

Mystery illness shuts Australian airport terminal, 50 infected

AFP, Melbourne

One of Australia's main airport terminals was shut down for eight hours yesterday as emergency crews hunted in vain for the cause of a mysterious illness which struck down nearly 60 staff and passengers in the building, officials said.

Paramedics, firefighters and hazardous materials crews in full protective clothing rushed to Melbourne airport early Monday after staff in a domestic terminal began suffering nausea and vomiting, dizziness, headaches and shortness of breath.

Up to 2,000 staff, passengers and their friends were evacuated and the terminal shut down around 10:00 am while emergency crews tested air conditioning units and other facilities in an unsuccessful search for what was causing the illness.

Ambulance service spokesman James Howe said 47 people were taken to hospital and another 10 were treated at the scene for the symptoms.



PHOTO: AFP

A Kashmiri man walks in a street of Srinagar covered by snow yesterday. Heavy snowfall since February 19 killed 105 people in Kashmir and left scores of others missing.

Record snowfall halts life in Kashmir

105 dead, scores missing

AFP, Srinagar

At least 105 people were killed at the weekend with scores missing in Indian Kashmir after the heaviest snowfall in two decades caused avalanches and brought the region to a near-halt, officials said yesterday.

The death toll from avalanches in Indian Kashmir since Saturday rose to 105 after another 25 bodies were recovered Monday from four villages in southern Anantnag district, officials said.

A police spokesman in the summer capital Srinagar said the bodies were recovered in the villages of Waltingo, Kund, Kapran and Nigeennard.

"It took rescue teams some eight hours to reach the affected villages," he said.

Earlier, police had said 31 bodies were found Monday in Verinag and four in Poonch districts, in the rugged south of the Himalayan territory. Four more bodies were also recovered Monday in other areas.

As of Sunday night, 41 bodies had been recovered from various parts of the region.

Scores of people are missing after the heaviest snowfall in two decades caused the avalanches and brought the region to a near-halt, the officials said.

Army rescue and medical teams were searching for survivors.

"The death toll could be higher as

we are losing hope for the missing," a police officer said.

A 65-year-old woman was rescued Monday two days after an avalanche buried her house in southern Poonch district.

Hanifa Begum was under the snow for 50 hours after the avalanche hit on Saturday, the army said in a statement, adding she was suffering from frost bite.

The weekend deaths take the toll in two weeks of heavy snow to 86, including 19 soldiers, and 50 people missing.

Police said more than 1,000 houses had been damaged by the snow so far.

India tests medium range missile

AFP, Bhubaneswar

India successfully test-fired a medium range surface-to-air missile yesterday from a range on an island off the coast of the eastern state of Orissa, defence sources said.

The homegrown missile named Akash – sky in Hindi – was fired from a mobile launcher Monday afternoon at the Chandipur-on-Sea testing site, 200km northeast of Bhubaneswar, Orissa's state capital.

It successfully hit a pilotless target aircraft, a defence source said.

The 700-kilogram (1,540-pound) Akash can carry a 70 kilogram warhead and is designed to travel 27km.

On November 30, 2004, the same missile was tested with a live warhead.

Akash is one of five missiles being developed by India's state-run Defence Research and Development Organisation.

Nuclear-armed rivals India and Pakistan frequently test-fire missiles they are developing for military purposes.

9 killed in Iraq violence

Militants set free Indonesian journalists

AFP, Baquba

Nine Iraqis have died in a series of attacks in Iraq since Sunday evening, while a journalist, her son, and three men working for the US military have been kidnapped.

Iraqi militants have freed two Indonesian journalists taken hostage last week in a notoriously dangerous part of Iraq, Sunni Muslim authorities and Indonesian official said yesterday.

The two television reporters were freed in Ramadi, a rebel hotspot west of the capital in the so-called Sunni triangle, and were heading straight back to Jordan without passing through Baghdad, the sources said.

"The two Indonesians have been freed and will be transferred to the headquarters of the committee in Baghdad, where they will have the choice of going to their embassy or leaving Iraq," said a member of the Committee of Muslim Scholars, the country's leading Sunni organisation.

An Iraqi truck driver was killed overnight in an attack northeast of Baghdad on his convoy carrying equipment for the Iraqi army, police said. Two other drivers were missing.

Nepali Maoists open fire on convoy

Food prices soar as blockade bites

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepalese Maoist rebels raked a convoy of vehicles with gunfire, killing a bus driver and injuring nine passengers in the first violence linked to the transport blockade they called to protest at the king's power grab, the army said yesterday.

The attack occurred late Sunday in Dhading district, 55km west of Kathmandu.

The rebels had fired on army vehicles escorting the bus and had hit the bus by mistake, an army official said.

"The rebels began shooting at the moving vehicles on the highway but the bus was hit accidentally," the official said.

The Maoists have said the blockade which began February 13 will be maintained until King Gyanendra reverses his February 1 seizure of power and declaration of emergency rule.

The blockade has reduced traffic to a trickle in the Himalayan state. Until the weekend it had been imposed through threat of retribution rather than through roadblocks or other action.

