

Dangerous haze returns to haunt SE Asia

REUTERS, Jakarta

If rhetoric could douse fires, the haze that haunts Southeast Asia, endangering health, travel and tourism, would have disappeared in the late 1990s. Thick smoke from major fires on Sumatra and Borneo islands in 1997 and 1998 spread to Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, making thousands sick and costing regional economies \$9 billion in damage to farming, transport and tourism. Governments and environmental groups agreed something must be done. Speeches were made, international conferences called and proposals put forth to bring the situation under control. But those came just as Southeast Asia was hit by an economic crisis, leaving limited will or resources to fight the fires or their root causes, especially

when smoke levels fell anyway in the next few years. This month the price of procrastination is being paid in peninsular Malaysia, much of which has been shrouded in thick smog. Asthma attacks have soared, tourists are holing up in their hotels, and some schools, ports and airports have closed. The haze comes from burning by farmers, plantation owners, loggers and miners to clear land, mostly on Indonesia's Sumatra and on Borneo—split among Indonesia, Brunei and Malaysia. The effects vary dramatically from year to year depending on winds and the severity and length of the dry seasons. "The dry season this year has made the fire spread more," Yuri Thamrin, a spokesman at the

Indonesian foreign affairs ministry, said on Thursday. "Hotspots" is a term for the fires that reflects the use of satellites to locate them through the heat they generate. While modern technology may make the fires easy to find, getting to them can be something else in sprawling Indonesia. There can be hundreds of fires at a given time, many far from major cities in terrain difficult to reach with heavy equipment. The bulk of the fires seriously affecting Malaysia this month are in the swampy, remote region of Rokan Hilir on Sumatra's east coast around 100 kilometers from Malaysia. Environmentalists and analysts say small farmers are often less of a factor than corporate-run plantations and other commercial operators.

Britain detains ten foreigners

AFP, London

Ten foreigners were detained in London and other parts of Britain and face deportation on national security grounds, Home Secretary Charles Clarke announced. None of the foreigners were identified, but observers said the operation marked the start of an expected crackdown on hardline Islamists from overseas in the wake of the London bombings in July. One of the detainees was thought to be Abu Qatada, 44, a Jordanian resident in Britain for 12 years who has been described as Al-Qaeda's "ambassador" in Europe, and who has been the subject of a "control order" or house curfew. In a statement, Clarke said: "According to my power to deport individuals whose presence in the UK is not conducive to the public good for reasons of national security,

the Immigration Service has today detained 10 foreign nationals who I believe pose a threat to national security." "They will be held in secure prison service accommodation and I shall not disclose their names." London's Metropolitan Police told AFP its officers had assisted in an Immigration Service operation to detain individuals under the Immigration Act, but did not themselves carry out any arrests. Other detentions were carried out in central England, in Bedfordshire, Leicestershire, and the West Midlands, the region that includes Britain's second city of Birmingham. Thursday's detentions came a day after the signing of a memorandum of understanding with Jordan ensuring deportees would not be mistreated after their forced return from Britain.



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian from Rafah, Gaza Strip, wave flags yesterday around an olive tree just planted in front of the Israeli Settlement of Rafiah Yam. The operation to uproot the 8,000 Gaza settlers is due to begin on August 17.



PHOTO: AFP
A postal worker delivers mail while wearing a face mask to avoid breathing in dense haze in the township of Klang, near Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

IRAN NUCLEAR DISPUTE UN watchdog considers EU call for solution

AFP, Vienna

The UN atomic watchdog agency pursued intense talks here on an EU proposal calling on Iran to halt nuclear fuel work that has raised fears of a weapons program, while leaving the door open to further negotiations if Tehran complies. The draft text sets a September 3 date for a report on the Islamic country which could lead to an emergency board meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and possible referral to the UN Security Council. The 35-nation board was meeting here a day after Tehran upped the stakes in the crisis over its nuclear program by removing IAEA seals placed on a uranium conversion facility. The plant at Isfahan carries out the first step in making enriched uranium that can be fuel for power reactors or

the raw material for atom bombs. According to the draft, Iran is urged "to re-establish full suspension of all enrichment-related activities including the production of feed material, including through tests of production at the Uranium Conversion Facility" in Isfahan. The IAEA is being asked for a consensus adoption of the text from European Union negotiators Britain, Germany and France, which stops short of calling for the matter now to be taken to the UN Security Council for possible sanctions, as Washington wants. The proposed resolution comes at a time when the United States and Europe are trying to find a measured way to rein in Iran while at the same time keep Tehran negotiating with the EU in eight-month-old talks on giving guarantees its nuclear program is peaceful.

