



PHOTO: AFP

A large crew looks out at the Super Star Virgo cruise ship berthed at the Singapore Cruise Center on Friday. A second crew member of a Malaysian-owned luxury cruise ship has been confined at a Singapore hospital as a suspected SARS case, a spokeswoman for the company said Friday.

SARS infection: No end in sight

AFP, Hong Kong

A global health crisis triggered by a new strain of killer pneumonia showed few signs of easing on Friday, one month after the World Health Organization (WHO) issued its first warning about the disease.

Scientists may be close to identifying the virus which causes what has come to be known as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, or SARS, but one month later the disease continues to wreak havoc around the globe, particularly in Asia.

The WHO, the UN's health agency, issued a global alert on March 12 about outbreaks of atypical pneumonia in Vietnam, Hong Kong and China's southern Guangdong province.

At least 115 deaths have been attributed to the lung disease since then and more than 3,000 suspected cases have

been reported in more than 30 countries.

The SARS outbreak led to the WHO taking the unprecedented step on April 2 of issuing a warning advising against non-essential travel to Hong Kong and China's Guangdong province, the two most infected areas in the world.

A number of countries have unilaterally imposed restrictions on visitors from SARS-affected areas since then and set up health screening at ports of entry.

China has taken a battering with the authorities under fire for failing to promptly report the initial cases in Guangdong province in November to the WHO and accused of playing down the extent of the illness nationwide.

The Chinese authorities have reported 55 SARS deaths and more than 1,300 cases of the disease as of Friday. A

further three deaths in China were reported by the WHO Friday.

Thirty-one people have died of SARS and some 1,000 cases have been reported in neighboring Hong Kong, where the economy is reeling as tourists stay away, residents flee and many choose to work from home to avoid infection.

Despite an array of government measures to contain the outbreak -- shutting schools early, setting up quarantine camps and ordering home confinement -- the number of cases in the former British colony has risen inexorably day by day.

Ten deaths have been reported in Canada, the worst-hit country outside Asia, and 253 possible cases but there are indications Canadian health officials may finally be getting a handle on the outbreak there.

New Laden tape could be authentic, says CIA

AP, Washington

The Central Intelligence Agency has determined that a new audiotape obtained earlier this week is likely an authentic recording of Osama bin Laden, a US intelligence official said Thursday.

The audiotape exhorts Muslims to rise up against Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Bahrain and Afghanistan, which it claims are "agents of America," and calls for suicide attacks against US and British interests to "avenge the innocent children" of Iraq.

CIA analysts, after listening to the audio, were fairly certain the voice was bin Laden's, according to the intelligence official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

7 killed in Japanese explosions

AFP, Tokyo

Seven workers were killed and two others missing after a series of explosions ripped through a fireworks factory in southern Japan Friday, at the height of production for mid-summer pyrotechnic festivals.

Five other people, including two passersby, were injured in the mid-day accident at the plant in Kagoshima, a provincial city some 1,000 km southwest of Tokyo, police and fire department officials said.

Two of those hurt were seriously injured.

By nightfall, seven workers were confirmed dead and two others missing, a Kagoshima prefectural police spokesman said. There had been 28 workers at the plant when the first of three blasts occurred at 1:30 pm (0430 GMT), he said.

US rejects preemptive strike against Pakistan

Fernandes sings Sinha's tune

PTI, Washington

Terming the Indo-Pak stand-off as "a very difficult and dangerous situation", US Secretary of State Colin Powell has said the United States wants to remain engaged in helping the two sub-continental rivals resolve their disputes in a peaceful way.

Powell rejected the view aired by External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha that an Indian pre-emptive strike against Pakistan was as justified as the one now being carried out by the US against Iraq.

"I don't think there is a direct parallel

between the two situations," Powell told Pakistan Television in an interview yesterday.

On Indo-Pak standoff, he said, "we do have a very difficult and a dangerous situation with respect to actions across the Line of Control," adding that he remained in close touch with authorities of India and Pakistan.

"The United States will stay engaged, but we don't believe there is a need now for any military action of any kind. We are looking to help the two parties resolve this in a peaceful way, and you can be sure that I will personally remain

engaged, as will President Bush and members of his administration."

Powell said the US wants to have strong relations with India and Pakistan and "through these relations we can serve to help both countries start to begin a dialogue with each other on outstanding issues. We want to be a friend to both nations."

On the future of US-Pak relations, Powell said as a result of the cooperation that Pakistan had extended in fighting the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, the US hopes to find new areas of cooperation.

Powell said it was through the

cooperation US has received from Pakistan that it had been possible to bring down the Taliban in Afghanistan and break the hold Al-Qaeda had on the country.

Meanwhile, Defence Minister George Fernandes Friday reiterated Indian warnings that Pakistan was a prime case for pre-emptive strikes.

"There are enough reasons to launch such strikes against Pakistan, but I cannot make public statements on whatever action that may be taken," Fernandes told a meeting of ex-soldiers in this northern Indian desert city.

Powell pushes EU for ME peace

Top Islamic Jihad leader killed in Gaza

AFP, Athens

US Secretary of State Colin Powell asked for close cooperation with the European Union in order to push for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a senior Greek diplomatic source said on Thursday.

According to the source, Powell spoke on Thursday afternoon (Greek time) at his own initiative with Greek Foreign Minister George Papandreu, whose country holds the EU presidency.

"Powell said the US will attach great importance to the Mideast peace process now that military operations in Iraq seem to be drawing to a close," the source said.

The US, Russia, the EU and the United Nations -- the so-called diplomatic quartet for the Mideast -- have drafted a blueprint for peace which calls for the creation of a Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel by 2005.

Meanwhile, Israeli helicopter gunships killed a senior military leader of the radical group Islamic Jihad in Gaza City Thursday, as violence also took the lives of Palestinians and Israelis in the West Bank.

