

Signs of panic as bird flu takes wing in Europe

AFP, Paris

A French mayor banning chicken from school canteens, Germans abandoning cats by the hundreds, Greeks and Italians virtually axing poultry from their diets are all signs that a worried Europe is inching toward what some have called a bird flu psychosis.

In Austria, a provincial hospital in Burgenland has even reserved 20 percent of its beds for possible bird flu patients, even though no human infections have been reported anywhere in Europe.

Indeed, despite assurances from officials that health risks are negligible, an edgy public is taking its own, not always rational, precautions against the deadly virus.

Their first line of defence has been to stop eating poultry, even if experts have said that cooked fowl poses no threat.

In countries where there have been avian outbreaks of the deadly H5N1 strain, poultry sales have been hit especially hard.

In Greece, consumption has plummeted by 75 percent in three weeks, according to the country's largest poultry farmers' association. "If sales continue falling at this rate, poultry farms may have to close," association head Spyros Nonikas told AFP on Friday.

Fearing a public panic, Nonikas has urged the Greek broadcasting regulator to ensure that TV channels are "more moderate about what they say on this issue."

In Italy, where poultry meat sales have dropped off by 70 percent since an H5N1 outbreak among wild, migratory birds, many butchers have simply

stopped selling chicken and duck altogether.

A special hotline set up by the ministry of health is fielding an average of 3000 calls a day, many asking about the risks posed by pets following the confirmation Thursday that a cat in Germany was killed by the highly pathogenic H5N1 strain, the first European known case in a mammal.

In Germany itself, hundreds of cat owners have abandoned their pets, and some have sought to have them put down, the German animal welfare society said.

"Nationwide, several hundred cats have been left with us. People are scared their cats have bird flu," a spokesman for the group told AFP.

In France, mayor Joel Boutier of Grosly, a small town north of Paris, banned chicken from school dinners "following numerous appeals from worried parents," he said.

The ban provoked angry reactions from poultry producers.

Martin Malvy, president of the Midi-Pyrenees region which includes a major chicken farming area in the Gers department, wrote to Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin asking him to condemn the measure as "inopportune and unjustified."

The gathering panic across Europe threatens to have a ruinous impact on the continent's multi-billion dollar poultry industry, as well as ancillary sectors such as feed suppliers.

Europe's largest poultry producer, the Brittany-based Doux group, announced Thursday that it would temporarily cut 500 to 600 jobs — 10 to 15 percent of the company's workforce in France — until at least June 30.

A drop in sales of 25 to 30 percent just in the last week has come on top of

an earlier fall of 15 to 20 percent since October 2005, a company spokesman said.

In Bosnia, sales have dropped off 90 percent, a spokesman for an association grouping 300 poultry farmers said Friday.

The German federation of poultry farmers estimated Friday that bird flu had already cost its members 134 million euros (160 million dollars) since last fall.

Policifiers, health officials and even a Catholic bishop have all tried to calm public fears.

In Greece's northern region of Thessaloniki, where a bird flu outbreak has axed poultry consumption by 80 percent, local authorities and schools have launched information campaigns, and poultry producers offered 1,500 grilled chickens on Wednesday to passers-by in the port city of Salonika.

In France, the bishop of Aire et Dax in the southwest — the country's largest poultry and foie gras-producing region — appealed to his flock to keep eating chicken.

"I ask Catholics in the Landes department to keep their heads, to maintain their traditional habits and to eat poultry as usual, notably during the season of Lent which has just begun," Philippe Breton said in a message to be read out in churches over the weekend.

Back in 1971, the country consumed only 150,000-200,000 tonnes of petroleum. The demand shot up to 3.5 million tonnes in 2005-06. Yet, the country's petroleum import, storage and processing infrastructures, which were set up in the early seventies, hardly expanded to meet the growing demand.

Roughly, petroleum related infrastructure grew on make-shift basis, like expanding storage facilities only by 30 percent over the years, which is too inadequate, noted an official.

DEMURRAGE AND LOSSES While unloading imported crude oil from ships from Kutubdia, the BPC invariably pays to the ships a demurrage of \$400,000 to half a million dollars for shipment of 100,000 tonnes for delayed discharging, beyond the permissible time of 36 hours.

