

## SARS wreaks havoc on lives in HK

THE NATION/ANN

A pall of gloom has descended over Hong Kong as wary residents come to terms with the havoc wreaked on their lives Hong Kong is feeling very sick. Like a person going through emotional turmoil, the island's mood has swung from gloom, to defiance, to resentment, to desperation.

As the hot spot of the SARS outbreak, Hong Kong residents are now being treated like pariahs in many countries.

Airlines have cancelled flights to the territory. Air traffic had fallen by over 40 per cent, and with that, tourist dollars.

As overhead costs are high in Hong Kong, the seriousness of the crisis is realised rather quickly. There are not many smiles behind the facemasks, although authorities encourage the smiles to come from the eyes.

Handshakes are now taboo. As the number of visitors dwindle and consumer spending vanishes, many smaller restaurants have closed.

Big hotels have shut whole floors to save costs. Tourism related

enterprises have told staff to go on voluntary leave. Others are asked to take unpaid leave.

The public's reluctance to venture into crowded areas like malls after working hours, has added to the woes of the business community.

Essential services like the subway and public buses have also recorded a drop in users.

During Easter, residents avoided taking their holidays by the beach and parks, unlike previous years.

Today, not many people visit places like cinemas and entertainment venues. Urban lifestyle has considerably changed.

Easter is also no longer a highpoint for the movie industry as many scheduled blockbuster releases have been delayed.

This year saw more cancellations than releases as cinema owners and film distributors saw crowds staying away from airconditioned theatres.

Along with Hollywood movies, the Thai sequel to "Satre Lek" was also shelved. The planned premiere with a reception for its stars was also cancelled.



A young woman wearing a protective mask stands in a subway train in Shanghai on Monday. China now has a total of 2,914 cases and a further 1,921 suspected infections, the health ministry said.

## N Korea ready to scrap nukes for cash

Pyongyang rejects talks on nuclear arms with Seoul

AFP, Seoul

North Korea has offered to scrap, not just suspend, its nuclear weapons program in return for a package of political and economic steps by the United States, South Korean reports said Monday.

The offer was part of "bold" measures North Korea tabled at talks with the United States and China last week in Beijing, newspapers here said.

At talks in Beijing, North Korea reportedly suggested that Pyongyang and Washington act simultaneously and equally to resolve the six-month-old nuclear crisis.

North Korea created a stir in Beijing by asserting that it has nuclear weapons.

But South Korea has positively assessed North Korea's "package deal" of matching the dismantling of any nuclear arsenal with the normalization of ties between Washington and Pyongyang, the Munhwa Ilbo, a daily in Seoul, said.

Munhwa and other newspapers quoted unnamed government sources here as saying North Korea had urged the United States not to hinder Pyongyang's ties with Seoul and Tokyo.

The North's ruling Workers Party newspaper, Rodong Sinmun, indicated Sunday that North Korea wanted economic and political "rewards" from the United States in return for the elimination of its nuclear program.

Rodong called for a "fair and equal" footing in talks with the United States, blasting Washington for insisting that there would be "no security of the system nor provision of rewards" even if Pyongyang gave up its nuclear program.

It insisted North Korea could do "everything" to defend itself if the United States "legally guarantees no use of arms including nukes".

"The US statement that there will be no provision of rewards even after the settlement of the 'nuclear issue' is, in essence, little short of opposing the conclusion of a non-aggression treaty between the two countries," Rodong said.

Ra Jong-Yil, South Korea's senior presidential advisor, said Monday that Washington and its allies should look at "bright aspects" of the Beijing meeting.

Meanwhile, North Korea rejected South Korea's call for the Stalinist state to clarify its alleged admission that it has nuclear weapons at inter-Korean ministerial talks Monday, pool reports said.

The North instead called for national unity against US pressure at the three-day Korean talks, which began in Pyongyang on Sunday, according to state media.

On the second day of negotiations, North Korean chief negotiator Kim Ryong-Song was quoted by South Korean pool reports as insisting that Seoul have no say in the issue.

## SARS vaccine a year away?

AFP, Toronto

Toronto health officials received a boost Sunday in their efforts to reassure the public over SARS after a leading US official gave the green light to travel here, even as another person died of the disease.

