

WHO warns of 'explosive' SARS epidemic

East Asia forges united front as death toll goes up

AFP, Hong Kong

The World Health Organisation called for a global hunt to track down every possible SARS case Saturday after revealing a sharp rise in the mortality rate from the disease in recent weeks.

The WHO appeal came at a meeting of Asian health ministers and international experts in Kuala Lumpur as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) claimed another life in neighbouring Singapore.

The respiratory illness that first emerged in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong nearly six months ago has now killed at least 278 people, mostly in Asia, and infected more than 4,800 people in more than 25 countries.

Several governments have already introduced sweeping emergency measures to curb the spread of the disease, quarantining thousands of people and sealing off entire buildings,

hospitals and schools.

Shigeru Omi, the WHO's Asian director, said everyone infected with SARS as well as anyone they have been in contact with must be found in order to halt the explosive epidemic in its tracks.

"We cannot afford to miss a single person," Omi told the conference in Kuala Lumpur, which is a prelude to an emergency regional summit Tuesday in Bangkok aimed at forging a united front against the disease.

"We are at a crossroads. What we decide today and at the heads of state meeting on Tuesday will determine the future course of this outbreak," Omi said.

"We must be absolutely relentless in our search for every possible SARS case. We must use every weapon at our disposal. The world is watching us."

Omi said although the number of SARS cases and deaths was not large compared to other diseases, the illness

posed an "unprecedented" threat and had distinct characteristics.

"First this virus has already demonstrated its explosive power to cause sudden outbreaks in a large number of countries," he said.

"In some countries schools and offices are being closed, international travel has been dramatically reduced, tourism has almost disappeared and normal life has been seriously disrupted," he said.

A second characteristic was the severe impact on health workers, Omi said.

"This is a major concern since this means that our health systems are under threat, undermining our ability to fight the outbreak," he said.

Omi's rallying call came as officials at the WHO's Geneva headquarters played down fears that a more virulent strain of the disease could be responsible for a surge in the death rate in recent weeks.

Meanwhile, East Asian countries including China forged a united front Saturday against SARS as the World Health Organisation (WHO) warned that all cases must be found if the epidemic is to be defeated.

"We cannot afford to miss a single person," WHO regional director Shigeru Omi told a meeting of regional health ministers and international experts on the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) crisis.

The meeting in Malaysia is a prelude to an emergency regional summit Tuesday in Bangkok aimed at forging a common strategy against the disease which has left close to 280 dead out of more than 4,800 cases worldwide, mostly in East Asia.

"We are at a crossroads. What we decide today and at the heads of state meeting on Tuesday will determine the future course of this outbreak," Omi said.



An Indian security personnel looks at the wreckage following a blast near the main gate of a radio station in Srinagar on Saturday. Two Indian security men and three Kashmiri rebels were killed in a suicide attack on the state-run "Radio Kashmir" station in the heart of Indian Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar.

PHOTO: AFP



PHOTO: AFP

China's Vice Minister of Health Huang Jiefu speaks to the press during the ASEAN+3 Health Ministers special meeting on Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in Kuala Lumpur on Saturday. China acknowledged that the SARS outbreak, which erupted in its southern region had become a global disaster and vowed solidarity with other countries against the epidemic.

Tigers soften stand on talks after US barrage

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers Saturday sought to assure the United States that they were not scuttling talks with the government, two days after Washington's envoy slammed the rebels for suspending negotiations.

The chief negotiator of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Anton Balasingham, said Monday's decision to suspend the talks was only aimed at mounting "pressure" on the government to deliver on key issues.

US ambassador Ashley Williams on Thursday said there had been problems in implementing a Norwegian-arranged truce that went into effect from February 23 last year, but rejected Tiger claims that the government alone was to blame.

"The Tigers, too, bear heavy responsibility for numerous breaches of the ceasefire," the ambassador said adding

the guerrillas must renounce violence and the use of terror and return to talks.

"Assassinations of opponents, intimidation of (minority) Muslims, taxation without representation, aggressive Sea Tiger behaviour and continued child recruitment do not build trust in the LTTE's intentions," he said, adding the United States saw a role for the LTTE provided it renounced violence.

Balasingham said there was an "element of misunderstanding" between the Tigers and the United States which declared the LTTE a foreign terrorist organisation in October 1997.

"We have not terminated the negotiating process or walked away from talks," Balasingham said in remarks published on the pro-rebel website Tamilnet.com.

"We have not scuttled the peace process or terminated negotiations."

"Our intention is to pressurise the government to realise the urgency of the existential issues confronting our people and to impress upon them the importance of fulfilling obligations, pledges and decisions."

