

China denies bird flu cover-up

AFP, Beijing

China denied yesterday it was covering up the extent of its bird flu outbreak, insisting it was under control and there had been no reports of humans contracting the disease.

In its first press conference since bird flu was reported in the world's most populous country on January 27, leading health and agriculture officials parried a barrage of questions on a possible cover-up.

Some media and medical experts, remembering the Chinese government's initial cover-up of the SARS crisis last year, have suggested the epidemic could be more widespread than acknowledged and that human cases were inevitable.

As with SARS, many foreign media have been barred from visiting affected areas. Some journalists have even been detained and forced to sign a confession that

they were reporting secretly before they could be freed.

Vice health minister Wang Longde however refuted allegations of human infections.

"There is no human patient in China," he said, attributing this to China's improved surveillance system.

"Whether humans are infected or not is decided by many factors. For instance, there have been epidemics in Japan and South Korea but there were no human patients," he said.

So far, 1,418 people in close contact with poultry have been examined by doctors and no human infection has been found.

"Since the SARS outbreak, the ministry of health has strengthened its surveillance system. If there is a suspected human case, health authorities even at the county level will report it to the ministry of health," he said.

4 Indian troops killed in Kashmir attack

AFP, Kashmir

Four Indian soldiers were killed and seven injured by a landmine in Kashmir Thursday in the first major attack by Islamic rebels since separatists held breakthrough talks with the Indian government last month, the army said.

The troops, who belonged to the army's counter-insurgency wing, the Rashtriya Rifles, were travelling through the wooded Salar area of central Anantnag district when their vehicle ran over the mine, an army spokesman said.

Soldiers were rushed in and sealed off the area. Kashmir's largest rebel group Hizbul Mujahedin, which wants Indian Kashmir to join Pakistan, claimed responsibility for the blast in a telephone call to local media.

It was the deadliest attack in the scenic Himalayan territory since five separatists met Indian Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani on January 22 and jointly called for an end to 15 years of bloodshed in the Muslim-majority province.

The separatists, including Kashmir's chief Muslim cleric Umar Farooq, were also received in New Delhi by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

Muslim militants rejected the appeal to stop the violence, deriding the separatists who travelled to the Indian capital as "paid agents".

In separate violence overnight, suspected rebels shot dead two Muslim civilians in Anantnag and in the southern Doda district, police said. The motives behind the killings were not immediately known.

A third civilian was killed in the

crossfire between troops and militants in the northern Kupwara district, a police spokesman said.

The unrest comes ahead of February 16-18 talks in Islamabad between India and Pakistan to discuss bilateral disputes including Kashmir, which has triggered two fully-fledged wars between them since independence in 1947.

The nuclear-capable neighbours nearly came to another war in 2002 but launched a drive last year to repair ties, and on November 26 entered an historic border ceasefire in Kashmir.

Both Indian security forces and rebels said the border truce, which silenced nearly daily skirmishes between the rival militaries, would not affect operations inside Indian-administered Kashmir.



PHOTO: AFP
An Indian Border Security Force (BSF) personnel stands guard in Srinagar yesterday. Four Indian soldiers were killed and seven injured by a landmine in Kashmir in the first major attack by suspected Islamic rebels since separatists held breakthrough talks with the Indian government last month, the army said.

Nuke leak may cost Pakistan billions

ANI, Islamabad

The three billion dollar US economic and military package promised by President George W Bush in June 2003 to President Pervez Musharraf may be in jeopardy because of Wednesday's disclosures by Dr A Q Khan that he had helped North Korea, Iran and Libya in their nuclear programmes.

"The US laws provide automatic sanctions against a country, indulging in nuclear proliferation," the Dawn quoted an official as saying during a background briefing.

But he also said that before reaching to any conclusion, the Bush Administration was likely to consider the matter retrospectively because the pilferage had stopped after the setting up of an effective nuclear command and control mechanism.

He said that Dr Khan had categorically denied that Pakistan's

missile programme was in any way the result of an exchange of technology with Pyongyang.

