

# 345 pilgrims killed in Saudi stampede

## Muslims were rushing to complete hajj stoning ritual

By SALAH NASRAWI  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

### MINA, Saudi Arabia

Thousands of Muslim pilgrims rushing to complete a symbolic stoning ritual during the hajj tripped over luggage Thursday, causing a crush in which at least 345 people were killed despite Saudi attempts to prevent stampedes that have plagued the annual event.

The stampede occurred as tens of thousands of pilgrims headed toward al-Jamarat, a series of three pillars representing the devil that the faithful pelt with stones to purge themselves of sin.

Interior Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Mansour al-Turki said 345 people were killed. More than 1,000 people were injured, said Dr. Abbasi with the Saudi Red Crescent.

Footage from the scene showed lines of bodies laid out on stretchers on the pavement and covered with sheets. Ahmed Mustafa, an Egyptian pilgrim, said he saw bodies taken away in refrigerator trucks.

An Egyptian pilgrim, Suad Abu Hamada, heard screaming and "saw people jumping over each other."

"The bodies were piled up. I couldn't count them, they were too many," she said.

The site is a notorious bottleneck for the massive crowds that attend the annual hajj pilgrimage and has seen deadly stampedes in the past, including one in 1990 that killed 1,426 people and another in February 2004 that killed 244. Seven of the past 17 yearly pilgrimages have seen deadly incidents at al-Jamarat.

The latest crush came despite Saudi attempts to ease the flow of traffic around al-Jamarat. This year's hajj was marred by the Jan. 5 collapse of a building being used as a pilgrims' hotel that killed 76 people in Mecca.

The stampede happened as pilgrims were rushing to complete the last of three days of the stoning ritual before sunset, said Interior Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Mansour al-Turki. Some of the pilgrims began tripping over dropped baggage, causing a large pileup, he said.

Many pilgrims carry their personal



AP PHOTO

Emergency vehicles arrive at the scene of a stampede in Mina, Saudi Arabia, on Thursday. A rush to complete one of the final events of the hajj resulted in a stampede in which at least 345 people were killed, the Interior Ministry said.

effects with them as they move between the various stages of the hajj.

Earlier, al-Turki said some baggage spilled from moving buses at one entrance to al-Jamarat, causing pilgrims to trip and pile up. However, no vehicles were allowed in the area where the stampede occurred.

Al-Turki said 345 people were killed. State-run Saudi television Al-Ekhabriyah reported that most of the victims were from South Asia. The Health Ministry said 289 people were injured.

The pillars are located on a large pedestrian bridge, the width of an eight-lane highway over the desert plain of Mina outside the holy city of Mecca. Four ramps lead up the bridge to give pilgrims access to the site, and the stampede occurred at the base of one ramp.

Mina General Hospital, a small facility several hundred yards from the site, was filled with injured, and some victims were sent to hospitals in Mecca and

Riyadh, said Ismail Abdul-Zaher, a doctor at the hospital.

Ambulances and police cars streamed into the area, and security forces tried to move pilgrims away from part of the site, though thousands continued with the ritual.

The stampede took place despite Saudi efforts to improve traffic at the site, where all 2.5 million pilgrims participating in the annual hajj move from pillar to pillar to throw their stones, then exit.

Saudi authorities replaced the small round pillars with short walls to allow more people to throw their stones without jostling for position. The walls extend down through the bridge and protrude underneath, so pilgrims below can also carry out the stoning without going above.

Officials also recently widened the bridge, built extra ramps and increased the time pilgrims can carry out the rite, which on the second and final days traditionally takes place from midday until sunset.

# U.S. predicts more violence as election results released

## General: Insurgents trying to use transition to undermine democracy

By PATRICK QUINN  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

### BAGHDAD, Iraq

The U.S. military predicted Thursday that violence would increase around Iraq as final results from last month's elections are released and political groups forge ahead with forming a new government.

Brig. Gen. Donald Alston, spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition force, said a series of horrific attacks that killed at least 500 people since the Dec. 15 elections were an indication that insurgents were trying to take the opportunity of the transition to a new government to destabilize the democratic process.

"As democracy advances in the form of election results and government formation, and as the military pressure continues, and the pressure generated by political progress increases, we expect more violence across Iraq," he said at a news briefing.

