

WHO for global collaboration, vigilance to beat SARS

China calls for 'people's war'

AFP, Beijing

World Health Organization officials here said Thursday global collaboration and vigilance is what will help crack Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, which has killed more than 390 people worldwide.

More than 100 health officials, clinicians, epidemiologists and representatives from Britain, Canada, China, Hong Kong and the United States met here for two days to exchange ideas about how to fight SARS.

Toronto is the area hardest hit by SARS outside of Asia.

At the close of the conference, David Heymann, WHO's executive director for communicable disease clusters, praised world efforts to contain the disease that has now infected nearly 6,000 people.

He said "detect and protect" measures are the key to SARS

containment, since there is yet no cure for the disease, which emerged in China in November.

"Detect this disease by having health workers understand that this disease is present and protect by using the proper protective equipment for health systems also with public health doing surveillance and screening in patients," he said.

WHO's medical officer global outbreak alert and response, Julie Hall, added that continued global collaboration and vigilance is the key to beating SARS.

Heymann reiterated the WHO's belief that Vietnam, Toronto, Hong Kong and Singapore have reached the peak of their outbreaks.

Still, he said many questions about SARS remain.

Heymann and Julie Gerberding, head of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, differed slightly on their views about the

suspected case of SARS: the coronavirus.

Gerberding noted that "not all of our probable SARS cases (in the United States) have evidence of coronavirus infection." The CDC reported 50 probable cases in Illinois.

However, she added that "there is strong evidence from all the laboratories in the network that coronavirus is implicated in a causal manner."

Canadian officials share Gerberding's view as tests have shown that coronavirus appeared in only 40 per cent of probable SARS cases in Canada.

Both WHO officials praised Canada's efforts to contain SARS, saying a Canadian web data search engine is helping the UN health agency track SARS developments around the world.

Asked about containment or the long term outlook for SARS, Heymann said: "I would say that China is key to the whole answer. ...

(it) depends on how soon China can understand the situation and can take the appropriate measures to control the spread."

Canada reported two more probable SARS cases Thursday for 348 nationwide (including 149 probable). It has 23 SARS-linked deaths to date.

AP adds: Echoing the slogans of China's communist revolution, President Hu Jintao called for a "people's war" against SARS as the government imposed restrictions on university students and migrant workers to keep the virus from spreading to the countryside.

The Communist Party and health officials tried to reassure a frightened public on Friday, denying rumors that Beijing is to be sealed off and insisting that food and other supplies would be plentiful.

India declared SARS-free

AFP, Beijing

Good news came late Thursday for India, declared SARS free by the World Health Organisation, but gloom and death still hung over neighbouring China, which reported another 11 deaths from the atypical pneumonia.

The mysterious illness and its social and economic repercussions cast a pall over May Day celebrations in the country of 1.3 billion people, normally one of the biggest holidays of the year for China.

At the same time, scientists met in Canada to discuss how to battle the disease that has now killed 393 worldwide and infected nearly 6,000.

Indian Health Minister Sushma Swaraj said Thursday the WHO had declared India "SARS-free," even though the country's health authorities say 20 people have tested positive for the mysterious atypical pneumonia.

Swaraj said that according to WHO guidelines, none of the 20 can be confirmed as being infected with SARS.



PHOTO: AFP
Indian patient Pratap Singh, a suspected case of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), sits in a vehicle in Amritsar on Thursday. Indian Health Minister Sushma Swaraj said the World Health Organisation (WHO) had declared India "SARS-free," even though the country's health authorities say 20 people have tested positive for the deadly virus.