The BPC pays this because it cannot unload oil within the permissible and penalty-free time of 36 to 42 hours. Due to lack of appropriate port facility, it takes 8 to 10 days to finish the job while paying a demurrage of \$50,000 a day. Since this is unavoidable, the BPC calculates the oil import price incorporating this loss by asking 10 days laytime for completion of discharge. The demurrage stands at \$4 per tonne.

Again, the BPC bears the extra cost for unloading crude oil, in smaller instalments technically termed as lightering, from the mother ship in smaller ships chartered by Bangladesh Shipping Corporation (BSC).

Lightering adds an extra cost of \$4 per tonne of crude oil. In addition, on an average, the BPC loses 350 tonnes of crude oil per 100,000 tonnes of shipment as "ocean loss," adding a loss of another 22 cents per tonne.

The crude-oil carrying ships anchor at Kutubdia as they cannot approach the jetty or any other nearest point of anchorage due to draught problem. But these lightering and demurrage costs and ocean loss can be avoided by setting up a single mooring system. For unloading crude oil, Bangladesh like any other importing countries must set up a 50 km-long 20-inch diameter oil pipeline in Kutubdia and outer anchorage up to oil mooring. Such a system would make unloading a fast and loss-free process, saving a huge cost. "As Bangladesh will depend on petroleum import, it must optimise its import facilities to make it as cost-effective as possible. The higher authorities are aware of the importance of having a single mooring sea terminal but never

Dr Kamal said it will not be wise to make a quick investigation into the case of Abdur Rahman and punish him after trial by a speedy tribunal. It must be seen how this man could build up such militant network in the last seven years, what was his motive and who are with him.

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Hasina

FROM PAGE 1 sincere stance against militancy, they would not have expelled BNP MP Abu Hena for naming some ruling alliance leaders as patronising the militants," Hasina observed.

After the 17 August blasts, the government had taken some measures against the militants in the face of pressure from international community as well as public, but they repeatedly made drama in the name of punishing down Shaekh Rahman and Bangla Bhai, said the opposition leader.

The way Rahman surrendered has aroused suspicion among the people, she added.

Hasina said it was unbelievable how a man like Rahman stays with his family members even after the government had announced a bounty of Tk 50 lakh for his head.

The recovery of books of Golam Azam and Moududi from the house of Rahman proves the ruling coalition partner Jamaat-e-Islam's links with the militant outfit, the AL president observed.

She said the people now wait for what she said was the time when the government would again stage a drama on Bangla Bhai.

Bush to talk

FROM PAGE 16 slow-moving peace process since early 2004 aimed at settling their nearly six-decade-old feud over the Himalayan region of Kashmir, trigger of two of their three wars.

The United States has been pursuing a delicate balancing act in seeking to boost relations with India at the same time as preserving its ties with Pakistan, a key ally in Washington's "war on terror".

Poor planning

FROM PAGE 1

Jamuna, Padma and Meghna—three of the government's oil distribution subsidiaries, sources say. Jamuna incurs a massive loss from oil distribution while Padma Oil, which is a public-private joint venture, makes good profit doing the same job.

"Policymakers talk a lot about smuggling of petroleum products. But where do the smugglers get them? They get it from the coastal tankers. If the policymakers really mean business, they must stop such pilferage," a top official noted.

Furthermore, the country's petroleum storage facilities built in the early seventies can only maintain fuel inventory for 30 days. This threatens petroleum security and also puts the nation at a disadvantage in purchasing larger quantity of oil when the price is comparatively low.

According to oil industry sources, to meet the domestic oil demand growth of 10 percent a year, the government must follow a policy of upgrading discharging facilities, storage capacity and crude oil refining capacity.

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28 public polytechnics

FROM PAGE 16

Though officials at the Directorate acknowledged many of the statements made by the teachers, they denied that academic activities across the polytechnics are being severely hampered due to dearth of teachers.

The officials said the insufficient number of teachers in the project-based institutes should not be viewed so negatively as the institutes have come into operation only recently.

Those institutes have just had the inaugural batch of students enrolled and that is why they do not need a large number of teachers right away, they argued.

The directorate officials, however, said so far only one qualified candidate has been found against an advertisement for the positions of principal in the 18 polytechnic institutes.

"The situation at the 20 old government polytechnics will improve considerably as the government will soon complete recruitment to 225 posts of junior instructor and instructor," said Abul Bashar, director general of Technical Education Directorate.

