

## 21 children die in Siberian school blaze

AFP, Moscow  
Twenty-one Russian children and their teacher were killed in a fire that destroyed a school in eastern Siberia yesterday, a spokeswoman for the Russian emergencies ministry, Marina Rykлина, told the Interfax news agency.

The children were aged 11 to 17, another emergencies ministry official told the ITAR-TASS news agency.

Earlier reports had said the children were aged five to 11.

Seven other children were rushed to hospital, the official added.

However, RIA Novosti quoted another emergencies ministry official as saying that 10 children had been hospitalised.

The fire broke out in the village of Sydy Bal, in the east Siberian region of Yakutya.

A government-appointed commission flew to Sydy Bal to determine the cause of the fire, ITAR-TASS reported.



PHOTO: AFP

Two hospital patients don surgical masks as they went out to buy provisions nearby a hospital in Beijing on Monday. Two more people have died in China from Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), official media reported, quoting the health ministry, as the toll reached 53 with 1,268 cases of infections.

## HK moves to keep city clean

CHINA DAILY, ANN, Hong Kong

With more people becoming infected by the deadly Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) virus, efforts are being stepped up to keep Hong Kong clean.

Among the measures is a harsher punishment imposed on those who spit in public places. Offenders will have to appear in court and face a fine of up to HK\$1,000.

Some may argue that the move is a bit late. But it is directed in the right direction.

Despite the education campaign for and warnings about the spread of

SARS, it is surprising to see that there are still some members of the public who choose to overlook the potential danger.

## Another Indian MiG aircraft crashes: 5 hurt

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian Airforce Mig-21 aircraft crashed yesterday shortly after take-off in the northern state of Haryana, injuring at least five people on the ground, the United News of India news agency reported.

The aircraft crashed into a residential area of Ambala city, the agency said adding that the pilot ejected safely. The cause of the crash was not immediately known.

The injured included two children and three women. A house and some vehicles were also damaged, the agency said.

The accident is the second involving an Indian Airforce MiG aircraft in four days.

## War echoes with full force in Indian parliament

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian government on Monday felt the heat of the war in Iraq as opposition parties joined forces to target Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee for not condemning outright the US-led military action.

Parliament resumed its crucial budget session yesterday after almost a month's holiday with the legislature erupting in turmoil as MPs demanded scheduled business be scrapped so a debate on the war could be held.

Manohar Joshi, speaker of the 545-seat lower house, relented to the request, saying the war was a "strategic matter" that needed to be discussed.

Vajpayee has said the war is "unjustified" and his BJP party has passed a resolution saying it "deplores" the military action, but the opposition Monday insisted the condemnation should be stronger.

# Inter-Korean ties freeze as top-level talks scrapped

AFP, Seoul

South Korea said on Monday that four-day cabinet-level talks with North Korea scheduled for this week in Pyongyang had been scrapped, effectively freezing ties and deepening a six-month-old nuclear crisis.

Government officials said the talks were the last official channel of communication between the capitalist South and the communist North.

"It is regrettable that the 10th South-North ministerial talks, scheduled for April 7-10 in Pyongyang, cannot take place because your side failed to respect an agreement," South Korea's Unification Minister Jeong Se-hyun said in a statement that was delivered by telephone to the North Korean side.

The first cabinet-level talks since South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun took office on February 25 were expected to focus on inter-Korean

exchanges and the North Korean nuclear crisis that has raised tension on the Korean peninsula for the past six months.

South Korea has been seeking for several days to contact North Korea to discuss the scheduled talks, but the approaches were met by a wall of silence from the Stalinist state.

Analysts said the North Korean decision reflected anger in Pyongyang over South Korea's decision to send non-combat troops to help the US-led war on Iraq, an "unpardonable criminal act," according to the North's state media said.

Last month, North Korea called off inter-Korean economic and maritime talks, accusing South Korea of heightening its security alert status and conducting massive war games with the United States.

North Korea has also criticised Seoul's decision to launch a probe into

allegations that Pyongyang received illicit payments from the South Korean government in return for staging an inter-Korean summit in 2000.

President Roh last week urged the North to return to the dialogue table, saying "North Korea must talk with South Korea in an open and sincere manner."

A Unification Ministry official said that for now all lines of official communication between North and South were cut.

"Basically relations between the North and South are frozen," he said.

The previous round of cabinet-level talks was held in Seoul in late January, shortly after North Korea pulled out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as the nuclear crisis deepened.

The International Atomic Energy Agency referred North Korea to the UN Security Council on February 12 and on Wednesday the Security Council will

discuss the crisis for the first time.

Pyongyang said Sunday it saw the council meeting as a "prelude to war" and that it would not recognise any resolution emerging from the Security Council.

North Korea is holding out for one-on-one talks with Washington to resolve the stand-off, demanding a non-aggression treaty before addressing "US security concerns."

