

Doctors identify deadly pneumonia virus

REUTERS, Hong Kong

Doctors in Hong Kong have scored a major breakthrough in identifying a deadly pneumonia virus that has killed at least 11 people and left hundreds ill as it races around the world.

Medical experts said the discovery would make the disease easier to diagnose and opened the way for a vaccine to be developed. But they stressed more lab work had to be done to pin down the exact make-up of the virus and scientists had not ruled out that it might be a new strain.

"From the shape of the virus, it belongs to the paramyxoviridae family," said virologist John Tam at the Chinese University in Hong Kong.

Though the symptoms appear similar, influenza was not a member of the that family, said Lo Wing-lok, an infectious disease expert.

World health authorities have long been referring for some new strain of flu they fear could repeat the devastation of the 1918 pandemic that killed an estimated 20 million people.

Scientists have been working around the clock to identify the agent causing the contagious disease, which has spread quickly around the world with travellers from parts of Asia.

Most cases have been in China, Hong Kong and Vietnam, but suspected cases have been reported in Australia, Britain, Brunei, Canada, Spain and the United States.

Most of the infections are concentrated in Hong Kong and Vietnam, stretching public health resources.

Health officials in Hong Kong said on Tuesday new cases of the disease had been discovered in two more hospitals, sparking fear that it was slowly spreading into the community of nearly seven million people.

Most of the cases have been medical staff at hospitals or relatives of people who have fallen ill.

A 66-year-old French doctor at the Vietnam-France Hospital in Hanoi died early on Wednesday, the second person to die from the

disease in Vietnam. A nurse died at the weekend.

Nearly 60 people are fighting the disease in the capital Hanoi and health officials said two people with suspected symptoms, a Japanese and an American, were in hospital in Ho Chi Minh City.

Two people have died of the disease in Canada.

In Hong Kong, two people have died of the disease while a third, an elderly man, is believed to have died of it on Tuesday night but authorities have not confirmed the cause of death.

About 123 people are known to be infected in Hong Kong, where authorities temporarily closed the emergency clinic at the Prince of Wales Hospital on Wednesday to give exhausted staff a break.

Of those infected, 111 are suffering severe pneumonia and most are in that hospital.

But the identification of the virus is holding out some hope.

Saudi Arabia proposes exile for Saddam

REUTERS, Riyadh

Key US ally Saudi Arabia has officially proposed for the first time that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein should go into exile as a last-ditch effort to avert war, a Saudi diplomatic source said on Wednesday.

"The kingdom, and other parties, are exerting maximum effort to prevent a devastating war and they have proposed the idea of exile for Saddam and securing a safe haven for him and his family," the source told Reuters.

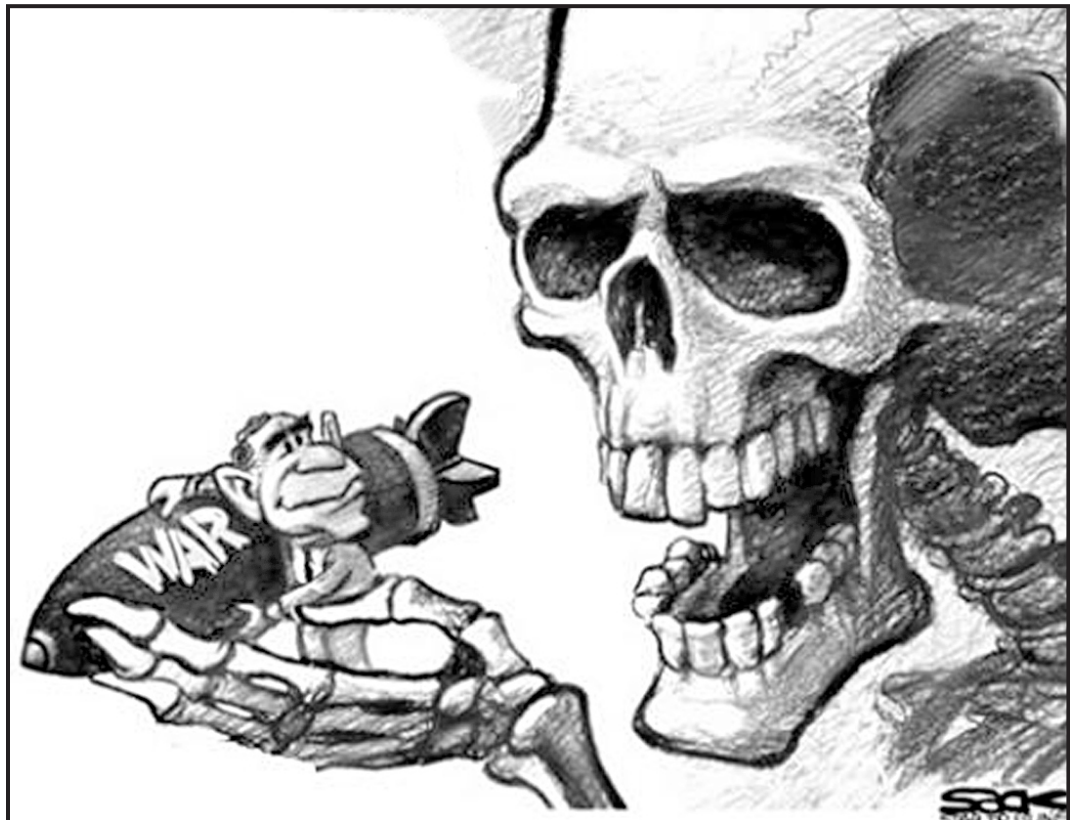
President Bush has said that Saddam and his two sons must leave Iraq by early Thursday Baghdad time or face invasion by some 280,000 US and British forces massed in the Gulf.

