

Countries step up bird flu battle

REUTERS, Van

Rich donors promised to step up the cash flow for fighting bird flu on Friday, with the World Bank saying \$1.4 billion is needed, the European Union pledging \$100 million, and the US sending a team of experts to Turkey to fight a growing outbreak there.

Turkey culled more birds to try to stop the deadly H5N1 avian flu virus from spreading further, as did some worried neighbours.

Roche AG, maker of Tamiflu, the best known drug defence against flu, said it would donate more antiviral pills to Asia, the epicenter of the health threat. Turkish doctors expressed hope that early use of the drug was helping save some of the young victims of the virus.

The World Bank said global financial costs to prepare for and respond to outbreaks of bird flu will be between \$1.2 billion and \$1.4 billion, with most money needed in East Asia and the Pacific region, followed by Europe and Central Asia and then Africa.

Cash will be needed for animal and human health alike, as well as the building of drug stockpiles to

treat victims of the virus, which still mostly affects birds but which has infected about 150 people and killed at least 78.

The human victims of the disease had all been in East Asia until the recent outbreak in Turkey brought the virus to the crossroads of Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

Three infected children died last week in eastern Turkey and 15 more people have tested positive. Authorities are testing whether a four-year-old girl who died Friday was infected.

At least two children, including eight-year-old Sumeyye Mamuk, were discharged from a hospital in Van, eastern Turkey, on Thursday after being treated with Tamiflu. "She has completely recovered. This is a success for us," Van hospital Dr. Ahmed Faik Oner told Reuters.

Like so many other children, Sumeyye apparently became infected while trying to comfort a sick chicken.

Two people were admitted to hospital in the southeastern city of Diyarbakir for tests after showing

"suspicious" symptoms. The disease has struck poultry in the area.

Turkey's Agriculture Ministry said almost 600,000 poultry had been culled across the country over the past two weeks.

Newspapers say the authorities may offer 5 lira (\$3) per chicken, 15 (\$9) lira per goose and duck and 20 lira (\$12) per turkey as compensation.

"Our sales of white meat have plunged 80 percent in the last couple of days. People are avoiding chicken. They choose other dishes instead," said Van egg producer Resat Baytar.

Iran started culling thousands of birds along its border with Turkey to try to stop the disease from spreading.

France said it was extending its poultry confinement measures to 58 departments from an original 26 as fears grow over a virus believed to be carried by migratory birds.

Romania, just across the Black Sea from Turkey, boosted disinfection measures on major roads and introduced luggage checks at airports, train stations and sea ports.

Saddam trial judge not to step down

AFP, Baghdad

The judge presiding over the Iraqi tribunal trying deposed dictator Saddam Hussein intends to stay in his job, Iraqi judicial officials said after a report suggested he might step down.

"These reports are baseless and the judge has shown no intention of resigning," said an official close to the Iraqi High Tribunal who requested anonymity.

Iraqi newspapers Saturday said Rizkar Mohammed Amin, a Kurd, intended to step down as judge presiding over the trial of Saddam and seven co-accused.

The men are charged with ordering the massacre of more than 140 Shiites in the town of Dujaal following a 1982 assassination attempt on the Iraqi leader.

"Judge Amin is staying put and nothing has changed in the make-up of the court," another official close to the tribunal said.

The case against Saddam adjourned in December and is to reopen on January 24.

The High Tribunal in late December denied earlier press reports suggesting the judge wanted to resign in the wake of criticism.

'US targeted Zawahiri in air strike'

Pakistan investigating reports, protestors torch aid office

REUTERS, AFP, Islamabad, Washington

A US air strike in Pakistan targeted al Qaeda's second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, but it was unclear if he had been killed. US sources knowledgeable about the strike said.

CNN quoted sources saying the CIA ordered Friday's strike after receiving intelligence Zawahiri was in a village near the border with Afghanistan.

ABC News quoted Pakistani military sources as saying five of those killed were "high-level" al Qaeda figures.

The attack killed at least 18 people, including women and children, locals say.

US sources in Washington knowledgeable about the strike, believed to have been conducted by CIA-operated unmanned drones armed with missiles, told Reuters it would not be known whether Zawahiri was killed until the remains of the dead were examined.



A recent photo of Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Pakistan was investigating the reports, Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed said. "Our investigation is still going on ... I cannot confirm anything," he told Reuters.

A Pakistani intelligence source said he had been told by US officials the strike was ordered based on information Zawahiri and Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar had been invited to a dinner to celebrate this week's Muslim Eid

al-Zahra festival.

But they had no confirmation either had been there at the time of the attack about 3 am on Friday (2200 GMT Thursday) and senior Taliban commander Mullah Dadullah told Reuters no Taliban commander had been there.

Another intelligence official said four US aircraft had fired four missiles that destroyed three houses in the attack on the village of Damadola in the Bajaur tribal agency opposite Afghanistan's insurgent-troubled Kunar province.

