

SARS death soars in HK

China braces for surge in infections

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong suffered its blackest day in the SARS crisis yet Saturday as 12 more deaths were announced -- the highest jump in a single day.

Forty-six people have died from Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) here in the past week, more than half the 81 SARS deaths recorded in the territory since the first fatality on March 13, according to government figures.

The number of dead in Hong Kong, which also has nearly 1,360 cases, now far outweighs official figures for China's toll which climbed to 67 Saturday with another death reported in state media.

But China, which officially has 1,530 cases, was tipped to be on the verge of dramatically revising its figures following orders from President Hu Jintao and after allegations that it was covering up the true extent of the crisis.

"They told us in the next couple of days, they will make an announcement of (more) cases," World Health Organisation (WHO) expert Jeffrey

McFarland told AFP.

"They said it would be much higher but I don't know what that means."

The number of confirmed or suspected cases of SARS in Beijing is expected to be in the several hundreds, one well-placed source said. Officially it stands at 44, with four deaths.

Singapore also reported another death Saturday, taking its toll to 14, the third highest in the world.

Hong Kong's dramatic announcement of 12 more deaths came as hundreds of thousands of residents mucked in to clean up the city's polluted streets and buildings and halt the virus.

SARS has spread like wildfire in some of Hong Kong's densely populated housing estates, with more than 300 cases in one housing block blamed on a faulty sewage system.

Ahead of the two-day weekend clean-up which will see the disinfection

of housing estates, parks and commercial premises, Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa acknowledged the SARS outbreak had been disastrous.

SARS has inflicted damage on the

city's economy and the health and mental well-being of residents, Tung said Friday.

"No matter which way you look at it, it is a disaster," said Tung.

Hong Kong authorities meanwhile released figures showing that the mortality rate of SARS in the territory was 4.6 percent of cases, with 47.5 percent of the fatalities of people aged 65 or older.

Authorities do not include in their death toll of 81 an American national who was pronounced dead on arrival at a Hong Kong hospital last week after being transferred from mainland China.

The outbreak also threatened to be the worst disaster faced by Singapore, unless swift action was taken to bring it under control, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said Saturday.

Saturday's new deaths pushed the global toll from SARS to at least 184 while the number of infections has surged past 3,700. Other deaths are in Canada (13), Vietnam (5), Thailand (2) and Malaysia (1).

The United States, however, has reduced its official number of cases

from 208 to 35 by switching to a WHO method of only counting probable cases.

Canada, the worst-hit country outside of Asia, also said it was reducing its number of cases from 306 to 304.

In other developments, Vietnam said it was considering closing its land border with China, where the disease is believed to have originated in November.

The WHO has pinpointed the coronavirus -- a virus family which causes the common cold -- as the cause of SARS, which begins with fever, a cough and shortness of breath.

Meanwhile, the deadly SARS virus claimed more lives in Asia on Saturday as world health officials waited for China to reveal the true extent of the epidemic there.

Chinese state media reported another death and 48 new cases on Saturday, lifting the country's official death toll to 67.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan Muslims leave the Muslim-dominated town of Muttur on Friday after at least three people were killed and more than 100 homes destroyed when Tamil villagers and Muslims clashed there as well as in neighbouring villages. Some 1,800 government troops poured into the dusty fishing village near the strategic port city of Trincomalee to help police enforce a fresh curfew.

Lanka extends curfew in Muslim town

AFP, Colombo

Curfews were extended at a Muslim-dominated town in northeastern Sri Lanka Saturday as inter-communal clashes there threatened the island's Norwegian-backed peace bid, police said.

A night curfew that was due to be lifted on Saturday was ordered to be continued despite an easing of clashes between Tamil and Muslim mobs, a local police official said.

"This is a precautionary measure to ensure that the troubles don't spread to neighbouring villages," the police official said by telephone. "There were some minor skirmishes overnight, but the situation is now under control."

Some 1,800 government troops also poured into Muttur overnight, ferried in by helicopters and navy landing craft, to help police maintain law and order, officials said.

The rioting in the region since Thursday has claimed at least three lives and left more than 1,000 people homeless, according to official estimates.



PHOTO: AFP

A Bell 412 private helicopter after it crashed while landing at Juhu aerodrome in Bombay on Saturday. The helicopter was not carrying any passengers when it crashed slightly injuring the two pilots.

20 N Korean scientists, military men defect to west

REUTERS, Sydney

Up to 20 high-ranking North Korean military officers and nuclear scientists have defected to the United States and its allies under a plan involving several countries including the Pacific state of Nauru, an Australian newspaper said on Saturday.

The defections began last October after 11 countries agreed to provide consular protection to smuggle North Koreans from China, The Weekend Australian said.

The man seen as the father of North Korea's nuclear program, Kyong Won-ha, was believed among the defectors, the newspaper said.

It said a US-based lawyer approached Nauru's former president, Rene Harris, with an offer to foot the bill for establishing Nauruan embassies in Washington and Beijing, ostensibly to boost trade ties with those countries.

US concerned over Indo-Pak nukes

Islamabad rejects US criticism

PTI, Washington

The pursuit of nuclear weapons capabilities by India and Pakistan have been "a principal non-proliferation concern" but sanctions against the two countries had proved controversial and were therefore relaxed by the US Congress, the Congressional Research Service, which advises members of the Congress, has said.

Non-proliferation efforts have been concerned in the short term on a number of regional crisis points like the India-Pakistan "arms race", North Korea and the West Asia, the CRS said in a paper on non-proliferation.

"China has long been a non-

proliferation concern. It was widely viewed as a major supplier of Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme in the 1980s and early 1990s, and also as a supplier of aid and technology to Iran", it said.

