

10 killed in Vietnam bus explosion

Ten people were killed and around 90 injured, many critically, when a bus en route to the capital exploded in northern Vietnam, medical officials said Saturday.

Two victims died late Friday at Hanoi's St Paul Hospital and one died at the National Burns Institute, taking the toll to 10. Seven others had died on Friday.

"We had 22 patients yesterday. Four of them passed away, the others are in serious conditions," a St Paul administrative official told AFP.

The National Burns Institute said it had received more than 50 patients, one of whom died overnight.

The explosion occurred in Bac Ninh town in Bac Ninh province, around 30 km northeast of Hanoi.

A police spokesman said initial findings suggested the blast, which occurred Friday morning, was caused by explosives transported on the bus.

Some newspapers also suggested the blast might have been provoked by some gunpowder.

Vietnamese newspapers carried conflicting figures Saturday on the casualties and the number of people on the bus and in the surrounding area. Several vendors were in the area to service passing buses.

Hospital sources said the casualty figures could rise in the coming days.

Islamabad to spell out steps soon to improve India ties

Musharraf reiterates desire to reduce tension

REUTERS, Islamabad
Pakistan told Secretary of State Colin Powell on Saturday it would soon announce measures aimed at improving relations India, the Pakistan foreign ministry said.

Pakistani Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali spoke with Powell by telephone. The two discussed the latest developments between Pakistan and India, the ministry said.

"He conveyed to Mr Powell that Pakistan will soon announce measures aimed at creating a congenial atmosphere and to promote peace and security," it said.

Powell telephoned Jamali a day after Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said he would make a decisive bid to make peace with Pakistan. He also announced India would appoint an ambassador to Pakistan and restore air links.

Pakistan welcomed the Indian announcement and said it was ready for talks on all issues.

Air and rail links were cut and diplomatic relations downgraded

between the rivals after an attack on India's parliament in December 2001, which India blamed on Pakistan-based militants fighting Indian rule in disputed Kashmir. Pakistan denied any involvement in the parliament raid.

The nuclear-armed neighbors have fought three wars since their independence in 1947, two of them over Muslim-majority Kashmir. The two countries came to the brink of a fourth war last year, again over the Himalayan region of Kashmir. The crisis was averted after international pressure, led by the United States, was put on them to avoid war.

Two weeks ago Vajpayee told a rally in Indian Kashmir he wanted talks with Pakistan. Last Monday Jamali telephoned Vajpayee and invited him to visit Pakistan.

The foreign ministry said Jamali had told Powell he had sent a formal invitation to the Indian prime minister to visit Pakistan. India has not yet responded.

"Secretary of State Powell assured the Prime Minister that the United States would continue to make efforts to promote better

understanding between India and Pakistan," the ministry said.

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage is to visit the region next week.

AFP adds: President Pervez Musharraf has reiterated Pakistan's readiness for talks with India, state media reported Saturday amid ground-breaking peace gestures between the hostile neighbors.

"We stand ready to enter into a dialogue anytime, anywhere," Musharraf was quoted as saying at a banquet late Friday by the Associated Press of Pakistan (APP).

"We seek peaceful resolution of all disputes and differences especially the core dispute over Jammu and Kashmir...we on our part will demonstrate all our seriousness.

"We desire tension-free and cooperative relations with India."

The prospect of the first talks in almost two years between the nuclear rivals is warmer than ever following Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's offer last month to accept Pakistan's repeated calls for dialogue.



A government helicopter drops off food and medicine over the flood-submerged central Argentine city of Santa Fe on Friday where at least 16 people have been killed due to heavy rains. Provincial governor Carlos Reutemann compared the impact of the floods with the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.

Floods kill 16 in Argentina

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

The worst flooding to hit Argentina's farming heartland in memory has killed 16 people and forced 100,000 from their homes -- with some evacuees taking shelter in cemetery crypts -- officials said on Friday.

Vast tracts of land are submerged under several feet of water in the central farming province of Santa Fe after a major river broke its banks. Locals are forced to navigate the streets in boats, while others are sitting out the floods on the rooftops of their sodden homes amid fears of opportunistic looting.

"There are now 16 confirmed dead," said provincial police chief Miguel Belletti, adding that 50,000 people had been evacuated from the provincial capital and a similar number from flooded towns across the province. The Salado River burst its banks following 55 inches of rain in two days earlier this week, flooding towns throughout the No.2 soy producing province. The average rainfall for the area is 32 inches of rain per year.

