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THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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The SARS scare: While evidence grows that the virus is coming under control, business travellers and tourists continue to avoid Toronto, wreaking economic havoc in Canada's financial capital

SARS war near end: officials

BY CAROLINE ALPHONSO

The battle against the spread of the SARS virus is all but over in Toronto, health officials said yesterday, even as the city and the rest of Canada struggled to fight growing fear of the disease.

In Toronto, the centre of the country's severe acute respiratory syndrome outbreak, there haven't been any new cases in the general community in 19 days, leaving health officials optimistic the virus is no longer spreading.

And although there is still concern some hospital staff are being infected, a better understanding of the symptoms is keeping any possible spread contained. Ontario's caseload dropped for the first time yesterday, listing 257 probable and suspect cases, down 10 from the previous day.

"I don't think there is a crisis any more. We're seeing an incredible decrease in the curve," said Donald Low, chief microbiologist at Toronto's Mount Sinai Hospital.

"We are on the descending part of an epicurve, not on the ascending part of the epicurve," said James Young, Ontario's public security commissioner.

The upbeat assessment came even as the World Health Organiza-

tion rejected Canadian pleas to rescind its travel advisory to Toronto. Health Minister Anne McLellan failed to persuade WHO director-general Gro Harlem Brundtland to lift its SARS warning, but Ms. McLellan indicated that a reassessment could take place in days as opposed to weeks.

This came amid some good news yesterday, most notably in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong, where SARS is believed to have originated five months ago: It appears the number of cases has peaked.

But there was more evidence of upheaval in Canada, as the WHO's travel advisory on Toronto was causing economic havoc.

Conventions in Quebec City, one of Canada's prime tourist destinations, are seeing a drop in registration of up to 30 per cent, even though the province hasn't had a single recorded case of SARS.

"What's worrisome is that there are people who don't grasp Canadian geography," said Pierre Belle-rose of Tourism Montreal. "People don't know Canada and even if Montreal is five hours from Toronto, for some people it's Canada as a whole that has a problem."

See SARS on page A4



TIBOR KOLLEV/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman listens yesterday to Dr. Sheela Basrur, medical officer of health. The city plans a \$25-million campaign to market itself to the world and win back skittish tourists.

Canadians ratchet up criticism of travel advisory

BY ANDRÉ PICARD AND CAROLINE ALPHONSO

The shock and anger that greeted the surprise World Health Organization advisory that travellers should avoid Toronto has not abated. On the contrary, it has boiled over, leaving politicians, scientists and public-health officials alike seething and stepping up the criticism of the United Nations body.

"The WHO took an unprecedented and, I think, totally unwarranted step," Ontario Premier Ernie Eves said yesterday. "We were, quite frankly, sandbagged."

Donald Low, a mild-mannered microbiologist, said officials at the WHO are guilty of one of the worst transgressions possible for scientists: Being guided by political concerns rather than facts.

"I think they're looking for another scapegoat and I think we're the scapegoat," he said, charging that the WHO was trying to soften the blow of its travel advisories for Hong Kong and parts of China by extending it to Toronto, a city far from Asia.

Had the move come two or three weeks ago, when SARS cases were on the rise in Toronto and the potential for spread into the community was real, Dr. Low said he could have lived with the decision.

But coming at a time when there has not been a single new SARS case in a week — and no community spread in 19 days — the decision was incomprehensible and unacceptable, he said.

Colin D'Cunha, Ontario's chief medical officer of health, was similarly harsh, saying WHO officials should be ashamed of the lack of scientific rigour that went into a decision with broad economic and social implications.

"We didn't find their scientific arguments convincing."

"We were shocked at the level of science that went into that decision," he said.

See WHO on page A6

Fear and shunning of Torontonians

BY PAUL WALDIE, TORONTO AND BERTRAND MAROTTE, MONTREAL

Across Canada and indeed the globe yesterday, Torontonians were blackballed, blacklisted and forced to adjust to the infamy of living in one of the SARS capitals of the world.

