

Kournikova virus maker tracked to Netherlands

AFP, San Francisco

The Anna Kournikova e-mail virus that hit millions of computers world-wide may have been hatched in the Netherlands...

A spokeswoman at Excite-AtHome, a Redwood City, California, Web portal, confirmed the company is trying to identify a subscriber, believed to be from the Netherlands...

"We are looking at someone from the Netherlands who put something on our system that appears to be the first copy of the Anna Kournikova virus," said Serena Overhoff at Excite...

Overhoff would not say whether the company is cooperating with a law enforcement investigation. The virus, which comes in an e-mail purporting to include a picture of the 19-year-old tennis star, was unleashed over the weekend.

According to computer security experts, the virus does not damage individual computers but replicates itself through the Microsoft's Outlook e-mail program...

The virus has been found in Australia, Japan, the United States and Europe.

According to the online news site CNET, the virus writer could be a hacker known as OnTheFly, who used a common virus writing tool called "Ubs Worm Generator" to create the Kournikova virus.

Taiwanese govt restarts N-plant construction

AP, Taipei

Taiwan's new government ordered construction to begin again on the island's fourth nuclear plant Wednesday, sacrificing a sacred policy goal for political and economic stability.

Restarting the nuclear project was the first major defeat for President Chen Shui-bian's administration, which infuriated the powerful opposition by trying to cancel the plant three months ago without seeking lawmakers' approval.

Political feuding over the plant that ravaged investor confidence in the stock market officially came to an end Tuesday when Premier Chang Chun-hsiung reinstated the US dir 5.4 billion plant, the pet project of the previous government.

During a news conference, Chang Taiwan's No. 3 ranking leader said several times that restarting the plant was a "painful decision." But he said, "If we allow this standoff to continue, it will cause economic and social chaos."

The announcement came a day after the government cut a deal with the opposition, capping days of tense negotiations. The agreement includes a pledge to work together on a nuclear energy bill...

Restarting the nuclear project, one-third complete, was an agonizing decision for the president because his Democratic Progressive Party has spent years campaigning to spike the project. The DPP argues the plant would be unsafe on the earthquake-prone island and that other energy sources would be cleaner and more practical.

20 killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar, India

Fourteen Muslim guerrillas and six other people were killed in clashes in the disputed Indian state of Kashmir, officials said here on Tuesday.

Heavily-armed Muslim militants ambushed an Indian security convoy in Kashmir, killing one paramilitary soldier and injured nine others, police said.

Gunmen ambushed two security vehicles at Tarzoo, some 54 kilometres north of Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar.

Five militants were killed in three separate encounters in Srinagar and Kupwara districts on Tuesday, police said.

A police spokesman in Srinagar, meanwhile, said nine militants and a soldier were killed Monday night in separate gunbattles in the southern district of Poonch.

The fiercest encounter took place at Khanetar-Top, near Mendhar township, 170 kilometres from Jammu, in which four militants and a soldier were killed, he said.

Two more clashes occurred in neighbouring villages of Chungan and Pathana, the spokesman said, adding that four civilians were also killed in the past 24 hours.

More than 34,000 people have died in Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, since 1989 when militancy flared in the disputed territory.

Eight killed as Palestinian bus driver rams group of Israelis

Security situation 'seriously deteriorating': US

AFP, Jerusalem

Eight people were killed and 21 wounded when a Palestinian bus driver mowed down a group of Israelis at a busy junction near Tel Aviv Wednesday, according to the latest police toll.

Seven of the dead were soldiers and one a civilian, police said, without giving further details. Among the injured are three women soldiers in critical condition, hospital sources said.

The driver, who fled on the bus after the attack, was seriously wounded and captured after a chase in which shots were fired, Tel Aviv police commander Yossi Setbon told public radio.

The bus hit as a crowd of people was waiting at the busy Azur junction near Holon, some 20 kilometres south of Tel Aviv, early Wednesday morning. Israeli officials called it a deliberate attack, while Palestinian groups said the 35-year-old driver was acting alone, responding to increasing Israeli pressure on Palestinians in more than four months of violence.

Outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Barak vowed that "the perpetrators" would be hunted down and punished, while two of his cabinet ministers called for complete blockade around the Palestinian territories until the Palestinian revolt that began more than four months ago was halted.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat meanwhile blamed "Israeli military escalation" while his cabinet secretary said the driver's action was a "personal operation" reflecting the seething anger of the Palestinians after months of bloodletting.

