

Food poisoning claims 30 lives in China

AFP, Beijing

Up to 30 people were killed after more than 200 people were poisoned from eating tainted food in China's eastern city of Nanjing Saturday, state press and local witnesses said.

"More than 200 people were poisoned and a lot of people died one after another as attempts to save them failed," the official People's Daily reported on its website late Saturday afternoon.

One local resident with close links to the area's hospitals told AFP that at least 30 people were killed by the tainted food.

"I was told that 30 people had died by 4:00 this afternoon (0800 GMT)," the woman said on condition of anonymity.

"The exact cause of death is still unclear, police are investigating."

Iraq rejects return of arms inspectors

REUTERS, United Nations

Iraq flatly rejected President Bush's demand for a swift and unconditional return of UN arms inspectors on Friday, raising the stakes in their high-risk confrontation and bringing closer the spectre of a second Gulf War.

Bush, who did not threaten an attack on Iraq but clearly implied it in his speech on Thursday to the UN General Assembly, took a blunter approach less than 24 hours later, saying he was "highly doubtful" that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein would meet conditions for averting military action.

Baghdad lived up to his expectations. "We do not accept President Bush's conditions," Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz told the Dubai-based Arab satellite television station MBC in an interview broadcast on Friday.

Oil prices leapt with traders saying Aziz's rebuttal raised the likelihood of a U.S. attack on Iraq. The market fears conflict could spread into other countries in the Gulf region, which pumps a quarter of global oil supply.

Ministers from Russia, Europe and key Arab states at the United Nations piled pressure on Saddam to readmit inspectors responsible for checking Iraq for nuclear, chemical, biological and ballistic weapons.

World financiers were reaching for their calculators and computer mod-

els to work out the implications of a second Gulf War. A source in Italy said G7 finance ministers look set to join a chorus of voices warning about the possible impact of a war when they meet later this month.

With Secretary of State Colin Powell consulting his counterparts on the UN Security Council, Bush made clear he wanted quick movement on a tough new resolution requiring Iraq to disarm, urging UN action in "days and weeks."

Aziz raised the stakes in the ballooning crisis. "The return of inspectors without conditions will not solve the problem ... because we have had a bad experience with them," Aziz said. "Is it clever to repeat an experience that failed and did not prevent aggression?"