Floodwaters covered much of the area around the provincial capital, Santa Fe, which lies 300 miles from Buenos Aires. Water began to recede on Friday but many residents remained without drinking water and electricity, the government said.

Caretaker President Eduardo Duhalde has declared Santa Fe a "disaster zone" and the World Bank plans to loan \$123 million to help the province.

"The only thing I have is the clothes on my back; everything else is under water," a flood victim told reporters.



German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (L) speaks with his British counterpart Jack Straw and EU Commissioner for External Relations Chris Patten (R) on Saturday on the port of Kastellorizo, moments before a second meeting of the informal meeting of European Foreign Ministers on the island of Kastellorizo.

EU seeks to bridge divisions over Iraq

AFP, Rhodes, Greece

EU foreign ministers held "constructive" talks Friday on bridging divisions over post-war Iraq, notably agreeing to begin sending diplomatic representatives back to Baghdad as the country returns to the international fold.

But while bonhomie was thick on the ground in informal talks on a Greek holiday island, few decisions were made, while another key issue which has soured relations - European defence - still hung in the air.

"People (were) very concerned to look forwards and not back," said British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, describing the talks as having been held in a "good atmosphere, a constructive atmosphere."

"I don't have the impression that we are at loggerheads," added

international affairs, was clouded by Europe's soured links with the United States following the Iraq war.

"Everyone is aware of the tension and mutual distrust that cast their shadow on the relationship between the EU and the USA," said the Greek EU presidency, the host of the talks.

Ministers sought to accentuate the positive at the meeting, including an island-hopping cruise and an evening dinner in Turkey on Saturday.

"It is a very obvious fact that the EU was divided over the question of military action. But what was clear today was that people wanted to put that behind us, because the facts have changed," said Straw.

But the tensions bubbling under the surface of post-war diplomacy were evident.

Al-Qaeda plane crash plot on US consulate in Karachi uncovered

AP, Washington

US authorities say they have uncovered an al-Qaeda plot to crash an explosives-laden small aircraft into the American consulate in Karachi, Pakistan. That prompted the Homeland Security Department to warn about possible attacks in the United States.

A department advisory said al-Qaeda was in the late stages of planning an attack on the consulate using a small fixed-wing aircraft or helicopter.

Such a plot, along with one uncovered last year in which al-Qaeda hoped to fly a small plane into a US warship in the Persian Gulf, demonstrated a "fixation" on using aircraft in attacks, the advisory said.

The warning was issued Thursday to US pilots and airport

managers as part of a broader bulletin urging vigilance to guard against similar attacks in America.

A US law enforcement official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said a plot against the consulate was uncovered with the arrests earlier this week in Karachi of Waleed bin Attash and five other alleged al-Qaeda members. About 300 pounds of explosives and a cache of weapons were seized.

Attash is believed to have played a leading role in planning for the Sept. 11 attacks and the bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen.

Homeland Security officials say there is no specific evidence about an attack using small aircraft in the United States. But the advisory says al-Qaeda could try to use such planes because they are easily available and require less pilot skill than large jets.

Powell asks Syria to accept new ME dynamics

Proposal to declare region WMD-free rejected

AFP, Damascus

US Secretary of State Colin Powell pressed Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on Saturday to adapt to new strategic "dynamics" in the Middle East by ending support for anti-Israel groups and embracing changes brought about by Saddam Hussein's ouster in neighboring Iraq.

Powell, making his first trip to the Middle East in more than a year, said Saddam's fall, coupled with reform in the Palestinian leadership that triggered the release of the long-awaited "roadmap" for a peace with Israel, had fundamentally altered the situation in the region.

"Much has changed since my last visit to Syria ... We have two dynamics at work," he said before heading into talks with Assad, whose government has signalled willingness to listen to Powell's message but bridled at suggestions that it submit to US demands.

Washington ramped up pressure on Damascus last month at the height of the war in Iraq, accusing it of aiding Saddam's collapsing regime and renewing accusations that Syria sponsors terrorism and is pursuing weapons of mass destruction.

US criticism of Syria on issues related to Iraq has since subsided and Powell made clear that despite the often bellicose rhetoric of mid-

April, the United States was not intent on broadening the war.

"I am here to pursue diplomacy and mutual political efforts," he told reporters. "The issue of war and hostilities is not on the table."

AP adds: Secretary of State Colin Powell on Saturday turned aside the idea of immediate US support for an Arab-backed UN resolution on ridding the Middle East of weapons of mass destruction - a proposal obviously aimed at Israel.