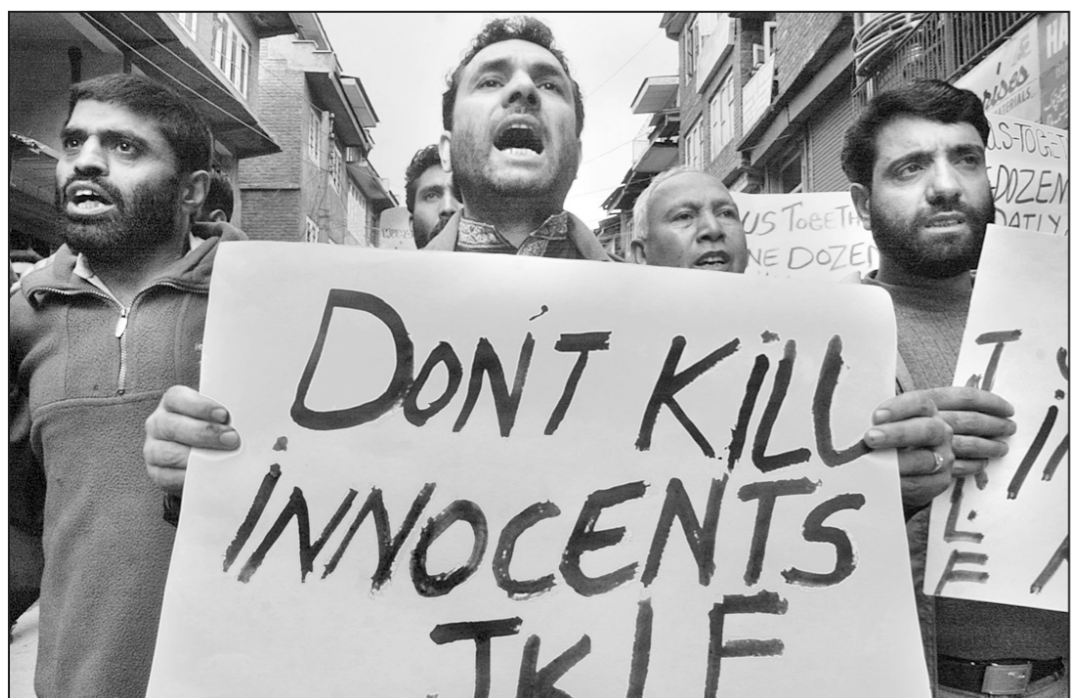


PHOTO: AFP
Vice chairman of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation front Javed Ahmad Mir (C) displays a placard during a demonstration in Srinagar on Friday. Mir and his supporters staged the demonstration after soldiers of the Indian army's counter-insurgency wing the Rashtriya (National) Rifles allegedly shot and wounded student Javed Ahmed on Thursday near his house in the Soitang area of Srinagar sparking anti-government protests.

India to export missiles to friendly countries

AFP, New Delhi

India will soon begin selling missiles to "friendly countries", media reports quoting defence sources said Friday.

The systems earmarked for export include cruise and anti-tank guided missiles, which will not violate international laws governing the sale of missiles -- such as the Missile Technology Control Regime, the reports said.

In January, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said several countries had shown interest in buying the BrahMos missile which India is developing jointly with Russia.

The BrahMos is a 280-km range cruise missile meant to arm Indian warships and submarines.

It has been test-flown three times since 2001 and is likely to enter production by the end of the year.

The Asian Age newspaper said the state-run Bharat Dynamics

Limited (BDL) was exploring the option of exporting subsystems of the home-grown surface to surface Prithvi (Earth) missile.

Exporting the entire missile could have security implications for India, which was why the sale of subsystems was being considered, the report said.

"The missile will go to Singapore but from there we do not know what its final destination is," the paper quoted an unidentified BDL official as saying.

"This is a big problem owing to which we can only export subsystems."

BDL has already bagged orders from Malaysia and a number of countries had shown interest in buying missiles from India, the report added.

The prices for some types of missiles -- around 420,000 rupees (8,750 dollars) -- are far less than those quoted in the international market, the report added.

US has asked Syria to 'dismantle' Hezbollah

Powell heads for Syria

AFP, Jerusalem

The United States has demanded that Syria "dismantle" the militant Lebanese Shiite Muslim movement Hezbollah, US National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice was quoted as saying in an Israeli newspaper Friday.

"At every opportunity, we have asked Syria to stop supporting terrorism, dismantle Hezbollah, close the headquarters of terrorist groups in Damascus and end the threat posed to Israel from rockets in south Lebanon," Rice said, in remarks published in Hebrew in the Yediot Aharonot daily.

Rice was referring to the positions in south Lebanon held by the Iranian and Syrian-backed Hezbollah, which led the resistance to Israel's 22-year occupation of the area which ended in May

2000.

Aside from frequent violations of Lebanon's airspace by Israeli warplanes, which draw ineffective anti-aircraft fire from Hezbollah, the Lebanon-Israel border has been largely quiet since the Israeli pullout.

