

Cockroaches could be spreading SARS

REUTERS, Hong Kong/Singapore

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.

But in China's Guangdong province, where SARS first emerged, officials said on Tuesday the rate of new infections was down sharply and the outbreak there was under control.

Worldwide, at least 103 people have died from SARS and 2,750 have been infected in about 20 countries -- nearly half of them in China.

At least three more people died in Beijing from SARS than officially reported, doctors in Beijing said on Tuesday as fears spread and hospitals disclosed suspected cases not previously revealed.

"It's impossible there are only 19 SARS cases in Beijing," said a doctor at the Beijing University No. 1 Hospital. "There are no beds left in our epidemic ward."

Beijing has reported 19 cases and four deaths out of 1,279 infections and 53 deaths nationwide, most of them in Guangdong, where the virus first appeared last November.

Hong Kong Deputy Director of Health Leung Pak-yin told a radio programme cockroaches may have carried infected waste from sewage pipes into apartments at Amoy Gardens in densely populated Kowloon district.

If proved true, it would represent an alarming development in the swiftly spreading epidemic in Hong Kong, a city of seven million people filled with densely populated apartment blocks.

"The drainage may be the reason. It is possible that the cockroaches carried the virus (from the drainage pipes) into the homes," Leung said.

SARS raced through a block in Amoy Gardens in late March, infecting nearly 300 people and forcing residents in the building and others in the complex to flee in panic. The speed of the outbreak has baffled health officials.

SARS symptoms include high fever, chills and breathing difficulties and doctors think the virus is spread through droplets by sneezing and coughing or by direct contact.

Virus fear goes wild

Deaths, infections from killer pneumonia up

AFP, Hong Kong

Concern over the global spread of the killer SARS virus grew Wednesday as more deaths were reported in Hong Kong, additional cases were detected in North America and the worldwide number of infections approached 3,000.

In China, the epicentre of the outbreak, World Health Organisation (WHO) experts said they wanted to open an investigation in Beijing following allegations that the death toll from Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) was higher than official figures stated.

The economic impact of the outbreak worsened as more airlines cut flights to affected areas and businesses across the region felt the pinch of the downturn in international travellers.

In Hong Kong, one of the worst-hit areas, another two deaths were reported and 42 new cases were detected, raising the territory's death toll to 27 and the number of infected to 970, health officials said.

They continued a grim trend of multiple daily deaths and accelerating infections in the territory after health officials last week said the outbreak was ebbing.

The global death toll from SARS now stands at 106, with 2,939 infected.

Canada, the worst hit country outside of Asia, overnight reported its detected cases of SARS had risen by six to 242. The only good news was that a suspected 11th SARS-related death was cleared of any link to the virus.

Earlier, US health authorities said another 33 sufferers had been detected since Friday, bringing the total of SARS cases to 148 with no deaths.

WHO experts searching for the origins of the outbreak in China urged officials there to come clean on the scale of the disease after a Time magazine report in which a doctor claimed the capital's main hospital for SARS cases had admitted 60 patients with the virus, of whom seven died.

This contradicted health ministry figures of 19 infected and four dead.

The report echoed allegations by other nurses and doctors that the true extent of the virus' spread had been covered up by the authorities, adding to international criticism of China's slow response in addressing the disease.

The WHO now wants to lead as extensive an investigation in Beijing as it did in the southern province Guangdong, where the disease was first detected in November and where the majority of China's 1,279 officially tallied cases and 53 deaths occurred.

Meanwhile, fears of the spread of SARS -- thought to be related to the common cold-causing coronavirus -- continued to take its toll on the global economy as travellers and businessmen kept away from SARS-hit areas.

As Manila considered issuing a travel warning to Filipinos wanting to go to Hong Kong, the territory's five-star hotels were reportedly struggling with occupancy rates of just 10 per cent. Similarly, Indonesian and Vietnamese resorts reported slumps in arrivals of between 30 and 40 per cent.

