



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistan army commandos (L and 3-L) stand alert as a police officer (2-R) searches a car in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistani army troops were deployed in Islamabad for the first time as part of massive security efforts for next week's South Asian summit. The heads of state and government of the seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) which groups Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, will start arriving on January 3.

ElBaradei confirms after trip to Tripoli Libya in early nuke stage

AP, Tripoli

The UN nuclear chief said yesterday that his visits to four once-secret nuclear sites proved that Libya had been in the early stages of a weapons programme before it dismantled its efforts.

Mohammed ElBaradei said the equipment and technology had come from a number of countries.

"What we have seen is a programme in the very initial stages of development," ElBaradei told reporters. "We haven't seen any industrial-scale facility to produce highly enriched uranium; we haven't seen any enriched uranium" the material needed for developing nuclear weapons.

ElBaradei and his team of experts visited four previously unmentioned nuclear sites in and around Tripoli on Sunday, and he said all the equipment had been dismantled and boxed up.

The inspections follow leader Muammar Gaddafi's decision to

abandon his country's attempts to produce weapons of mass destruction.

Libya is one of just 14 countries that has neither signed nor ratified the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention prohibiting the production, storage and use of chemical weapons.

ElBaradei said the origins of Libya's technology would easily be identified "as they were of a familiar design."

He suggested a "sophisticated network" was behind the technology, including "a number of different people in a number of different places, a network which you can call a cartel but not necessarily with the knowledge of a particular country or countries." "It has been across many countries in the world," he said.

ElBaradei had said earlier that Libya received its weapons equipment "through the black market and middle people."

On Monday, he declined to

reveal the number or names of Libyan scientists or where they received training, but said they were "well competent scientists."

"That is good for Libya... to work on the peaceful development in nuclear program for civilian purposes," he said.

The UN official, who left Libya yesterday, met with Matouq Mohammed Matouq, a Libyan deputy prime minister and head of the country's nuclear program, to develop a plan for future inspections.

The visit by the UN team is part of an international effort to ensure the North African state has no weapons of mass destruction. Six inspectors will be in Libya until Thursday.

Libya, long on the US list of countries that sponsor terrorism, has portrayed its move as a strategic step, insisting it never produced any weapons of mass destruction.

It has promised full transparency and cooperation with the

International Atomic Energy Agency and said it would sign a protocol allowing wide-ranging inspections on short notice.

Gaddafi said he hoped Libya's action would pressure Israel to disarm. Israel, the only Middle East nation believed to possess nuclear arms, refuses to confirm or deny a weapons program.

According to ElBaradei's spokesman, Mark Gwozdecky, the sites visited Sunday were new facilities that "have never been mentioned in the media before."

As a signatory of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, Libya is required to declare all sensitive nuclear installations to the United Nations.

Some of the inspectors on Sunday met with Libyan officials on "technical matters concerning the history of (Libya's) entire program" related to weapons of mass destruction, the UN spokesman said. ElBaradei did not take part in this meeting, he said, providing no further details.

UK warns of terror attack in KSA

AFP, London

A terrorist attack could be in the final stages of preparation in Saudi Arabia, the British government warned Sunday, in the latest of a spate of alerts over travel to the oil-rich kingdom.

"Following terrorist attacks in Riyadh in May and November, we continue to believe terrorists are planning further attacks in Saudi Arabia, and that these could be in the final stages of preparation," the Foreign Office said.

"We advise British nationals against all but essential travel to Saudi Arabia," it added in a travel advisory posted on its website.

A Foreign Office spokesman declined to give further information on the new warning, saying only that travel advice was kept under constant review based on all the information available.

Saudi authorities and foreign embassies in the kingdom have been on heightened alert since the May 12 and November 8 attacks on residential compounds in Riyadh that killed a total of 52 people.

Looters hamper Iranian quake aid efforts Health fears rise

AFP, Bam

Widespread looting is hampering international efforts to bring aid to the southeast Iranian city of Bam and prevent disease spreading following a huge earthquake in which some 30,000 people are feared to have died, official sources told AFP yesterday.

Iranian security forces were sealing off access to the city to all traffic on Monday except trucks and cars carrying aid supplies and relief workers, according to officials in the administrative office of Kerman province, where the disaster occurred.

The move was taken to stem the kind of chaotic scenes of looting of the badly needed humanitarian supplies seen around the city on Sunday.

The flood of vehicles bringing worried and grieving family members to Bam brought traffic to a standstill. Then trucks carrying aid were set upon by looters and by the time they entered the stricken city they had been cleaned out.

Locals blamed the looting on villagers from surrounding areas unaffected by the quake hoping to cash in on the disaster.

