," said Marlin Fitzwater, President Bush's spokesman. American officials blamed Iraq's leadership for the tragedy, saying it had put civilians "in harm's way."

The AP correspondent, Dilip Ganguly, inspected the ruins with other journalists and said he saw no obvious sign of a military presence.

Another new report of civilian casualties came from Jordanian refugees who reached their homeland Wednesday from Kuwait. They said allied warplanes last Saturday attacked their bus as it left Kuwait, killing 30 of their countrymen.

At U.N. headquarters in New York, where Third World diplomats sought an open Security Council discussion on the conflict, an African delegate, Bagbeni Nzengeya of Zaire, said the civilian deaths "will make everyone think again about the scope of the war."

Iraq's foreign minister, Tariq Aziz, will fly to Moscow this weekend to meet with Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev, a Soviet spokesman said. A Soviet envoy's talks Tuesday with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in Baghdad "give cause for hope," the spokesman said, without elaboration.

The deadly Baghdad air strike was among 2,800 sorties mounted by Operation Desert Storm on Wednesday in favorably clear skies.

About one-third of the missions were directed at targets in southern Iraq and Iraqi-occupied Kuwait, aimed at "softening up" the dug-in positions of Iraqi troops before the expected ground offensive by the U.S.-led alliance.

Saudi officers reported that one of their attack planes, an F-5, was lost on a bombing mission against ground forces in Iraq, and the pilot was listed as missing.

U.S. officers told reporters in Riyadh, the Saudi capital, that the Iraqi military had managed to maintain communications links, despite more than three weeks of nonstop bombing. It was clear U.S. strategists were anxious to knock out more of these command-and-control networks.

The night's raids on Baghdad, described by residents as among the worst of the air war, began about 8 p.m. Tuesday and lasted 12 hours, Ganguly reported. Telecommunications centers in two Baghdad districts were among the sites bombed.

At about 4 a.m., it was the turn of the 40-foot-deep underground structure in al-Amerieh, a middle-class neighborhood.

Economists re-evaluate recession

WASHINGTON (AP) — Retail sales fell 0.9 percent in January after an even worse December performance, the government said Wednesday, in a report analysts took as an ominous sign the recession could be longer and deeper than expected.

The Commerce Department said retail sales totaled a seasonally adjusted $148.2 billion, down from $149.5 billion in December when sales dropped 1.5 percent — even worse than the 0.4 percent first reported last month.

It was the first back-to-back monthly decline in seven months.

At the same time, January sales were down 1.4 percent from those of the same month of 1990, the first year-over-year decline in 29½ years.

Some economists had said the recession would be short and mild, lasting just two quarters, but many now are having misgivings.

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