

International

Researchers find gene that diminishes anxiety

WASHINGTON, Nov 29: Part of the difference between a person who worries and frets and one who approaches life with a relaxed attitude may be a gene that controls the effects of a brain chemical, researchers say, reports AP.

A new study that probed the personalities of 505 people found that those with one variation of a gene called 5-HTTP are more anxious than people with another form of the gene, although the difference is very slight.

Dr Dennis Murphy of the National Institute of Mental Health, senior author of a study to be published Friday in the journal Science, said the research gives strong evidence that 5-HTTP influences how the brain makes use of serotonin, a neurotransmitter, or signaling molecule, that affects the sense of well-being.

"Serotonin is thought to modulate anxiety in humans and in animals," Murphy said. "Many of the drugs, such as Prozac, that treat anxiety and depression act primarily on the serotonin system in the brain."

Murphy said 5-HTTP is a so-called transporter gene because it determines the rate at which the serotonin signals are cycled between neurons.

The cycling rate of serotonin is reduced in people with a short form of the gene. As a result, people with a short form of the gene are more anxious than people with the long form, he said.

But Murphy said the influence of the gene "is small," which means that many other genes also play a role in mood.

Dr Dean H Hamer, another NIH gene researcher and a co-author of the study, said the gene's effect is only a "tendency" and not a total determination of mood or personality. And the range of difference, he said, is what is seen in ordinary people, not in those who require medical care.

"Some people are a little bit more worried, a little bit more pessimistic," he said. "Others are more optimistic, more relaxed and cheerful. Among ordinary people, some are high and some are low in these traits."

The 5-HTTP gene plays a role in these basic attitudes, said Hamer.

Two presidents agreed in principle Indo-China amity vital for world peace

NEW DELHI, Nov 29: The presidents of India and China said on Thursday that friendship between the world's two most populous nations, which fought a brief border war in 1962, could be a key to world peace, reports Reuter.

India's Shankar Dayal Sharma and China's Jiang Zemin were speaking at a state banquet on the first day of the Chinese leader's landmark three-day visit to India.

"The purpose of my current visit is to enhance understanding, deepen friendship, increase trust and promote cooperation," Jiang said in an earlier arrival statement.

Jiang told the banquet he was convinced that the people of both countries "joining together" would be a great force and an important guarantee for Asian and world peace.

The two countries, home to one-third of humanity, fought a brief Himalayan border war in 1962 and troops are still de-

played along both sides of the rugged line of control.

Only hours before Jiang started the first visit by a Chinese president to India, Tibetan demonstrators demanding China quit their homeland staged a noisy protest in New Delhi.

More than 600 protesters burnt an effigy of Jiang and the Chinese flag at a Tibetan refugee camp.

To keep delicate bilateral relations on track, both India and China were expected to avoid dwelling on the contentious issue of Tibet during official talks today.

The Dalai Lama, Tibet's exiled spiritual leader based in India, urged Jiang to stop what he called Chinese repression in Tibet but distanced himself from the protests.

Jiang, accompanying to New Delhi by his foreign, foreign trade and civil affairs ministers and a 100-strong business delegation, will meet Indian

Prime Minister HD Deve Gowda, Foreign Minister Inder Kumar Gujral and business leaders.

At the banquet, he said: "I am convinced that the Chinese and Indian peoples joining together will be a great force and an important guarantee for peace in Asia and the world at large."

"I can say for sure that our common interests far outweigh our difference, as neither of us poses a threat to the other," added Jiang, who will travel to Pakistan on Sunday.

Sharma said: "The cooperation and friendship of Asia's two largest nations would be a powerful and enduring factor in promoting peace and stability in our continent and the world."

He also made an apparent reference to China's friendship with Pakistan, India's traditional rival, saying New Delhi was concerned by actions that adversely affected regional security.

China eager to sign nuclear non-aggression accord with US

BEIJING, Nov 28: China would like to conclude a nuclear non-aggression agreement with the United States modelled on a Sino-Russia accord that precludes either from resorting to nuclear first strikes, a government official said Thursday, reports AP.