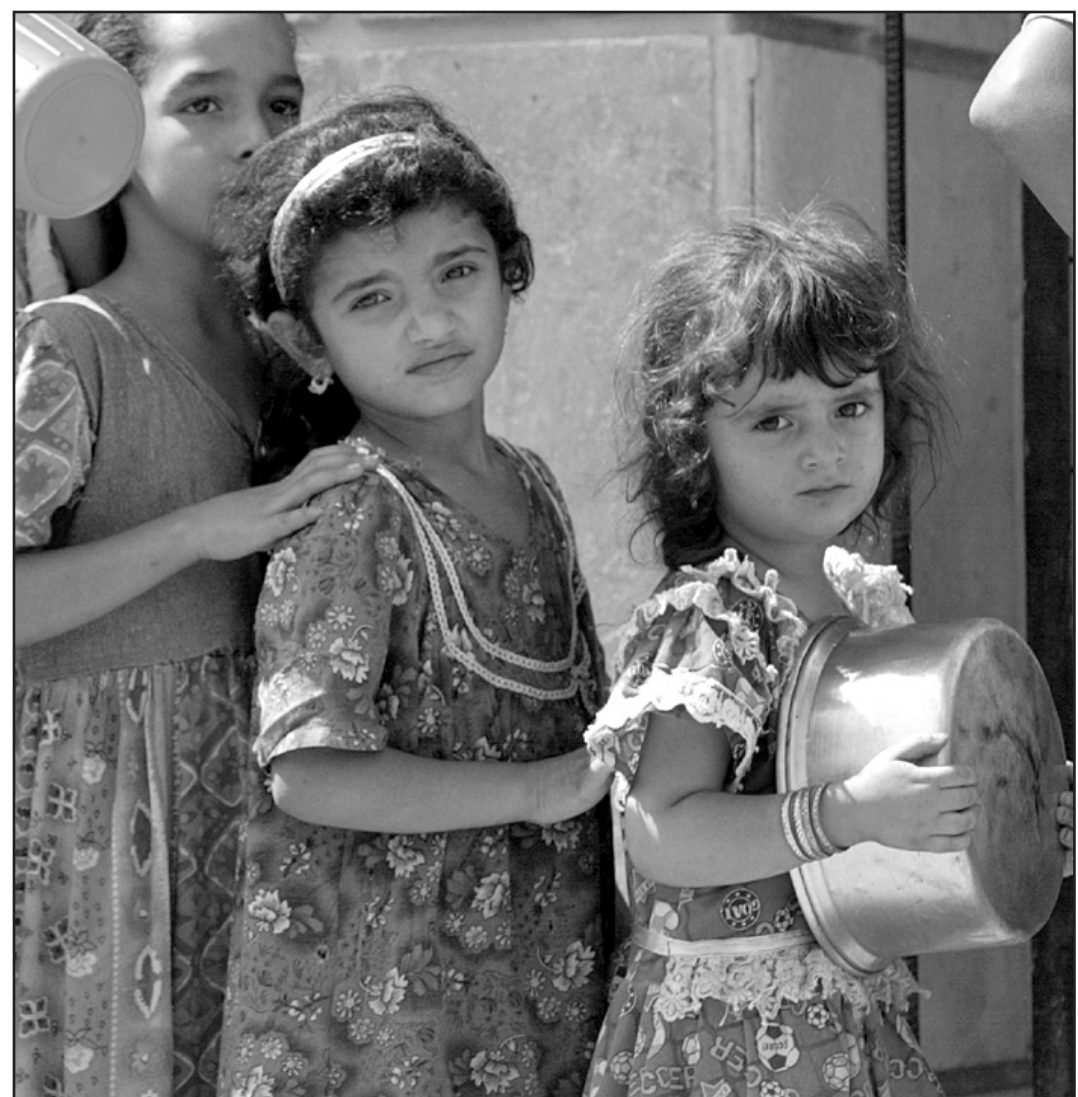
The White House said that Aziz's rejection meant that Iraq had "something to hide."

AFP adds: Iraq lashed out Saturday at US President George W. Bush's ultimatum to Baghdad, where an American congressman is on a rare visit aimed at "giving peace a chance."

Bush's speech to the UN General Assembly Thursday was "nothing but a dangerous chapter in a perfidious US game intended to deceive and manoeuvre to achieve its aggressive aims under the cover of the UN Security Council," said the government daily al-Qadisiya.



United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan (C) is flanked by US Secretary of State Colin Powell (L) and Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxun (R) at a luncheon on Friday at the United Nations.



Young Iraqi girls stand in queue as they wait in line near a mosque on Friday to receive monthly food rations from a local mosque in Baghdad. Arab states urged Iraq on Friday to allow the UN weapons inspectors back after US President George W. Bush warned that US actions against Baghdad was "unavoidable" unless the United Nation disarmed Iraq.

Palestinians hail first meeting with Bush

AFP, Ramallah

The Palestinians Saturday hailed a first ever meeting between one of their top negotiators and US President George W. Bush as administration officials played down the encounter as just a courtesy handshake.

"Nabil Shaath met Bush at a reception in New York and they had a 10 minute discussion about the situation in the Middle East," a top Palestinian official told AFP, asking not to be identified.

"During the conversation, Bush said some good things," the official said without going into further details.

Friday's encounter with Shaath -- international cooperation minister in the Palestinian Authority until its cabinet resigned en masse this week -- was Bush's first with a Palestinian official since taking office early last year.

A White House spokeswoman had initially insisted she was not aware of any such meeting.

But later a senior administration official confirmed Bush had shaken hands with Shaath at a reception on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York attended by most heads of UN delegation.

A spokesman for Shaath said he had stressed to the US president the need to resolve the Middle East conflict peacefully and establish an independent Palestinian state.

And Shaath himself told the Palestinian Wafa news agency that

the US president had elaborated on a key Middle East policy speech he delivered in June.

