

Deadly bird flu strikes first chickens in EU

AFP, Vienna

The deadly H5N1 bird flu virus has been detected in two chickens in Austria, officials said Wednesday, the first time the virus has appeared in poultry in the EU.

Two chickens were contaminated in the Noah's Ark animal pound in the southern city of Graz, apparently infected from a swan which had been brought there earlier this month, the head of the pound Herbert Oster told AFP.

Hans Seitinger, agriculture official for the Steiermark region, told reporters that three ducks from Noah's Ark had also tested positive for H5N1.

Serbian media fan Mladic rumours

BBC NEWS ONLINE

Serb media reports suggest the net is closing around top war crimes suspect General Ratko Mladic, despite official denials of his capture.

Some Serbian papers suggest the former Bosnian Serb wartime general is under arrest or being talked into surrender.

But Belgrade has rejected reports of his capture, and it is also denied by The Hague tribunal, which has charged Gen Mladic with war crimes in Bosnia.

Nonetheless, BBC correspondents say some form of talks may be under way.

European Union Enlargement Commissioner Olli Rehn is due to present a report early next week to EU foreign ministers on whether Serbia is co-operating with the tribunal.

Iraqi city sealed off after attack on shrine

REUTERS, Samarra, Iraq

Security forces sealed off the mainly Sunni city of Samarra in Iraq yesterday after a bomb attack wrecked a major Shia shrine in the city.

Police said they had fired over demonstrators' heads at one point as they chanted religious and anti-American slogans.

Iraqi troops patrolled streets in the Sunni Baghdad district of Aadhamiya. The Defence Ministry said it was considering deploying troops to prevent clashes between rival communities. The US military said its forces had taken no special action.

Top Sunni political leader Adnan al-Dulaimi urged Jaafari to impose a curfew to protect Sunnis and accused Shia gunmen of

killing a Sunni cleric in Baghdad.

Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, powerful leader of the Shia SCIRI party, which has its own armed wing, said: "The great Iraqi people will not keep silent over this grave crime."

The leading Sunni religious body also condemned the attack, as did Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, a Sunni Kurd.

In the mainly Shia city of Basra, police said gunmen fired on the office of the main Sunni political group, the Iraqi Islamic Party. Witnesses said rocket-propelled grenades damaged a Sunni mosque in the city. A Reuters reporter said Sunni and Shia gunmen were trading heavy fire.

Police said an Iraqi Islamic Party office was burned on the outskirts of Baghdad.

Gunmen fired on a Sunni mosque in Baghdad's Ghazaliya district and burned its gate, police and witnesses said. A Sunni clerical group said three Baghdad mosques were fired on. A Sunni cleric said rocket-propelled grenades hit mosques in the eastern area of Baladiyat. Iraqi troops prevented journalists reaching the scene. Some similar reports turned out to be false.

In an instant protest, thousands of people marched in Shia towns across the country and through the capital, condemning the Samarra attack.

Black-clad militiamen of the Mehdi Army, loyal to Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, were out in force in Shia strongholds like Sadr City in Baghdad and the southern city of Samawa.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqis inspect the bombed holy shrine of al-Hadi in the Iraqi northern city of Samarra yesterday.

3 charged with planning to attack troops

AP, Cleveland

Three men from the Middle East have been charged with plotting terrorist attacks against US and coalition troops in Iraq and other countries.

One of the men, a citizen of both the US and Jordan, also was accused of threatening to kill or injure President Bush, according to an indictment released Tuesday.

All three had lived in Toledo within the past year and were arrested over the weekend two of them in Toledo, the third in Jordan, authorities said.

An unidentified person with a military background helped the US government foil the plot by working with the suspects while secretly gathering evidence, according to the indictment.

Attorney General Alberto Gonzales also did not exclude the use of warrantless wiretapping in the investigation, but said prosecutors were careful not to jeopardize the case.

"This case stands as a reminder of the need for continued vigilance in the war on terrorism," he said at a news conference in Washington.

One of the men's lawyers said Tuesday that the government was overzealous in bringing the charges.

"It doesn't help that he's Jordanian," attorney Steve Hartman said of his client. "I think he's caught up in the Justice Department's vigorous work."

Danish embassy to reopen in Jakarta

AFP, Jakarta

Denmark's ambassador to Indonesia has returned to Jakarta after having evacuated the embassy building earlier this month, because of violent protests over cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, an official from the mission said on Wednesday.

"The ambassador plans to reopen the embassy as soon as possible and that's the reason for him coming back", an embassy official said, adding however that not all staff were yet back in the country.

The mission staff had evacuated Jakarta on February 11, after an extremist group issued death threats against them, in protest against the caricatures of Prophet Mohammed published in a Danish newspaper in 2005.

A Jakarta police spokesman said that security would be boosted around the building housing the embassy, although he said no request to do this had yet been received.