In Thailand -- where two people have died with SARS -- travel agents warned that the strategically important tourism sector faced the worst crisis in its history, while in Vietnam, with four reported deaths, hundreds of mostly European businessmen snubbed a major international trade show in Hanoi.

Malaysia, which has recorded one death, took steps to ease the spread of SARS by temporarily freezing the issue of visas to Chinese and Hong Kong travellers.



PHOTO: AFP

A pregnant woman riding the underground train system wears a mask to protect against the killer outbreak of pneumonia in Hong Kong on Wednesday. The disease known as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) has so far infected 928 people in the former British colony and been blamed for 25 deaths defying a series of government measures aimed at curbing the mystery respiratory illness.

24 feared drowned in Orissa boat capsized

PTI, AFP, Nawarangpur

At least 24 people were feared drowned after a country boat capsized in Indravati reservoir near the border of Koraput and Nawarangpur districts in Orissa, official sources said on Wednesday.

The boat was carrying about 30 persons back from a weekly market in Kathargada village last evening when the mishap occurred, the sources said.

While eight persons swam ashore to safety, there was no trace of 20 others, most of them belonging to villages in Dasamanthpur block of Koraput district, they said.

The boat was carrying 30 people from a weekly market and sank overnight in the Indravati reservoir near Koraput district, 650 km from the state capital Bhubaneswar.

"Six persons swam to safety," the district's top administrative official, Usha Parikh, told AFP. He said a search was on for the bodies.

Last week, 17 pilgrims died in a similar accident in the western Gujarat state.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian medics treat a wounded youth at Gaza City's al-Shifa hospital after an air raid by Israeli F-16 fighters and Apache helicopters on a residential area of the city on Tuesday. At least seven Palestinians were killed, including a local leader of the armed wing of the Islamic movement Hamas, and more than 20 wounded in the raid, according to Palestinian medical sources.

Hamas leader among 7 killed in Israeli attack

REUTERS, Gaza

Israel killed a senior Hamas leader, one of his deputies and five other Palestinians on Tuesday in an air strike hours after President Bush vowed to renew efforts to end Israeli-Palestinian violence.

More than 40 Palestinian civilians were wounded in Gaza City's densely populated Zeitoun neighborhood in the first such attack since the start of the US-led war in Iraq three weeks ago, hospital officials said.

Hamas, a militant Islamic group that has killed dozens of Israelis in suicide bombings during a 30-month-old Palestinian uprising for statehood, vowed to avenge the deaths of Sa'ad al-Arabeed, a senior commander of its Izz el-Deen al-Qassam armed wing, and deputy Ashraf al-Halabi.

They were in a car struck by two of three missiles which witnesses said were fired by an Israeli F-16 warplane.

A bystander was killed by the missile that missed the vehicle and also wounded about seven other people in Zeitoun, a neighborhood known as a Hamas stronghold, witnesses said.

Bleeding from the leg, a woman tried to comfort her child as they waited for help to arrive. "God, what should I do," she asked in desperation as workers from a nearby bakery rushed to help her.

Minutes later, panic ensued as hundreds of people gathered at the scene and Israeli Apache attack helicopters appeared overhead while the F-16 fired missile-deflecting flares.

People began to scatter in all directions, causing a stampede in which many were trampled. Just then, witnesses said, the helicopters fired two missiles and more in the crowd fell to the ground bleeding.

Two civilians were killed and another two, among some 40 wounded, died later in hospital, doctors said.

Asia jittery as UN takes on DPRK nuclear crisis

Pyongyang warns Tokyo it is within striking distance

AFP, Seoul

The United Nations intervenes for the first time Wednesday in the nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula, prompting warnings of war from North Korea and concern that the world body could make a dangerous situation even worse.

The 15-member UN Security Council convenes in New York for a meeting that represents a victory for US efforts to cast the deepening crisis as a challenge to the entire world community but leaves North Korea's Asian neighbours jittery about how the unpredictable regime will react.

In the run-up to the meeting, North Korea said it would not recognize any resolution to be adopted at Security Council deliberations which it referred to as a "prelude to war."

