

## 8 children die in ROK football training camp

AFP, Seoul

Eight children were killed and 17 others were injured in a fire late Wednesday at an elementary school in the southern city of Cheonan, South Korean police said.

Most of the victims were suffocated to death by toxic gas as they were asleep following a hectic day of training at a cramped room of the school's football training camp.

The death toll may rise as six of the injured remain in critical condition at hospitals, they said.

Firefighters brought the fire under control but only after it had gutted part of the single-storey building.

Television reports quoted firefighters in Cheonan, 90 kilometers (55 miles) south of Seoul, as saying lack of safety measures caused the heavy casualties.

The walls, ceiling and floor were made of materials that easily catch fire and emanate toxic gas while burning, police pointed out.

The door of the room and windows were too narrow, they said.

Police believe the fire was caused by short circuit as a witness said the lights suddenly went out in a small room where the children were sleeping before smoke and flames engulfed the room.

# Red alert across Asia as pneumonia toll goes up

AFP, Hong Kong

Asian governments took maximum measures Thursday to contain the spread of a killer pneumonia outbreak as the global death toll from the disease soared past 50 after China disclosed casualty figures.

Schools were shut down in Singapore and Hong Kong, and even Canada was considering drastic measures, as an international consortium of laboratories worked feverishly to identify the virus causing Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

The World Health Organization (WHO) raised its casualty totals overnight after China admitted suffering 31 deaths and 792 cases of atypical pneumonia from an outbreak which began in November and peaked in February.

From southern China's Guangdong province, the disease apparently crept to nearby Hong Kong, a global aviation hub where travellers got infected and transported the disease all the way to North America and Europe.

After China's disclosure, the

WHO on Wednesday listed 49 deaths out of 1,323 reported cases of SARS worldwide.

But they excluded a second fatality in Singapore who succumbed to SARS on Wednesday night, as well as three pneumonia deaths in the Chinese capital Beijing, also disclosed on Wednesday.

Elsewhere, the disease has claimed 10 lives Hong Kong, four in Vietnam and three in Canada.

After discussions with authorities in Guangdong Province, a WHO expert team has concluded that "the atypical pneumonia cases which began occurring in China in November 2002 are likely cases of the same disease, now referred to as SARS," the Geneva-based WHO said in a statement.

The UN health watchdog said the Chinese figures were only valid till February and it was "expecting further information on reported cases in China for March as these data become available."

"China is also beginning a collaborative programme in which

sera from infected Chinese patients will be exchanged with the WHO network of collaborating laboratories who are working to identify the SARS causative agent," it added.

Singapore has suspended all classes up to junior college level until April 6, affecting 600,000 students in what the Straits Times said was the first mass closure of schools since a polio epidemic in 1958.

In addition, at least 861 people in Singapore have been confined home on government orders, under pain of heavy fines, after health authorities invoked an infectious diseases quarantine law for the first time in 33 years.

In Hong Kong, the front pages of all the newspapers were dominated Thursday by the pneumonia epidemic.

Even though the government has only closed six schools, newspaper reports say more than 100 have voluntarily shut their doors. The government is also facing growing criticism over its failure to follow Singapore's lead and take

decisive action.

The WHO supported the "maximum measures" being imposed by affected countries but said these can be modified as more information is known about the disease.

"New diseases such as SARS are poorly understood as they emerge. At the beginning of an outbreak it is sound public health policy to institute maximum control measures needed to prevent further spread," it added.

Rock icons The Rolling Stones, who held the second of two concerts in Singapore on Wednesday night, announced they have cancelled their gigs in Hong Kong over the weekend.

The band said on its website that it had cancelled the March 28-29 concerts "as a result of the warnings on SARS from the Hong Kong government and the World Health Organization."

The band has also planned to perform in Shanghai but it was not immediately known if the concerts there have been cancelled as well.



