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Togo overnight shootout between security forces kills three

'THE FIGHTING WAS LINKED TO AN ATTEMPT AGAINST THE STATE SECURITY, AND INVOLVED MILITARY AND CIVILIAN PERSONNEL'

LOME, (Xinhua) -- The overnight shootout between the security forces and the guard of Togolese President Faure Gnassingbe's brother killed three persons and injured two others, the West African country's Le Regard newspaper reported on Tuesday.

Dozens of security forces launched a raid on the residence of parliamentarian Kpatcha Gnassingbe, who is brother of the president, between Sunday night and early Monday, sparking a shootout with Kpatcha's body guards.

Kpatcha was reportedly inside the residence when soldiers opened fire, but was unhurt. The building was partly damaged.

The fighting was linked to an attempt against the state security, according to an official communique issued on Monday, which indicated that the plot involved military and civilian personnel of Kpatcha's entourage.

Several people including five military officers have been arrested for questioning, giving rise to speculations about the current relationship between President Gnassingbe and his half brother Kpatcha, the former defense minister.

Tension rises in northern Nigeria state over attack on Christians

LAGOS, (Xinhua) -- Tension is rising in the northern Nigerian town of Gwada and Minna in northwestern Niger State, after churches were attacked and destroyed by people suspected to be Muslim fundamentalists, causing bodily harm and destroying properties worth several millions of naira.

Christians earlier in the day had assembled at churches for the symbolic Galilee picnic, an event to mark the resurrection of Jesus Christ, before the day turned bloody in Gwada, where three churches were burnt while about 26 Christians were injured.

According to the Lagos-based Punch newspaper reports on Tuesday, the Niger Baptist Church was the target of the fanatics who injured five Christian youths and damaged more than five cars.

Trouble started in Gwada as Christian youths from all churches marched round the town, drumming and rejoicing over their ability to see another resurrection day of Jesus Christ.

It was learnt that as the procession continued, some Muslim youths, who apparently had pre-planned their action, appeared and started attacking the Christian youths, injuring some of them.

The attackers reportedly turned their attention to churches where special services and picnics were being held to commemorate the Easter.

They disrupted their activities and burnt three of the churches.

In Minna, the incident at the Baptist Church happened in a similar way, but the combined efforts of the Christian youths saved the churches in the town from being set ablaze.

It was learnt that two Muslim fanatics, who had hidden in a provisions shop near the church, had first come to spy on the building but they were spotted by the Christian youths who had come out of the church. The youths, according to one of the victims Mr.Olajide Oke, informed the church leadership, who intimidated the church members. The youths, on getting wind of the development, vowed to protect the church. According to Oke, the two Muslim fundamentalists earlier found lurking around the church premises left and came back a few minutes later with about 60 others and they immediately sprayed the cars parked outside the bookshop with petrol, but the efforts of the Christian youths prevented the hoodlums from setting them ablaze. Richard Oguiche, State Police Public Relations Officer, who confirmed the attack, said three assistant commissioners of police and a detachment of riot policemen were immediately sent to Gwada to put the situation under control. He disclosed that the police were able to arrest of 88 Muslim fanatics, adding that they had been taken to the Criminal Investigations Department and would be charged to court soon. The police spokesman said 20 suspects were arrested in Minna while all the injured were taken to the General Hospital where they had been receiving treatment. No life was lost.

Nigeria seeks concerted actions on Niger Delta problem

LAGOS, (Xinhua) -- The Nigerian federal government Monday urged indigenes of the oil-rich Niger Delta region to eschew all tendencies capable of derailing the government's development goals and direction, the Lagos-based This Day newspaper reported. Ufot Ekaette, Nigerian Minister of Niger Delta Affairs, made the call at a reception organized in his honor in Uyo, southeast Nigeria's Akwa Ibom State capital. Ekaette said the Niger Delta could be made a better place if the people shun their differences and work as members of the same family toward achieving a better and peaceful region. "Although to some who for selfish reasons would argue that we are incongruent in character and disposition, it is to our own benefit for us to use our God-given characteristics to work for our common good," he said. The minister reminded the people of the Niger Delta of Nigerian President Umaru Musa Yar' Adua's intention to grant general amnesty to militants who lay down their arms and his commitment to resolution of the Niger Delta crisis, to pave way for peace and development of the region. According to him, President Yar'dua had demonstrated enough commitment and sincerity in the issue, and it was time for those still in the creeks to come out and embrace peace, so the ruins of the battered environment could be rebuilt. He explained that the Nigerian federal government is committed to bring an end to the suffering and misery in the Niger Delta. "Let me assure the people that in place of poverty and penury in the Niger Delta, government will provide concrete people- oriented projects for the people," he added. Ekaette said the design of the Niger Delta Coastal road starting from Calabar in Cross River State to Ilaje in Ondo State would begin this year.

Fishing boat blast kills five Chinese crew members in Lagos

LAGOS, (Xinhua) -- An official with the Chinese Consulate-General in Lagos confirmed that five Chinese crew members were killed in a fishing boat explosion in Nigerian economic hug Lagos on Monday night. Another member, who narrowly escaped the mishap, sustained serious injuries on his right ankle. According to the official, the victims are all Chinese sailors working for the fishing company, but their identification remains unknown unless rescue facilities arrived to uncover their bodies, which have still been confined inside the sunken ship. The Chinese owner of the fishing boat, Mr. Zheng, told Xinhua at the scene of accident that the blast happened to the ship's engine cabin when the five crew members were trying to start the boat for a new journey. He said the consequent fire lasting for about seven hours would have dismissed any hope of his sailors' survival. It was learnt that the reason of the accident is still under investigation, and reporters at the scene were promised to be informed as soon as results come out. The injured worker has been sent to hospital to receive medical treatment, while the body-uncovering job has still not been seen by now.

UNHCR says 60,000 return to Mogadishu as more flee Somalia

NAIROBI, (Xinhua) -- The UN refugee agency UNHCR said on Tuesday that some 60,000 people have returned to war-ravaged Somali capital Mogadishu since the start of 2009. A statement from the UNHCR said the majority are returning from settlements for internally displaced people in the Lower and Middle Shabelle regions in south-central Somalia, and Hiraan, Galgaduud and Mudug regions in central Somalia. They are returning mainly to the districts of Yaaqshiid, Wardhiigleey, Heliwaa, and Hawl Wadaag in north-east Mogadishu. According to the UN agency, some 2,200 returnees from Kenya, 300 from Yemen and 20 from Ethiopia, as well as a mixed group of some 900 refugees and forced returnees from Saudi Arabia have returned to the Horn of Africa nation. "Although Mogadishu was relatively peaceful in March, the fighting that erupted at the end of that month between an armed opposition group and government forces displaced some 1,200 people," the statement said. "Despite the fact that returns are a positive sign and that sustainable return of refugees and displaced people is the preferred solution, at the moment UNHCR is not encouraging returns to Mogadishu because of the volatile security situation and lack of basic services," it said. The UN agency said the returnees are facing multiple problems, including the lack of adequate shelter. Many houses in the neighborhoods of return were destroyed in the heavy fighting that took place in Mogadishu in the last two years. "UNHCR is leading an inter-agency assessment of the situation in Mogadishu, which will guide the assistance and protection policy of the humanitarian community with regards to the returnee communities," it said. UNHCR is also re-establishing its presence in Mogadishu, as all international humanitarian workers were evacuated after the security deteriorated in July 2008 following killings and kidnapping of UN officials, including the abduction of the UNHCR head of office. UNHCR's representative to Somalia visited Mogadishu on April 8 together with other humanitarian agencies where they discussed with the new Minister for Humanitarian Affairs the next steps to take in support of returnees and the displaced. Despite the positive sign of returns to Mogadishu, UNHCR said the insecurity in some regions of the country, combined with drought and the lack of livelihood among rural and urban people, continues to push thousands of Somalis to flee to neighboring countries. According to UNHCR, more than 24,000 Somali refugees fled to Kenya since January and some 3,000 entered Ethiopia, while another 10,000 people left their homes during the same period because of the acute drought ravaging many parts of the country. Some 8,000 of the drought-affected population were displaced in Kismaayo and Badhaade districts in the Lower Juba region, while over 2,000 have moved from rural to urban areas in Galgaduud in central Somalia. The biggest problem is the heavy loss of livestock suffered by the predominantly pastoralist communities in the worst drought in 30-years. UNHCR assists more than 460,000 Somali refugees in nearby countries, including Kenya (277,000), Yemen

(126,000), Ethiopia (36,000), Djibouti (8,000), and Uganda (7,000) in addition to coordinating protection and shelter activities for the 1.3 million displaced in Somalia.
Somalia, which has been beset by factional strife since the overthrow of Siad Barre in 1991, has witnessed a number of positive developments in recent months, including the creation of an expanded Parliament, the election of President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed and the formation of the Unity Government.

UN envoy for Somalia condemns continuing piracy scourge

NAIROBI, (Xinhua) -- The UN Special Representative for Somalia Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah Tuesday called piracy an "international scourge" which is damaging to ordinary Somalis, the region and the world.
"I strongly believe that concrete efforts, such as the international maritime presence off the Somali coast, should be increased to help marginalize and suppress piracy," said Ould-Abdallah in a statement issued in Nairobi.