Health officials stationed out-

side Alcan Inc.'s annual meeting in Montreal screened shareholders from Toronto. British Airways told pilots and flight crews to stay out of Toronto hotels and sleep in Montreal instead. Major Canadian companies told people from Toronto and other regions hit by SARS to stay away from head office. Toronto businesses scrambled to cope with a flood of

cancelled events.

Even schoolchildren were turned back at the U.S. border.

"It's panic," said Shirley Renaud, who is organizing a trade show in Toronto for 600 spa dealers and spent yesterday fielding calls from frantic Americans worried about visiting the city. "Of course, we have people who are scared. The WHO put Toronto on

the blacklist."

Almost immediately after the World Health Organization issued a travel advisory about Toronto on Wednesday, people from the city found themselves being treated like pariahs.

See TORONTO on page A6

• **Valuable lessons from last year's pariah. A19**

INSIDE

■ Dollar sinks on growing fears over impact of SARS. **B1**

■ A glimmer of hope emerges in global fight against virus. **A8**

■ Major-league ballplayers wary of Toronto road trip. **S1**

■ **Editorial:** Leadership lacking at all levels of government. **A20**

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Explosion kills seven at west-end strip mall

BY GAY ABBATE

A natural-gas explosion caused by a backhoe may have killed as many as seven people as it levelled a small strip plaza in west-end Toronto.

Another four people were taken to hospital with what were believed to be minor injuries caused by falling debris.

The number of deaths could rise when search-and-rescue personnel start sifting through the tonnes of rubble, which until yesterday afternoon had been four retail stores with four apartments above.

The quiet neighbourhood along

Bloor Street is a few blocks west of the Kipling subway, the last station on the Bloor line. Acrid smoke darkened the sky and debris lay scattered. Only one store was not levelled, its rickety skeleton leaning into the rubble-filled crater.

Rosemary Currie said she had never heard such a bang. "The sky went dark, and everything started flying through the air," she said, her voice shaking as she spoke of a mother and daughter presumed to have died in the explosion.

See BLAST on page A22

• **The heartbreaking tale of Louie and his family. A22**

North Korean nukes

A North Korean negotiator admits — at a social gathering — that his country has nuclear weapons and says they are needed to deter an attack by the United States. U.S. officials play down the statement as two days of talks in Beijing to end the crisis over Pyongyang's weapons program close with little progress. **A17**

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Weather: Mainly sunny. High, 13. Map and details, **\$9**
Births & Deaths, **\$8**



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Iraq's Aziz turns himself in

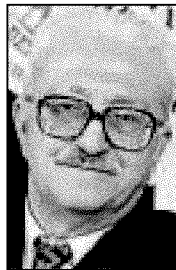
Well-known face of regime in U.S. custody

BY TIMOTHY APPELBY

Tariq Aziz, Iraq's smooth-talking deposed deputy prime minister, once remarked that he always regarded himself as lucky. Mr. Aziz's luck appears to have run dry: The U.S. Central Command in Qatar triumphantly announced yesterday that he is in custody.

The sole Christian in Iraq's Revolutionary Command Council, and the eight of spades in the U.S. military's most-wanted deck of 55 cards, Mr. Aziz is a big prize in the manhunt for leaders of the vanquished Baath Party.

Ever since Iraq invaded Kuwait



Deposed deputy prime minister Tariq Aziz is a big prize in the manhunt for leaders of Iraq's vanquished Baath Party.

in August, 1990, the gnome-like Mr. Aziz has been the best-known face and voice of the now-deposed regime.

Only the image of his rarely seen boss, Saddam Hussein, is more familiar to the world.

Beyond the fact that he had turned himself in, no information about Mr. Aziz's capture was released yesterday. Responding at the White House to reporters' shouted questions about Mr. Aziz's fate, U.S. President George W. Bush just gave a grin and a thumbs-up.

Despite his unswerving loyalty to Mr. Hussein and his international prominence, Mr. Aziz's real power was always in doubt, chiefly because he came not from Mr. Hussein's home province of Tikrit but from the northern city of Mosul, a Baath Party stronghold.

