



Chinese health enforcement officers prepare to transfer a batch of a civet cat to be destroyed in Guangzhou, southern China's Guangdong province yesterday. China's first SARS patient for six months said he has never had contact with civet cats as concerns mounted Wednesday over a mass slaughter of the animals, which are suspected of spreading the disease.

Rooting out Sars

Rats - next target in China's campaign

AFP, Beijing

China's quest to stamp out SARS has spread from the slaughter of civet cats to rats as the southern province of Guangdong ordered a large scale rat extermination campaign, state media said Wednesday.

Communist Party and government officials in Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong, have stipulated a city-wide effort to kill rats or mice between January 10 and 13, the Guangzhou Daily said.

Residents are encouraged to set rat poison in their homes, block all channels of entry for the rodents, including drains and holes in the walls, and to generally clean up surroundings, the report said.

Government offices, commercial buildings, apartment compounds and residential neighborhoods will be especially targeted.

The campaign comes as the official Xinhua news agency said

Wednesday a man who is China's first SARS victim in six months reported catching a mouse and throwing it out the window before he fell ill in late December.

Officials had trapped and tested about 30 rats in the man's apartment compound but the evidence was "inconclusive," Roy Wadia, a WHO spokesman in Beijing, told AFP.

The campaign comes on the heels of the slaughter of an estimated 10,000 civet cats being raised or sold in the province's farms, wildlife markets and restaurants by Saturday.

Officials ordered the slaughter after scientists from mainland China and Hong Kong found the weasel-like animals carry a similar SARS virus as the latest SARS victim, who has recovered.

The rat killing spree is part of a 15-day city-wide "all citizens patriotic health campaign," the daily said.

Officials are mobilizing the

public to "cut off the channel of infections," calling the campaign the "people's war" to prevent the resurgence of SARS.

Rat killers are urged to wear protective gear, including hats, goggles, gloves and boots and are reminded to wash their clothes and shower after the work is done.

Wadia said while rats have historically been known as the carriers of various diseases, including the plague, WHO wants to see more research into the source of the virus' spread to humans.

"So far, all the available studies that's been done has shown circumstantial evidence, but there's no conclusive link between a certain type of animal and SARS," Wadia said.

"We'd like to see everyone involved in slaughters protected. We'd like to see animal carcasses and remains disposed of safely because there's the possibility of airborne, waterborne or soil contamination."

Indo-Pak deal not enough to stop bloodshed: Hizbul chief

AFP, Muzaffarabad (PoK)

Terrorist outfit Hizbul Mujahideen on Wednesday rejected as "paperwork" a move by India and Pakistan to reopen talks and said it would not stop a 14-year insurgency.

"Tuesday's development is nothing but paperwork," Syed Salahuddin, supreme commander of the Hizbul Mujahideen rebel group, said of the landmark deal by India and Pakistan to resume dialogue to solve issues including Kashmir.

"We have seen dozens of such announcements and agreements in the past but unfortunately India never honoured a single one," he added.

"It seems India wants to gain time, during which it would ... employ every possible resource to crush the freedom struggle in the occupied territory," he said.

Salahuddin said India must accept that Kashmir is a disputed region, then consult Kashmiris on the settlement of its status.

"When India accepts the disputed status of Kashmir, stops (alleged) killings and atrocities, release all detainees and reduces the number of troops in Kashmir to pre 1988 positions with a view to resolving the issue in accordance with the aspirations of the Kashmiris, only then will there be no justification for us to keep guns in our hands," the rebel chief said.

"Unless that happens, guns cannot be laid down by mere signing of a piece of paper (by Indian and Pakistani leaders). The freedom struggle will continue at the same pace," he said.

India, Pakistan likely to ink extradition pact

Pak opposition raps Musharraf for 'sidelining' Kashmir

ANI, Islamabad

Pakistan and India have agreed to finalise an extradition treaty entailing provisions regarding handing over of "terrorists and criminals" wanted in each other's countries, media reports said on Wednesday.

The two countries have also decided to stop talking to each other through the media and instead adhere to "quiet diplomacy", The News reported while quoting a reliable source.

According to the paper, sources in Islamabad, New Delhi and Europe have indicated that Pakistan had agreed, in principle, to invite Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani to Pakistan for discussing modalities of an extradition treaty and other related issues.

Pakistani security officials have reportedly told New Delhi that modalities of the extradition treaty should be discussed in parallel to other issues.

The two countries have also agreed to resist the tendency of talking to each other through the media claiming that all details of the proposed treaty would be worked out through high-level contacts between security agencies, said the report.

The report further said that the US, UK and other world powers have endorsed the view that the Indian demand of handing over 20 wanted men allegedly in Pakistan, could not be fulfilled as currently

there was no extradition treaty between the two countries.