Khan in his signed statement, had accepted supplying old and discarded centrifuge and enrichment machines together with sets of drawings, sketches, technical data and depleted Hexafluoride (UF6) gas to North Korea.

Dr Khan, the official said, had also admitted supplying centrifuge and enrichment equipment along with a set of drawings to Iran under pressure from the late General Imtiaz, a former advisor to Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on defence, between December 1988 and August 1990.

Official said the proliferation started in 1989-91 because of what he termed the flawed security arrangement.

Between 1997 and 1999, orders were placed for the pro-

duction of components for centrifuge machines while during 1998-2000, technical assistance was provided to North Korea.

Between 1999-2001, intelligence officials had found nothing after they raided a North Korea-bound chartered aircraft.

However, the then chief of the general staff and the director-general of the Inter-Services Intelligence alerted Dr A Q Khan. It was then decided by authorities not to grant further extension to Dr Khan.

After this, the official said, Dr Khan started covering up his tracks and even fired one Dr Zubair from his services.

The official said in all eleven scientists and security personnel of the KRL had been called for "debriefing" but no third-degree method was used to pressurise them.

Cargo plane crash shuts Lanka airport for hours

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's only international airport reopened Thursday after being closed for nearly 10 hours following the crash-landing of a cargo plane that damaged runway lights, an airport official said.

The seven-member crew of the IL-18 aircraft escaped unharmed when it crash-landed at around 10:30 pm Wednesday (1630 GMT), and there were no injuries on the ground, officials said.

But the Bandaranaike International airport near the capital was shut for repairs to 15 runway lights and the clearing of the plane, which badly damaged its left engines and fuselage.

"The airport is now open and all services are back to normal," the official said.

At least 38 flights were affected and some of them were diverted to airports in neighbouring India and the Maldives.

Hundreds of stranded passengers were put up at hotels overnight after their flights were cancelled.

The crashed aircraft, operated by Expo Aviation of Sri Lanka and arriving from Dubai, was towed to the end of the runway.

Airport authorities imposed a blanket ban on press photographers entering the high security area.

Wednesday's accident was the first major shutdown of the airport since Tamil Tiger rebels infiltrated tight security in July 2001 and destroyed four passenger planes and two damaged two others -- all belonging to national carrier SriLankan Airlines.

Malaysian PM's son in nuclear row

BBC ONLINE

The probe could be embarrassing for Malaysia's Prime Minister

A firm controlled by the son of Malaysia's prime minister is being investigated for allegedly supplying Libya's nuclear weapons programme.

Police say foreign intelligence warned them that Malaysian centrifuge parts were on a Libyan-bound ship last year.

The parts were reportedly in boxes with the name Scope, a subsidiary of Scomi Group controlled by Kamaluddin Abdullah, son of PM Abdullah Badawi.

Scomi said it had won a contract to ship parts to a customer in Dubai.

The Malaysian Government has denied that the country in any way contributed to the spread of nuclear technology.

"Investigations so far showed that not one company in Malaysia has the ability to manufacture a complete centrifuge unit," Malaysia's Inspector General of Police Mohammad Bakri Omar said in a statement.

"Because this requires technological capability and high expertise in the field of nuclear weapons," Mr Bakri said.

Analysts say the news of Scomi's involvement in the probe could be embarrassing to Mr Badawi, who was only appointed prime minister last October.

Mr Bakri said the tip-off was received by British and US intelligence services in early November.

He said the CIA and MI6 claimed the parts had been found a month earlier on board a ship heading to Libya during a stopover in Italy.

"The components were said to have been placed in wooden boxes labelled Scomi Precision Engineering Sdn Bhd (Scope). Scope is a subsidiary of Scomi Group Bhd," said a police statement.

Scomi - a medium-sized oil and gas company - said Scope had been awarded a contract to provide tooling services to a Dubai-based firm.