A 79-year-old woman died of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, becoming the 21st victim of the epidemic in Canada. Like all the other Canadian fatalities, she came from Ontario province, health officials said.

But Julie Gerberding, the director of the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention emphasised the need for vigilance and containment in the absence of an immediate treatment for the atypical and deadly strain of pneumonia.

"I think our strategy right now is, let's work really hard to contain this until we have better tools like a vaccine or a drug treatment, but we're at least a year away from any kind of vaccine that would be useful in people," she said.

But she had reassuring words for embattled health and local government officials in Toronto still seething over a global travel advisory against non-essential travel to the city issued Wednesday by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Asked in a separate TV interview whether it was safe to travel to Toronto despite the relatively high number of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome cases there, Gerberding said:

"In my view it is. I'm planning to go there next week."

"In Toronto, the disease is very contained in the sense that it's in travellers, it's in the health-care workers who have taken care of them, and one group of people who went to a religious meeting there. But they're not seeing it pop up unexpectedly in other parts of the community," she added.

## Global cost of SARS nearing \$30 billion

ANN, Washington

The global cost of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, or SARS is already approaching 30 billion dollars, according to a report in the latest edition of Time magazine.

In Canada, the country most affected outside Asia, where the disease originated, J.P. Morgan Securities estimates that the city of Toronto is losing 30 million dollars a day as a result of the outbreak, Time reported.

With 269 of Canada's 344 possible SARS cases and all 20 of its deaths from the atypical strain of pneumonia, Toronto has borne the brunt of the country's epidemic.

In Asia, where SARS has hit hardest, economists predict that China and South Korea could each lose as much as two billion dollars in tourism revenue, retail sales and productivity as a direct result of the disease.

## India urged not to use pre-condition

Islamabad to respond within days

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan has urged India not to attach any pre-condition for resumption of dialogue and said it would finalise within two to three days the response to Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's fresh offer of friendship.

"Our response would be made public within two-three days," Pakistan Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali told reporters in Lahore on Sunday while welcoming Vajpayee's hand of friendship, terming it as an encouraging gesture.

His Foreign Minister Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri, who was also in Lahore on Sunday said, India should not attach any precondition to resume talks.

On the infiltration issue, he said Pakistan was ready to appoint

foreign observers including UN to monitor the LoC to verify allegations of cross-border infiltration.

"India should accept joint monitoring of LoC by United Kingdom, United States, France, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia and Iran to observe factual position of its allegations against Pakistan for sponsoring cross border terrorism".

He said Pakistan always welcomed role of United Nations and other neutral bodies or states to resolve the issue of Kashmir.

"As India is not willing to accept increase in number of UN observers at the LOC therefore, we want to get clear the picture regarding its allegations by engaging some sovereign state or states," he said adding Pakistan welcomes any "honest brokers" to resolve its dispute with India.



Pakistani tribesmen protesting a crackdown on poppy cultivation take position against paramilitary forces in the country's southwestern Gulistan area near the Afghan border on Sunday. According to officials and witnesses, tribesmen blocked the main highway to Afghanistan and torched two military vehicles a day after a shootout between opium farmers and security forces in which a paramilitary soldier was killed.

## Pakistan urges UN 'Big-5' to monitor LoC

AFP, Islamabad

The UN Security Council's permanent members and two Islamic states should post observers along disputed Kashmir's de facto border to check whether Islamic militants are crossing into the Indian side, Pakistan said Sunday.

Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri urged India to accept Pakistan's latest offer, which would see monitors from Saudi Arabia and Iran join representatives from the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China along the Line of Control (LoC).

"As India is not willing to accept increase in number of UN observers at the LoC, therefore, we want to get clear the picture regarding its allegations by engaging some sovereign state or states," Kasuri said.

India accuses Pakistan of arming and training Islamic militants battling New Delhi's rule in Kashmir, a charge that Islamabad denies.

## Pak parties to hold talks to end constitutional deadlock

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani opposition and ruling parties will hold a second round of critical talks later Monday aimed at breaking a crippling deadlock over presidential and military powers.

The dispute is paralysing the six-month old government, the first civilian administration since the October 1999 coup by army chief-turned-president General Pervez Musharraf.