"India, in justifying its own nuclear weapons tests, cited China's help to Pakistan as a major motive in developing nuclear weapons capability."

China's past involvement in Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme, and India's accusation that it needed to test nuclear explosives because it was being "encircled" by China, make China a major player in the nuclear escalation in South Asia, the

CRS said.

The "undeclared nuclear arms competition" between India, Pakistan and China reached a turning point on May 11, 1998, when India announced an underground test, which was followed by Pakistan, the paper said.

There is also concern about China's actions in expanding its nuclear force, and of Chinese and Russian activities that may encourage proliferation in the other regions, it added.

AFP adds: Pakistan Saturday rejected criticism from the United States that it has not done enough to control rebel incursions into India's zone of disputed Kashmir.

N Korea sees talks on track

REUTERS, Seoul/Washington

North Korea signaled on Saturday it was ready for talks on its suspected atomic program after confusion over whether it tried to scupper negotiations by saying it was reprocessing fuel rods to make nuclear bombs.

The United States said an English-language statement on Friday from the North Korean Foreign Ministry might have been mistranslated to say Pyongyang was reprocessing the 8,000 nuclear rods rather than on the verge of reprocessing them.

A Korean-language version published by South Korean media said the North had "advanced the project to the final stage" before reprocessing.

Reprocessing would be the most provocative step North Korea has taken since the dispute flared in October.

Pak unholy designs won't succeed: Vajpayee

All issues can be resolved peacefully

PTI, Srinagar

A day after extending a hand of friendship to Pakistan, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on Saturday accused Islamabad of perpetrating violence in Jammu and Kashmir for over a decade but said its designs would never be allowed to succeed.

"The Centre will not allow Pakistan to succeed in its designs", he said at the convocation of Kashmir University here.

Vajpayee assured, "We will work in tandem with the state government for the betterment of the state".

He said the Centre had fulfilled its promise of holding free and fair elections and the state government had taken some good steps.

Vajpayee said the people who supported militancy in Kashmir were against the basic ethos of Kashmiri culture and Sufi Islam.

"An objective examination of the situation in Jammu and Kashmir will reveal that those who support militancy in the state are against the basic ethos of Kashmiri culture of peace, brotherhood and friendship," he said at the convocation.

Appealing to the people to shun gun culture, Vajpayee quoted a famous Kashmiri philosopher, who had said, "Do not divide Hindus and Muslims".

AFP adds: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee Saturday said there was no issue that cannot be resolved "peacefully and democratically", on the final day of his two-day tour of troubled Kashmir.

Vajpayee also said India was committed to a peaceful resolution of the Kashmir conflict, continuing the conciliatory theme that saw him on Friday extend a hand of friendship to arch-rival Pakistan and urge Islamabad to join talks on the future of the divided state.

"I believe -- and I would like one and all in Jammu and Kashmir to share this belief -- that there is no problem which cannot be resolved peacefully and democratically," Vajpayee said in Srinagar, the Kashmiri summer capital.

Vajpayee was addressing a convocation of Kashmir university, the first by an Indian premier since the start of Islamic insurgency in the region in 1989.

Polling opens in Nigeria

AFP, Abuja

Polling stations opened across Nigeria on Saturday as tens of millions of voters were invited to take part in historic presidential and state elections, AFP reporters said.

In the capital Abuja voting began exactly on time at 8:00 am (0700 GMT), with queues of people ready to take part in Nigeria's first civilian-run presidential election in 20 years.

Voting was also brisk in President Olusegun Obasanjo's southwestern hometown, Abeokuta, where in a voting centre near his house in the Oke-Sokori district 50 people cast their ballots in the first 15 minutes.

In the sprawling northern city of Kano, where police have warned of electoral violence, two officers with brand-new truncheons stood guard over a queue of 70 voters at the Taurani polling station.

Obasanjo is standing for re-election after four years at the head of Nigeria's first civilian government since the end of military rule and is the firm favourite after his party won last week's parliamentary poll.

Muslims flee to Canada to escape INS registration

IANS, Washington

With just a week left for tens of thousands of Muslim living in the US to register with the government, many are quitting the country for good.

The Department of Homeland Security says the programme is aimed at weeding out potential terrorists.

But American Muslims, including those from Pakistan, think otherwise.

It is not they are terrorists. Most have overstayed their visas and are afraid of being deported back to Pakistan.

The deadline for Pakistanis expired last month. Rather than sign up, hundreds of families fled to Canada. More Muslims are expected to leave as the final deadline, April 25, approaches.

Canadian officials say nearly 2,000 Pakistanis have entered their country from the US between January and March - equivalent to the number who arrived during all of last year. Many more are waiting on the border.

Pakistani families from as far away as Texas and California have made their way to the border crossing north of Plattsburgh, New York.

There are still many illegal immigrants in the US who haven't registered, according to unofficial estimates.

Federal officials say they don't know how many foreign nationals have dodged registration. But they maintain the programme is a success.

Kimberly Wiseman, a spokesperson for the newly re-organized Bureau of Customs and Border Protection, said nearly 90,000 people had registered and have been scrutinized.

The programme allows the US to run the fingerprints of aliens who may present elevated national security concerns against a database of wanted criminals and known terrorists.

Nine terrorists have been identified through the programme, according to the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection.

Wiseman said around 1,700 men have been detained through special registration, most on immigration charges. About 170 are still in jail, many arrested while trying to flee the US.

Some critics say those numbers do not add up to success.



PHOTO: AFP

Aishat, the wife of General Mohammedu Buhari, the All Nigeria People's Party presidential candidate, arrives at the polling station on Saturday at Sarkin Yara, in his hometown of Daura, in the northern Nigeria Katsina state. Former Nigerian coup leader Mohammedu Buhari said he was sure of victory against President Olusegun Obasanjo.