A provincial government source said Bam was also likely to be effectively quarantined from Monday as the emergency operation switched from a rescue mission to an effort to quickly recover bodies from underneath the rubble in order to avert the spread of disease.

Humanitarian aid sources said they were also looking to bring in large quantities of disinfectant.

Hopes were fading of finding any more survivors of from Friday's quake, which measured 6.7 on the Richter scale.

Some officials were talking of up to 30,000 people killed in the quake. Official estimates put the death toll at over 20,000 and rising. So far around 16,000 bodies have been recovered and buried.

And three people were killed Sunday when an Iranian navy helicopter crashed just outside Bam after delivering aid, the student news agency ISNA reported. The two pilots died along with a third person on board.

So far more than 500 helicopters and planes have delivered aid and ferried the wounded out of Bam since the quake, according to Iranian officials.

Quake survivors endure cold, sleepless nights

REUTERS, Bam

Aid supplies and rescue workers flowed into Bam yesterday, but survivors of the devastating earthquake were losing hope of finding loved ones after another sleepless, bitterly cold night.

Bam's small airport was packed with a dozen or so military and civilian cargo planes in the early hours, barely able to find space on the tarmac that handled no more than a handful of planes each week before Friday's quake.

Soldiers unloaded crates of bottled water and other supplies and an international rescue team mingled with scores of Iranian Red Crescent volunteers in the shattered terminal building.

The airport's former taxi desk has become a makeshift pharmacy and the arrival hall has been converted into a temporary hospital ward.

For survivors living in tents or simply sleeping under blankets in streets, hope was fast fading of finding lost relatives and friends under rubble that was once their homes.

Fatima Momen Abadi, 30, wandered among those huddling round open fires to keep warm.

She was unable to sleep after losing her sister and three daughters in the quake.

"It is very important (to find the bodies)... Maybe they have found them and buried them. I have no hope," she said, her voice cracking with emotion.

Her own home lay in ruins close to a tent where she has been accommodated.

Kobra Abbasi Nejad, 53, lost four of her six adult children when the ceiling collapsed in the bedroom of their home.

"We wish we were killed, not them. They were young," she sobbed, standing beside her injured husband after collecting an extra blanket from a passing aid truck patrolling the streets.

Some aid workers still held out hope that people could be hauled out of the ruins alive.

"It's a possibility that for two to three days they will be found," said Red Crescent worker Hassan Al Saadi.

But his last task had been to pull out the bodies of a family of five at one ruined house.

Saadi, who traveled in from a town several hundred km away and was sleeping rough like many of Bam's residents, said some rescue work had been hampered by lack of equipment such as diggers and generators for lighting.

"We don't have enough big equipment... But from today, everything is coming," he said.

As searches went into a fourth day, rescuers said they were no longer finding survivors -- only the mangled remains of people killed when the world's most lethal earthquake in at least 10 years leveled Bam in southeastern Iran.

"(Rescue operations) will continue at least for one more day (until midnight on Monday) when an assessment will be made to continue or not," Alain Pasche, of a UN rescue coordination team, told Reuters.

"After five days the chances of finding anyone alive are very slim," Pasche said.



PHOTO: AFP
An Iranian civil defense worker recovers yesterday the body of a victim of the deadly earthquake in the southeastern city of Bam. Some 30,000 people were killed in the earthquake which hit the city on December 26.



PHOTO: AFP
A female dog (L) feeds a one month and three days old female Jaguar cub called Soni (R) at the National Zoological Park in New Delhi yesterday. Soni is being fed twice daily by the female dog and three times daily by a goat after her mother Sundari refused to take care of her following her birth at the zoo.

Villagers start returning home in China gas disaster zone

REUTERS, Beijing

Villagers from the area most severely damaged by last week's natural gas blow-out in China began returning home yesterday, each given an umbrella apparently to keep off toxic rain.

The death toll from Tuesday's disaster in the southwestern municipality of Chongqing has climbed to 234 as rescue workers cleaned up a vast "death zone," littered with bodies of people and animals, Xinhua news agency said.

The cloud of toxic gas swept across a 25 square km area, devastating villages, poisoning farms and forcing the evacuation of more than 64,000 people.

About 1,000 workers cleared away and buried almost 4,000 animals, including cattle, pigs, rabbits, ducks, chickens and dogs, killed by the gas-well burst, Xinhua said.

Suicide attack in Kabul: 7 killed

Taliban claim responsibility

REUTERS, Kabul

Remnants of Afghanistan's ousted Taliban claimed responsibility yesterday for a suicide attack in Kabul that killed five security officials and two bombers, and vowed to launch a fresh wave of violence aimed at cities.

