

Police: Hundreds dead after fire

KANUNGU, Uganda (AP) — Rutemba Didas heard what sounded like an explosion, then saw black smoke billowing from the brick structure on a hilltop compound where members of a religious cult had been living for several years.

The farmer and his neighbors heard screams coming from the chapel, but they couldn't get close to the new building inside the compound where members of the Movement for the Restoration of Ten Commandments of God lived in this remote corner of southwestern Uganda.

Police said Sunday it may take them a week to determine how many people died in the Friday morning fire, but they believe there were as many as 470 victims — of mass suicide or mass murder.

Circumstances surrounding the deaths — who the dead were and how the fire was started — remain foggy. Little was known about the cult, although it

appeared to incorporate Christian beliefs, and local farmers said it was led by a former prostitute.

Syncretic Christian religious sects are mushrooming across Africa as many people become disillusioned with the inability of politicians to improve their lives. In one case, also in Uganda, a sect turned into a guerrilla movement that used claims of religious powers to attract fighters.

In Kanungu, cult members locked themselves in the chapel early Friday and nailed doors and windows closed, then sang for a few hours before dousing themselves in gasoline and paraffin and setting themselves ablaze, said David Sseppuuya, deputy editor in chief of the government-owned New Vision newspaper, quoting investigators.

"According to an eyewitness on the site, they came around and bid farewell to the people, and they heard that the

"They heard that the Virgin Mary would appear on Friday, so they did expect to die on Friday."

David Sseppuuya

deputy editor in chief of New Vision newspaper

Virgin Mary would appear on Friday, so they did expect to die on Friday," Sseppuuya said.

Didas said the cult was established in 1994 by former prostitute Credonia Mwerinde at her family's compound.

Cult members from inside and outside the compound had been invited to a ceremony Friday to inaugurate the chapel, which had recently been built by Mwerinde on the graves of her parents, Didas said.

In other buildings on the compound, there were images of the Virgin

Mary and several rosaries.

Didas, whose farm adjoins the compound, said two men, one identified as Joseph Kibweteere and the other an unidentified Catholic priest, were Mwerinde's deputies. It was not known if any of the three had died in the blaze.

A report Sunday in the Monitor disputed that account, saying Kibweteere was the sect leader. He had reportedly predicted that the world would come to an end Dec. 31 but changed that to Dec. 31, 2000 after nothing happened, the newspaper said.

Fraternity house fire kills 3 in Pennsylvania

BLOOMSBURG, Pa. (AP) — A fire in an off-campus fraternity house near Bloomsburg University killed three people early Sunday, while others jumped to safety in their underwear from a second-story window.

Six male fraternity members were sleeping in the Tau Kappa Epsilon house when the fire broke out about 6 a.m. Three managed to get out safely, university spokesman Jim Hollister said.

Hollister said it was too soon to tell whether the bodies were those of the missing students. He said the victims would be identified through dental records.

The cause of the fire was not immediately clear. The two-story wooden house is located in a hilly neighborhood about two blocks from campus.

Red-eyed students in sweatshirts huddled in small groups and talked quietly as fire officials and construction equipment sifted through still-smoking ruins. A neighboring white three-story home was scorched, and police said it sustained severe damage inside.

Bloomsburg University President Jessica Kozloff said the building was owned by the fraternity and had been maintained well. She said the university had revised its procedures to offer edu-

cation and training for off-campus students after a fraternity house fire in 1994 killed five students.

"These are young adults who do make decisions on their own about their lifestyle and where they're going to live," Kozloff said. "We can't protect them from everything."

City officials cleared the house for occupancy after noting a dozen code violations in October, including a battery missing from a smoke detector, five electrical heaters being run on an inadequate electrical system, a missing doorknob and an empty fire extinguisher, said code enforcement officer Dean Van Blohn.

He said the violations had been corrected by late January.

The house was required to have three smoke detectors, Van Blohn said. "I can assure you that if we discover that this occurred because of any negligence ... we will certainly take measures to make sure it doesn't happen again," Kozloff said.

Two students escaped by jumping from a second-story window in their underwear, and a third fled out the front door, police said. All reported awakening and finding heavy smoke in the building; one reported hearing a smoke alarm.

Hostages still held by murder suspect

DUNDALK, Md. (AP) — A murder suspect holding three people hostage for a third day repeatedly fired bursts of gunfire out a window at police Sunday while breaking off his telephone contact with negotiators, officials said.

Authorities tried to avoid agitating the suspect, who was believed to be watching the ordeal on television.

Joseph Palczynski had been on the run since March 7, when police say he kidnapped his girlfriend, Tracy Whitehead, and killed the couple she was staying with and a neighbor. A fourth person was killed and a boy was wounded when Palczynski allegedly carjacked a vehicle, police said.

Whitehead escaped unharmed; police would not disclose her whereabouts. Palczynski later fled to Virginia, where he stole guns and forced a man to drive him back to Baltimore County.

The five bursts of gunfire Sunday morning were the first signs of activity since Palczynski took Whitehead's mother and two others hostage Friday night. No injuries were reported, and police did not return his fire.

Palczynski stopped talking with

negotiators for about an hour and a half Sunday morning, and police moved in with an armored vehicle and a bullhorn to urge him to resume communications.

