

China reports new suspected Sars case

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday reported a new suspected Sars case after releasing its only confirmed patient, while three Hong Kong journalists were hospitalized with symptoms of the respiratory disease.

Officials in the southern province of Guangdong said a 20-year-old waitress was under quarantine at the No. 8 People's Hospital in the capital Guangzhou with Sars-like symptoms. She reportedly worked at a wildlife restaurant.

In a statement, the provincial government said she was first hospitalised on December 31. Her temperature has been normal for seven consecutive days.

The announcement coincided with a 32-year-old-television journalist, who was China's first Sars case in six months, being discharged from hospital after recovering.

'Prospects for N Korean nuke talks improving'

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Colin Powell said Wednesday prospects for six-nation nuclear talks including North Korea were improving but Pyongyang's offer not to produce or test atomic weapons did not herald a breakthrough in the crisis.

"Even though we haven't had a six-party meeting for some time, I expect that the prospects for having one are improving," Powell told reporters.

"The statement made by the North Koreans -- not at the most senior level but at an authoritative level -- is a positive step forward, not a breakthrough or anything revolutionary, but it is a positive step forward."

Powell's comments appeared slightly more qualified than his initial response to North Korea's offer on Tuesday, when he said he was "encouraged" by what he termed a "positive" step from Pyongyang.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (L) talks with Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani (L) and Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha in New Delhi yesterday. Vajpayee held a crucial meeting yesterday with top BJP leaders to discuss the advancing of parliament polls and possibility of seeking a vote-on-account to be passed by Parliament.

Vajpayee briefs cabinet on summit breakthrough

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee Wednesday briefed his security cabinet on his historic talks with leaders in Pakistan that opened the doors for the resumption of bilateral dialogue next month, officials said.

Vajpayee, who returned from Islamabad Tuesday, spoke to his cabinet colleagues for 80 minutes about his meeting with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali on the sidelines of the now-concluded South Asian summit.

The meeting was attended among others by deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani, Defence Minister George Fernandes, Foreign Minister

Yashwant Sinha, Finance Minister Jaswant Singh and top military brass.

Jamali, meanwhile, told India's private Aaj Tak television network that Islamabad was sincere in its efforts to normalise ties with nuclear-capable India.

"The government-to-government responsibility is to resolve the disputes and our concrete steps will have to be so exemplary that others can follow," Jamali said Wednesday.

Describing Musharraf as a "trend-setter", Jamali rejected suggestions that the latest rapprochement between India and Pakistan, which since 1947 have fought two of their three wars over Kashmir, was a result of pressure

from the United States.

"There is no pressure on Musharraf and Vajpayee, but there is facilitations that the two sides should talk. We want good relations between us," he added.

Premier Vajpayee's ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), meanwhile, said the February talks would be "possible" only if cross-border militancy ended in Kashmir.

"We are happy to take note of the fact that India has maintained its consistent stand during their meeting with Pakistani leadership that sustained dialogue with Pakistan would be possible only after cross-border terrorism is brought to an end," BJP President Venkaiah Naidu said.

BJP set for early polls call

AFP, New Delhi

India's ruling Hindu nationalists will meet Sunday and likely recommend national polls six months ahead of schedule to take advantage of a strong economy and warming ties with rival Pakistan, party leaders said.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee will huddle with leaders of his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for two days in the southern city of Hyderabad, with the mood upbeat after the party swept regional elections on December 1.

"That elections should be held soon has almost been decided. The party rank and file want them soon to cash in on the feel-good factor in the country," senior BJP leader J.P. Mathur said.

Mathur said the most likely date for the world's biggest election will be in April or May.

"These two months are preferable as later it will be intensely hot and then rains will set in," he said.

The election can be held any

time before October. But analysts point out that the economic growth -- which soared to 8.4 percent in the quarter ending September -- came on the back of a healthy monsoon, which may or may not be repeated in 2004.

Another BJP leader said Vajpayee had overcome reservations about early elections, which are favoured by Lal Krishna Advani, the deputy prime minister and a party heavyweight.

In the past, Vajpayee has been reported to want to become the first Indian prime minister from outside the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty's Congress party to serve a full five-year term.

Vajpayee, 79, has also had an eye on the history books in relations with Pakistan.

After a near war between the nuclear powers in 2002, Vajpayee in April announced he was on a final peace-making mission. On Tuesday, India and Pakistan announced they were restarting stalled dialogue from February.

Top BJP strategist Pramod Mahajan said Monday that the warming ties between Pakistan and India "will help the BJP in the forthcoming general elections."