Washington is seeking a multilateral framework and rejecting Pyongyang's demand for direct talks.

Washington says a bilateral negotiating track would amount to a reward for "bad behaviour" by North Korea, which has systematically raised tensions over the crisis since it was confronted last October by what the United States says was evidence of a prohibited nuclear weapons program.

# SARS gloom deepens

## Canada, China, Hong Kong reveal new deaths; Beijing under WHO fire

AFP, Hong Kong

More deaths from SARS on Sunday in Canada and Hong Kong and the death of an International Labour Organisation (ILO) official in Beijing provided a gloomy backdrop to efforts to find a cure for the killer disease.

As the first suspected case of infection by the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) virus was detected in Kuwait and a fifth in Britain, World Health Organisation (WHO) experts pursued the search for the cause of the mystery illness in the epidemic's epicentre, southern China.

The death of the ILO's Pekka Aro from Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome was announced at a Chinese health ministry press conference in Beijing. He was the highest profile casualty of the outbreak since WHO expert Carlo Urbani -- who first identified the disease -- died in Bangkok last month.

Aro, from Finland, was among 19 new cases announced in the capital, bringing the number of deaths in Beijing to four.

At least 51 deaths from SARS have been reported in China and 1,247 people have been infected, according to official figures released Sunday.

China went into damage control mode to repair an image badly tarnished by its foot-dragging in handling the outbreak.

WHO investigators held meetings with Chinese health and disease control officials on Sunday, their fourth day in Guangdong province, where the virus has killed more people than anywhere else.

In an effort to fend off criticism of China's handling of the outbreak,

state-run media carried reports by the WHO praising China for its handling of the crisis the authorities put a gag on Internet surfers mentioning SARS online.

The German magazine Stern Sunday challenged the official figure of four deaths reported in the Chinese capital, saying at least 15 died in Beijing.

Ten of the victims had died in military hospital 302, and a further 40 were hospitalised there with the ailment, Stern said on its website, quoting hospital doctors and nurses.

At least three patients and a doctor and nurse had died at another hospital in the centre of town, it reported.

In neighbouring Hong Kong, hopes that the rate of infection has slowed were dashed as two people died on Sunday and another 42 cases were detected.

Despite assurances from health authorities and Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa last week that the rate of infection had stabilised, the sudden weekend surge raised the death toll to 22 and infections to 842.

The latest figures brought the worldwide death toll from SARS to 94 and the number of confirmed or suspected infections to 2,718.

Hong Kong residents and organisations who had begun shedding surgical masks in belief that the disease was under control, stepped up precautionary measures on Sunday.

Among them, the Roman Catholic diocese removed basins of holy water from its churches and ordered clergy to wear masks and gloves.

In Singapore, where six people have died and three new cases Sunday lifted its total of confirmed infections

to 106, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong set up a cabinet-level task force to help beef up the city-state's defences.

In Malaysia, acting Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi called for calm after the country's first probable death from SARS was announced overnight.

Australia was taking no chances after four children who recently arrived in the country were identified as suspected carriers: Authorities will detain anybody entering the country with suspected symptoms.

On the other side of the Pacific, Canadian health officials Sunday said that a person who died in hospital on April 1 had succumbed to SARS, bringing the country's death toll to nine.

Britain's Department of Health and the Health Protection Agency said in a joint statement Sunday that a man was hospitalised the previous day after returning from Taiwan on March 29, at which point he had not shown SARS symptoms.

France's ministry of health told AFP on Sunday that 16 suspected SARS cases have now been recorded in the country.

Meanwhile, China was publicly criticised yesterday for its foot-dragging over the deadly SARS outbreak by the director of the World Health Organisation as the death toll rose to 53.

In WHO's first public condemnation of China, the global health agency's director general Gro Harlem Brundtland said China should have reported its first cases of the atypical pneumonia, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), more quickly.

## '1,000 killed in ethnic bloodbath in Congo'

AFP, Kigali

At least 1,000 people have been killed in ethnic violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the United Nations said on Sunday, one day after the signing of an accord to end over four years of war in the vast Central African country.

The massacres, which took place on Thursday in the northeastern region of Ituri, claimed "at least one thousand victims", the UN mission in the DRC said in a statement sent to AFP's office in the Rwandan capital Kigali.

It said this information came from "witness accounts" of the massacres, which took place in the parish of Drod and 14 neighbouring areas.

According to lists compiled by local leaders, 966 people were "summarily executed" in three hours of massacres, said the UN mission, which on Saturday sent a team to Drod and the surrounding areas.

## Pak police hunt tribesmen after bloody clashes

AFP, Karachi

Police launched a search Monday for tribesmen who killed 14 rivals in southern Pakistan last week, as a separate intra-tribe clash claimed 16 lives in the same district at the weekend.

