

Philippines beefs up security for ASEAN summit

AFP, Cebu

Philippines authorities have ramped up security for this week's summit of Southeast Asian leaders, saying Sunday a terror attack could not be ruled out although there was no specific threat.

After the original gathering last month was postponed at the last minute -- ostensibly because of an approaching typhoon -- several thousand extra police have been drafted in for security on the resort island of Cebu.

Armed forces are reinforcing police in securing the venue, while a raft of other measures, including an air exclusion zone and navy patrols, are also in the operation schedule.

"As far as we know there is no specific threat against the summit itself, but we have not ruled anything out," general Silverio Alarsio, who is leading the massive security operation for the related summits of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and East Asia group, told AFP.

The country's military chief, General Hermogenes Esperon, said that "there are no concrete plans that have been monitored,"

for possible terror attacks, but the armed forces were bolstering police in securing the event anyway.

Days before last month's summit was due to open, Canada, Britain, Australia and the United States all issued warnings that "credible information suggests terrorists are in the final stages of planning attacks."

None of those governments released specific details, but the Philippines abruptly cancelled the meetings citing an approaching typhoon which eventually missed Cebu.

Australia, Britain and Canada have maintained their travel warnings on Cebu for this week's summit.

One senior diplomat, who did not want to be named, told AFP: "Although the summit itself may not be a target, there is always the possibility of something happening on the fringes, especially places frequented by foreign tourists."

Alarsio said that police and military were working closely with security agencies from Australia and the United States on intelligence gathering.

"Although there is no specific threat to the summit you can never

rule out the possibility that something may happen, especially outside of Cebu," he cautioned.

He said some 4,000 military personnel from Manila and the central Visayas islands and 6,000 police were now in place in Cebu.

From Wednesday until January 16, he said, a 20-mile (32-kilometer) no-fly zone will be enforced around Mactan airport and the main summit venues of Cebu City, nearby Mandaue City and the luxury Shangri-la resort where the 10 ASEAN leaders will be staying.

"The Philippine navy will patrol waters around Cebu while the air force will monitor all air movements," Alarsio added.

Although the Philippines no longer maintains any tactical fighters, he was confident the air force would be able to secure the skies effectively.

He also said security forces had been increased by "a few thousand" from December's cancelled summit to provide additional cover for an annual festival taking place in Cebu right after the summit.

Nobel winner made chief editor for a day in Turkey

AFP, Ankara

Orhan Pamuk, the winner of the 2006 Nobel Literature prize, was made editor-in-chief for a day of a Turkish newspaper and used the opportunity to highlight the oppression of artists and intellectuals in his cover story yesterday.

Pamuk, who has a degree in journalism but never worked in the press, was given free rein in the edition of the liberal Radikal newspaper which is celebrating its 10th anniversary by inviting celebrity guest editors.

The 54-year-old author, who was brought to court last year in a freedom-of-speech trial, used the cover story to criticise the lack of freedom of expression in Turkey and the treatment of dissident intellectuals.

It quoted a 1951 article about internationally renowned Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet, who was prosecuted at home for his leftist views, declared a traitor and escaped to Russia where he died in exile in 1963.

Published alongside a picture of Hikmet, whose works were banned in Turkey for a long time, the article urged the public "to spit in his face as much as they want".

"This expression... summarises the unchanging place of writers and artists in the eyes of the state and the press," said Pamuk's story.

He also mentioned several other prosecuted intellectuals such as Yasar Kemal, an acclaimed author who has been tried for his remarks on a long-running Kurdish rebellion in southeastern Turkey.

Pamuk himself was regarded as a "traitor" in nationalist circles and stood trial on charges of "insulting Turkishness" when he told a Swiss magazine last year that "one million Armenians and 30,000 Kurds were killed in these lands."

His remarks were widely seen as an acknowledgement that the Ottoman Turks committed genocide against Armenians during World War I, a position that Ankara fiercely rejects.

The court case against Pamuk, in which he risked up to three years in jail, was dropped on a technicality in January.



PHOTO: STAR

Water remains stagnant on a pothole on Tongi Station Road for long, causing suffering to pedestrians as well as passengers.

Sunnis protest Saddam execution

AFP, Samarra

Hundreds of Sunni Arabs protested yesterday the execution of Saddam Hussein outside a revered Shiite shrine in northern Iraq that was the target of a devastating bomb attack last year.

Men, women and children, carrying Iraqi flags and Saddam portraits, and in some cases guns as well, were seen marching through the streets of Samarra where they gathered outside the Al-Askari mosque.

There they shouted slogans praising the former dictator, whose hanging on December 30 for crimes against humanity triggered protests among Sunnis and criticism from international leaders for the way it was conducted.

The crowd also condemned the current Iraqi government, which is dominated by Shiites.

Malaysia flood toll rises to 17

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

The death toll from floods in Malaysia rose to 17 as fresh heavy downpours forced hundreds to evacuate in the country's north and the eastern state of Sabah, authorities said yesterday.

The latest victim was an elderly man in Kota Marudu town in northern Sabah, where intermittent rain fell over the weekend, said Malaysia's crisis and disaster management chief.

Che Moin Umar said conditions were expected to worsen in the coming days, with heavy rains forecast over the country's northern states.

"It will deteriorate ... I cannot say much whether it will be like Malacca and Johor," Che Moin told AFP, referring to two southern states worst hit by Malaysia's flood crisis so far.

"We are preparing for the worst-case scenario," he added.

The meteorological department yesterday issued its highest "red stage" warning for heavy rains in the northern states of Kelantan,

Terengganu, Perlis, Kedah, Penang, Perak, and central Pahang state until Wednesday.

Moderate rain will also continue in Sabah into the week, it said.

Che Moin said authorities had evacuated more than 150 people in Kelantan and Terengganu after rains on Saturday night sparked flooding.

Some 200 people were also evacuated over the weekend from the town of Beaufort in Sabah, he said.

Conditions are easing in Johor, which has seen 15 of the 17 fatalities,

although 16,455 people evacuated from the floods were still sheltering in relief centres on Sunday, said Malaysia's Bernama news agency.

The number of people sheltering in relief centres nationwide peaked at 90,000 in the last week of December.

Johor authorities said Sunday that it would cost some 60 million ringgit (17.08 million dollars) to repair flood-damaged infrastructure such as bridges, Bernama reported, as Health Minister Chua Soi Lek warned of dengue outbreaks.



PHOTO: STAR

Members of armed forces stand guard at a level crossing at Tongi yesterday while a train passes by during the countrywide blockade enforced by Awami League-led grand alliance.