

Court summons Advani in mosque razing trial

AFP, New Delhi

A special court has summoned India's deputy premier L.K. Advani and six top Hindu nationalist leaders in connection with the 1992 razing of a mosque that sparked bloody riots, a report said Tuesday.

The Press Trust of India (PTI) said besides Advani, Human Resources Minister Murlu Manohar Joshi, former cabinet sports minister Uma Bharti and Ashok Singhal, president of the hard-line Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) are under orders to appear before the court on April 16.

The summons were issued Monday and were mailed to the seven leaders.

Advani, Singhal, Bharti and several others have been named in police reports as encouraging a frenzied mob of several thousand Hindu zealots who tore down the Babri Mosque in the northern town of Ayodhya on December 6, 1992.

WHO warns against travel to Hong Kong, S China

12 new SARS deaths in China

REUTERS, Hong Kong

The World Health Organisation urged travellers on Wednesday to postpone visits to Hong Kong and China's southern Guangdong province, where officials announced a sharply higher number of cases of a deadly flu-like virus.

The rare travel warning from the world health body came after a jump in the global death toll with China, Canada and Thailand reporting more victims of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

At least 75 have died worldwide and nearly 2,300 have been infected by the

virus that is spread by air travellers. The majority of cases have been in China and Hong Kong and health officials believe the outbreak began in China's southern Guangdong province in November.

"We have decided to make a recommendation that people planning to travel to Hong Kong and Guangdong consider postponing," said David Heymann, WHO's head of communicable diseases in Geneva.

The advisory is set to hit airlines, hotels and other industries reliant on tourists even harder after widespread trip cancellations to Asia and flight

cutbacks by Asian carriers.

"Even without this warning no one is coming to Hong Kong. Everyone here and everyone outside of the territory is so scared," said consultant Janice Lo.

Hong Kong, Singapore and Canada have already imposed sweeping quarantine measures, while airlines have enforced strict screen procedures.

Australia advised its citizens on Wednesday not to travel to Canada or any affected Asian country, while the United States planned to cut its diplomatic presence in Hong Kong and Guangzhou.

AFP adds: Twelve more Chinese

deaths from the pneumonia epidemic were reported Wednesday as the World Health Organisation (WHO) urged travelers to avoid the country's particularly hard-hit south. Suspected cases of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) were also reported across the continent-sized nation in areas previously believed unaffected, from Shanghai in the east to Sichuan in the southwest.

As the number of infected Chinese shot up, the WHO said the epidemic would also worsen internationally but appeared to have peaked in the southern province of Guangdong.

