

Pneumonia cases soar in Asia

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong took drastic new measures Monday to combat a killer pneumonia as nearly 100 more cases were reported in the territory amid growing disruption to travel and business across Asia.

The increasingly fraught battle to contain Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) came as the US authorities warned the virus could be more contagious than first thought and advised against travel to parts of Asia.

The mysterious illness has now infected more than 1,600 people in 15 countries and killed at least 59 people. It erupted in southern China, spread to Hong Kong and has been taken worldwide by airline passengers.

The Hong Kong authorities Monday isolated an entire housing block for 10 days in an attempt to control the epidemic after 213 people on the estate were found to be infected -- a rise of 92 overnight.

The virus has now killed 13 people

and infected nearly 630 in the city, and Health Secretary Yeoh Eng-kiong said the Amoy Gardens estate was put in isolation because the authorities were alarmed by the "huge increase" in cases.

Yeoh said no hypothesis had been ruled out in the battle against SARS, raising the possibility of a newly-mutated form of the virus that could undergo airborne transmission or survive extended periods of time on open surfaces.

Over the weekend the US Centers for Disease Control said the virus could move freely through the air and contaminate an object for as many as three hours. It also warned US citizens to avoid affected areas.

During the isolation period at Amoy Gardens, no one will be allowed to enter or leave the estate without express permission in writing of a health officer.

Medical personnel will visit residents, who will be given three meals a day free of charge as well as help and advice to clean and disinfect their flats.



PHOTO: AFP

Dr. Hitoshi Oshitani (L) World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Adviser in Communicable Disease Surveillance and Response, speaks as Dr. Robert Condon (R) SARS Response Team listens, during a press conference at the WHO regional office in Manila on Monday. Oshitani said identifying the killer pneumonia virus could be within days.

US to take up Indo-Pak issue after Iraq: Powell

Pakistani nuke facility accused of helping 'foreign' proliferator

PTI, Washington

US Secretary of State Colin Powell has said he hopes to take up the Indo-Pak issue once the Iraq crisis is tackled to ensure that there is no threat of a nuclear war between the two sub continental rivals.

In an interview to New York Times, he said the "Indo-Pakistan and the whole subcontinent problem" was part of the "broader agenda" that the US plans to go back to after Iraq.

"(We want to) make sure we don't find ourselves in the same situation we were in a year ago.

"When everybody was predicting war, we managed to solve that. People forget. If we had had a nuclear war, they wouldn't have forgotten it, but we didn't

have one so they forgot it.

"A hell of a lot of work" went into preventing an Indo-Pakistan nuclear war", Powell said.

He said "There is a lot for us to do and I think as we come out of this (Iraq) crisis and get fully engaged again on the President's agenda, which has been out there for the last two plus years, but has sort of been overtaken by the war against terrorism and by Iraq."

"We have to reach out. We have to spend more time," he said adding once the Iraq crisis is resolved, "it frees us to engage in ways that we have not been able to, say, in the last six to eight months."

Powell said the "broader agenda we (US) will go back to" also included "work to cement the expansion of NATO even

though we are not in the European Union."

AFP adds: The United States has accused Pakistan's key uranium enrichment plant of helping "a foreign country, person or entity" acquire or develop weapons of mass destruction, according to a statement made public Monday.

The allegation is contained in Washington's announcement of sanctions against the A.Q. Khan Research Laboratories (KRL), a uranium enrichment facility named after the man credited as the father of Pakistan's nuclear program, Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan.

The US embassy in Islamabad said the sanctions were imposed because of KRL's "material contribution to the efforts of a foreign (non-US) country,

person or entity of proliferation concern, to use, acquire, design, develop and/or secure weapons of mass destruction, and/or missiles capable of delivering mass destruction."

The decision to impose the sanctions, described as "non-proliferation penalties", was taken on March 24, an embassy spokeswoman told AFP. The "foreign country, person or entity of proliferation concern" was not identified.

Khan and KRL are at the center of widely-reported allegations from unnamed US officials since last year that Pakistan helped North Korea develop nuclear weapons by providing it with the designs for making uranium centrifuges.

Mullah Omar issues fresh Jihad call

AP, Islamabad

Taliban's elusive leader Mullah Mohammed Omar has issued a fresh order for Jihad or holy war against US Troops and Afghans who work with them, drawing parallels between Afghanistan and Iraq.

His latest decree carries the signatures of 600 Islamic clerics reminding the faithful of their duty to wage jihad and comes amid stepped up attacks against international forces in Afghanistan.

"Whenever the non-Muslims attack a Muslim land it is the duty of everyone to rise against the aggressor," reads posters that are reportedly authored by Omar and openly displayed in towns and villages in eastern Afghanistan and in the tribal regions of Pakistan.