PHOTO: AFP

A Hong Kong Chinese woman wearing a protective mask on Thursday reads an advertisement for the Rolling Stones concert which was to be held at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre. The Stones announced Thursday they have cancelled their concerts in Hong Kong, part of their 40 LICKS World Tour 2003 citing fears over the fast-spreading atypical pneumonia which has claimed 10 lives in the city so far.

## 40 burnt to death in Kyrgyz bus accident

AFP, Bishkek

Forty people were burnt to death Thursday in a bus accident in the central Asian republic of Kyrgyzstan, the interior ministry said.

The bus, carrying 50 passengers, overturned in the mountainous Naryn region of northern Kyrgyzstan and caught fire, a ministry spokesman said.

"According to our information, 40 people were burnt alive," Bakai Denis told AFP.

The people were travelling from the village of Sary-Bulak to the region's administrative center, he said.

He added the remaining 10 passengers were taken to a nearby hospital in a serious condition and were being treated in intensive care.

A special commission was formed immediately after the accident to investigate the cause of the incident, he said.

Kyrgyzstan's interior minister has also flown to the site of the tragedy to oversee the investigation process.



PHOTO: AFP

Activists of the right-wing Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP-World Hindu Council) display placards in a police bus, after they were arrested during a demonstration in New Delhi on Thursday. The VHP started a week-long rally in the capital to urge the government to hand over land located around a disputed site in Ayodhya in order to build a Hindu temple there. The 16th century Babri Mosque that stood on the site was torn down in 1992 by Hindu zealots, sparking nationwide riots.

## VHP pushes for temple on site of Babri Mosque

AFP, New Delhi

Thousands of activists of a radical Hindu group Thursday staged a protest in the Indian capital New Delhi to press for the site of a razed mosque to be handed over to them so a temple can be built on it, witnesses said.

Senior leaders of the radical Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP - World Hindu Council), including Ashok Singh, Mahant Avaidyanath and Ram Chandra Paramahansa, joined the protest.

They urged the ruling Hindu-nationalist BJP party to introduce legislation to pave the way for a temple on the site in the northern town of Ayodhya.

Hindu zealots tore down the 16th century Babri mosque in 1992, sparking some of the worst Hindu-Muslim riots since India's independence from British rule.

Hindus claim the mosque was

built by Mughal emperor Babur after destroying a temple to their god Ram, who they say was born on the site.

Muslims want to rebuild the mosque, while Hindus want to build the temple.

Archeologists are excavating the site to find out if a temple existed there previously, following an order by the courts which are now in charge of resolving the dispute.

"Even if the Ayodhya excavation establishes the existence of a temple, it is not sure that Muslims will give up their claim," said VHP's general secretary Praveen Togadia.

VHP leaders said leaders of the BJP, which is allied to the VHP, should intervene and give the land to Hindus because they had used the temple issue as an electoral plank to gain votes.

# Russia, EU call for fresh ME peace efforts

## Two Palestinians shot dead during Israeli incursion

AFP, Moscow

The foreign ministers of Russia and Greece, the current president of the European Union, backed calls for the relaunching of the Middle East peace process, in a telephone conversation Thursday, the Interfax news agency said.

Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and his Greek counterpart Georges Papandreou believe the first step in reviving peace efforts would be the publication of the Middle East peace "roadmap", the agency said, quoting a foreign ministry source.

The roadmap, created by the diplomatic quartet of the United States, Russia, the United

Nations and the European Union, lays out steps to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and create a Palestinian state by 2005.

The two ministers also discussed Iraq war, with Ivanov voicing his belief that the US-led campaign was becoming bogged down, which he feared could lead to more civilian casualties, Interfax said.

Meanwhile, two members of the Palestinian security services were shot dead by troops early Thursday during an Israeli incursion into the northern Gaza Strip, Palestinian medical sources said.

The two were identified as Iyad Khalil Fayad, 30, and Ihab Jarra, 21, killed during a raid

into Beit Hanun which left another 15 Palestinians injured, two of them seriously, the sources said.

