

## 7 face arrest over subway fire in S Korea

AFP, Seoul

South Korean police investigating a subway inferno in the south eastern city of Daegu said yesterday they would seek arrest warrants for a suspected arsonist and six subway staff.

Police said they were not ruling out more arrests and were questioning executives and other officials of the subway system in connection with the tragedy which killed 133 people and left 130 injured, some in serious condition.

More than 300 people still remain unaccounted for.

Police say the fire started when a man identified as Kim Dae-Hak, 56, set fire to a plastic bottle containing flammable liquid as a subway train he was riding in came to a stop at Jungang-ro Station in central Daegu Tuesday.

Although the train was aflame, a second train was allowed to enter the station and stop next to the burning one, leading to the huge casualties when it too caught fire.

"The suspected arsonist will be charged with arson and manslaughter," a police detective in Daegu said by telephone.

"Six others will be charged with negligent homicide," he said, noting that the staff failed to respond swiftly to the danger or evacuate passengers promptly.

The driver of a second train is suspected to have left the train after taking its master control key with him, leaving passengers trapped in their compartments.

## British tabloid takes another swipe at Chirac

AFP, London

The Sun, Britain's outspoken, top-selling daily tabloid yesterday took another swipe at French President Jacques Chirac, again branding him a "worm".

Under a picture of Chirac and Iraq's Saddam Hussein raising glasses in a mutual toast, the paper ran the headline: "Worm's toast to tyrant."

The Sun said the photograph was taken in 1974 in Baghdad, when Chirac was French Prime Minister, adding that it "proves his appeasement spans a generation".

On Thursday, the Sun branded Chirac a "worm" for his "spineless" opposition to US and British plans for an imminent war on Iraq.



## Baywatch star hurt in road accident

REUTERS, Los Angeles

Actor David Hasselhoff suffered fractures to his back and ribs and his wife injured her ankle when the 'Baywatch' star crashed the motorcycle they were riding into a curb, police said on Friday.

The 51-year-old actor and his wife Pamela Hasselhoff, 39, were taken to nearby UCLA Medical Centre for treatment, where both were in stable condition, Los Angeles police spokesman Jason Lee said in a statement.

The couple was riding on Hasselhoff's 2003 Harley Davidson motorcycle when they were hit by a gust of wind, lost control of the motorcycle and collided with a curb, Lee said.

# 200,000 US troops in Gulf ready to strike Iraq

## 'Iraq ready for dialogue with US if war plans abandoned'

AFP, Washington

The United States moved unrelentingly towards war in the Gulf, announcing its forces in the region had surpassed 200,000 and that it was ready to strike Iraq at a moment's notice.

"We are at a point where, if President George W. Bush makes that decision, the department of defence is prepared and has the capabilities and the strategy to do that," Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said in a television interview.

Pentagon officials have said US planning for a war with Iraq called for between 200,000 and 250,000 troops, and a defence official Friday said the 200,000 figure had been surpassed.

But Rumsfeld also stressed that war remained Washington's "last choice."

Bush was meanwhile meeting with Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, one of his strongest supporters on Iraq, at his Texas ranch.

Aides said they would be discussing, Friday night and Saturday, the wording of a UN resolution that would authorise military force against Iraq and that could be unveiled as early as Monday.

At the United Nations, chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix handed Iraqi ambassador Mohammed al-Douri a letter ordering his government to destroy its stocks of banned Al-Samoud 2 missiles under UN supervision.

His spokesman, Ewen Buchanan, said the letter, a copy of which went to the Security Council, concerned "the destruction of the Al-Samoud 2 missiles and associated equipment."

Iraq is not allowed to destroy its banned weapons unilaterally, but Buchanan did not say whether the letter told the Iraqis where and when the missiles were to be broken up.

Turkey meanwhile said it was nearing an accord with Washington for use of its strategic bases, ports and territory in an invasion.

Turkish Foreign Minister Yasar Yakis said in Ankara that the two nations were "quite close" to a deal that would open his country to US troops and materiel, providing a vital northern flank for any invasion of neighbouring Iraq.

"If there is a will, this could be finalised by working on Saturday and Sunday," he said.

Secretary of State Colin Powell for his part said on Friday that Turkey's parliament could debate allowing US combat troops in the country early next week, following progress in talks with Washington on compensation should

war break out with Iraq.