"We were blamed for Osama bin Laden because they said he was a terrorist and he was taking shelter with us. But what is the fault of Iraq? Iraq has

no Osama bin Laden in its country," the black and white poster says.

International peacekeepers in the Afghan capital of Kabul and the US Military headquartered north of Kabul at Bagram Air Base say they don't expect the war in Iraq to cause a deterioration in their security situation.

But Taliban loyalists hiding in Pakistan's tribal regions said in recent interviews that they have regrouped and built alliances with Al-Qaeda and rebel warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezbe-Islami.

Since the conflict in Iraq began, Afghanistan has been rattled by one incident after another.

The small pamphlets that had been circulated by Taliban, Hekmatyar and al-Qaeda operatives have given way to poster-size warnings to international forces.

11 killed as train rams into jeep in UP

PTI, Lucknow

Eleven persons, including four children, were killed and eight injured when the Gorakhpur-bound Maurya Express rammed into a jeep at an unmanned railway crossing near Nonapaar railway station, on Monday.

The mishap occurred last evening when the jeep, carrying a wedding party, got stuck at the crossing on the Deoria-Gorakhpur section due to some mechanical fault, police said here. The Maurya Express, which was heading towards Gorakhpur, arrived at the same time and rammed into the jeep, they added.

The injured have been admitted to the hospital and senior railway and police officials have reached the site.

Al-Qaeda top gun spills details of terror plots

PTI, New York

Captured top Al-Qaeda operative Khalid Sheikh Mohammed has surprised CIA interrogators with his willingness to spill the details of terror plots in the US, including his network's plans to attack gas stations and suspension bridges in Washington and New York.

In recent days, Mohammed has confirmed that Al-Qaeda had specific plans to attack the gas stations and suspension bridges, Newsweek magazine reported.

But more importantly, it said, he has revealed much about the terror group's methods and he has named names. Mohammed identified Pakistani operative Majid Khan as a "key soldier" in the United States.

He told his captors how Khan, who was recently detained by Pakistani authorities, was deployed to America to gather intelligence on potential targets.

Mohammed tasked a relative of Khan to identify the proper machine tools to loosen bolts on suspension bridges. Khan's family owns a gas station in the United States, and as an Ohio-based commercial truck driver, his relative would not arouse suspicions asking about tools.

Some in the intelligence community, the magazine said, had questioned whether Mohammed and other detainees may be feeding the Americans disinformation.

But Newsweek quoted sources as saying the CIA has been able to corroborate much of what Mohammed has said.



PHOTO: AFP

New Zealand's Sir Edmund Hillary (L), age 83, shakes hands with a young admirer (R) outside the parliament in Wellington on Monday as people gather to mark the 50th anniversary of Hillary's ascent to the top of Mount Everest with Nepalese Sherpa, Tenzing Norgay. Hillary will visit Nepal for the actual 50th anniversary on May 29. Hillary along with Norgay reached the summit of Everest on May 29, 1953 as the first mountaineers to conquer the 8,848-metre summit.

80 Taliban detained

AFP, Kabul

Eighty suspected Taliban have been arrested over the past three days in southeast Afghanistan's Ghazni province, provincial governor Asadullah Khaled said Monday.

"We have launched an operation which started on March 29 in which 80 Taliban have been arrested, including several (Taliban) military commanders and top officials," Khaled told a press conference in Kabul.

"These suspects were arrested throughout the province, in the town of Ghazni and in rural villages. Coming from Pakistan, they were gathering to conduct hostile actions. We acted on precise information, which proved

accurate. Their action was in this way neutralised in time," he said.

Led solely by the interior ministry, the police operation had been in preparation for several months and would continue for several more days, according to the governor.

The deputy education minister under the Taliban regime, Shahid Khil, as well as a Taliban secret service official, Asadullah Sadozai, were among those arrested, he said.

An independent source in the region told AFP that military operations had been launched several days ago, especially south of Ghazni town in Andar district where US forces set up an advance post on Friday.

Powell sounds optimistic note about ME peace

20 more Palestinians detained

AFP, Jerusalem

Despite an explosion of violence in the Middle East over the weekend, with a suicide bombing in Israel, US Secretary of State Colin Powell said the stalled Middle East peace process had "reached a hopeful moment".

However, Israel was skeptical Monday about the chances of renewing the peace process, a day after a Palestinian blew himself apart in Netanya, injuring more than two dozen people and leaving many more in shock.

Israeli forces also shot dead three Palestinians in the south, two of whom were gunmen who infiltrated from the Gaza Strip and battled with troops at a checkpoint.

The third was killed while apparently scouting ground near a Gaza Strip Jewish settlement, which Israel said was preparation for an ambush on a settler convoy.