The speaker of the Iraqi parliament said on Wednesday it was "unthinkable" President Saddam Hussein would comply with a US ultimatum to flee the country within hours to avert an invasion.



PHOTO: AFP

Staff Sgt. Timothy Fortin (L) of Fitzwilliam, NH, cleans his M-16 assault rifle as Sgt. Shawn Butler of Niles, OH, packs his bags 19 March 2003 at Camp Udairi in northern Kuwait. As Saddam's deadline to leave Iraq draws closer, US soldiers began increasing training and continue to prepare to cross the border into Iraq in the coming days.



Refugee camp to be set up on Iraq-Jordan border

AFP, Amman

A special camp will be set up in the no-man's land between Iraq and Jordan to process refugees fleeing Iraq in the event of a war, Jordanian officials said yesterday.

Refugees seeking to enter the kingdom will be processed in this "assembly" camp before they are sent to two other temporary camps near the Jordan-Iraq border, the sources said.

The "assembly" camp will be run by the Jordanian authorities who will check the refugees' identities for security reasons before referring them to the other compounds.

Jordan agreed in mid-February to set up two temporary refugee camps near Ruweished, the last frontier town which lies 60 km (35 miles) before the Karama border

post with Iraq.

They will be able to accommodate 10,000 refugees and will be managed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Jordanian Red Crescent.

One of the camps will be destined for Iraqi refugees and the other for "third country nationals", who will stay there for a short transit period before being repatriated to their own countries in line with an agreement between Jordan and the Geneva-based International Migration Organisation, the officials said.

Jordan took in 1.3 million refugees out of 2.5 millions who fled Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War.

The government pledged to help accommodate any influx of refugees in case of a new US-led

war on Iraq but stressed it cannot afford a repeat of the 1991 situation.

"We will service these people on the border but ... the ability of our country to absorb any number of refugees is simply not there," Foreign Minister Marwan Moasher told AFP earlier this month.

"We will live up to our humanitarian responsibility," he said. "We cannot let these people die, so we will live up to our responsibilities to the best of our ability."

The influx of refugees in 1991 and the return to Jordan of 300,000 Jordanians from Arab Gulf monarchies as well as the arrival of 300,000 other nationals raised the population in the kingdom by 15 percent in a few weeks, triggering a serious demographic imbalance and economic hardships.

British police find bombs near airport

REUTERS, London

British police said yesterday they had arrested three men under anti-terrorism laws after finding two explosive devices at a home near Gatwick airport, south of London.

Police said the men, arrested late on Tuesday, were European citizens and that they had not been linked to any specific group or target.

"Two explosive devices have been found at an address in Crawley, Sussex, and three men have been arrested and are being questioned," a Sussex police spokeswoman said.

"Police and bomb disposal experts are continuing to search the premises where the devices were found. The men have not been linked to any specific groups or targets," she added.

The three were being held

under Britain's Terrorism Act 2000.

Britain is on a heightened alert for the threat of a terrorist strike as tens of thousands of its troops prepare in the Gulf to launch an attack on Iraq.

Anti-terror police have arrested dozens of people in recent months, but the pace has quickened since the discovery of traces of the lethal poison ricin in a north London flat in January.

Gatwick, Britain's second-biggest airport, was the scene of a terror scare in February when police arrested a Venezuelan man carrying a live hand grenade after he arrived on a flight from Colombia.

British police recently launched an unprecedented advertising campaign that urges the public to report any suspicions about possible terror activity.

Iraqi Kurdish forces to be under US command

AP, Ankara

US special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad said that Iraqi Kurdish leaders had agreed to place their forces under the command of the US-led coalition in an Iraq war.

