

Chemical attacks on schools: 65 children fall sick in Vietnam

Sixty-five more schoolchildren were sickened in the latest in a series of mysterious chemical attacks on schools in the restive central Vietnamese province of Daklak, officials said yesterday.

They said 61 schoolchildren, three teachers, a school guard and a local official were affected by attacks on two schools in Fa Sup district last Friday and Saturday. Four more children were sickened in another attack in the district Monday morning.

The victims suffered from convulsions, stomach pains and vomiting and were treated at the district medical centre, where a dozen remained hospitalized, she said.

A doctor at the medical centre confirmed that some victims remained there, but declined to give figures.

More than 600 children and teachers in five districts of Daklak have been sickened by the string of chemical attacks on schools since early February, when Daklak and neighbouring Gia Lai provinces were hit by the worst ethnic unrest in the Central Highlands in years.

British 'top secret' laptop computer goes missing

A British Defence Ministry laptop computer packed with national security secrets has gone missing after an official left it in the back of a taxi, the mass-selling Mirror tabloid reported yesterday.

The laptop was thought to contain vital information about new weapons systems, it said.

The Mirror said the official had notified police about the missing laptop. No immediate comment was available from the Defence Ministry or police.

It was the latest of several laptops with military or intelligence information reported lost in Britain in just over a year.

In March last year there were reports that agents of M15, Britain's domestic security service, and M16, the overseas security service, had lost laptops containing secret information.

The M15 laptop, said to contain confidential information on Northern Ireland, was snatched at a London railway station.

Israeli airstrikes on Lebanon kill 3 Syrian soldiers

An early morning Israeli attack on a strategic Syrian radar position deep in Lebanon killed three Syrian soldiers and wounded six, a Lebanese security officer said yesterday.

Israel, which has long accused Syria of encouraging Lebanese guerrilla attacks on its territory, unleashed the airstrikes hours before dawn Monday in retaliation for a cross-border attack on Saturday by Lebanon's Hezbollah guerrillas that killed an Israeli soldier.

Security was stepped up following the Israeli attack, the first deep inside Lebanon since Israeli forces withdrew from southern Lebanon last May and the first on Syrian troops since 1996. Security officers barred access to the targeted radar station near Dahr el-Baidar, 35 kilometres east of Beirut in the barren mountains just north of a highway linking Beirut with Damascus, Syria's capital.

A Lebanese security officer at a checkpoint about a kilometre from the radar station told reporters three Syrian soldiers were killed and six wounded. The officer, speaking on customary condition of anonymity, said the wounded were taken to a military hospital in Chitaura, 10 kms east.

Reporters were barred from the hospital.

A bulldozer could be seen clearing rubble for the radar station and Syrian soldiers were posted on the roof of the damaged station.

They region is dotted with Syrian army troop positions that include radar stations, tanks and armored personnel carriers.

President Emile Lahoud condemned the attack as a "grave development expressing anew the bloody course adopted by (Israeli Prime Minister Ariel) Sharon since his coming to power in the Palestinians arena and outside."

"This course could lead to an overall confrontation," Lahoud, who discussed the attack by phone with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, said in a fax statement.

At midday Monday, Syria's state-controlled media still had not reported on the attack.

In Jerusalem, and Israeli army spokesman said "air force planes this evening attacked a radar target of the Syrian army at Dahr el-Baidar, north of the Beirut-Damascus highway in Lebanon." The spokesman said all the planes returned safely.

The Israeli army said the attack was in response to Hezbollah attacks in recent months, and most recently Saturday, when an Israeli soldier was killed in a tank that was hit by a Hezbollah rocket in a disputed border zone at the Chebaa Farms area, where the borders of Lebanon, Syria and Israel meet.



A Lebanese anti-aircraft gun takes a position in Beirut yesterday after Israel pounded a Syrian radar station at Dahr al-Baidar, 45 km east of Beirut, killing at least three Syrian soldiers and wounding six.

Estrada arrested for graft, posts bail to avoid going to jail

Ex-Philippine president Joseph Estrada was arrested yesterday for corruption and perjury, but he swiftly posted bail to avoid going to jail, court officials said.

Accompanied by his wife, a son and a posse of bodyguards and police, Estrada voluntarily showed up at the office of a court sheriff who formally served him an arrest warrant issued two hours earlier by a special anti-graft court.

