



People wear masks to protect themselves against a killer pneumonia on the streets of Hong Kong on Sunday. The disease, known as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), has now killed 12 people in the territory with 470 infected causing the cancellation of many events and affecting tourism.

WHO doctor dies of killer virus as infections rise

REUTERS, Singapore/Hong Kong

The World Health Organization doctor who first identified the deadly pneumonia virus which has killed at least 55 people worldwide has died, the latest victim of the disease, officials said on Saturday.

The number of people infected with the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) rose sharply in Hong Kong and fears about the virus spread in Singapore, where cinemas and shopping malls were deserted on Saturday as people stayed away to avoid contracting the infection.

Taiwan joined Hong Kong and Singapore in quarantining people at home if they had been exposed to the virus.

Carlo Urbani, a 46-year-old WHO doctor, identified the outbreak of SARS in a US businessman admitted to hospital in Hanoi, Vietnam.

The UN health agency announced his death on Saturday but did not say where or when he had succumbed.

However, an official at Thailand's public health ministry said a foreign doctor, believed to have contracted SARS, died in a Bangkok hospital.

The doctor contracted the virus in Vietnam and had been in hospital for 15 days in Bangkok, the official said.

Nearly 1,500 people have been infected around the globe after the virus first showed up in China and was subsequently carried to other parts of Asia, Europe and the United States by travelers. Washington has urged Americans to postpone travel to parts of Asia.

In an effort to rein in the disease, Taiwan ordered a quarantine late on Friday on some 240 family members and friends of its 10 patients battling the deadly respiratory disease.

"All the people related have been cooperative. Everybody is scared," said a Department of Health official, who added that the number could rise to 400 in coming days.

They will have to stay home for up to 14 days or face a fine of up to \$8,620.

Outside mainland China, infection numbers are highest in Hong Kong and Singapore. Desperate to break the cycle of the deadly virus, both cities have shut schools and quarantined people who may have been exposed.

Singapore, which has nearly doubled to over 1,500 the number of people under quarantine, released the names of 18 people it wanted to locate after they shared a flight with a sick woman.

These may have been exposed on Southern China Airlines flight CZ 355 on March 26, the government said.

The number of people infected with the virus in the tiny state rose to 89 on Saturday from 86 a day earlier. Thirteen patients are in a serious condition.

Struggling with its worst health crisis in half a century, Hong Kong was bombarded with yet another sharp rise in the number of infections on Saturday, to 470 from 425 a day ago.

The city is also tracking down hundreds of people who may have been exposed to the virus on at least three Hong Kong-linked

flights, and one of its top health officials delivered a chilling warning that many have not even dared to contemplate for weeks.

"We've never ruled out the possibility that the disease might be airborne," said Director of Health Margaret Chan. An airborne virus will spread more quickly than one carried by droplets.

Scientists say the virus is a new strain from the family of coronaviruses, which is the second leading cause of the common cold. Previously, they have said the virus was passed through droplets, such as in sneezing or coughing.

The epidemic has spooked air travelers all over the world and airports are screening passengers to sieve out those showing symptoms of the disease, which include chills, high fever and breathing difficulty.

In Taiwan on Saturday, workers scrubbed and disinfected the Taipei International Airport, subway stations and schools.

At least four large companies in Hong Kong and one in Singapore have sent some staff home after workers fell ill.

The disease has killed 34 in mainland China and infected over 800, although authorities say the situation there is now under control. Eleven are dead in Hong Kong, four in Vietnam, three in Canada and two in Singapore. The WHO doctor is the latest victim. But the virus did little to dampen the mood at the Hong Kong Rugby Sevens, though the number of attendees on the opening day fell to over 15,000 from more than 24,000 last year.

9 people killed in Turkey factory blast

REUTERS, Ankara

Nine people, including two children, were killed in southern Turkey when an explosion in a factory sent the building collapsing into the street, the Anatolian news agency said on Sunday.

It said officials were investigating the cause of the explosion in the boiler room in the yeast factory in the southern city of Adana.

The agency said children as young as three were also among the 11 people injured as the wreckage fell onto the street where they were playing. They were being treated at local hospitals.

Suicide bombing in Israeli resort: 26 injured

AFP, Jerusalem

Some 26 people were injured Sunday when a suicide bomber blew himself up outside a cafe in the Israeli coastal city of Netanya, north of Tel Aviv, police said.