Musharraf wrote the powers into the constitution last August before the parliament, suspended in 1999, was restored through October polls.

Opposition parties, including Islamists and the secular parties of exiled ex-prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, are set on forcing the government to submit the constitutional changes to parliament for approval.

They are also determined to force Musharraf, who named himself president in 2001, to relinquish his simultaneous post as army chief and president.

## Neplai Maoists start talks with a positive note

PTI, Kathmandu

A long, rocky road still lies ahead for the Nepal peace process despite a positive note struck during the first round of talks between government and Maoist rebels, an analyst said on Monday.

At the end of the groundbreaking first round talks at a Kathmandu hotel on Sunday, government and Maoist delegates said they were satisfied with the encounter.

Maoist representative Krishna Bahadur Mahara said the talks went smoothly and were held in a cordial atmosphere.

Government minister for communications Ramesh Nath Pandey said, "The talks were very satisfactory and we are very much encouraged of a successful conclusion."

However, the guerrillas said they had various demands, including that the army be recalled to barracks within a week and all Maoist prisoners be released within 15 days.

Maoist convenor Babu Ram

Bhattarai also demanded at the talks that anti-terrorism laws be scrapped and that all political charges framed against Maoist activists throughout the country be dropped.

The Maoists also outlined their preferred procedures for the creation of a new constitution and ways to deal with economic, social and human rights issues.

The demands had "discouraged" hopes of a quick breakthrough, analyst Professor Guna Raj Shastri of Tribhuvan University said.

"In view of the Maoists' agenda, (reaching) peaceful settlement may prove to be a Herculean task," Shastri said.

"The people's aspiration for a successful conclusion of the talks for a durable peace in the country has been discouraged after hearing Bhattarai's political, economic and social agenda."

Mahara said, "We are awaiting a response from the government."

"We are going to start discussion on

a proposal (on the agenda for future talks) at the monitoring committee as from Tuesday," he said.

A four-member monitoring committee was constituted during the talks, comprising Narayan Singh Pun and Ramesh Nath Pandey from the government side and Mahara and Ram Bahadur Thapa from the Maoists' side.

Mahara said the government may ask for more time to study the rebels' agenda.

"The proposals have come from only one side and we will not take an immediate decision before hearing the reply from the government," he said.

Pandey would say the proposals were being studied. He did not wish to comment further.

The Maoist "people's war" for a communist republic has claimed more than 7,800 lives since 1996.

A previous attempt at peace talks in 2001 stalled after three rounds over the Maoist demand for the abolition of the monarchy.

## Benazir obtains MPs resignation to stem mass defection

PTI, Islamabad

As Pakistan government stepped up pressure on opposition to end agitation against President Pervez Musharraf's constitutional amendments, former Premier Benazir Bhutto has in advance obtained resignation letters from her party MPs and members of provincial assemblies in an attempt to stem mass defection.

Benazir, who held a meeting of her Pakistan People's Party (PPP) legislators in Dubai, has received the resignation letters of the party's all 11 Senators and 59 members of National Assembly as well as members of provincial assemblies to use them at any time if required, PPP officials were quoted by media as saying.

PPP leaders here believe that the move to obtain resignations came a little late as 21 out of 80 members of the National Assembly have already defected from the party to support Premier Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali's government.

## Naga rebels to pursue peace as govt extends ceasefire

AFP, Guwahati

An influential tribal separatist group in the northeastern state of Nagaland said the Indian government's decision to extend a ceasefire which was to expire Monday had brightened hopes of an end to 56 years of insurgency.

Last week, New Delhi extended the ceasefire by a year following a meeting with the powerful S.S. Khaplang faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN).

"We shall utilize the ceasefire extension period to find a permanent solution to the vexed Naga problem," K. Mulatou, publicity chief of the NSCN (Khaplang), told AFP.



Maoist negotiator Krishna Bahadur Mahara (L) speaks at a press conference with government negotiator Narayan Singh Pun (R) after peace talks in Kathmandu on Sunday. The two sides said they were "satisfied" after their first round of peace talks, but the guerrillas said they wanted the army recalled to barracks within a week.