Powell's optimism was based largely on the March 19 appointment of Mahmud Abbas as the Palestinians' first prime minister, a key reform aimed at breaking veteran leader Yasser Arafat's stranglehold on power.

But he warned that the administration of President George W. Bush would be watching "very carefully" how Abbas exercises his authority, "which is so important for Palestinian hopes for better future."

Powell reiterated the promise by Washington and London to unveil a "roadmap" for peace, a broad plan for achieving a comprehensive settlement in the Middle East put together in cooperation with the United Nations, the European Union and Russia, as soon as Abbas and his cabinet are confirmed.

But Israel, which has suggested more than 100 changes to the roadmap, refused to pass judgment on Abbas until he had proven his mettle by ending bloody attacks in Israel.

Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom saw the move as a "positive step but on the other hand we have top see actions on the ground," said ministry spokesman David Saranga.

Another government official, who asked not be named, said that while Abbas, a moderate calling for a suspension of attacks on Israel, appeared genuine in his desire for peace, he faces an uphill struggle to impose his will.

Abbas was in Gaza Monday trying to woo hardline Islamic groups to join his national unity government. The suicide bombing in Netanya was claimed by one of those groups, Islamic Jihad, underscoring the difficulties he faces.

But he did notch up a minor victory when a Gaza leader of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) said Sunday the hardline nationalist faction was for the first time ready to join a new unity government headed by Abbas.

Reflecting Israel's wariness of any Palestinian efforts to end attacks, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon reportedly ticked off his military intelligence chief at a cabinet meeting for praising measures taken by Abbas.

Meanwhile, Israeli troops arrested 20 wanted Palestinians, including two militants from the radical Islamic Jihad movement, during overnight operations in the West Bank a spokesman for the army said early Monday.

One of the Islamic Jihad activists was arrested in Ramallah and a second was picked up in Tammun, a village some 10 kilometres (six miles) north-east of Nablus.



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan security personnel man a checkpoint at the entrance to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) headquarters in Kabul on Monday. The ISAF compound was the target of a rocket attack late Sunday which hit an accommodation block but caused no casualties.

SC dismisses Delhi's plea on temple-mosque row

Verdict has opened doors for direct fight: VHP

PTI, New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Monday rejected Union Government's application seeking vacation of the order banning any kind of religious activity on the 67-acre undisputed land surrounding the disputed site at Ayodhya and directed maintenance of status quo therein.

The five judge Constitution Bench comprising Justice S Rajender Babu, Justice S S M Quadri, Justice M B Shah, Justice N Santosh Hegde and Justice Doraiswamy Raju in an unanimous verdict rejected the plea of Union Government saying status quo order was required to be operative till the Allahabad High Court disposed of the title suits.

"We are of the opinion that the Supreme Court's March 13/14, 2002 order should be operative till Allahabad High Court disposed of the title suits," the Bench said.

"This is not only to maintain communal harmony but also to fulfil other obligations," it said.

The Allahabad High Court at present is hearing rival suits claiming ownership of

the 2.77 acres disputed land and has ordered excavation by Archaeological Survey of India to determine whether a temple pre-existed the Babri masjid.

The Centre had filed this application seeking vacation of the March 13-14 ban order saying there was a vast difference between the situation prevailing last year and at present.

The government has also indicated that as per the 1994 order of the Supreme Court, the Centre was free to hand over the management of the undisputed land to a trust or a registered body after making adequate provisions for the access to the disputed site. However, all the Muslim bodies - All India Muslim Personal Law Board, Babri Masjid Action Committee and Babri Masjid Movement Coordination Committee - had opposed the Centre's application saying it has not pointed out any change in the ground situation at Ayodhya to seek alteration in the last year's status quo order.

Meanwhile, declaring that the Supreme Court verdict on Ayodhya has opened the doors for a "direct fight with secularists", VHP on Monday said it cannot wait end-

lessly for a judicial resolution of the vexed issue and would chalk out its second phase of agitation later this week.

"We welcome the Supreme Court's rejection of the Centre's plea to vacate the stay on religious activity on the undisputed land. It has opened the doors for a direct fight with the secularists and opponents of the Ram temple," VHP senior vice-president Acharya Giriraj Kishore said.

"Our effort would be to get a Parliament enactment to resolve the vexed issue," he said.

Asked whether VHP would wait till the Allahabad High Court disposes of the pending title suits, he said, "no, we won't. If we wait, then somebody may go in appeal against it in the Supreme Court. Hindus now do not have the patience to wait for a verdict that would take years to come."

After tomorrow's conclusion of the ongoing 'Satyagraha' in support of a Parliament legislation to facilitate construction of the Ram temple, the VHP would chalk out its second phase of imitational plan either on April two or three, Kishore said.