

# Over a million wait as China poised to drain 'quake lake'

AFP, Mianyang

China was poised yesterday to drain a dangerous "quake lake" in an attempt to avert a disaster that could have flooded the homes of over a million people.

Authorities started to helicopter workers away from a dam that was caused by quake-induced landslides after hundreds of soldiers finished an enormous drainage channel.

Water trapped in the lake in Tangjishan was expected to start flowing out as soon as Saturday afternoon, according to Luo Haolong, a commander of the water resources section of the police working on the site.

"This afternoon, the water will flow again," said Luo. "Experts say we are ready to break through and allow the river to flow."

Other officials said that the breach may not happen for a few days, but they appeared confident their efforts would eliminate the risk of a disastrous flood.

"The lake problem is under control, we do not have any fears that there will be an uncontrollable flood," Han Guijun, a top official in quake-devastated Beichuan county, told AFP.

More than 197,000 people have been evacuated in case of flooding, an official from nearby Mianyang city told AFP, but there was still concern for the more than a million people living downstream.

Residents said people had been ordered to move at least 30 metres above the level of the river as a precautionary measure.

Despite the warnings, tents where residents have been sleeping since the tremor remained in place along the banks of the Fujiang river in Mianyang city, the largest population centre below the Tangjishan quake lake.

"So far we have received no orders to remove the tents," a local policeman told AFP. "If the order comes to move them, then we will move them."

The local government cancelled

an emergency evacuation drill scheduled for Saturday, while China's central television said earlier plans to use explosives to breach the lake had been abandoned.

Dealing with the "quake lake" has become one of the most pressing issues in the aftermath of the May 12 earthquake that killed more than 68,500 people, with over 18,000 still missing.

Threats to the environment if the dam burst remained a concern, with state media reporting that radioactive and chemical materials were being moved from the potential flood zone.

There were also 33 other lakes in Sichuan province created by the quake, 28 of which were at risk of bursting, the official Xinhua news agency reported earlier.

The Ministry of Environmental Protection said late Friday that authorities had dispatched thousands of people to inspect businesses in quake-hit areas, finding some with possible environmental risks.

## Key provincial polls split Sunnis in Iraq

AP, Baghdad

Plans for provincial elections in Iraq by the fall have already set Sunni Arabs against each other as factions prepare to compete for control of the local governments that will wield considerable power over security and finances.

The elections will choose governing councils in Iraq's 18 provinces and are seen as a key step in repairing the country's sectarian rifts, particularly by opening the door for greater Sunni Arab political representation.

Many Sunnis boycotted the last provincial balloting in January 2005, enabling Shias and Kurds to win a disproportionate share of power even in areas with a substantial Sunni population.

This time, more Sunnis are expected to participate, and US and Iraqi officials hope the elections will result in greater Sunni representation and provide a more accurate gauge of the popularity of political parties.

## Iran not seeking to build nukes: Putin

AFP, Paris

Iran is not trying to acquire nuclear weapons but Tehran should avoid "irritating" its neighbours, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said yesterday in an interview with French newspaper Le Monde.

Putin, who was in Paris for two days of meetings with President Nicolas Sarkozy and other French leaders, said there was no indication Iran was building its own nuclear arsenal.

But he admitted that Iran's compliance with investigations by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was still a "point to be resolved."

Asked if Iran was trying to acquire nuclear weapons, Putin replied: "I don't believe so. Nothing indicates it." "The Iranians are a proud people," he went on. "They want to enjoy their independence and exercise their legitimate right to civil nuclear power."

"I am serious. On a legal level, Iran has infringed nothing at the moment. They have the same right to enrichment (of uranium.) The paperwork says so, Iran is accused of not displaying all its programmes to the IAEA. This point remains to be resolved...." Putin stressed that Russia was opposed to Iran achieving nuclear-power status.

"That is our principled position," he said. "Using nuclear weapons in a region as small as the Middle East would be synonymous with suicide. Whose interests would it serve? The Palestinians? Hardly. The Palestinians would cease to exist...."



General view of the scene where a TACA airplane crashed at the Tegucigalpa's airport in Honduras on Friday. The plane, an Airbus A-320 carrying 124 people, went off the runway and slid into a highway. At least four people died in the accident.

## Passenger jet crashes in Honduras: 4 killed

AP, Tegucigalpa

A jetliner overshot a runway and raced onto a busy street in the Honduran capital on Friday, killing the pilot, two passengers and a motorist on the ground. At least 65 people were injured.

The Grupo Taca Airbus A320 with 140 people on board was flying a Los Angeles-San Salvador-Tegucigalpa route and was scheduled to head next to Miami. It ended up with its nose smashed against a roadside embankment and its fuselage buckled and broken in places.

Authorities frantically hosed down cars trapped beneath the wreckage as thousands of gallons of fuel gushed from the jet.

Rescuers pried open part of the wreckage to get the pilot and co-pilot out, but the pilot didn't survive, said Cesar Villalta, director of Honduras' military hospital.

## NEWS ANALYSIS

# US terrorism list also a political tool

AP, Washington

North Korea has not been linked to a terrorist attack in more than two decades, but it is still on the US list of state sponsors of terrorism. Now, it may be on the verge of its coveted goal of getting removed for reasons having little to do with terrorism.

