

Govts warn travellers to avoid Bangkok

AFP, Hong Kong

Governments around the world urged their citizens to stay away from the protest-hit Thai capital Bangkok, and in some cases the whole of Thailand, unless absolutely necessary.

As Thai troops fired warning shots and tear gas in clashes with petrol bomb-hurling protesters in Bangkok, leaving 70 injured, foreign ministries across the world issued travel warnings to their citizens.

So far however, there have been no reports of tourists being hurt.

Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva on Sunday issued a state of emergency in the capital, after a similar measure was imposed the day before in the popular resort city of Pattaya, 150 kilometres (90

miles) away.

Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith urged his country's nationals to reconsider any travel plans, as the situation in the "Land of Smiles" deteriorated.

"Those Australians who are in Bangkok, we urge them to stay within their homes or their hotels, to certainly avoid demonstrations and to certainly avoid large gatherings of people," Smith added.

Smith's warning echoed an official travel advisory issued Monday, the fourth time in three days that the Australian government's advice on Thailand has been revised in the face of a rapidly evolving crisis.

Japan's foreign ministry warned travellers to be on high alert and to avoid government buildings and street rallies. It also advised against wearing red or

yellow T-shirts, so as to avoid being mistaken for either anti- or pro-government protesters.

A particular feature of the unrest in the past year has been the strong allegiance to colours, with the current anti-government demonstrators wearing red, while last year their opponents adopted yellow as their signature colour.

The Philippines, Malaysia and South Korea on Monday also told travellers to stay away from Bangkok or exercise extreme caution there.

Hong Kong stepped up its travel advisory strongly urging against travel there.

Hong Kong's Travel Industry Council estimated there were around 8,000 visitors from Hong Kong currently in Thailand, many of whom had jetted there over the long Easter weekend holiday.



Thai soldiers charge towards the supporters of ex-premier Thaksin Shinawatra during clashes in Bangkok yesterday. Thai troops fired warning shots and tear gas in clashes with petrol bomb-hurling protesters in Bangkok, leaving 70 injured as the government launched a crackdown to enforce the state of emergency.



US Senator John Kerry (2nd R, rear) introduces US officials to Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani (R) prior to a meeting at the Prime Minister House in Islamabad yesterday. Kerry held talks with Pakistani leaders on efforts to fight extremists and provide aid to the cash-strapped frontline state in the "war on terror".

Thaksin accuses Thai govt of covering up deaths

AFP, Bangkok

Former premier Thaksin Shinawatra accused Thailand's embattled government of lying to cover up deaths in an army crackdown on protesters yesterday.

Speaking to CNN from an undisclosed location, the fugitive tycoon said soldiers who were seen earlier firing rounds into the air to disperse his rioting supporters in Bangkok had killed "many".

"They trapped the people... Many people died... They even take the dead bodies up on the truck and take them away. They're trying to confuse everything," Thaksin told the channel.

"You try to lie to the whole world, you try to lie to the people, but... it's impossible,"

he added, as Thailand's four-month-old government attempted to quell street unrest under emergency measures declared a day earlier.

Thai officials contacted by AFP throughout Monday repeatedly said that there had been no deaths and denied reports on a pro-Thaksin radio station that there had been several fatalities.

The telecoms billionaire, who was ousted in a military coup in 2006, fled Thailand in August before being sentenced to two years in prison on corruption charges.

He has made a series of speeches by telephone and video in recent weeks to incite anti-government street rallies loyal to him and his allies in the previous administration.

US navy rescues captain held by Somali pirates

Pirates vow to target Americans in retaliation

AP, Nairobi

In a daring high-seas rescue, US Navy SEAL snipers killed three Somali pirates and freed the American sea captain who had offered himself as a hostage to save his crew. The operation was a victory for the world's most powerful military but angry pirates vowed Monday to retaliate.

Those threats raised fears for the safety of some 230 foreign sailors still held hostage in more than a dozen ships anchored off the coast of lawless Somalia.

"From now on, if we capture foreign ships and their respective countries try to attack us, we will kill them (the

hostages)," Jamac Habeb, a 30-year-old pirate, told the Associated Press from one of Somalia's piracy hubs, Eyl. "(US forces have) become our No. 1 enemy."