The UN envoy said that Tuesday some 300 hostages and 17 vessels are being held by a small group who are only interested in maximizing their illegal profits.

Therefore a military solution, while essential, should be complemented by credible development activity.

"Without the maritime presence, the pandemic would have been far worse. Those contributing to the international presence are doing an excellent job, but they have a huge area to cover," he said.

He said the recent self defensive actions by the governments of the U.S. and France are sending a strong message to the pirates and, more importantly, to their backers who are exploiting the poverty and desperation of their young, unemployed compatriots."

"To ensure stability in Somalia and the region, as well as the freedom of navigation, the financial backers of the pirates should be identified quickly and held accountable," said Ould-Abdallah.

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Second ship hijacked by Somali pirates

MOGADISHU, (Xinhua) -- NATO said on Tuesday that a second cargo ship has been hijacked by Somali pirates in the day, according to agencies' reports.

A NATO spokesperson was quoted as saying that the Togo-flagged MV Sea Horse has been seized by the pirates in speedboats off the Somali coast. No more details were available so far.

The development came after pirates hijacked the Greek-flagged tanker MV Irene E.M with 22 crew members aboard, before dawn on Tuesday.

Andrew Mwangura, the East Africa's Coordinator of Seafarers Assistance Program (SAP), said the Greek-flagged vessel owned by Chian Spirit Maritime Enterprises was sailing from Jordan to India when it was attacked by armed Somali pirates. It has 22 Filipino crew members and all are safe.

Mwangura said another Malta-flagged Panamax Anna bulker was attacked on Monday, about 110 miles north of Bosaso but escaped.

Reports have said Somali pirates also seized two Egyptian fishing boats in the Gulf of Aden off Somalia's northern coast. Egyptian Foreign Ministry cited a Somali diplomat in Cairo as saying there were 18 to 24 Egyptians onboard at the time.

The assault on MV Sea Horse was the latest attacks on the world's most dangerous waters which came days after several pirates were killed by U.S. and French navy forces.

The international efforts have so far foiled hundreds of attempts to hijack merchant ships in the 800-km-long waterway. While Somali pirates seized nearly 38 percent of the vessels they targeted in 2008, their success rate in the first two months of this year plummeted to about 13 percent due to the strong presence of naval ships. However, there are still 14 vessels and about 200 crew members currently under the control of pirates, according to the International Maritime Bureau based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Pirates hijack freighter off Somali coast with 22 crew aboard

NAIROBI, (Xinhua) -- Somali pirates have hijacked a Greek-flagged tanker off the coast of Somalia with 22 crew aboard, a regional maritime official said on Tuesday.

The tanker MV Irene E.M. which was hijacked off the Somali coast has 22 Filipino crew members and all are safe, regional maritime official Andrew Mwangura said.

Andrew Mwangura, the East Africa's Coordinator of Seafarers Assistance Program (SAP), said the Greek-flagged vessel owned by Chian Spirit Maritime Enterprises was sailing from Jordan to India when it was attacked by armed Somali pirates.

Mwangura said another Malta-flagged Panamax Anna bulker was attacked on Monday, about 110 miles north of Bosaso but escaped.

"There are no reported casualties. Information shows that the same owner's 64,800 bulker Panamax Anna, Malta flag, built in 1982 was attacked by six pirates in one boat in Gulf of Aden on Monday in north of Bosaso but escaped. The vessel is heading westbound," Mwangura said.

Reports have said Somali pirates also seized two Egyptian fishing boats in the Gulf of Aden off Somalia's northern coast.

Egyptian Foreign Ministry cited a Somali diplomat in Cairo as saying there were 18 to 24 Egyptians onboard at the time.

Andrew Mwangura said earlier that the MV Irene E.M. was seized in the Gulf of Aden before dawn.

The overnight attack is the latest attacks on the world's most dangerous waters which came days after several pirates were killed by U.S. and French navy forces.

Reports from the EU Maritime Security Center said the Irene, a 35,000-ton Greek-owned vessel, was seized overnight.

The center said the 22-man crew is believed to be unhurt and shipping has been warned to stay clear of the area for fear of further attacks.

The seizure came soon after U.S. navy forces rescued Richard Phillips, an American cargo ship captain, on Sunday by killing three young pirates who held him captive in a powerless lifeboat for five days.

A fourth pirate surrendered after seeking medical treatment for a wound he received in trying to take over Phillips' vessel, the Maersk Alabama.

The attacks occur despite dozens of warships from a number of countries, which are patrolling the Somali coastline and have been dispatched as a deterrent, but there is no way they can cover the large swath of the Indian Ocean in which pirates operate.

Seven pirates have been killed in the last seven days by the U. S. and French navies, but that does not seem to have stopped their crimes.

Sources said over fishing has deprived the Somalis of a vital food source and they reacted by forming their own rag-tag "coast guard" whose aim is to arrest and "tax" foreign vessels in their waters.

The international efforts have so far foiled hundreds of attempts to hijack merchant ships in the 800km-long waterway.

While Somali pirates seized nearly 38 percent of the vessels they targeted in 2008, their success rate in the first two months of this year plummeted to about 13 percent due to the strong presence of naval ships.

However, there are still 14 vessels and about 200 crew members currently under the control of pirates, according to the International Maritime Bureau based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

In 48 hours between April 4 and 6, five ships were hijacked, some of them in the Gulf of Aden heavily guarded by naval forces.

The attacks show the patrols by warships have not been an effective deterrent measure in the war on piracy

since the bandits are determined to make money at whatever cost. According to Jane Campbell, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet based in Bahrain, it would take 60 naval ships to adequately guard vessels traversing the Gulf of Aden, far beyond the number of the warships now deployed in the area.

14 Indian sailors held hostage in Somalia released

NEW DELHI, (Xinhua) -- Fourteen Indian sailors who were held hostage in a cargo vessel in Somalia since last October were released late Monday night, the Indian Director General of Shipping (DGS) said on Tuesday. "M.V. Jaikur-I, with the crew of 14 Indians, three Pakistanis, two Somalians, one Iraqi and one Filipino, which had been detained in Mogadishu since October 2008 due to a commercial dispute between owners and other interested parties, has been released," the Mumbai-based DGS said in a statement released to the media. The Indian Embassy in Nairobi said that all the Indian crew members were in good health, it said.

Somali pirates step up new attacks on Gulf shipping

NAIROBI, (Xinhua) -- Somali pirates have recently stepped up its attacks on ships with seizure of three vessels in the past two days, in an apparent attempt to challenge the international patrol efforts in the waters off the Somali shore.

The pirates hijacked a Greek-flagged tanker off the coast of Somalia with 22 crew aboard in the middle of the night on Tuesday and seized two Egyptian fishing boats in the Gulf of Aden off Somalia's northern coast on Monday.

The tanker MV Irene E.M. which was hijacked off the Somali coast has 22 Filipino crew members and they are all safe, regional maritime official Andrew Mwangura said on Tuesday.

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Reports have also said Somali pirates also seized two Egyptian fishing boats in the Gulf of Aden off Somalia's northern coast.

Egyptian Foreign Ministry cited a Somali diplomat in Cairo as saying there were 18 to 24 Egyptians onboard at the time.

These attacks are the latest ones on the world's most dangerous waters which came days after several pirates were killed by U.S. and French navy forces.

These attacks came after months of relative calm in the waters off the Somali shore which once again triggers grave concern from the international community.

The attacks also came soon after U.S. navy forces rescued Richard Phillips, an American cargo ship captain, on Sunday by killing three young pirates who held him captive in a powerless lifeboat for five days.

A fourth pirate surrendered after seeking medical treatment for a wound he received in trying to take over Phillips' vessel, the Maersk Alabama.

The attacks occurred despite dozens of warships from a number of countries, which are patrolling the Somali coastline and have been dispatched as a deterrent. But there is no way they can cover the large swath of the Indian Ocean in which pirates operate.

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The new attacks have shown the patrols by warships have not been an effective deterrent measure in the war on piracy since the bandits are determined to make money at whatever cost.

According to Jane Campbell, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet based in Bahrain, it would take 60 naval ships to adequately guard vessels traversing the Gulf of Aden, far beyond the number of the warships now deployed in the area.

Somali pirates threaten 'revenge' on France, U.S.

MOGADISHU, (Xinhua) -- Somali pirate groups Tuesday vowed to kill American and French crews of ships hijacked by them after U.S. marines shot dead three of the four pirates holding a U. S. captain hostage, local media reports said.

The threat came after a three-day hostage drama of Captain Richard Phillips, who was abducted after his ship Maersk Alabama was briefly taken by Somali pirates, ended with the killing of three pirates and capture of the fourth by U.S. special forces.

"If they have started killing us, we (pirate groups) have decided to take revenge and kill any American or French crew or passenger members of ships we capture fishing in our seas," Jaama Siyad, a pirate spokesman told local Shabelle radio in Mogadishu.

Siyad said pirate gangs were in agreement that if any group hijack a ship with either a crew or a passenger from France or the U.S. they would immediately "shot them in the head".

Two Somali pirates were killed and four others captured by French commandos in a rescue operation on a French yacht off Somalia. Four French passengers were rescued while another was killed in the shootout between the pirates and French troops.

