

Man with grenades hijacks Cuban jet

REUTERS, Havana

Cuban authorities were negotiating early on Tuesday with a man armed with two hand grenades, who hijacked a domestic airliner with 46 passengers and crew aboard in an attempt to reach the United States.

The man hijacked the Soviet-built Antonov 24 plane on a flight from the Isle of Youth on the southern coast of Cuba on Monday night and ordered the pilot to fly to the United States. However, the plane had to land in Havana because it did not have enough fuel, a government statement said.

The AN-24 turboprop was standing on the tarmac at Havana's international airport with all its passengers and crew still on board as Cuba's Communist authorities tried to negotiate the hijacker's surrender, an airport official told Reuters.



PHOTO: AFP

A view of the memorial cemetery in Potocari, near Srebrenica, where victims of the infamous Srebrenica massacre are re-buried on Monday almost eight years after Europe's worst atrocity since World War II. Over 10,000 people including many of the bereaved as well as overseas officials, help re-bury 600 Muslim men and boys, removed from mass graves. More than 7,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys are believed to have been slain in Srebrenica after Serbs overran the enclave on July 11, 1995.

US slaps sanctions on Pakistan, N Korea

Islamabad wants nuke proliferation proof from Washington

AFP, Washington

The United States has slapped sanctions on a Pakistani firm and North Korea over an alleged barter deal in which it is claimed Pyongyang swapped missile components for expertise in developing a nuclear program, officials said Monday.

Sanctions targeted North Korea's Changgwang Sinyong Corporation and A.Q. Khan Research Laboratories (KRL), a uranium enrichment facility named after the father of Pakistan's nuclear program, Abdul Qadeer Khan.

The North Korean firm was censured under US law for "its involvement in the transfer of missile technology," State Department spokesman Richard

Boucher said.

KRL was accused of "a material contribution to the efforts of a foreign country, person or entity of proliferation concern to use, acquire, design, develop or secure weapons of mass destruction and or missiles capable of delivering weapons of mass destruction," he added.

Pakistan has vehemently denied the allegations.

Since North Korea does not have a market economy, the sanctions, which are largely symbolic, prohibit all government-related missile contacts with the United States.

US officials did not publicly make a direct link between the two cases.

But a senior US official said on

condition of anonymity that the North Korean firm was sanctioned because it exported items "including missiles and the Pakistani company was sanctioned because it imported missiles."

"You connect the dots," the official said.

Reports last year, quoting unnamed senior intelligence officials, accused North Korea of sending missile technology to Pakistan in exchange for designs for gas centrifuges and machinery used in an enriched uranium nuclear arms project.

Meanwhile, Pakistan has demanded evidence from the United States to back allegations that it exported nuclear technology to North Korea.

"We reject the charges made by the

American administration," Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri was quoted Tuesday as saying after the United States confirmed that it had imposed sanctions on the A.Q.Khan Research Laboratories (KRL), a uranium enrichment plant south-east of Islamabad.

The sanctions -- a two-year trade ban -- were imposed because of KRL's "contributions" to efforts by an unnamed foreign body to develop weapons of mass destruction, US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said in Washington overnight.

US sees human rights blackspot in Asia

AFP, Washington

From former Soviet states in Eurasia to communist ruled China and North Korea, Asia is blanketed by severe human rights abuses, with freedom in many states muzzled under repressive rule, a US government report said Monday.

The State Department's annual survey of global human rights is always controversial, prompting denunciations by targeted governments and allegations of US hypocrisy.

But it is likely to be even more contentious this year, with the United States accused of aggression and causing

civilian casualties in the war in Iraq, and still holding hundreds of prisoners and terror suspects from the Afghan war in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

"As we lead an international campaign against terrorism, we are also working to extend the blessings of freedom at home and abroad," Secretary of State Colin Powell said, unveiling the report.

China, traditionally a target of the congressionally mandated survey, came in for renewed criticism, though improvements were noted in some areas.

Beijing's human rights record "remained poor, and the government

continued to commit numerous and serious abuses," the report said.

But the department noted that several senior envoys from Tibet's spiritual leader the Dalai Lama were permitted to visit Beijing and officials had agreed to welcome UN officials who are watchdogs torture and religious tolerance.

The report was issued as attention focused on China's record at the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva, amid speculation over whether the United States will this year sponsor a resolution critical of Beijing.

"We have not made a decision on that," Powell said.

Criticism was also savage in the report of North Korea, with which Washington is locked in a prolonged standoff over its nuclear programs.

"The leadership viewed most international human rights norms, particularly individual rights, as illegitimate, alien, and subversive to the goals of the state and party," the report said.

"Female prisoners underwent forced abortions, and in other cases babies reportedly were killed upon birth in prisons."

Another US foe, Myanmar came in for the latest of its regular doses of US criticism, as the report lionised democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Rebels blast rly station, damage tracks in Bihar

PTI, Patna

The outlawed Peoples War Group extremists on Tuesday blasted Nadul railway station building, relay centre and damaged tracks on Patna-Jehanabad section in an apparent bid to "enforce" the state-wide bandh called by ultraleft outfits.

