

N Korea regime mounts disaster cover-up

AFP, Seoul

Isolated North Korea threw its customary blanket of silence yesterday over an explosion on a rail line in a northern city that may have killed or injured thousands of people.

The opaque Stalinist regime that holds a monopoly on power and views freedom of information as a potential threat to its survival responded to the blast in the northern city of Ryongchon in typically secretive fashion.

Phone links to the outside world were cut, neighbouring countries were starved of information, and a tight news blackout was imposed, according to officials and media reports.

North Korea has yet to break its silence on the explosion which

ripped through the railway station at Ryongchon in the northwest of the country, 20km south of the border with China.

News reports in South Korea, citing sources over the Chinese border, said phone links, as well as train services from China to Ryongchon, were cut off following the disaster, in which Red Cross officials said at least 54 people were killed and over 1,200 injured.

South Korea's government complained of "difficulties confirming details" and Jeong Se-Hyun, the Unification Minister who handles relations with North Korea, said he had received no official word from Pyongyang concerning the blast.

The head of South Korea's National Red Cross is currently in Pyongyang and had offered aid to the

North Koreans, but has received no information concerning the disaster.

Offers of humanitarian aid from South Korea, Australia and the United States were met with silence.

International aid agencies and diplomats based in Pyongyang have also been kept in the dark.

A correspondent for Russia's ITAR-TASS, one of the few journalists from an outside the country based in Pyongyang, said that North Korean officials refused to comment on the disaster and North Korea's media was mute.

The only direct confirmation has come from a railway official on duty at Pyongyang station who said there had been an accident near the border with China, ITAR-TASS reported.

"It is a rule for the North Korean

propaganda mill not to talk about any accidents," said a North Korean defector based here who helps run a radio station that broadcasts information into North Korea.

"I've never found out a thing about accidents or disasters through North Korea's media," he said.

Another defector, Jong Yong-Sun, 68, said North Koreans would clam up and refuse to talk about any negative events, fearing the ubiquitous public security agents.

Though North Korea has repeatedly said it wants to open up its economy to the outside world, the leadership's grip on political power and control of information remains tight.

Suspected Sars case in China rings alarm bells for Asia

AFP, Penang

The possible reemergence of Sars in China has rung alarm bells across Asia but health officials meeting here said yesterday they were confident the deadly disease would be contained.

China's Vice Minister of Health Zhu Qingsheng briefed his colleagues from the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) about a new suspected case and pledged to provide timely information.

"We will cooperate with Asian countries. We will be transparent in all our cases. We will be honest," he told reporters.

Takashi Minagawa, councillor with Japan's ministry of health, labour and welfare, said there was no need for the public to panic.



Indian paramilitary troopers take up positions outside the Congress Party headquarters in Srinagar yesterday following a suicide attack. At least three persons were injured in a suicide attack on the office of Congress party headquarters in Srinagar.

Indian Elections

Floods make voting uncertain in 2 Assam constituencies

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, Guwahati

Elections in two constituencies of Silchar and Karimganj in Barak Valley in southern Assam is uncertain because of the flood situation and extensive damage caused to polling stations in many parts of the valley by storm and heavy rains.

Elections in these two constituencies, which cover the three districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi in the valley, is scheduled for April 26, along with six other constituencies in Assam going for polls in the second phase.

Incessant rains for over a week since 13 April raised the water levels of Barak river and its tributaries in the valley, inundating vast areas and creating apprehensions.

It prompted all major political parties in the state, barring the ruling Congress, to demand rescheduling of polls in the two constituencies in Barak valley. The parties believe that, even if the polls are held, the turnout will be very low, as most of the roads in rural areas have been left devastated by flood water.

Rebels attack Cong office in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Suspected rebels launched a grenade attack against the local headquarters of India's main opposition party yesterday as election-linked violence continued in troubled Kashmir, police said.

The attack on the offices in downtown Srinagar, the state's summer capital, was followed by two more blasts and then a rattle of automatic gunfire, witnesses said.

Zee Television said 10 party workers were trapped in the building but police could not immediately confirm the report.

Security forces sealed off the busy Maulana Azad Road in central Srinagar where the offices are situated.

Police said at least one suicide attacker had entered the building, adding that senior Congress leaders were not present when the attack took place.

