

India gears up to tackle new bird flu outbreak

AFP, New Delhi

Indian authorities geared up Wednesday to begin a new mass slaughter of poultry after fresh cases of bird flu were found in the western state of Maharashtra.

The latest cases of the lethal H5N1 bird flu strain announced late Tuesday were in Jalgaon, said senior state animal husbandry official Bijay Kumar.

The site was 140 kms from the initial outbreak reported February 18 in the town of Navapur, also in Maharashtra.

The new outbreak came as the national government published advertisements in newspapers assuring consumers properly cooked poultry products were safe to eat.

Chicken is a staple meat for Indians as pork and beef are often avoided due to religious beliefs. But after detection of the flu virus, chicken and egg sales plummeted, badly hurting the poultry industry.

Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar urged people to stay calm.

Upma Chowdhry, an agriculture ministry official, said most of the latest birds affected were backyard poultry, in contrast to the first outbreak which was concentrated on chicken farms.

Pak troops blow up madrassa near Afghan border

AFP, Miranshah

Pakistani troops using explosives Wednesday destroyed an Islamic school suspected of being a hideout for militants in a tribal region bordering Afghanistan, officials said.

The Khalifa Madrassa in the restive North Waziristan district was seized by troops and blown up, becoming the third religious seminary to be demolished in the area in the past fortnight.

The action followed fierce clashes between Pakistani paramilitary soldiers and Taliban-supporting tribesmen that have left around 170 militants and five troops dead.

"The Khalifa Madrassa was destroyed by security forces today as part of a campaign to deprive militants of any hideout," a local official told AFP in Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan.

The school was unoccupied at the time, officials said.

The madrassa was set up by Khalifa, an Islamic cleric from Afghanistan who died several years ago but who was an associate of former Taliban commander Jalaluddin Haqqani, local officials said.



PHOTO: AFP

A poster of the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat is seen in the debris at the destroyed Palestinian prison compound, blasted by Israeli forces yesterday in the West Bank town of Jericho. The Israeli government strenuously denied today that an army raid on a Palestinian Authority-run prison less than a fortnight before a general election was motivated by political considerations.

Palestinian areas hit by general strike

AFP, Gaza City

The Palestinian territories ground to a halt under a general strike Wednesday to protest against an Israeli army raid on a West Bank prison, as the authorities braced for further violence.

Palestinian Authority president Mahmud Abbas was en route home after cutting short a tour of key European cities to manage the crisis sparked by Israel's capture of PFLP leader Ahmed Saadat and five other wanted militants in Jericho.

Businesses remained shuttered and schools closed across the Gaza Strip and West Bank after all Palestinian factions united to order a strike late Tuesday.

Palestinian security forces, ordered to respond with live fire to attacks against Western interests, remained on high alert after the Israeli operation sparked an unprecedented wave of security anarchy.

Two Palestinian security guards were killed and 26 others wounded, five of them critically, in the Israeli assault that ended with its aim: the capture of Saadat, four other PFLP cohorts and wanted Fatah member Fuad Shubaki.

The Israeli government strenuously denied that the raid – less than a fortnight before a general election – was motivated by political considerations, but kept security forces on high alert.

"Thousands of police officers, border guards and volunteers have been mobilised in sensitive areas of Israeli territory," police spokesman Mickey Rosenfeld told AFP.

Security was also beefed up around foreign interests, notably British and American offices, after Anglo-US targets suffered the brunt of unrest that inflamed the Palestinian territories on Tuesday.

A senior Palestinian official said that Abbas, in Jordan for talks with

Prime Minister Maaruf Bakhit, would demand Israel hand Saadat and his colleagues back to their former custody arrangements immediately.

"We will ask the Israeli side to hand back Ahmed Saadat and his colleagues immediately," chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat said.

Saadat and three other PFLP members had been kept in Jericho under US and British supervision, since August 2002 after his militant faction claimed the 2001 killing of Israeli tourism minister Rehavam Ze'evi.

