



An organisation styled 'Satya Sundar Mangalmoy' takes out a procession at Paltan in Dhaka yesterday demanding a free, fair and peaceful election. PHOTO: STAR

## Poor immunisation blamed for India polio outbreak

REUTERS, New Delhi

A poor immunisation drive and widespread filth in India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh have fuelled a polio outbreak, killing about two dozen children and affecting nearly 450 this year, the health minister said.

"The quality of immunisation rounds in districts of western Uttar Pradesh... was not of the desired quality leading to many children being missed," Anbumani Ramadoss said in a statement to parliament on Thursday.

The prevalence of non-polio enterovirus in the stomachs of children living in the state's crowded and unsanitary towns interfered with the efficacy of oral polio drops,

leading to a spike in cases in 2006, he added.

More than 500 cases of polio were reported this year from across the country, 443 in Uttar Pradesh alone, he said.

The polio outbreak in Uttar Pradesh, home to more than 170 million people, has fuelled fears that it could undermine global efforts to eradicate the disease, which is incurable and leads to irreversible paralysis among children.

The WHO has said the Uttar Pradesh strain of the virus had spread to neighbouring Nepal and Bangladesh besides faraway Angola and Namibia. All four nations had been polio free.

India has stepped up efforts to

combat polio by roping in thousands of extra volunteers to administer polio drops, especially in Uttar Pradesh where thousands of children were missed in earlier immunisation rounds.

Besides poor hygiene, a campaign by some of the state's Muslims that polio drops were part of a western conspiracy to make their children sterile have undermined efforts to stamp out the disease, officials say.

But international experts say new vaccine strategies could wipe out hotspots in north India by the end of the decade.

Scientists at the Imperial College, London, said last week that switching to a monovalent vaccine against the dominant strain

in India from the standard trivalent one that protects against three types of polio virus, is key.

They said the problem with the trivalent vaccine, especially in the unhygienic conditions of many Indian towns, was that the three strains could interfere with one another inside the body, producing immunity to one strain but not the others.

The health minister said authorities had begun to change their strategies.

"Monovalent oral polio vaccine 1 is being used in high-risk districts and states as it produces higher immunity as compared to the trivalent polio vaccine," Ramadoss said.

## Bitter winter for Iraq's swelling refugee camps

REUTERS, Baghdad

Summer was bad. Winter will be worse. Since freezing temperatures last descended on Iraq, close to half a million people have fled sectarian violence for other parts of the country, the United Nations said.

"We have no electricity here and no running water," said Abdul Hussein Sachid, a tribal elder in traditional robes as he sat on a rug sipping tea outside the makeshift shack that has been home to his family of 23 for the past few months.

"We cannot live like this any longer," he said, squatting amid the dust and flies of a new camp run by a Shi'ite charity led by radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr on the edge of Baghdad.

"Something must be done to help us rebuild our lives," said Sachid, one of some 7,000 fellow Shi'ites in

camps in the area who fled the town of Haswa, south of the capital, when bands of Sunni gunmen began attacking homes there some months ago.

Violent civilian deaths hit a record high of 120 a day, according to a bi-monthly UN human rights report published on Wednesday. It is such violence that is driving the refugees.

After one of his sons was kidnapped and killed, Sachid left the home he owned and sold his car to buy corrugated iron and bricks to build the three-room hut that now houses himself, two sons, their wives and children. With night-time temperatures already chilly, he says there is no prospect of their returning.

"If you paved the road from here to Haswa with gold, I would never go back," he said. "I can't sleep at night

because I'm always worried. I don't feel safe travelling through Shi'ite areas so how can I even think of passing Sunni areas again."

Sachid is one of at least 420,000 people to move to other parts of Iraq in the nine months since the bombing of a major Shi'ite shrine at Samarra sparked tit-for-tat reprisals that are dividing the country and Baghdad in ways resembling Bosnia or Lebanon and which many fear pave the way for all-out civil war.

Sattar Nowruz of Iraq's Migration Ministry said the figure may be much higher as many do not register their move. And he added ominously: "We expect this to increase."