Israeli tanks backed by a helicopter gunship entered Beit Hanun earlier and surrounded a position of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Force-17 elite bodyguard, injuring one of its members, Palestinian security sources had said.

Israeli public radio confirmed an operation was underway, citing a military source, and said it was aimed at nabbing Palestinians suspected of planning anti-Israeli attacks.

The radio added that the troops had run into fierce resistance and that anti-tank shells were fired at them.

# Kashmir govt to release innocents

AFP, Srinagar

The leader of Indian-administered Kashmir Thursday said his government was determined to release all detainees who were not implicated in militant activities.

"There is no reason to keep such persons under detention against whom no case has been established," Chief Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed said in a statement.

During last year's assembly polls, Sayeed's Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) made an election promise to release separatists and militants who were languishing in jail without any charges against them.

After the PDP and India's main opposition Congress formed a coalition government in November after sweeping the long-ruling National Conference from power, Sayeed started to release detainees.

But his move was criticised by the BJP-led government in New Delhi, who set up a committee to screen release cases.

The statement said eight separatists and militants had been released on parole since November, while another two dozen had been released by the courts.

Those release on parole by the new government include Yasin Malik and Syed Ali Geelani -- two top leaders of Kashmir's main separatist alliance the All Parties Hurriyat Conference.

"Since the eruption of militancy in the state (in 1989) 16,103 persons have been arrested until January this year," the statement said.

It said some 476 Kashmiris and 130 foreign nationals were currently detained, while others were on bail or had been acquitted of the charges by the special courts.

The statement said that since the

new government took charge some 85 people with links to the insurgency had been arrested.

Meanwhile, the leader of Indian Kashmir said Thursday his government would restore a sense of security among the region's Hindu Pandits, who have been devastated by Sunday's massacre of 24 villagers.

"The state government will take measures to restore a sense of security among Kashmiri Hindus in the wake of Nadi Marg massacre," chief minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed said in an overnight statement.

The villagers -- 11 men, 11 women and two small boys -- were lined up and shot dead by gunmen in the south Kashmir village of Nadi Marg on Sunday, sending shockwaves through the Hindu community and drawing international condemnation.

# N Korea boosts military spending

AFP, Pyongyang

North Korea has set aside a greater chunk of its limited resources to beef up its military while a nuclear crisis escalates, and announced a rare sale of government bonds to fill empty state coffers.

North Korea's rubber-stamp parliament, at its annual session Wednesday, allocated 15.4 percent of this year's budgeted expenditure to defense, up from 14.9 percent last year.

Finance Minister Mun Il-Bong said the increase was needed to develop North Korea's defence industry and train troops "as an invincible army and thus consolidate the country's defences as an impregnable fortress."

Top priority will be given to the production of "quality raw and other materials" needed for boosting military power and also putting

"all the people under arms and turning the whole country into a fortress," he said in a report to the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA).

North Korea boosted its overall budgetary expenditure this year by 14.4 percent, requiring the sale of state bonds for the first time since the 1950-53 Korean War, said the official Korean Central News Agency.

"The budgetary revenue envisages taking a step for issuing bonds for the people's life with a view to making an effective use of money to spare," Moon said.

South Korean Unification Minister Jeong-Se-Hyun said the bond issue highlights North Korea's economic woes aggravated by a five-month-old nuclear standoff with the United States.

"The bond issue proves their situation is worse than before," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan men and boys wade in the Kabul river on Wednesday in the capital. The scene is an uncommon sight in a country, which has suffered from years of drought. At least 11 people have been killed by floods which have damaged hundreds of homes and affected thousands of people in northern Afghanistan.



PHOTO: AFP

Jagruti Pandiya (C) looks at the body of her husband Haren Pandiya with her son (L) at their residence in Ahmedabad on Thursday. The body of the former Gujarat state home minister was kept at his residence for mourners to pay their respects ahead of the funeral. Pandiya was shot dead on Wednesday in his car after a morning walk.