Sunday's attack was the worst in Kabul since four German peacekeepers were killed and 31 injured by a suicide car bomb in June, and coincided with the final stages of a key debate to finalise the country's post-Taliban constitution.

Taliban guerrillas and Islamic militant allies believed to include members of al-Qaeda have declared a holy war on foreign forces in Afghanistan and their local partners, including govern-

ment officials, soldiers and aid workers.

"A group of 200 Mujahideen (holy warriors) has penetrated various Afghan cities," said Mullah Sabir Momin, Taliban deputy operational commander in southern Afghanistan.

"In Kabul alone, 130 trained Taliban are present on suicide missions," he added, speaking by satellite telephone. "They can manufacture powerful bombs with limited resources."

If confirmed, the switch in tactics will be a worry for 5,700 international peacekeepers in Kabul and the 12,000-strong US-led force hunting Taliban and al-Qaeda rebels.

The deadliest guerrilla attacks

have been in remote areas of the south and east in recent months. More than 400 people have died in the violence since early August, including many rebels.

Confusion surrounded the circumstances of Sunday's attack near the airport, which came just after dusk.

Defence ministry spokesman Dr Gulbuddin said there appeared to be two "terrorists" involved, one more than first thought.

He explained that five security officials detained two men after a tip-off. One was carrying explosives in a metal cooking pot, while the other had explosives wrapped around his body, which he set off, killing all seven people in the vehicle.

Another regional ally quits BJP-led govt

AFP, PTI, New Delhi

A four-member regional party decided yesterday to pull out of India's ruling Hindu nationalist coalition to protest against the continued imprisonment of one its leaders.

But the move will not affect the stability of the coalition government which holds a comfortable majority.

Two federal ministers belonging to the southern Indian party, Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK), were also expected to quit the coalition government which numbers around 20 parties.

"The decision will not affect the federal coalition or the government," said ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) party spokesman Mukhtar

Abbas Naqvi.

The MDMK was upset with the federal government for not acting to free MDMK leader M.K. Vaiko from jail more than a year after his arrest by authorities in southern Tamil Nadu state under a tough national anti-terror law.

The decision was taken at a meeting of the district secretaries of the party in Chennai attended among others by the two Union Ministers Gingeer N Ramachandran and M Kannappan, who are now expected to resign.

The meeting was held after the two ministers and the MDMK Presidium chairman L Ganesan met Vaiko in Vellore prison last week in the wake of DMK's decision.

Ever since the DMK's decision to pull out of the govern-

ment and the NDA, MDMK has been under pressure to follow suit as the DMK had taken up Vaiko's detention under POTA as a major issue.

Earlier, the MDMK appeared to have been hesitant on a break with the NDA because of the latest amendment brought to the POTA, which the party felt would help Vaiko's case.

The MDMK's decision comes less than a week after another southern Indian political party, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), with 11 MPs, decided to pull out of the government for the same reason.

Both the DMK and MDMK have accused Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha Jayaram of abusing the country's Prevention of Terrorism Act by jailing a number of her political opponents.

Ex-Mauritanian president convicted of coup plot

AFP, Nouakchott

A Mauritanian court Sunday convicted former president Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah of plotting to overthrow the current head of the northwest African state and handed him a five-year suspended jail term.

Ould Haidallah, who had vehemently denied planning the ouster of President Maouiya Ould Taya while running in a controversial election against him last month, was also ordered to pay 400,000 ouguiyas (1,550 dollars, 1,250 euros).

Afterwards he told AFP he planned to lodge an appeal with the Supreme Court.

"This verdict is not just and does not reflect the proceedings that took place in front of the court during this long trial and anyhow we are going to lodge an appeal with the supreme court," he said.

Of the 14 others on trial for the past four weeks in the west African country, eight -- among them Ould Haidallah's son Sidi Mohammed -- were given suspended prison terms of two to five years and fined.



PHOTO: AFP
In his first interview since being charged with child molestation, US pop star Michael Jackson talks to 60 Minutes' reporter Ed Bradley on December 25 in a Los Angeles hotel room which aired on Sunday. Jackson says he was mistreated during his recent arrest and the police search of his Neverland ranch so violated his privacy that he would never live there again.

Two ministers for scrapping rough Israeli settlements

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Two members of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's cabinet said yesterday the government was moving too slowly in carrying out a commitment to remove unauthorised settlement-outposts from occupied territory.

The ministers spoke in interviews with Israel Radio after Sharon signed an order to accelerate the removal of four outposts -- only one of them inhabited -- in accordance with a US-backed peace "road map."

Israeli media reported the outposts could be torn down within days but delays were likely if Jewish settlers appealed the order to Israel's Supreme Court.