Though all five permanent members of the UN Security Council oppose North Korea's suspected nuclear weapons drive, the unity ends there.

Divisions within the council indicate that Washington may be on collision course with Moscow and Beijing and no consensus is likely to emerge soon on a statement condemning North Korea's recent unilateral withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Sanctions are even less likely.

Pyongyang insists that it would view any sanctions statement as an outright "declaration of war."

China and Russia oppose a UN role and South Korea and Japan view Security Council intervention with trepidation while the European Union has also expressed reservations.

In Beijing, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao said Security Council talks were inappropriate and said no action should be taken to escalate the crisis.

Last month China's ambassador to the United Nations in Vienna Zhang Yan cautioned that pressure and sanctions "may exacerbate the confrontation."

In Moscow, Alexander Losyukov, the foreign ministry's curator of Asian affairs, said urgent measures were needed to cool off the situation.

"Otherwise, the UN Security Council discussion could, instead, become a launching pad for a further unraveling of relations," Losyukov said.

The United States has been pressing the United Nations to take up North Korea since October, when Washington said Pyongyang had admitted pursuing nuclear weapons despite a 1994 accord to freeze its nuclear program.

Since October, North Korea has expelled UN nuclear inspectors, restarted its mothballed nuclear reactor at Yongbyon that can produce weapons grade plutonium, withdrawn from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and test-launched missiles.

And the war in Iraq has only served to complicate the situation.

North Korea, which was included along with Iraq and Iran in President George W. Bush's "axis of evil," maintains that it will be the next target of American military action.

In a rare statement on Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency from a senior military official, Kim Yong Chun, chief of the general staff of the (North) Korean People's Army, said his country was in the process of being transformed into one massive fortification.

Meanwhile, North Korea on Wednesday warned Japan to remember it was "within striking distance" of the Stalinist state amid heightened calls in Tokyo to contain the Pyongyang regime.

The North's official Korean Central News Agency accused Japan of being emboldened by the US-led invasion of Iraq, which it condemned as "state-sponsored terrorism," in its ambition to remilitarize.

"Japan should behave with discretion, clearly mindful that it is also within the striking range of the DPRK (North Korea)," KCNA said in a dispatch monitored here.

11 Afghan civilians killed as US bomb misses target

REUTERS, Bagram

The US military said 11 Afghan civilians, seven of them women, were killed early on Wednesday when an American bomb missed its target and landed on a house in eastern Afghanistan.

"Eleven Afghan civilians were killed and one was wounded early this morning when a bomb dropped by coalition aircraft landed in a house on the outskirts of Shkin near the Pakistan border," said Douglas Lefforge, a spokesman at the US military's headquarters at Bagram air base north of Kabul.

"Coalition forces never intentionally target civilian locations," he told reporters. Shkin is in Afghanistan's Paktika province.

"The tragic incident occurred when enemy forces attacked an Afghan military post checkpoint that was providing security near the Shkin

E Timor indicts 16 for crimes against humanity

REUTERS, Jakarta

East Timor prosecutors have filed indictments charging 16 former Indonesian military personnel and officials with crimes against humanity, the tiny country's serious crimes unit said on Wednesday.

Among incidents involved is the September 1999 massacre at Sauki church, where hundreds of civilians sought refuge "in fear of the campaign of terror and violence by TNI (Indonesian military) soldiers, police and militia," a statement issued by the serious crimes unit in the East Timor capital Dili said.

It said an unknown number of people including three priests were killed in the attack, and many wounded. Others have put the total killed at around 27.

Those indicted include eight TNI district or sub-district commanders in East Timor when it was under Jakarta's control, a former Indonesian administrator and former Indonesian district chief of police, and six East Timorese who served in the TNI.

'World focus to turn to DPRK after Iraq'

THE NATION, ANN, Bangkok

Cambodia, who currently holds the rotating chairmanship of the Asean Regional Forum (ARF) will hold a triumvirate of ASEAN foreign ministers in Siem Reap on Friday to discuss its roles in easing tension in Korean Peninsular, suggesting world spotlight is turning to Pyongyang after war in Iraq.