The Somali government has welcomed the rescue operations of both French and American troops saying it was the right thing to do in such circumstances. The Somali government has always been opposed to the payment of ransoms to pirates saying it encourages more pirate activities in the Horn of Africa coast.

Somali pirates are holding several ships with a couple of hundred crew members but it is not clear if they include American or French nationals.

Somali pirates do not usually harm their captives in expectation of the hefty ransom payout often received following negotiations with foreign governments or ship owners.

Dozens of countries have their navy patrolling the pirate infested Somali waters and the Gulf of Aden to prevent hijackings of commercial ships plying the important waterway after the UN Security Council authorized member states to fight piracy and the armed robbery at seas off Somalia last year.

Somali Red Crescent Society compound hit by mortar

NAIROBI, (Xinhua) -- The compound housing a limb-fitting center of the Somali Red Crescent Society (SRCS) in the capital Mogadishu was hit by a mortar on Monday afternoon, killing one civilian and wounding five others, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) said. None of the victims were staff of the SRCS or patients.

The ICRC said in a statement the ICRC and SRCS are deeply saddened by the incident and the bloodshed it caused, and wish to extend their heartfelt condolences to the family of the person killed.

"The incident illustrates once more how dangerous it is in Mogadishu and how difficult it can be to provide victims of the armed conflict with medical care and humanitarian aid," said Dr. Ahmed M. Hassan, the president of the SRCS.

"Although nothing suggests that the centre was deliberately targeted, the ICRC and the SRCS remind all parties concerned of their obligation to respect and protect at all times medical staff and infrastructure such as hospitals, clinics and limb-fitting and rehabilitation centres," the statement said.

The ICRC continues to work closely with the SRCS and remains a key provider of emergency aid for victims of conflict and natural disasters in Somalia. It has maintained an uninterrupted presence in the country since 1982. According to the UN information, 35 aid workers were killed in Somalia in 2008 and 26 were abducted. Two workers have been killed this year.

Hundreds of thousands of people are dependent on aid in the war-torn country. Close to 50 percent of the Somali population, or some 3.2 million people, are reliant on humanitarian assistance.

WFP increases emergency aid in north eastern Uganda

KAMPALA, (Xinhua) -- The UN World Food Programme (WFP) on Tuesday announced that it had increased the amount of emergency aid to northeastern Uganda where about one million people are at risk of starvation.

Stanlake Samkange, WFP Uganda Country Director told Xinhua by telephone that starting in April, more than one million people will get 12 kg of food per person per month, up from nine kg per person per month.

He said the increment will enable WFP address the critical food gap between what it provides and what the people of Karamoja (northeastern Uganda) are able to get for themselves.

Samkange said the food aid agency was forced to increase the amount of emergency assistance due to the worsening food crisis.

The operation, WFP's largest ever life-saving program in Karamoja, will reach an estimated 1.03 million people, approximately 85 percent of the region's population.

"The situation is getting worse .. according to a needs assessment, we identified more people than we had estimated," he said.

Samkange confirmed that WFP had also opened three new sub-offices in Kaabong, Nakapiripirit and Abim districts, bringing to five the number of its sub-offices in Karamoja to coordinate its operations in the region.

The food aid agency in February this year launched a nine-month emergency operation in the region targeting over 970,000 people. However due to a new assessment, the operation has been extended to 10 months and is now targeting over one million people.

The cost of the operation has also increased from 64 million U. S. dollars to 96 million dollars. According to Samkange, WFP currently faces a shortfall of 69 million dollars and urgently needs additional resources to sustain the operation.

The new ration represents 70 percent of the recommended daily energy requirements (an average 2,100 kilocalories per person per day), compared to the 50 percent provided by rations since February.

The food crisis in northeastern Uganda has been escalating for years and was heightened by a severe drought in 2008, which led to a failed harvest, the region's third in a row since 2006.

Deputies of ex-Madagascan presidents quit UN-brokered talks

by Bai Jingshan ANTANANARIVO, (Xinhua) -- Representatives of former Madagascan presidents Marc Ravalomanana and Didier Ratsiraka on Tuesday quit the four-party negotiations initiated by the United Nations and the African Union (AU) at the Embassy of Senegal.

The walkout came after the opening of the talks arranged by UN special envoy Tiebile Drame and AU mediator Ablasse Ouedraogo.

The roundtable negotiations were attended by representatives of the ruling High Transitional Authority led by former Antananarivo mayor Andry Rajoelina and those of ex-presidents Didier Ratsiraka, Albert Zafy and Marc Ravalomanana.

The representative of the former ruling I Love Madagascar party led by Ravalomanana, Raharinaivo Andrianantoandro, claimed that the UN special envoy wanted to impose "a scheme without Ravalomanana," which he could not accept.

A private Antsiva radio reported that representatives of former president Didier Ratsiraka urged Rajoelina, the transitional government leader, to order a general amnesty for all political prisoners and political refugees abroad rather than the presidential pardon he issued at his sworn-in ceremony on March 21.

Ravalomanana came to power in 2002 following a six-month stalemate with his predecessor Didier Ratsiraka, who ruled the fourth largest island in the world from 1975 to 1991 and from 1997 to 2001.

Ravalomanana was forced to step down on March 17 following a rebellion of the armed forces, which openly supported Andry Rajoelina, who proclaimed president of the country on Feb. 7.

Since Rajoelina took over the presidency three weeks ago, Ravalomanana's supporters have continued their protests, demanding the restoration of their leader to the top post.

Ratsiraka's supporters warned him not to participate in the transitional government, though rumors circulating here said that the former president has been behind Andry Rajoelina in his demonstration against Ravalomanana.

Rajoelina appointed several of Ratsiraka's supporters to the High Transitional Authority on March 31, but the former president's representatives denounced Rajoelina's take-over as a coup d'etat.

They told the media that they would send a letter to the UN headquarters to explain the reasons for their withdrawal from the four-party talks.

Early last week, Albert Zafy, another former president of the country who led the island from 1993 to 1996, declared that he would rather establish an autonomous province than joining the transitional government in response to Rajoelina's refusal to listen to his advice before the announcement of the transitional government.

It is ironic that one of Zafy's political advisors, Betiana Bruno, was appointed by Rajoelina as member of the High Transitional Authority on March 31, while another of his political advisors, Tabera Randriamanantsoa, was appointed by Ravalomanana as his prime minister last week to lead a new government.

However, Randriamanantsoa said on Friday that he was waiting for the result of the four-party meeting before making a decision to accept or reject the appointment by Ravalomanana.

The AU and the Southern African Development Community, which has failed to mediate a peaceful solution to the political controversy between Ravalomanana and Rajoelina, urged the Madagascan authorities to hold a national election in three to five months.

But the High Transitional Authority led by Rajoelina decided at the end of a national conference early this month to hold a general election in October next year.

Eleven killed, over 200 injured in Easter holiday in Madagascar

ANTANANARIVO, (Xinhua) -- Eleven people were reportedly killed and over 200 others injured in various accidents during the Easter Holidays in the Indian Ocean island country of Madagascar, a French-language daily Les Nouvelles, reported on Tuesday.

The newspaper identified several cases such as the one in which three passengers died on the spot when a minibus bound for Antananarivo fell under a bridge in Ambatolampy, 75 km south of here on Saturday afternoon.

A 50-year-old man was hit dead by a truck on Monday at the exit of Ambohimandroso, 80 km south of the capital city while a biker, who was struck by a car just 20 km south of the mountainous city, died in a nearby hospital hours later.

In another traffic accident last Saturday when a taxi went off the road, a man was killed on the spot in a north suburb of the capital. Meanwhile, a woman died of overdrinking alcohol in a hospital here Monday afternoon. The daily paper said that 226 others were injured in various incidents over the island country during the holiday from last Saturday to Monday. Statistics published by hospitals and the police showed that the year 2009 was the worst in three years in terms of traffic accidents and social disturbance, in which hundreds of people had been killed.

Malawi major parties attack independent presidential candidate

LILONGWE, (Xinhua) -- Independent presidential candidate in Malawi's May 19 general elections has come under heavy attack from the country's two major political parties following his claims that he rebuffed their proposals to join them, the Nation reported on Tuesday. James Nyondo, who is contesting in next month's polls as an independent presidential candidate, disclosed in a statement issued Sunday that he had turned down overtures from the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and United Democratic Front (UDF). Nyondo, who is one of the seven presidential contenders, claimed the two political parties had made unconditional offers to him urging him to withdraw from the presidential race. "A senior cabinet minister came to my house to negotiate that I withdraw from the race and be appointed prime minister in the next election," Nyondo claimed. He added DPP's Secretary General Chimunthu Banda also approached him with unconditional offers from the DPP if he withdrew from the presidential race and join the ruling party. Nyondo said having considered the offers from the DPP and UDF, his campaign team resolved that accepting any offers would be contrary to the very principles of his campaign. However, the DPP secretary general denied visiting Nyondo and threatened to sue the independent presidential candidate for character assassination, the daily said. The UDF publicist Rob Jamieson described Nyondo as confused, saying it was Nyondo who went to offer himself as a presidential candidate for the party following the rejection of Bakili Muluzi as its presidential candidate. With only a month to go before the general elections little known Nyondo is reportedly making inroads in the country's Central and Southern regions, it added. Malawians will go to the polls next month to elect a president and parliamentarians in the country's fourth multiparty general elections.