But on Saturday the rebels began blocking sections of highways linking the Kathmandu Valley to Nepal's main trading partner India as well as to the countryside, which

is largely under Maoist control, a transport official said.

The rebels piled boulders and trees on the roads but security forces cleared them and allowed vehicles to pass through, the official said.

Also Saturday the Maoists toppled electricity pylons in Dhading district, plunging some two dozen villages into darkness.

India, Britain and the United States, the main military aid providers for Nepal's ill-equipped army, have called on the king quickly to restore democracy.

Shopkeepers said yesterday that prices have continued to soar as a result of the blockade, with most vegetables costing more than double what they were a week ago.

Officials and residents of Kathmandu said the action was impeding food supplies and prices were soaring even though the government has invoked an anti-hoarding law.

They said the price of tomatoes rose to 36 rupees (51 US cents) a kilogram from 12 rupees before the strike.

"Prices of peas, onions, tomatoes, cucumbers and chillies have continued to rise," said Arjun Prasad Aryal, deputy director of the Kalimati Fruits and Vegetables Market Committee.



PHOTO: AFP

Former US Presidents George H. Bush (R) and Bill Clinton (C) smile as they look at a young Sri Lankan tsunami survivor's art work representing the tsunami at a housing project run by USAID in the village of Polathumodara, some 160km south-east of Colombo yesterday.

US SENATOR SAYS Half of Russia nuke materials 'missing'

AFP, Washington

Half of Russian nuclear material is not accounted for and may have found its way into the hands of plotters against the United States, a US senator with access to classified intelligence charged Sunday.

John Rockefeller, vice chairman of the Senate intelligence committee, said loose Russian radioactive materials and possibly other components of nuclear weapons made him wonder whether Russia was a greater proliferation threat than North Korea, which has publicly claimed to have a nuclear weapons arsenal.

Members of the committee received last week a detailed classified briefing from Central Intelligence Agency officials on security threats the United States faces.

"In the sense that half of the nuclear materials, pieces and parts of it, are unaccounted for by the Russians – and a lot of them, these places are in rural areas – I think you can ... have a real debate as to which is more threatening to the world right now," said the Democratic senator, appearing on the "Fox News Sunday" television programme.

The warning came as US President George W. Bush arrived in Europe as part of a fence-mending visit aimed at smoothing over disagreements with allies on the Iraq war

and strengthening transatlantic security cooperation, including in nuclear non-proliferation.

Bush is scheduled to discuss this and other issues with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, when the two meet in the Slovakian capital of Bratislava on Thursday.

Rockefeller questioned Russia's ability to guard its nuclear arsenal due to widespread corruption in the country.

He insisted that "a lot of those lost nuclear weapons can be out circulating in the terrorist community" and president Putin "ought to be very worried" that these weapons or materials could end up in the hands of Chechen separatists.

The CIA, which monitors proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, declined to comment on the senator's remarks.

Russia has thousands of nuclear warheads and dozens on nuclear production and research facilities handling fissile substances. It was not immediately clear which materials the senator referred to. Calls to his office with requests for clarification remained unanswered on Sunday.

During a Senate hearing last week, Rockefeller read from a yet-to-be publicly released report by the National Intelligence Council, a CIA think tank that analyzed security arrangements at Russian nuclear sites.

MYANMAR SAYS Referendum on constitution to include all

AFP, Manila

Myanmar Prime Minister Soe Win said yesterday that a convention which is drafting a new constitution for his military-ruled country includes "all strata of society" despite a boycott by the opposition party.

The Philippines for its part said it believes in "constructive engagement" with Myanmar, a fellow member of the 10-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean).

At a speech before a lunch meeting with Philippine President Gloria Arroyo, Soe Win said a "road map for democratization" was being implemented to transform the country into a "disciplined democratic nation."

"The national convention in which all the nationalities in the country and all strata of society are represented resumed four days ago," Soe Win said.

Israeli cabinet okays Gaza pullout plan

500 Palestinian prisoners freed

AP, Jerusalem

Israel freed 500 Palestinian prisoners in a good-will gesture yesterday, a day after the government gave final approval to a pullout from Gaza and a revised route of the West Bank separation barrier that would encompass at least 6 percent of land claimed by the Palestinians for a future state.

With the historic Cabinet vote, Israel began charting its final borders, bypassing negotiations and angering the Palestinians. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said the decision to leave Gaza and four settlements in the northern West Bank was the hardest he ever made but would ensure a better future for Israel.

Sharon signed an order saying Israeli civilians would have to leave

the areas slated for evacuation by July 20. Those remaining would be removed by force over a period of two months. Settler leaders have pledged not to leave voluntarily, and security officials are bracing for violent confrontations.

In the West Bank, Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas won the backing of his Fatah movement for a new 24-member Cabinet after a stormy debate, clearing the way for approval of the new ministers by parliament later Monday.

The release of Palestinian prisoners was one of the gestures Sharon agreed to at his summit with Abbas earlier this month in Egypt. Convoys of buses carrying shackled inmates left Israel's desert prison camp of Ketziot around dawn Monday. Those freed had not been involved in attacks on Israelis

Israel has promised to release 400 more prisoners within the next three months. A joint Israeli-Palestinian ministerial committee will decide which prisoners will be released in the second round.