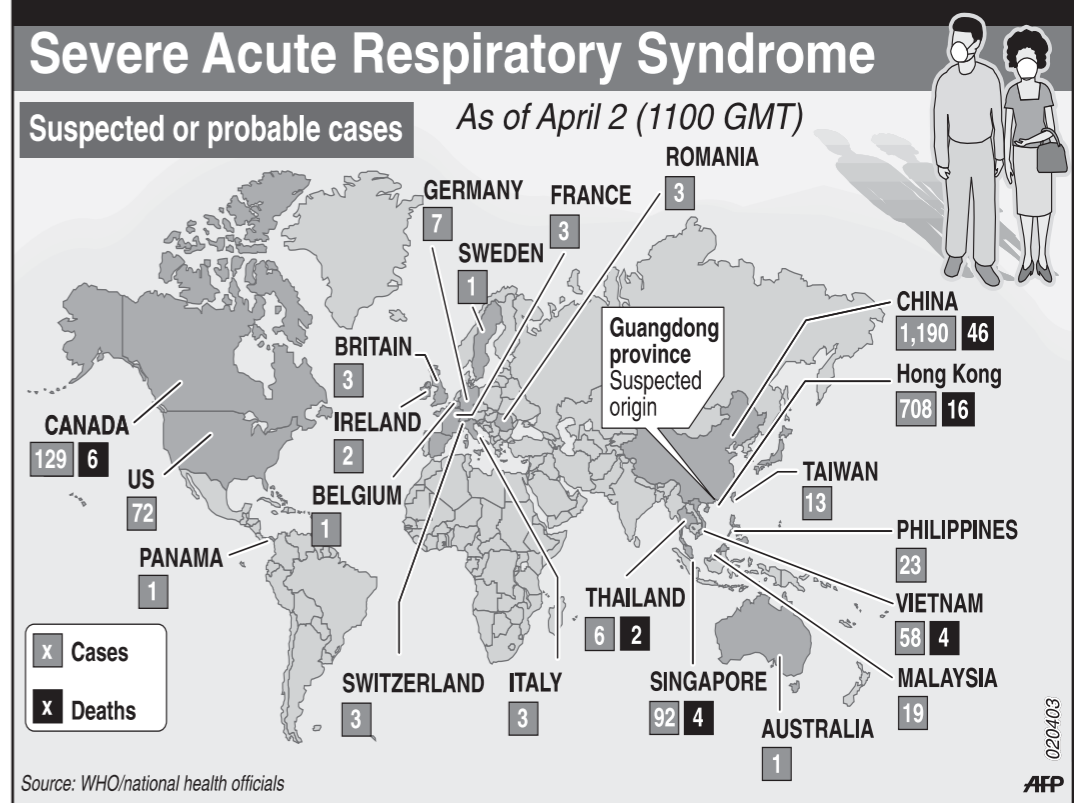


PHOTO: AFP

Friends and relatives grieve on Tuesday in Chima, 250 km from the Bolivian capital La Paz, after a landslide buried much of this remote gold mining town leaving perhaps as many as 300 people dead and another 200 missing. La Paz Governor Mateo Laura said he could not offer a specific toll, but said that local residents believe 200-300 people had lost their lives. Tonnes of rocks and earth sent sliding down Andean foothills by heavy rains entombed one third of the town in a valley north of the Andean country's capital.

Bolivian mudslide toll now 14 400 feared buried alive

REUTERS, Chima

A landslide triggered by heavy rains in a remote gold-prospecting town in northern Bolivia has killed 14 people, with 400 others feared buried beneath tons of mud and rock, officials said on Tuesday.

A mountainside washed into Chima, 117 miles from the capital, La Paz, on Monday, burying more than 100 houses in mud.

"We believe there must be between 300 and 400 people buried there," Defense Minister Freddy Teodovic told a news conference, saying he received preliminary reports a market and transportation terminal had been engulfed as well as houses.

Officials previously feared 200 people were missing in the area, which was declared a disaster zone by President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada.

"The people here are resigned to the fact they will never know how many

people were killed," said one doctor who arrived with a convoy of rescuers after a grueling 10-hour journey to reach the town, accessible only by a winding 360-mile road.

Government officials said the U.S. Embassy lent rescue teams, four helicopters and an airplane that are usually used in efforts to eradicate illegal crops of coca, the plant used to make cocaine. Bad weather hampered air travel to the area.

About 1,200 families live in the town beneath Chima mountain, where mining cooperatives prospect for gold with rudimentary equipment, desperate to escape poverty that envelops about 60 percent of the country's 8 million people.

"Everything I have swept away by the mountain -- my husband, my young son, my house," said Margarita Esquivel, who went shopping minutes before the deluge of mud thundered down on the town.

US discloses heavy losses in terror hunt

175 special operations forces got killed or injured

AFP, Washington

US special forces, whose superman image has created an aura of invulnerability around them, have unexpectedly disclosed heavy casualties in their worldwide hunt for Osama bin Laden and his terror associates.

Addressing a congressional panel Tuesday, Deputy Assistant Defence Secretary Marshall Billingslea said a total of 175 special operations forces (SOF) had been lost, killed or wounded since the beginning of a concerted post-September 11 counterterrorism drive aimed at bin Laden's al-Qaeda network.

"To date, there have been 137 SOF wounded, 91 of whom sustained injuries during combat," Billingslea told the House Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities. "Thirty eight SOF have been killed in the course of Operation Enduring Freedom and related counter-

terror operations."

The latest losses came in Afghanistan, where two US special forces troops were killed and one was wounded on Saturday, when their four-vehicle reconnaissance patrol was ambushed in the vicinity of the southwestern city of Geresk, according to the US Central Command.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell presented a slightly different version of the event, saying late Sunday that the two soldiers "were lost by being ambushed while they were inspecting a school and a hospital, both being built with American funding."

A total of 64 members of a broad international coalition taking part in Operation Enduring Freedom launched in October 2001 to rid Afghanistan of al-Qaeda operatives and their Taliban protectors have been officially reported dead.

However, a defence official ruled out the possibility that some of the casual-

ties, even among the secretive special forces, have remained undisclosed.

"There is no hiding of casualties at the Department of Defence," said the official, who spoke to AFP on condition of anonymity.

But he pointed out the Pentagon followed a different policy on combat injuries.

"We don't release the identities of wounded people because it's kind of a privacy matter," the official said.

With the US-led war on terror gathering steam, in recent months there has been a boom in US special operations around the world.

In addition to Iraq and Afghanistan, US special forces are deployed on in the Philippines, Colombia, Ivory Coast, Georgia, Yemen and the Horn of Africa, according to Billingslea, who advises Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on special operations.

Israel extends Scud alert by two weeks Talks with Palestinians resume

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel said Wednesday it will stay on full alert for another two weeks for fear of Iraqi missile strikes as its US ally closes on Baghdad, but on the home front high-level security talks were reportedly held to ease fighting with the Palestinians.

"The state of alert in the country over fears of an Iraqi attack will remain in force for at least a further two weeks," Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, in Washington for a series of meetings with the US government, told the daily Yediot Aharonot.

The minister's estimate came after talks with US President George W. Bush, and as US troops closed in on Baghdad.

US officials say Iraqi President Saddam Hussein could use chemical weapons against US and British troops as they move on Baghdad, or even try to fire Scud missiles against Israel as he did in the 1991 Gulf war.

On Tuesday, Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz had also said the state of alert would not be lifted.

"When we are sure that the threat of

missile attacks has passed -- but it has not and the threat still exists -- we will review the state of alert," Mofaz said.