"When Abu Mazen returns he will meet with the Palestinian leadership to discuss what happened yesterday at all levels and how the Palestinian Authority will conduct their policy after the Israeli attack on Jericho," Erakat said.

Nepal strike enters second day, transport crippled

AFP, Kathmandu

A week-long road blockade called by Nepal's Maoist rebels seeking to topple King Gyanendra's royal government entered its second day Wednesday, affecting the transport of vital supplies.

The Maoists have ordered all vehicles off the roads heading to and from Kathmandu, district capitals and other towns in a bid to end Gyanendra's direct rule of the impoverished Himalayan nation that began 13 months ago.

Fear of Maoist reprisals rather than physical blockades was keeping many drivers off the road. Vehicles have been torched and roads boobytrapped during previous rebel blockades.

Those defying the blockade this time round covered their license plates to prevent being tracked down.

11 killed in US raid in Iraq

AP, Isahaqi

Eleven people, most women and children, were killed when a house was bombed during a US raid north of Baghdad early Wednesday, police and relatives said.

The US military acknowledged four deaths, a man, two women and a child, in the raid that they said netted an insurgent suspect in the rural Isahaqi area, about 50 miles north of the capital.

The victims, some wrapped in blankets, were driven in the back of three pickup trucks to the Tikrit General Hospital, about 45 miles to the north, relatives said.

Associated Press photographs

showed the bodies of two men, five children and four other covered figures arriving at the hospital accompanied by grief-stricken relatives.

A suicide bomber on a bicycle missed a police patrol and killed at least two civilians Wednesday in Bagouba north of Baghdad, police said.

Six others were wounded in the attack in downtown Baqouba, 35 miles northeast of Baghdad, police said.

The provincial police command said the bomber's explosives appeared to have detonated prematurely as he was peddling toward the patrol.

Riyadh Majid, who identified himself as the nephew of the killed head of the family Faez Khalaf told AP at the hospital that U.S. forces landed in helicopters and raided the home early Wednesday.

Khalaf's brother, Ahmed, said nine of the victims were family members who lived at the house and two were unidentified visitors.

"The killed family was not part of the resistance; they were women and children," Ahmed Khalaf said. "The Americans have promised us a better life, but we get only death."

The US military said it was targeting and capturing an individual suspected of supporting foreign fighters for al-Qaida in Iraq.

Saddam calls tribunal a 'comedy'

AFP, Baghdad

Deposed Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein took to the stand in his own defense on Wednesday and denounced his trial as a "comedy".

Saddam took the stand wearing his trademark well-tailored dark suit without a tie, following a long rambling testimony by his half brother Barzan al-Tikriti.

"It is a comedy against Saddam Hussein and his comrades," he told the judge as he took the stand.

"Oh mighty people, I am still your faithful son, oh Iraqi people... I am still your sword, and despite what has happened to my people, to me, to my comrades because of the criminal occupants, I shall be patient," he said.

The chief judge Rauf Abdel Rahman told Saddam to stick to the case and not make a political speech.

Earlier Saddam Hussein's half brother, Barzan al-Tikriti, Wednesday denied involvement in mass reprisals ordered against a village after the ousted Iraqi leader escaped assassination there in 1982. "I arrested no one, it was the security services that were in charge" of operations in Dujail, Barzan said as the trial of Saddam and seven co-accused resumed before the Iraqi High Tribunal.

"I can assure you I have no responsibility in this matter. It was handled by the former head of security who has since died. Just show me one document proving that I ordered an arrest or the destruction of someone's farm," he said.

Iran urges Russia, China to defend nuclear work

AFP, Tehran

Iran on Wednesday urged key UN Security Council members Russia and China to defend its nuclear programme as the world body meets to address the Iranian atomic case, the foreign ministry said.

"We hope that Russia, China, permanent and non-permanent members of the Security Council ... pay heed that defending Iran is rather defending international organizations, collective work and multilateralism," foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi told reporters.

The UN Security Council will hold formal consultations on the Iranian

nuclear issue Friday.