Of those posts, 110 junior instructors have already been recruited while 115 wait to be appointed soon, he added.

Many principals and vice-principals in the conventional gov-

ernment polytechnics have gone into retirement recently, creating a huge vacuum to be filled, he noted.

About the vacant posts of principal and vice-principal in the project-based institutes, Abul Bashar said the government will soon place advertisement for the second to fill the posts.

"However, none of the public polytechnics are having difficulties in terms of functions as other faculty members have been immediately tasked with carrying out the responsibilities of the posts left vacant," he said.

BPTA has submitted a memorandum to the prime minister and the state minister for education of late, demanding an urgent initiative to fill the vacant posts in the public polytechnics. In the memorandum, they threatened to go for tougher programmes in case of the government not taking necessary measures to this end.

Expressing concern over the teacher crisis at the polytechnic institutes, President of Institute of Diploma Engineers, Bangladesh Rafiqul Islam said, "Quantity as well as quality of the diploma engineers will come down alarmingly if such an acute shortage of teachers persists."

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Muslims protest

FROM PAGE 16 competition," he told the students.

Andhra Pradesh state supplies nearly a quarter of the Indian technology professionals who work in the United States, according to government figures.

After Bangalore, Hyderabad is India's number two exporter of software, mainly to the United States, and is a pillar of the country's booming multi-billion dollar technology and outsourcing services industries.

The Press Trust of India news agency quoted Bush as acknowledging that people lose jobs as a result of globalisation.

"Losing a job is painful. But the fundamental question is how does the government react," he told the students, adding that one way was to resort to protectionist laws and the other was to educate people so that they could find new jobs.

The president was scheduled to deliver a speech to political and business leaders late Friday at a 16th-century Mughal fort in New Delhi before departing for neighbouring Pakistan.

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4 abducted girls rescued in Patuakhali

UNB, Patuakhali

Police rescued four girls, abducted by human traffickers, from the local launch terminal yesterday.

The victims are Hajera, 9, Mariyam, 7, and Jesmin, 12, of Najibpur village in Kalapara upazila, and Rashida, 8, of Galachipa upazila of the district.

Police said they rescued the girls in the afternoon as they cried for help.

The victims told police that some miscreants had picked up them from Mahipur while they were going to their relatives' house.

Sensing the presence of the law enforcers, the traffickers fled the scene.

Duta unhappy

FROM PAGE 16 But the VC said the committee was formed with only members of the syndicate. Nobody from outside the syndicate was included in the committee to maintain its impartiality.

According to the terms of reference of the probe committee, it will investigate only the faults in the tabulation sheets but will not investigate the allegations that the question papers were not kept in the examination controller's strong room before the examinations, possible leakage of those question papers and possible irregularities in evaluating the examination papers.

Duta will officially ask the university authorities to let it know about the terms of reference of the probe committee, as it wants a thorough investigation of the matter, Prof Sharifullah Bhuiyan said.

"We will also demand that the university authorities show all the documents to Duta present and secretary, so they could not be tampered with."

Earlier, Duta held an urgent general meeting on February 19 and asked the university authorities to form a facts finding committee to facilitate a thorough investigation and wanted to see the tabulation sheets, as it is having a crisis of confidence on the authorities, said Prof Bhuiyan.

Sources said there are some strong suspicions about where the question papers were kept before the examinations, possible leakage of those questions, and evaluation of the examination papers, so Duta might ask the authorities to change the terms of reference of the probe committee to cover all the allegations.

The VC said if any one comes with proper evidence of question paper leakage and other matters, those must be investigated.

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KTS FIRE IN CTG

Families of five victims get TK 79,000 each

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Chittagong

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) yesterday distributed cheques for Tk 79 thousand each to the five families of the burnt dead workers of KTS Textile and Garments where the country's worst-ever factory fire on February 23 left over fifty people killed and around one hundred injured.

At a function at Agrabad BGMEA Bhaban conference room in the afternoon, the chief guest Fisheries and Livestock Minister Abdullah Al Noman handed over the cheques.

The cheques for compensation were handed over to the five bereaved family members who appeared with sufficient proofs or evidence to claim it. Families of deceased Khuki Akhter, Yasmin Begum, Amena Khatun, Mohiuddin Rana and Sumi Akhter received the cheques.

