INTERNATIONAL

China's countryside facing 'serious' SARS epidemic

Beijing lacks hospitals, doctors to fight virus

AFP, Beijins

Millions of migrant workers have ignored government warnings against returning from SARS-affected areas to their rural homes, as Premier Wen Jiabao warned Wednesday of a serious outbreak in the Chinese hinterland.

More than 800,000 migrant workers have returned in recent weeks to central Henan province, one of the country's most populous areas, while one million have returned to neighboring Anhui, local officials and press reports

"At present there has not been a large epidemic in the rural areas, but we must be on high alert, neglecting prevention work in the rural regions will not be tolerated," Wen was quoted by the People's

"The basic rural medical facilities are weak, technical capabilities are not adequate (and) the epidemic surveillance system is not sound."

During a nationwide teleconference with top provincial officials on Tuesday, Wen said that the nation faced "stark challenges" in controlling the spread of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome in the countryside.

Stopping the epidemic from spreading to rural areas would be key to containing the virus nation-

wide, Wen said, as he repeated an apparently ineffective demand for migrant workers not to return home

"It has been very difficult to advise migrant workers in (SARS) affected areas not to return home," the China News Service said, citing efforts by Henan to control the migrant population.

"The situation of SARS prevention in the entire (Henan) province is extremely serious."

Some 75 percent of an estimated 290,000 migrant workers that returned to Henan between May 1 and May 4, came from SARS affected areas, it said.

The "recent" return of up to 800,000 migrants to the province appeared as part of an exodus from SARS hotspots like southern Guangdong province and Beijing despite the government warnings ahead of the May Day holiday.

Henan, a largely rural province of 91 million people -- bigger than any European country except Russia -- has more than five million migrant workers that have spread to prosperous urban areas in search of a better livelihood.

Such workers in SARS-hit areas like Beijing and Guangdong were unlikely to return immediately to their jobs due to the epidemic, while many have been laid off from restaurant and hotels because of the slump in business due to SARS.

The situation was similar in neighboring Anhui province, which boasts a population of nearly 63 million and has some five million migrant workers, local officials said.

So far Henan has only reported 14 SARS cases and 14 suspected SARS cases as of Tuesday, while Anhui had nine confirmed cases and 13 suspected cases, far below the nearly 1,900 cases in Beijing and some 1,400 in Guangdong.

Moreover, a team of experts from the World Health Organization (WHO) would be visiting Hebei province Thursday, which surrounds Beijing and is home to many of the capital's migrant workers, WHO officials said

The number of infections in Hebei have doubled to 113 in the last week.

In Henan particularly, a SARS outbreak could seriously threaten an estimated one million HIV-positive patients who were infected with the AIDS virus from selling blood to unsanitary collection stations beginning in the mid-1980s.

With immune systems already weakened by HIV-AIDS, an attack by SARS was likely to be the final blow, Ray Yip, head of AIDS prevention for the United Nations Children's Fund's China office, has said.

China's government, which refused to acknowledge the extent of the epidemic for months after it was discovered in Guangdong in November, has only appeared to fully address the outbreak since the health minister and the mayor of Beijing were sacked on April 20.

Meanwhile, China and its capital Beijing are seriously lacking in hospitals and doctors who can treat severe SARS cases and the shortage will lead to more patients dying, a Chinese expert said Wednesday.

"It's a big problem," Hu Yonghua, director of the prestigious Beijing University's school of public health, told AFP.

"We have a lot of doctors, a lot of

hospitals, a lot of hospital beds.
The problem is we don't have
enough hospitals and doctors
specializing in this field.

"In the coming days, we can

"In the coming days, we can expect the number of deaths to increase because of health workers' lack of experience."

Hu, who also assists hospitals treating patients suffering from

Hu, who also assists hospitals treating patients suffering from Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), has recently written several articles about the problems China's healthcare system is facing in fighting the disease.



PHOTO: AFP

Patients and workers under quarantine walk in a courtyard at the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) facility of Xiaotangshan hospital on Wednesday on the outskirts of Beijing. The 1,000-bed military-run facility was built in barely a week and is filling up fast with patients diagnosed with SARS or suspected of having the disease in the world's worst affected city.

OTO: AFP

A wounded soldier (L) covers his face with his hand after being injured by an explosion at a military base, some 60km northeast of Baghdad on Tuesday. Three soldiers from the 4th Infantry Division were hurt when, under unknown circumstances, an unexploded bomblet from a cluster bomb went off inside the grounds of the camp. The soldiers were flown to a combat support hospital for assistance.

Emerging Iraqi leaders hold talks to form govt

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi groups named by the United States to take the lead political role after the fall of Saddam Hussein held talks here Tuesday to prepare the formation of an interim government in the next few weeks.