Iraqi Kurdish forces "committed themselves to fully cooperate with the coalition, and to put whatever forces they have under the command and control of the coalition commanders," Khalilzad told reporters after a meeting in Ankara with Jalal Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, or PUK, and Nechirvan Barzani of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, or KDP. Turkish officials were also at the meeting.

It was not clear what role the Iraqi Kurdish forces some 70,000 men according to KDP sources would play in a US-led attack on Iraq.

The United States wants to open a northern front against Iraq, but its plans suffered a blow when Turkey's parliament refused earlier this month to allow in 62,000 US combat troops. Without a large contingent of its own troops in northern Iraq, Washington is likely to be more dependent of Iraqi Kurdish forces there.

Hoshiyar Zebari, the foreign relations chief of the KDP, confirmed that Kurdish groups had agreed in principle that "all forces inside Iraq will come under the control of US command." Zebari said the agreement with the United States had been reached some time ago, but did not give details on what role the local Kurdish forces would have.

"Any forces that do not fall under the command will be regarded as hostile forces," Zebari said, adding that this included any foreign forces.

Arafat signs premiership law as Israel kills more Hamas leaders

AFP, Jerusalem

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat signed into law a bill creating a post of prime minister to share power with him, as Israeli troops killed two top Hamas militants in the West Bank.

Earlier in the day, the parliament voted by 69 votes to one to appoint the premier who will control domestic affairs and internal security issues while foreign policy and national security will stay in Arafat's hands.

The move is a key reform demanded by Israel and the United States, as well as by Palestinian legislators who accuse the current administration of corruption and mismanagement.

Mahmud Abbas, the second-in-command of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), has been nominated as prime minister but has not said whether the powers attached to the post will be enough to lure him into accepting the job, which he wants to use to launch substantive reforms.

"President Arafat signed Tuesday night the law creating a Palestinian prime minister," top aide Nabil Abu Rudeina told AFP.

"The text must now be published in the official gazette, after which it will be possible to proceed to investing Mr. Mahmud Abbas in this post."

The parliament had adjourned on Monday after Arafat loyalists failed to push through an amended version of the law under which the Palestinian leader would retain the right to hire or fire ministers.

Reformist lawmakers challenged Arafat's autocratic hold on power when they blocked the changes he had proposed from being passed as an integral part of the bill.

Thailand expels eight Iraqi nationals

ANN/THE NATION

Eight Iraqi nationals, most of whom are suspected of spying and involving in terrorism, will be expelled from Thailand, together with three lower ranking Iraqi diplomats, because their presence "posed a threat to national security," a high ranking security source said yesterday.

Some of the Iraqi nationals had set up front companies, including tour companies, currency exchange and underground banking to help channel money back to the Baghdad regime through underground banking, the source said.

The move came amid yesterday's announcement by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra announced that the three Bangkok-based Iraqi diplomats would be expelled because their presence posed a threat to national security.

"We urged the Iraqi Embassy to send out three officials after we learned from intelligence sources that they are a threat to the security of the nation," Thaksin told reporters yesterday.

The three are Samer Y Dawood, Satar H Najim, and Ghazi N Turki and are scheduled to leave Bangkok today by a Jordan airline. Remaining in Bangkok is only Charge d'affairs Ali A Mohammed.

Thaksin dismissed suggestion that Thailand did not make the request solely at the behest of the United States.

"I believe the expulsion will not cause political problems with Baghdad because it is normal practice for every country to have the right to ask embassy officials to leave," Thaksin said.

Under the compromise reached on Tuesday, an interpretative memorandum was attached to the bill stipulating that any new cabinet would be presented to the head

Israel and the United States regard as a failed peace partner.

In a bid to boost the cause of reform, US Secretary of State Colin Powell on Sunday said he would



PHOTO: INTERNET

Mahmud Abbas is known to be close to Yasser Arafat.

of the Palestinian Authority, officials said.

It did not specify if Arafat would have the right to appoint or dismiss ministers, officials said.

The move was welcomed as a breakthrough by reformers, including those inside Arafat's own Fatah faction.

"This is the start of a new political democratic system that will allow the separation of powers," said Fatah MP Qaddura Fares.

Arafat loyalists played down Monday's snub, as Washington and London praised the move towards appointing a premier, seen as essential to overhauling the much-criticised administration and marginalising Arafat, whom

invite the new premier to Washington for talks, by far the most generous offer made by the US administration in months.

The appointment of Abbas will put pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to make concessions after lauding the PLO moderate and holding secret talks with him.

As the Palestinian administration moved its reforms up a gear, Israel moved its deadly attacks on the radical Islamic group Hamas from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen walks away after a peace activist poured red paint over him in the Danish parliament in Copenhagen, March 18, 2003. The protester spilled the paint chanting 'You've got blood on your hands,' in protest at the government's positive stance towards a US-led war on Iraq.