Beijing and Moscow agreed in September 1994 to cease targeting each other with nuclear arms and not to resort to nuclear first strikes, said government spokesman, Cui Thankai.

"China would also like to have an accord with the United States in which the two countries would undertake not to resort to a nuclear first strike," Cui said at a weekly press conference.

Such an accord would play "a positive role in the stability of the two countries and world security," he said.

Washington recently proposed Beijing an accord in which the two countries would cease to target each other with nuclear arms.

Rao's refusal to resign sparks fresh infighting

NEW DELHI, Nov 29: The refusal of former Indian Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao to resign as head of the Congress party's Parliamentary Wing has sparked fresh infighting, party officials said today, reports AP.

Congress spokesman Vithal Gadgil admitted a growing number of the party's parliament members felt Rao should quit his post after being implicated in three corruption scandals.

"Yes, that is the general feeling," Gadgil told AFP. "The feeling is growing. If Rao does not agree to the demand, some MPs will meet him and let him know the feelings of party men."

On Thursday, the anti-Rao camp got a boost when party strongman Sharad Pawar joined them.

Pawar, who ran against Rao for the post of Prime Minister in 1991, had until now not taken sides in the escalating war between Rao and Sitaram Kesri, the new Congress president who has pledged to clean up the party.

The times of India newspaper said anti-Rao MPs in Congress had stepped up their drive against the former premier, who has been blamed for the party's rout in the April-May general elections.

"There is a general consensus... in the country that Rao has lost the moral authority to continue as (the party's parliamentary) leader," The Times quoted party MP Ashok Gehlot as saying.

"It is not our intention to cause any humiliation to him, but he should understand the situation and quit in the interest of the party," he told The Times.

Rao, 75, made way for Kesri by giving up the post of Congress president in September after he was named in the scandals.

But he has refused to resign as the leader of the Congress, India's oldest party, in the Lower House of Parliament. The Congress backs the minority United Front coalition government.

NASA abandons planned space walk

CAPE CANAVERAL, FLA. Nov 29: NASA on Thursday abandoned a planned space walk from the shuttle Columbia after a hatch jammed, leaving the two astronauts stuck inside the spacecraft's airlock, reports Reuter.

Astronauts Tammy Jernigan and Tom Jones were supposed to open the hatch leading to the shuttle's cargo bay at about 9:20 pm EST (0220 GMT) but were unable to fully turn the handle that unlatches the 40-inch (101 cm) diameter door.

After more than two hours of wrestling with the bulky mechanism, flight controllers at mission control in Houston ordered the astronauts out of their space suits and cancelled their planned 6-1/2-hour walk in space.

"Last night's space walk has been scrubbed... after repeated attempts to rotate the hatch handle," said mission commentator Rob Navias.

Flight controllers had convened a team of engineers to look into the problem, said Navias.

The problem cropped up as the two astronauts, wearing bulky space suits, floated in the shuttle's cramped airlock.

"We're having a hard time opening the outer hatch," said veteran astronaut Story Musgrave, who was to direct the space walk from inside Columbia.

The handle rotates about 30 degrees and then it doesn't seem to want to move," Jernigan said as she struggled with the door. The handle has to move a full revolution to open the hatch.

Flight controllers at mission control in Houston huddled around their desks discussing the problem and periodically radioed suggestions to the shuttle crew.

They recommended the astronauts put more force on the handle but it still refused to budge. Jernigan had even tried getting extra leverage by putting her feet on the ceiling of the airlock.



Women cast their ballot in Algiers during a controversial referendum on Thursday. The proposed changes would ban Islamic parties and boost the powers of head of state Liamine Zeroual, who won strong backing in a presidential poll last November to head a country gripped by a bloody fundamentalist insurrection. — AFP/UNB photo

US troops in KSA must remain on high alert: Perry

KUWAIT, Nov 29: Intensive intelligence-gathering has averted terrorist activities and led to arrests in Saudi Arabia, where US forces are on high alert for threats Defence Secretary William Perry said Thursday, reports AP.

