

China will extend pension benefits to all workers

BEIJING, Apr 19: Pensions and insurance covering unemployment and medical care will be extended to cover workers throughout China, a senior official was quoted as saying on Friday, reports AP.

The comprehensive system will eventually become compulsory for all employers and employees in China, the China Daily reported.

Laws establishing the system will be in place by 2000, the report quoted a vice minister of labour, Wang Jianjun, as saying.

China will set up a new medical insurance system to replace the free medical care system in cities that has been in place for decades under the communist government.

The new system is designed to prevent abuse of medical resources and alleviate the burden of heavy medical bills. Attempts to reform the medical system have meant that increasingly costs are passed on to patients.

A pilot project for medical insurance was introduced in six cities and Hainan province last year and will be extended to 80 cities in a pilot programme, the report said.

In the next five years, accident and maternity insurance will be extended to at least 80 per cent of China's cities and countries.

Sudan stops debt payments to IMF

KHARTOUM, Apr 19: Sudan has stopped its debt payments to the International Monetary Fund because it can no longer afford them, the governor of the Central Bank said in published remarks Thursday, reports AP.

"We have stopped paying the sum to the IMF since last January because of our inability," Sabir Mohammed Hassan, the bank governor, told the Modern Sudan newspaper.

He promised that the country would resume payments when it could.

Sudan has a foreign debt of more than 16 billion dollars, of which an estimated 1.7 dollars is owed to the IMF.

After falling into arrears, Sudan resumed token payments to the IMF in January 1995 to avoid becoming the first country expelled from the Washington-based institution.

The nation has been torn by a civil war since 1983 which has hurt commerce and drained the treasury of needed development funds. The war pits the Islamic North against rebels who have been fighting for autonomy for southern Christians and animists.

Consumer prices have been rising rapidly, and the value of the Sudanese pound has been depreciating. The pound currently is trading at about 1,260 to the dollar, compared with about 600 in mid-1995.

In the interview, Hassan blamed rising government outlays and heavy government borrowing from the banking system for inflation that has doubled the prices of some goods over the past year.

He said the Central Bank was pushing for a reduction in government spending and other anti-inflation measures.

British public deficit in March \$14.5b

LONDON, Apr 19: The British public deficit in March was 9.6 billion pounds (14.5 billion dollars), the office of national statistics reported yesterday, reports AP.

This figure, which was broadly in line with market expectations, brought the total deficit for 1995-96 to 32.2 billion pounds. This is more than three billion pounds above the government target for this fiscal year.

In the budget presented in November last year, the chancellor of the exchequer, Kenneth Clarke, allowed for a deficit of 29 billion pounds for the 1995-96 fiscal year to March 1996.

This reduces the scope for vote-winning tax cuts in the budget in November this year. The governing Conservative Party, which is some 30 points behind the opposition Labour Party in opinion polls, must call general elections by May next year.

Most of the overshoot in the target for the shortfall between government revenue and spending, known as the public sector borrowing requirement (PSBR), was caused by a shortfall in tax receipts mainly through Value Added Tax and corporation (company) tax.

These totalled 244.8 billion pounds in 1995-96, compared with the treasury's forecast of 247.2 billion pounds.

In the same period, central government spending was 280.3 billion pounds, above the treasury's forecast of 278.8 billion pounds.

Kenneth Clarke said: "My main aim is not just tax-cutting... the main aim is to make sure we have the most successful economy in Western Europe."

1176 illegal workers held in US

WASHINGTON, Apr 19: The Immigration and Naturalisation Service has in recent weeks arrested over a thousand illegal aliens working in more than 100 businesses across the eastern United States, says Deputy Attorney General Jamie Gorelick, according to USIS.

A total of 1,176 aliens from 31 countries (8 from the Middle East/South Asia region) were arrested in 19 states, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands in a series of raids March 18 to April 12, she told reporters April 17.

Gorelick and Deputy INS Commissioner Chris Sale said that the raids are part of the Clinton administration's continuing crusade against employment of unauthorised aliens.