Malawi agrees to lease land to Djibouti

LILONGWE, (Xinhua) -- Malawi has agreed to lease arable land to Djibouti for crop production, leaders of the two countries have disclosed, the Nations reported on Tuesday. Speaking at the end of his three-day visit to Malawi, Djibouti leader Ismail Omar Guelleh told local journalists before his departure at Chileka Airport in the commercial capital Blantyre that he had discussed with Malawi President Bingu Wa Mutharika on investing on a huge arable land, the newspaper said. "We are now discussing how Djibouti will invest in agriculture so that we will be part of Malawi development programme," said Guelleh. Mutharika also echoed Guelleh's remarks, saying the two had agreed on the land lease. "We have agreed to get experts and investors from Djibouti to lease some land to grow specific food stuffs that should be exported to Djibouti. This is a very important development," said Mutharika. The two leaders, however, did not say when and where Malawi would lease the land whose size was not also mentioned, according to the daily. Mutharika said although Malawi is smaller compared to countries neighboring Djibouti, the country has better arable land and water sources that can facilitate agricultural production. Guelleh was in Malawi at the invitation of Mutharika who wishes to seek Djibouti's support in the development of Malawi's inland port in the country's Southern district of Nsanje.

Malawian drug trafficker convicted in south China city

NANNING, (Xinhua) -- A Malawian man received the death penalty with a two-year reprieve for trafficking more than 1,140 grams of heroin into China. The Intermediate People's Court of Guilin, a city in south China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, handed down the sentence last Friday. Mpasu Gerrad, 29, was seized at the Guilin airport July 14, 2008 shortly after his arrival from Macao. Customs officials detected an illegal substance, but couldn't find it. Gerrad was taken to a hospital, where doctors found, through computerized tomography, 88 capsules of compact powder in his stomach. He confessed he had swallowed 1,140 grams of heroin before boarding the flight from Macao to Guilin. Gerrad said he was offered 3,500 U.S. dollars for bringing the drug to dealers in Beijing. Under Chinese law, heroin traffickers can get the death penalty when a drug transaction exceeds 50 grams. A court spokesman said the court showed leniency in Gerrad's case because he confessed to his crime and had been stopped before the drugs were sold.

Nicaragua congratulates Algerian president on re-election

MANAGUA, (Xinhua) -- Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega congratulated on Tuesday Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika on his recent triumph in the presidential elections with more than 90 percent of the votes. "When knowing the news of your reelection to a third presidency, we want to express our joy and fraternal congratulations for the renewal of your charge as president of those heroic people, whose fights have inspired the revolutionary people in the world," Ortega said in a press communique. Ortega added that "today, the independence, the sovereignty and the self-determination in democracy, have strengthened ties between people and government that we think are indispensable in the world of respect, reconciliation and solidarity." Official results on April 10 showed Bouteflika is set to stay on power till 2014 when he won a landslide victory in the presidential election with 90.24 percent of all the votes cast.

Nigerian businesses to seek cooperation in Vietnam

HANOI, (Xinhua) -- A delegation of about 30 Nigerian businesses will head to Vietnam to seek trade and investment cooperation from April 19 to 24, the local newspaper Vietnam Economic Times reported Wednesday. According to Vietnam's Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Nigerian delegation includes representatives from ministries, promotion agencies and businesses in such fields as energy, electricity, agriculture, garment, banking and finance, and telecommunications. The conference on Vietnam- Nigeria Business and Investment Cooperation is scheduled to take place in Hanoi on April 23. According to Vietnamese Deputy Minister of Industry and Trade Nguyen Thanh Bien, Nigeria is a potential African market and a gateway for Vietnam's goods to gain entry into Africa. In 2008, the two-way trade between Vietnam and Nigeria reached 105 million U.S. dollars.

Nigeria begins calibration of nav aids in seven airports

LAGOS, (Xinhua) -- The Nigerian Airspace Management Agency (NAMA) Tuesday began the second phase of flight calibration of navigational equipment at seven airports across the country, the Lagos-based Punch newspaper reported.

The airports to be covered under the exercise include Lagos, Maidugiri, Gombe, Jos, Enugu, Port Harcourt and Calabar.

Supo Atobatele, the General Manager, Public Affairs of NAMA, said Monday in Lagos that the seven-day's exercise, which would be conducted by ASCENA, a Dakar-based firm, would boost safe flight operations across the country.

According to him, the navigational aids to be calibrated at these airports are instrument Landing System, very high Omni- directional radio range, distance measuring equipment, glide path, precision approach instrument while the instrument approach procedure for Gombe Airport would be carried out during the flight- check exercise.

"Top on the list of the exercise is the flight-check on the newly installed primary and secondary surveillance radar at the Lagos Airport while the VHF radio and the glide path on the international runway at the same airport would also be calibrated," he added.

Last month, NAMA carried out the first phase of the flight calibration of navigational equipment of Malam Aminu Kano International Airport.

Calibration of nav aids is a regular quality maintenance feature of NAMA as all equipment must pass the calibration test before they are being put to use.

Nigerians at the mercy of reckless drivers

By Olatunbosun Awoniyi LAGOS, (Xinhua) -- Just as men of the Nigerian Police Force are facing a deadly onslaught from armed robbers with many killed in different parts of the country, reckless driving and over-loading are major causes of auto accidents in the Africa's most populated country, where poor maintenance of roads and lack of implementation of traffic rules are often reported.

These led to the latest tragedy struck in Nigeria's northern Katsina and Kwara states on Saturday and Sunday where a total of 43 persons were reportedly killed in separate auto accidents.

In the first incident, twenty-four persons died on Sunday night while 10 others were injured at Kanbi on Bode Saa'adu-Jebba road in Moro Local Government Area of Kwara State.

The Kwara accident occurred on Jebba road when a motorcycle suddenly crossed the busy main road without looking sideways.

It was learnt that in a bid to avoid the motorcyclist, two oncoming commercial buses had a head-on collision. Though the cyclist escaped unhurt, the accident claimed the lives of 24 of the passengers in the commercial vehicles. Ten others sustained serious injuries.

The remains of the dead passengers have been deposited at mortuaries of some hospitals in Jebba, while those who sustained injuries were receiving treatments.

In Katsina, local media reported the family was returning home after attending a marriage ceremony in Minna, when the crash occurred.

Eye witnesses were quoted as saying that the vehicle had a tyre burst and that the driver lost control. The accident killed 13 occupants, including women and children, while the driver and his conductor were narrowly escaped the death.

On Saturday, six people were killed in another auto accident in Malumfashi of the same state.

A truck carrying more than 60 people was loaded with wheat flour. The driver also reportedly lost control before heading into a bush. In addition to the deaths, some were injured and later sent to Malumfashi General Hospital.

Osita Chidoka, Nigeria's top road marshal, early this month announced that road accidents totalling 18,308 have claimed 5,157 lives and left 13,251 persons injured in Nigeria in the past three years.

Chidoka told journalists in the capital city of Abuja that errant petroleum tanker drivers were responsible for most of the accidents.

According to him, in the first three months of this year alone, 2,119 accidents involving tanker drivers caused 301 deaths.

Some Nigerians were of the opinion that the figure of fatalities given by the top marshal is a gross under-estimation of the deaths resulting from road accidents in Nigeria.

The majority of the accident victims in Nigeria are young adults of the age group 22 to 30 years and about 75 percent of the accident victims are males, according to Afamdi Ezenwa of the Department of Community Health, College of Medical Sciences, University of Benin in his study on trends and characteristics of road traffic accidents in Nigeria.

He said reckless and dangerous driving, driving without license, excess speed, alcoholism, faulty pedestrian attitude constitute the major causes of road traffic accidents in Nigeria.

Other contributory factors include unsafe driving conditions such as road and vehicle defects.

He explained that the observations from the present study indicate the need for a regular evaluation of accident trends in relation to a critical evaluation and innovation of accident counter measures in Nigeria.

Uganda to get loan from AfDB to boost electrification

KAMPALA, (Xinhua) -- Uganda is to get a loan of 9 million U.S. dollars from the African Development Bank (AfDB) for the construction of the Buseruka hydro-power dam in Hoima district to boost rural electrification. Benedict Kanu, the AfDB Uganda field officer, was quoted by the state-owned New Vision daily as saying on Tuesday that the Buseruka project would contribute to economic development by facilitating growth and social service delivery.

Hillary Oniek, Uganda's energy minister, said the project is in line with the government's efforts to increase rural electrification to 10 percent by 2012 from the current 2 percent.

"This will make the countrywide coverage about 25 percent. Energy will improve the quality of life in households," said the minister. "I appeal to other private investors to bid for other mini-hydropower sites. We have sites that can produce a total of over 60MW," said Oniek.

Fred Kabagambe-Kaliisa, the Energy Ministry's permanent secretary, said the government's priority is to increase the power generation capacity and boost the transmission network.

Hydromaxx, a renewable energy firm, will build and operate the project, which includes a 9MW power plant and aims at providing affordable, reliable and increased power to remote areas in the East African country.

The project will cost 27 million dollars in total. The PTA Bank will provide 10 million dollars, while Hydromaxx will invest 8 million dollars. This has left a shortfall of 9 million dollars.