Combat aircraft, new missiles Indian priorities: Fernandes

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes has listed an effective air defence system as his highest priority and says New Delhi is seeking permission from ally Russia to deal directly with manufacturers, a report said yesterday. Fernandes, in an interview with Defence News weekly military magazine on the sidelines of a global armament fair here, also said that New Delhi would replace its ageing attack missiles mostly through imports.

"Some of the top-priority acquisitions will be the medium multi-role combat aircraft, air defence systems, (nuclear) command and control, communications ... advanced weapons for aircraft,

advanced warning and control systems and force-multipliers," he said.

The US armaments industry has offered to sell high-technology Patriot missiles to India on the back of a promise by US President George W. Bush last month to forge closer links with India over nuclear regulation, safety and missile defence.

French electronics firm Thales on Thursday unveiled details of plans to transfer critical technology to India for the construction of 19 low-level air defence radar systems within the next three years.

Fernandes said India was negotiating with its main arms supplier Russia to allow it to deal directly with

arms-makers to speed up the sale of spare parts for the country's technology-starved military.

"We are trying to meet the spare parts requirement through indigenisation. Besides, we are contacting the equipment manufacturers, who may be located in Commonwealth of Independent States countries," the defence minister said.

"We are also trying to impress upon the Russians to permit us to directly deal with the manufacturers."

Russia accounts for 70 percent of Indian armament sales, but inordinate delays in supplying critical components especially for the airforce has often led to friction between the two sides.

Congressman in India fired for hosting cabaret

PTI, Bangalore

A shocked and angered Congress leadership on Wednesday stripped Mandya District Unit Party President L R Shivaram Gowda of the post, for organising a cabaret to keep the audience engaged at a public meeting on Monday.

The incident took place in Devalapur village, in Nagamangala taluk of Mandya district. A simply clad woman danced to Kannada film hits to entertain the restless audience as the meeting was delayed. Even as BJP was quick to grab the opportunity and organised a demonstration in Bangalore on Wednesday, the show caused a major embarrassment to the Congress. Mandya happens to be the home district of Chief Minister S M Krishna.

The state Congress leadership was helpless in initiating any action immediately against Gowda as only the AICC is authorised to do so in cases pertaining to district presidents. After getting the green signal from the high command, KPCC President B Janardhana Pojary issued a statement to announce Gowda's removal.

Meanwhile, Textiles Minister H M Revanna, who addressed the Devalapur meeting condemning the incident said: "When I went it must have been either before or after the dance performance. I was totally unaware of it."

3 Tibetan monks imprisoned for 12 years

AFP, Beijing

China has sentenced three Tibetan monks to 12 years in prison for painting a Tibetan flag and possessing photographs of the exiled spiritual leader Dalai Lama, rights groups said on Thursday.

The three monks are from the Khangmar monastery in Kakhog county or Hongyuan county in Chinese in the Ngaba prefecture of southwest China's Sichuan province, which borders Tibet.

A report, commissioned by the Australia Tibet Council, Free Tibet Campaign and the International Campaign for Tibet, identified the monks as Choedar Dargye, Gedun Thogphel and Jampa Choephel.

Two other Khangmar monks, Migyur Gyatso and Jamyang Oezer, are awaiting sentencing. Jamyang Oezer is reportedly ill and in hospital, the report said.

Public security officials in Hongyuan county refused to comment. Court officials could not immediately be reached.

The sentenced monks apparently held responsible positions at the monastery.

Photographs obtained by the London-based Tibet Information Network show four of the Khangmar monks in a room with pictures of the Dalai Lama on the wall.

Many Tibetans still display

pictures of the Dalai Lama in private, particularly in the Tibetan areas outside the Tibet Autonomous Region, formerly known as Amdo and Kham and now incorporated into the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan and Gansu, the report said.

The US State Department stated in its annual Report on International Religious Freedom released late last year that possession of pictures of the Dalai Lama appears to be on the rise, the rights groups said.

According to the same US State Department report, Chinese government officials maintain that possessing or displaying pictures of the Dalai Lama is not illegal.

However, Chinese officials distinguish between political and religious application of the exile leaders photograph.