Another 100,000 a month leave the country, the UN said -- proportionately equivalent to a million Americans emigrating every month -- draining Iraq of badly needed

skills.

**"DEMOCRACY IN A JUNGLE"**

"The fast approaching winter adds another major concern for the wellbeing of the most vulnerable," the United Nations said.

"I was forced away from home for no good reason," shouted Waleed Jihad as he struggled to keep warm in a tent in the Kurdish mountain city of Sulaimaniya, 330 km north of the Baghdad home he was forced to leave by Shi'ite militias.

"I'm living in a tent because we are practising democracy in a jungle, where the mighty kill the weak," said Jihad, 37, a Sunni Arab from the Shi'ite stronghold of Kadhimiya where, he said, gunmen gave him a 48-hour ultimatum to get out of town.

Sulaimaniya's refugee camps, dependent on the charity of suspicious Kurdish neighbours and international Red Crescent, might be a model for the sectarian harmony many Iraqis say they remember -- Sunnis and Shi'ites live side by side in tents.

Elsewhere, religiously-based parties run separate camps.

Issam, who works in the organisation of Moqtada al-Sadr, is a volunteer at the camp housing Sachid from Haswa. He recalls some Sunnis also being there but he said fear drove them away months ago: "Everyone's scared now of going to the others' areas," Issam said. "There's a lack of trust. It's a shame."

Sadr's Mehdi Army militia is blamed by Sunnis for some of the worst death squad violence, a charge it denies.

The movement has also gained a mass popular following by stepping in to provide welfare where the state has failed -- modelling itself on Lebanon's Shi'ite Hezbollah organisation.

The prospect of hundreds of thousands of children growing up in such an environment -- nearly half the 26 million Iraqis are under 18 -- raises fears of a hardening of sectarian mistrust.

The UN said growing evidence of militants deliberately settling displaced families of their own sect in the homes of others who had fled reduced the chances of reversing the trend.

## New human gene map shows unexpected differences

REUTERS, London

One person's DNA code can be as much as 10 percent different from another's, researchers said on Wednesday in a finding that questions the idea that everyone on Earth is 99.9 percent identical genetically.

They said their new version of the human genetic map, or "book of life," fills in many missing pages and chapters to explain how genes are involved in common diseases.

"This important work will help identify genetic causes of many diseases," Dr Mark Walport, director of Britain's Wellcome Trust, said in a statement.

Instead of showing single variations in human DNA that make people unique, the map looks at differences in duplications and deletions of large DNA segments known as copy number variants or CNVs, which can help explain why some people are susceptible to illnesses such as AIDS and others are not.

"We're a patchwork of DNA sequences, gains and losses," Dr Charles Lee of the Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School in Boston,

Massachusetts told a news conference.

Scientists from more than a dozen centres around the world identified about 3,000 genes with variations in the number of copies of specific DNA segments. The changes can affect gene activity, including susceptibility to diseases.

The Human Genome Project mapped the billions of letters that make up the human genetic code. Scientists later refined the map by looking for single variations called SNPs or single nucleotide polymorphisms.

The CNV map gives researchers a different way to look for genes linked to diseases by identifying gains, losses and alterations in the genome.

"We estimate this to be at least 12 percent of the genome, similar in extent to SNPs. This has never been shown before," said Dr. Matthew Hurles of Britain's Wellcome Trust-Sanger Institute. He said that resistance to infection by HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, is determined in part by multiple copies of the gene CCL3L1, which cannot be seen on an SNP map.

**NEW TOOLS**

The scientists, whose findings were

reported in the journals Nature, Nature Genetics and Genome Research, compiled the CNV map by comparing DNA from 270 healthy people in China, Japan, Nigeria and the United States.

The consortium identified 1,447 different CNVs that covered about 12 percent of the human genome. About 285 of them are associated with diseases, including schizophrenia, psoriasis, coronary heart disease and congenital cataracts.

