INTERNÄTIONAL

Mars as

AFP, London

Silence from

hopes fade

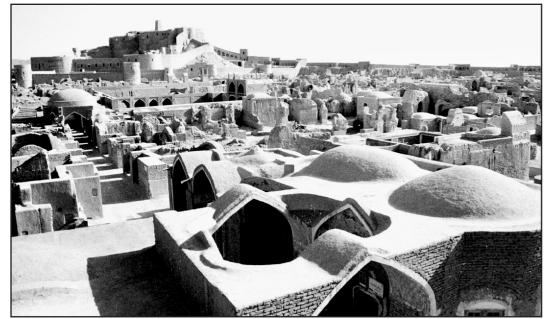


PHOTO: AFP

A 17 September 2002 photo shows the city of Bam with the citadel on the horizon. Virtually levelled in devastating earthquake yesterday, the historic heart of Bam was one of the wonders of Iran's cultural heritage, boasting a 2,000year-old citadel that was the largest mud-brick structure in the world.

Chinese rescue teams fan out across gas 'death zone'

AFP, Beijing

Rescue teams yesterday fanned out across a mountainous region of southwest China turned into a "death zone" by a massive explo-sion at a natural gas field which has so far claimed 191 lives. The search so far claimed 191 lives. The search for survivors was given priority, and to leave enough resources for that crucial task, officials post-poned an operation at the Chuangdongbei gas field to plug the well that had released the deadly times deadly fumes.

Under a sky darkened by fires lit to curb the spread of the silent killer, 1,500 police, firemen and soldiers split into 80 teams to cover an area of 80 square kilometers (32 square miles) to retrieve bodies and look for survivors.

Officials and residents of Kai county, the site of the gas field some 340 kilometers (210 miles) northeast of the large city of Chongqing, feared the casualty figures would rise further once they started reporting back.

"The rescue workers have been sent to the villages to check on this," said Wang Ruxiang, an official at Gaoqiao township, near the epi-center of the disaster.

Officials and media described horrible scenes of sudden death in the hours after Tuesday's blow-out sent a 30-meter (100-foot) geyser of concentrated toxic gases into the air, causing people to drop where they stood.

Some bodies were found at their homes, some outside," said a Kai county official.

Pak parliament

A day after Pakistani President

session

REUTERS, Islamabad

Only two of the bodies were workers employed at the gas field. The rest were local residents, 39 of them children below the age of 10, the China News Service reported.

"Many young people have gone out to work in faraway cities, leav-ing behind the elderly and kids at home who could not act swiftly to seek safety," said Pan Benqing, an official with a hospital in Zhonghe Town.

The frank reporting of the death toll Friday contrasted with the day before, when state-run media had initially said only eight had died in an industrial accident that is now called the worst in Chinese history. Rescue teams and technicians

had been scheduled Friday to pump some 260 cubic metres of concrete into the well to contain

the escaping sulfurated hydrogen. But the plan was put off for 24 hours, the Xinhua news agency and officials said.

Dozens of fire trucks and emergency equipment remained on standby around the gas field, operated by the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC).

"CNPC pays a high degree of attention to the rescue work after the blow-out," the company said in a statement.

Some 290 people, mostly children, were hospitalized and four of them were still in critical condition Friday, while some 3,000 people were reported to have sulfurated hydrogen symptoms like conjunctivitis and colds, Xinhua said.

2 had landed safely on Mars after the British-built craft failed for a second time to make contact with Earth and confirm its arrival. Scientists had hoped that the Lovell radio telescope at Jodrell Bank in west England would pick up a signal between 2200 GMT

Hope began to fade Friday that

the European space probe Beagle

Thursday and 0030 GMT Friday to tell them the missing spacecraft had arrived safely on the Red Planet. But the Beagle 2, which had

already failed to signal its arrival to NAŠA's Mars Odyssey orbiter earlier on Christmas Day, once again remained silent and the fate of the probe remains unknown.

Rescuers battle to find bodies in Benin plane crash

REUTERS, Cotonou

Rescuers yesterday battled high waves to free bodies from the wreckage of an airliner which crashed into the sea off the West African nation of Benin, killing at least 90 people.