A day after the retired US general now running Iraq, Jay Garner, said they were the "nucleus" of an emerging Iraqi leadership, the five groups met to discuss who would attend the congress, which could come by the end of May.

"Our efforts now are aimed at solving the problems of the people and forming an interim government," Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, deputy leader of a main Shiite Muslim group, the Supreme Assembly for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SAIRI).

Iraqis are angry at the lack of leadership amid the chaos gripping the country since Saddam's ouster on April 9. US officials urge patience but Garner said the next weeks were "key" to restoring order and basic services.

Jalal Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), one of the two main Kurdish factions, said the five would hold another round of talks with US officials in Baghdad on Thursday.

The other groups are the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Massoud Barzani, the US-backed Iraqi National Congress of Ahmad Chalabi and the Iraqi National Accord movement of Iyad Alawi.

"They are going to bring in leaders from inside Iraq and see if we can't form a nucleus of leadership as we enter into June," Garner said Monday.

The five formed a leadership committee under the aegis of the United States in February, at a meeting in Kurdish-held northern Iraq before the war to oust

t Saddam was launched.

"The committee should be the

party that decides how the conference should be held," Talabani said Tuesday.

Hundreds of delegates are

Hundreds of delegates are expected to attend the congress, which will gather representatives from Iraq's vast mix of religious, ethnic and tribal groups. It is expected to be held later this month.

A Chalabi advisor told AFP that two seats would be added to the committee but officials said Adnan Pachachi, the ageing former foreign minister who returned from more than 30 years of exile Tuesday, would not be one of them.

The US occupation administration has been accused of not doing enough to keep order, as many Iraqis have seen their first taste of life after Saddam blighted by anarchy and violence.

9 killed in Aceh as peace deal on brink of collapse

AFP, Banda Aceh

Nine people have been killed in Indonesia's Aceh province since Monday as the government prepares for a military operation amid the virtual collapse of a peace pact with separatist rebels.

Five of the dead were members of the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM), according to reports Wednesday from police or the rebels.

On Tuesday the government

On Tuesday the government announced it is preparing a security operation that will be part of an "integrated" approach, including humanitarian and law enforcement operations and an effort to restore local government administration.

Military chief General Endriartono Sutarto said the military operations will depend on the situation on May 12 -- the government-imposed deadline for GAM to accept its terms for a meeting aimed at saving the December 9 peace deal.

India to deploy Agni missiles

PTI, New Delhi

India's key nuclear riposte, the intermediate range Agni I and II missiles, would be deployed during the year, the government said in the Rajya Sabha on Wednesday.

Defence Minister George Fernandes said in a written reply that production of Agni I with a range of 700 kms and Agni II with a reach of 2,000 km had already started and they would be deployed during 2003.

He also told the house that based on long-term security needs, the government has approved the development of the longer range 3,000 km Agni III missiles.

"The development is in progress and the missile is likely to be tested in near future", the minister said, however, adding that no date had yet been fixed for the first launch of this longer version Agni.

N Korea threatens to export nukes

Seoul urges Pyongyang to make first move to resolve crisis

REUTERS, Washington

North Korea threatened during talks in Beijing to export nuclear arms and to add to its arsenal, The Washington Times reported on Wednesday.

Citing US officials familiar with the talks, the newspaper's report said North Korea's negotiator, Li Gun, made the threat during a side meeting with US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly.

Li, a North Korean Foreign Ministry official, told Kelly that Pyongyang will "export nuclear weapons, add to its current arsenal or test a nuclear device," one administration official told The Times.

"This was clearly a threat," said another official described as being familiar with reports of the threeway talks among the United States, China and North Korea.

The Washington Times reported that the North Koreans also said that they had nearly finished reprocessing thousands of spent fuel rods that can be used to make atomic bombs.

North Korea's Li reportedly said the course that Pyongyang takes would depend on how the United States responds to its overtures. Kelly rejected the words as a threat and thus unacceptable, The Washington Times reported.

On Monday, a White House spokesman said the Bush adminis-

Korea either possessing or selling nuclear materials but denied a reported shift in policy for dealing with the threat.

"Our position remains the same," White House spokesman Scott McClellan told reporters. "The United States as well as the international community is concerned about North Korea possessing nuclear weapons and potentially transferring nuclear materials to others."

The New York Times reported

on Monday that the Bush administration was shifting from a decadeold policy of preventing North Korea from producing nuclear weapons to working to block it from exporting weapons-grade nuclear materials.

AFP adds: South Korea urged

North Korea to make the first move in its standoff with the United States Wednesday, calling on the Stalinist state to scrap its nuclear programme and warning brinksmanship would no longer work.