Procedurally, Vajpayee's cabinet needs to pass a resolution to dissolve parliament and the autonomous Election Commission would decide the date. The parliament would hold a special session to pass a budget.

"If the polls are delayed, the government will have to present a proper budget which if soft slows the economy, but if tough makes the government unpopular," said B.G. Verghese, an analyst at the Centre of Policy Research.

"If the rain fails this year and there is a drought, the feel-good factor can evaporate. So in all, they seem confident this is the right time for polls," Verghese said.

Another analyst, Mahesh Rangarajan, said the BJP would also benefit from the "disarray" in the main opposition Congress party.

Pakistan asks envoy to India to initiate follow-up action

ANI, Islamabad

In the backdrop of the success achieved at the 12th Saarc Summit, Islamabad has asked its High Commissioner to India to rush back to New Delhi and carry on with urgent follow up diplomatic action.

Pakistan Foreign Secretary Riaz Khokhar conveyed the instructions to Aziz Ahmad Khan on Wednesday. The News reported quoting well-placed sources.

Aziz was called to Islamabad for consultations prior to the start of the summit.

It may be recalled that in the joint press statement (issued after the Saarc meet), both the countries had resolved to carry forward the peace process and hold a composite dialogue, which is slated to begin sometime in February.

The High Commissioner is

Pakistan launches drive against al-Qaeda

AFP, AP, Islamabad

Pakistan's army launched a major offensive against suspected terrorists in a mountainous region near the Afghanistan border believed to be used by al-Qaeda fugitives, the information minister and other officials said yesterday.

Pak troops backed by helicopter gunships yesterday launched a new operation to capture al-Qaeda suspects in a remote tribal district near the Afghan border.

However, Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed did not confirm whether any arrests have been made.

The operation to capture "foreign terrorists" started early morning west of Wana, the capital of South Waziristan tribal area,

military spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan told AFP.

"The operation is progressing," Sultan said five hours after the army went into action.

The number of troops involved in the operation and other details were not immediately available.

"We don't yet have details about casualties or arrests," he added.

South Waziristan is one of the main suspected hideouts for Osama bin Laden and other top al-Qaeda fugitives. Officials in the region have said American planes dropped leaflets in the area on Wednesday urging residents to cooperate with authorities and turn in any foreign terrorists.

It was at least the second major operation in South Waziristan in recent months.

In October last year Pakistani troops conducted a major operation in South Waziristan territory, killing eight al-Qaeda suspects and arresting 18. Two Pakistani soldiers were also killed in a gunbattle with the suspects.

Local officials said the operation was taking place at Kalu Shah, around 40km from the porous border with Afghanistan.

"Helicopters are hovering over the area and firing at targets," a local official said.

South Waziristan is located opposite the eastern Afghan province of Paktika and has long been a suspected sanctuary for al-Qaeda and resurgent Taliban fighters fleeing US-led forces in

Afghanistan.

Wana is around 330km south-west of the capital Islamabad.

US troops have frequently chased suspected Taliban attackers to the border, only to see them slip through the unmarked frontier into Pakistan's semi-autonomous tribal areas.

The target of that raid was apparently Said al-Kadr, an Egyptian-born Canadian citizen. Pakistani officials say he appears to have escaped, but his family has said he is missing and has accused the Pakistani government of hiding information about his fate.

Pakistan is a key US ally and has turned over more than 500 al-Qaida suspects, including alleged No. 3 Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, who was captured in March.

Thai troops roll out on night patrol in south

AFP, Pattani

"We're not scared or intimidated," says Pipatporn Siptamruattoh. "We're prepared for anything."

Fully clad in body-armour and with a pistol strapped to his thigh, the 28-year-old Thai police lieutenant joins around 100 troops in a convoy of Humvees and army trucks and heads out into the night.

These soldiers and military police are in a danger zone -- and on virtual war footing -- in their own backyard after the killings of four soldiers on Sunday and two police Monday in Thailand's deep south.

The column of troop transports rolled out of Bo Tong military camp after a "spiritual empowerment" ceremony to scour Pattani province, scene of the latest flare-ups, for an elusive enemy.

Pakistan willing to look beyond UN resolutions to resolve Kashmir row

PTI, Dubai

With India and Pakistan agreeing to hold a composite dialogue in February, Islamabad has said it is willing to look at options other than UN resolutions to settle the Kashmir problem but made it clear that it has no plans to "abandon Kashmir".

