

Rocket carrying Japan's spy satellite launched

AFP, Tokyo

A Japanese H-2A rocket carrying the nation's first spy satellites lifted off successfully on Friday as fears grew of a missile test by North Korea.

The two intelligence satellites were put into orbit at an altitude of 500 kilometers (310 miles) shortly after the rocket blasted off from the launch site on the southern island of Tanegashima some 1,000 kilometers southwest of Tokyo.

Television footage showed the domestically developed H2-A No. 5 rocket soaring into a clear blue sky trailing a plume of white smoke.

"Our country had been behind" in setting up an information gathering system, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda told a news conference.

"With the operation of the satellites, we want to strengthen our capability in information gathering, which is necessary for the security of our nation," Fukuda said.

The two information-gathering satellites, entirely developed by Japanese firms, are equipped with optical sensors capable of identifying objects measuring a mere one metre (yard).

The satellites are believed to match the technological sophistication of current commercial imaging satellites, but are acknowledged not to be as good as those used by the US military.

Under the 250 billion yen (2.1 billion US dollar) project pursued by both the public and private sectors, the country plans to launch a total of four spy satellites this year.

Long under the US security umbrella during the Cold War years, Japan awoke to the need for self-reliance in defence in 1998 when North Korea test-fired a medium-range Taepodong missile over the country into the Pacific.

Some 400 police were around the launch site and coast guard ships were patrolling waters to thwart possible terrorist attacks following the US decision to invade Iraq, which Japan has backed.

The heavy security was also in response to reports that Pyongyang, angry at what it sees as threatening re-militarisation by Tokyo, may test fire a ballistic missile around the time of the satellite launch.

Earlier this week, Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency accused Japan of acting as a "shock brigade" for the launch of a US

pre-emptive attack and nuclear war against North Korea by putting up the spy satellites.

But Japan defended the move. "A number of other countries are doing it," Fukuda said, referring to spy satellites launched by major military powers, led by the United States and Russia.

"We don't aim to collect information for the purpose of attacking or an invasion," he said.

Shigeru Ishiba, the minister heading Japan's Defence Agency also stressed the satellites would "not be any threat to other nations."

Japanese officials said there has so far been no sign of North Korea's imminent test-firing of a ballistic missile.

"We have not heard of any concrete information" related to North Korea's missile test, Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi said.

In Seoul, US ambassador to South Korea Thomas Hubbard warned that any provocative response by North Korea to the Japanese spy satellites would rebound on the communist state directly.

"I don't think anyone knows what the North Koreans are going to do at any given moment," Hubbard told a breakfast meeting in Seoul prior to the satellite launch.



PHOTO: AFP

A Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) female patient (2nd.R back) is helped by doctors and nurses shortly after arriving at the Institute for Research on Tropical Diseases inside Hanoi's Bach Mai hospital on Friday. Some 11 Vietnamese patient suffering from an atypical pneumonia were transferred from the French hospital to the Institute.

ICRC worker 'executed' by Taliban in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's aid agency community was reeling Friday after the "execution" of a foreign relief worker by Taliban extremists amid fears the slaying would prompt the withdrawal of vital assistance.

Government officials said the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) worker, a Swiss citizen of Salvadoran origin, was killed Thursday as his two-car convoy travelled to the central province of Oruzgan.

The 39-year-old was the first expatriate aid worker killed in Afghanistan since 1998, when an Italian United Nations security officer was murdered, allegedly by Taliban fighters, on the outskirts of Kabul.

"The attackers pulled out the only foreigner in the convoy and in front of Afghan ICRC staff, executed him in cold blood with Kalashnikovs, calling him an infidel and unbeliever," said Jan Mohammad, governor of Oruzgan.

"No one else was killed, all the Afghans were spared. These were Taliban and supporters of al-Qaeda who committed this murder."

Saudi envoy murdered in Ivory Coast

AFP, Abidjan

Saudi Arabia's ambassador to Ivory Coast, Mohamed Ahmed Rachid, has been found murdered in his residential building in the main city Abidjan, several sources said Friday.

Rachid's body was found naked on Friday morning on the 15th floor of the stairwell in the building in the Plateau district, where he lived on the 17th floor, the sources said.

The corridor from his apartment and the stairs were stained with blood.

The circumstances of his murder were not clear.

Rachid had come to Ivory Coast in December from Bombay in India, where he was had been Saudi consul-general.

He had been invited to dinner at the home of the Algerian ambassador on Thursday but cancelled the engagement at the last minute.

His driver was the one to alert the building's concierge. He had gone in the morning to pick up the car keys and found the corridor in front of the ambassador's flat bathed in blood.

7 workers buried alive in Meghalaya mine collapse

AFP, Guwahati

At least seven workers have died after being trapped inside a coalpit when a section of mine collapsed in the northeastern Indian state of Meghalaya, police said Friday.

A police spokesman said the accident happened Wednesday night at the remote Nongalibira Coalfields in South Garo Hill district, 350 kilometres (218 miles) from Meghalaya state capital Shillong.

"The miners were buried alive while digging a pit when a huge chunk of land caved in followed by gushing water, trapping all of them," Jerry Marak, deputy police superintendent of South Garo Hill district, told AFP.

The bodies of all seven workers were recovered Thursday.

Last year, 40 miners were killed in a similar incident while digging a pit in a coalfields in the same district.

Meghalaya boasts of large deposits of coal and limestone, besides granite and uranium ore.