Estrada, who turns 64 in three days, posted 40,000 pesos (800 dollars) bail before Associate Justice Narciso Nario for his provisional freedom.

The court is expected to allow him to return to his suburban Manila mansion before dusk without spending a second in jail.

Had he failed to post bail he would have been thrown in jail alongside ordinary criminals, court officials said.

Estrada was accompanied by his wife, Luisa Ejercito, eldest son Jose Ejercito, also known as Jingoy, and a battery of lawyers and police escorts.

It was the first time a warrant of arrest had been issued by the judiciary against a former Philippine president.

Former movie star Estrada was ousted in a military-led popular uprising on January 20 after being embroiled in a corruption scandal.

Dozens of policemen took positions in and around the Sandiganbayan court in suburban Quezon city to thwart possible violence, radio reports said.

"We have to follow the procedure. We will do everything we can to protect the rights of president Estrada," one of his lawyers Jose Flaminiano told reporters.

"We have to post bond, in the first place and we will (make use) of so many remedies. We are keeping our options open. We do not want to communicate, our moves, at this time."

Justice Nario set a 30,000-peso (600-dollar) bond each for the provisional liberty of Estrada and his four co-accused in the corruption case.

The court also barred the five suspects from leaving the country. A 10,000-peso bond was set for the perjury case.



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Powerful Taliban leader dies of cancer

A powerful Taliban leader, Mullah Mohammed Rabbani, died of cancer, officials said Monday. He was 45.

Head of the Taliban's governing ministers' council, Rabbani, who had been receiving treatment for cancer, died late on Sunday.

Rabbani was among the first wave of Taliban, who swept into Kabul in September 1996, driving warring Islamic factions led by former defence Chief Ahmed Shah Massoud and President Burhanuddin Rabbani from the capital.

It's believed it was Rabbani who ordered the execution of Afghanistan's pro-communist president Najibullah, who had been living in a United Nations compound in Kabul since 1992, when Islamic factions took power.

Najibullah was dragged from the United Nations compound in Kabul, tortured and hanged.

Najibullah's body, as well as that of his brother, was left hanging in the city for two days before it was taken down.

The execution of Najibullah was sharply criticised by the United Nations and is seen by many as a major factor in the uneasy relationship between the Taliban and the global world.

Rabbani had been ill for several months and had not been seen in public for much of this year.

Rabbani was considered a powerful man in the Taliban movement, second only to the reclusive leader of the hardline Islamic militia, Mullah Mohammed Omar.

Rabbani was a strong advocate of the hardline Islamic rule followed by the Taliban. His death is not expected to result in any major policy changes by the Taliban.

130 protesters arrested in Nepal after PM's car stoned

More than 130 communist party members were arrested in Nepal yesterday after the car of Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala was stoned in a protest to demand he quit, police said.

Thousands of people, mainly from the opposition Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist (NCP-UML), took to the streets amid tight security in the capital Kathmandu to demand Koirala's resignation, police said.

A stone was lobbed at the premier's car as it was approaching his office, a home ministry official said.

Police then used tear gas to disperse the protesters, witnesses said. Police said they arrested more than 130 NCP-UML leaders, MPs and activists.

The home ministry official added that "no ugly incidents took place and the premier went to his office without being obstructed."

A police spokesman said: "The NCP-UML had planned to stop the car of prime minister and pull him out in protest of his alleged involvement in the aircraft lease scam."

Koirala is under investigation for corruption relating to a controversial aircraft lease deal but has denied any wrongdoing.

The protest was part of a NCP-UML plan to cordon off the streets leading to Koirala's Central Secretariat office until he resigned.

The NCP-UML protest was backed by five other splinter communist groups, including the NCP-Marxist, Leninist and Maoist (NCP-MLM), the Nepal Peasants and Workers' Party (NPWP), National People's Front (NPF), United People's Front-Nepal (UPF) and NCP-United.

The communist parties also accuse Koirala of failing to control corruption and maintain law and order.

Koirala was elected as the premier in March last year by an overwhelming majority of the ruling Nepali Congress lawmakers. His term is due to end in May 2003.

The NC has a total 113 MPs in the 205-member lower house of parliament while the combined forces of the opposition parties total only 92.