"Bush committed again to do everything he said in his speech concerning the Palestinian issue and how it is necessary and important for the Palestinian people to have a Palestinian state," Shaath told Wafa by telephone.

"He said it was necessary to end the conflict in the Middle East and that he would do his best to reach this aim."

"Bush said all parties were responsible for what is happening (in the Middle East), and that the Israeli side had to end the occupation and stop the suffering of the Palestinians."

"He said he was in pain when he saw the pain of the Palestinians."

The leading Palestinian foreign policy official, Shaath has hit out at the targeting of civilians by Palestinian militants and is widely regarded as a moderate.

Since his election to the US presidency in November 2000, Bush has not met with any of the Palestinian leadership.

By contrast, he has met Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon six times, stoking Arab charges of bias against the Palestinians.

Last November, the president refused to greet Arafat at a UN meeting in New York. Despite making an address in which he used the word "Palestine" for the first time in public, Bush avoided shaking hands with the Palestinian leader.

'Vajpayee's UN speech a warning for Pakistan'

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's tough talk at the United Nations charging Pakistan with trying to disrupt next week's polls in Kashmir was meant as a warning to Islamabad not to interfere in the vote, analysts said Saturday.

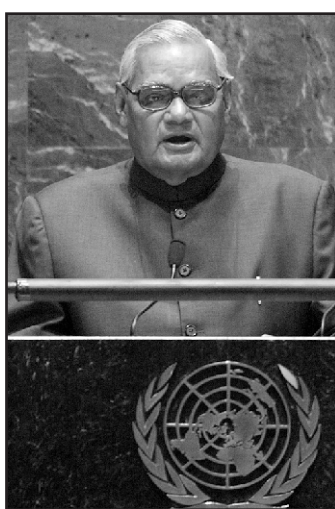
"The whole message was to tell Pakistan to lay off Kashmir. It was to tell Pakistan that 'Look, an election is happening in Kashmir, stop the terror, end the violence,'" said Ajai Sahni, executive director of the New Delhi-based independent think-tank the Institute of Conflict Management.

Addressing the United Nations General Assembly Friday, Vajpayee confronted Pakistan with the charge that it was fomenting violence in troubled Kashmir ahead of elections that begin Monday.

"If the elections are a mere fraud, why are terrorists being trained and infiltrated into India at the command of the Inter-Services Intelligence Agency of Pakistan to kill election candidates and intimidate voters?" Vajpayee asked.

"Those who had to adjust voting and counting procedure to win a referendum are ill-placed to lecture others in freedom and democracy," he added, referring to a fraud-marred April referendum that gave Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf five more years in power.

On Thursday, Musharraf said



"elections under Indian occupation will not help peace," and added "the people of Jammu and Kashmir must be allowed to exercise their right to determine their own future."

Provincial elections in Kashmir are due to be held in four phases beginning Monday. Twenty-three political activists, including state law minister Mushtaq Ahmad Lone, have been killed since the poll dates were announced August 2.

Almost all the separatist outfits in the region have decided to boycott the elections and militants have vowed to disrupt the campaigning and polling.

Islamabad denies the New Delhi

charge that it foments the violence. G. Parthasarthy, India's former envoy to Islamabad, said Vajpayee's hardtalk was "reflective of India's upbeat mood on the polls".

"I think it should be kept in mind that his speech came after his meeting with President (George W.) Bush," Parthasarthy said. "It underlines the need for the United States to tell Pakistan to stop violence in Kashmir during elections."

Nuclear-armed India and Pakistan have deployed one million troops to their borders since a December attack on the Indian parliament which New Delhi blamed on Islamabad.

India has called on the United States to declare Pakistan, a vital ally in its campaign in Afghanistan, a state sponsor of terrorism.

"It (the speech) was also an attempt to tell the world that already the elections in the state had become very violent, more violence was expected, and that for all this, Pakistan is and would be held responsible," Sahni said.

The prime minister also accused Musharraf of using "nuclear blackmail" to browbeat India.

"In our South Asian region, nuclear blackmail has emerged over the last few months as a new arrow in the quiver of state-sponsored terrorism," he said.