Meanwhile, the World Bank has approved a 75 million dollars International Development Association credit to finance the second phase of the Energy for Rural Transformation program in Uganda.

The first phase was approved in 2001 and was completed in February 2009.

The program seeks to facilitate significant improvements in the productivity of enterprises and the quality of life of households in the rural areas by giving them access to modern energy, and information and communication technologies.

Zambia to hold meetings with mines to prevent further job losses

LUSAKA, (Xinhua) -- A senior Zambian government official said that he would this week engage mining companies in talks in an effort to prevent further job losses in the sector, Times of Zambia reported on Tuesday.

In an interview with Times on Monday, Labor and Social Security Minister Austin Liato said the Zambian government is not in support of mining companies closing down and is sympathetic with the miners.

"I will hold another round of talks with mining companies this week or early next week because we cannot afford to have any further job losses," Liato was quoted.

He said there is no need for any further job losses because copper prices have stabilized, adding that the government will do everything possible to prevent miners from losing their jobs.

Over 5,000 miners have lost their jobs as mining firms continue downsizing their operations in view of the global economic meltdown which has affected the sector badly.

On Saturday, former workers at one of the closed mines, Luanshya Copper Mines (LCM) in Luanshya town on the Copperbelt Province, attempted to stage a peaceful demonstration to pressurize the government to announce a new investor for the mine but their union officials intervened and called for patience, Times said.

The Zambian government is currently in the process of selecting a new investor for the closed mine where 1,700 miners lost their jobs.

South Africa's fuel strike enters seventh day

JOHANNESBURG, (Xinhua) -- A strike in the South African road freight industry, which has seen at least 300 petrol stations run dry in the past week, continues on Tuesday.

"The strike continues. We've had overwhelming support from our members, between 80 and 90 percent are participating," said South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union (SATAWU) general secretary Randall Howard.

Talks between SATAWU and the Road Freight Employers' Association (RFEA) will continue on Tuesday in attempts to solve a wage dispute, he added.

"There is a meeting planned. Certainly, we are interested in talking," Howard told a media briefing.

The South African Fuel Retailers Association on Monday said 300 petrol stations across the country had run dry with retailers in townships most affected.

"The Easter weekend was a plateau in terms of delivery but commercial customers are coming back. Everybody is going back to work and this is going to increase demand," CEO Reggie Sibiya said.

"The longer the fuel strike takes, the backlog will also increase. If we hadn't had this long weekend relief, we may already have been in a crisis," Sibiya said.

An estimated 20,000 truck drivers are taking part in the strike that started last Tuesday. SATAWU's demands include a 13 percent pay hike and four months' paid maternity leave with a job guarantee on return to work. The RFEA has offered salary increases of between 10.5 percent and 11 percent.

IMF predicts Uganda's economic growth to fall to 5.5 per cent

KAMPALA, (Xinhua) -- Uganda's economic growth rate will slow down to 5.5 percent in 2009/2010 due to the global financial crisis, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has predicted.

Martine Guerguil, the chief of the IMF mission to Uganda, was quoted by the state-owned New Vision daily as saying on Tuesday in a statement that the projected slowdown is from 8.5 percent for the last several years to 6.2 percent in 2008/2009 and 5.5 percent in 2009/2010.

"The effects of the crisis are starting to be felt in lower export growth, a decline in foreign capital inflows, depreciation of the shilling as well as lower tax revenue collections. The deceleration in growth could be more pronounced if the global recession turns out to be deeper than anticipated," she said.

This was after conclusion of the fifth review of Uganda's three-year economic program supported by the IMF's Policy Support Instrument (PSI).

The PSI is designed for low-income countries that don't need IMF financial assistance, but still seek IMF advice, monitoring and endorsement of their policies.

The IMF said that while the current macro-economic stance in the East African country is appropriate, it needs fine-tuning to address the evolving economic outlook.

The IMF backed the Ugandan government's plans to maintain a high level of development spending in 2008/2009 and 2009/2010 despite the projected shortfall in revenue.

"For the remainder of the fiscal year 2008/2009, the main challenge will be to ensure effective absorption of this spending, in particular for infrastructure development. For 2009/10, the mission sees a need for the planned increase in development spending to be matched by higher recurrent outlays," said Guerguil.

She added that this balanced approach would have the dual effect of sustaining growth in the near-term and enhancing Uganda's growth potential over the medium-term.

Guerguil cautioned that an uncertain market environment would continue to complicate Bank of Uganda's (BoU) monetary policy management.

"The BoU has shown an appropriate combination of flexibility and caution in its approach to these challenges. Its staff is working on refinements for the current liquidity management framework. This is expected to provide a more flexible response to unanticipated shocks," she noted.

She said the central bank's challenge is to ensure inflation remains on a downward path while providing sufficient liquidity to support a healthy level of activity.

The IMF's executive board is expected to discuss the fifth review of Uganda's economic program under the PSI in May 2009.

Zambia seeks private sector to help in tourism promotion

LUSAKA, (Xinhua) -- A senior Zambian government official has called for increased private sector participation in the promotion of tourism in the country's Luapula Province, Zambia News and Information Service (ZANIS) reported on Tuesday.

Luapula Province Permanent Secretary Jazzman Chikwakwa said increased private sector investment was cardinal if the province was to unlock its tourism potential.

He said the government would continue to provide an enabling environment for private sector participation in tourism development in the province.

According to ZANIS, Chikwakwa said this on Monday night at a cultural night organized by the Luapula Tourism Association (LTA) in a speech read for him by District Commissioner Charles Makwaya.

The Provincial Permanent Secretary said government had realized that the province had great potential in tourism but would need private sector participation to utilize the potential for the benefit of the people in the province and the country as a whole.

According to Chikwakwa, the recently launched Destination Luapula tourism and investment promotion project, which aims at marketing the tourism and investment potential in the province, would not realize the intended benefits if the private sector did not partner with government.

"We need to work together to promote this province's tourism and investment potential, this province has remained behind in terms of development despite its rich untapped natural resource endowments," Chikwakwa was quoted.

Speaking earlier, LTA Vice-Chairperson Pius Ndlovu said the association would create an effective lobbying voice to harmonize activities aimed at promoting tourism in the province amongst stakeholders.

Ndlovu said there had been less awareness campaigns on tourism in the province both by the local people and outsiders, adding that this had negatively affected the promotion of the industry.

He said his association would soon embark on carrying out tourism sensitization campaigns and holding of government and private sector dialogue for development of tourism in the province.

Angolan housing conference urges better housing strategy

LUANDA, (Xinhua) -- Angola's National Conference on Housing being held here on Tuesday urged the government to take a better housing strategy.

In a final communique issued at the end of the first conference of its kind, participants asked the government to give priority to the housing problem, especially for the most vulnerable.

They proposed the creation of basic infrastructure including sanitation, roads, health, education, water and power supply facilities.

The participants also recommended local governments simplify the process of acquisition of plots for urbanization and construction of well-designed houses to the citizens.

The document said the harmonization of the country's national housing plans should be reassessed in a systematic way to ensure their feasibility.

The meeting highlighted the need to reinforce environmental policies towards the valorization of the natural and landscape patrimony, saying it is necessary to implement environmental legislation and conduct studies on environmental degradation.

The two-day national housing conference opened on Monday in the Angolan capital Luanda with a motto "Housing: A Challenge for Everyone".

Researchers find resistant mutations of malaria parasites

WASHINGTON, (Xinhua) -- Researchers have discovered that malaria parasites in east and west Africa carry different resistance mutations, which suggests that the effectiveness of sulfadoxine as an antimalarial drug may vary across Africa.

The findings, published Tuesday in U.S. journal PLoS Medicine, have implications for the manner in which malaria control campaigns are carried out, and suggest that coordinating efforts between parts of Africa that share similar patterns of resistance is likely to be more effective than working in isolation in each country.

Plasmodium falciparum (P. falciparum) a mosquito-borne parasite that causes malaria, kills nearly one million people a year, mostly in sub-Saharan Africa. Until recently, treatment in Africa relied on chloroquine and sulfadoxine-pyrimethamine.

Unfortunately, parasites have developed resistance to both these drugs by acquiring "resistance mutations", genetic changes that prevent the drugs from killing them.

Scientists have discovered that the mutations that caused resistance to chloroquine and pyrimethamine originated in Asia and spread into Africa in the late 1970s and early 1980s respectively.

These mutations are now common across Africa and it is no longer possible to determine how they spread across the continent. However, the mutations that cause resistance to sulfadoxine only began to emerge in the mid-1990s, and have not yet spread evenly across Africa.

A study led by Cally Roper of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, used genetic methods to characterise how resistance to sulfadoxine has spread across Africa, with a view to determining its geographical origins in order to help improve measures aimed at controlling the spread of drug-resistant P. falciparum.

The team analyzed blood samples collected from patients with malaria in various African countries, and searched the scientific literature for other similar studies.

They discovered five major variant genetic sequences (three of which contain mutations that confer various degrees of resistance to sulfadoxine in laboratory tests) to be present in Africa, each with a unique geographical distribution.

In particular, the data showed that malaria parasites in east and west Africa carry different resistance mutations. The findings show that sulfadoxine-resistant parasites have emerged independently at multiple sites in Africa, and that the molecular basis for sulfadoxine resistance is different in east and west Africa.