The Beirut-bound Boeing 727 was carrying many Lebanese passengers heading home for the holidays on Christmas Day. At Beirut city airport, waiting families broke down with grief as news of the disaster broke

Benin's Health Minister Celine Segnon said 18 people survived the crash, including a three-year old month. child.

Through the night, rescuers toiled with steel cords and a tractor to try and lift large sections of the plane's wreckage from the shallow waters where the airliner crashed just moments after takeoff from the main city Cotonou on Thursday. appeared to be a forgone conclu-

Just after daybreak, fishermen swimming in the sea brought two adult bodies to the shore, bringing to three the number of bodies found since officials announced vote. He added that although a late on Thursday that 90 corpses had been recovered from the Atlantic Ocean

ROK to destroy 5.6 million ducks, chickens THE KOREA HERALD/ ANN, Seoul

The government will slaughter a total of 5.6 million chickens and ducks to contain a deadly bird flu

AFP, New Delhi Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee is likely to go for an early election next April or May, the ruling Hindu nationalist BJP

"Today, the (party) general secretaries charted out a course said yesterday, to cash in on a of action in the event of an early election," he said. booming economy and an overall "feel good" factor.

Parliamentary elections are The main opposition Congress due before next October, but party, routed in polls on December 1 in three Hindialready there is intense pressure on Vajpayee to hold them in the speaking heartland states, said it next few months to exploit the surging fortunes of his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which swept several key state elections this

"Have you any doubt?" Javadekar said to AFP when asked

about the chances of an early

A final decision is expected at a party meeting to be held on January 11-12 in the southern city of Hyderabad. But party spokesman Prakash Javadekar said after a meeting of senior BJP leaders that bringing forward the polls

was ready to take on the BJP. "The sooner they are held, the better," Congress spokesman Anand Sharma told AFP. The move for early national

polls has gained momentum since the BJP scored its landslide wins at the state level.

'Feel good' factor likely to

push India to early polls

Vajpayee is playing his cards close to his chest but has told party workers to get ready to face "the coming challenge".

"There is no room for complacency after the victory in the three states as time is of essence, he said on Thursday at a celebra-tion for his 79th birthday.

A big element favouring early final decision would be taken at polls is the "feel good" factor in the country, with economists hailing 2003 as a bumper year for the Hyderabad meeting, the party leaders discussed on Friday an "action plan keeping in mind the likelihood of early elections". the economy following good monsoon rains along with a booming stock market.

The economy is forecast to grow by around seven percent --near the government's long-term target of 8 to 10 percent.

Another factor tempting Vajpayee to call early elections is confusion in the Congress party's ranks following its rout in the state polls.

"The total disarray of the Congress camp is a huge advantage for BJP," said political ana-lyst Yashwant Deshmukh. "The opposition is absolutely nonexistent. (Congress chief) Sonia Gandhi's ratings are continuously plummeting. There seems to be no credible alternative to Vajpayee.

A slew of opinion polls have shown Gandhi, the Italian-born widow of slain prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, way behind Vajpayee in the ratings.

Pervez Musharraf survived the second attempt on his life in two weeks, parliament gathered yesterday to debate a deal that would keep him in power until 2007 if he gives up his military post. Musharraf struck the deal with hard-line Islamic opponents on

summoned

Wednesday to step down as army chief by the end of 2004 to resolve a row over his powers that all but paralyzed parliament. The prospect of such a deal, to

be sealed by a vote of confidence in Musharraf expected on January 1, does not appear to have pleased all Islamists. Musharraf blamed Muslim extremists for Thursday's attack on

his motorcade by suicide car bombers in the city of Rawalpindi that killed at least 14 people, including the bombers. The president's car was slightly damaged but he was unhurt.

Interior Minister Faisal Saleh Hayat told the Senate that one of the two suicide bombers had been identified



Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf speaks to official media representatives after he survived an attempted suicide bomb attack in Rawalpindi Thursday. Investigators probing the second assassination bid against Musharraf within a fortnight have identified two suicide bombers killed in the attack.

Hundreds of rebels fleeing to Assam amid crackdown: Bhutan

AFP, Guwahati

The crackdown followed AFP, Jerusalem

Israel closer to 'unilateral steps' after suicide blast **Violence rattles ME peace hopes**

Sharon's "disengagement plan" Reuters adds: A Palestinian

Israel stepped up an already ight blockade on travel in and out

of the West Bank and Gaza Strip after Thursday's attack in Tel Aviv, the first suicide bombing in almost

Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qorei called for total calm

to help a troubled US-backed "road map" for peace, but militants vowed bloody revenge for the helicopter strike that killed the commander of Islamic Jihad's

But there was no respite in

Israeli army raids against Palestinians, with five more sus-

pected militants arrested in the West Bank overnight.