While 18 villagers were killed -- eight women, five men and five children -- another five bodies were thought to have been removed after the attack and Pakistani agents were uncertain where they had been taken, said the first intelligence source, who declined to be identified.

One Damadola resident said three or four foreigners had come from Afghanistan for Eid. Another

said he had seen bodies of at least two people who seemed to have been outsiders.

"Where these bodies have gone, I don't know," he said.

Meanwhile Pakistani tribesmen torched the office of a US-funded aid group Saturday amid protests against the deaths of 18 people in an alleged US airstrike targeting al-Qaeda's number two, witnesses said.

An estimated 5,000 people gathered at a stadium near Khar, the main town in the Bajaur tribal zone, close to the village of Damadola where Friday's attack happened, an AFP reporter said.

Some demonstrators then set fire to the offices of Associated Development Construction, a non-governmental organisation funded by the US Agency for International Development, an official at the aid group said.

"They people have attacked our office in reaction to the deaths on Friday and put it on fire, it is badly damaged," site engineer Fazal Maibood told AFP.

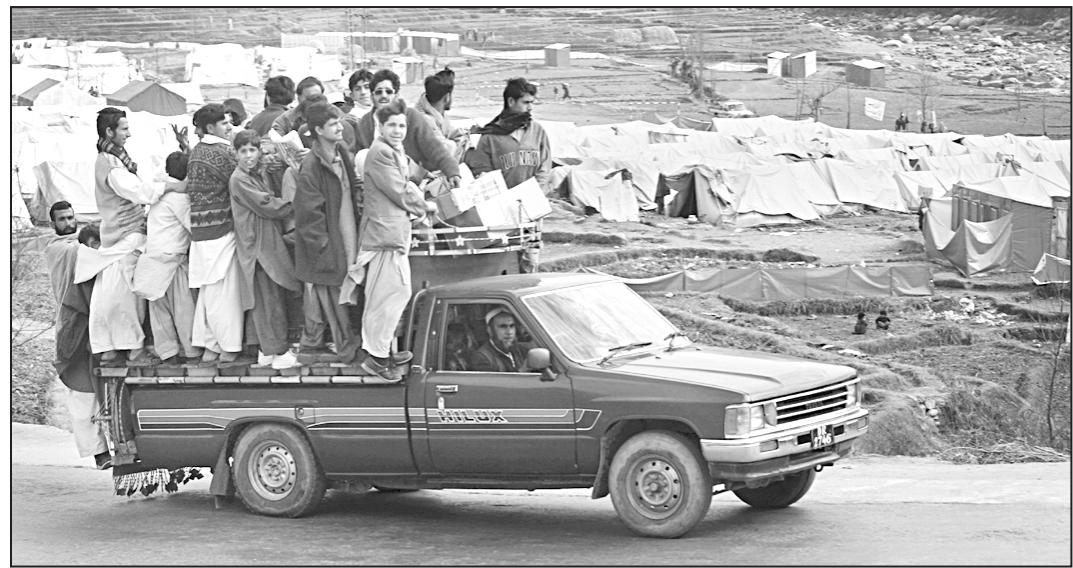


PHOTO: AFP

A taxi carries Pakistani passengers past a refugee camp in Batgram yesterday. The earth-quake of October 8 last year, the worst in Pakistan's history, killed nearly 74,000 people and rendered more than three million homeless in Pakistani Kashmir and parts of the country's North West Frontier Province.

Clinton backs Blair as next UN chief

BBC NEWS ONLINE

British Prime Minister Tony Blair would make a "good" secretary general of the United Nations, former US President Bill Clinton has said.

Clinton said he had discussed Blair's future with him and told him there was "a lot of good you can do in the world" after leaving Number 10.

Blair has said he would step down before the next general election, but has not revealed his future plans.

The current UN chief, Kofi Annan, ends his term on 31 December this year.

When asked on BBC2's Newsnight if Blair should run for UN secretary general, Mr Clinton responded: "That would suit me. He would be a good one."

Clinton said whatever Mr Blair did after leaving Number 10 he could expect "immense rewards" from speaking engagements, books and directorships.

"What I would say to him and what I have said to him - I saw him actually last month - is that, when he does go, he's still got a lot he can do, a lot of good you can do in the world and that's the most important thing," Clinton said.

"I think there are lots of things you can do."

"You can... take a position, or you can do what I do - just create your own operation and try to find some public good you can do as a private citizen."

Since his own retirement from leading a country in 2000, Clinton has established a foundation campaigning on issues such as the fight against HIV/Aids.

"This has been an immensely rewarding phase of my life and I think he will find immense rewards when his service is done," Clinton added.

Iraq set for political fight one month after vote

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq geared up Saturday for a political fight to create a new government, with Shiite leaders saying they should call the shots while Sunni Arabs and Kurds feel the power should be shared.

A month after the general election, political parties are still waiting for the results and are jockeying for position ahead of the start of serious bargaining on the make-up of the country's first full-term government since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

Initial indications showed that Iraq's Shiite majority came out on top in the December 15 vote but final results -- due in the coming days -- have been delayed by a probe into complaints by Sunni-backed and secular parties of ballot-rigging.