See AZIZ on page A14

• **U.S. outlines timetable for new Iraqi government. A15**



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It’s not business as usual after WHO travel warning

TORONTO *from page A1*

Officials in Arizona told delegates from Toronto who are planning to attend a Global Convergence Forum next week to bring a medical certificate proving they don't have SARS. The conference organizers have also hired a doctor to screen delegates who arrive from Toronto and several Asian countries without certificates.

“Given what’s going on today, we just want to make sure everybody feels comfortable and safe,” said Alex Pachetti, a spokesman for Accenture, host of the event.

In Montreal, Alcan screened shareholders from Toronto attending the company’s annual meeting. Employee shareholders from out of town were also encouraged to avoid attending the meeting in person and to watch it instead on an Internet Webcast, Alcan spokesman Joseph Singerman said.

One or two people checked in with the company doctor and nurse for a quick “verbal triage” and were cleared, he added.

“We took a tough decision several weeks ago when the first significant cases developed in Toronto,” Alcan president and chief executive officer Travis Engen said after the meeting.

“We’ve asked people who’ve been to the affected regions to not visit with us” at head office in Montreal or at other facilities or to meet offsite or by teleconference, he added.

In Vancouver, Placer Dome announced yesterday that its executives will not travel to the company’s annual meeting to be

held in Toronto on April 30, but plan to participate via videoconference.

Several other companies, including Telus, Ford Motor Co., Finning International, Teck Cominco and Shell Canada, issued similar advisories. Even Canada’s national broadcaster, the CBC, cautioned its people against travelling to Toronto after the WHO announcement.

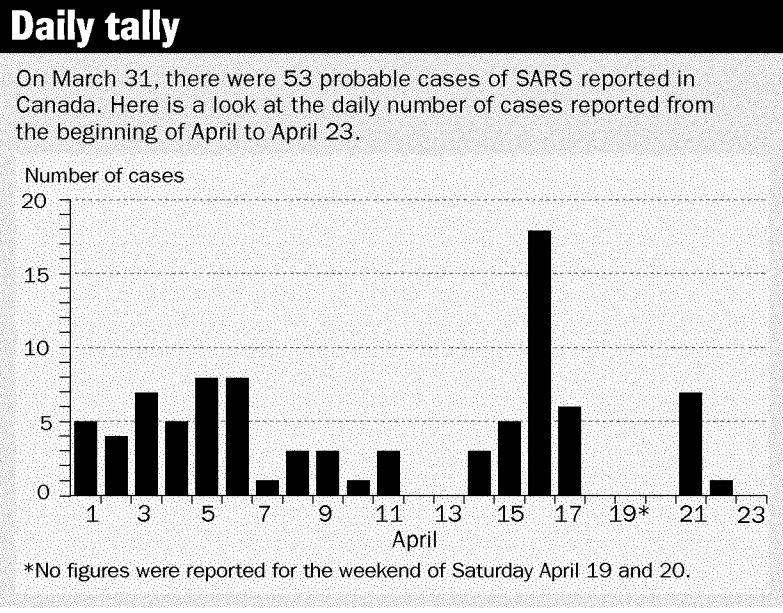
“CBC/Radio Canada takes these advisories seriously and would encourage employees to reconsider non-critical travel to Toronto,” the CBC told employees yesterday.

In London, British Airways announced that flights between Toronto and London will make an unscheduled stop in Montreal so pilots and flight attendants don’t have to take their rest time in Toronto hotels.

“Because of the World Health Organization [directive], we’re just taking extra precautions for the crew,” said Honor Verier, a spokeswoman for British Airways. “We take every precaution. This would just be standard procedure everywhere there was a health advisory.”

Steve Shields and Fran Hopkins, who run an Edmonton-based consulting business, found themselves shunned in Dublin when the WHO warning came out. So many clients cancelled meetings the pair had to return home early.

“It’s the first time that we haven’t felt welcome. There’s just generally a sense that they don’t want to be dealing with Canadians,” Mr. Shields said. “We tried to explain to them that we’re from Edmonton, which is several thou-



SOURCE: HEALTH CANADA THE GLOBE AND MAIL

sands of kilometres away from Toronto. It didn’t matter.”