Thai Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai and Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Syed Albar were invited to the meeting as ARF's Friend of the Chair.

Cambodian Foreign Minister Hor Namhong, in his capacity of the ARF's chairman, picked up the two ministers to help him explore possibilities for the forum to play a certain role in diffusing tension in the peninsula.

North Korea, which is at the core of conflict on nuclear weapon project with the US, said earlier that Pyongyang wanted to have a bilateral negotiation with Washington, rather than using multilateral forum.

However, Foreign Minister Surakiart who would leave for Siem Reap today said AFR would supplement efforts to ease the tension, rather than replacing other diplomatic channels.

"It is the test case for the ARF, of which both US and North Korea are also the members, to move forward to its strategy of preventive diplomacy after confidential building measures has been taken to handle security matters in the region for years," he said in an interview.

In the Siem Reap meeting, the three foreign ministers are expected to lay out the so-called "term of reference" for consultation with other concern parties, he said.

Set up in 1994, the ARF is a single regional forum for 23 members to discuss security matter.

Pyongyang decision to end cooperation with the International Atomic Energy and to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty would be a hot topic in an annual meeting held in Phnom Penh on June 18.

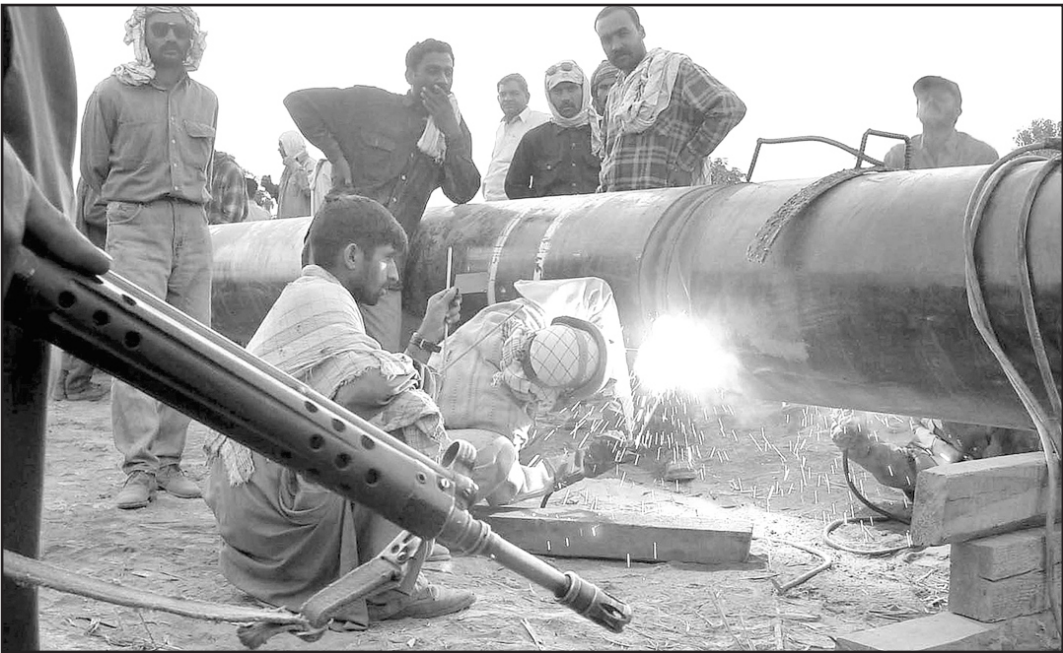


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani technicians weld part of the gas pipeline as paramilitary forces stand guard on Wednesday in the central Pakistani town of Sadiqabad, about 600 km northeast of Karachi. Authorities have tightened security around the gas transmission system after a rocket attack blew up two key gas pipelines in central Pakistan early Tuesday disrupting supplies to almost half of the country's industrial consumers.