This latter result may have clinical implications because it suggests that the effectiveness of sulfadoxine as an antimalarial drug may vary across the continent.

They also suggest that economic and transport infrastructures may have played a role in governing recent parasite dispersal across the continent through their influence on the volume of human migration.

Eighty-eight peoples die of diarrhea in Angola's central province

LUANDA, (Xinhua) -- At least 89 peoples died of diarrhea during the first quarter of this year in Angola's central Bie province, a health official said on Tuesday.

Jose Augusto Goncalves, director of the Bie provincial health department, told reporters that the disease affected 2,200 peoples in Bie province during the first three months of this year.

To help people prevent from the disease, the provincial government has carried out the promotion campaigns in the communities to popularize knowledge on preventing from and control of the disease.

The official added that the government has also carried out the "Water for All" project across the province.

Diarrhea is a common disease in the province due to poor environmental conditions where people have no access to clean drinking water. Statistics show that around 50,000 cases of diarrhea were recorded in the province in 2008, leaving 1,024 people dead.

Uganda to conduct HIV/AIDS prevalence survey in 2009

KAMPALA, (Xinhua) -- Uganda is set to conduct a national survey this year to ascertain the current HIV/AIDS prevalence rate in the country, local media reported on Tuesday.

According to the Director of Planning at the Uganda AIDS Commission, Rose Nalwadda, the survey to be carried out later this year will enable health service providers get up to date about HIV/ AIDS.

"We carry out this survey every five years and we are optimistic that after this exercise we shall be in position to give up-to-date statistics about the scourge," she was quoted by the Daily Monitor as saying.

The Ministry of Health currently uses the 2004/2005 Sero- Behavioral Survey findings that put the national HIV prevalence at 6.4 percent.

The survey included the testing of over 18,000 adults and 8,000 children under the age of five.

Nalwadda said lack of knowledge of people's HIV status and their partners was a key driver of the HIV epidemic.

According to the 2004/2005 Sero-Behavioral Survey report, only 20 percent of the infected do know their status.

"What defeats our understandings today are the high infections among married couples. And as partners we have to check this trend as soon as possible," she said.

Floods in western Zambia recede

LUSAKA, (Xinhua) -- The high water levels, which caused severe damage to crops and infrastructure in western Zambia, are slowly receding, Times of Zambia reported on Tuesday.

According to Provincial Permanent Secretary Ikanuke Noyoo, the water levels that caused flooding are going down compared to the way it was three weeks ago.

In an interview with Times on Monday in Mongu, the provincial capital of western Zambia, Noyoo said the floods had left a trail of destruction, with 80 percent of the rice crop destroyed.

The floods had also washed away at least 65 percent of the maize grown on the edge of the plain in the region,

Times said.

The Provincial Permanent Secretary said Shang'ombo, one of the districts which was cut off from the rest of the province when bridges were washed away, has since been re-connected after the construction of the two bridges.

The floods have affected over 483, 000 people in many parts of the province who are currently in need of assistance.

The Zambian government has since started sending relief supplies to the affected people and so far about 9, 000 have benefited.

Zambian game scout drowns in pursuit of poacher

LUSAKA, (Xinhua) -- A game scout in central Zambia's town of Serenje has drowned and died as he was chasing a suspected poacher, Zambia News and Information Service (ZANIS) reported on Tuesday.

The game scout drowned in Mumbu stream in Kasanka National Park, said ZANIS.

Kasanka National Park Warden Teddy Bwale told ZANIS in an interview on Tuesday that the deceased Shaft Mushiki, 28, was in the company of another game scout when the incident happened.

Bwalya said the game scout and his colleague had gone into the park on patrol on Monday morning when the incident happened.

Bwale said the game scout was on patrol when they noticed a person paddling a canoe whom they suspected to be a poacher. The game scout drowned after falling to swim in pursuit of the suspect.

South Africa's ANC president calls for corruption hotline

JOHANNESBURG, (Xinhua) -- Whistle-blowers will be able to report corrupt activities via a hotline if South Africa's ANC head Jacob Zuma takes over as president of the country after the general elections.

Addressing thousands of people during an African National Congress (ANC) rally in Ngwelezane, outside Empangeni, Zuma proposed introducing a national tollfree number where people could report corruption.

The number would also be used to report lazy government officials.

"This is my idea that I want to put forward. The number will not only have to report corruption, but will also ensure that there is constant communication between the presidency and people on the ground," he said.

Zuma said he had noticed that very few people were reporting corruption.

He also said a performance monitoring structure would ensure that dead wood was removed from government.

"The structure will ensure that lazy people are removed from government and replaced with competent ones," he said, adding that there were government officials who thought they were bigger than people.

"The structure will also make sure that corruption cases are dealt with speedily because at the moment we have many people who are suspended with full pay for a long time," he pledged.

Earlier on Tuesday, the party said it had penetrated the strongholds of its arch-rival, the IFP.

"People have made a shift from the IFP to the ANC," said ANC spokeswoman Jessie Duarte ahead of Zuma's appearance at the rally in KwaZulu-Natal.

"They have shifted in huge numbers. Our rallies in the so-called IFP strongholds are attended by thousands of people," she said.

After addressing a rally in Phoenix on Tuesday evening, Zuma would return to Johannesburg to prepare for the ANC's final rally in Coca-Cola Park stadium on Sunday.

South Africa's ruling ANC has no plans to diminish local government

JOHANNESBURG, (Xinhua) -- South Africa's African National Congress (ANC) on Tuesday rejected suggestions that it intends cutting the powers of local government.

"The African National Congress has noted with dismay claims by Democratic Alliance leader Helen Zille that the ANC plans to diminish the powers of local government," ANC spokeswoman Jessie Duarte said.

"The ANC wishes to place on record that it has no intention to diminish in any way the constitutional powers of local government. In fact, the ANC is determined that local government should be better empowered and have greater capacity so that it can respond to the needs of the people," she said.

On Monday, Zille told DA supporters the extent of the ANC's plans to change the Constitution and entrench its powers were clear from a draft National Treasury Constitution amendment bill.

This showed the ANC wanted to reduce municipalities to administrative arms of central government.

"This will enable a centralised ANC to severely limit the mandate of elected local government, especially where the ANC does not govern and where local authorities legitimately refuse to implement ANC policies," said Zille. If the ANC managed to pass this constitutional amendment, giving itself a range of reasons to undermine local government, it could effectively nullify voters' choice and enforce ANC policy from the center, Zille said.

The South African Local Government Association (Salga) also weighed in on the debate on Tuesday, describing as "unfortunate" reports that Zille said the ANC wants to "amend the constitution to paralyse local government". Salga said the proposed constitutional amendment was a bid by the government to speed up plans to create six regional electricity distributors and remove delivery deadlocks.

It added that while it was still debating its position with members, it was not in favour of an amendment that would lead to "an outright removal of the municipalities' executive authority over electricity reticulation" as this would have severe financial implications for local governments.

South African ruling ANC accuses Mbeki of betraying legacy

JOHANNESBURG, (Xinhua) -- Former South African president Thabo Mbeki is a "conniving" person who betrayed the legacy of struggle icon Nelson Mandela, the South African ruling African National Congress (ANC) election head said in an open letter published on Tuesday.

"Former president Mandela handed you a vibrant and united ANC, yet at the twilight of your presidency, you chose to betray everything that Mandela and those that came before him stood for, struggled for, and laid down their lives for," said Fikile Mbalula, campaign head of the ANC.

"In a moment of intoxication with power, you forgot Madiba's wise counsel and allowed our glorious movement to stumble on the edge of an abyss," said Mbalula.

Mbalula said Mbeki decided to "spawn" the ANC breakaway party, the Congress of the People, after being defeated as ANC leader by Jacob Zuma at the Polokwane conference in December 2007.

"It is one's considered view that it was the failure of this strategy that led you and your lieutenants to spawn the so-called Congress of the People as a vehicle to fight the ANC and undermine its hegemony and legacy." Mbalula, who is also a member of the ANC national working committee, said the events of the past week had left him with "very little option but to address you directly on the matters at hand".

He referred to the release of transcripts of conversations between former prosecutions chief Bulelani Ngcuka and former Scorpions boss Leonard McCarthy, discussing the timing of re-charging Zuma with fraud and corruption. Acting National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) head Mokotedi Mpshe announced last week that the charges against Zuma will be dropped, saying the transcripts were evidence of an "abuse of process".

Mpshe said no concrete evidence could be found to support claims that Mbeki had manipulated the prosecuting process behind-the-scenes but many Zuma supporters believe that was the case.

Mbeki's spokesman, Mukoni Ratshitanga, was not immediately available for comment.

Kenyan leader says government to hasten reforms

By Daniel Ooko NAIROBI, (Xinhua) -- Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki said on Tuesday the ruling coalition government will hasten reforms especially those dealing with land and governance as spelt out in the national accord.

Speaking in Nairobi, President Kibaki also expressed optimism that he and Prime Minister Raila Odinga would keep the coalition government together.

Speaking during the installation of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa (PCEA) Moderator David Ritho Gathanju on Tuesday, the President said that they would work towards enforcing the national agenda.