Oklahoma man held before boarding plane with bomb

REUTERS, Oklahoma City

An Oklahoma man was taken into custody after he tried to carry a bomb on board an airplane on Wednesday in Oklahoma City, an FBI spokesman said. Charles Alfred Dreyling Jr., 24, was detained on Wednesday morning after a security screener using an X-ray machine saw the device in his luggage as he tried to board a flight to Philadelphia at Will Rogers Airport in Oklahoma City. "Although the investigation is in its initial stages we have found no apparent connection to any type of terrorist activity or group," FBI spokesman Gary Johnson said. Johnson said the screener saw an "improvised explosive device" in Dreyling's carry-on luggage.

Gaza pullout opponents to stage last strength

AFP, Tel Aviv

Opponents of the impending Israeli pullout from the Gaza Strip were to stage a last show of strength at a mass rally in Tel Aviv on Thursday as the army finalised its preparations for the historic evacuation. As Prime Minister Ariel Sharon argued that leaving Gaza would enable Israel to keep hold of its large West Bank settlement blocs, hardliners planned one last push to derail the project to uproot the 8,000 Jewish residents of Gaza which is due to begin in earnest on August 17. The main settlers' organisation Yesha was predicting that around 100,000 people would take part in the demonstration in the landmark Rabin Square in the heart of Israel's commercial capital.

While previous mass protests have been dominated by ultra-nationalist and religious activists, organisers are hoping that Israel's secular majority will be out in force in Tel Aviv. Organisers had hoped that Benjamin Netanyahu, who quit Sharon's cabinet on Sunday in protest at the disengagement plan, would address the rally. He has decided not to attend however and no mainstream politicians are expected to take to the podium. Settler sources said that demonstrators would be given instructions at the rally on how to disrupt the actual operation from August 17, including plans for roadblocks. Gaza settlers are expected to form a human chain around some of the doomed settlements, with the images beamed to Rabin Square.

Saddam trial could start in 2 months

AFP, Baghdad

The trial of Saddam Hussein could begin within the next two months, a source close to the Iraqi Special Tribunal that will try the former dictator said Thursday. Ousted in April 2003 after the US-led invasion of Iraq and captured the following December, Saddam is in US custody near Baghdad airport awaiting trial on charges of crimes against humanity. "My best guess is that the trial

could begin 45 days from the day the defence looks at the evidence," said a source close to the tribunal. The source said he believed Saddam's defense team has looked at the documents but that it was up to the Special Tribunal to announce the date for a trial. Although the tribunal has had little interaction with the public, "I can tell you with absolute certainty that the investigation is going forward thoroughly and rapidly," the source said.

TWO WEEKS ON N Ireland waits for IRA disarmament

REUTERS, Dublin

Two weeks after the Irish Republican Army pledged to down arms, the guerrilla group has yet to prove it has disposed of any weapons, disappointing hopes it would begin disarming immediately. Britain has already started to cut its military presence in the province, which is emerging from a 30-year conflict that killed 3,600 people, in response to the July 28 declaration. The IRA's announcement of a formal end to its armed struggle was widely hailed as a breakthrough in politically deadlocked Northern Ireland — provided the group's promise to put its massive arsenal beyond use was fulfilled. In its statement, the IRA said this process would be concluded "as quickly as possible" to "enhance public confidence." Hopes it would begin to disarm almost immediately were raised further when the head of the international monitors overseeing disarmament, retired Canadian General John de Chastelain, extended a

stay in Ireland. But his departure for home in Canada last week — and the fact other members of the disarmament body are on holiday for most of the rest of August — has prompted speculation the first weapons' disposal may not take place until next month. The IRA wants to united British-ruled, mostly Protestant Northern Ireland with the mainly Catholic Irish Republic. Protestant unionists, deeply skeptical the IRA would match words with actions given a string of broken promises, worried on Thursday the paramilitaries were holding out for more. "I think certainly there was an expectation that if the IRA wanted to build maximum public confidence they wouldn't hang about," said a spokesman for the main Democratic Unionist Party, which supports continued British rule in Northern Ireland. "Clearly the longer they drag it out, the more people will be of the view that they are again trading their guns for other concessions."

Trip around the moon!

AP, New York

The company that pioneered commercial space travel by sending "tourists" up to the International Space Station is planning a new mission: rocketing people around the far side of the moon. The price of a round-trip ticket: \$100 million. The first mission by Space Adventures could happen in 2008 or 2009 and is planned as a stepping stone to an eventual lunar landing by private citizens. "For the first time in history, a private company is organizing a mission to the moon," Space Adventures CEO Eric Anderson said at a Manhattan news conference Wednesday, a day after space shuttle Discovery safely returned to Earth. "This mission will inspire countries of the world, citizens... our youth." Anderson said he already has prospective "private explorers" who are interested in the trip and could afford the ticket. The initial travelers would be the first to orbit the moon in more than 33 years, according to the Arlington, Va., company. Only 27 people have ever made such a journey. The trip, aboard a modified Russian spacecraft, will offer the chance to see the Earth rise from lunar orbit and a view of the far side of the moon from an altitude of 62 miles.