Bosnian Serb war crimes suspect arrested

NATO-led peacekeepers arrested a Bosnian Serb army commander on Sunday who had been indicted by a UN war crimes tribunal for alleged involvement in the 1995 massacre of thousands of Muslims in Srebrenica.

Dragan Obrenovic, who was commander of a Bosnian Serb army brigade at the time, was under "sealed indictment," meaning the charges against him had not been made public to avoid alerting him to his possible arrest.

Florence Hartman, spokeswoman for the tribunal prosecutors' office, said Obrenovic had been arrested by the NATO-led Stabilization Force (SFOR) near Zvornik, in Bosnia's Serb republic near the border with Yugoslavia.

He was flying to The Hague last night and was expected to be brought before the court in the next few days.

He was charged with complicity in genocide, crimes against humanity and violations against the laws and customs of war, said Hartman. The indictment was issued April 9.

Obrenovic was allegedly involved in the killing of thousands of Muslims in the eastern Bosnian town of Srebrenica, Hartman said. The Srebrenica massacre is regarded as Europe's worst atrocity since World War II.

Bosnian Serb forces are alleged to have killed up to 8,000 Muslims in and around the town. The biggest mass grave of the Srebrenica victims was found around 35 miles away near Zvornik. Obrenovic was chief of staff of the Zvornik Brigade.

"Srebrenica represents one of the darkest episodes in the recent tragedy that befell Bosnia," the US White House said in a statement, noting that US forces aided in the arrest.

"This apprehension demonstrates that NATO and the United States remain committed in helping to bring indicted war criminals to justice as an essential step in consolidating the peace and promoting the rule of law in Bosnia," it said.

UN chief prosecutor Carla del Ponte was also pleased with the arrest.

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West African police hunt for slave ship

West African police hunted yesterday for a ship thought to be carrying scores of suspected child slaves which has been roaming off the coast for more than two weeks.

Police in Benin said they had alerted neighbouring countries to prevent the ship's captain from disembarking its human cargo, believe to be 180 children sold by poor families to be forced into work on plantations or as domestic servants.

Port officials said the vessel, which was expected to dock in Cotonou after a round trip of more than 2,000 km, was not responding to calls and had not tried to make contact with Benin's authorities.

"We are still waiting for the ship but it hasn't given any signs. We had no radio communication with them," a port official told Reuters late on Sunday.

Interpol sources in Cotonou said police wanted to question a businessman and two of his associates who were thought to have chartered the ship. Police called for help from colleagues in Nigeria, Togo, Ghana and Ivory Coast.

"The whole coast is under surveillance," said Martin Cocou Dean, head of the police division fighting child trafficking.

Princess Masako to become mother

Japan's Crown Princess Masako may be pregnant with a possible heir to the Chrysanthemum Throne after nearly eight years of marriage, the Imperial Household Agency said yesterday.

The agency told a hastily called news conference that Masako, 37, had been showing signs of pregnancy and would be examined by doctors. Officials did not disclose a date for the examination.

Masako will restrict her public duties, an agency official added, calling for "restraint" in media coverage.

The baby could be born in early December, public broadcaster NHK quoted palace sources as saying.

Masako has been married for nearly eight years to Crown Prince Naruhito and in late 1999 suffered a miscarriage after a brief but highly publicised pregnancy.

"It's a happy event. It is a really happy event," Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori told reporters at his official residence.

If the baby is a boy, it would be second in line to the throne and the first royal male born in more than three decades.

No royal males have been born since 1965, when the Crown Prince's younger brother, Prince Akishino, was born. Akishino's two children are girls.

This has sparked speculation that Japan might have to alter its strict males-only succession statute to permit a female to inherit the throne of the world's oldest monarchy.



Princess Masako to become mother

REUTERS, Tokyo

Notice on Time Extension

The Northwest Crop Diversification Project has invited 'Letter of Interest' for Shortlisting of Consulting Firms which was published on 18-3-2001 in The Bangladesh Observer on 29-3-2001 in The Daily Star, 30-3-2001 in the Weekly Holiday. Now the date of submission of letter of interest invited for Shortlisting of Consulting Firms under this Project is hereby extended up to May 17, 2001. Those Consulting Firms has already submitted their Letter of Interest and those applicants has submitted their applications for the post of some specialist, need not apply further.

Project Director Northwest Crop Diversification Project Lab Building, Farmgate, Dhaka-1215. GD-337

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