With Sunday's Cabinet vote, an Israeli government agreed for the first time since capturing the West Bank and Gaza in the 1967 Middle East war to dismantle some of the dozens of Jewish settlements it has built there.

However, in approving the route of the West Bank barrier, Israel acted unilaterally on what was to be a key issue in peace talks with the Palestinians and signaled it will keep a chunk of prime West Bank land close to Jerusalem, including two large Jewish settlement blocs, Maaleh Adumim and Gush Etzion.

3 killed in blast as Bush, Clinton tour Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Three people were killed and at least 30 injured in a blast at a courthouse in southern Sri Lanka yesterday, police said, as former US presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton toured the region. Police said they suspected that a remand prisoner may have lobbed a grenade inside the courthouse as the magistrate began hearing cases listed for the day.

"We suspect this to be the work of a man held in prison custody at the court premises," the region's top police officer, Kingsley Ekanayake, told AFP.

He said a prison guard and a man and a woman were killed. At least 30 people were admitted to hospital, a spokesman for the Embittiya hospital said.

Police said more than a dozen prisoners had escaped in the confusion following the bombing.

However, the magistrate and lawyers were not injured.

Bush meets Iraq critics in Europe, calls for unity

REUTERS, Brussels

President Bush met one of the most outspoken opponents of the Iraq war yesterday at the start of a European tour aimed at overcoming past rifts and building "a new era of transatlantic unity."

Bush met Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt ahead of a keynote speech in which Bush will appeal to Europeans to replace disagreements over Iraq with joint action to spread democracy across the Middle East.

"Great to be back," Bush told Verhofstadt, adding that he wished he could have gone cycling with the Belgian leader, a keen amateur cyclist.

"He's a great biker. I need a little training," Bush said.

Along with European Union heavyweights France and Germany, Belgium blocked Nato military support for Turkey in the run-up to the 2003 US-led invasion to oust Saddam Hussein, plunging the alliance into its most serious post-Cold War crisis.

In an address (scheduled for 1300 GMT) meant to set the tone for his Europe visit this week, Bush will offer a conciliatory message, saying: "America supports a strong Europe because we need a strong partner in

the hard work of advancing freedom in the world," according to excerpts released by the White House.

But he is unlikely to move much toward the Europeans on the substance of two key contentious issues – an EU diplomatic initiative to offer Iran incentives to curtail its nuclear program and EU plans to lift an arms embargo on China.

And he may cause discomfort by demanding his European hosts support pressuring Syria following the assassination last week of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri, which Lebanese opposition figures have blamed on Damascus.

After four years of tension over Iraq, the Middle East, climate change and the world criminal court, Bush will tell European leaders: "As past debates fade, and great duties become clear, let us begin a new era of transatlantic unity."

EU foreign ministers were putting final touches on Monday to a program of assistance for Iraq, including plans to train police and judges and to offer political support in drafting a new constitution.

At a time of promise between Palestinians and Israelis, Bush will say, "Our immediate goal is peace in the Middle East," arguing that creation of a Palestinian state "can add

to the momentum of reform throughout the broader Middle East."

Despite his public appeal for unity, policy differences remain ahead of summits with Nato and the EU on Tuesday over how hard to push Iran to give up its nuclear ambitions, whether to impose new penalties to prod Syria to pull its troops out of Lebanon and to deny support for the Hizbollah guerrilla group.

Washington is also worried about EU wishes to lift an arms embargo to China, but is seeking to play down differences in hope of casting the relationship in a cooperative light.

"Our strong friendship is essential to peace and prosperity across the globe – and no temporary debate, no passing disagreement of governments, no power on earth will ever divide us," Bush will say.

But two European Parliament Socialist leaders, Martin Schulz and Jan Marinus Wiersma, bluntly told Bush on Monday that he should come to terms with Europe's "soft power," contrasting the EU approach to Turkey with US policy in Iraq.

"Europe's years of patient negotiation with Turkey have resulted in impressive democratic reforms and the opening of the path to EU membership," they said in a statement.

Chavez says US planning to kill him

BBC ONLINE

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has said he believes the US government is planning to assassinate him.

"If they kill me, the name of the person responsible is [President] George Bush," Chavez said.

Chavez - who offered no evidence to back his claim - said any attempt on his life would backfire and threatened to cut off oil supplies to America.

He was apparently reacting to growing criticism by top US officials of his left-wing government.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has recently described the former paratrooper as a "negative force" in Latin America, while CIA chief Porter Goss said Venezuela was a possible source of instability in the region.

Washington blames Chavez of being heavy-handed towards Venezuela's opposition, and has recently criticised Caracas for arms purchases from Russia.



PHOTO: AFP

Indonesians cross a flooded street by a traditional one-horse carriage in Bandung yesterday. Heavy seasonal rains brought flooding in the city of Bandung and a massive landslide killing almost 150 when the rains unleashed tonnes of garbage and earth on housing settlements.