Mohammed al-Hindi, a top Jihad political leader, named the dead man as 50-year-old Mohammed al-Zatma whose car was hit and destroyed by two missiles in Al-Nasser, in the north of the city.

Twelve Palestinians in the vicinity,

including three children, were injured, hospital sources said.

Four helicopters were said to have participated in the attack, about which the Israeli army declined to comment.

Zatma, a resident of the impoverished Rafah refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip, was a civil engineer in Rafah's municipality and had been wanted by Israel since 1992, Hindisaid.

"This murder is a great loss for the Palestinian people; Zatma is the most senior Islamic Jihad military leader to have been killed in Gaza," he added.

"Israel is trying to use the situation in Iraq to crush our people so that it will surrender, but the resistance will continue and so will our war against

the (Israeli) occupation," he said. Hindi said he expected Israel's "assassinations of our leadership will increase, especially after the fall of Baghdad; I also expect renewed aggression against our people."

On Tuesday, a military leader of Hamas was killed in a similar Israeli air strike which also killed six other Palestinians and left 47 wounded.

Hamas has vowed to avenge those deaths.

Tuesday's air attack, part of an ongoing Israeli policy of killing leading Palestinian "terrorists," was the first since the war on Iraq started on March 20.

N Korean leader pays secret visit to China

Russia takes extra defense steps amid growing nuke tensions

AFP, Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il paid a secret visit to China last month, shortly after the start of the war in Iraq, according to a US-based global intelligence consultancy citing Russian intelligence sources.

During his visit, the reclusive Kim met new Chinese President Hu Jintao, who said China would not "stand idle" if relations deteriorated further between Pyongyang and Washington, according to Strategic Forecasts.

The visit occurred during a 50-day period which ended last week and during which Kim, 61, disappeared from public view in Pyongyang, the report said.

North Korea is engaged in a standoff with the United States over its atomic weapons ambitions, with Washington demanding the Stalinist state scrap its nuclear programmes before it enters into dialogue.

South Korean officials said they were unable to confirm the visit, which Strategic Forecasts said succeeded in healing a rift between Pyongyang and Beijing over Beijing's detention in October of Yang Bin, a Chinese citizen chosen by North Korea to head a proposed new economic zone at Sinuiju on the border with China.

Meanwhile, the North Korean nuclear crisis has prompted Russia to take "preventive" action to defend its population in the region, a top foreign ministry official said Friday.

"We have been forced to think about preventive means to defend our interests and, why hide it, to defend our population bordering Korean territory in the event of a serious conflict in that region," Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Losyukov told the Interfax news agency.

"Instructions regarding this were given by the country's leaders to the departments concerned," he added.

Russia has been attempting to mediate in the crisis, which erupted in October when the United States disclosed that North Korea had restarted enriching uranium for its nuclear program.

Moscow has tried to convince Washington to agree to Pyongyang's request of direct talks, but the United States has insisted the crisis be dealt with multilaterally by the regional powers, or perhaps through the United Nations.

Losyukov -- who met with North Korea's reclusive leader Kim Jong Il during a trip to North Korea after the US disclosure -- warned Friday that the crisis was "continuing to worsen and approach the red line, making an uncontrollable reaction possible." The first UN Security Council talks on the crisis ended in deadlock Wednesday, with attempts by Britain, France and the United States to bring UN pressure on Pyongyang opposed by the other two permanent council members, China and Russia.



PHOTO: AFP

Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov (2nd,L), and his Japanese counterpart Shigeru Ishiba (R), hold talks at the defense agency in Tokyo on Friday. After visiting Seoul, Ivanov flew in to Tokyo to discuss about the North Korean situation.

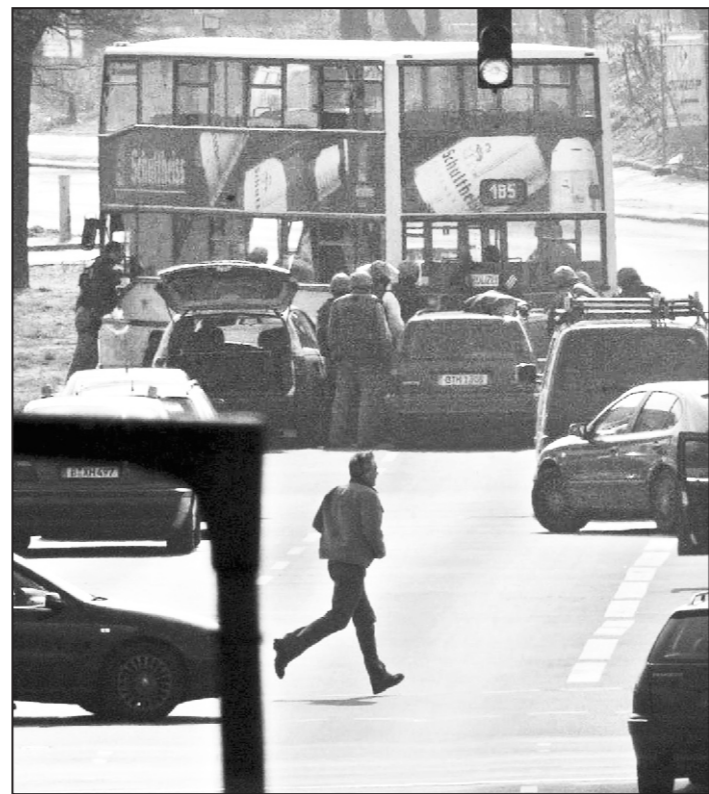


PHOTO: AFP

Police assault a Berlin public bus after at least one armed man took its passengers hostage after a bank robbery on Friday in Berlin, Germany.