

## Stench of death in Iranian quake zone

REUTERS, Bam

Iran's earthquake-devastated city of Bam was filled with the stench of death yesterday as top foreign rescuers warned hopes were fading for any more survivors from a disaster that killed at least 20,000 people.

President Bush's administration cast aside its branding of Iran as an "axis of evil" state to begin sending in military plane loads of aid and held rare talks with a government it has shunned diplomatically for two decades.

From China to South Africa, Britain to Australia, nations rushed

to respond to Iran's appeals and sent rescue workers, doctors, tents and cash to help deal with what appeared to be the world's most lethal earthquake in at least 10 years.

Cemeteries in Bam were overflowing with fully clothed corpses and hundreds of bodies had been tipped into trenches hollowed out by mechanical diggers, witnesses said.

The predawn quake on Friday also injured about 30,000 people when it flattened about 70 percent of the mostly mud-brick buildings in the ancient Silk Road city.

Bam airport was converted into

a sprawling, makeshift hospital and rubble-strewn pavements were lined with injured, some on intravenous drips.

Reuters witnesses saw some looting when vans of young men armed with pistols and Kalashnikovs drove into Bam and stole Red Crescent tents, as residents said relief efforts were chaotic.

"There is no organisation. Whoever is stronger takes the aid," said Mehdi Dehghani.

President Mohammad Khatami said Iran could not cope on its own, as authorities battled to accommodate thousands of homeless people

on a second bitterly cold night.

"Everyone is doing their best to help, but the disaster is so huge that I believe no matter how much is done we cannot meet the people's expectations," Khatami said on state television.

The Interior Ministry confirmed on Saturday the death toll stood at 20,000, but the chaos and scale of the disaster made it difficult for officials to produce exact casualty figures.

Interior Minister Abdolvahed Mousavi-Lari said he could not make any forecasts about the final toll.

## Attempt on Musharraf Kashmiri, Afghan groups blamed

REUTERS, Islamabad

Kashmiri and Afghan militant groups were behind the latest assassination attempt on President Pervez Musharraf, a Pakistani minister said yesterday.

"Both the suicide bombers have been identified. One of them belonged to Kashmir and the other was from the North West Frontier Province, said Sheikh Rasheed Ahmed, information minister, referring to Pakistan-held Kashmir.

Pakistan's North Western Frontier Province borders Afghanistan.

"It's a huge network of terrorists having tentacles from Kashmir to Afghanistan. They also have international ties," he said.

Two suicide car bombers tried to ram explosives-laden vehicles into Musharraf's limousine on Thursday in the garrison city of Rawalpindi, 12 miles from the capital, Islamabad.

Fifteen people were killed and 45 wounded in the attack, the second against Musharraf in less than two weeks. A powerful bomb exploded moments after his motorcade crossed a bridge on the same Rawalpindi road on Dec. 14.

Musharraf, a staunch ally of the United States in the war against terror, blamed Islamic extremists for the attacks and vowed not to falter in fight against "terrorism."

Interior Ministry officials blamed a little-known Kashmiri group, Al Jihad, for Thursday's attack.

Hard-line Islamists are furious with Musharraf for supporting the US-led war in which Pakistan arrested hundreds of al-Qaeda militants and handed them over to the United States.

Musharraf's recent peace overtures with India and attempts to resolve the protracted dispute with Pakistan's nuclear-armed South Asian rival over Kashmir has also fueled militants' anger.

## US scales down plans for Iraq

AFP, Washington

Attacks on the US-led occupation and an accelerated timetable for Iraq's return to sovereignty have prompted the United States to scale down its ambitious agenda for remaking that country, the Washington Post reported yesterday.

The daily said US officials had in the past few months dropped plans to privatise state-owned businesses and backed off efforts to disarm militias under the control of ethnic and political factions.

"The Americans are coming to understand that they cannot change everything they want to change in Iraq," Adel Abdel-Mehdi, a senior leader of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, a Shiite Muslim political party cooperating with the US-led occupation, told the daily.

"They need to let the Iraqi peo-

ple decide the big issues."

The US administrator for Iraq, L. Paul Bremer, and his deputies are now focused on forging compromises with Iraqi leaders and combating a persistent insurgency in order to meet a July 1 deadline to transfer sovereignty to a provisional government, the Post said.

"There's no question that many of the big-picture items have been pushed down the list or erased completely," a senior US official involved in Iraq's reconstruction told the daily on condition of anonymity.

"Right now, everyone's attention is focused on doing what we need to do to hand over sovereignty by next summer."

The anti-US insurgency has killed 209 American soldiers since May 1, when US President George W. Bush declared major combat ended in Iraq, according to an AFP count.



A little girl lies injured at a make shift hospital in the devastated southeastern ancient city of Bam Saturday, one day after an earthquake measuring up to 6.7 on the open-ended Richter scale hit the city. The devastating temblor killed and injured up to 70,000 people in the city of Bam and destroyed the city's ancient citadel, Iranian Health Minister Dr Ahmad Pezeshkian said.