"PW ultras numbering around 25-30 swooped on the station and forced railway employees to leave. They later used dynamites to blow up the main building of the station and its relay centre in the wee hours today," Jehanabad Superintendent of Police AK Yadav told PTI.

The extremists also blew up tracks around 10 metres near north cabin of the station, he said, adding train services on Patna-Jehanabad section of the East Central Railway were disrupted as a result.

Israel and US lock horns over ME peace roadmap

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel and the United States locked horns Tuesday over the implementation of an US-backed peace plan, with Washington reportedly saying it will publish the "roadmap" despite Israeli demands that further changes be made.

Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom stressed after a meeting with US President George W. Bush that the Palestinians had to fight "terrorism" before any implementation of the peace plan.

But Bush, facing a tougher than expected campaign in Iraq and with mounting tension in the Arab world, insisted he was "serious" about pushing ahead with the step-by-step plan to forge a Palestinian state, Israeli public radio said.

"I said clearly there cannot be two

parallel paths: the war against terrorism in the day and negotiations at night," Shalom told the radio in Washington.

"The end of terrorism constitutes the central question for a return to negotiations with the Palestinians," he said.

Shalom, who was making his first visit to Washington since being named foreign minister last month, met Bush late Monday when the US leader dropped in on talks he was holding with US national security advisor Condoleezza Rice and Vice President Dick Cheney.

He also met with US Secretary of State Colin Powell.

The roadmap is a plan setting out the steps to Palestinian statehood by the year 2005. Based on a Bush speech on the Middle East last June, it was drafted by US, UN, EU and Russian diplomats, but Israel has raised a number of objec-

tions.

Foremost among its complaints is the fear that the plan might progress from one phase to the next without really tackling the problem of powerful militant groups attacking Israel.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's advisor Dov Weisglass has said he would like a US mechanism to judge when the conditions have been met to move from phase to phase, sidelining the United Nations and European Union, with whom Israel has cool relations.

Israel has reportedly proposed 100 changes to the roadmap as drafted, and convinced the United States to delay its publication, despite European objections, until after its January 28 elections.



PHOTO: AFP

A Chinese medicine worker prepares herbs for a customer in Chinatown, Singapore on Tuesday. Fear and confusion over a killer bug which has left more than 60 people dead and 1,700 infected worldwide are boosting sales of traditional medicine and vitamins in East Asia.

HK probes virus spread, cases soar in Canada

REUTERS, Hong Kong

Hong Kong health experts pursued a life-and-death search on Tuesday to find out why a virus ran through an apartment block like wildfire in an apparent departure from its previous pattern.

Armed with sampling kits and dressed in white surgical coats, caps, masks and gloves, investigators combed through Amoy Gardens apartments, home to almost a third of all cases in Hong Kong which currently has most known victims outside of mainland China.

Canada reported another 31 cases on Monday, but China, which is identified by most health officials as the origin of the disease, has still not started reporting full figures as requested by the World Health Organisation.

Australia reported a first suspected case on Tuesday but said the person had since recovered.

Some of those who first contracted Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which puts many of its victims into intensive care with very high fevers, have been cured with a cocktail of antiviral drugs and steroids.

The disease has killed 62 people from a total of more than 1,700 reported cases worldwide, a death rate so far of around four percent.

The urgency of the search at Amoy Gardens is to find whether the virus has mutated into an airborne threat. Doctors had thought the disease could be caught only through close contact with spray from patient's coughing, or bodily fluids.

But over 110 people from only one tower block have caught SARS. More than 200 are believed to be infected in the whole housing estate.

"If it were related to water or sewage or air-duct systems you can expect a continual appearance (of more victims)," said Leung Ping-chung, a professor at the Prince of Wales Hospital, where the first Hong Kong patients appeared in mid-March.

The virus has been found in faces of patients. Officials say one possible infection source may be a faulty waste pipe at Amoy Gardens which had been spraying tiny clouds of waste matter in the direction of the worst infected block.

The Hong Kong government put residents of the block under quarantine in their own apartments on Monday, but hundreds had already fled, and some may be carrying the disease with them.

N Korea fires missile into Yellow Sea

REUTERS, Tokyo

North Korea fired a short-range missile into the Yellow Sea on Tuesday, a Japanese Defence Ministry official said, adding that this latest missile launch by Pyongyang posed no threat to Japan.

North Korea has fired at least two other short-range missiles this year into the Sea of Japan and there have been reports that it was preparing to fire a ballistic missile capable of reaching Japan. The Yellow Sea is between the Korean peninsula and China.

"Considering the direction of the missile fired, it was no threat to our country," the Defence Ministry official said.

The missile was fired at 10:15 a.m. Japanese time (8:15 p.m. EST Monday).

It was believed to be of a type having a range of just 37.5 miles, Japanese officials said.

US defence officials in Washington confirmed the launch of what one called "an anti-ship missile."

"It was a no-notice test firing of the missile at 10:15 a.m. local time," the official added.