Officials maintain that while it is acceptable for an individual to possess a photo of the Dalai Lama for the purpose of worshipping him as a religious figure, it is not acceptable if the photo is being used "to advocate separatism," the report said.

China occupied Tibet in 1951. The Dalai Lama has lived in India since fleeing the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, in 1959 with thousands of supporters after an abortive revolt against Chinese rule.

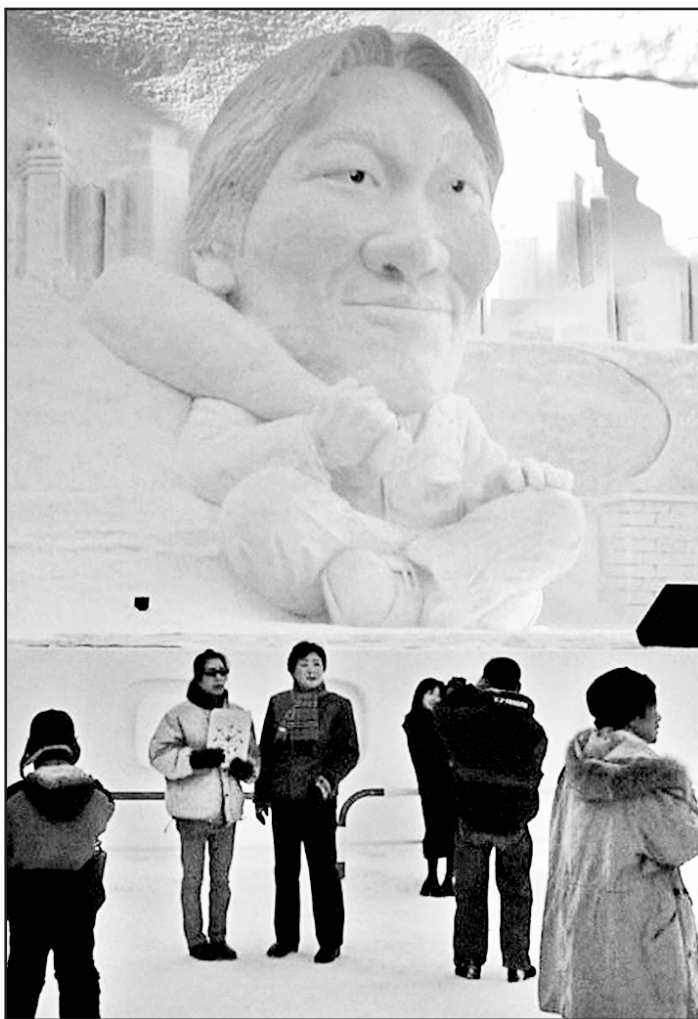


PHOTO: AFP
Visitors have their photo taken in front of a large snow sculpture of New York Yankees' slugger Hideki Matsui at the 55th annual snow festival in Sapporo, Japan's northern island of Hokkaido yesterday. Some 300 ice and snow sculptures are displayed at the winter festival which expect two million visitors during the week long event.

Nepal's king flies to Maoist-dominated south

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's King Gyanendra yesterday flew by helicopter to the impoverished kingdom's Maoist rebel-dominated far south to assess the security situation, government officials said.

Gyanendra was accompanied by his wife, Queen Komal, and top security officials on the visit, which is expected to last more than a week.

The royal couple Sunday will attend a civic reception in Nepalgunj, where Gyanendra may make a statement regarding renewal of the peace process with the rebels, observers said.

He may also make a bid to resolve differences with political opposition parties that have been demanding a return to elected rule.

"The civic reception is going to be an important event from all aspects, including security issues," said Ratna Kamal Baidya, a political science professor at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu.

Gyanendra has been under fire from opposition parties for dismissing the elected government in 2002 and installing a staunch loyalist, Surya Bahadur Thapa, as prime minister.

Political observers say attendance at the reception will be a sign of the support enjoyed by the king in an area where the rebels have a strong base.