

International

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Vietnamese families bury first victims of UK truck tragedy

Families have waited weeks for bodies to come back

DIEN CHAU, Vietnam: Throngs of weeping relatives yesterday buried the first of 39 Vietnamese people found dead in a truck in Britain last month, in emotional ceremonies for the young victims whose deaths have rattled their rural towns. The first of the remains arrived in Vietnam from London on a commercial flight Wednesday, closing a weeks-long, agonizing wait by families eager to have their children back home. All 31 men and eight women found dead in a refrigerated trailer in Essex last month were Vietnamese, many from small towns in central Vietnam.

Yesterday, several families laid their loved ones to rest after long nights of emotional vigils. Under rainy skies in central Nghe An province, scores of relatives and villagers gathered for a final farewell for Hoang Van Tiep, 18, Nguyen Van Hung, 33, two cousins who died on the truck. "I've never attended a funeral as big as this. It's a sad day for all of us," said a neighbor Hoang Thi Mai, her eyes wet with tears.

"I hope they are happy in heaven," she added, as their flower-flanked caskets were transported by a long procession to a cemetery in Dien Chau district. The parents of Hung were carried away from the burial on a motorbike, overcome with emotion and unable to watch. Those who stayed wailed as the coffins were lowered into the ground. Their families have waited weeks for their bodies to come back, and took loans from the government to cover the cost of repatriation - \$1,800 for ashes, or \$2,900 for bodies. Many families opted to pay more for the bodies so they could give their children traditional burials, since cremation is rare in rural Vietnam.

North Korea fires two projectiles on Thanksgiving

SEOUL: North Korea fired two "unidentified projectiles" yesterday - the Thanksgiving holiday in the US - Seoul said, as nuclear talks between Pyongyang and Washington remain deadlocked. The projectiles were fired eastwards from South Hamgyong province and came down in the Sea of Japan, also known as the East Sea, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said. They added that the launch, the latest in a series by Pyongyang, was carried out at 16:59 pm local time (0859 GMT) - or the early hours on the east coast of the United States, during one of the country's biggest annual holidays.

It was also one day short of the two-year anniversary of the North's first test of its Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missile, which analysts say is capable of reaching the entire US mainland. Pyongyang is banned from firing ballistic missiles under UN Security Council resolutions, and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said that Thursday's launch was the latest in a series of violations. "North Korea's repeated launches of ballistic missiles

Warning sign

The tragedy has shone a grim light on the dangers of illegal migration into Britain, a top spot for many young Vietnamese hoping for better lives. The majority of the victims discovered in the truck on Oct 23 were from central Vietnam, driven by a perceived lack of opportunity at home and helped by a sophisticated network of brokers. Some families told AFP they borrowed tens of thousands of dollars to send their children to Europe. They spent several thousand more to secure a spot on the truck, promised by brokers as the safer route into Britain, where many Vietnamese end up working illegally in nail salons or on cannabis farms. Speaking at a packed memorial service for Hung and Tiep on Thursday, priest Phan Sy Phuong said the tragedy was a lesson. "Your death may be a warning to young people, to our children, who because of poverty think they have to leave their homeland," he told the crowd, some of whom fainted as the caskets were carried in. "The death of 39 people may save many others... your deaths will not be meaningless," he said.

'Bury my son'

Most of the victims came from just a handful of central provinces in Vietnam, where incomes sag beneath the national average and many people work as fishermen, farmers or factory workers. Ten of the victims came from Ha Tinh province, where a massive toxic dump in 2016 killed tons of fish, decimating livelihoods and sparking an uptick in illegal migration, according to experts. "I'm very sad to have to bury my own son," Vo Van Binh told AFP from his



NGHE AN, Vietnam: A priest officiates final rites during the burial of coffins bearing the remains of Nguyen Van Hung (left) and Hoang Van Tiep (right) at a cemetery in Dien Chau district yesterday. —AFP

bare home in Ha Tinh, surrounded by mourning relatives. "I wanted to bring him back in full so I could see his face one last time," he said of his 25-year-old son Vo Van Linh, who was sent abroad in search of a good job. He was among 16 victims whose bodies arrived in Vietnam on Wednesday. The rest of the remains are expected later this week. Vietnam has ar-

rested at least 10 people in connection with the tragedy for people smuggling, though none have been formally charged. Several people have also been arrested in Britain, including the 25-year-old driver of the truck Maurice Robinson, who pleaded guilty to conspiring to assist illegal immigration in court this week. —AFP



SEOUL: South Korean Army Major General Jeon Dong-jin of the Joint Chiefs of Staff speaks during a press briefing on North Korea's projectiles at the Defense Ministry yesterday. —AFP

are a serious defiance to not only our country but also the international community," he told reporters in Tokyo.

Yesterday's launch came after Pyongyang fired what it called a "super-large multiple rocket launcher" system last month, and the JCS said the latest devices were presumed to be of a similar type. They flew 380 km and reached a maximum altitude of 97 km, the JCS added. Nuclear negotiations between the US and the North have been at a standstill since the Hanoi summit between President Donald Trump and leader Kim Jong Un broke up in February, and Pyongyang has since demanded Washington change its approach by the end of the year. —AFP

New Zealand PM apologizes over 1979 air disaster

WELLINGTON: Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern offered an official apology yesterday on the 40th anniversary of New Zealand's worst peacetime disaster, the Mount Erebus air crash in which 257 people died. An Air New Zealand DC-10 on a sight-seeing flight over Antarctica slammed into remote Mount Erebus during "whiteout" conditions on the frozen continent on November 28, 1979, killing all on board.

"That loss, in and of itself, was huge. It sent ripples across the country... but that loss and grief was compounded. It was undeniably worsened by the events that followed," Ardern told a commemoration service in Auckland. An initial inquiry blamed pilot error but a royal commission, the most powerful judicial inquiry under New Zealand law, subsequently cleared the crew. It found the airline reset the plane's navigation systems without telling the pilots, inadvertently

setting the aircraft on a collision course with the side of the mountain.

The report's author, judge Peter Mahon, also accused Air New Zealand officials of telling "an orchestrated litany of lies" to cover up the mistake and keep the blame on the pilots. The then prime minister Robert Muldoon attacked Mahon's report, viewing the findings against the state-owned carrier as a blow to national prestige, and it was not formally tabled until 1999, 18 years after its completion.

Ardern said the government's handling of the disaster's aftermath was wrong. "It caused trauma on top of grief. And persecution on top of pain," said the prime minister, who at 38 was not born when the crash occurred. She also said put it on record that both the government and Air New Zealand now accepted there was an error with navigation systems and the pilots were totally blameless for the crash. "The time has come to end the piecemeal acknowledgements," Ardern said. "After 40 years, on behalf of today's government, the time has come to apologize for the actions of an airline then in full state ownership; which ultimately caused the loss of the aircraft and the loss of those you loved." —AFP