



PHOTO: AFP

Homes are flooded on the banks of the Yangtze in Yichang, central China's Hubei province, as the water levels keep rising yesterday. Millions of people in central China faced an increasingly grave flood peril as water levels in a vast lake surged ever higher above danger marks, with some locals already abandoning waterlogged homes.

US to "push" for peace in Sri Lanka

AFP, Jaffna, Sri Lanka

The United States yesterday said it will "forcefully push" for a peaceful settlement to Sri Lanka's drawn-out Tamil separatist war which has claimed over 60,000 lives since 1972. US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, the highest ranking US official to visit this remote village in the embattled northern peninsula of Jaffna, said the destruction here reminded him of his stint in Vietnam.

He said "enough was enough" and he was encouraging the government of Sri Lanka and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to seek a peaceful solution to the long running conflict.

Armitage, who inspected a US-funded demining project in this impoverished village, said he discussed continued assistance for such humanitarian programs.

Millions at risk as army battle floods in China

AFP, Chenglingji, China

Almost a million workers were battling yesterday to save one of China's most densely populated regions from catastrophic floods, as water levels in a vast lake and surrounding river continued to rise.

Army units were working around the clock alongside police officers and civilians to shore up dykes and embankments on Dongting Lake in the central province of Hunan, officials and state press said.

Others could be seen waiting in tents erected on top of embankments alongside mountainous piles of sandbags, ready to plug leaks as Dongting continued to swell despite clear skies yesterday.

Some lakeside houses were already totally submerged, with just

the roofs of buildings poking out of the water in parts of Yueyang, a large town next to where the Yangtze River exits the lake.

Dongting acts as a flood catchment for the historically flood-prone Yangtze, sparking fears for the safety of 7.5 million people in Wuhan, which sits on the river further downstream.

"If Dongting lake bursts its banks, then water flowing down the Yangtze could threaten neighbouring Hubei Province and its capital Wuhan," the state-run China Daily warned.

Changsha, Hunan's capital city of 5.5 million people on the Xiang River upstream from Dongting, "is in serious danger of being hit by floods", the newspaper added.

As rain-swollen rivers emptied into the lake, around 850,000 were

working on anti-flood measures throughout the region, it said.

Some people were already being evacuated, locals reported, following a province-wide declaration of emergency around Hunan province the previous day, which saw the army and police mobilised.

Officials warned that Dongting was likely to continue rising for three more days.

"If skies stay clear, the peak is expected to happen around 8:00am on Sunday," said a provincial government spokesman called Mr Jian.

At Chenglingji, a historical danger spot where the Yangtze exits the lake, waters were heading ever closer to levels recorded in 1998, when more than 4,100 people were killed in floods around the country.

Pakistan for Indian role to end Kashmir infiltration

Joint patrol along Line of Control ruled out

AFP, Kathmandu

Pakistan yesterday said that India had to play a part in preventing Muslim militants crossing the disputed border in Kashmir.

"Across the Line of Control (LoC - the de facto border in Kashmir) whatever is happening is the responsibility of the Indian government to ensure law and order in Indian Kashmir," Pakistan's deputy foreign minister Inamul Haq said.

Haq, who is in Kathmandu to attend a South Asian ministerial conference, said that if there was any infiltration of militants it was going on without the knowledge or support of Pakistan.

"We have taken a position that we will not allow anybody across the LoC," he told a group of reporters.

But he added that it was impossible to seal off the porous border and Indian security forces lined up on the borders should play a part in stopping militants crossing over.

Haq said the only way to assess whether infiltration was continuing was to have an international mechanism in place to monitor the LoC. However, he ruled out joint patrols with India as proposed by New Delhi.

"In a situation where there are more than a million men are staring at each other across the line of control, there is not sufficient confidence in each other to start joint patrolling," Haq said.

Talks between the nuclear rivals have been stalled since last year, with tensions spiralling after an Islamic militant attack on India's parliament

complex last December by gunmen New Delhi claims were sponsored by Islamabad - a claim it rejects.

That attack resulted in hundreds of thousands of troops being deployed on the border, triggering international fears of a nuclear conflict.

On Wednesday Indian deputy prime minister Lal Krishna Advani said in London that India considered itself to be at war with Pakistan over Kashmir.

But Haq said: "We do not consider ourselves to be at war with India."

"The statement was a bit excessive. We want to de-escalate and have a dialogue. War is not going to resolve any problems in the region."

Elections are due to be held in Indian-held Kashmir beginning in September and India has claimed that Pakistan wants to sabotage the polls.

"To say Pakistan is preventing free and fair elections is to assign a power that we do not have," Haq said.

But he added the elections were not a substitute to a solution to the problems of Kashmir, where a Muslim insurgency has claimed 36,500 lives since 1989.

"Pakistan cannot accept the legality of such elections but is not going to do anything to stop them being held," he said.

Both Haq and Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha were attending a South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) meeting, but they have not held talks, despite shaking hands on Wednesday.

"We have sat at the same table. We have spoken to each other, but certainly not about the issues that have bedevilled the relationship," Haq said.

Eleven Islamic extremists killed in Algeria

AFP, Algiers

Thirteen people, including 11 Islamic extremists, were killed in three separate incidents in Algeria, newspapers reported here yesterday.

At least 11 armed Islamic extremists were killed by government troops in an offensive against the insurgents in northeastern Kabylie province, the papers said.

The 11 were part of a group of around 100 radical Islamic fundamentalists who have been surrounded by the army near Bouira, in the foothills of the Djurdjura mountains, since Monday, according to national radio.