PHOTO: AFP

Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dixit (L) offers a bouquet to Congress (I) Party President Sonia Gandhi during the inauguration of the three-day Congress National Convention in New Delhi on Friday. Gandhi made a scathing attack on the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led coalition government of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee at the Centre, saying its rule has "divided" the country and that "the nation needs Congress on Friday more than ever before".

Indian MPs call for mosquito smashing minister

AFP, Patna

Lawmakers in the eastern Indian state of Bihar were Friday scratching their heads over proposed legislation to appoint a minister to control mosquitoes.

Legislators have become so annoyed by bug bites in their official quarters that they brought proceedings of the state assembly to a standstill Thursday as they loudly demanded action over what they called the "government's failure to curb the mosquito menace".

"I am not even able to read newspapers in the toilet in peace," said leader of the opposition Shushil Kumar Modi. "During my short sojourn to that haven, 20-25 mosquitoes attack and suck my blood."

The state Health Minister Shakuni Choudhary expressed concern but wondered why the bugs appeared to only be targeting opposition members.

Pneumonia scare hits airlines as labs zero in on virus

AFP, Singapore

International airlines Friday felt the direct impact of a killer pneumonia outbreak after experts called for passenger screening and a Singaporean stewardess was hospitalized as a suspected case.

As the global death toll hit 54 with more than 1,400 cases recorded, more travellers were cancelling trips or being warned against travel to Asia, where the worst outbreaks have occurred in Hong Kong and southern China.

The World Health Organization (WHO) on Thursday recommended that countries most affected by the disease start screening international passengers at airports, but stopped short of calling for outright travel restrictions.

Fears of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), an unusual form of pneumonia, have also begun to be felt in the exhibition industry, with foreign participants pulling out of an interna-

tional bicycle trade fair in Taiwan.

Taiwan joined Singapore and Hong Kong in invoking quarantine laws, and in a further sign of creeping public panic, a bank in Singapore complained to financial authorities that one of its branches was hit by SARS rumors allegedly spread by a competitor.

In a new development the WHO confirmed four people were suffering from atypical pneumonia in Shanghai, the first time suspected SARS cases have been discovered in the eastern Chinese metropolis.

Share prices of Singapore Airlines (SIA), Cathay Pacific and Qantas, three of Asia's top carriers, took a hit Friday on fears that the SARS scare, in addition to the war in Iraq, would eat into their revenues.

The entire crew of SIA's flight SQ25 from New York to Frankfurt on March 14 has been grounded after three passengers fell ill with SARS.

A stewardess who had attended to a Singaporean doctor, his wife

'Unveiling of ME roadmap to await end of Iraq war'

AFP, Jerusalem

The international "roadmap" for peace between Israel and the Palestinians will not be published until the war in Iraq is over, a senior Israeli official told AFP on Friday.

"We don't expect this document to be published before the end of the campaign in Iraq and until the United States consult us in advance," said the official on condition of anonymity.

He said he was pleased with a statement on the roadmap Thursday by President George W. Bush in which the US leader said only that the document would be published "soon" but did not give a date.

The roadmap, drawn up 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.

Responding to Bush's statement, chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat called for concrete action and recalled that the publication of the plan had already been put back six times.

Bush said on March 14 that the quartet would publish the roadmap after a Palestinian prime minister with real powers took office.

Five days later, reformist Mahmud Abbas, Yasser Arafat's second-in-command of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, has agreed to become the first Palestinian prime minister. He has three weeks to form a government.

Meanwhile, the Israeli police beefed up security around mosques in east Jerusalem to contain potentially violent anti-war protests after Friday prayers, Israeli public radio reported.

Access to the Al-Aqsa mosque compound, the third holiest site in Islam, will be denied to Muslims under 40 and any Palestinian who does not hold the Israeli resident permit granted to east-Jerusalemites, the radio added.

Last week, Israeli police resorted to tear gas to break up a group of Palestinian protesters demonstrating their support to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein after Friday prayers.



PHOTO: AFP

An Acehese child holds a placard reading "Don't take commercial gain on Join Security Committee" in Sigli, Aceh on Thursday. The Indonesian government and separatist rebels were expected to exchange detailed plans soon for the demilitarisation of Aceh, a group monitoring the peace pact in the province said.

Israel summons UK envoy to condemn 'revolting' Straw remarks

AFP, Jerusalem

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw's remarks that the West was guilty of hypocrisy by taking action against Iraq and not against Israel for not implementing UN resolutions were "revolting," Israel's foreign ministry has told Britain's ambassador.

Yoav Biran, director general of the foreign ministry, summoned ambassador Sherard Cowper-Coles late Thursday to tell him that Straw's remarks were "totally unfounded," a ministry spokesman said Friday.

"The comments ... are particularly revolting and threaten to damage the Middle East peace process," especially within the context of Britain's action along with the United States against Iraq, he said.

"Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Foreign Minister Silvan

Shalom took Mr. Straw's remarks very seriously and in particular the totally unfounded attempt to establish a parallel between the international campaign against Iraq ... and the Arab-Israeli conflict," he told the ambassador, the spokesman added.

Straw told the BBC on Tuesday that "there is a real concern too that the West has been guilty of double standards -- on the one hand saying the United Nations Security Council resolutions on Iraq must be implemented; on the other hand, sometimes appearing rather quixotic over the implementation of resolutions about Israel and Palestine."

Asked if Britain was guilty of such double standards, Straw said: "To a degree yes... and we're going to deal with it."

Britain on Friday sought to soothe Israeli anger over the comments.