

SARS crisis escalates

China reports 2 more deaths

AFP, Beijing

The spread of the killer SARS virus showed no sign of slowing Saturday as China reported two more deaths and a rising number of cases around the globe had governments battling to stem the outbreak.

Beijing said two people had died in Inner Mongolia, the first reported cases in China's remote north, taking its death toll from Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) virus to 60, by far the highest in the world.

The news Saturday came a day after the World Health Organisation (WHO) said it believed the virus had peaked in southern China's Guangdong province, from where it is believed to have started in November, before jumping to Hong Kong and then spreading globally.

The two deaths, which took the worldwide death toll to 119, occurred among 10 people infected in the region that borders Mongolia and Russia, and renewed fears concerning the spread of the virus in the country, where 1,319 cases have been reported.

"After examining patients an expert team from the Ministry of Health said that up to April 10, 10 cases of imported acute pneumonia had been detected in Inner Mongolia, of which two patients have died," China's official Xinhua news agency reported on its Web site.

On Friday Mike Ryan, director of the WHO's global alert and response coordination in Geneva, said about Guangdong province: "Our team has told us that they are very confident that the epidemic has peaked ... but that there are still cases in Guangdong."

China has been criticised internationally for not promptly and openly addressing the epidemic, and the WHO has urged China for "full and open" reporting of SARS cases.

The WHO Saturday began to beef up its surveillance of the epidemic in China, with a team of its experts arriving in southern Macau, which along with Hong Kong borders Guangdong.

WHO experts visited Guangdong last week and are inspecting of Beijing's health facilities.

Meanwhile, 13 more possible cases

of SARS were reported in Canada, the country hardest hit by SARS outside Asia, as the nation's toll climbed to 266, including 10 deaths.

And Vietnam reported a new case of SARS case on Saturday, with its toll now at 62 cases, including four fatalities.

The respiratory virus has spread to more than 30 countries and infected more than 3,000 people, according to an AFP count based on reports from national health officials.

Governments across the globe are battling to bring it under control, with some sending people into quarantine or imposing travel restrictions.

The Philippines, which reported its first probable case of the pneumonia-like illness of Friday, placed airport authorities on alert Saturday with thousands of Filipino workers expected to return for vacations next week from SARS-plagued Hong Kong.

Hong Kong health officials Friday reported two more deaths from SARS -- men aged 81 and 79 -- and 61 new cases of the disease, taking the total number of deaths in the territory to 33 and the total

number of cases to 1,060.

In Singapore, where nine people have died of SARS and 133 cases have been reported, a spokeswoman for the company which owns the Superstar Virgo cruise ship said two members of the ship's crew have been hospitalised with suspected cases of SARS, one in Singapore and one in Malaysia.

Indonesia also reported its first probable cases of SARS on Friday, while more suspected infections were reported in Europe: a sixth in Britain, a sixth in Switzerland and a fifth in France.

Taiwan said Malaysia had advised the island that it would temporarily stop issuing visas to Taiwanese tourists from April 14 to halt the spread of SARS, a decision Taipei said it regretted.

"Malaysia has overreacted by announcing an abrupt decision to stop issuing visas to Taiwanese, when our health authorities have kept the SARS outbreak under steady control," the foreign ministry said.

Nigerians voting in biggest ever polls

AFP, Onitsha

Polling began Saturday in Africa's biggest ever election, as Nigerian voters began turning out in foul weather for their first civilian-run poll in 20 years.

Polling began shortly after 8:30 am (0730 GMT) in the country's largest city, the southwestern commercial centre of Lagos, after a delay caused by a fierce tropical storm.

In the northern city of Kano a brief delay in the distribution of ballot papers held up voting, but by 8:30 am a queue of voters had formed outside an open centre in the central Kage district.

Meanwhile, a militant secessionist group from southeast Nigeria has called for a last-minute boycott of Saturday's legislative elections, activists said.

Militants from the Movement for the Actualisation of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), which is seeking independence for the Igbo ethnic group, told AFP they opposed the election.



PHOTO: AFP

Prospective voters queue to exchange slips obtained from INEC officials during voter's registration for the new voter's card on Friday at Obalende district of Lagos. As the much awaited elections to usher in a new civilian government in Nigeria begins on Saturday with the election of members of the National Assembly, INEC officials have assured that registered voters who were unable to exchange slips obtained during voter's registration will be allowed to vote.



PHOTO: AFP

Passersby look at the White House through a security fence erected in Lafayette Square in Washington, DC on Friday. The fence was put up in anticipation of anti-war and WTO/IMF protests during the weekend.