Calm after security talks

Israel calls Palestinian officials "sincere, serious"

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Defence Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer praised Palestinian security officials yesterday as "sincere and serious" in their desire to implement a plan to enforce a truce in return for an Israeli pullback from reoccupied areas.

The Labour party leader was talking as a rare calm prevailed followed the latest round of security talks and the arrest of a Palestinian terror cell operating inside Israel, using occupied east Jerusalem as a base.

"I've found my Palestinian interlocutors to be sincere and serious, but the question is whether they have the capability to stop terrorism," he told public radio.

"If we have attacks every day, it is clear that nothing will work... but we should not demand too much from them (the Palestinians) in the immediate future, so as to leave some room for hope," he said.

Palestinian security officials met late Wednesday with their Israeli counterparts at the Erez checkpoint in the northern Gaza Strip despite a

deadly Israeli raid into a Gaza town that prompted Palestinian accusations of "doubletalk".

"We discussed a withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in line with the initial understanding on a pullout from Bethlehem and Gaza," a senior Palestinian security official said after the meeting.

Israeli forces quit Bethlehem, just south of Jerusalem, on Monday night.

An Israeli army statement said the meeting "took place in a positive atmosphere, and its objective was to verify how to put in place the arrangements made by the defence minister."

It said the Palestinians had agreed to "immediately act to restore calm to the land and prevent violence," while the army would "continue to apply measures to improve the lives of the Palestinian population in humanitarian terms."

Both sides have kept the details of the plan - which Israel stresses is no more than an "understanding" - under wraps, after dozens of previous such projects have collapsed in vicious outbursts of fighting.

The two sides are to meet again on Monday to mull further confidence-building measures in the Gaza Strip and Hebron in the southern West Bank.

The talks have been matched by intermittent discussions among the various Palestinian factions, who were expected to meet again this week to try to work out the future of their 23-month struggle, or intifada, against Israeli occupation.

Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement has called for militants to focus their attacks exclusively on the occupied territories.

Hardline Islamist groups such as Hamas, but also Fatah's deadly offshoot, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, have rejected the call.

Hamas operations suffered a serious blow on Wednesday, when Israel's security services announced they had smashed one of the group's most important cells operating inside Israel, using occupied east Jerusalem as a launchpad.

To appease the goddesses

Over 100 children buried alive for nearly a minute

AFP, Madras

More than 100 children were buried alive for about a minute as part of a ritual to appease two Hindu goddesses in a village in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, a Hindu priest said yesterday.

The ritual, organised once every five years, was held Wednesday at Perayur village, about 500 kilometres from Madras, Tamil Nadu's provincial capital.

Local lore has it that the festival has been organised regularly for the past 400 years to propitiate two ferocious female deities, Muthukuzhi Mariamman and Kaliyamman, both incarnations of the Hindu goddess of destruction, Kali.

According to Kaili Raj, secretary of the ritual's organising committee, all 106 children who took part in Wednesday's ceremony, known as "Kuzhi Maatru Thiruvizha" or "Festival of emerging from the pit", were fine but exhausted by their experience.

The ceremony was essentially a "thanksgiving" service offered by parents of those children who had been suffering from chronic diseases, while others took part in the ritual to show their gratitude for being blessed with an heir, he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Relatives carry a child wrapped in a yellow shroud on Wednesday during a live burial ritual in Perayur village, some 500 kilometres from Madras. More than 100 children were buried alive for about a minute as part of a ritual to appease two Hindu goddesses. The ceremony was essentially a "thanksgiving" service offered by parents of those children who had been suffering from chronic diseases, while others took part in the ritual to show their gratitude for being blessed with an heir.

Bush allays "frenzy" of Iraq strike speculation

AFP, Crawford, Texas

US President George W Bush vowed to consult US allies and lawmakers about military action against Iraq, striving to calm what he calls a "frenzy" of speculation that a US attack is imminent, even as Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld admits Bush is "thinking about it".

"I'm a patient man, and we will look at all options, and we will consider all technologies available to us, and diplomacy, and intelligence," Bush said Wednesday, with Rumsfeld at his side, after a half-day meeting with top national security advisers.

Later, Rumsfeld, meeting with US troops at nearby Fort Hood, Texas, quipped that Bush was "thinking about" an attack on Iraq when asked by a soldier how such a war would impact US relations with Russia.

"The president has made no such decision that we should go into a war with Iraq," he said, adding with a chuckle, "He's thinking about it."

Bush said Iraq "didn't come up" during talks here with Vice President Dick Cheney, White House Chief of Staff Andy Card, national security adviser Condoleezza Rice, joint chiefs chairman General Richard Myers,

and the head of the Pentagon's missile defence office, Lieutenant General Ronald Kadish.

Just hours after the US leader sought to calm what he termed "a churning, a frenzy" that he will soon carry out his repeated threats to topple Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, Rumsfeld at Ford Hood said there was nothing definite.

Those comments came a day after General Tommy Franks, the commander of US forces in the Gulf, said he would present Bush with "credible options" for military action against Iraq.

Bush stressed that Franks was absent from the meeting on his "Prairie Chapel" ranch here, and that the general was following a directive to plan for "all contingencies," not charting a course for battle.

Bush and Rumsfeld said that the meeting aimed to assess the impact of the September 11 terrorist attacks and Washington's new freedom to deploy a missile defence system on longstanding plans to modernise the US military.

"The cold, hard fact is that the United States lives in a very different security environment today in this 21st century than we did prior to September 11," said Rumsfeld, who was here a year ago for a similar discussion.