The incident occurred just eight days after Israeli hardliner Ariel Sharon's landslide election victory.

The United States said Tuesday the security situation in Israel and the Palestinian territories had seriously deteriorated since the weekend and threatened to spiral out of control.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said political assassinations carried out by Israel and attacks on Israeli settlers by Palestinians had to stop if peace talks were to resume.

"The use of Israeli helicopter gunships, Palestinian attacks against settlements and motorists, the use of mortars by Palestinians and the targeted killings by the Israeli defence force today are producing a new cycle of action or reaction which can become impossible to control," he said.

Boucher referred to the latest in a series of pinpoint strikes against Palestinian activists in which the Israeli army killed a senior officer in Arafat's personal bodyguard Tuesday with a helicopter, accusing him of being a terrorist.

But Sneh defended Israel's tactics, which were also condemned by the European Union.

"We will continue our policy of liquidating those who plan or carry out attacks, and no one can give us lessons in morality, because we have unfortunately 100 years of experience in fighting terrorism," he said.



Bodies of Israeli soldiers and civilians lie on the ground at the Tempo crossroads near Holon, south of Tel Aviv yesterday. A Palestinian bus driver rammed his vehicle into a group of Israeli civilians and soldiers killing at least eight people and wounding 13.

Chandrika blasts corruption, inefficiency in civil service

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka President Chandrika Kumaratunga blamed inefficiency and corruption in the civil service for eating up 40 per cent of the war-torn country's development budget, state media reported yesterday.

"Over 40 per cent of the funds allocated for development are consumed in wastage, inefficiency and corruption by the public sector," the state-owned Daily News quoted Kumaratunga as telling a meeting a senior public sector officials on Tuesday.

Kumaratunga also said senior civil servants should be paid much higher salaries "but this could not be done only due to the war, but also due to the inefficiency of cabinet ministers."

The government is under growing pressure to raise salaries of public servants amid strong opposition protests about the cost of living which has begun to soar since the rupee was floated last month.

Sri Lanka last week announced plans to spend 63 billion rupees (\$720 million) this year, or about 16 per cent of projected expenditure, on its war against Tamil separatists which has claimed an estimated 64,000 lives since it began in 1983. "I am not prepared to tolerate corruption in the state sector," said Kumaratunga who ordered a

crackdown on graft among government officials in November.

The newspaper said Kumaratunga also accused her ministers of lethargy saying she had "yet to receive a single document or report from any one of her 44 cabinet ministers".

Kumaratunga appointed a large cabinet in October last year to cement a shaky coalition government after losing her parliamentary majority in a general election.

Aid donors have frequently complained about the slow disbursement of funds and the World Bank office in Colombo told Reuters on Tuesday it was looking to more than double its disbursement ratio.

Marriage under the sea

AP, Bangkok

Thousands of engaged couples took the plunge on Valentine's Day, some literally - 72 men and women in Thailand exchange vows and registered their marriage under the sea.

In a mass ceremony organised by local tour agencies to promote tourism, 34 foreign and two Thai couples got married underwater Wednesday at the southern beach resort of Koh Kradan, about 800 kilometres south of Bangkok, Radio Thailand said.

Wearing wedding dresses on top of diving gear, they dived 15 metres into the Andaman Sea, exchanged rings and signed waterproof marriage registration documents with special pens, the radio said.

The whacky weddings contributed to a surge in marriage ceremonies as people rushed to tie the knot on Valentine's Day, an event that has gained popularity in cities in recent years in this traditional Buddhist country.

Civilian was at controls of US submarine during collision

AFP, Washington

A civilian guest was at the helm of a US submarine when it struck and sank a Japanese fishing vessel as it surfaced off Hawaii last week, leaving nine people missing, a US Navy official said on Tuesday.

The civilian was given the controls of the USS Greeneville's bow planes and rudder during a maneuver called an emergency main ballast tank blow, which sends the submarine shooting to the surface, the official said.

The Greeneville came up under the Ehime Maru Friday, ripping open its hull and sinking the 53-meter trawler within minutes, some 16

kilometers south of Hawaii's famed Waikiki Beach.

Coast guard and navy ships continued their search yesterday for nine people missing from the trawler which carried a group of Japanese high school students learning about commercial fishing.