Fernandes questions Pak role in war against terror

AFP, Kolkata

Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes Saturday challenged Pakistan's participation in the global war against terror saying Islamabad had been "sponsoring" terrorism in India for over two decades.

"One cannot believe that Pakistan is a member of the anti-terrorism coalition, formed to root out the terrorism from the globe after the terrorist attack in the US," Fernandes told reporters in this eastern metropolis.

"It is now a well-known fact that Pakistan is sponsoring terrorism to India for over two decades," Fernandes said referring to New Delhi's claim that Islamabad supports an Islamic insurgency in the Himalayan region of Kashmir.

More than 38,000 people have died

in Indian Kashmir since the eruption of an anti-Indian rebellion in the region in 1989. Separatists say the toll is twice as high.

Fernandes said Afghanistan's former hardline Taliban rules, and the al-Qaeda held responsible for September 11 attacks on New York and Washington two years ago, had their centres in Pakistan.

The minister, who is on a visit here, said infiltration of Islamic rebels into Kashmir was continuing unabated.

"Infiltration into Kashmir has ups and downs, but it continues without a respite," he said.

The cross-border infiltration of rebels was at the heart of a 10-month long military stand-off between India and Pakistan last year, which was triggered by a militant attack on the

Indian parliament complex in December 2001.

Tensions cooled only after extensive diplomatic efforts by Washington and London.

Tensions have risen again in recent weeks following a militant attack in a village in Muslim-dominated Kashmir, killing 24 Hindus.

Within days of the massacre, Indian foreign minister Yashwant Sinha told AFP that "India has a much better case to go for pre-emptive action against Pakistan than the US in Iraq," drawing a sharp response from Islamabad.

The United States too refused to draw any parallels between the situations in South Asia and Iraq and vowed to remain engaged in efforts to calm tensions between the two nuclear armed rivals.

India involved in Libya's missile development: CIA

PTI, Washington

Indian entities are allegedly among those from which Libya has obtained assistance for its ballistic missile programme, a CIA report has said.

Serbia, Iran, North Korea and China are the other entities according to its semi annual report to Congress on the acquisition of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) and advanced conventional weapons, which covers the first half of 2002.

The report, released on Friday, says the suspension of UN sanctions in 1999 allowed Libya to expand its efforts to obtain ballistic missile-related equipment, materials, technology and expertise from foreign sources.

"Outside assistance particularly from Serbian, Indian, Iranian, North Korean and Chinese entities has remained critical to its ballistic missile development programme."

Libya's capability is improving and with continued foreign assistance it will probably achieve a medium range ballistic missile capability a long-desired goal or extended scud capability.

On other weapons-related developments in Libya, the CIA said it continued to develop its nuclear infrastructure. Tripoli and Moscow continued talks on cooperation at the Tajura Nuclear Research Centre and a potential power reactor deal.

Truce, talks fail to alley Chandrika's fear of assassination

AFP, New Delhi

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga has said she is under threat from Tamil Tiger rebels despite a Norwegian-brokered ceasefire and ongoing peace talks.

In an interview with the Hindu newspaper published here Saturday, Kumaratunga said that she believed the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were out to get her.

"Recently also they (the LTTE) have said various things, which the security people feel are direct death warrants issued on the president," Kumaratunga told the newspaper Thursday at the end of her four-day visit to India.

"I have stopped being worried about my security, but the security people are worried about it. They say the threat is very big at the moment."

The threats issued by the LTTE

against her were prompted by the rebels' belief that she was trying to scuttle the Norwegian-backed peace process, Kumaratunga said.

She narrowly escaped assassination in a December 1999 suicide bomb attack blamed on the Tigers, but lost her right eye.

Kumaratunga, who held brief talks with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and other leaders during what Indian authorities described as a "working visit", said New Delhi was supportive of Sri Lanka's peace bid.

"The government of India is also very strongly of the view that whatever solution is reached should be within the framework of one Sri Lanka," she said.

India has taken a hands-off policy towards Sri Lanka after getting militarily involved in trying to quell Tamil separatism and losing more than 1,200 soldiers in the late 1980s.

Cuba executes 3 ferry hijackers

REUTERS, Havana

Three hijackers who commandeered a Havana ferry last week in hopes of reaching the United States were executed on Friday after being convicted of terrorism, the Cuban government said.

The three men were summarily tried and convicted on Tuesday on terrorism charges, and the Supreme Court and Council of State rejected their appeals, an official communique said.

"At dawn today the sentences were carried out," the government said, referring to the executions of Lorenzo Enrique Copello Castillo, Barbaro Leonid Sevilla Garcia and Jorge Luis Martinez Isaac, accused of being the ringleaders of the group.