On Kashmir "we are willing to look at options other than the UN resolutions. We realise these are what give Pakistan's position legitimacy in Kashmir but the UN resolutions were made 50 years ago. Has it solved the Kashmir

issue?" Pakistan Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri said in an interview to Gulf News published yesterday.

He gave the interview on Wednesday, a day after India and Pakistan issued a joint statement in Islamabad announcing holding of composite dialogue on bilateral issues, including Jammu and Kashmir, after talks between Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and President Pervez Musharraf.

"There are other UN resolutions, Palestine is a case in point, which have not been honoured. We must explore the option of talks

with India," Kasuri said. However, he hastened to add that Pakistan would not abandon Kashmir.

"We have no plans to abandon Kashmir. Indeed, we have made sure it is part of the declaration (joint statement), that it is part of the composite dialogue," he said while urging opposition parties not to make political capital of the Kashmir issue.

Kasuri was reacting to the rising displeasure of hardline jihadi elements, rattled by the Pakistan government's promise not to allow itself to become a haven of terror.



PHOTO: AFP

Thai militaries sit on trucks while patrolling a military camp following a violent attack in Narathiwat province, southern of Thailand yesterday. Thailand clamped martial law on its troubled south following a deadly arms heist and arson attack which reignited security concerns in the majority Muslim provinces, where a separatist rebellion has simmered for years.

Malaysia helps US, UK probe Libyan nuke link

REUTERS, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian police are working with US and British intelligence services on an investigation into the supply of parts crucial to Libya's secret nuclear weapons programme, a government official said yesterday.

Centrifuge parts from Malaysia were found aboard a cargo ship bound for Libya last October, he said.

Centrifuges are used for enriching uranium for nuclear reactors or fissile material for bombs.

"I believe the police are investigating, and they are working with the CIA and MI6," said the Malaysian official, referring to US and British intelligence agencies.

Other countries would inevitably be implicated as the story unfolded, the official told Reuters.

He declined to divulge more details of the investigation into the sale of the equipment, which is available through middlemen on the black market.

Libya said last month it would abandon its weapons of mass destruction programs and would allow snap inspections of its atomic facilities.

Britain says Libya was close to making a nuclear bomb and US officials have described its program as "much further advanced than believed."

White House spokesman Scott McClellan said this week Libya had obtained its nuclear know-how from Pakistan -- the only country in the Islamic world with nuclear arms.



PHOTO: AFP

Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri (R) walks beside Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi before a bilateral meeting at Merdeka Palace in Jakarta yesterday. Indonesia and Malaysia agreed to step up efforts to fight increasing sea piracy and smuggling yesterday.

China asks Taiwan to 'stop playing with fire'

AFP, Beijing

China cranked up the pressure on Taiwan's President Chen Shui-bian yesterday, demanding he "stop playing with fire" by pushing for independence and warning the peace and stability of the region were at stake.

"Taipei's radical push towards independence has put cross-Straits relations in the crucible," Wang Zaixi, vice minister of the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council, was quoted as saying in the China Daily's lead page one story.

"Peace and stability across the Taiwan Straits will be determined by what happens in the next three months," he said, warning Chen to "stop playing with fire".

Chen has signed a controversial bill which allows referendums to take place and plans to hold the island's first ever referendum alongside presidential polls on March 20, demanding Beijing remove hundreds of ballistic missiles targeting the island.

Taipei has said repeatedly the referendum has nothing to do with independence and is a symbol of Taiwan's full-fledged democracy, but Beijing is wary and US President George W. Bush has publicly rebuked the plan.

"Taiwan leader Chen Shui-bian's stepped-up efforts towards independence pose a great threat," Wang was cited as saying.

"They should be closely watched. If Chen will recklessly take more risky pro-independence moves ..., it will trigger tension and even a clash in bilateral ties."

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao has vowed Beijing will pay any price to safeguard the "unity of the motherland", but Wang stopped short of threatening force.

Instead, he reiterated Beijing's long-standing policy that the mainland will make unremitting efforts to peacefully settle the Taiwan question but "will never allow anybody to split Taiwan from China in any way."

Aside from the front-page story, the English language broadsheet devoted a comment piece and an entire inside page to articles attacking Chen.

In the comment piece, a senior researcher at the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences, a research institute under the umbrella of China's armed forces, called Chen an irresponsible, dangerous liar.

"All signs point to Chen Shui-bian as one who does not care for his reputation," said researcher Luo Yuan of the president who pledged when he came to power in 2000 not to push for independence or hold a referendum on independence.

"His reneging on his erstwhile pledge, under the pretence of mainland military threat', is highly illogical.