Foreign Minister Yoon Young-

Foreign Minister Yoon Young-Kwan said the United States would be unlikely to grant the security guarantee North Korea has been demanding unless it dismantled its nuclear programme first.

Korea to take a bold step and provide momentum which would lead to what it wants from the United States -- economic assistance and a

security guarantee," Yoon said.

"The scrapping of the nuclear programme in a verifiable and

reversible manner would lead to

the security gurantee that North Koreawants," Yoon said.

He said decision-makers in Pyongyang should ponder deeply whether it would be acceptable to post-September 11 America for the North to demand rewards after breaching international regula-

North Korea has threatened to scuttle all nuclear talks unless the United States responded positively to its offer to dismantle its nuclear program in exchange for economic and diplomatic concessions.

At the talks with the United States and China in Beijing last month, North Korea offered to ditch its nuclear and missile programs in return for economic and diplomatic benefits, according to US accounts.

"We should not take it for granted that the US-North Korean talks will continue," Yoon told journalists.

"At this moment, therefore, it is very important for us to accelerate the momentum for dialogue and give a boon to those in the United States who support dialogue (to resolve the crisis)," Yoon said.

He noted that moderates in

He noted that moderates in Washington were locking horns with hardliners over how to deal with North Korea.

'Broken seal on wing tiles causes Columbia to crash'

AFP, Washington

The Columbia shuttle disaster was probably caused by a seal that broke between protective tiles on the left wing, according to preliminary results from the official inquiry announced Tuesday.

"We now know enough ... to the point where we should now focus our effort," said retired admiral Hal Gehman, who heads the Columbia Accident Investigation Board.

Gehman, speaking at a press conference broadcast from the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas, described the preliminary findings as "a working hypothesis" that was reached in the previous 10 days.

Indian cabinet gives nod to dual citizenship

PTI, New Delhi

The Union Cabinet on Tuesday night decided to grant dual citizenship to Indians living in the United States, the United Kingdom and six other countries.

"Indians living there will have to apply for dual citizenships and government could grant it after due verification," Parliamentary Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj told reporters after a meeting of the Cabinet lasting over an hour.

They would not have the privilege of voting rights and would not be allowed to hold constitutional offices or jobs in three Defence services, she said.



PHOTO: AFP
An Iraqi girl sits in the first passenger train leaving Baghdad on route to the southern city of Basra on Wednesday. The re-opening of the train services follows up the new US directed administrative plans to bring Iraq back to normality.

Annan hails easing of Indo-Pak tensions

AFP, United Nations

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan warmly welcomed Tuesday recent steps by India and Pakistan aimed at easing tensions and improving bilateral relations.

"He hopes that these steps, starting with Prime Minister Vajpayee's statement on 18 April and Pakistan's positive response, will lead to the strengthening of peace and stability in the entire South Asian region," said Fred Eckhard, the spokesman for the secretary general.

secretary general.

In a surprise move, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee agreed last month to Pakistan's long-held call for talks, bringing hopes for dialogue between the two perennial foes closer to reality.

Earlier Tuesday, Pakistan

announced the lifting of restrictions on travel to India, proposed an exchange of ambassadors and a revival of sports ties.

Eckhard said Annan would like to see these confidence-building measures expanded.

"The secretary general also hopes that the normalization of diplomatic relations and restoration of rail, road and air links, as well as other confidence-building measures being introduced by the two sides, will lead to the resumption of a sustained dialogue," he

"He looks forward to the peaceful resolution of the differences between India and Pakistan, including over Kashmir," the spokesman added.

India and Pakistan fought two out of their three war over the disputed Himalayan region.

Bush promises cash for storm-ravaged states

AFP, Stockton

Residents of the US states ravaged by tornadoes at the weekend tried to pick up the pieces Tuesday, as President George W. Bush declared parts of Missouri and Kansas disaster areas.

The White House decision releases federal dollars for the clean-up operation, and defrays the costs of home-repairs and temporary housing for the homeless.

The resources are desperately

needed: many of the storm victims

have sought refuge with relatives -but it's a temporary fix.

Dana Phillips in Stockton, southeastern Missouri, her husband and three kids are shacking up with relatives and wondering if they'll ever go home. "My home is still standing," -the windows were blown out by the
twister -- "but my husband had a
computer business in town, and
we've lost that," said the 24-yearold.

"We're going to stay with family

for now while we figure out what to do." With three children under the age of four, and the memory of Sunday fresh in her mind (the family took cover in the bathroom as the twister blazed a path through town), Phillips is in no rush to go back to a homestead that appears to be in tornado alley.

Not much is left of this town,

flattened by what meteorologists called "supercell thunderstorms."
Main street is a picture of devastation: businesses reduced to piles of rubble, trees stripped down to the bark.