



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinians youths throw stones at an Israeli armoured vehicle during clashes on the main road north of the Deir al-Balah village in the Gaza Strip on Sunday. A Palestinian teenager and a member of the armed wing of Hamas were killed by Israeli forces during an army incursion into the village of Al-Msaddar, north of the Deir al-Balah refugee camp, after a six-hour operation to arrest militants.

WHO wages war against SARS

AFP, Guangzhou

Overshadowed by the Iraq conflict, the World Health Organization (WHO) is fighting a war of its own -- racing against time to find the source of a mysterious virus as it rages through the world.

The deadly virus, called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), has struck more than 30 countries worldwide but mostly in southern China's Guangdong province and Hong Kong.

Four WHO experts are beginning a second week in Guangdong to identify the virus, its transmission process and possible preventive steps.

They are being aided by a hoard of some 50 journalists on every step.

Reporters have stuck to the WHO team on its visits to hospitals, the Chinese Center for Disease Control offices and a nearby city where the first case of the virus was reported.

Seconds after WHO experts get in their van with their Chinese hosts, journalists fly into their taxis and give chase, forming an impressive motorcade.

WHO team spokesman Chris Powell said team members were made to feel like rock stars.

"It's like we are the Rolling Stones being followed by a pack of journalists," Powell told a reporter, alluding ironically to the British rock band which cancelled its maiden gigs in China because of the SARS scare.

"There are several cars following us

and I think they intend to follow us all day," Powell said.

Although the WHO epidemiologists and disease specialists are seen visiting several places, their agenda is set by Chinese officials and the only data they get is what their hosts provide.

Even the telephones in their rooms at the government-run Guangdong Guest House are blocked: they can neither make nor receive calls.

By the end of their first week in China, the experts Saturday had still not received laboratory specimen samples from the SARS cases in China -- something that is crucial for them to precisely identify the virus and work out ways to stop its spread.

China lacks the technology to properly test the specimen samples and determine the pathogens causing SARS.

It can either allow technology to be brought to the country or hand over sample specimen to be taken abroad for testing.

"We've proposed that both happen and we're assuming that's what will happen. Orally, they've agreed. We're waiting for it to actually happen," said Robert Breiman, head of the WHO team.

While the WHO experts repeatedly say they are getting good cooperation from Chinese officials and have been "impressed" with the hospitals and laboratory facilities they have been shown, Chinawatchers point out that the team is only being taken to some of the best hospitals.

Vajpayee for talks to resolve Ayodha row

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said Sunday an explosive dispute over the construction of a temple on the ruins of a razed mosque would be resolved through talks.

"The Ram temple issue is very much relevant and it is to be solved through negotiations," Vajpayee told the Press Trust of India news agency in the central town of Raipur.

In 1992, Hindu zealots tore down the 16th-century Babri Mosque, as they claimed the site was once the birthplace of the Hindu warrior god Ram and a temple had existed there previously.

The destruction sparked India's bloodiest riots since the subcontinent's

independence in 1947 and left at least 2,000 people dead.

Militant Hindu groups want to build a temple on the site, while Muslims want to rebuild the mosque.

The dispute is now in the hands of the courts, which recently ordered the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), a government body that looks after monuments and historical sites, to carry out excavations to determine if a temple existed on the site before the mosque.

Radical Hindu organisation Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP -- World Hindu Council) has threatened to organise mass agitation campaigns to mobilise support for the construction of the temple.

N Korea condemns UNSC meeting as 'prelude to war'

AFP, Seoul

North Korea accused the United States Sunday of using UN Security Council discussion of its nuclear program as a "prelude to war" and warned that it would fully mobilize and beef up its forces.

"The UNSC's handling of the nuclear issue on the peninsula itself is precisely a prelude to war," a North Korean foreign ministry spokesman said in a statement released by Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency.

North Korea will not recognize any resolution to be adopted at a UN Security Council meeting on Wednesday, the spokesman added.

He condemned Security Council discussion of North Korea's nuclear program as "a grave provocative act intended to scuttle all its efforts for dialogue and aggravate the situation on

the Korean peninsula.

"If the UNSC is abused for the US hostile policy to stifle the DPRK (North Korea), it will not bear any responsibility for the failure of all the efforts for dialogue and the extremely tense situation but will have no other option but to beef up the deterrent force for war by mobilizing all the potentials," the statement said.

South Korea has stepped up its diplomatic drive to find a negotiated settlement to the nuclear crisis.

The US attack on Iraq, however, has raised tension on the Korean peninsula, with Pyongyang accusing Washington of planning a pre-emptive strike on North Korea after hostilities in the Middle East.

"The Iraqi war shows that to allow disarming through inspection does not help avert a war but rather sparks it. This suggests that even the signing of a non-aggression treaty with the US

Pakistan is a 'fit case' for attack by US: Indian FM

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha has described Pakistan as a "fit case" for an Iraqi style military action by the US because it has weapons of mass destruction, sheltered terrorists and lacked democracy.

"It is a fit case," Sinha told the Hindustan Times in an interview published Sunday when asked whether Pakistan deserved action similar to that against Iraq.

Sinha said he would not oppose such action against Pakistan, but added "...whether they will be up to them. We can't go to someone and ask them to attack another country."

"We will keep pointing out the activities of Pakistan and in them the role of the army, the drug business centered in Pakistan ... and how people in (the Pakistan

zone of Kashmir) are repressed and trampled on," he said.

Relations between India and Pakistan, who both conducted nuclear tests in May 1998, are strained.

India says arch rival Pakistan has sheltered Osama bin Laden since the Taliban were ousted from Afghanistan in November 2001.