Public Security Minister Tzahi Hanegbi told public radio that initial reports indicated only the suicide bomber was killed in the blast at the entrance of the London Cafe in the town.

Six of the injured were listed as serious, the radio said.

The suicide bomber detonated an explosive charge packed with nails that he was carrying at the entrance to the cafe, where four soldiers were standing, witnesses said.

The blast blew out the window of the cafe but failed to cause more damage after the security guard at the door apparently prevented him from entering the building, they added.

Shortly before the blast the head of military intelligence, General Aharon Zeevi, had warned ministers at a weekly cabinet meeting of the heightened risk of suicide bombings by Palestinian headline groups in protest at the US-led war in Iraq, public radio said.

No groups laid immediately claim to the blast.

Palestinian minister Saeb Erakat said that the Palestinian Authority "condemns any attack on civilians, Palestinians or Israelis."

He also rejected frequent Israeli claims that the Palestinian Authority is to blame for the attacks for failing to crack down on militant groups, and called for the immediate implementation of a peace plan drawn up by top EU, Russian, UN, and US officials which sets out steps for the creation of a Palestinian state.

Meanwhile in the northern West Bank town of Jenin, a bastion of Palestinian hardliners, the main square in the refugee camp was renamed in honour of an Iraqi suicide bomber who killed four US soldiers on Saturday.

The deadliest suicide bombing of the 30-month Palestinian uprising, or intifada, took place just over a year ago in Netanya on March 27,

2002, killing 29 people and sparking the first full-scale Israeli invasion of the West Bank since partial autonomy was granted in 1994.

That blast was claimed by the radical Islamic group Hamas.

Netanya, a popular seaside resort, is just 15 kilometres (nine miles) from the West Bank town of Tulkarem, said by Israel to be a launching pad for Palestinian attackers and, like almost the entire West Bank, reoccupied by Israeli forces since last June.

Sunday's blast was the first suicide bombing in Israel since March 5, when a Hamas bomber killed 17 people on a bus in the northern port city of Haifa. Most of the victims were school children.

Maoist leader says his party still wants republic in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Senior Maoist leader Babu Ram Bhattarai Saturday made his first public appearance in seven years and said the rebels had not given up their demand for a republic despite a ceasefire with the government.

"The party has not given up the demand for a republic state, a constituent assembly election to redraft the constitution and an all-party round table conference," he said at a press conference in Kathmandu.

"We want the current system of government to be changed to meet the people's aspirations, help build the country's economy and end exploitation and social injustices," he said.

Bhattarai, who arrived in Kathmandu Friday, had been in hiding since February 1996 when the Maoists launched their "people's war" for a communist republic.

The Maoists and the government declared a ceasefire on January 29 and said they were willing to hold talks. Despite the signing of a code of conduct for the talks this month, no date has yet been decided.

"No definite date has been fixed for the peace dialogues," Bhattarai said.

"However, our party is prepared to hold the talks anytime if the government creates a healthy situation."

On Friday the government said

a preliminary "goodwill" meeting between the two sides could take place on Monday or Tuesday.

Asked if he would meet King Gyanendra before talks, Bhattarai said: "We have no immediate plans of meeting the king and we have not met him so far."

"But if necessary, we are prepared to meet him any time and anywhere as a centre of power of the old regime," he said.

He criticised the king for sacking the elected prime minister, Sher Bahadur Deuba in October, and appointing an interim government.

"The monarch has... grossly bypassed the democratic constitution," he said.

"We want the king to restore the people's democratic rights and honour the post-movement constitution based on multi-party democracy," Bhattarai said.

Bhattarai denied that the rebels were terrorists, saying they were a new political power.

"Even the UN, the Western and European world have already recognised us as a new political power to reckon with," he said.

Bhattarai was accompanied by four other senior Maoist leaders.

Before they arrived at the press conference venue, the road was blocked by up to 5,000 onlookers.

To disperse the crowd, police had to resort to baton charges which injured a few journalists and onlookers, witnesses said.



Congress Party supporters hold portraits of party President Sonia Gandhi while they listen to her speak at a rally for grassroots level party workers in New Delhi on Sunday. Sonia slammed the ruling National Democratic Alliance coalition for its economic policies and its failure to deal with terrorism and national security issues.