Meanwhile, Washington has what appears to be fresh evidence that Venezuela supported Colombian guerrillas that the US considers terrorists. Yet the terrorism list does not include Venezuela, a major oil supplier to the United States.

Nearly three decades after its inception, the state sponsors of terrorism list is not just about terrorism. It has become a diplomatic tool to win concessions from US adversaries eager to end the stigma and sanctions that come with the designation. It may also be

too blunt a tool to be used against strategically important countries, even if the terrorism link appears clear-cut.

"Of course the list is political," said Bruce Hoffman, a professor of security studies at Georgetown University.

The United States has many blacklists for people, groups and countries it deems unsavoury. But the state sponsors of terrorism list has perhaps the highest profile, though only five countries are on it: Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Sudan and Syria.

Those countries designated by the US face restrictions on foreign aid, a ban on defence sales and other sanctions that can hinder their acquiring US technology or doing business with US financial institutions.

The penalties can extend beyond US borders. The United

States will use its weight at the United Nations and world financial organisations to try to block assistance to designated countries. The designation could also discourage US allies and multinational corporations from dealing with the designated nations.

By contrast, getting off the list is a sign of a return to the global community.

"This is exactly the purpose: to offer carrots and sticks to engage states and then to use this as a means to persuade them to desist from activities that we think are harmful to America," Hoffman said.

The president may rescind the terror designation by submitting a report to Congress that certifies a country has changed policies and has provided assurances that it will not support future acts of terror.

## N Ireland's veteran firebrand leader steps aside

AFP, Belfast

Ian Paisley, a giant of Northern Ireland politics for 40 years, handed the leadership of his party Saturday to Peter Robinson, who becomes First Minister of the British province next week.

Dogged until recently by three decades of civil unrest known as "the Troubles," Paisley, 82, helped bring stability to Northern Ireland by agreeing finally to share power with one-time republican arch enemies Sinn Fein.

He used to be nicknamed "Dr No" because of his and his hardline Protestant Democratic Unionist Party's (DUP) refusal to deal with Catholic Sinn Fein, once the political wing of paramilitary group the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

## Lebanese PM wraps up talks on new govt

AFP, Beirut

Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora wrapped up two days of talks with leaders of rival parliamentary blocs yesterday on forming a national unity government but gave no date for a new line-up.

"I am not setting any specific date," Siniora said of his efforts to form a new government after a deal last week between rival politicians ended an 18-month crisis that erupted into street battles that killed 65 people.

Siniora is due to brief President Michel Sleiman on the results of his talks with lawmakers from the Western- and Saudi-backed ruling parliamentary majority and the Hezbollah-led opposition backed by Syria and Iran.

"We want the government to reflect Lebanese consensus and the (terms of the) Doha accord, and I will strive to do that in the next few days," said Siniora, who was reappointed on Wednesday by Sleiman and asked to form a new cabinet.



Indian street children wearing masks takes part in an anti-tobacco rally in Kolkata yesterday in observance of World No Tobacco Day. At least 2,200 people die daily from tobacco-related diseases in India, a nation of 1.1 billion people.

## Opposition mounts to US-Iraq security deal

AP, Baghdad

Tens of thousands rallied in several cities Friday against a proposed US-Iraqi security agreement, raising doubts that negotiators can meet a July target to finalise a pact to keep UN troops in Iraq after the current UN mandate expires.

Although US officials insist they are not seeking permanent bases, suspicion runs deep among many Iraqis that the Americans want to keep at least some troops in the country for many years.

"We denounce the government's intentions to sign a long-term agreement with the occupying forces," Asaad al-Nassiri, a sheik loyal to anti-American cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, said during a sermon in Kufa. "Our army will be under their control in this agreement, and this will lead to them having permanent bases in Iraq."

President Bush and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki signed a statement last December on the future of US-Iraqi relations, saying they planned to finalise a new security agreement by July 31 in time for Iraq's parliament to approve the deal before a UN mandate expires at the end of the year.

US and Iraqi officials began negotiations in March on a blueprint for the long-term security agreement and a second deal, to establish the legal basis for US troops to remain in the country after the UN mandate runs out.

Rallies in Baghdad and several other Iraqi cities followed Friday prayer services and were the first in wake of a call by al-Sadr for weekly protests against the deal, even though few details of the talks have been released.

Most of the protesters appeared to be followers of al-Sadr, the hard-line Shia cleric and militia leader whose Mahdi Army battled American and Iraqi troops in Baghdad's Sadr City district until a truce this month ended nearly seven weeks of fighting.

But opposition to the agreement appears to be growing beyond the Sadrist movement.

A militant Sunni clerical group, the Association of Muslim Scholars, denounced the "ring of secrecy" surrounding the talks and said the proposed deal would pave the way for "military, economic and cultural domination" by the Americans.

On Thursday, the head of the country's biggest mainstream Shia party, Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim, said some unspecified points under negotiation "violate Iraq's national sovereignty," adding that a "national consensus" was emerging against the proposed agreement.

Al-Hakim is al-Sadr's main rival in the majority Shia community and maintains close ties to the country's main Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Aides to the powerful ayatollah say he also has reservations about the deal.



A South African girl places a message on a tree at Durban's Bulwer Park yesterday in memory of the people who lost their lives after a xenophobic spate of violence started two weeks ago in South Africa.

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