News of Capt. Richard Phillips' rescue caused his crew in Kenya to break into wild cheers and brought tears to the eyes of those in Phillips' hometown of Underhill, Vermont, half a world away from the Indian Ocean drama.

President Barack Obama called Phillips' courage "a model for all Americans" and said he was pleased with the rescue, but added the United States still needed help from other countries to deal with piracy and to hold pirates

accountable.

The stunning resolution to a five-day standoff came Sunday in a daring nighttime assault in choppy seas after pirates had agreed to let the USS Bainbridge tow their powerless lifeboat out of rough water.

Vice Adm. Bill Gortney said Phillips, 53, was tied up and in "imminent danger" of being killed because a pirate on the lifeboat held an AK-47 assault rifle to the back of his head.

At that, the commander of Bainbridge made the split-second decision to order Navy snipers to shoot at the lifeboat, about 25-30 yards (meters) away, taking aim at the pirates' heads and shoulders.

Pakistan warns US against conditional aid

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan accused the United States and the West yesterday of generating "ill will" and warned US Senator John Kerry against attaching conditions to a massive aid package.

The chairman of the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee has backed a bill that would triple economic assistance for Pakistan, a key US ally in the fight against Islamist militants, to 7.5 billion dollars over five years.

But Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani criticised conditions attached to the package.

Although the bill meets some long-standing requests for military equipment, it requires the White House to certify that Pakistan is fighting terror and that its military and intelligence services do not support extremists.

Pakistan must also close all terror camps in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and work to prevent cross-border attacks into

Afghanistan.

But a statement from Gilani's office quoted the prime minister as saying: "The US should not attach conditionalities to the assistance package being presented to the US Congress, as aid with strings attached would fail to generate the desired goodwill and results in Pakistan."

"Relations between Pakistan and the United States should be based on 'mutual respect and mutual trust and both sides should work together to reduce the trust deficit,'" Gilani said.

"The prime minister also pointed out that the negative messaging emanating from the US and the West was generating ill will," the statement added.

US officials have publicly criticised Pakistan's powerful intelligence services -- which have a history of supporting Islamist militants to fight in Indian-controlled Kashmir and in Afghanistan -- for supporting extremists.

Kuwait cabinet sets snap election for May 16

AFP, Kuwait City

The Kuwaiti cabinet on Monday approved a decree setting May 16 for snap parliamentary elections, state minister for cabinet affairs Faisal al-Hajji said.

The decree will now be issued by the emir, who last month dissolved parliament for the third time in as many years following a bitter dispute between MPs and the government.

The new general election will be the second in a year and the third since May 2006 in the Western-backed oil-rich Gulf state that has been rocked by a series of political crises.



Kashmiri Muslims duck as Indian soldiers open fire in the air to disperse thousands of Muslims who snatched the bodies of two militants killed in a gun battle at Aglar, south of Srinagar yesterday. Two militants were killed, one Indian Army officer was injured and three residential houses gutted during a fierce fight between militants and troops.

Four soldiers killed in Lebanon ambush

AFP, Baalbek

Four Lebanese soldiers were killed in an apparently drug-related ambush on an army patrol in the east of the country on Monday, a security official said.

The attack occurred in the Bekaa Valley near the Syrian border, a stronghold of the Shia Muslim militant movement Hezbollah, that has also long been known as a fertile drug-producing region.

Fifteen soldiers were also wounded in the attack, the security official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Iran ready for talks on its nuclear plans

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday said it is ready to talk with a group of six world powers over its nuclear programme, a move that could help resolve the deadlock over Tehran's controversial atomic push.

Saeed Jalili, a top official with the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, told EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana in a telephone call that Tehran is willing to discuss the issue, Iranian news agency ISNA reported.

"The Islamic Republic of

Iran welcomes discussion with the group of six for a constructive cooperation, earlier this week," Jalili told Solana, the ISNA report said.

The Supreme National Security Council is Iran's top national security decision-making body, and in particular is responsible for the nuclear negotiations.

On April 8, the United States, Britain, Russia, China, France, and Germany said Solana has been tasked to invite Iran for talks on its nuclear programme which

they suspect is aimed at making atomic weapons but which Tehran denies.