VHP threatens to 'change' Indian government

AFP, New Delhi

A radical Hindu group seeking to build a temple on the ruins of a razed mosque Sunday threatened to "change" India's ruling federal government if it did not hand over the disputed site.

"We have the power to change the government if it does not hand over the land to us and bring in legislation in parliament to pave the way for the construction of the temple," said Ashok Singhal, a top leader of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP, World Hindu Council).

Singhal was talking to reporters in the Indian capital New Delhi on the sidelines of a rally organised to pressure the BJP-led

government to hand over land to construct the temple, the United News of India (UNI) news agency said.

The BJP is allied to the VHP.

About 10,000 people attended the rally, which is part of a mass agitation programme launched by the VHP to drum up support for the temple construction campaign, the UNI report said.

Hindu zealots tore down the 16th century Babri mosque in Ayodhya, northern India, 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.

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

On Sunday, Singhal said the VHP was determined to complete construction of the Ram temple within two years.



A devastated Okere village in Nigeria's western Niger Delta belonging to the Itsekiri ethnic group on Sunday. The Itsekiri claim that a dozen of their communities have been attacked and burned by militants from the neighboring Ijaw community during two weeks of violent ethnic unrest which has crippled the regions oil industry.

Nigerian oil battle seethes as world watches Iraq

AFP, Warri, Nigeria

While the world watches the battle for control of Iraq's oil fields, in southern Nigeria a small but bloody conflict for control of another blighted, oil-rich region is seething.

From the air, the western Niger Delta is a depressing sight: a polluted swamp dotted with ruined, debris-strewn villages and abandoned oil wells, both evacuated during the past two weeks of ethnic unrest.

Local people say that just as it has stained their polluted waterways, oil has poisoned local politics and exacerbated longstanding ethnic tensions.

"The crisis of today was a result of the oil money coming to Warri. It would have been better if there was no oil," said Prince Eou Omagbemi, a local traditional ruler who says his village was burned

down in recent fighting.

The region has long been prey to ethnic clashes, but a two-week-old uprising by armed militants from the Ijaw ethnic group has bit deeper than before.

Three oil multinationals have shut down operations in the western Delta, choking off supplies of Nigeria's economic lifeblood, crude oil, cutting exports by more than a third and sending tremors through world markets.

And with more than 1,600 refugees displaced from their villages and Ijaw political grievances unresolved, observers are raising doubts over whether next month's key Nigerian elections can take place in the western Delta.

Ijaw militant leaders say they will disrupt the polls and destroy the evacuated oil wells if their demands for greater political representation are not met before the April 19 presidential election.

Pakistan never favours terrorism, says Jamali

PTI, Beijing

Asserting that Pakistan never "favoured" terrorism anywhere in the world as it was a "victim of terrorism" itself, Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali on Sunday said that Islamabad would continue to support the global war on terror network. "Pakistan has never favoured terrorism. We have always fought against terrorism," Jamali told the state-run China central television (CCTV-1) in an interview aired on Sunday.

Describing Pakistan as a "victim of terrorism", Jamali, who concluded his maiden official visit to China on March 26, said that Islamabad had never been a part of terrorism or supported it.

"Pakistan has itself been a victim of terrorism. So terrorism anywhere in the world, we have

never appreciated, we were never a part of it, we will never be a part of it," he said.

"Whatever is our contribution is to the fight against terrorism, Pakistan will continue that policy and we will keep on helping people, countries and even protect ourselves as far as terrorism is concerned," he said.

Interestingly, there was no question on the Indo-Pak issue during the 15-minute show on the Chinese television network.

Asked whether the world's most wanted terrorist, Osama Bin Laden was alive or dead, Jamali quickly intervened to say that God only knew about it.

"Before you go to the question whether Bin Laden is alive or not, only God knows it. We don't know whether Bin Laden is alive or not.

He (God) is one who gives life and he is one who takes the life," Jamali said.

"As far as Bin Laden is concerned, we will look towards Allah whenever or whatever happens. We in Pakistan, it is not our cup of tea as far as Bin Laden is concerned. Absolutely, it is not our cup of tea," the Pakistani premier said amid reports that Bin Laden was hiding somewhere in Pakistan or on the Pak-Afghanistan border.

Asked about generous American aid flowing into Pakistan, an issue which is causing concern in Beijing, Jamali expressed his surprise that China should be concerned about the US aid flow into Pakistan.

"Why should it be a matter of concern for others, for China at least?" Jamali quipped.