Diplomats said the LTTE's sudden suspension of talks was an act of brinkmanship.

However, the seventh round scheduled for April 29 in Thailand will almost certainly have to be rescheduled, they said.

The United States, France and Japan have asked the Tigers to reconsider their decision and return to the negotiating table.

Washington said it was not convinced by LTTE's reasons for putting the talks on hold.

Balasingham sounded conciliatory in his remarks on the Tamilnet website, but said the LTTE refused to give up its weapons as demanded by Washington.

Benazir asks PPP leaders to revitalise party

PTI, Islamabad

As the deadlock continues between Pakistan government and the opposition over the legality of Pervez Musharraf's presidency and constitutional amendments, former prime minister Benazir Bhutto has directed leaders of her Pakistan Peoples Party to revitalise it.

Without making direct reference to any possibility of mid-term polls, Benazir in a letter to party members said, "the party should emerge as a single majority party in Sindh, Punjab, NWFP and Baluchistan."

Despite a ban on self-exiled Benazir from contesting the polls, the PPP won the highest number of votes in the October general elections, finishing second.

Meanwhile, her party has hit out at Musharraf for his criticism of Benazir in his meeting with editors on Thursday, in

which he called her and exiled former Premier Nawaz Sharif "plunderers and looters."

"Last week at the formation commanders meeting of the Army, the General (Musharraf) betrayed how the ghost of Bhuttos haunted him. Instead of addressing the security concerns of the country, the General accused the PPP and Benazir for alleged corruption," PPP said in a statement.

It claimed that Musharraf himself was exposed as taking instructions from "foreign masters", accusing him of toying the US line.

The PPP also flayed Musharraf for having said the delay in judicial proceedings was responsible for the continuing imprisonment of Benazir's husband Asif Ali Zardari.

"Can the General keep his hand on his heart and claim that the regime has not interfered in the judicial process," the statement asked.

Pak govt, opposition talk on constitutional row

AFP, Islamabad

The Pakistani government and opposition expressed cautious optimism after a first round of ice-breaking talks overnight to end a paralysing deadlock in parliament over presidential powers.

Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali and his aides met leaders of three main opposition groups, Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz for almost three hours at his official residence.

The talks stretched late into the night.

"There is flexibility on both sides and I hope we will reach some consensus in the coming days," Jamali told reporters.

Secretary general of MMA Islamic alliance Maulana Fazlur Rehman described the meeting as a "good beginning."

He said the opposition demand that parliament must have a final say on

President Pervez Musharraf's Legal Framework Order containing constitutional amendments would be further discussed when the two sides meet again on Monday.

Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed told AFP there was a positive trend and things appeared to be moving forward.

"We see some light at the end of the tunnel," Ahmed said in apparent reference to opposition agitation that has stalled the working of the lower and upper houses of the parliaments for weeks.

Hours ahead of the opposition-government meeting Musharraf called for an end to "politics of confrontation."

Meeting a group of ruling coalition senators, Musharraf said confrontation had "harmed national interest immensely in the past and we should not let this country suffer any more on this count," a statement released late Friday quoted him as saying.

5 killed in rebel raid on Kashmir radio station

REUTERS, Srinagar

Authorities in disputed Kashmir fought back an attempt by separatist guerrillas to raid India's main state-run radio and television station on Saturday but three rebels and two security force troopers were killed.

A senior police official told Reuters the militants first detonated a car loaded with explosives outside the complex in the heart of Srinagar, summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir, to divert the attention of guards in the high-security area.

"They then tried to storm the complex but were stopped by security forces," the official said. One militant was killed at the entrance to the complex and two were chased and killed in a gun battle outside a nearby mosque in pouring rain, he said.

Two security force personnel were killed and six more injured, he added.

Security forces suspect a fourth militant may have sneaked into the complex and have begun a hunt, he added.

A less known rebel group, Al-Madina Regiment, called local newspaper offices to claim responsibility.

The same group had owned up to a suicide attack on a paramilitary camp on Friday in the town of Bandipura, north of Srinagar, in which three soldiers and a civilian were killed.

Two of three militants involved in Friday's attack were also killed.

Saturday's incident follows a series of guerrilla attacks in the Himalayan region on Friday that killed 10 people, including six soldiers.

The violence comes after India and Pakistan toned down their rhetoric over Kashmir, with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee last week urging talks to end 13 years of a bloody revolt in the region.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Prime Minister Zafar Ullah Khan Jamali (2nd R, Rear) flanked by President of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League Quaid Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain (C, Rear) meets with the leaders of the opposition parties in Islamabad on Friday. Pakistan's government holding talks to break a deadlock with opposition parties over sweeping powers granted to the military and President Pervez Musharraf.