Kashmir police chief Gopal Sharma said "one or two" security forces members were hurt in the attack.

"There was firing and a grenade attack, one or two securitymen are injured," Sharma told Zee, adding that soldiers fired into the air to scare away the attacker or attackers.

"The area has been secured," he said, adding that the raid was aimed at disrupting elections here on Monday.

Other officials said two civilians were also injured.

Srinagar residents go to the polls on Monday to elect a candidate to represent their constituency in the staggered parliamentary elections that ends May 10.

The Congress party is a partner of the regional People's Democratic Party (PDP) which governs Indian-administered Kashmir.

On Thursday, two people were killed and six injured in two separate bomb attacks by militants in Srinagar city.

Separatist rebels have threatened Kashmiris with "unspecified consequences" if they participate in the elections that are being staggered to allow security forces and officials to move around the country.

Four people were killed and 25 wounded by rebels in voting in two constituencies in Kashmir Tuesday when the elections began.

A senior police officer said extra troops were being shifted to Srinagar and Budgam districts for Monday's polling.

Tens of thousands of people have died in the Himalayan region since the insurgency against Indian rule erupted in 1989.



Families flee with their belongings as a huge fire rages through a slum area of Bangkok yesterday. The fire engulfed hundreds of wooden houses in the Tungmahamek slum area, home to about 7,000 people, just behind Thailand's Immigration Department, and threatened to spread beyond the congested region as strong winds fanned the flames.

Relatives rush to North Korean crash site

AFP, Seoul

Residents of Ryongchon, where a train collision wreaked carnage, were living in tents and coping as best they could as panicky relatives rushed over the border from China to help.

"As soon as the explosion happened a lot of homes collapsed. A lot of the people are using canvas or plastic to shield themselves from the weather," Li Kaisheng, who has spoken with family in the devastated town, told AFP.

"Many people are living outside in tents. A lot of windows have been shattered and roofs blown off."

The Red Cross, which has visited the scene of the accident 20km from the Dandong border, said at least 54 people died and 1,249 were wounded when two trains collided.

Many residents of this industrial city, separated from North Korea by a railroad bridge over the Yalu River, said they had spoken to relatives and had gone to North Korea to find out if they were still alive.

They burst into tears when they heard news of the disaster.

"They received phone calls from relatives on the day of the accident," said a shopkeeper in a Korean neighbourhood close to the border post.

"They started crying. A lot of them have gone over to the other side to see their relatives."

Li, whose nephew went to

Ryongchon Thursday, said the explosion happened in a residential area and he had been told the hospitals were struggling to cope with the flood of wounded.

"They are not well equipped," he said. "Only the lightly injured were taken to hospital in Ryongchon. The people seriously hurt were taken about 15 kilometers to Sinuiju city," close to the Dandong border.

"I heard that all the hospitals there are full of patients," he said.

This would explain why hospitals in Dandong had received no patients despite authorities telling them to be ready to accept the injured.

"We got a call from the Dandong health department last night telling us an accident had happened and to be prepared to assist them," Zhang Fengjing, director of the hospital affairs department at the No 1 hospital, told AFP.

"But we haven't received any of the patients. None of the hospitals in Dandong have received any patients."

Nurses in the hospital said they had stayed up throughout the night waiting for the wounded to arrive.

"Several nurses and doctors were on duty. We stayed up all night waiting for them but they never came," said Sun Chengying, the nursing supervisor.

al-Qaeda harbourers to surrender in return for Pak amnesty

AFP, Wana

Five rebel Pakistani tribesmen protecting hundreds of al-Qaeda fighters will surrender in a ceremony near the Afghan border after striking an amnesty deal with the government, officials said yesterday.

The ceremony will be held today instead of Friday as originally planned because religious party lawmakers who brokered the surrender deal will be busy delivering sermons, Islamist MP Maulana Merajuddin told AFP.

Led by Nek Mohammad, a former Taliban commander from the defiant Yargukhel sub-tribe, the five have been leading the fierce resistance to Pakistani army efforts in the frontier tribal region to kill, capture or expel up to 400 mainly Central Asian al-Qaeda fighters.

Under threat of a repeat of last month's military operation in South Waziristan tribal area to smash what

US commanders have described as a major al-Qaeda sanctuary, the rebel tribesmen have agreed to surrender in exchange for amnesty.

