

WORLD NEWS

WEST GERMANY

Eight drift to freedom in home-made balloon

NAILA, West Germany, Monday (AAP-AP). — Four children and four adults bet their lives on a hot-air balloon made of nylon and bedsheets early yesterday and drifted through the darkness of East Germany to freedom across the border in West Germany.

Mr Peter Strelzek, an aircraft mechanic who designed the balloon, said yesterday that the 19-kilometre 20 to 30 minute flight was his second attempt to escape by balloon from his communist-ruled homeland.

"It was no longer possible for us to lie to our children and put up with the political conditions in East Germany", he said.

He, his wife and two children, and Mr Andreas Wetzel, a stonemason, his wife and their two children, got on to a gondola made of an iron plate. Gas burners were fired, filling the handsewn envelope with hot air at a field near Lobenstein and the balloon became airborne.

Borne toward the south by a good breeze, the refugees flew over the border and put down in Naila, far from the border's electrified fences and minefields.

It was believed to be the first time refugees had used a balloon to cross the border.

During the flight, the children rode in the middle of the 1.67-square metre iron plate and were huddled around bottles of gas used to fuel the fire that heated air in the 3 999-cubic metre balloon.

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The adults rode on four iron rods projecting laterally from the plate, each grabbing on to 2.5 centimetre thick ropes attaching the gondola to the balloon.

Mr Strelzek said he had designed the balloon using principles he learnt from his work with aircraft.

The escape had begun about 1.30am, and the balloon had climbed to 2,440 metres in the moonless sky as the breeze had pushed it toward freedom.

As the balloon came down, it was met by two West German police officers who had gone to the landing site, thinking the floating object might be an unidentified flying object.

Mr Strelzek said "We were convinced that we were in the west even before the police officers came because we saw a modern farm machine on the field unlike anything we have".