"With these new tools, we and our clinical colleagues are able to find previously undetectable deletions or duplications of the genome in a patient. The CNV map now allows us to identify which of these changes are unique to the disease," said Dr Nigel Carter, of the Wellcome Trust-Sanger Institute.

Genes important to the immune system and to brain development and activity tend to have many CNVs, the researchers said. These are functions that have evolved rapidly in humans.

## US-led troops kill 7 Taliban in fresh battle

REUTERS, Kabul

US-led coalition troops clashed with Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan yesterday, killing seven of the militants, the US military said.

Afghanistan has this year seen the most intense violence since US-led forces drove the Taliban's radical Islamic government from power in 2001.

The level of violence has taken Afghanistan's allies by surprise but the fighting has eased off in recent weeks.

One soldier from the US-led coalition force was wounded in the battle on Friday in Kandahar province in the south, which involved artillery, mortars and close air support, the US military said in a statement.

There were no casualties among civilians, it said. No Taliban official could be reached for comment.

Afghanistan's separate Nato force said one of its soldiers was killed and one wounded when militants fired a rocket at a Nato patrol in Ghazni province, to the southwest of the capital, Kabul, on Thursday. It did not give their nationalities.

More than 3,700 people have been killed in the violence this year, according to a recent government and UN report.

## Thai generals say martial law could be lifted this year

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's generals have said they might lift martial law at least partially before the end of the year, if they decide a feared anti-coup movement is no longer a threat.

"It depends on the situation and the movement of various groups. We have to take that into consideration when deciding whether to abolish martial law," Air Force chief Chalit Pukbhasuk, a member of the ruling junta, told AFP.

Earlier, junta leader General Sonthi Boonyaratglin told CNN that martial law could be lifted by the end

of the year. But after the interview was broadcast, other generals described that as a best-case scenario.

"Martial law could be lifted in December," Defence Minister General Boonrawd Somtas told reporters.

"There are two scenarios -- it might be lifted before the end of the year, but the latest it would be lifted is early next year," he said.

The secretary general of the Council for National Security (CNS), as the junta calls itself, said that martial law might be lifted only in parts of the country by the end of 2006.

"Council for National Security will have to discuss which areas we will lift martial law," General Winai Phattayakul said.

"Initially we will lift it in some areas, on a province by province basis, and provinces with (anti-coup) undercurrents will remain under martial law," he added.

"But as of now, the CNS has not yet discussed the matter," he added.

Sonthi ousted twice-elected prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra in a bloodless coup on September 19 and has kept the nation under martial law since then.

## Low-caste girl burnt alive by alleged rapist in India

REUTERS, Raipur

A Hindu low-caste teenage girl was burnt alive in Madhya Pradesh by an upper-caste man after she refused to withdraw a rape charge against him, police said yesterday.

Asha Katia, 16, had taken 36-year-old Chhote Singh Rajput to court accusing him of raping her in 2005, said P. P. Sharma, police chief of Hoshangabad district in Madhya Pradesh where the crime occurred.

"The deceased was under immense pressure to withdraw charges and deny the rape allegation in court," Sharma said. But Katia stood by her accusation, enraging Rajput, he added.

On Wednesday, he allegedly doused Katia with kerosene and set her alight in front of her family at her home in Sahalwada village.

Rajput denies murdering the girl. He was arrested by police soon after the killing and remains in custody.

Katia, a poor servant in an upper-caste household, belonged to the Dalit community, once considered "untouchables" and placed at the bottom of the hierarchical Hindu caste system.

## Teachers fear political pressure

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people from the governing or managing or ad hoc committees.

The authorities of nine secondary and higher secondary boards, Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE), and National University (NU) have been tasked with identifying the members with political affiliations while Upazila Teachers Committee that itself had been selected on political consideration, has been asked to detect those in the committees of non-government primary schools.

Around six lakh presiding and polling officers usually conduct voting at around 26,000 polling stations on the election day and of them, over three lakh come from non-government educational institutions.

Teachers said heads of the schools and colleges have to make the list of presiding and polling officers on suggestions made by the managing or governing bodies.