"The administration is committed to reduce the magnet of job opportunities for illegal aliens by targeting illegal practices that undercut law-abiding businesses and authorised workers. Let there be no mistake about it, we mean business when it comes to worksite enforcement," Gorelick declared.

Gorelick stressed that the acceleration of these enforcement programmes will in no way mean lessening of border controls. The Border Control Initiative has made it harder for illegal aliens to get here.

The goal of our worksite enforcement efforts is to take away their reason to come in the first place," she said.

The worksite enforcement operation began when INS obtained various leads about businesses and industries that are often associated with illegal employment, such as food processing, garment manufacturing, and construction.

Although the initial raids focused on the illegal workers, follow-up probes will likely lead to prosecution or civil penalties against those employers found to have knowingly violated the law, said Gorelick and Sale.

In addition, three business could lose their federal contracts and be barred from competing for such contracts again, in accordance with an executive order signed by the president last February. Sale pointed out.

The operations concluded last week are not unusual. INS has made worksite enforcement a priority. Our agents are out every day across the country, targeting illegal employers who disregard immigration laws, and working with federal and local agencies to remove illegal workers and make those jobs available to legal workers," she said.

The 1,176 arrested aliens include three criminals, one of whom was wanted for attempted murder in New York. At least 14 had outstanding warrants for deportation. Most of the others have already been deported as well, said Sale.

Most of the arrested persons came from Latin America: Mexico 784, Ecuador 83, El Salvador 65, Guatemala 60, Honduras, 36, Venezuela 29, Colombia 21, Brazil 19, Peru 18, Dominican Republic 18, Jamaica 6, Nicaragua 3, Dominica 3, St. Lucia 2, Costa Rica 1, Haiti 1.

The rest came from 15 other countries in every region of the world, including South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa: India 3, Lebanon 2, Egypt 2 and Morocco 1.

The operation was a cooperative effort involving federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies. Not only immigration issues were involved: the US Labour Department took part, and is charging some of the businesses with wage-hour violations including paying sub-minimum wages.

Labor also says the businesses engaged in unauthorised withholding of wages owed to the workers.

Freeing the 1,176 jobs opened up 15.5 million in annual wages for legal workers. Some of the jobs paid up to 13 per hour, according to Sale.

The two officials said the INS is in the process of increasing the number of its agents from 300 to about 700, guaranteeing that more such raids will take place.

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Trade sources said the two sides might agree later to merge the two panels, which under DSB statutes have to be formed within 30 days and then report their findings within a further six months.

The disputes concern year-old US import quotas on women's and girls' wool coats and on woven woollens and blouses, which Washington imposed as transitional measures it argued were legal under WTO accords to safeguard domestic producers.

But the cases have a wider significance, reflecting concern among developing countries at what they see as the slow pace of opening of markets in major economies to their products under 1994 world trade accords.

Some Asian trading powers have also criticised the WTO's Textile Monitoring Body (TMB), established under the 1994 accords to oversee the phase-out over 10 years of the old multi-fibre arrangement on international textile trade and its replacement by the 1994 agreement on textiles and clothing.

India had originally taken both cases to the TMB, which found in one that the United States had not demonstrated it was suffering serious damage from Indian imports but could not agree if there was a threat of damage.

In the other, it found in favour of US arguments that actual trade of serious damage from a sharp increase of imports from India had been proven.

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According to a report published by the EU Statistics Office, the total number of hours worked on farms in the union fell by 2.8 per cent in 1995, compared with 3.7 per cent the year before and 5.1 per cent in 1993.

The report highlighted the success of farms in eastern Germany in adapting to the less labour-intensive farming methods of the West.

For the first time since the reunification of Germany, the fall in labour input into farms in the old lander was bigger — three times bigger — than in the new lander.

With less than one person in five now working in the new lander, a large part of the structural adjustment process can be seen to have already taken place," the report noted.

The overall fall in labour input was heavily influenced by a 1.4 per cent contraction in Italy, which accounts for a quarter of EU agricultural employment.

Although the trend of labour contraction is slowing, the still-high level of job shedding will cause concern as farming communities across the EU brace themselves for a new wave of redundancies as a result of the slump in beef consumption caused by the "mad cow" crisis.