Pak opposition mulls election boycott

AFP, Islamabad

The Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) of ex-premier Nawaz Sharif said Saturday it would consider boycotting next month's elections after top opposition leaders were barred from standing.

"The government is becoming a party in the October 10 elections and a boycott will become inevitable if the pre-poll rigging continues," PML-N chairman Raja Zafar ul Haq told a news conference.

"Boycott is an option if the interference and undemocratic policies are not stopped," he added.

"We will consult other parties before taking a decision."

Zafar described as "undemocratic, illegal and unconstitutional"

the rejection of nomination papers from Shahbaz Sharif, PML-N leader and brother of the deposed prime minister, and from Nawaz's wife Kulsoom.

He also slammed the refusal of election authorities to allow self-exiled former prime minister Benazir Bhutto and several of her Pakistan People's Party (PPP) stalwarts to contest elections.

The polls will be the first since military ruler General Pervez Musharraf seized power in an October 1999 coup.

"We will lodge an appeal in the Supreme Court in two or three days against the rejection of the candidatures" of the Sharif family members, Zafar said.

The PPP is also planning to

challenge the rejection of Benazir's papers.

Shahbaz, 51, took over leadership of the PML-N in July after Nawaz Sharif bowed to laws disqualifying him on the grounds of his convictions for plane hijacking and tax evasion in 2000.

The election tribunal on Thursday also disqualified Sharif's wife Kulsoom, saying her documents had not been properly attested.

Nawaz Sharif, Kulsoom, Shahbaz and around 15 other members of the wealthy industrialist clan have been living in exile in Saudi Arabia since December 2000 under a deal brokered by the Saudis which freed Nawaz from prison.

Bush asks Musharraf to end incursion

PTI, New York

President George W Bush has told Pakistan military ruler Pervez Musharraf in clear terms to put an end to incursion of terrorists into Jammu and Kashmir to help in resumption of Indo-Pak dialogue, US officials said.

During a half-hour meeting between the two leaders on Thursday, Bush also conveyed to Musharraf that democracy was key to his country's future, the official said.

The meeting took place shortly after Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee met Bush who assured India that US would use its leverage with Islamabad to curb terrorism in Kashmir.

It also came in the backdrop of Musharraf's vitriolic attack against India in his address to the UN General Assembly.

"He (Bush) does look forward to some resolution of the underlined problems in Kashmir," the US officials told reporters, adding the President was "telling both sides".

According to the officials Bush emphasised on Musharraf the need to keep militants from infiltrating from Pakistan across the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir as an essential step towards resumption of talks.

Pakistani officials said Musharraf explained to Bush the "initiatives" taken by Pakistan to ease tensions in the region as well as to resume dialogue with India.

"But the Indian intransigence is the main hurdle," the officials quoted Musharraf as telling Bush.

BJP to keep Modi in power if reelected

AFP, New Delhi

The chief minister of India's riot-ravaged state of Gujarat earned a reprieve Saturday after his Hindu nationalist BJP party said he will retain office if the party wins in upcoming provincial elections.

Chief Minister Narendra Modi's state came again under the limelight at the UN General Assembly Thursday when Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf said the recent riots in Gujarat showed growing Hindu extremism in India.

Venkaiah Naidu, president of India's ruling Hindu nationalist BJP party, which also governs Gujarat, said Modi would hold the same office if the party returned to power in provincial elections later this year.

Black holes in galaxy put evolution theories to test

AFP, Washington

The discovery of active black holes in a galaxy cluster could lay waste to theories that such clusters are deposits for dormant black holes, US astronomers said Friday.

"This changes our view of galaxy clusters as the retirement homes for old and quiet black holes," said astronomer Dan Kelson of the Carnegie observatories in Pasadena, California.

In observations of the galaxy cluster Abell 2104, some 700 million light years from Earth, researchers found six times the number of galaxies with active cores than they had anticipated.

Galaxies cluster based on their mutual gravitational attraction. Many scientists believe that the ancient, defunct black holes played

a role in the birth of such clusters, so to find active black holes, whose cores continue to absorb surrounding space material, surprised researchers.

"The question now is: How do these black holes turn themselves on again?" Kelson said, noting that the discoveries cast doubts on how galaxies, and the stars within them, evolved.