Eager to flex his political muscle, Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, head of the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), the top Shiite-backed coalition, said

the new government should reflect election results rather than an undemocratic consensus between parties.

A consensus-based government "signifies the end of democracy, the end of giving power to the majority and of the elections," Hakim told the publicly-funded Al-Sabah newspaper.

Hakim indicated the minority Sunni Arabs and Kurds would be invited to take part in the new administration, but only on the terms of the winning Shiite coalition.

As a result, he said, the country would also enjoy a viable opposition -- crucial in a democracy.

US and British officials have repeatedly warned Iraq's political parties that in a democratic election there are winners and losers.

At the same time, Washington and London hope Iraqi leaders set up a broad-based coalition government to help undermine Sunni support for the insurgency.

Western nations to reopen Jordan missions

AFP, Amman

Australia, Britain and Canada are to reopen their embassies in Jordan which have been closed for a week because of a terror alert, officials said.

"We are resuming normal activities from tomorrow (Sunday)," an official at the Canadian embassy in Amman told AFP.

Staff at the British embassy have also been told to return to work on Sunday, while the Australian embassy will reopen on Monday, according to the foreign ministry website.

The three missions were closed for security reasons a week ago, warning of a new threat of attacks against Western targets in the kingdom.

The moved followed bomb attacks claimed by al-Qaeda against three luxury hotels in Amman in November that killed 60 people plus three bombers and wounded about 100 more.

Jordan is a key US ally and regarded as one of the most stable countries in the volatile Middle East.

Lanka peace monitors hit by bomb attacks

AFP, Colombo

Scandinavian truce monitors were hit by a bomb attack Saturday after they pointed fingers at both Sri Lanka's government and Tamil Tiger rebels for violence that threatens to push the island back to war.

Meanwhile two sailors were killed and another wounded Saturday in a claymore mine attack by suspected Tiger rebels on the northern Jaffna peninsula in the latest of a series of assaults on the navy.

A similar bomb and a hand grenade were found by troops sweeping a main road in Jaffna for mines early in the morning, the ministry said.

Before dawn an explosion ripped through a parking area of the Norwegian-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) office in Batticaloa, 300 km east of the capital, police said.

A pickup truck was badly damaged and shrapnel peppered three other SLMM vehicles, police said adding that there were no casualties in the attack.

"We suspect that the bomb was either planted in the ground or was

attached to a wheel of the pickup truck," a police official told AFP. "We have called in forensic experts to carry out an investigation."

There was no immediate claim of responsibility and the SLMM had issued no comment.

The blast came just hours after the monitors asked the Colombo government to disarm anti-LTTE paramilitary units operating in the east, including Batticaloa, and also criticised the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam for the upsurge in violence.

On Christmas day, a pro-LTTE legislator was shot dead while he attended a midnight service at a Catholic church in Batticaloa, which is heavily guarded by troops.

The bombing of the SLMM office was the latest in a series of attacks against the Scandinavian monitors who number about 60 and are deployed under a truce brokered by Norway.

The SLMM was established several weeks after the ceasefire went into effect on February 23, 2002 and has on several occasions had vehicles attacked and its members threatened.



PHOTO: AFP

An Indian Hindu devotee holds a child as they offer prayer on Sagar Island, some 150 kms south of Kolkata, yesterday during the main bathing day of the Gangasagar Mela. Thousands of pilgrims have assembled on the island for West Bengal's largest festival, The Gangasagar Mela held to mark Makar Sankranti, the worship of the sun god.

Gonzales to testify on US domestic spying programme

REUTERS, Washington

US Attorney General Alberto Gonzales said on Friday he would testify in a Senate hearing to give the administration's legal justification for a secret domestic eavesdropping operation approved by President George W. Bush after the September 11 attacks.

News last month of the covert domestic spying programme sparked an outcry by Democrats and Republicans, with many lawmakers and rights groups questioning whether it violates the US Constitution.

"One of my responsibilities as attorney general is to explain some of what the administration is doing and the reasons for, the rationale for, what the administration is doing," Gonzales told reporters.

"The president has confirmed the existence of a highly classified program," he said, referring to the domestic eavesdropping programme conducted by the

National Security Agency. "Many parts of the programme still remain classified."

Gonzales said he had agreed with Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Arlen Specter, a Republican from Pennsylvania, to testify in hearings on the controversial programme that eavesdrops on US phone calls and e-mails.

Gonzales said he would not discuss any operational details at the hearing and would only explain the legal justification.

The testimony will take place in Senate hearings that are expected to be held early next month.

It was unclear whether the judiciary committee would also hear testimony from senior intelligence officials such as the NSA director, Army Lt. Gen. Keith Alexander, or Air Force Gen. Michael Hayden, the No. 2 US intelligence official who ran the NSA when the eavesdropping program began.