

Coronavirus 'likeliest' cause of SARS: WHO

Virus spreads pentacles in HK, Singapore

AFP, Guangzhou

Coronavirus, a virus which causes the common cold, is the "likeliest" cause of the mysterious disease SARS, a World Health Organization (WHO) official said Tuesday.

Wolfgang Preiser, a member of a WHO team probing the source of SARS in southern China's Guangdong province, said much evidence pointed to the virus, but added it could be working in conjunction with another pathogen to create the global epidemic.

"In fact, there is on an international level, much evidence pointing towards coronavirus ... but that is still not proven. Much more work needs to be done on that," Preiser told reporters on the last day of a six-day investigation.

"On the other hand, there are several laboratories that have found other pathogens perhaps on top of coronaviruses so basically we cannot tell with certainty so far, but from the overall picture it seems coronavirus is the likeliest agent."

WHO and other international experts have said they suspect a strain of the coronavirus previously known to affect animals may be causing Severe

Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

Guangdong's Health Department Director Huang Huahua said Tuesday Chinese scientists are testing for the coronavirus in patients' specimen samples, but have not found it.

"So as of now we haven't found this illness has any direct relations with animals," Huang said.

WHO team leader Robert Breiman, however, had told AFP China lacks the technology to properly test for coronavirus and must either allow the technology to be brought here or provide samples to be taken abroad.

Chinese officials have verbally agreed, but WHO is still waiting for further movement on the subject.

It was unclear why China still has not turned over the samples, but if evidence is found that the disease is caused by a strain of the coronavirus which affects animals, China's agriculture industry could come under question and its massive animal and meat exports harmed.

Experts have said many disease virus originated in animals and jumped to humans.

Guangdong residents' have close habitation and frequent contact with

animals such as pigs.

A top US epidemiologist told Congress Monday there was mounting evidence that SARS is caused by a novel coronavirus that may have crossed species from an animal to humans.

Doctor Anthony Fauci, who heads the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said a vaccine used to treat viral respiratory infections among pigs could prove useful in finding a cure.

To get definitive answers, WHO needs samples from China, which has more SARS cases than anywhere else in the world and which is where the first SARS case was reported.

Reuters adds: Cockroaches may have carried a deadly flu-like virus through a Hong Kong apartment block, a top health official said on Tuesday as the disease spread to one of the city's crowded new towns.

In Singapore, air force paramedics have joined the battle against Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the government said on Tuesday Internet-linked cameras might be used to enforce home quarantine orders.



PHOTO: AFP
A staff member from Hong Kong's Health Department (L) escorts on Tuesday a resident of Amoy Gardens housing estate to his apartment wearing masks and gowns to clean-up after an outbreak of the killer pneumonia virus SARS led to residents being quarantined last week. A massive clean-up started at the housing block which has been one of the centres of the outbreak of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) virus sweeping the region leading to 247 residents of one block being quarantined for ten days.

Pakistan accuses India of escalating arms race

US will not attack Pakistan, says Pak FM, China seeks calm in S Asia

AP, Islamabad

Pakistan accused neighbouring India on Monday of escalating an arms race as New Delhi's plans to test-fire a nuclear-capable missile heated tensions between the South Asian rivals.

Saying it could defend itself against any strike by New Delhi, a Pakistani government minister urged India's Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha to tone down the rhetoric against Islamabad. "As we have stated before, India is the proliferator in this region," Foreign Office spokesman Aziz Ahmed Khan said at a weekly briefing.

He was responding to New Delhi's announcement Sunday that India hopes to test-fire an Agni III missile, which can carry a nuclear warhead, later this year. India's Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha earlier said his nation would be justified in launching a pre-emptive military strike against Pakistan because terrorists allegedly cross from Pakistan into Jammu and Kashmir to

foment insurgency there.

India claims Pakistan arms and trains the terrorists, but Islamabad denies this. Sinha said India had a better case to attack Pakistan than the United States and Britain did for launching the assault on Iraq.

Pakistan Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed said Islamabad can defend itself against any strike by India. "We want to live in peace," Ahmed said. "But we can defend ourselves against any intrusions."

The United States and other Western countries have urged India to abandon development of the Agni III, saying they were worried about an arms race between India and Pakistan, which both have nuclear weapons. The Agni III's exact range hasn't been disclosed, but officials have said it could be more than 3,000 kilometres (1,800 miles).

PTI adds: Seeking to calm fears that the US might target Pakistan after its war on Iraq, Foreign Minister Khurshid Muhammad Kasuri said Washington

has promised to continue its economic assistance and military sales to Islamabad.

Dismissing speculation that US would turn its attention to Pakistan due to its alleged nuclear co-operation with North Korea and the danger of its nuclear arms falling into the hands of Islamic extremists, Kasuri said "it can never be the turn of Pakistan as it is a responsible country."