Global powers led by Washington are exploring possibilities for talks with Iran with the aim of stopping the Islamic republic's sensitive uranium enrichment programme.

Enriching uranium so that it can be used for nuclear power -- or building a weapon of mass destruction -- lies at the heart of the controversy surrounding Iran's nuclear programme.

US sergeant pleads not guilty to murder in Iraq

AFP, Vilsack

US Master Sergeant John E. Hatley pleaded not guilty Monday to murder charges that included what a prosecutor has termed the "execution-style" shootings of prisoners in Iraq.

Hatley, 40, is accused of five counts of premeditated murder, one count of conspiracy to commit premeditated murder and one count of obstruction of justice, according to an army charge sheet.

Communication plan

FROM PAGE 1

"We want to build up Bangladesh as the bridge between East and West hemispheres of the world," PM told the meeting.

"Already we have decided to construct elevated roads on the Tongi-Gazipur-Narayanganj route and introduce commuter train service between Dhaka and its adjacent districts to ease the traffic jam and overcrowds in the capital city," she said.

The PM said country's waterways and railways need to be developed so that lower income people can use these paths for communications at cheap rates.

The premier asked the ministry officials to think how the railways and waterways could be upgraded and made more effective means of travels.

Hasina informed the meeting about the government's another plan to set up rail line from Chittagong to Cox's Bazar to directly link the town of scenic beauty with the capital city, Dhaka, for cheaper movement of holidaymakers from home and abroad.

"We have the longest sea beach of the world in Cox's Bazar. But it takes huge time and money to go to Cox's Bazar. If Cox's Bazar can be linked with Dhaka, it will boost the economy and tourism both," Hasina said also adding that the railway

communications in the country's northern districts need to be expanded.

[Hasina then proposed setting up underpasses in the capital as a way out of the nagging traffic jam.

The PM said she has already talked to the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) mayor about constructing an under-bypass linking the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban and the NAM flats wherein the lawmakers reside.

The government has another plan to create a ring road surrounding the capital, she also said.

Hasina asked the communications ministry to help DCC remove traffic congestions from the capital city.

She said since the Awami League's (AL) first tenure of 1996-2001, they had a plan to build up a fast and modern road communications network between the capital city of Dhaka and other districts of the country.

PM said most of the major bridges like the Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge, Paksey Bridge, Dharala Bridge, Gabbhan Bridge and Shikarpur Doarika Bridge were set up by the AL government.

"We wanted to set up the much expected Padma Bridge. But the process had been halted for the last seven years. However, Padma Bridge is expected to be built in time centering which a modern highway would be

set up to link the capital with the Mongla port and other parts of the southern districts," she said.

Hasina underscored the need for constructing roads and highways in a well-planned manner for maximum welfare of the people.

The premier said if the country's all potential could be tapped and utilized properly through effective planning, the people of the country would attain their long cherished economic emancipation.

She also noted that the massive win of the AL-led grand alliance at the December 29 polls imposed a big responsibility on the government to work for people's welfare.

PM assured the government officials of their job satisfaction in all the offices and asked them to continue their work without any fear.

She urged the media men to play constructive role as she said a panicked and frustrated nation cannot work for development.

Finance Minister Abul Maal Abdul Muhith, Communications Minister Syed Abul Hossain, PM's Office Secretary Mollah Waheeduzzaman, Press Secretary Abul Kalam Azad and top officials of the ministry were present.



Palestinian youths hold placards against the Israeli naval blockade on the Gaza Strip at its port yesterday. The Israeli navy blew up a fishing boat filled with explosives off the coast of Hamas-run Gaza, the army said.



Photo shows, Bo, a six-month-old Portuguese water dog, on Sunday after its arrival at the White House in Washington, DC. Bo is a gift from Massachusetts Senator and Mrs. Ted Kennedy.

Obama girls name their new puppy 'Bo'

AP, Washington

Bo? No jest. The first family has settled on a first pet a 6-month-old Portuguese water dog that the Obama girls are naming Bo.

The selection was one of the White House's most tightly kept secrets.

President Barack Obama's daughters, 10-year-old Malia and 7-year-old Sasha, picked a black and white pup, a White House official speaking on the condition of anonymity told The Associated Press Saturday night.

The dog is a gift from Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., who owns several Portuguese water dogs himself.