"Mohammad and his associates will not be arrested as they have been given amnesty under the agreement," a local official who could not be named told AFP.

"According to the agreement Mohammad and his associates will not indulge in any militant activities and they will not launch attacks in Afghanistan."

Merajuddin and Maulana Abdul Malik, both Islamist MPs from the tribal region, brokered the deal.

"By the grace of Allah (God) the matter has been resolved," Malik told AFP.

South Waziristan administrator Rehmatullah Wazir said the surrender ceremony would be held at 10:00 am (0500 GMT) Saturday in the town of Shakai, 25km north of the area's main town Wana.

US contractor fired for military coffin photo

REUTERS, Washington

A US contractor and her husband have been fired after her photograph of 20 flag-draped coffins of American troops going home from Iraq was published in violation of military rules.

"I lost my job and they let my husband go as well," Tami Silicio, who loaded US military cargo at Kuwait International Airport for a US company, told Reuters in an e-mail response to questions.

The Pentagon tightly restricts publication of photographs of coffins with the remains of US troops and has forbidden journalists from taking pictures at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, the first stop for the bodies of troops being sent home.

John Molino, a deputy undersecretary of defense who oversees the policy, told reporters the Pentagon was not involved in the decision to fire Silicio, but refused to say whether she should be rehired.

Israeli troops kills 3 Fatah members

REUTERS, Qalqilya

Israeli troops shot dead three members of Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement yesterday in a surge of violence that has claimed 25 Palestinian lives since Israel assassinated a Hamas leader last week.

The latest sweep for militants in the West Bank town of Qalqilya came amid rising tensions over Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to uproot Gaza settlements while tightening Israel's grip on much of the West Bank -- a tradeoff Palestinians have rejected.

A new Israeli newspaper poll reinforced signs of eroding support for Sharon's plan within his right-wing Likud party, which will hold a May 2 referendum on the issue. The survey showed 49 percent in favor of the proposal and 39.5 against it.

Mindful of opposition within the Likud's pro-settler ranks, Sharon signaled on Thursday that he would likely press ahead with his proposal

even if his own party rejected it.

The latest series of army raids and sweeps could help shore up support for Sharon, who has tried to calm Israeli fears that a Gaza withdrawal might encourage stepped-up attacks by militants claiming it as a victory.

Witnesses said Israeli commandos in an unmarked car opened fire on four men in Qalqilya killing three and wounding the fourth, identified as the local leader of al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades.

The army said soldiers fired after the men ignored orders to halt and tried to flee, but witnesses described it as an ambush.

A senior official of al-Aqsa, a militant faction of the Palestinian president's Fatah movement, said one of the dead belonged to the armed group but the other two were political activists.

An Israeli army spokesman said the men were all militants on Israel's wanted list.

'Civil liberties trampled in name of nat'l security'

THE NATION/ ANN, Bangkok

Civil liberties in many countries have been significantly undermined in the name of national security after the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, according to a World Economic Forum report.

Global Governance Initiative, a major report written by over 40 WEF experts and released on Wednesday, evaluated the world community's effort to tackle poverty, war, ignorance and disease.

It found that little was achieved last year.

"Governments, international organisations, business and civil society are engaging in only about one-third of the effort necessary to realise the United Nations Millennium Declaration Goals," it said.

The report found that peace and security proved elusive, as the world community failed to find a way to act collectively with regard to the US-led war in Iraq.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict remained dangerously unresolved and international terrorist networks and nuclear proliferation continue to pose a severe global threat.

The World Trade Organisation negotiations in Mexico were perceived to be the "biggest failure" of the year.

"The failure to liberalise trade in agricultural commodities at Cancun continued the discrimination against poor farmers' market access," the report said.

One out of every six people in the developing world still did not receive enough food and the numbers of hungry people is likely to increase in the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

As for education, at least 96 countries are still far from the target of universal primary education by 2015, while 104 million children are not even in primary school.



Undated picture showing US military personnel offloading coffins of US soldiers killed in Iraq at Dover Air Base in Delaware. A total of 360 photos taken by the Air Force at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, where many of the caskets have been repatriated, was released on April 14 to Internet site www.thememoryhole.org by the Pentagon after the site requested them under the Freedom of Information Act.