"Joby, we need you to pick up the phone," an officer said over the loudspeaker, using Palczynski's nickname.

Palczynski responded with shots, and the armored vehicle backed away.

He soon resumed talks, but then fired more shots, spokesman Bill Toohey said. Later, police used a robot to send food into the house.

"Our main strategy is patience, patience, patience," Toohey said.

After Palczynski returned to the area from Virginia, police searched the area for more than a week. On Friday, he broke into a house, tied up the occupants and stole three guns.

He then shot his way into the home of Whitehead's mother, Lynn Whitehead. Relatives said he was holding Lynn Whitehead; her boyfriend, Andy McCord; and 12-year-old Brad McCord.

Police refused to characterize their negotiations with Palczynski but confirmed that a psychiatrist was helping negotiators.

Test held to help determine if FBI agents shot at Waco

KILLEEN, Texas (AP) — Aircraft circled, tanks rumbled and combat-garbed shooters fired off rounds at a Texas military base Sunday in a high-stakes field test to resolve whether federal agents shot at the Branch Davidians in the waning moments of the 1993 Waco standoff.

The test's participants, emerging from the tightly controlled, nonpublic test conducted at Fort Hood, said the demonstration had gone well.

"The test today went smoothly, but we're really kind of limited right now as to what we can share with you," said U.S. Attorney Mike Bradford, one of the government's lead lawyers in ongoing Branch Davidian litigation.

Government officials have always insisted that their forces fired no shots on the siege's final day, when the FBI launched a tear-gassing operation designed to end the 51-day standoff.

But Branch Davidian plaintiffs suing the government for wrongful death insist Sunday's field test will confirm their experts' analysis: that rapid-fire bursts of light appearing on

the FBI's 1993 aerial infrared surveillance footage represent gunfire from government positions into the Davidians' retreat.

"If we ... show that there are flashes from gunfire, I am hopeful FBI leaders will acknowledge that guns were fired, and the FBI will find out who fired and on what orders," the plaintiffs' lead counsel, Michael Caddell, said before the test at the Army outpost, 50 miles southwest of the site of the 1993 Waco siege.

FBI officials have suggested the flashes come from sunlight glinting off water, metal or other debris strewn on the ground while the government's tanks pierced the compound's walls to insert tear gas.

Davidian leader David Koresh and some 80 followers perished during the fire that consumed their compound several hours into the tear-gassing operation. The government contends their deaths, whether from fire or gunshot wounds, came by their own hand. The plaintiffs argue government gunfire cut off the Davidians' only avenue of escape as the inferno raged.

WEATHER

TODAY TOMORROW

Partly cloudy
high 57, low 42

Partly cloudy
high 55, low 38

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World and Nation

Datelines

■ Washington

Starr's successor enlists more help in Clinton investigation

WASHINGTON (AP) — Independent Counsel Robert Ray said Sunday he is adding investigators to help him determine whether to file criminal charges against President Clinton.

It marked the first time that Ray, who took over for Kenneth Starr in October, has publicly discussed the possibility that Clinton might be prosecuted for his statements and actions in the Monica Lewinsky matter.

A federal judge in Little Rock, Ark., has held the president in civil contempt for 10 alleged lies in a deposition that "no reasonable person would seriously dispute."

Presidential lawyer David Kendall did not immediately return a message left at his office.

■ Taiwan

President quits after protesters storm party headquarters

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — Storming the Nationalist Party's headquarters, a stone-throwing crowd demanded — and got — President Lee Teng-hui's promise Sunday to quit as the party's leader, one day after its humiliating election defeat.

Many of the thousands of protesters blamed Lee for fielding a weak candidate who was trounced by the opposition in Saturday's presidential election.

The vote will bring to power an untested leader, Chen Shui-bian, who some fear could spark a devastating war with Taiwan's longtime rival, China, through his party's support for the island's formal independence.

The two sides split amid civil war in 1949, and China insists Taiwan must eventually reunify with the mainland.

■ Israel

Israeli Cabinet approves partial withdrawal of West Bank

JERUSALEM (AP) — A land transfer that stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace talks for five weeks easily cleared a final hurdle Sunday with Israel's Cabinet approving maps for the withdrawal from 6.1 percent of the West Bank.

The transfer will take place Tuesday, just before negotiators convene near Washington for peace talks, and will leave the Palestinians in control of 41 percent of the West Bank.

The Palestinians had suspended the talks last month after it became clear Israel was not going to give them populated suburbs of Jerusalem as part of the troop withdrawal. The revised maps approved Sunday give the Palestinians three suburbs near but not abutting Jerusalem.

■ India

Clinton forced to scale down Bangladesh visit

NEW DELHI, India (AP) — President Clinton opened the first trip to troubled South Asia in 22 years by an American president Sunday night and immediately was forced to scale down his visit to Bangladesh when the Secret Service raised concerns about him going to a rural village.

The last-minute scramble underscored Clinton's recent description of South Asia as "perhaps the most dangerous place in the world today" because of a nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan and tensions over the disputed Himalayan territory of Kashmir.

Also before his arrival, protesters in New Delhi burned an effigy of the president.