Rice also reiterated US charges that Damascus was hosting members of Saddam Hussein's deposed regime.

"President (George W.) Bush felt Syria's attitude during the war in Iraq was problematic, notably because high ranking Iraqi officials were able to enter Syria. Since then, the Syrians have been behaving more responsibly and closing their borders."

"Nevertheless, the issue is far from solved," she added.

Rice also pressed Israel to "react

in a positive way to the changes in the Palestinian leadership," referring to the new reformist government of prime minister Mahmoud Abbas that began work on Wednesday.

"Israel must improve the humanitarian situation and restore freedom of movement to the Palestinians," she said.

But Rice assured Israel of continued backing from its key ally. "The United States has proved that it is a true friend on whom Israel can rely, and this is particularly the case with President Bush."

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Colin Powell heads for Syria Friday at the start of a major push for the new Middle East peace "roadmap," already under pressure after a deadly Israeli raid on Gaza City.

Pakistan demands proof to back US terror watch list

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan on Friday demanded proof from the United States to support the placement of several Pakistan-based groups on a terrorist watchlist.

"If they have any evidence against the listed organisations, they must tell us and we will take action," Interior Minister Faisal Saleh Hayat told AFP.

The US State Department on Wednesday issued a list of 38 "other terrorist" groups to be watched closely, presenting it as a second-tier to its list of 36 "Designated Foreign Terrorist Organisations."

The watchlist includes Hizbul Mujahedin, Jamiatul Mujahedin and Al-Badr Mujahedin, all pro-Pakistan militant groups fighting Indian rule in Kashmir, the Himalayan region divided between Pakistan and India and claimed by both.

It also includes Sipah-e-Sahaba, a Sunni extremist organisation outlawed in Pakistan since January 2002, and extremists loyal to renegade Afghan Islamist commander Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Hizb-i-Islami Gulbuddin.

The pro-Hekmatyar loyalists are believed to be hiding out along eastern Afghanistan and Pakistan's north-western tribal regions bordering Afghanistan, according to the State Department's Prevention of Global Terrorism Report.

The report lists Hizbul as the largest Kashmiri militant group and the militant wing of Pakistan's largest Islamic political party, Jamaat-i-Islami.

Its estimated several hundred members, mainly ethnic Kashmiris, are listed as based in Indian Kashmir and Pakistan.

Al-Badr, an offshoot of Hizbul, was listed as operating in Kashmir, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

'Surgical masks provide best protection against SARS'

AFP, Paris

Surgical-quality face masks, but not paper ones, offer the best protection against the SARS virus, according to a study published on Saturday in The Lancet, the British medical weekly.

Doctors at Queen Mary Hospital in Hong Kong, one of the epicentres for the SARS scare, looked at the precautions taken by 254 colleagues who had been exposed to 11 people infected with the pneumonia-like disease.

The participants were quizzed closely as to whether they had followed recommendations to wear a mask, gloves and gown and scrupulously wash their hands when caring for SARS patients.

Of the 241 staff members who were uninfected, 69 had obeyed all four recommendations.

The 13 infected staff had omitted at least one measure, but there was a common denominator: they had not worn a surgical mask.

Israel stages raid in WB: 12 killed

US calls for restraint

AFP, Jenin

Israeli armour launched a brief incursion in the Palestinian territories Friday a day after 12 Palestinians were killed in a major raid on Gaza City and as Washington issued a rare call on its ally to stem the civilian deaths.

Troops backed by tanks moved into the northern West Bank city of Tulkarem and the adjacent refugee camp, Palestinian security sources said.

The army also dynamited the houses of two Palestinian militants killed earlier this week in a foiled attack on a wildcat settlement near the city of Nablus, sources on both sides.

Israel's policy of deterrent house demolitions has seen more than 200 homes destroyed since last summer, drawing condemnation from rights groups as being collective punishment.

In pre-dawn sweeps across the territories, the army also arrested 22 Palestinians, 10 in the West Bank and 12 in the Gaza Strip, the army said.

The army withdrew in the morning and lifted the curfew on all the West Bank cities it has reoccupied for almost a year.

The smouldering violence came a day after a massive Israeli raid into the Gaza Strip aimed at a senior leader of the radical Islamist movement Hamas killed him and 11 other Palestinians.