He said negotiators from the two sides would work intensively over the next two or three days to resolve these issues.

"They are difficult but they should be resolvable," Powell said.

The negotiations hit a snag over Turkey's demand for a guaranteed multibillion dollar aid package, and over political questions on Iraq's future.

The announcement of force strength, by a Pentagon official who declined to be named, included 98,000 troops in Kuwait, which Iraq invaded and occupied in 1990 triggering the Gulf War, and which would serve as a primary staging area for an invasion.

The United States now has some 210,000 troops spread across the US Central Command's operational theatre and in the Mediterranean, including 64,000 aboard US warships in the Gulf and the Mediterranean and 10,000 in Afghanistan, said the defence official.

AFP from Baghdad says Iraq is ready for dialogue with the United States if it abandons plans for a military attack, Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan said on Friday in a televised interview.

"We are in favour of dialogue with all countries of the world, except the Zionist entity (Israel)," Ramadan said on al-Shabab television.

Ramadan said Iraq has repeatedly answered in the affirmative when asked: "Are you ready for dialogue with the US administration to have economic ties and co-operation to benefit both parties?"

But for dialogue to take place, the United States "should abandon aggression" and not interfere in Iraq's "domestic affairs", he added.

In Crawford, Texas, where US President George W. Bush was meeting with Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, White House spokesman Scott McClellan dismissed Ramadan's offer of dialogue.

"Dialogue is one thing, disarmament is another, and our focus is on disarmament," he said.

Ramadan also warned that "anyone who will have a direct or indirect role in any aggression against Iraq can only reap shame for itself, his country and his future."

"This aggression against Iraq will have negative effects on all countries, without exception ... and mostly neighbouring countries. It is in the interest of neighbouring countries to form a (protective) belt and reject any aggression" against Baghdad.

## Powell begins Asia tour with focus on N Korea

REUTERS, Tokyo

US Secretary of State Colin Powell arrived in Tokyo yesterday Saturday at the start of a four-day trip to East Asia that is expected to focus on North Korea.

The trip, which will also include visits to Beijing and Seoul, also aims to shore up support for a possible US-led war against Iraq, which China in particular has resisted.

Powell earlier revived the possibility that the United States could offer broad assistance to North Korea but said it must first scrap its suspected nuclear weapons program.

Powell told reporters the United States could revive its "bold approach" of considering an array of assistance to North Korea, but the nuclear issue had to be settled first.

"It's not out of the realm of the possible and it's not out of consideration," he told reporters at Elmendorf Air Force base in Alaska during a stop-over on his way to Tokyo.

"But we have to get these matters resolved and behind us with respect to their proliferating actions, with respect to their nuclear weapons development program and also with respect to the size of their military," Powell said.

He said he was likely to announce on his trip that the United States would provide fresh food assistance to North Korea, stressing the US position that it does not use such aid as a political tool and

that it has not offered any since December because it lacked budget authority from Congress.

The United States has sought without much visible success to persuade regional powers, notably China, to pressure North Korea to abandon its suspected nuclear weapons program.

North Korea wants a non-aggression pact with the United States and bilateral talks, something others in the region, particularly China and South Korea, favour but Washington has resisted, pushing instead for a multilateral process.

US officials say they will not be blackmailed, pointing to the 1994 Agreed Framework under which North Korea promised to freeze its nuclear weapons program in exchange for fuel oil and provision of two Western-financed nuclear reactors as an example of Pyongyang wrestling concessions through "bad behaviour."

The latest crisis began in October, when US officials said North Korea had admitted to pursuing a covert nuclear weapons program in violation of its international commitments.

It has since escalated as Pyongyang expelled International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors, said it would pull out of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and threatened to resume missile testing and abandon the 1953 Korean War armistice.

## Hindu fanatics begin protests over Ayodhya

AFP, New Delhi

Hindu zealots began assembling yesterday for a fresh showdown with the government over a disputed site held sacred by both Hindus and Muslims, amid fears that the gathering could be targeted by Islamic militants.

More than 2,000 policemen were guarding a public park in New Delhi, named after the Hindu warrior god Ram, in whose memory the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) want to build a temple in the northern town of Ayodhya.

Hindus claim Mughul emperor Babur built a mosque in Ayodhya in the 16th century after destroying a temple of Ram, who they say, was born on the spot.

The mosque was razed by thousands of Hindu fundamentalists December 6, 1992, sparking nationwide riots that left 2,000 people dead.