The list of 20 terrorists was handed over to Pakistan after the December 13, 2001 attack on the Indian Parliament.

AFP from Islamabad: Pakistani opposition parties rebuked President Pervez Musharraf on Wednesday over his breakthrough deal to reopen formal talks with India, accusing him of making too many concessions on Kashmir.

"We cannot call it a historic event," said Raja Zafar ul Haq, leader of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party, challenging Musharraf's proclamation that history had been made.

"Pakistan has substantially withdrawn from its stated position on Kashmir without any quid pro quo," he told AFP.

Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee issued a landmark agreement after talking on the sidelines of a South Asia summit in Islamabad, to resume dialogue from February on issues including Kashmir, two years after coming to the brink of their fourth war.

They expressed confidence in their statement that the resumption of dialogue would lead to "peaceful settlement" of all bilateral issues including Kashmir.

Zafar said the joint statement

marked a "significant change" in Pakistan's policy on Kashmir by omitting reference to United Nations Security Council resolutions calling for a referendum in the disputed territory.

"But for the first time in 56 years this is not done in the joint statement issued in Islamabad," Zafar said.

"They are now seeking a settlement acceptable to both India and Pakistan."

Musharraf offered to drop Pakistan's demand for a referendum in the lead-up to the summit.

The Islamist alliance Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) also dismissed the agreement as "one-sided".

"Pakistan is sidelining the UN resolution on Kashmir," said MMA executive Hafiz Hussain Ahmed.

"Musharraf has pledged to block the Kashmiri struggle from Pakistan's side but got nothing in return from India, not even a pledge that the 700,000-strong Indian occupation force will stop atrocities on the territory under its control."

Musharraf reassured Vajpayee that he would not permit any territory under Pakistan's control to be used for terrorism.

India has been insisting that militants based in the Pakistani-controlled zone of Kashmir cross the de-facto border in order to foment unrest in its zone.

Guerrilla bases in Myanmar intact: Naga rebel leader

AP, Gauhati

Foreign guerrilla camps operating in Myanmar are intact and ready to repel attacks by the ruling junta's military or Indian forces, a leader from a rebel group said on Wednesday.

The National Socialist Council of Nagaland has been fighting for an independent homeland for Naga tribespeople in the remote northeast since the early 1980s. Some of the rebels claim to have set up camps in neighbouring Myanmar.

"We have enough strength and capacity to survive in Myanmar," Kughalu Mulatonu, a top leader of the NSCN, told The Associated Press by telephone from an undisclosed location along the India-Myanmar border. "We are prepared to face anything and everything to hold on," he added.

Myanmar's Army attacked rebel camps last week, Calcutta-based The Telegraph newspaper earlier quoted another NSCN leader as saying. But Mulatonu refused to say whether Myanmar's forces had launched an offensive against rebel bases there.

"We have enough strength and capacity to survive in Myanmar," Kughalu Mulatonu, a top leader of the NSCN, told The Associated Press by telephone from an undisclosed location along the India-Myanmar border.

Minister U Win Aung visited New Delhi and said his country would not allow anti-India rebels to operate from the territory.

"If New Delhi is to collaborate with the Burmese junta for a crack-down against us, it could jeopardize the truce between us and the Indian government," Mulatonu said. Myanmar is also known as Burma.

Brigadier Sheonan Singh, an Army officer, said soldiers routinely guarded the frontier with Myanmar, but hadn't instigated operations against the Naga rebels.

India shares a 1,640-kilometer (1,200-miles) porous border with Myanmar. Foreign guerrilla camps operating in Myanmar are intact and ready to repel attacks by the ruling junta's military or Indian forces, a leader from a rebel group said on Wednesday.

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Injured Afghan children are attended to by medical personnel as they are taken to hospital from the scene of a bomb blast which killed at least 15 people, mostly children, in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar, on Tuesday. A large bomb ripped through a crowd of onlookers, mostly children, who had gathered after a smaller device exploded 20 minutes earlier some 100 metres away without causing casualties.

500 Iraqi prisoners to be released

BBC NEWS ONLINE

The US-led coalition in Iraq plans to release 506 prisoners, with the first batch of 100 to be freed on Thursday.

The top US administrator in Iraq, Paul Bremer, said it was a goodwill gesture aimed at reconciliation.

Those released "must renounce violence", Mr Bremer told reporters, adding it was "not for those with blood-stained hands".

Mr Bremer also unveiled a \$200,000 reward programme for the capture of more wanted individuals in Iraq.

At least 10,000 prisoners are

being held in Iraq by the US-led coalition.

Mr Bremer said he wanted to give some of those prisoners a fresh start.

"In a gesture to give impetus to those Iraqis who wish to reconcile with their countrymen, the coalition will permit some currently detained offenders to return to their homes and families," he said.