Perry, speaking with reporters en route to Kuwait after celebrating Thanksgiving with US troops in Bosnia, said American and Saudi agents have information that "supports the view that we should remain on high alert."

Nineteen US airmen were killed June 25 in a truck bombing at a US housing unit in Dhahran in eastern Saudi, and five Americans were slain in an earlier attack on a military post in Riyadh in November 1995.

Asked about renewed threats reported recently, Perry said some of them have amounted to mere harassment. He refused to offer any details.

"There are cases I can't discuss which were based on intelligence information we or the Saudis had, but that information... in my judgment averted what could have been terrorist action," Perry said.

Asked if that included arrests, Perry replied, "Yes."

"We take all of this seriously and we remain on a high threat alert," Perry said.

There are 25,000 US forces in the Gulf region with 15,000 afloat. Some 5,000 are based in Saudi Arabia, most moved from the Dhahran base to a remote desert air strip south of Riyadh after the truck bombing.

Perry noted that US dependents living in Saudi Arabia were sent home earlier this year because of the threat situation.

"I have no basis for backing off any of those force protection measures," he said, noting the families haven't been allowed to return.

A senior Defence official travelling with the secretary said the Saudi investigation into the Dhahran bombing "has not come to any final conclusion. We haven't ruled anyone in or out."

Earlier this week, a radical group — The Movement for Islamic Change — threatened to attack US forces in Saudi Arabia unless jailed Muslim militants were freed.

Saudi opposition groups have accused the government of detaining hundreds of people for questioning about the truck bombing. Opposition groups and Saudi officials have said about 50 Shiite Muslims with links to Iran are among those detained. Iran has denied any involvement.

AFP adds: Saudi and US intelligence services have foiled "what would have been some sort of a terrorist tentative action," US Defence Secretary William Perry said Thursday.

Perry told journalists on the plane carrying him to Kuwait that the Saudi authorities had made several arrests, but declined to give further details for "security reasons."

BRIEFLY

- Yeltsin to join Kremlin in mid-Dec:** Russian President Boris Yeltsin, who underwent a heart by-pass surgery on November 5, might appear in the Kremlin early December, chief Kremlin Doctor Sergei Mironov said on Thursday. Xinhua reports from Moscow.
- Mironov told reporters that Yeltsin, who is recovering in the Barvikha sanatorium outside Moscow, may appear in the Kremlin after December 5.
- "We hope that after December 15 or 20 Boris Nikolayevich (Yeltsin) will be able to work in the Kremlin almost in the rhythm he was used to," Mironov said.
- 700 Reindeer starved to death:** Some 700 Reindeer have starved to death in the Chukotsk Peninsula in the Siberian Arctic and a further 150,000 may perish because their pastures are icebound, Itar-Tass news agency reported Thursday, AFP says from Moscow.
- Half the herd of 300,000 Reindeer in the remote autonomous region of Chukotsk, on the Arctic Ocean in the far northeast of Russia, are at risk, the agency said.
- 79 kg of heroin seized in China:** Police in the southwestern Chinese province of Yunnan have cracked a major drugs smuggling ring, confiscating 79 kilograms (174 pounds) of heroin, a report said Thursday, AFP says from Beijing.
- The narcotics were discovered hidden in 14 separate packages under the seats of a Santana car, the semi-official China News Service said.
- Rebels kill 9 in Bougainville:** A raiding party believed to be made up of anti-government rebels has killed nine villagers in Papua New Guinea's offshore island of Bougainville, newspapers reported Friday, AFP says from Port Moresby.
- Two children were among the dead in the attack around dawn Thursday at Sisiapai village on the northwest coast of the island province, scene of a long-running secessionist conflict.
- 103 people executed in Russia:** A total of 103 people have been executed in Russia since the country joined the Council of Europe and signed a protocol imposing a moratorium on the enforcement of death sentences, an official said Thursday, AFP reports from Moscow.
- Speaking in Kiev at a Council of Europe seminar on the abolition of the death penalty, Anatoly Pristakin, chairman of the Russian Commission for Pardons, said that 53 of those executed were sentenced in 1995 and the other 50 this year.
- Teacher kills 3 pupils in China:** A disgruntled teacher in northwestern China has been arrested for hacking three of his students to death with an axe, the Yangcheng Evening News said in an edition published in Beijing yesterday, Reuter reports from Beijing.