## US puts bounty on head of last of Iraq's 55 most wanted

AFP, Baghdad

The US-led coalition announced Saturday a one-million-dollar bounty on the head of the remaining men still on the loose from its list of the 55 most wanted Iraqis.

"The capture of Saddam Hussein brings to 42 the number of the 'deck of 55' either captured or killed by Iraqi and coalition security forces," the coalition said in a statement.

"With these new rewards, Iraqi security forces and the coalition expect to bring a final closure to this search."

The US military has already put a 10-million-dollar bounty on the head of Izzat Ibrahim al-Duri, number six on the deck of cards and Saddam's number two, suspected by the Americans of masterminding many of the attacks against them.

## Libya set to show UN inspectors nuke sites

REUTERS, Tripoli

UN nuclear inspectors were set to visit sites related to Libya's atomic weapons programme yesterday as the agency gears up for full-scale inspections in the North African state.

A team of inspectors from the UN International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), led by IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei, arrived in Tripoli Saturday just over a week after Libya acknowledged developing banned weapons -- including atomic arms.

One diplomat close to the delegation said he did not know what sites the Libyans would show them on Sunday, but assumed they would be related to whatever weapons-related activities they had been conducting.

The Libyans said they had been working on a pilot scale centrifuge uranium-enrichment program but had not enriched any uranium. Enrichment is a process of purifying uranium for use as nuclear fuel or in weapons. Libya's Foreign Minister Mohamed Abderrhmane Chalag told a news conference on Saturday that Tripoli had never crossed the line from laboratory experiments into actual weaponisation.

## Workers clean up China gas blast death zone

REUTERS, Beijing

Rescue workers began the grim task of cleaning up a vast "death zone" in southwest China yesterday after a toxic cloud of natural gas killed nearly 200 people, devastating villages and poisoning farms.

Paramilitary police were clearing away hundreds of animals killed by the huge cloud of gas that swept across a 10-square-mile area on Tuesday when a natural gas well burst, the official Xinhua news agency said.

More than 100 medical workers were disinfecting eight villages, testing drinking water and poisoned crops close to the site of the leak, a natural gas field in Chongqing municipality, said Zhang Mingku, director of the Kaixian County Bureau of Environmental Protection.



Iraqis are pushed away by a US soldier outside a coalition military camp just 2km from the southern holy city of Karbala following attacks Saturday. At least six coalition soldiers and seven Iraqis were killed and at least 127 people wounded as insurgents terrorised the Shiite holy city of Karbala with four suicide car bombs, machine-gun fire and mortars.

## Indonesian army tank collides with minibus: 18 killed

THE JAKARTA POST/ ANN, Yogyakarta/Purwokerto

An armored military vehicle crashed into a public transportation minibus on Saturday in Temanggung regency in Central Java, killing 18 people and injuring seven others.

Sixteen of the fatalities were passengers on the minibus and the driver, and the two others were military personnel.

The accident occurred when three armored vehicles, belonging to the Army's Ambarawa Cavalry Division in Ambarawa, were returning in convoy from military exercises in Kebumen, another regency in Central Java. One of the Army vehicles apparently tried to overtake a car but it hit the minibus head on as it was coming in the opposite direction.

The minibus was knocked into a four-meter-deep ravine, followed by the errant Army vehicle.

The chief of Temanggung police precinct, Adj. Sr. Comr. Widiyatno, said that the vehicle, which was made in France in 1963, had crossed over the center line on the two-lane highway.

"It could be seen from its skid marks," he said.

## Overload causes Benin plane crash: Lebanon

### Black boxes recovered

AP, Beirut

Fifteen people injured in a plane crash off the west African nation of Benin returned home Saturday as the Lebanese Foreign Minister suggested that overloading may have caused the Christmas Day crash.

More than 100 of the 161 passengers and crew were killed in the crash. Several more were missing. The number of survivors was in the low 20s and included the pilot.

The cause of the crash of the privately owned Boeing 727 was not known, but Lebanese Foreign Minister Jean Obeid said that overloading of people and baggage may have contributed to the crash.

"It appears that the number of passengers exceeds the normal number, in addition to the load, which it appears was very much in excess," he told reporters at Beirut airport upon returning

from Benin with the survivors.

One of the survivors, identified as 14-year-old Abdelrahman, said he was sitting on the plane's floor near the emergency exit because the plane was full, adding that the jet had trouble taking off.

"The pilot tried but was unable to take off the first time. He turned the plane back and tried to take off another time ... slamming into a tower. I tumbled into the water," he said in an interview with a local television station.

Ali al-Durr, head of the Lebanese community in Benin, told LBC television that he had tried to contact owners of the jetliner in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Benin in order to obtain a manifest of the passengers names, claiming the lists had disappeared.