Going into his meeting with Syrian President Bashar Assad, Powell said clearing destructive weapons from the region is a long-standing US goal, but now is not the time to address that matter.

Falling boulder buries 12 alive in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar

Eight children and four women were killed when a boulder fell on their homes in northern Pakistan's mountainous Kohistan region, police said Saturday.

"Heavy rain and thunder were blamed for the downhill rolling of a huge rock onto the victims' homes," local police officer Nazir Khan told AFP.

The victims were from two families.

The disaster struck in the early hours of Friday as they slept in their homes in Gaicho Baila village, some 400 kilometres (248 miles) north of Peshawar, the capital of North West Frontier Province.



A Turkish girl sits near her family's belongings in front of the tent camp in the city center of Bingol on Saturday. Calm returned to the Turkish eastern city after violent protests erupted over the official handling of a deadly earthquake in the region. About 200 children were trapped early May 1 when the earthquake measuring 6.4 on the Richter scale hit the poverty-stricken mainly Kurdish province of Bingol, killing 127 people and injuring nearly 540 others across the region.

Calm returns to quake-hit Turkish city

AFP, Bingol

Calm returned to the eastern Turkish town of Bingol Saturday after violent protests erupted over the official handling of a deadly earthquake in the region.

Armed police patrols were still evident in front of the governor's offices in the mainly Kurdish town, where the worst violence took place, but their numbers were considerably reduced.

No serious incident was reported overnight, an officer told AFP.

About 200 children were trapped early Thursday when the earthquake measuring 6.4 on the Richter scale hit the poverty-stricken mainly Kurdish province of Bingol, killing 127 people and injuring nearly 540 others across the region.



An Iraqi man shows an application for job between two US soldiers maintaining a security barrier at the entrance of the Palestine Hotel in Baghdad on Saturday. Several hundred Iraqis invaded the city center Palestine Hotel where journalists live under US military protection, to demand jobs and aid from the United States.

China lacks weapons to fight killer pneumonia

REUTERS, Geneva/Beijing

Chinese officials said on Friday SARS was at its peak in Beijing, but Hong Kong scientists said the microbe was mutating and the World Health Organization warned that China still lacked the equipment and expertise to fight it.

WHO also removed the United States and Britain from the list of countries affected by SARS, following a 20-day period without local spread of the flu-like disease.

Canada, China -- including Hong Kong -- Taiwan, Mongolia and Singapore remain on the list of countries where national authorities reported the virus is being spread locally as opposed to being imported from elsewhere.

In Beijing, the deputy director general of the Municipal Health Bureau, Liang Wannian, said

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome was peaking in the capital, the hardest hit city in the world with 91 deaths and more than 1,600 cases.

"Since April 21, the number of SARS patients in Beijing has entered the peak period," Liang told a news conference.

"My personal judgment is the present high plateau of the number of cases in Beijing will continue for a period of time. Overall the situation in Beijing is stable, and the upward trend has been effectively checked."

SARS has killed close to 200 people in China and infected nearly 4,000 since it emerged in the southern province of Guangdong late last year. Globally, it has infected more than 6,300 people in 30 countries, killing more than 400.

But WHO said China had a great

SARS virus mutating to evade diagnosis

AP, Hong Kong

Like a "murderer who is trying to change his fingerprints," the SARS virus is mutating rapidly into at least two forms, complicating efforts to develop a solid diagnosis and a vaccine, researchers say.

Scientists at the Chinese University of Hong Kong say they analyzed the genetic sequences of virus samples taken from 11 SARS patients and found by late March that two forms of the virus were present in Hong Kong.

One strain was detected in a woman whose illness was linked to an outbreak caused by a mainland Chinese man who spread SARS to others at a Hong Kong hotel.

The other strain came from a Hong Kong man believed to have caught it in the mainland border city of Shenzhen.

"This rapid evolution is like that of a murderer who is trying to

change his fingerprints or even his appearance to try to escape detection," said Dr. Dennis Lo, a chemical pathologist at the university.

But while Lo said researchers have shown "the SARS coronavirus is undergoing rapid evolution in our population," he noted more work is needed before researchers can say whether the virus has become more infectious and lethal.

Researchers also need to find out whether people who get SARS from one strain can develop immunity to other strains, he said. If not, finding ways to better diagnose it and to develop a vaccine could be more difficult.

The World Health Organization says there's no evidence that the mutations have any effect on the disease itself. WHO scientists also say it's not surprising the SARS bug shows genetic changes, because the coronavirus family is prone to mutations.