In addition to Tk 79 thousand, Tk 21 thousand will be given to each deserving persons as per law through Labour Court, sources said.

BGMEA will help the victims' family members to get the rest of the money from the

Labour Court, said BGMEA 1st Vice-President S.M. Abu Taher.

Putting the official figures of the burnt dead workers of KTS at 56, the BGMEA leaders promised to pay compensation of Tk 1 lakh for each of the other victims gradually.

The BGMEA leaders asked the

family members or relatives of the KTS fire victims to contact the BGMEA leaders directly at Agrabad BGMEA Office.

Minister Abdullah Al Noman urged the BGMEA leaders to compel all the garment factory owners to maintain safety standards and be compliant to the rules to avert recurrence of such tragic incidents in future.

He asked the garments owners to take care of the workers' rights and improve the owner-workers relationship for the greater interest of the country.

The BGMEA leaders in their February 26 meeting at Agrabad office decided to absorb all the KTS factory-fire affected workers in other garments at Kalurghat BSCIC Industrial Area and provide them with financial assistant alongside making arrangement for payment of their salaries pending with KTS factory.

At the function chaired by BGMEA first Vice-President Abu Tayyab, BGMEA leaders, Chittagong Fire Service Deputy Director Rashedul Islam Mazumder, International Affairs Secretary of Bangladesh Sramik League Safar Ali, and Shramik Dal President of Chittagong unit Nazim Uddin Chowdhury, among others, were present.

Baghdad slaps

FROM PAGE 16

the most important prayer service of the week.

Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari warned preachers not to incite hatred or violence in their sermons, threatening them with "severe measures."

"Our hope is that Friday sermons be sermons of unity," al-Jaafari said in a statement late Thursday. "The street is angry and they should know how to calm the people and reassure them that the government will do all it can to pass through this period."

Security forces sealed off Baghdad, preventing most vehicles from entering or leaving the city of 7 million, said Capt. Adil Mohan of the traffic police.

Armed police and soldiers in bullet-proof vests manned checkpoints across the capital, preventing most cars and motorcycles from leaving their neighbourhoods.

Militiamen loyal to radical Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr were also out in force in the teeming Shia slum known as Sadr City, helping police check cars and patrol the area.

The collaboration was likely to raise alarm among Sunni Arabs, who accuse followers of the firebrand cleric of numerous attacks against them in recent days. US officials have also been pressing for the disbanding of private militias.

Downtown was largely deserted. Most shops and gas stations were closed, though small neighbourhood groceries stayed open. Dozens of young boys turned parts of Baghdad's usually busy Saadoun Street into improvised soccer fields, looking clearly unhappy when the odd card disrupted their games.

Hundreds were killed in the violence unleashed by the Feb. 22 bombing of a revered Shia shrine in the central city of Samarra and reprisal attacks against Sunni mosques. An extraordinary daytime curfew and vehicle restrictions last weekend helped curb the worst of the sectarian killing, but attacks continued this week.

South of Baghdad, a mortar shell slammed into a market Friday in Mahmudiya, killing one person and injuring another, police Capt. Rasheed al-Samarai said. And police found two more handcuffed, blindfolded, bullet-riddled bodies in Iskandariyah, said Capt. Muthana.

The recent surge of violence has complicated negotiations for a new, broad-based government after December parliamentary elections. US officials consider an inclusive government essential if they are to start withdrawing troops before the end of the year.

Sunni Arabs walked out of the talks last week, accusing the Shia-led government and security forces of standing by as Sunni mosques were attacked. On Thursday, the main Sunni bloc joined Kurdish and secular parties in demanding that the dominant Shia alliance withdraw its nomination of al-Jaafari for another term as prime minister, threatening the country with new political turmoil.

Al-Jaafari won the nomination by a single vote during an election Feb. 12 among Shia lawmakers who won seats in the Dec. 15 parliamentary election. He defeated Vice President Adil Abdul-Mahdi in large part because of al-Sadr's support.

The idea of a prime minister who owes his position to the young radical has

When contacted, industries ministry sources said the proposed move for expansion of the joint venture Karnaphuli Fertiliser Company (Kafco) would result in an increase in urea production but that would be of no significance for the country since it has to buy Kafco fertiliser at international market price.

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