Those, who act as polling or presiding officers, often could not ignore the requests or orders from the politically influential members for fear of trouble with their jobs, they also said.

Almost all the managing committees of non-government primary, high schools and Dakhil madrasas and governing committees of non-government colleges and Alim madrasas have been dominated by local lawmakers and leaders of BNP-Jamaat alliance.

So far, only a few of them have been removed while the others have been retained after being falsely portrayed as non-politically nominated members, teachers alleged.

It would not have been possible had the circular asked for exclusion of all the nominated ones from the committees, they added.

The politically appointed high-

ups like DSHE Director General Dilara Hafiz, wife of immediate past commerce and water resources minister Major Hafiz Uddin Ahmed, chairmen of nine secondary and higher secondary boards, and NU Vice-chancellor (VC) Prof Wakil Ahmed are now out to keep in the committees as many as possible the pro-BNP-Jamaat people, they added.

Many of the non-government teachers said it will be tough for them to work without coercion or intimidation during the polls if the BNP-Jamaat-oriented managing and governing committees are not dissolved before the election.

Leaders of different teachers' organisations have called for a fresh circular seeking removal of all persons nominated to the bodies.

Progress reports on implementation of the circular have yet to be submitted to the ministry although the recipients had been directed to report back by November 20, said sources at the education ministry.

"Although the tenure of the BNP-led alliance government ended on October 28, leaders and activists of the party and its allies are still holding the commanding posts in the governing/managing committees of about 30,000 non-government educational institutions, taking advantage of the flawed circular," observed AA Awal Siddique, convener of Bangladesh Shikshak-Karmachari Oikya Parishad, a platform of eight teachers' organisations.

According to NFTE, allegations that political persons are not being removed from the bodies in many educational institutions are rife especially in Bogra, Bhola, Kushtia, Barisal, Kishorganj, Feni, Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi.

Zia Parishad President Kamrul Islam, who once had contested for

a member's post in the Dhaka University Teachers Association (Duta) from the pro-BNP-Jamaat white panel, is still the chairman of Dhaka Siddhirganj Degree College as the authorities there consider him a "non-partisan" person, school sources said.

The outgoing governing body of Dhaka Ideal College has reportedly sent to the NU a proposal for forming an ad hoc committee with Nasreen Sayeed, wife of Major (retired) Sayeed Iskandar, brother of BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia, as the chairperson and Prof Ashrafur Islam Chowdhury, a member of PSC (Public Service Commission) and a DU teacher belonging to the white panel, as a member of the committee, said college sources.

The caretaker government should issue a circular to remove all nominated members from the managing/governing bodies and hand over the charge to the deputy commissioners or thana education officers (TEO) or upazila nirbahi officers (UNO) for the sake of free and fair holding of the upcoming election, said Quazi Faruque.

The National Front has already submitted a memorandum to President and Chief Adviser Iajuddin Ahmed, proposing five educational reforms.

"It is hard to ignore the orders or requests from chairmen or members of the managing bodies because they can create a lot of troubles for the teachers with their jobs, salaries, promotions and so on," said Samsul Alam, president of Bangladesh Non-government Primary Teachers Association.

## N Korea rejects talks with Japan

AFP, Tokyo

A North Korean official yesterday rejected bilateral talks with Japan at upcoming six-way negotiations due to Tokyo's hard line after Pyongyang's nuclear test, a report said.

Japan has imposed a sweeping ban on all imports from North Korea since the impoverished communist regime conducted its first atom bomb test on October 9.

"By implementing the sanctions, the Japanese government is closing off the possibility of contact and exchanges in all areas," Ri Pyong-dok, a researcher in charge of Japan at the North Korean foreign ministry, told Kyodo News.

"This is my personal view, but I don't think sanctions and dialogue can exist at the same time," he was quoted as saying in an interview in Pyongyang.

He repeated North Korea's threat to retaliate against Japan in an unspecified way.

North Korea on October 31 agreed to return to six-nation disarmament talks, which involve China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea and the United States.

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