Military put on full alert

Zambian president dissolves cabinet

LUSAKA, Zambia, Nov 29: President Frederick Chiluba dissolved his cabinet Thursday and put the military on full alert, a day after opposition groups vowed to stage mass protests against his reelection.

Presidential spokesman Richard Sakala said Chiluba, top civil servants, and police and military chiefs will run the country until a new cabinet is appointed.

He gave no indication when a new cabinet will be named.

"There is no time limit. The president is overall minister and the cabinet merely runs affairs on his behalf," Sakala told reporters.

Chiluba was expected to retain most previous cabinet members, including powerful Defense Minister Ben Mwila and other close political allies.

On Wednesday, an opposition alliance led by former President Kenneth Kaunda vowed to protest Nov. 18 elections it boycotted and warned that political tensions could lead to chaos or even a military takeover.

The alliance said it did not recognize last week's presidential and parliamentary polls and was planning nonviolent demonstrations. It appealed to regional leaders to intervene to return the nation to "legality and the democratic process."

Independent election monitoring groups declared that the elections were not free and fair, citing flawed registration of voters, extensive vote buying by Chiluba's ruling party and unfair treatment of the opposition in the state media.

The monitors also criticized a controversial constitutional amendment banning Kaunda from the race because his parents were not born in Zambia. They said his disqualification undermined democratic freedoms.

Chiluba's Movement for Multiparty Democracy won 131 of the 150 elected parliamentary seats in the polling.



More than 3000 students march through Belgrade on the tenth day of mass anti-government demonstrations, on Thursday. The students began protesting early Friday, saying they were demonstrating "for their future" and acting independently of any political party. — AFP/UNB photo

Accord to airdrop supplies to Rwandan refugees

OTTAWA, Nov 29: An Agreement was reached Thursday to launch an international mission to airdrop supplies to Rwandan refugees in eastern Zaire, Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy said, reports AP.

The international community has agreed to set up a multinational headquarters in the region and to put in place the capability to carry out airdrops of food into eastern Zaire," the minister said in a statement.

He said more than 20 countries have offered to contribute to the mission, including Belgium, Denmark, France, Japan, Malawi, Senegal, South Africa and the United States.

Bus mishap in Nepal: 10 die

KATHMANDU, Nov 29: Ten people were killed and 37 others injured when an accident befell a passenger bus Wednesday night in west Nepal, the official news agency RSS said yesterday, reports Xinhua.

The accident occurred in Arghakanchi district, about 150 km west of Kathmandu, when the iron spring plates of the bus broke, the RSS quoted police sources as saying.

'Drums of war beating over ME'

CAIRO, Nov 29: Syrian Defence Minister Mustafa Tlass warned that "the drums of war" were beating over the Middle East because of Israel's hardline position in the peace process, reports AP.

"The drums of war are beating over the region and the Israeli prime minister is responsible for that," General Tlass told the Egyptian government daily Al-Ahram in its early Friday addition.

Off the Record



Models for French stylist Loris Azzaro present a variety of sophisticated evening dresses during the presentation of his collection within the International High Fashion Week festival in Moscow's Russia Concert Hall on Thursday. — AFP/UNB photo

Queen with little voice

LONDON: Britain's Queen Elizabeth II pulled out of a church reception on Thursday having almost lost her voice because of a cold, Buckingham Palace said, reports AP.

Although the queen was to attend a service at Westminster Abbey she would not attend a reception at church house afterwards, the palace said.

"The queen will go as planned to the service at the Abbey but not to the reception afterwards because she has a cold and very little voice," said a palace spokesman.

"It is nothing serious and, at this stage, no other engagements have been altered or cancelled."