"We are in government with Hon Raila Odinga and as a Grand Coalition we shall overcome any differences that there may be and the church should not encourage disunity by calling for unnecessary elections," said President Kibaki.

The president reiterated the commitment of his government to implementing comprehensive reforms including constitutional review and electoral reforms.

"You (religious leaders) have also raised issues of governance and the need to forge ahead with reforms, especially those in Agenda Four of the National Accord. In this regard, I assure religious leaders that my government will continue to listen to them and to act on constructive ideas and criticism," he said.

He called on Kenyans to concentrate on the reform agenda and support the coalition government to achieve the development agenda.

"It is imperative that as leaders, we concentrate on the major reforms that need to be undertaken and not resort to public sideshows. I believe in the importance of honest consultations before leaders engage in public utterances that confuse the public and give the impression of a crisis," he said.

He re-affirmed the government's commitment to implement Agenda Item Four of the mediation talks, which involve land reforms.

"As I have stated, our country is experiencing challenges arising from a slow economic growth, famine and recovering from the post-election violence. We have high unemployment rates and rising food prices," he said.

"These challenges require a concerted effort by all leaders so that the welfare of the people of Kenya continues to improve. Governance is on the basis of the constitution and rule of law and should be anchored on dialogue and mutual respect," he noted.

While he welcomed criticism from religious groups, the President asked them to offer solutions that would help the government to remain united and succeed in its development agenda.

He asked them to actively participate in reforms especially in the constitution process, but at the same time gave them a tongue lashing against spreading messages of despair.

"I am very depressed when I hear many people express words of despair and many of them are people inside the church, they are people who should be preaching. It is not your role to discourage us, it is your basic role to pray for us," he said.

Kibaki admitted that the government was faced with many challenges owing to the 2007 post-election violence, the global economic crisis and the current famine. He said the government was still struggling with unemployment and resettling internally displaced persons who were still residing in camps.

He asked the country to be peaceful and begged for support and patience as the government continues to source for ways of alleviating the difficulties.

President Kibaki challenged the church to be at the forefront in encouraging Kenyans to face with courage the challenges they faced as a nation and shun rumors that may create despair.

The President noted that religious leaders should come out to preach hope and harmonious coexistence among all Kenyans to correspond with biblical teachings.

The President said that the church should take up its frontline role of civic education to enable Kenyans embrace change and take advantage of opportunities arising in the country.

He said that Kenyans presently are interested in sustainable peace and revival of the economy after the post election skirmishes of last year and all energies should be directed towards providing necessary hope in forging ahead as one nation.

Kibaki reassured Kenyans that despite the current challenges, the Grand Coalition Government would continue working together to steer the country through the current hard times.

The President also called on leaders to practice mature politics that would steer the country forward and avoid rhetoric that only served their sectarian interests saying utterances that may scare investors and other visitors to the country should be avoided at all costs.

"I believe in the importance of honest consultations before leaders engage in public utterances that confuse the public and give the impression of a crisis."

He further urged Kenyans to count their blessings and to particularly cultivate a positive attitude towards the country's well being and its achievements.

President Kibaki said that despite the existence of a number of challenges, the country was making commendable progress in addressing key challenges such as modernization of the infrastructure to create jobs for the youth and tackling the famine situation in the country.

The President, however, cautioned Kenyans against negative propaganda that could create hopelessness among citizens and divert their attention from nation building.

"It is, however, understandable for there to be a perception that the Grand Coalition government is not functioning when there is constant grumbling and wrangling over the media by leaders," he said.

President Kibaki said that the tribulations afflicting the nation require concerted efforts by all leaders to safeguard the welfare of all Kenyans at all times.

"Our country is experiencing challenges arising from a slow economic growth, famine and recovering from the post-election violence. We have high unemployment rates and rising food prices," he said.

The President said that governance must be based on constitutionality and the rule of law but should be anchored on dialogue and mutual respect.

Zimbabwe, Nigeria to revive joint commission

HARARE, (Xinhua) -- Nigeria has started the process of reviving its permanent joint development commission with Zimbabwe, a diplomat has said.

Nigerian Ambassador to Zimbabwe Kunle Adeyanju said negotiations for revival of the Zimbabwe-Nigeria Development Commission were not concluded last year as a result of the challenges Zimbabwe was facing, The Herald reported on Tuesday.

He said the commission would guarantee security between Nigerian and Zimbabwean companies operating in either of the countries.

"Foreign ministries from both countries have already started talks on the arrangement," he said, adding that the commission was in existence but was in a limbo because of the challenges Zimbabwe had been facing.

The development commission, the ambassador said, would ensure effective cooperation in various sectors of the economy.

"There is need to resuscitate the commission as it has a lot of bearing on business partnerships and possible investment. Now that things are stable, we need to re-engage," said Adeyanju.

Zimbabwean rural folk hit hard by dollarized economy: report

HARARE, (Xinhua) -- The current dollarization of the economy has hit vulnerable people living in Zimbabwe's rural areas hard, as they are struggling to raise foreign currency to pay travelling costs and buy basic commodities, The Chronicle reported on Tuesday.

This has been worsened by the fact that prices of goods and services in the rural areas are very high.

According to the daily newspaper, villagers said although the dollarization of the economy had resulted in availability of basic commodities, they were being forced to sell off their livestock to meet their needs since

most of them had no other source of foreign currency.

"Food is now there on the shelves but we have no money to buy it. Most of us in the rural areas don't work, so we have no way to raise the money other than perhaps selling livestock. Even for travelling, some people are paying using chickens or goats which is unfair," said Alick Ngwenya in an interview at Bhaghani Shopping Centre on Saturday.

Dube said to make matters worse prices of basic commodities were very high in rural areas compared to urban areas. The worst affected by the dollarization were orphans and elderly people.

Some of the villagers said they sometimes received groceries and money from their relatives abroad but it was not enough to sustain them.

"There are many people who don't have children abroad or in town, so the situation is worse for them. There are also some among us who have irresponsible children who are working and they have never sent anything back home, so the majority of us are suffering," said another villager Mavis Ndiweni.

SADC lobbies economic aid for Zimbabwe

HARARE, (Xinhua) -- The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has dispatched teams of ministers to the U.S. and European Union to lobby for the lifting of sanctions and canvass for economic support for the inclusive Government, local media reported on Tuesday.

According to reports by The Chronicle, South Africa's Foreign Affairs Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma said four teams were set up for the purpose.

"SADC has sent four groups to go and lobby for economic aid and lifting of sanctions against Zimbabwe in a move meant to speed up economic recovery of Zimbabwe," she said.

Dlamini-Zuma said this on Sunday during an election debate broadcast on South African Broadcasting Corporation 2. When asked about whether South Africans themselves would have accepted the Zimbabwe arrangement in their country, she said that had already happened when the National Party under F.W de Klerk shared power with the ANC when former President Nelson Mandela was president.

"South Africa has already been involved in a power sharing deal before, when the ANC shared power with the National Party," she said.

Last month SADC approved Zimbabwe's reconstruction plan of 8.3 billion U.S. dollars.

At the end of the SADC summit held in Swaziland the regional bloc was unanimous that the illegal economic sanctions should go as they only served to undermine the successful implementation of the inclusive government.

The summit also proposed a committee of Finance Ministers that would approach multi-lateral lending institutions to normalize ties as well as restore financial support.

Dlamini-Zuma stressed that SADC governments would not raise the money themselves, but would try to mobilize it from international donors and international financial institutions.

Zimbabwe urged to draft law to allow dual citizenship: deputy PM

HARARE, (Xinhua) -- Zimbabweans abroad should be allowed to have dual citizenship so that they can plough back into the country and help market the country as a safe tourist destination, Deputy Prime Minister Arthur Mutambara has said.

Mutambara said some Zimbabweans who left the country years ago had families in foreign countries and their children had become citizens by birth but were still Zimbabweans, The Chronicle reported on Tuesday.

"We need to change our laws. Let's not force people to choose against their country. You cannot have all your citizens in the country even if the country does well there are some Zimbabweans who will remain in Japan or England," the deputy prime minister said.

"Let's use our people outside to attract foreign investment and invite tourists to Zimbabwe," he said.

Mutambara, who was addressing delegates at the just-ended youth conference, said it was crucial to embrace those in the diaspora so that they can help in the country's economic recovery program.

It is estimated that at least three million Zimbabweans live outside the country as economic refugees with most of them in Britain, Australia and South Africa.

Zimbabwe government to address security of tenure of farms

HARARE, (Xinhua) -- The Zimbabwean government will within the next three months address the issue of security of tenure of farms to facilitate maximum utilisation of commercial land to the benefit of the country, The Chronicle reported on Tuesday.

Welshman Ncube, the minister of Industry and Commerce and co-chairperson of the Joint Monitoring and Implementation Committee (JOMIC), said there has been a realisation that the country lacks a clear land ownership policy and this is in the process of being addressed.

JOMIC was set up after the formation of Zimbabwe's all-inclusive Government with the aim of ensuring that the resolutions set out in the Global Political Agreement are implemented.

"There is an urgent need to review the land ownership policy in the country. If this were done then we would have addressed the question of security of tenure that has been hanging for quite some time. In two to three months' time we will have come up with a common position as regards commercial land," he said.

He said the varied ownership patterns that rang from leasehold to the traditional tenure that applies in rural areas has seen some large pieces of land going unused.

