

Britain suspends boarding operations in Gulf

AFP, London

Britain has suspended boarding operations in the Gulf and is reviewing its rules of engagement after a dispute with Iran over the capture of 15 British naval personnel, a top officer said yesterday.

First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Jonathon Band, also accused Iran of exerting "psychological pressure" on the eight sailors and seven marines who returned to emotional reunions in Britain on Thursday after 13 days in detention.

Band said an official inquiry would look at the rules of engagement, intelligence gathering, equipment and procedures to prevent any repeat of the March 23 capture.

Until a comprehensive review is complete, the Royal Navy has suspended all boarding operations in the area of the kind that the Britons were carrying out when seized, he added.

Band rejected suggestions that the 15 should not have made "confessions" to their captors for allegedly breaching Iranian territorial waters, and only have given their name, rank and serial number.

The inquiry is to look into the

alleged confessions made by some of the group, including the only woman, Leading Seaman Faye Turney.

"They weren't on combat operations. They weren't like people shot down in Tornados in the (first) Gulf War," the head of the Royal Navy said.

"I don't think there is any doubt from the statements some of them made, and certainly the letters, that they were under a certain element of psychological pressure."

"I think you will find out that they were actually a brave set of youngsters."

On Thursday, Royal Marines officer Lieutenant Colonel Andy Price said some of the group may have been left in solitary confinement during their detention, despite their appearance together on Iranian television.

The sailors spent their first night of freedom at the Royal Marine Base Chivenor in Devon, southwest England, after being reunited with their families.

They are being debriefed and undergoing medical examinations. Some of the group are due to

address a news conference at 1400 GMT. In a joint statement released Thursday, the group said their ordeal had been "very difficult".

A military inquiry was under way to determine how they came to be captured as they conducted what Britain said were routine anti-smuggling operations near the Shatt al-Arab waterway dividing Iraq and Iran.

One of the 15, Royal Marine Captain Chris Air, told Sky News television in an interview recorded a week before their detention that British crews did gather intelligence on Iranian activities in the Gulf area.

In his BBC interview, Band dismissed suggestions that the 15 had surrendered too easily and that they should have fought back against their captors.

"I think our people have reacted extremely well in some very difficult circumstances," he said, adding that the decision to board and search a merchant ship that led to their seizure was "absolutely proper".

"I think they acted with considerable dignity and a lot of courage," he added.

Curfew in Pak town after 3 die in clashes

AFP, Dera Ismail Khan

Pakistani authorities yesterday imposed an indefinite curfew in a mountainous tribal town bordering Afghanistan after three people died in fighting between rival Muslim sects, local officials said.

Soldiers were called out after gunbattles between Sunni and Shia Muslims in Parachinar, a town in the semi-autonomous Kurram region, local administration official Nasim Khan told AFP.

"Troops have taken up positions in the area and a curfew has been imposed in the town," he said. "Fighting is still going on in different parts of the city."

Three people died and 13 others were injured in the violence Friday, hospital sources said.

Khan said trouble erupted on Friday when members of the minority Shia sect staged a demonstration outside their mosque against local Sunnis who allegedly chanted anti-Shia slogans during a religious rally last week.

Rival groups went on the rampage in the main bazaar and torched a commercial building and several shops, Khan said.

Parachinar, bordering eastern Afghanistan's Paktia province, has a large Shia population. Clashes between the two communities over a shrine in the tribal areas last year left around 20 people dead.



PHOTO: STAR

WHO urges countries to unite against diseases

AFP, Geneva

The World Health Organisation yesterday urged countries to join forces to tackle the growing number of cross-border threats to public health, including avian influenza and HIV/AIDS.

"When the world is collectively at risk, defence becomes a shared responsibility of all nations," WHO Director General Margaret Chan said in a statement to mark World Health Day.

New diseases, such as the SARS outbreak in Asia in 2003 and human cases of H5N1 bird flu in recent years, have been emerging at a rate of at least one a year in recent decades, according to the UN health agency.