It is worth noting... that for Asia — a region popularly viewed as full of countries so efficient that it threatens to overwhelm the rest of the world — last year was the fourth year in a row that imports expanded faster than exports," Ruggiero said.

Storm kills 60,000 tuna fish in Australia

ADELAIDE, Apr 19: A freak storm in Australia has killed about 60,000 tuna on commercial farms, wiping out up to 50 million US dollars in exports to Japan, officials said yesterday, reports Reuters.

The southern bluefish tuna died of shock and suffocation at the coastal resort of port Lincoln in South Australia, a loss amounting to two-thirds of the state's stock.

The state's Blue Fish Owners Association President Brian Jeffries said the weekend storm was so severe "we had substantial mortalities from the first shock, then reduced levels of oxygen in the water and sediment (stirred up by huge waves) were severe enough to cause a whole second tier of fish to die."

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Many of the dead fish were still edible but all would be dumped in compliance with government regulations and to avoid any quality concern from potential buyers.

South Australian Primary Industries Minister Rob Kerin said the storm was an enormous setback for the annual A 90 million dollar (71 million US dollar) tuna industry. "It may be as high as the A 60 million mark," Kerin said.

Commercial farming for southern bluefish tuna, which grow to an average 35-40 kg (75-90 lbs) and sell for about A 35 dollar (28 US dollar) a kg, was only recently introduced in Australia.

Sugar production up in Cuba

HAVANA, Apr 19: Cuba has produced nearly half a million metric tons more sugar in its continuing 1995-96 cane harvest than it did in the whole of the last harvest, meaning it has so far produced nearly 3.8 million tons, President Fidel Castro has said, reports Reuters.

Referring to the current harvest in a speech on Tuesday evening, Castro said, "Now we have almost half a million (tons) more than last year."

He did not elaborate, but his comments reflected recent official optimism that Cuba is heading for a much better harvest than last year.

Production last year was a dismal 3.3 million tons, the worst harvest in Cuba for 50 years. This year authorities are hoping for production of 4.5 million tons.

Officials said production had reached 3.3 million tons in early April. The harvest, which began last December, is expected to last until May.

Production has been averaging 40,000 tons a day recently, according to official media. This would be expected to drop in the coming days since cane yields fall later in the season.

Reconstruction work in Beirut stops from fear of Israeli attack

BEIRUT, Apr 19: Work has stopped on major reconstruction projects in Beirut because contractors fear Israeli air strikes, and damage from the blitz will halve Lebanon's growth rate this year, officials said yesterday, reports Reuters.

Work on a 50,000-seat sports stadium and a major extension of Beirut airport had halted. Nabli al-Jisr, President of the government's Committee for Development and Reconstruction (CDR), said.

Repair of damage to two electricity sub-stations near Beirut rocketed by Israeli warplanes this week will take up to 18 months to complete, the state electricity utility EDL said.

The damage to the sub-stations has reduced Lebanon's power supply to two hours in every 12, EDL said in a communiqué published in Beirut newspapers on Thursday.

Central bank Governor Riad Salameh said the impact of Israel's eight-day-old blitz on Lebanon will cut the country's growth rate this year by half.

"There is no doubt that the Lebanese economy will pay the price for this war," Salameh said in a television interview on Wednesday night.

"The rate of growth that was expected to be between five and 6.5 per cent might shrink to two or three per cent," he said.

Jisr said the British company Trafalgar House Plc had stopped work on the sports stadium and Hochtief AG of Germany and stopped work on the airport.

"Work on the sports city has stopped because the company fears there could be Israeli air attacks," Jisr said in a televised statement.

He said Hochtief also stopped work on the airport for fear of Israeli air raids. The project is one of the biggest contracts in Lebanon's multi-billion dollars reconstruction programme.

The stadium and airport are both close to Beirut's Shiite Muslim southern suburbs which Israeli helicopters have rocketed five times in eight days, causing civilian and military casualties in an apparent effort to hit targets of the pro-Iranian Hizbollah (party of god).

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