"If we say we adopt the leasehold land ownership system then we should know that they are not tradable and as a result farmers would not be able to source the much needed capital requirements to engage in productive farming," the minister said.

"Leasehold ownership has a problem of rendering land valueless and if we adopt it as a country we will have taken the balance of the country backwards," he said.

He said appropriate structures have already been put in motion and a national stand will be drawn up.

Ncube said when it comes to property rights the country has one of the most secure policies as compared to other countries.

He said the notion that the country does not respect property rights is based on perception rather than fact.

He said JOMIC's mandate is to monitor the implementation of the Global Political Agreement and ensure that agreement is implemented to the fullest extent possible in letter and spirit.

He also said allegations of fresh farm invasions are baseless, adding that there are a number of anomalies in the farms, which the media has misinterpreted as invasions.

19 die in Easter holiday accidents in Zimbabwe

HARARE, (Xinhua) -- A total of 19 people perished in 217 accidents countrywide in Zimbabwe that left 235 injured, according to the police record on the road during the Easter holidays.

Police spokesperson Superintendent Andrew Phiri said the incidents were reported between Thursday and Monday.

Matabeleland South had recorded the highest number of deaths. Five people died in Matabeleland South, four in Matabeleland North while Harare, Mashonaland East, and Masvingo had each recorded two deaths.

The figures show an increase of seven in the number of reported deaths from Sunday, 52 more accidents and 64 more injuries from the same date.

He urged motorists to continue driving with care on the country's roads to reduce unnecessary carnage on the roads. "Most of our major roads have potholes, so we would like to urge motorists to continue exercising caution

and avoid speeding," said Phiri.

He warned drivers who overloaded their vehicles in order to make "a quick buck", that the law would deal with them.

Phiri said police would remain heavily deployed across the country to ensure that anyone who break the law would be arrested.

He said motorists should be aware that there was an operation that was under way to impound unroadworthy vehicles and improperly registered cars.

He attributed most accidents on Zimbabwe's roads to poor road conditions, unroadworthy vehicles, drunken driving, inattention, speeding, overloading and faulty traffic lights.

Angolan police hold security training for CAN2010

LUANDA, (Xinhua) -- The Angolan National Police here on Tuesday opened a professional training course for police officers for the successful holding of the African Football Cup of Nations (CAN2010) in the southwestern African country during January 2009.

According to a press release issued by the General Command of the National Police, the training course will be carried out in Capolo 2 Police School with National Police Commander-General Ambrosio de Lemos addressing the opening.

According to Joaquim Vieira Ribeiro, coordinator and director of the Security and Protection of the Organizing Committee of the CAN2010, the training course will last one month with a view to helping police officers, chiefs and sub-agents from the National Police Provincial Commands of Luanda, Cabinda, Benguela and Huila, the four provinces chosen to hold the CAN2010 from January 10 to 30, 2010.

The trainees totaling 100 in number will be instructed with the knowledge and skills in management policing sports, techniques of proximity, ethics, communication and police service, technical and tactical security and protection and provision of first aid.

World Cup trophy tours Africa

LAGOS, (Xinhua) -- The World Cup trophy is scheduled for a 50-nation, 70-day African tour starting from September 24 in Cairo, Egypt.

The unprecedented journey across Africa is part of events to promote the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, which will be the first to be staged in Africa.

The first leg of the tour will round off in Cape Town, South Africa, on December 3, 2009, ahead of the final draw in the port city.

The second leg will see the trophy visit additional countries across the globe from January to April 2010.

During the tour, fans will be given the chance to enjoy a rare close-up view of the 36.8-centimeter, 18-carat gold trophy.

"The FIFA World Cup Trophy Tour by Coca-Cola will give thousands of fans in Africa the extraordinary chance to get close to the real trophy for the first time ever," said Emmanuel Seuge, group director of the Worldwide sports and entertainment marketing division of The Coca-Cola Company.

"While South Africa is the host country for the 2010 FIFA World Cup, the entire continent will celebrate and welcome the event, that is why it was important to us to ensure the tour visit every country in Africa," he said.

The 2010 FIFA World Cup Trophy Tour draws on the huge success of the first global Trophy Tour held in 2006, during which the trophy visited 31 cities in 29 countries, covering 63,734 miles (102,570 kilometers) with millions of fans around the world enjoying the chance to have a closer look at football's most famous prize.

South Africa to increase Confederation Cup advertising

JOHANNESBURG, (Xinhua) -- Johannesburg, host to the first and final game of the 2009 Confederation Cup as well as the 2010 World Cup, does not look or feel like a place ready to host these prestigious events.

The streets are littered, the air is pungent and the hundreds of taxis, cars and buses that crawl through its busy streets add to the noise of loud music, the odd siren and people talking and shouting.

This is daily life in Johannesburg—as Africa's economic powerhouse is popularly known.

Only a few posters (in Rissik Street) indicate that the once in a lifetime event is coming South Africa's way.

However, Selwyn Nathan, chairman of the LOC marketing and communications department, says this will change after the April 22 elections.

"If we advertised right now we'd be competing for the public's eye," he said.

"But after the 24th (of April) you will see a difference. There will be posters all over Johannesburg," Nathan said confidently.

The shortage of advertising seems to have affected the sales of tickets with recent reports stating that some 200,000 applications have been made for the 640,000 tickets available.

However, ticket sales were boosted by banking giant Investec who snatched 50,000 tickets to the tune of R3.5 million.

The eight-team tournament starts on June 14 and ends two weeks later. South Africa will face Iraq, New Zealand and European champion Spain in Group A while Group B brackets the United States, Brazil, Egypt and Italy.

Nigeria finishes third at four nation soccer tournament in Dubai

ABU DHABI, (Xinhua) -- Nigeria's U-17 national team, which will host the 2009 FIFA World Championship, finished third at the four-nation Dubai invitational tourney after beating Zambia 2-1 in its final match on Monday.

South Korea, which will also feature at Nigeria 2009, won the four-nation competition with seven points after defeating host, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), 2-0.

UAE is also poised for the FIFA championship in Nigeria in October.

Striker Adamu Hassan Lawal opened scoring for Nigeria in the second half before Terry Envoh doubled the lead late on.

Zambia pulled a goal back while the Nigerian side would have won by a bigger margin but missed a penalty after the referee ordered a retake.

Taiwo Ogunjobi, the Technical Committee Chairman of the Nigeria Football Federation (NFF) who watched the match said he was expected to submit a report as regards the suitability or otherwise of the Eagles head coach, Henry Nwosu.

Nwosu's competence has come under focus after some lackluster showings by the team and already, the NFF has interviewed three top coaches for his job - Kadiri Ikhanu, John Obuh and Stanley Eguma.

Nigeria is the U-17 World Cup defending champion after it won the competition for the third time in South Korea two years ago.

Nigerian badminton players in camp for African championships

LAGOS, (Xinhua) -- Twelve Nigerian players are presently sweating it out in Abuja, ahead of the fast approaching African Badminton Championships in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, local media reported Tuesday. Mohammed Bako, the chief coach of the Nigerian badminton team, is optimistic of the team's chances of

returning home at the end of the African Championships with the continental title.

"We have a very good chance of emerging winners in the men's and women's singles events, I'm very confident about our chances in these events judging from the quality of players in camp," he added.

"But what will give all of us greater joy is, if we can finish the championship as winners of the team event, to me, is the ultimate prize and I felt we have the players that can do it this time round," Bako said.

The players in camp are led by Africa's number one women's player, Grace Daniel and her doubles partner Mary Gideon.

Others are Maria Braimah, Dorcas Abbey, Ketu Ilofuan, Ola Fagbemi, Dimkam Ifrainu, Ibrahim Adamu, Femi Elera and Kenneth Omoruyi, as well as the duo of Stephen Andrew and Isaac Mainatu.

The 2009 African Badminton Championships, which take place between April 17 and 24, will bring together under one roof the best players in the continent in the racket and shuttle sport with Nigeria expected to compete in the individual events, as well as in the team event.

Nigeria failed to take part in the team event at the 2006 championships in Algeria but finished in second place behind South Africa two years earlier in Mauritius.

The country's male and female players also carted home the men's and women's singles titles during the 2004 tournament in the Indian Ocean island nation.

Nigeria handball team in Togo for training

LAGOS, (Xinhua) -- Fourteen handball players and six officials left Lagos on Monday for Lome, Togo, to take part in the African Zone 111 U-20 Handball Development Program, according to the reports of the News Agency of Nigeria.

The officials comprise coaches, referees and a lecturer at the National Institute for Sports, Lagos. The program slated to hold from April 13, 2009, to April 20, 2009.

Chinedu Ezeala-Ogundare, Secretary of the Handball Federation of Nigeria (HFN) said the program promised to prepare players as well as officials for international championships.

"The training program is part of preparations for the World Cup, the Olympics, and other international championships," he added.

"The HFN wants to use this opportunity to expose the players and officials to the current development in the game and update their skills," Ezeala said in Lagos before departure.

According to her, the program is the first international event that Nigeria will be participating in this year.

"We have gone through our records and have come up with promising players and officials who have shown signs of improving their skills if given intensive training program," she said.

According to her, the program which would attract delegates from handball-playing countries in Africa would offer a special course for officials.

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