Israelis have prepared sealed rooms as a protection in the event of chemical or biological attack, and have been instructed to carry gas masks with them whenever they leave their homes.

The press reported this week that two elderly sisters suffocated in a sealed room, apparently fearing a Scud attack. Last month, an Arab Israeli woman and her two teenage sons died in similar circumstances.

As Israel remained on stand-by for an attack from the embattled Iraqi regime, reports emerged that new efforts were being made to ease the 30-month conflict with the Palestinians which has claimed more than 3,000 lives, most of them Palestinians.

The first high-level security talks in months were held last week between delegations headed by General Doron Almog, head of the Israeli army's southern command, and General Abdelrazak al-Majaida, head of Palestinian security in the Gaza Strip, the Maariv daily said.

There was no official confirmation

from either side.

The meeting was held as part of efforts by moderate new Palestinian prime minister Mahmud Abbas to form a government to tackle the protracted crisis.

Abbas has called for a suspension of attacks on Israel, a move that has so far been publicly rejected by hardline factions.

During the meeting, the Palestinian delegation reportedly asked Israel to halt its hunt-and-kill policy against wanted militants as well as its often bloody incursions into the Gaza Strip.

Almog said Israel was ready to re-examine its operations if the Palestinian security forces, which in Gaza are still largely intact, take action against the powerful militant groups to end the attacks on Israel and Jewish settlements in the territory, Maariv said.

The last such security meeting was in August 2002, when the two sides aired the so-called Bethlehem-Gaza First plan, under which Israel agreed to pull back from reoccupied areas in return for Palestinian forces taking charge of security.

'North Korea sent missiles to Pakistan in February'

REUTERS, Tokyo

North Korea shipped about 10 Scud-B ballistic missiles to Pakistan in February in what could have been part of a deal to pay for nuclear technology from Islamabad, a Japanese daily reported on Wednesday.

Quoting unidentified US security sources, the Sankei Shimbun newspaper said a Pakistani freighter with about 10 Scud-B missile on board returned home in late February after loading them at a North Korean port earlier the same month.

The shipment of the ballistic missiles, which have a range of 190 miles, was spotted by US satellites as well as the Central Intelligence Agency, it said.

Sankei quoted a US intelligence source as saying that the missile sales may have been used by the communist state to pay for nuclear-related technology and materials bought from Pakistan.

Pakistan, which conducted its first nuclear tests in 1998, has repeatedly denied reports that it helped North Korea develop its suspected nuclear weapons

program.

Tuesday's Sankei report could not be independently confirmed.

Tensions have been high on the Korean peninsula since October, when US officials said North Korea had admitted to a secret nuclear arms program.

Last August, the United States imposed sanctions on a North Korean company and the North Korean government for exporting medium or long-range missile components.

In what appears to be a separate development, a US official in Washington said on Monday that Washington had imposed commercial sanctions on a Pakistani company because it arranged a transfer of North Korean missiles to Pakistan.

The company is Khan Research Laboratories (KRL), once headed by nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan, revered by many in Pakistan as the father of its nuclear bomb.

Under the sanctions, the United States will not enter into contracts or issue licenses to KRL and the company will not be authorised to export to the United States.



PHOTO: AFP

This photo released in the Monroe County Sheriff's Office website on Tuesday shows US Customs and Monroe County SWAT team members guarding passengers of a hijacked Cubana Airlines flight which landed at Key West International Airport in Key West Florida, on Tuesday. For the second time in two weeks, a hijacked Cuban airliner landed in Key West, Florida, 15 hours after a man saying he was armed with grenades seized the plane and demanded that the plane be flown to the US. Authorities said the alleged hijacker was arrested after the Soviet-made Antonov-24 made a "safe landing". In Cuba, authorities identified the hijacker as Adelmis Wilson Gonzalez and described him as having "a serious criminal record." The hostages were removed from the plane without incident or injuries but were handcuffed for security purposes.

Britain tightens citizenship laws

AFP, London

British citizenship can be stripped from people with dual nationality who act in a way that is "seriously prejudicial" to the country's interests, the Home Office said Tuesday, launching a radical overhaul of citizenship, immigration and asylum laws.

"If we are to welcome those that aspire to and qualify for British citizenship; we must also ensure that those who acquire it by deception or prove to be abusing the privilege of that citizenship by acting against the UK's vital interests, are not able to retain it," Home Secretary David Blunkett said in a statement.

As the reforms in the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act came into force Tuesday, a Labour minister called

in parliament for the new powers to be used to kick out the radical Muslim cleric Abu Hamza.

The Egyptian-born Hamza, vocal in his support of Islamic fundamentalism, has condemned the invasion of Iraq as a "war against Islam", and also claimed the September 11 attacks on the United States were a Jewish plot.

Home Office minister Beverley Hughes said in parliament last month that Hamza and others "are being very, very closely monitored."

The Act also aims to stop failed asylum seekers delaying their removal from Britain by abusing the appeal system, and to crack down on illegal employment by giving immigration officers new powers to enter and search business premises.