The VHP has given the federal government until Saturday to hand over the 67 acres (27 hectares) of land around the Babri mosque ruins -- currently out-of-bounds to all -- to begin building a temple to Ram.

Some 10,000 VHP members were expected to attend the three-day Dharam Sansad (religious council).

The large assembly of Hindu militants and the controversial subject set for deliberation had made the conclave a potential target for Islamists who in the past have

attacked temples in the western state of Gujarat and the Himalayan region of Kashmir.

Senior Delhi police official Arvind Deep said security men had been posted on all high-rise buildings adjacent to the park where the three-day meeting is being held.

Ahead of the conclave on Friday, VHP leader Ashok Singhal said the militants were "very angry" as they felt "betrayed" by Hindu nationalist-led federal coalition government.

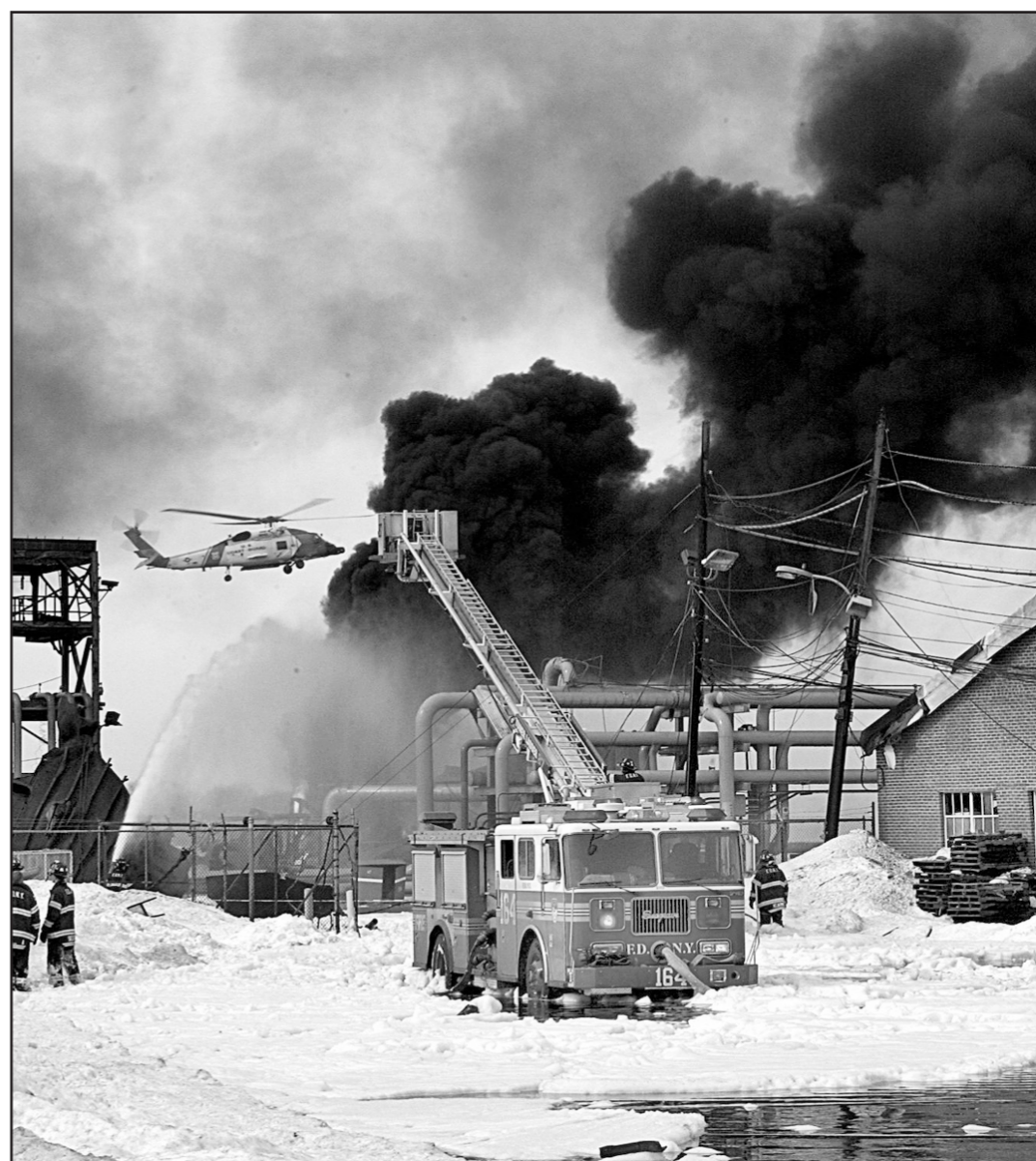
Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) party is closely associated with the VHP and its temple construction campaign.