In New York, retailer Gap Inc. cancelled a fashion event for Toronto media planned to start today. The San Francisco-based retailer also banned all travel in and out of Toronto.

Many businesses across Toronto felt the effect of the WHO warning almost immediately as worried clients from outside the city rushed to cancel events.

Several banks offered assistance to businesses struggling with SARS, and law firms held briefings on legal issues surrounding cancelled events and contracts.

But others played down the WHO warning and vowed to press on.

The annual Brazilian Ball, an extravagant fundraiser that features scantily clad samba dancers mingling with wealthy and business patrons, is going ahead as planned, organizers said.

“It’s going to be bigger than ever and everyone is very excited,”

spokeswoman Edna Kempster said. Of the 1,850 people who bought tickets for tomorrow’s ball, only 30 have cancelled, she said. Yesterday, organizers welcomed 70 samba dancers who flew to Toronto from Rio de Janeiro despite the WHO travel advisory.

Sir Graham Day, former chairman of Ontario Hydro and Sobey’s, also said yesterday that business executives from Atlantic Canada had purchased at least eight tables for the Canadian Business Hall of Fame fete to be held in Toronto on May 1. Sir Graham said a person visiting Toronto these days stands “a greater chance of being hit by lightning or struck by a car” than contracting SARS. “For the average person, of course, [it’s] I’m going to Toronto. Why wouldn’t I?”

With reports from Jill Mahoney, Greg Keenan, Jacquie McNish, Keith McArthur, James Adams, Marina Strauss, Showwei Chu, Wendy Stueck and Colin Freeze

U.S. chief disease expert dismisses WHO advisory

WHO *from page A1*

The WHO decision to issue a travel advisory was based on three criteria: the number of cases over all, the way the disease is being transmitted domestically and the number of cases exported. It said travellers should avoid Toronto because it fared poorly in all three areas.

James Young, Ontario’s public security commissioner, dismissed that view out of hand and made a point-by-point rebuttal. He said the number of SARS cases is actually going down sharply, there is no community transmission of the disease (all the cases can be linked directly with an infected patient) and allegations that Canadians have carried SARS to other countries are nonsense.

The WHO says a Canadian woman introduced SARS to the Philippines and has exposed 60 others to the disease in that country; Dr. Young said she is Canadian, but there is no evidence she contracted SARS in Canada.

WHO said there were three cases introduced into Australia; again, Mr. Young said an investigation showed that it is highly unlikely this family actually had SARS.

The third case the WHO singled out was that of a man who travelled to Pennsylvania from Toronto and was suspected of having SARS; he, too, turned out not to have the disease, and spent his time in quarantine.

Canada’s case was given a high-profile boost yesterday when the head of the influential U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Preven-

tion dismissed the WHO advisory, saying the risk of contracting SARS in Canada is no greater than in any other country.

Julie Gerberding said there is no reason for people to avoid travelling to Toronto or other Canadian cities as long as they take “common-sense precautions,” such as avoiding hospitals.

Officials at the WHO, however, remained steadfast, saying there is no reason to change the advisory and, if anything, it could be extended.

“The reason is that Toronto fits the three criteria for such a warning — that there is an increase in cases, that there is a geographic spread in cases and that there is an export of cases,” said Jon Linden, a WHO spokesman in Geneva. “To say that Toronto has very good health service and that the likelihood is not high of getting the disease if you get to Toronto is fine, but it does not change the basic criteria for our travel advice.”

Canadian officials have challenged the WHO advisory not only in public statements, but also through formal diplomatic channels.

Federal Health Minister Anne McLellan yesterday spoke directly to Gro Harlem Brundtland, executive director of the WHO, to express Canada’s displeasure with the unprecedented move.

The minister said in Edmonton that the discussion was “frank.” The WHO would not rescind its advisory against travel to Toronto, but the agency would reassess the directive.

With a report from Jill Mahoney

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