It also accuses Pakistan of "cross-border terrorism" -- arming, training and funding an Islamic insurgency in its Muslim majority region of Kashmir, a charge Islamabad denies.

The 14-year-old insurgency has claimed more than 38,000 lives.

Kashmir, which has sparked two of the three wars between the two nuclear rivals since their independ-

ence from British rule in 1947, is divided between them and claimed by both.

The two came to the brink of war last year over the issue of cross-border terrorism with hundreds of thousands of troops deployed on their shared borders. The troops were withdrawn late last year.

On Wednesday, Sinha told AFP in an interview that international opinion regarding India's position on disputed Kashmir had been boosted by the precedent set by the US-led military invasion of Iraq.

"We derive some satisfaction ... because I think all those people in the international community ... realise that India has a much better case to go for pre-emptive action against Pakistan than the US has in Iraq," he said.

Israel sees Iraq threat vanishing after start of war

AFP, Jerusalem

As the strategic threat from Iraq was seen to vanish with a US-led advance into Baghdad Sunday, Israeli forces shot dead two Palestinians, one of them aged 14, during a raid into a Gaza Strip village.

Israel, which has been on full alert for Iraqi missile attacks since the start of the US-led war against the regime of President Saddam Hussein, remained on a high state of vigilance but a senior army officer said a major menace to the Jewish state had gone.

"A very large threat which was hanging over Israel's eastern border has disappeared," General Amos Gilad, in charge of explaining the country's defenses during the war, told public radio.

"Without Iraq, there is no longer the possibility of a united Arab front on our eastern border," he added.

"Saddam's regime was a threat to us. Its disappearance bolsters American hegemony in the region and deprives Syria of its strategic rear."

Gilad said "the Americans probably reckoned that their entry into Baghdad would cause the dictator's regime to crumble ... they don't want to occupy Iraq militarily but to cause the emergence of a democratic power which would be a stabilising factor in the region".

India set for test-fire of 'Agni-III': Fernandes

PTI, AFP, New Delhi

India is developing 'Agni-III', a long-range surface-to-surface missile capable of carrying nuclear warheads, and is making all efforts to test-fire it this year, according to Defence Minister George Fernandes.

"The test firing of Agni-III is overdue and we feel the need for that long-range missile as part of our policy of deterrence," he told PTI in an interview.

Asked as to what would be the range of Agni-III, Fernandes said it would have a strike capacity longer than Agni-II, which has a range of over 2000 km.

India is in possession of surface-to-surface missiles, 700-km range Agni-I and Agni II, which are both capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

To a question as to when Agni-III would be test-fired, the minister said, "The date has not been fixed up. Effort is to see that it is test-fired this year".

On whether Agni-I and Agni-II have been deployed with the armed forces, Fernandes said "well, they are available

for deployment".

Replying to a question on if these missiles would be with the strategic forces or the Army, he said "that will depend on the situation that will demand their use".

Fernandes replied in the affirmative when asked if Agni-I and Agni-II were being produced.

Two other variants of the missile -- the Agni-I, with a range of 700 kilometres (437 miles) and the Agni-II, with a 2,000 kilometre (1,240 mile) range -- were at present "available for deployment," he said.

When asked about the range for the Agni-III, Fernandes said it would be more than 2,000 kilometres (1,240 miles).

India reportedly began developing Agni-III in 1999 and reports have suggested it could achieve a range of 5,000 kilometres (3,100 miles).

"The date (for the Agni-III test) has not been fixed up. The effort is to see that it is test fired this year," Fernandes said.

7 militants killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Indian troops shot dead seven suspected Kashmiri militants in separate encounters, while a civilian died in a mine explosion in Kashmir, police said Sunday.

Six militants were killed Sunday in Rajouri district as they tried to infiltrate into Indian-Kashmir from the Pakistani-administered zone, a defence source said.

"A group of rebels were intercepted by Indian troops just after they crossed into India from the Pakistani side," he said.

Elsewhere in Kashmir, a police spokesman said soldiers had shot dead Fayaz Ahmed, alias Saif-ul-Islam, a top commander of the hardline Harkat-ul-Mujahedin, near Ahrilal, 75 km south of Srinagar, the summer capital, on Saturday.

68 killed in Honduran prison riot: Police

AFP, Tegucigalpa

At least 68 people were killed and 34 injured in a riot and attempted jailbreak at a prison in the Honduran port of La Ceiba, police sources said Sunday.

"Two of the injured who were in hospital have died, so with that there are 68 dead," police spokesman Rene Briceño told AFP.

One prison officer from El Porvenir prison was among the dead, he added.

Honduran President Ricardo Maduro visited the prison, some 400 km north of Tegucigalpa on the Central American country's Caribbean coast, late Saturday.

Maduro said he would name a commission to investigate the riot, which authorities said was sparked when members of a notorious youth gang called Mara 18 attempted to overcome prison guards and make their

escape en masse.

Members of the gang wielded machetes, knives and at least two guns when they attacked guards and later set fire to the prison, which houses some 500 inmates, Briceño said.

The fire spread rapidly and some of those who died were overcome by the flames, while others were caught in the crossfire of a gunfight between gang members and prison security, he added.

Prison warden Gustavo Fajardo warned that the death toll could still rise further given the large number of injured, and the seriousness of their conditions.

The injured were taken to Atlantida hospital where medical staff were overwhelmed by the number of patients. A doctor who identified himself only as Canahuati said the injured were being triaged to decide which would be treated at the hospital.



PHOTO: AFP

Japanese Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi (3rd-L) and Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing (3rd-R) hold talks in Beijing on Sunday. Japan and China discussed the nuclear crisis in North Korea.