Reuters adds: Divers recovered the black boxes from the wreckage of an airliner in Benin Saturday as

investigators puzzled over why the Beirut-bound Boeing smashed into the sea moments after take-off.

Nine more bodies were pulled from the surf Saturday, taking the death toll from Thursday's disaster to near 140, while 15 survivors were met after touching down in Lebanon.

The Boeing 727 was carrying 151 passengers plus crew, including over a hundred Lebanese nationals, 15 Bangladeshi army officers returning from UN peacekeeping duty in Sierra Leone and Liberia, and people from many African nations.

A team of divers found the black boxes underwater in the plane's tail section. The two orange-colored devices should have recorded cockpit conversations prior to the crash and any anomalies in the functioning of the aircraft.

## Saarc comes out of limbo

### Indo-Pak rivals inch towards peace

AFP, Islamabad

South Asian leaders are to meet here next week in a summit that raises hopes for cooperation in one of the world's most populous and poorest regions, marred by persisting tensions between India and Pakistan.

The summit, to be held under unprecedented security in Islamabad following the Christmas day assassination attempt on President Pervez Musharraf, will discuss a report on poverty alleviation in the region, Pakistani foreign secretary Kiaz Khokhar said.

"A more ambitious undertaking of creating a South Asia Free Trade Area (Safra) will also come up for discussion" at the January 4-6 meeting, he said.

Agreements on suppressing terrorism, narcotics, trafficking in women and children for prostitution will be on the agenda at the 12th summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc), he said.

Founded in 1985 to foster good neighbourly relations and eco-

conomic cooperation in the region, Saarc never realised its objectives because of hostilities between India and Pakistan.

In its 18-year history the organization has seen "many ups and downs," Khokhar said, adding that "frequent postponements" of the summits hampered Saarc's progress.

Pakistan's bid to host the summit in January this year was frustrated by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's refusal to participate in the wake of heightening tensions between the two countries.

However, as the two countries moved towards normalisation in April after two years of sparring, Vajpayee agreed to visit Pakistan -- a move hailed by the regional experts as a sign Saarc could revive its dormant agenda.

"The significance of the upcoming summit is that it will revive the functioning of Saarc, which was stalled because the Indians were not ready to sit on a conference table with Pakistan," chairman of the Institute of Regional Studies, Khalid Mahmud, said.

Saarc groups Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

According to the World Bank the region remains one of the most disadvantaged in the world.

"More than 40 percent of its 1.4 billion people live on less than one US dollar a day, making South Asia home to nearly half of the world's poor," its August 2003 report said.

Analysts said the miserable socio-economic conditions among its member states stem either from domestic troubles or bilateral disputes.

India, which forms 70 percent of the total area in South Asia and holds about two-thirds of the region's population, borders almost every Saarc.

"Unfortunately other members are scared that India wants to dominate the region," former Pakistani ambassador to Thailand, Kamal Matinuddin said.

"Saarc can make progress if India removes this fear and settles disputes with others, including the Kashmir issue with its big neighbour Pakistan."

## Suspected SARS patient stable in China

REUTERS, Beijing

China's first suspected SARS patient since July, when the United Nations health organisation declared the world free of the deadly flu-like virus, is in stable condition under quarantine, the official Xinhua news agency said yesterday.

Those who have had close contact with the victim, a 32-year-old freelance television producer, were also under quarantine but do not have a fever and have not shown other SARS symptoms, Xinhua quoted doctors as saying.

Xinhua said the patient was first diagnosed on December 16 with pneumonia of the right lower lung and quarantined for treatment. He was transferred to the quarantine ward of Gu anzhou No. 8 People's Hospital on December

Doctors at the No 8 People's Hospital in the southern province of Guangdong were still trying to determine how the patient was infected.

"The case does not seem to be infectious and the patient is recovering very quickly," Xinhua quoted Zhong Nanshan, one of China's top respiratory experts, as saying.



Flanked by security members, Romano Prodi (C) the head of the European Union's executive commission smiles on the doorstep of his home in Bologna late Saturday after he escaped unharmed when he opened a booby-trapped parcel, triggering to catch it on fire. There was no damage or casualties.

## Prodi survives parcel bomb blast in Italy

REUTERS, Bologna

A parcel bomb exploded in the hands of EU Commission President Romano Prodi at his Bologna home Saturday but he was not hurt.

"I opened a parcel containing a book...I was holding it quite far away from me...There was a big flame but no serious damage, it just burned some furniture and a carpet," Prodi, smiling and appearing calm, told reporters outside his home.

"There was explosive powder inside the book," he said.

Italian news agencies said the parcel had been addressed to Prodi's wife.

The former prime minister said he opened the parcel very carefully after "recent warnings," apparently in reference to two small home-made bombs that exploded in rubbish bins near his Bologna apartment on December 22.

Prodi was not in his flat at the time of those explosions, which hurt no one and caused no damage to property. Explosives experts defused a third device placed in another nearby bin.