"The assassination of the chief leader of the Jerusalem Brigades will not pass without a deterrent, a

strong and an earthquake-like response," an Islamic Jihad state-

three months.

military wing.

ment said.

that has spread to new regions, including the edge of the Seoul metropolitan area, officials said yesterday

In a related development, officials said a separate viral disease has emerged, infecting blackskin chicken, a state-designated cultural treasure.

The government will spend about 7 billion won (\$5.8 million) to buy and slaughter the poultry, a Ministry of Agriculture official said. Some 3.5 million chicken eggs also will be purchased and destroyed, said a ministry statement.

The ministry also promised to offer a arrange of financial aid to farmers hit by the bird flu.

Agriculture and Forestry Minister Han Sang-nam said in a news briefing that the cental and local governments will provide as much as 10 million won in aid to each affected household. The government will also extend lowrate loan, tax breaks and other benefits, he said.



PHOTO: AFF A group of Chinese pay their respects on the 110th anniversary of the birth of the late revolutionary Mao Zedong at his mausoleum in Beijing yesterday. The revolutionary and often brutal leader, born on December 26, 1893, has long been praised for establishing the People's Republic of China in 1949, but he has also been widely debunked for his post-1949 Communist atrocities such as the "Great Leap Forward" programme and the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution.

dreds of Indian separatist rebels were fleeing towards the Indian border state of Assam yesterday amid an almost two-week-old military drive to expel them.

The Bhutanese army said hun-

"The militants are no longer resisting and are fleeing towards Assam," a Royal Bhutan Army commander told AFP by telephone from the southern Samdrup Jhonkhar district. There was no immediate comment from rebel officials or Indian authorities.

"Our troops are clearing the dense jungles inch by inch to eject the rebels," the com-mander, who asked to remain unnamed, said.

The ancient Himalayan kingdom shares a 262-km (162 miles) unfenced border with the revolt-torn northeastern Indian state of Assam.

Bhutan says it has destroyed about 30 camps belonging to three Indian separatist groups since the launch of the military offensive, the kingdom's first since it fought the British in

Bhutan to expel the estimated 3,000 rebels who have been staging hit-and-run attacks on Indian government targets for a dozen years from the camps located in dense jungle in the nation's south.

Bhutan has released no casualty figures, but the Indian army, which helps train the Bhutanese army, says more than 140 rebels have died along with eight Bhutanese troops support personnel since the offensive started on December 15. The rebels deny any major losses.

India says it has sealed the border with Bhutan to cut off the rebels' escape routes. It has offered them an amnesty and financial aid to start new lives if they surrender by the end of

January "We would take care of the militants if they surrender,' said Mohinder Singh, an army corps general commanding officer in Assam.

A fresh suicide blast in Tel Aviv may have pushed Israel closer to adopting "unilateral measures" announced by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon last week, a government official warned yester day.

"Israel remains committed to the 'roadmap' as long as this plan has a chance of being implemented, but such an attack draws us near the time when we will have to take unilateral measures," said the official on condition of anonymity

On December 18, Sharon gave a keynote address in which he said Israel may disengage from the Palestinians should they fail to carry out their responsibilities under the US-backed roadmap.

The blueprint calls for an end to the violence and for the establish-ment of a Palestinian state by 2005, but has all but collapsed since its official launch last June.

Israel wants Palestinian prime minister Ahmed Qorei to crack down on militant groups in order to halt anti-Israeli attacks

would, among other things, involve the relocation of as yet suicide bombing that killed four people in Israel and a helicopter unnamed settlements. It is sup-ported by a majority of Israelis, said strike that killed a top Islamic militant and four other survey released Thursday by Palestinians dealt a double blow to hopes of reviving a Middle East public radio. peace plan.

The plan was squarely rejected by the Palestinians who deplored Sharon's "threatening" tone.

But the official also accused Syria, among other regional powers, of having a hand in Thursday's Tel Aviv blast that killed four Israelis and the bomber.