Final election results are expected early next week.

Alston said that as a new government starts coming together, "those committed to seeing democracy fail will see this time of transition as an opportunity to attack the innocent people of Iraq."

He said the recent attacks were part of an attempt to discredit and derail the progress of the Iraqi people.

At least 121 people died last week in twin suicide attacks against a Shiite shrine in the holy city of Karbala and a police recruiting center in Ramadi. A day earlier, 32 people were killed by a suicide bomber at a Shiite funeral in Muqadadiyah. Another 29 died in a Monday attack against the Interior Ministry in Baghdad.

Sixteen U.S. troops died from hostile action, and eight died in a helicopter crash, the cause of which has yet to be determined.

All the attacks, Alston said, had an aim "to incite fear and create doubt in the people of Iraq in an attempt to suffocate progress

toward a better future for Iraq."

He added that "many innocent Iraqis were undeniably targeted by terrorists. The increase in attacks across Iraq this past week clearly indicates that al-Qaida and others terrorists still have the capability to surge."

Alston denied allegations by leading Shiite politicians that the United States had restricted the ability of Iraqi security forces to deal with insurgents.

Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, the leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, or SCIRI, has both blamed hard-line Sunni groups for inciting the violence and said the Defense and Interior ministries, both dominated by Shiites, were being restrained by the U.S.-led coalition.

"I would tell you that I do not see any additional procedures that have been employed, or I should say additional restrictions or additional requirements that have been levied on the Iraqi security forces that would tie their hands," Alston said.

But he did say that "we have always had coordinating instructions with the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Defense. As the situation changes and they grow in capability those policies are re-evaluated in order for us to be as effective and for them to be as effective as we possibly can."

Sunni Arabs have complained that often brutal methods used by Interior Ministry forces have already pushed Iraq to the brink of sectarian war.

# Turk who shot pope released from prison

By SELCAN HAGAÇLI  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

### ISTANBUL, Turkey

The man who shot Pope John Paul II in 1981 was released from prison Thursday after serving more than 25 years in Italy and Turkey for the plot against the pope and the slaying of a Turkish journalist.

To the cheers of nationalist supporters, a white sedan whisked Mehmet Ali Agca, whose attempt to assassinate the pope gained notoriety for himself and shame for his homeland, through the gates of the high-security Kartal Prison as dozens of police officers stood guard. His supporters showered the car with red and yellow flowers.

But Turkey's justice minister

later said authorities will review Agca's release to make sure there were no errors in the handling of the complicated case.

Agca, 48, wearing a blue sweater and jeans, was freed five years after he was pardoned by Italy and extradited to Turkey. He had served 20 years in prison in Italy, where John Paul forgave him in a visit to his cell in 1983.

"We are happy. We endlessly thank the Turkish state," said his brother, Adnan.

He said one of the first things Agca wanted to do was order a typical Turkish meal of beans and rice at a restaurant overlooking the Bosphorus Strait, the narrow waterway that bisects Istanbul and joins the European and Asian continents.

Immediately after his release, Agca reported to a military recruitment center and a hospital, both routine procedures, said his lawyer, Mustafa Demirbag.

Agca shot the pope May 31, 1981.



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In death we do the same.

It broke our hearts to lose you,  
You did not go alone.

For part of us went with you,  
The day God called you home.

You left us beautiful memories,

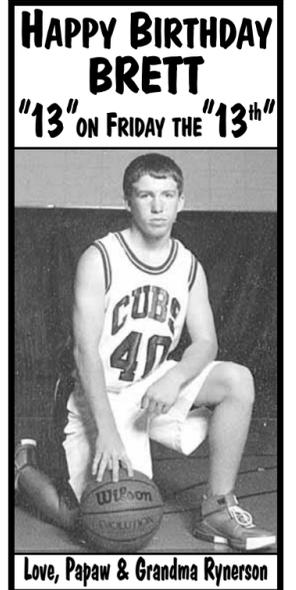
Your love is still our guide,  
And though we cannot see you,

You are always by our side,  
Our family chain is broken,

And nothing seems the same,  
But as God calls us one by one,

The chain will link again,  
Miss you and love you forever,

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