The service at Westminster Abbey is in celebration of the Porvoo agreement between the British and Irish Anglican churches and Nordic and Baltic Lutheran churches.

Sushmita's clarification

MUMBAI: Former "Miss Universe" Sushmita Sen broke into tears on Friday as she pleaded with the media not to drag her into controversies which were affecting her life, reports IFL.

Addressing a press conference at a hotel in west-west Mumbai, the beauty queen said she was meeting reporters to clarify various controversies about her personal life which were allegedly misinterpreted by the media.

She said the controversy broke out after a photograph, taken during a film shooting, depicting her in a bad light had been used without her knowledge.

Urging the media to view her performance in the film before passing judgement on the basis of such photos, the beauty queen-turned-actress burst into tears and wept silently as photographers clicked away and reporters kept asking for details of the photo episode.

"I know many young people who have died," said Besin Akisayeva, who also has two children being treated at the sanatorium outside Almaty. "Our children don't have grandparents anymore. I am afraid."

Aral Sea disaster takes heavy health toll in Kazakhstan

ALMATY, Kazakhstan, Nov 29: The doctors at the National Rehabilitation Center put the two young boys through the gamut of tests and examinations, reports AP.

Then they sat down the mother for their findings: Hepatitis, Bronchitis, Malnutrition. The 3-year-old, Nurkhan, also has cerebral palsy, Nurkin, 2, suffers hypertension.

"No one ever told me this. I had no idea," said Achkendzhe Shiderbayeva, whose sons are among a lucky few from the Aral Sea region to get slots at a children's sanatorium outside Almaty, capital of this former Soviet State.

They boys' illnesses are common for children from the ecological disaster area of the Aral Sea, an inland sea in Central Asia that has been polluted and shrunk by overirrigation and pesticide use for cotton farming.

According to a United Nations report this year, the illness rate has skyrocketed for infants in Kyzyl-Orda, biggest city in the Aral Sea region. In 1990, it was 1,485 ailments, including colds and other common illnesses, per 1,000 children. By 1994, it was 3,134 per 1,000 youngsters.

Especially common are respiratory, infectious and parasitic diseases. Blood diseases and birth defects also have increased, the report said.

"These children won't die now, but they also won't live to see 60," said Dr. Zaira Mazhitova, director of the National Rehabilitation Center.

Life expectancy in the Aral Sea region is 59.5 years, and most residents can count on both hands the number of relatives, friends and neighbours who died in their mid-40s.

The area's problems stem from Soviet efforts to turn the region into a vast plantation, especially for cotton. Heavy use of pesticides and other chemicals contaminated the sea and

ground water, as did salt blown from the evaporating sea.

Huge irrigation networks diverted so much of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers that nearly off of the water flow to the sea was cut off. Since 1960, it has lost two-thirds of its volume and its surface shrank from 64,000 square kilometers (25,000 square miles) to just 29,000 square kilometers (11,000 square miles). In some spots, the shoreline receded 150 kilometers (90 miles).

Scientists say the poor quality of drinking water due to high salt and chemical content is the root of the high incidence of diseases.

The demise of the Aral Sea is not limited to the bordering countries of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, but affects all of Central Asia.

Sand blowing from the exposed seabed is saturated with pesticides and salts. Hundreds of miles (kilometers) away, it covers the ground like toxic

snow. Desertification has caused temperatures to soar and altered plant and animal life.

But the greatest problems are in the immediate region, which is home to 1.5 million people, or just over 9 per cent of Kazakhstan's population.

Until the early 1980s, most families managed to grow their own fruits and vegetables, but salinization has ruined the land.

"Last year we wanted to grow tomatoes, but they dried out. Now nothing grows," said Shuderbayeva, who lives in the town of Dzhangaldash.

Of necessity, the regular diet is now beshbarmak — a local meat dish — and bread. Fruits and vegetables are available at bazaars but are too expensive for the average family.

Water must be boiled before it is drunk. Its salt content has risen from 10 grams per liter (about a quart) in the 1960s to 40 grams per liter today, said Kakimbek Salykov, an Aral