Meanwhile, China Tuesday called for calm in South Asia and urged nuclear rivals India and Pakistan to engage in dialogue to resolve mounting tensions over nuclear weapons and Kashmir.

"India and Pakistan are both countries of importance in South Asia and have great responsibility in maintaining peace and stability in the region," foreign ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao said.

"We hope that the two sides can sit down and properly handle their disputes so as to realize peace and stability in South Asia."

9 killed as Aceh peace monitors pull back

AFP, Banda Aceh

Indonesian police and soldiers on Tuesday shot dead nine suspected separatist rebels in Aceh province in one of the bloodiest days since a peace pact was signed last December, police said.

The report coincided with an announcement that international and local peace monitors will be withdrawn from the field because of fears for their safety.

"There were nine people killed in five different locations today in Pidie district," said district police chief Adjunct Senior Commissioner Mariyanto.

He said suspected members of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) ambushed an army patrol at Blang Malu. Two attackers were killed and two handguns seized.

Around noon, a group of policemen encountered two suspected rebels who were extorting money from traders at

the market in Grong Grong, Mariyanto said.

One rebel was killed in a shootout while the other escaped, he said.

Mariyanto said an armed group ambushed the police group as they were on their way back to their station in Delima. Four attackers were shot dead but only one handgun was found on the victims.

In Tiro district, declared as a "zone of peace", gunmen ambushed a police patrol near Pulau Kenari village. Mariyanto said two attackers -- suspected rebels -- were killed and one handgun was found on one of the victims.

A witness said police hunting down the ambush group traded shots with unidentified men at Mila near Delima. The clash was continuing in late afternoon.

GAM said the killings were "part of a scenario to scuttle" the peace deal.

North Korea ups rhetoric on eve of UN talks

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea said on Tuesday, the eve of a key UN review of Pyongyang's suspected nuclear weapons program, that the United States wanted to "perpetrate military terrorism" against the North because of its atomic ambitions.

Two deadlines loom this week in the long-running nuclear crisis, which has hit foreign investment in South Korea, put international ratings agencies on their guard and added to global tensions already heightened because of the US-led war in Iraq.

"You have to expect a ratcheting up by North Korea this week," said Brad Glosserman of the Hawaii-based Pacific Forum CSIS think tank.

On Wednesday, the UN Security Council meets to discuss a response to

North Korea's decision 89 days earlier to pull out of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Pyongyang says it will ignore what the council says and would consider sanctions -- highly unlikely at this stage -- a declaration of war.

On Thursday, North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT becomes official with the end of a formal 90-day notice period. North Korea has said the notice period did not apply to it.

True to form, North Korea's media rummaged deep in their store of invective on Tuesday ahead of the deadlines.

"The US rulers are keen to perpetrate military terrorism, state terrorism against the DPRK, groundlessly terming it 'terrorism sponsor' and 'a rogue state'," said the communist party

newspaper Rodong Sinmun in a commentary. Washington has lumped North Korea with Iraq and Iran in an "axis of evil."

The impoverished communist state -- its official name is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) -- has accused Washington of pressing for the Council to take up the nuclear standoff as a prelude to war once the Iraq conflict is over.

It says it will discuss its atomic plans only with Washington as part of talks on a non-aggression pact. The United States says any talks must include South Korea, China, Japan and Russia.

A flurry of diplomatic visitors to China suggests the United States could be making some timely headway on this front.

India to attend Lankan peace meet in US

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka said Tuesday the Indian government had confirmed it would take part in a key international meeting aimed at boosting the island's peace bid with Tamil Tiger rebels.

"Representatives of the governments of Germany, India, Japan, Norway and the UK are among the countries that have already confirmed their participation," said a statement from the Sri Lankan embassy in Washington issued here Tuesday.

The April 14 meeting will set the stage for an aid pledging conference in Tokyo, Japan on June 9 and 10, co-chaired by Sri Lanka's peace broker Norway, Japan, the US and the European Union.

Nearly 30 countries which provide foreign aid to Sri Lanka will participate at the "peace support seminar" in Washington.

Hindus offer prayers at disputed Indian temple

AFP, New Delhi

Hindu devotees Tuesday offered prayers at a disputed temple after a government body opened up the site following violent protests, an official said.

The 1,000-year old Bhojshala structure in the Dhar district of central Madhya Pradesh state, which has a mosque inside a Hindu temple, has been open to Muslims for prayers every Friday.

Previously Hindus were only allowed to offer prayers there once a year on the day of the spring festival Basant Panchami under an agreement made in 1998.