On April 1, 14 members of the Mazar tribe were killed when Bugti tribesmen gunned down a Mazar elder and his colleagues at the elder's home in remote Kashmeer district, some 600 km northeast of Karachi at the junction of Sindh, Punjab and Baluchistan provinces.

"We have handed over a list of wanted persons involved in last week's killings to the Baluchistan police for their arrest," police chief of southern Sindh province Syed Kamal Shah told AFP.

## 2 dead as fire sweeps through Delhi slum

AFP, New Delhi

Two people were killed yesterday in a fire which swept through a slum in the Indian capital New Delhi, officials said.

About 700 shanty homes were destroyed in the blaze which broke out early morning near a memorial to peace icon Mahatma Gandhi, a fire service department official said.

"We recovered two charred bodies after putting the fire out which took three hours," the official said.

About 18 fire engines were brought in to control the blaze, the cause of which was not known, he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Relatives of one of the ten Belgian servicemen killed on duty as United Nations during the early days of the 1994 Rwanda Genocide, visit Camp Kigali where the massacre took place. A delegation of families and relatives arrived on Sunday in Rwanda to take part in the commemoration of the 9th anniversary.

# Govt stops Kashmiri Pandits from fleeing homes

BBC ONLINE, Srinagar

Hindu Pandits in Indian-administered Kashmir who survived a massacre last month say the authorities have forcibly stopped them from fleeing their homes.

The village of Nadimarg in southern Kashmir, where 24 members of the minority Hindu community were gunned down two weeks ago, looks like a fortress.

More than 125 police have been deployed to guard the village, which has a population of just 28.

A barbed-wire fencing has been put up around the village. But none of this has restored a sense of security to the villagers who survived the massacre.

Instead they feel as if they had been lodged in a prison.

Vicky, aged about 20, lost his whole family in the massacre.

"We are being held hostage. We are not allowed to move out of the village," he says.

"Yesterday, a boy, Deepak, dared to visit the neighbouring village of Yaripora. The Central Reserve Police Force beat him up and brought him back. They watch us even when we go out for our morning ablutions. We have become virtual prisoners."

Movement of the Pandits, as Kashmir's Hindus are known, was restricted after they attempted to flee

their homes a few days ago.

They set out for the Hindu-majority city of Jammu, some in vehicles and others on foot, carrying the ashes of their slain relatives.

But the police and military stopped them in the village of Bosul.

Police took away licenses and other documents from the drivers.

But the Pandits travelling in the vehicles were allowed to go up to the town of Khanabal after villager Moti Lal pleaded with the police that taking the ashes back home would be a sin.

Later, the authorities led by the state's Planning commissioner, Vijay Bakaya, had a meeting with the Pandits and persuaded them to go back to their homes.

Vijay Kumar, a young man who is the only survivor in a family of nine, says the authorities promised to "do everything possible for us within 48 hours. But nothing has been done except that we have been placed under house arrest."

Not only are the Pandits being stopped from moving out of the village, their Muslim friends from the neighbouring villages are being discouraged from visiting them too.

Vicky says: "Nobody has come here after the 10th day ceremony. A Muslim friend from the neighbourhood had been trying for the past three days to visit us but has been allowed in only

today. (The 10th day ceremony is observed by Hindus to mark the end of the mourning period after which people can start their normal routine.)

"Two of my friends used to come here to sleep at night. One of them was beaten up by the military the other day."

A senior most police officer says that the government has been caught in an impossible situation.

"Nadimarg has become a symbolic case. If we let the Pandits flee their homes, we'll make a success of the enemy's game-plan. At the same time, the government would lose face if a single person from the village came to any harm now," the officer said.

Security apart, Vicky says it is too painful for him to stay in the village; for he is constantly reminded of his family members who were killed.

He says he would be able to relax in Jammu.

Vijay Kumar says he will flee to Jammu even if he has no food there.

While I was at Nadimarg on Sunday, the state's junior minister of industries, Raman Mattoo, himself a Pandit, visited the village to persuade the Pandits not to leave.

Meanwhile, at least 20 families from other villages across the Kashmir Valley have migrated to Jammu over the past week.

# China 'exposes' US HR abuses

CHINA DAILY, ANN, Beijing

The Information Office of China's State Council published a document Thursday entitled "The Human Rights Record of the United States in 2002" in response to the US State Department's "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2002."

The article uses the latest evidence to show that although the United States is only too ready to censure other countries for alleged human rights abuses, it has turned a blind eye to serious violations of human rights on its own soil.

The article comprises eight parts:

Ineffective Protection of Life and Security of Person; Serious Human Rights Violations by Law Enforcement Officials; Money-driven Democracy; Poverty, Hunger and Homelessness; The Worrying Condition of Women and Children; Deep-rooted Racial Discrimination; Flagrant Violation of Human Rights in Other Countries; and Double Standards in International Field of Human Rights.

Also Thursday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao Thursday urged the United States to think more of its own human rights problems.