"The terrorists who perpetrate these attacks are supported by Syria, Iran and the (Lebanese Shiite group) Hezbollah," he said, stress-ing that the Popular Front for the beration of Palestinian, which claimed the bombing, is headquar-tered in Damascus. Following an October 4 suicide attack in the Israeli costal city of Haifa, Israeli army warplanes bombed a site near Damascus, allegedly used as a training ground by Palestinian militant groups.

But Syria said the land was empty after the first such Israeli attack in three decades.

US seeks global help fearing terror attack

REUTERS, Washington

The United States has sought cooperation from France and other countries to help guard against the possibility that terrorists could again mount an attack on America using hijacked airplanes, officials said Thursday.

A day after Air France canceled six flights between Paris and Los Angeles at US urging, officials said terrorists may be seeking a repeat of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks that killed about 3,000 people.

"We remain concerned about al-Qaeda's desire to use an aircraft as a weapon," said Brian Roehrkasse, a spokesman for the US Department of Homeland Security

Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke to his French counterpart, Dominique de Villepin, by tele-phone on Wednesday about the reported threat, French and American officials said.

The conversation was one of several with other governments terrorists.

about "ways to counter" what the US intelligence community described as a substantial jump in intercepted communications about a possible attack during or after the Christmas holiday period, a State Department official said.

Powell also spoke to Ana Palacio, the Spanish foreign minis-ter, on Wednesday, though there was no immediate word on precisely what was discussed, the official said.

"The (US) embassy was talking to French officials, the State Department talked to French officials and law enforcement had been talking to French officials," the official added. "Of course, we've been in touch with govern-

ments -- plural -- not just France." The Los Angeles Times said France acted by canceling the flights after US intelligence found as many as six people, including a licensed pilot, booked on Air France's scheduled Christmas eve flight from Paris to Los Angeles "might be al-Qaeda or Taliban

"That belief, according to sev-eral senior US counterterrorism officials, was based on reliable and corroborated information from several sources," the newspaper

> It said some of the suspects had the same names as members of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, driven from power in Afghanistan by the United States after the Sept. 11 attacks.

CIA, FBI and the Department of Homeland Security officials declined comment on the report.

In Paris, a French Interior Ministry spokesman said nine people booked on Air France's canceled Christmas eve flight AF 068 had been questioned and released without being charged. Four were US nationals, two German, one Algerian, one French and one Belgian, the spokesman said.

An Air France spokeswoman said normal service between Paris and Los Angeles would resume on Friday.

Japanese troops embark on Iraq mission

AFP, Tokyo

The first groups of Japan's military contingent left for the Middle East vesterday to set the stage for a humanitarian mission in Iraq, the nation's most dangerous deployment of personnel since World War

Television footage showed airforce servicemen, clad in civil-ian clothes, left New Tokyo International Airport at Narita, just east of Tokyo.

They are headed for Qatar, where the main US airbase is located, and Kuwait, where Japan's airforce planes will be based to transport medical and other supplies to Iraqi airports, Japanese media said

"We want them to make a great contribution in reconstruction work and humanitarian assistance," Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda told a regular press conference.

Japan opted not to use its own

military or government planes but sent the first two groups, estimated to total about 20, aboard flights operated by British Airways.

"The time has come," advance party chief Colonel Tadashi Miyagawa, in suit and tie, told reporters just before the departure. "I do not see any immediate

danger as we have gathered information on the local security situation," Jiji Press news agency quoted Miyagawa as saying.

Those who took off Friday are a part of an advance party of about 40 airforce servicemen. The rest of them are also expected to depart on commercial flights later.

The advance mission is supposed to check airport safety and make other preparations to receive about 150 other airforce members possibly in January.

The dispatch is part of Japan's plan to send a total of some 1,000 personnel to the region to engage in humanitarian and reconstruction work in Iraq.



Japanese airforce servicemen (back), clad in civilian clothes, prepare to board a commercial plane at New Tokyo International Airport at Narita, east of Tokyo yesterday. The first groups of Japan's military contingent left for the Middle East to set the stage for a humanitarian mission in Iraq, the nation's most dangerous deployment of personnel since World War II. They are destined to Qatar, where the main US airbase is located, and to Kuwait, where Japanese airforce planes will be based to transport medical and other supplies to Iraqi airports.