Using the Chandra Ray telescope, astronomers directed by Paul Martini found six sources of X-rays in Abell 2104, which was detailed in Tuesday's Astrophysical Journal.

Then, using a new Walter Baade optical telescope at the Carnegie observatories in Chile, they confirmed that all the galaxies in question were truly within the cluster and not in front or behind it.

Violence keeps polls campaigners indoor

'Troops will not force Kashmiris to vote'

AFP, Srinagar

Fears of violence kept campaigners off the streets Saturday two days ahead of Indian Kashmir's elections, as authorities pledged to ensure security without forcing residents to take part in the controversial vote.

Pro-India political activists have been shell-shocked by the daylight assassination of the tightly guarded law minister, Mushtaq Ahmed Lone, as he campaigned Wednesday for another term in Kashmir's assembly.

The state government Saturday announced an inquiry into how security personnel "failed to react" to the gunmen. Three of Lone's police guards died in the attack.

Kupwara, where Lone was assassinated, and four other districts bordering Pakistani-administered Kashmir are set to go to the polls Monday in the first of four rounds of voting. The election ends October 8.

Residents reported little enthusiasm on Saturday, the last day election authorities permitted campaigning before the vote.

"Before Lone's killing the town of Kupwara had a festive look with rallies everywhere," resident Ghulam

Mohiuddin told AFP by telephone.

"But today being the last day of electioneering, we are only seeing occasional cars escorted by security forces with the passengers urging people to vote for their respective candidates," he said.

All major separatist groups are staying away from the election, arguing that India has not yet shown a willingness to resolve the dispute over Kashmir, which is divided between Pakistan and India and claimed in full by both.

Islamic militants have threatened to attack anyone participating in the election.

In the assembly elections in 1996, Kashmiris charged that security officers forced many people to the polls, which helped authorities declare that 58 percent of eligible voters turned out.

Meanwhile, Indian Kashmir's seniormost bureaucrat said Saturday security forces would not urge people to vote in controversial elections, after reports of potential coercion.

Voters allege that in past elections security forces have forced people to the ballot box, despite boycotts called by separatists and threats from rebels.

Lankan delegates in Thailand for talks

AFP, Bangkok

Sri Lankan negotiators arrived in the Thai capital Bangkok Saturday ahead of crucial Norwegian-arranged peace talks aimed at ending three decades of ethnic bloodshed.

The four-member Sri Lankan delegation and the head of the Tamil Tiger negotiating team, Anton Balasingham, arrived here separately, diplomats said.

"The Sri Lankan delegation has already travelled to the Thai naval base at Sattahip where the peace talks will begin on Monday," a diplomatic source close to the talks said.

He said only the delegates from both sides will be accommodated inside the naval base, 180 kilometres (112 miles) southeast of Bangkok, while support staff will be put up at a nearby tourist resort.

The Sri Lankan government team's chief negotiator, G. L. Peiris, said Monday's talks would set them on the way to peace with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

(LTTE), but played down hopes of quick results.

"We will initially work out an agenda for the next round of talks," Peiris told reporters travelling on a commercial airline bringing him and his negotiators to Thailand Saturday.

"There should not be the expectation of some kind of a 'decision' arrived at the first round itself. This is going to be a long process, but we are confident that we can make progress along the way."

Peiris who is also the Colombo government's constitutional affairs minister said the talks would be an important landmark.

"This is a very important occasion and we feel this time round there is more hope than ever before because of the changed global environment and the change of government (in Colombo)," Peiris said.

Four previous attempts at peacefully ending the island's drawn out conflict have ended in failure and led to more bloodshed.



A handcuffed Islamic militant (C) makes victory sign while others hiding their faces while sitting inside a Armoured Personnel Carrier (APC) after a Pakistani court sent five Islamic militants to prison. The militants have planned terrorist attack on the American fast food outlets to mark the first anniversary of the September 11 strikes in the US, in southern port city Karachi on Saturday. The militants, belonging to Harkatul Mujahideen al-Alaami gang, were produced in the court for police custody remand, which was refused by the anti-terrorism court judge, who sent them to prison for seven-days.