"No person directly involved in the death or serious bodily harm to any human being will be released."

Mr Bremer said those being freed must have a guarantor in their local community - such as a religious or tribal leader - who can accept responsibility for the person's conduct.

Did US play a role in Indo-Pak talk?

PTI, Washington

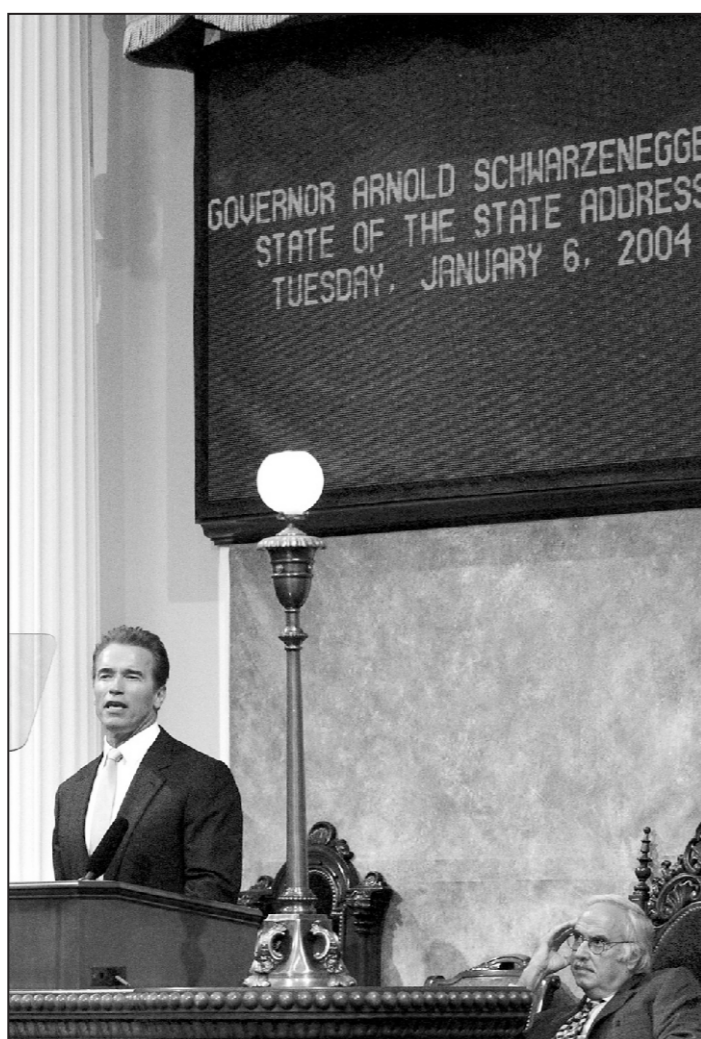
US played a "quiet but significant" role in bringing about the meeting between Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf on the sidelines of the SAARC summit, media report claimed on Tuesday.

The Wall Street Journal in a dispatch from Islamabad said diplomats trace the roots of the Vajpayee-Musharraf meeting to

back channel discussions involving the Indian National Security Adviser Brajesh Mishra, the head of Pakistan's ISI and other senior Indian and Pakistani officials.

"It also involved the Bush Administration," senior diplomats here (in Islamabad) said.

"The US has repeatedly urged New Delhi and Islamabad to resume direct dialogue. The Americans role was quiet but significant in the negotiations," a senior Pakistani official said.



California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger (L) gives his first State of the State address in the Assembly Chambers of the State Capitol as Senate Pro Tem of the Senate John Burton (D-CA) (R) listens Tuesday in California. Governor Schwarzenegger stated that he will try to attract as many businesses as possible to California and that he will also try to create new jobs in the state.

'Search is on for al-Qaeda bomber'

AFP, Paris

The French government said on Wednesday that police across Europe were searching for a passenger who failed to show up for an Air France flight on Christmas Eve and who is suspected of having links with the al-Qaeda network.

"I can confirm to you that we are looking for someone. I can't tell you any more than that," Justice Minister Dominique Perben told French RMC radio.

US television network ABC News reported on Tuesday that a search had been launched for the man.

The network said US law enforcement officials believed he had connections with al-Qaeda and had undergone "terrorist" training in Afghanistan.

Concerns about the man, who was travelling with a French passport, was one of the factors contributing to security jitters about transatlantic flights. ABC News quoted unnamed officials as saying.

A source in Paris close to the affair said the suspect was an Afghan national whose name -- Abdoulaye -- bore a phonetic resemblance to that of a man captured by US forces in Afghanistan but who managed to escape.

The US authorities noted the resemblance and informed their French counterparts.

The man's birthday and birthplace were not known, the source said.

French officials fear the suspect may have a small bomb whose components might get past airport security, the network said.