The arrangement was challenged in February by activists of the right-wing outfit Hindu Jagran Manch (Hindu Awakening Forum), leading to violent protests in which three people were killed and up to 15 policemen injured.

On Monday, the Archaeological

Survey of India, which oversees the property, directed the state government to open the structure to Hindus every Tuesday.

"Around 1,000 people have visited the site since morning. The situation is completely normal," said Sanjay Dubey, Dhar's top administration official.

Dhar told AFP by telephone that 150 armed guards, besides state police, were on guard at the site.

The complex is now also open to tourists seven days a week.

The Bhojshala temple was built around 997 AD by the Hindu king Raja Bhoj of the Parmar dynasty. The temple gradually fell into disuse and a mosque was built inside it sometime in the 15th century.

The dispute is reminiscent of one in the northern city of Ayodhya, where Hindu fanatics in 1992 tore down a 16th-century mosque, which they say was built over the birthplace of the god Ram.



PHOTO: AFP
An Indian woman stands by her husband as he recovers in a hospital in Agartala on Tuesday after being injured by tribal militants. Five people were killed and eight injured when tribal militants attacked a marriage reception at Jagabandhu Para village, 80 km east of the Tripura state capital Agartala.

Congolese fear reprisals after civilian massacre

Congo civil war kills 3.3 million people: IRC

REUTERS, Bunia

Congolese said on Tuesday they feared reprisal attacks after nearly 1,000 civilians were reported killed by tribal militias in what may be the worst atrocity in the country's 4 and a half year civil war.

"This is really hell," said Emmanuel Ralonji in the northeastern town of Bunia, near a remote area where witnesses say 966 people were shot and hacked to death within three hours last Thursday.

"We are not secure, even here. Anything can happen," Ralonji told Reuters as he listened to radio reports of the killings.

Witnesses said women and children joined in the dawn raid on Drodro town and 14 neighboring villages near Bunia, the capital of Ituri province 80 km (50

miles) from the border with Uganda.

Local people have shown United Nations investigators some 20 mass graves in Drodro, some with scraps of clothing and traces of blood in the freshly-turned soil.

About 49 seriously injured survivors are in hospital.

"There are people coming from that place and they tell us they have lost everybody in their family," said Isabel Kutu in Bunia.

Ituri province has seen some of the worst atrocities in Congo's civil war, which began in 1998 when Uganda and Rwanda backed an uprising to overthrow the Kinshasa government.

At one point six foreign armies were drawn into a free-for-all for Congo's mineral wealth. Two million people are believed to have died, mainly from hunger and disease.

AP adds: More than 3 million people have died during Congo's civil war, the vast majority from malnutrition and disease, a relief organization said Tuesday in Nairobi.

The International Rescue Committee said in a report that at least 85 percent of the 3.3 million deaths were from easily treatable diseases and malnutrition.

"This is a humanitarian catastrophe of horrid and shocking proportions," George Rapp, president of the New York-based organization said.

Previous IRC studies put the death toll at around 2.2 million.

A UN official dealing with Africa said an accurate account of the number of dead is impossible, but the toll of two million had been widely accepted. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity.

ROK opposes US pullout from tense border

AFP, Seoul

South Korean Defence Minister Cho Young-Kil said Tuesday he opposed any US proposal to pull back its forces from the tense inter-Korean border as talks began here between the two sides on how to revise their 50-year-old military alliance.

Richard Lawless, US deputy assistant secretary of defense for East Asia, and South Korea's assistant defense minister for policy, Cha Young-Koo, were engaged in talks scheduled to last two days.

The United States deploys 37,000 troops in South Korea, nearly 15,000 of them with the 2nd Infantry Division north of Seoul near the border with the Stalinist North.

Cho, speaking at the National Assembly, said the agenda would include the relocation of American bases at the request of US officials.

But he stressed that the relocation of the 2nd Infantry Division and other key bases near the border with North Korea can be discussed only after the North Korean nuclear crisis is over.

Rockets blow up key Pak gas pipeline

AFP, Multan

A rocket attack blew up two key gas pipelines in central Pakistan early Tuesday disrupting supplies to almost half the country's industrial consumers but causing no casualties, officials said.

"Rockets blew up two main pipelines bringing gas from the southern Sui and Qadirpur gas fields," General Manager, Sui Northern Gas Pipeline Limited (SNGPL), Abrar Ahmed told AFP.

He said the first blast occurred at around 2:00 am (2100 GMT Monday) followed by another attack two hours later in the desert area of Rahim Yar Khan district.

He believed the pipeline was blown up by members of the Bugti tribe who were blamed for similar attacks in January.

Abdul Rashid Lone, Managing Director of the SNGPL, told state-run television that the explosions triggered a fire in the pipelines.