The US officials said they were not overly concerned about the unscheduled missile test, especially since it was fired off the western coast of North Korea. They noted that North Korea had given notice of earlier missile launches.

Those previous launches in the past two months, involving similar missiles, were apparently part of regular military exercises.

Japan sent two spy satellites into orbit last week, which will give Tokyo its

first independent opportunity to scrutinise North Korea from space. Pyongyang denounced the launch as a "hostile act" that could set off an arms race in the region.

Financial markets in the region are sensitive to any sabre-rattling by North Korea but showed only a muted reaction to Tuesday's missile, with attention still firmly on the Iraq war.

The yen weakened slightly against the dollar on the initial report of the firing but dealers said the impact was short-lived.

In the stock market, Tokyo's benchmark Nikkei average, which had ended the morning session up 0.04 percent, was pushed into negative territory by the report but managed to end with a modest rise of 0.18 percent.

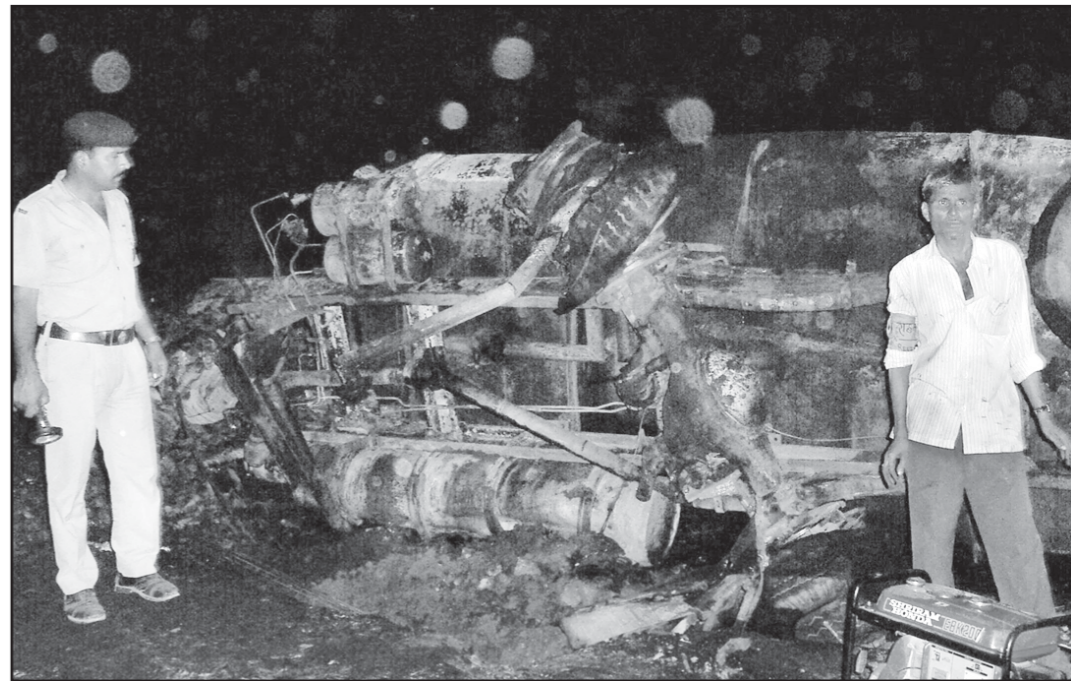


PHOTO: AFP

A policeman inspects the overturned wreckage of an oil tanker in Vakaner, some 210 km from Ahmedabad early Tuesday. At least four people were killed and 15 injured when an oil tanker collided with a passenger train causing an explosion and fire in three carriages.

Landslide kills 4 in Bolivia

AP, La Paz

Rescue officials struggled to reach victims buried by a landslide that roared through a gold-mining town in Bolivia's tropical lowlands, killing at least four people, injuring three and burying dozens of homes.

"It's still too early to estimate the level of damage," said Mateo Laura, governor of La Paz, who is leading a rescue mission that has been delayed by heavy rains and bad roads to the jungle town of Chima, 125 miles north of the capital.

Pakistani town tense after 14 killed in tribal bloodbath

AFP, Karachi

Hundreds of police and paramilitary troops patrolled the southern Pakistani town of Kashmir Tuesday as tensions simmered over the killing of 14 people in a tribal feud, police said.

Most shops and markets remained closed in Kashmir, a remote town at the junction of Punjab, Sindh and Baluchistan provinces, where over a dozen gunmen killed 14 people and injured 20 on Monday.

"The situation is tense and police and rangers are patrolling the city as part of preventive measures," local police officer Tahir Nasir told AFP by telephone.



PHOTO: AFP

This handout photo provided by The New York Times shows Elizabeth Brennan Moynihan (back, L), walks with pall bearers as they walk behind the casket of Sen. Daniel P. Moynihan during a memorial at the Church of St. Patrick in Washington, DC on Monday. Though widely known for his commitments to left-of-centre politics, Moynihan was actually more of an iconoclast, often staking out policy positions -- like steadfast support of free trade -- at odds with his Democratic Party.