"But even without a demand, it is our obligation to reinforce our security for the embassy and its staff, especially after the recent events there," he said.

Russian anti-terror draft law passed

AFP, Moscow

Russian MPs cleared the way Wednesday for passage of a sweeping new anti-terror law defining terms under which the military may shoot down hijacked passenger planes, strike at suspected terrorist targets abroad and curb civil liberties for security reasons.

A draft law entitled On Counter-terrorist Action was approved by deputies in the State Duma on the second of three readings by a vote of 408 in favor, one against and five abstentions.

A third and final vote on the new law was expected to take place

Sunday, after which its approval by the upper chamber of parliament, the Federation Council, and signing into law by President Vladimir Putin, was considered a formality.

The draft law, under revision since it was first debated in the Duma a year ago, aims to codify action that may be taken by the military, law enforcement agencies and other security bodies to deal with acts of terrorism in progress and to prevent them from taking place.

It states, for example, that anti-air defenses may shoot down an aircraft after confirmation that it has been hijacked and if its flight path poses a threat to vital targets or sites with a high concentration of people.

Dalai Lama envoys return after talks with China

AFP, Beijing

Envoys of the Dalai Lama headed home Wednesday after closed-door talks in Beijing that they hope will lead to more autonomy for Tibet, the spiritual leader's government-in-exile said Wednesday.

"They will arrive in Dharamsala tomorrow," said Thubten Samphel, spokesman for the government-in-exile located in the Indian hill station. He declined to comment on the progress or content of the talks.

The week-long talks were the fifth time that Chinese and Tibetan representatives have met since dialogue between the two restarted in 2002.

Sri Lanka truce talks begin

AFP, Geneva

Sri Lanka's warring parties formally ended years of deadlock in efforts to end three decades of bloody conflict Wednesday, kicking off two days of talks which negotiators hope will help save a fragile truce.

Sri Lanka's chief negotiator Nimal Siripala de Silva and his counterpart from the Tamil Tiger rebel group, Anton Balasingham, marked the first face-to-face meeting between the two sides since 2003 with a handshake before shifting behind closed doors with Norwegian peacebrokers.

The landmark gathering has drawn seven government dele-

gates and 11 from the rebel side, plus 10 Norwegian representatives.

The venue, the Chateau de Bossey near Geneva, was off limits to outsiders once the talks got underway Wednesday morning.

The government and the rebels, known formally as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), agreed to an initial photo opportunity and a closing statement on Thursday, said Norwegian diplomats who organized the talks with their Swiss counterparts.

Norway has been trying to help end three decades of ethnic bloodshed which has claimed more than 60,000 lives as the Tigers battle for independence for Sri Lanka's Tamil

minority.

The Scandinavian government arranged the talks to save a troubled four-year-old ceasefire and stop the island sliding back to full-scale war. Both sides spent months wrangling over a suitable venue.

Diplomats close to the process said they did not expect a breakthrough in Celigny, but that they believed they could get a deal on further meetings.

"We have got a very high-level meeting. After three years, it is a big breakthrough. But we must not expect a big decision on the peace process after two days of talks," a top diplomatic source close to the talks said.



PHOTO: AFP

Suspected members of Al-Qaeda in Yemen, Mohammed Hudhiban (L), Abdullah Hassan al-Abbadi (C) and an unidentified defendant, are seen behind the bars during the first hearing in their trial at a court in Sanaa yesterday. The 17 defendants face charges of plotting attacks on Western targets in Yemen on orders from Al-Qaeda's Iraq frontman Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. They are also suspected of plotting "to attack places where there are Westerners, including Aden Hotel," in the southern port city of Aden.

Hamas, Fatah discuss Palestinian govt

REUTERS, Gaza

Fatah leaders came to the home of a top Hamas official on Wednesday to begin talks on a possible governing partnership between the long-dominant Palestinian faction and the militant group that crushed it at the polls.

Fatah has been cool to the idea of joining a government led by its powerful Islamist rival, which swept to victory in the January 25 election on a platform of rooting out corruption in a Palestinian Authority dominated by the mainstream faction.

The coalition talks, at the Gaza home of Mahmoud al-Zahar, leader of Hamas's majority parliamentary faction, were the first between the two groups since the ballot.

Neither Hamas officials nor the Fatah delegation, led by Azzam al-

Ahmad, head of its legislative bloc, and Ahmed Hilles, a senior faction official in the

Gaza Strip, made any comment to reporters at the start of the session.

The meeting was held a day after President Mahmoud Abbas of Fatah asked Hamas Prime Minister-designate Ismail Haniyeh to form a government.

But in the West Bank city of Ramallah, Nabil Shaath, a senior Fatah official, said many members of the faction objected to joining a Hamas-led administration because "we need time to rebuild the movement" after the surprise election defeat.

"Fatah is effectively a participant in power ... through the position of President Abbas. But we need to agree on a political programme in order to take part in the government," Shaath said.