Outbreaks can no longer be handled as a purely national problem, because they threaten lives and the economy worldwide, it added.

H5N1 bird flu is widely thought to have jumped the species barrier into humans with outbreaks in southern China, but the disease was only detected after it spread into Hong Kong in 1997.

Pneumonia-like SARS, which infected more than 8,000 people and killed more than 800, also caused an estimated 60 billion dollars in business losses in the third quarter of 2003 alone, according to the WHO.

HIV/AIDS was unknown until its discovery in a patient in the United States in 1981. The immune deficiency disease claimed about 2.9 million lives last year and currently affects 39.5 million people worldwide, according to UN data.

The WHO is pinning its hopes for greater cooperation on revised international health regulations passed by its 193 member nations

two years ago, which are due to enter into force on June 15, 2007.

Under the old 1969 regulations, countries were only been obliged to inform the WHO about cases of three infectious diseases: cholera, plague and yellow fever.

The new version broadens the scope to all illnesses that might threaten other countries.

"We need to ensure that all coun-

tries are equipped to tackle health threats with solid health systems," WHO spokeswoman Fadelia Chaib told AFP.

"For example, if countries affected by bird flu can't control it at home, then there's a collective risk. The more new clusters of bird flu there are, the greater the chance that the virus will mutate," she added.

Scientists fear the H5N1 bird flu

virus could mutate into a form easily spread among humans, leading to the potential to kill millions.

The WHO said in a background paper that functioning health systems were key links of the chain for security, but most national services were "inadequate". It also highlighted a global shortage of 4.0 million health workers.



PHOTO: STAR

Traders occupy part of a road at Karwan Bazar market in the city to carry out their activities. The picture was taken yesterday.

5x3

Thai doctors separate conjoined twins in rare operation

AP, Bangkok



Thai doctors announced Thursday that they successfully performed a rare operation to separate a pair of conjoined female infants, teasing apart their hearts and livers in the delicate procedure.

The girls, Panwad Tyenjai and Pantawan Tyenjai, were so-called thoracophagus twins -- with their bodies joined from chest to abdomen, said an announcement from Bangkok's Siriraj Hospital.

What made their case unusual was that the upper chambers, or atriums, of their hearts were connected, with one pumping blood to the other, said Dr Somchai Sriyoschat, a cardiac surgeon who took part in the operation.

The 12-hour operation on February 20, in which 61 doctors and nurses took part, left both girls in good condition, though one has a slight heart defect which can be fixed when she gets older, he said. The girls were eight months old when they were operated on.

The hospital did not say why it delayed in announcing the operation.

Somchai told The Associated Press that a CAT scan and an MRI test before the operation clearly showed the connection between the two hearts, but doctors were unsure if one was dependent on the other.

In some cases where hearts are joined, a diagnosis results in the conclusion that the hearts cannot sustain the patients separately, and that the life of one patient might have to be sacrificed to let the other, stronger one live.

When the operation began and

the hearts were exposed, doctors blocked the flow of blood at the joining point to see if each heart could operate independently, Somchai said. Only after finding that stopping the flow caused no apparent problem, did they proceed, he said.

Had stopping the flow between the two hearts caused a problem, further surgery would have been terminated and the twins left in their conjoined state, he said. Conjoined twins who share a heart are often more vulnerable to sickness and have a poor life expectancy compared to separated ones.

The hospital's claims to having performed the first successful operation of its kind -- where the hearts were joined at their upper chambers -- could not immediately be confirmed.

It was not clear how it differed from an operation performed in the United States in 2002 at the University of Maryland Hospital for Children, where doctors successfully separated two Ugandan girls, Louise and Christina Onziga, who also had connected livers and hearts connected by their upper chambers.

Conjoined twins form when an embryo begins to split into identical twins but stops part way, leaving the partially separated egg to mature. They occur once in every 150,000 to 200,000 live births and are three times as likely to happen to females than males.

The chances of conjoined twins surviving depends on how they are connected. About 40 to 60 percent are stillborn and 35 percent survive 24 hours or less.

4x3

4.5x3

8x3