Singhal also said Friday he had fresh and irrefutable proof that a temple existed at the site disputed by the two communities.

On Thursday, Vajpayee, seen as a moderate in his BJP party, unexpectedly lent support to the VHP during a pre-poll rally.

"We want to build the Ram temple at Ayodhya. We are confident that it will be proved by historical evidence that there existed a temple... However, if it is not, then let the courts decide and we will abide by it," Vajpayee said in the northern town of Mandi.

An editorial in the Hindu newspaper Saturday criticised his remarks, saying Vajpayee had sought "to rationalise and lend support to the revanchist designs" of groups like the VHP.



A US Coast Guard rescue helicopter from Air Station Cape Cod flies over Sover Bouchard Barge 125 shortly after it exploded at the Exxon Mobil petroleum storage facility on Friday on Staten Island, New York. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg stressed there was no indication of a terrorist act, while the FBI and Department of Homeland Security said they were looking into the incident.

## 2 killed in massive blast at New York oil facility

AFP, New York

Two people were killed on Friday when an explosion ripped through an ExxonMobil oil facility on Staten Island in New York's harbour, triggering a major blaze on one of the city's busiest waterways.

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg stressed there was no indication of a terrorist act, while the FBI and Department of Homeland Security said they were looking into the incident.

A statement from ExxonMobil, the world's largest oil company, said the explosion occurred on a barge that was offloading 100,000 barrels of unleaded gasoline at its Port Mobil distribution terminal.

The statement said the bodies of two employees of the firm which owned the barge had been recovered from the water and one ExxonMobil worker had been injured.

"We are greatly saddened by the injuries and loss of life," said terminal manager Hank Muller. "We are working hard to bring the situation under control."

Bloomberg told reporters at the site that there was "absolutely no evidence and no reason to think whatsoever that this is anything other than a very tragic industrial accident."

All 30 ExxonMobil employees working inside the plant when the blast occurred at around 10:15 am

(1515 GMT) were accounted for. Within an hour, the fire had largely burned itself out and had been contained by the emergency services.

The noise of the explosion was heard as far as three miles away in Manhattan and New Jersey.

Staten Island, one of the city's five boroughs, is situated in the southern end of New York Harbour between the borough of Brooklyn and the state of New Jersey.

"It sounded as if a bomb had been dropped on Staten Island," said local resident Patricia Hopt. Others reported feeling their entire houses shake from the force of the blast.

"Everyone's immediate concern was that this might be some act of terrorism, and naturally there was a panic that went through our community," said Staten Island Councilor Mike McMahon.

New York City has been on a heightened terrorist threat alert ever since the September 11, 2001 attacks that demolished the city's landmark twin towers of World Trade Centre.

Friday's incident triggered nervous memories of that event, as an enormous plume of thick, black smoke from the burning fuel rose high over the city's skyline.

Oil facilities are considered high on the list of potential terrorist targets.

The initial blaze was vast as the burning fuel spread out onto the Arthur Kill waterway, a busy, narrow

shipping lane between Staten Island and New Jersey.

Coast guard officials said the port authority had closed down the waterway to all but the emergency craft.

Fire Department spokesman Michael Loughran said the fire had quickly burned itself out without spreading to any of the major storage tanks at the plant.

"They shut off the product and let the residual burn off," Loughran said, adding that there were still some flames at the jetty where the barge was offloading.

Over 200 firefighters and a clutch of US coast guard cutters had responded to the emergency.

Only a few residents closest to the facility were evacuated from the area and officials said the only real safety concern for the general public was the possible clogging effect of the sooty smoke.

ExxonMobil said a contracting firm, Clean Harbours, had been mobilised to the scene for environmental clean up.

The barge sank soon after the explosion and Bloomberg said officials were unsure how much of the gasoline had burned and how much was still in the vessel.

Oil prices spiked up by almost a dollar a barrel on world markets as news of the explosion broke but eased back later in the day as it became apparent there was no terrorist involvement.