The communique said the hijacking was "part of a sinister plan of provocations devised by the most extreme sectors in the US government and their allies, the terrorist Miami mafia (anti-Castro exiles), with the only aim of creating conditions and pretexts to attack our country."

Top Hizbul commander, 3 others killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Four people, including a senior rebel commander, were killed in Indian Kashmir as Indian and Pakistani troops traded heavy artillery fire across their disputed border, police said Saturday.

Indian troops shot dead Qamar-ul-Zaman, the communications chief of the dominant indigenous rebel group, the Hizbul Mujahedin, in the village of Shadimarg in Pulwama district overnight, police said.

Zaman was also the deputy divisional commander of Hizbul, which is fighting to separate Kashmir from India and join with neighbouring Pakistan.

Police described Zaman's death as "another major blow" to Hizbul, which lost its chief commander, operations Saif-ul-Islam during a shoot-out in Srinagar, the summer capital on April 2.

Police said Zaman has been "very active" in south Kashmir.

Hizbul has not confirmed Zaman's death.

In the same district, a Kashmiri

Muslim was abducted by unidentified gunmen and his bullet-riddled body was found later.

Indian security forces shot dead two Muslim rebels along the de facto border in the disputed Kashmir region overnight, a police spokesman said.

He said Indian troops patrolling the Line of Control (LoC) -- the 742-kilometer (460-mile) de facto border that divides Kashmir between India and Pakistan -- opened fire and killed the two militants in the Poonch district.

"On being asked to surrender, they (the militants) opened fire, which was returned," the spokesman said, adding that two of them were killed in the encounter.

Meanwhile, three Muslim civilians were injured in a bomb explosion in Poonch district, police said.

Panic gripped the residents of Kargil township, 190-kilometers (118-miles) northeast of Srinagar, when artillery shells fired from across the LoC by Pakistani troops hit the town and its adjoining villages Saturday.

Seoul warns of 'disastrous consequences' of conflict

China to make efforts to end nuke row

AFP, Seoul

South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun on Saturday said the North Korean nuclear stand-off must be resolved peacefully, warning that an armed conflict would have "disastrous consequences" for the world.

He issued the warning amid fears that North Korea could become the focus of another pre-emptive attack by the United States after Iraq.

"The North Korean nuclear issue is now looming larger than ever before. North Korea's nuclear development must not be condoned," Roh told a group of foreign dignitaries.

"However, this issue must be resolved through peaceful means. Should a war break out again, its disastrous consequences would not be confined to the Korean peninsula," he said.

North Korea is holding out for one-on-one talks with Washington to resolve the dispute, demanding a non-aggression treaty to guarantee that the United States will not attack.

Washington has rejected this

demand, insisting a bilateral negotiating track would amount to a reward for "bad behavior" by North Korea.

Seoul, which had angered US officials by calling for direct one-on-one talks between Pyongyang and Washington, has changed its tack, urging the North to accept multilateral talks which could include bilateral negotiations.

While pursuing inter-Korean talks, South Korea will continue coordinating policy toward Pyongyang with Washington and Tokyo and seek multilateral dialogue and cooperation with China, Russia and the European Union, Roh said.

"North Korea must come to dialogue. Nuclear development would be of no benefit to North Korea," Roh said.

Roh will meet with US President George W. Bush in Washington next month to discuss ways of resolving the nuclear issue peacefully, Roh said.

Pyongyang reportedly admitted to Washington in October that it was running a secret uranium-enrichment programme, in violation of a 1994

nuclear deal between the two countries.

The United States has since stopped fuel aid to the North while the Pyongyang threatened to restart a program which produces weapons-grade plutonium, kicked out International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors and quit the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Meanwhile, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao told visiting South Korean Foreign Minister Yoon Young-Kwan that Beijing would make efforts to resolve the simmering North Korean nuclear crisis and urged a peaceful solution to the issue, state press said Saturday.

"China will continue to make unremitting efforts to ensure the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula," Wen was quoted as telling Yoon by the leading People's Daily.

"China hopes that the concerned nations will remain calm and restrained and refrain from adopting any measures that will lead to the further deterioration of the situation," he said in the Friday talks.



PHOTO: AFP

Policemen inspect the explosion sight of a fireworks plant in Kagoshima, some 1,600 km southwest of Tokyo Saturday. Seven workers were killed and two others missing after a series of explosions ripped through a fireworks factory on Friday at the height of production for mid-summer pyrotechnic festivals.