The five veto-wielding members of the UN Security Council are divided over how to address the Iranian crisis with Russia and China, which have close economic and energy ties with Tehran, opposing sanctions and insisting on a central role for the UN nuclear watchdog.

The "Russians have said they will not compromise over Iran. This is defending the (International Atomic Energy) Agency," Asefi said.

The Security Council members are trying to agree on a statement that would urge Iran to comply with IAEA demands that it halt uranium enrichment and allay

suspicions it is hiding a covert nuclear weapons programme.

A draft statement discussed by the members Tuesday calls on Tehran to suspend all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities.

But Asefi reaffirmed that Iran would not suspend uranium enrichment if demanded by the Council, saying "research is clearly our undeniable right. Nobody can make that request and we cannot go back on research."

Enriched uranium is used in the nuclear fuel cycle but can also make the core of an atom bomb.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani people and officials stand around the first ever bus from Afghanistan to Pakistan as it arrives at the Turkhan border from the eastern Afghan city of Jalalabad yesterday. The first ever bus from Afghanistan to Pakistan carried out a trial run despite recent tensions between the key allies in the US-led war on terrorism. With the slogan "Long live Afghanistan-Pakistan friendship" written on the side, the bus carrying around a dozen local government officials left Jalalabad city in eastern Afghanistan early in the morning.

'Spiderman' sentenced to jail in Hong Kong

AFP, Hong Kong

A Briton who brought traffic to a standstill in Hong Kong when he staged a daring anti-China protest dressed as Spiderman was sentenced to 21 days in jail, his lawyer said Wednesday.

However, Matthew Pearce, 30, was released on bail pending an appeal against the conviction, his lawyer Michael Vidler said.

The court convicted Pearce last week of causing a public nuisance when he scaled a giant street-side video screen on a downtown building in June last year dressed as the comic-book super hero.

The stunt was staged to draw attention to commemorations of the June 4, 1989 Tiananmen pro-democracy crackdown in Beijing.

Fire engines, police and other emergency staff were rushed to the scene bringing parts of the city to a gridlock.

WTC site rebuilding talks break off

REUTERS, New York

Negotiations between the developer of the World Trade Center site and New York officials broke off on Wednesday after the sides missed a deadline to resolve who would construct which buildings at Ground Zero.

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey owns the site where the Twin Towers were attacked and destroyed on September 11, 2001. Real estate developer Larry Silverstein of Silverstein Properties holds a 99-year lease that was signed two months before the attacks.

New York Gov. George Pataki set a March 14 deadline for the two parties to reach an agreement on how to expedite the rebuilding.

Bud Perrone, a spokesman for Silverstein, said the Port Authority made the move to suspend the talks, which had continued after a midnight deadline.

"This temporary setback can and must be overcome," Perrone said in a statement, adding Silverstein was ready to resume talks. "We believe we can quickly finalize an agreement that will assure a speedy rebuilding of the World Trade Center."

Representatives from the Port Authority and Pataki's office could not immediately be reached for comment. Perrone would not comment on what differences remained or what steps the parties may take going forward.

A deal is crucial to Silverstein obtaining low-cost financing, in the form of Liberty Bonds, which he needs to rebuild. Silverstein has asked for \$3.4 billion in the tax-exempt bonds, half from the state and half from the city.

Pataki had pledged to release the state's half pending a Silverstein agreement with the Port Authority. Silverstein has been at odds with Port Authority and the city on the \$7.3 billion project to build four office buildings including a centerpiece Freedom Tower, which at 1,776 feet (541 meters) would be among the tallest buildings in the world.

The New York Times reported that the two sides were discussing a proposal for the Port Authority to take over construction of the estimated \$2.3 billion Freedom Tower. But the two sides were at odds over how to pay for the project.



PHOTO: AFP

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (L) pays respects to a senior Buddhist monk during his election campaign in Nakhorn Ratchasima province northeastern of Thailand yesterday. Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said he would consider stepping down for a period of time to ease the political crisis gripping the kingdom.