The raid lasted 15 hours. A pitched battle around a four-storey building where the man was holed up left a Gaza City neighbourhood in ruins and also left seven Israeli soldiers wounded.

Most of the victims were civilians, including a two-year-old child.

The raid, which came a day after the so-called "roadmap" for peace in the Middle East was published, prompted Israel's US ally to urge restraint.

Washington had promised to release the blueprint after the new Palestinian government was sworn in. Its publication Wednesday was seen as a potential breakthrough in attempts to bring the deadly cycle of violence to an end.



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinians survey the damage on Thursday to the four-storied building in Gaza City's eastern al-Shajaiya district in which Hamas leader Yusef Abu Hin and two of his brothers were holed up after Israeli sappers dynamited it, destroying it completely and killing the three men. Twelve Palestinians were killed in the Israeli army raid, including a two-year-old boy, one day after both sides received copies of a "roadmap" drawn up by an international diplomatic team aimed at achieving peaceful coexistence between Israeli and Palestinians and a separate Palestinian state by 2005.

2 ex-State Dept workers charged with selling US visa in Lanka

AFP, Washington

Nine persons, including two former US State Department workers, have been charged with illegally selling US entry visas out of the US Embassy in Sri Lanka, Justice Department officials said Thursday.

The indictment follows the arrests of eight of the nine suspects and searches at five locations in three states, Assistant Attorney General Michael Chertoff of the Criminal Division and McGregor W. Scott, United States Attorney for the Eastern District of California said in a statement issued here.

Earlier the State Department said the United States has temporarily closed the consular section of its embassy in Sri Lanka after two former employees were indicted in California on charges of visa fraud.

State Department deputy spokesman Philip Reeker said the charges against the diplomats identified as Acey R. Johnson and Long N. Lee stemmed from an eleven month probe by the Diplomatic Security Service, the FBI, the Department of Justice, the US embassy in Colombo and Sri Lankan authorities.

Japan seeks Indian backing against North Korea

AFP, Tokyo

Japan, which slapped economic sanctions on India for its 1998 nuclear tests, is sending its defence minister to New Delhi for a diplomatic offensive against North Korea, diplomats said.

Japanese Defence Agency Director General Shigeru Ishiba was to arrive Saturday for talks with his Indian counterpart George Fernandes on regional and international issues, they said.

Ishiba's trip comes on the heels of a visit by French Defence Minister Michele Alliot-Marie, who spoke of the need for a "multipolar" world after the Iraq war, and coincides with a visit by top Vietnamese leader Nong Duc Manh.

"China, Russia, South Korea and the US are the key players in the North Korean nuclear crisis but as Japan is directly threatened by any such weapons Pyongyang may possess, Tokyo would want to build a world opinion on the issue," said

a senior diplomat who wished not to be named.

"And thus Ishiba's visit to New Delhi has immense importance because India is a key part of this international community."

Takashi Inoguchi, professor of politics at the University of Tokyo's Institute of Oriental Culture, said talks between India and Japan had entered "a higher level this year as they have common interests."

"A great headache is Pakistan for India, and North Korea for Japan ... Pakistan and North Korea are said to be joining hands on developing nuclear arms," he said.

"Japan may be hoping to get some information from India about nuclear weapons held by Pakistan, and discuss how India is coping with the situation," he said.

Japan's Defence Agency declined to comment on the topics to be discussed at Ishiba's meeting with Fernandes. Ishiba has no plan to visit Pakistan at the moment, an agency spokesman said.

War fears haunt Lankans

AP, Jaffna

For more than 14 months, the guns have been silent in Sri Lanka's northern war zone after the government and the Tamil Tiger rebels signed a Norwegian-brokered cease-fire.

But the rebels' sudden decision to stop participating in peace talks last week has awakened fears that war may soon return to this tropical South Asian island.

"There is a certain kind of stiffness that has engulfed people during this last week," said Thiyagalingam Sivakumar, 32, a Tamil pharmacist in Jaffna, the main northern city, which bears the scars of 19 years of fighting.

"There is apprehension whether fighting will resume," said Sivakumar, who took over the family business when his father was injured by a shell and has been displaced three times by the fighting.

The rebels said they suspended the peace talks on April 21 because the government was not doing enough to normalize the area, particularly removing the military from city centers and the airport.

The military is hesitant, since it would have to fight its way back in if the talks fail and war resumes, as has happened twice before.