Although there was no evidence the civilian contributed to the collision, the disclosure seemed certain to further stoke Japanese outrage over the disaster.

Pentagon officials said 15 civilians were aboard the Greeneville as part of a routine navy public relations effort to show off the capabilities of their submarines and surface ships.

Navy officials said it was not out of the ordinary to allow visiting civilians to take the controls of a submarine under close supervision of crew members.

In this case, one of the civilians aboard the Greeneville "was at the helm through the evolution of the emergency blow," the navy official told AFP.

"The individual held a steady course and once the ship was in an up angle did nothing but hold that course steady," the official said. "There is nothing for them to do."

Rear Admiral Craig Quigley, a Pentagon spokesman, refused to identify the civilians on board the Greeneville.

Laden's telecommunications network outperforms US

AFP, New York

A top US intelligence official on Tuesday admitted that militant Islamic group leader Osama bin Laden's telecommunications network was more advanced than that of the United States.

In an interview with CBS television's "60 Minutes II", US National Security Agency director Mike Hayden admitted that the United States is "behind the curve" in the telecommunications realm.

"Our adversary telecommunications are now based upon the developmental cycle of a global industry that is literally moving at the speed of light," Hayden told "60 Minutes II," according to the transcript obtained by AFP.

"Cell phones, encryption, fiber-optic telecommunications, digital communications ... These are all available to people who could do harm to the United States of America. We are behind the curve."



Hayden said that, in the Cold War era, the Soviet Union "had to rely on those things the Soviet Union built" for telecommunications.

By contrast, he said, "Osama bin Laden has at his disposal the wealth of a three-trillion-a-year telecommunications industry he can rely on. He has better technology."

Hayden says change is imperative in order for his agency, which operates listening posts throughout the world, to survive on this new playing field.

"This is about an agency that's grown up in one world, learned a way to succeed within that world, and now finds itself in another world -- and it's got to change if it hopes to succeed in that world," he said.

Bin Laden, in exile in Afghanistan under the protection of the ruling Taliban militia, is among the US Federal Bureau of Investigation's 10 most wanted fugitives.

He is wanted in connection with the bombings of two US embassies in East Africa in 1998 which killed 224 people.

Quake hits Indonesia

AFP, Jakarta

An earthquake measuring 5.0 on the Richter scale rocked the south of the Indonesian island of Sumatra early Wednesday morning, but there were no immediate reports of casualties or damage, a seismologist said.

A monitor at the Meteorological and Geophysical Bureau in Jakarta said the tremor hit at 2.28 am (0128 BST) in the Indian Ocean some 21 km from the city of Bengkulu.

"Until now we have no reports of casualties or damage," the official, who identified himself only as Danny, said.

The state Antara news agency said some people in high rise buildings in Jakarta felt the quake, which was measured by the Australian Geological Survey Organisation (AGSO) at 7.4 on the Richter scale.

Afghan opposition captures key city

Major setback to Taliban

AFP, Kabul

Afghan opposition forces captured the key central city of Bamiyan from the Taliban overnight Wednesday in a major blow to the ruling militia, officials said.

"Our forces entered Bamiyan city last night," said Mohammad Alizadah, a spokesman for the anti-Taliban Hezb-e-Wahdat party. "Bamiyan has been fully liberated."

A senior Taliban official conceded the militia had lost control of the city saying: "We have pulled out to the Ghorband T-junction" outside the city limits after the opposition soldiers launched an attack from the rear.

"There are losses on our part. We have left behind a number of vehicles and arms as well," the Taliban official said. Ruling militia soldiers were regrouping for a counter-attack, he added.

"We have sent reinforcements. But it is not clear when we are going to launch the counter-attack," the Taliban official said.

The Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) said opposition forces had captured Bamiyan, the capital of Bamiyan province and a traditional stronghold of Afghani's minority Shiite Muslim community, after "brief overnight fighting."

It said Bamiyan's defences had become weak after the Taliban rushed troops from the central region to northeastern provinces controlled by opposition forces loyal to ex-defence minister Ahmad Shah Masood.

"We have vacated Bamiyan city as part of a military strategy," it quoted the unidentified Taliban official as saying.

Japan arrests 68 illegal immigrants

AFP, Tokyo

Japan Coast Guard arrested 68 suspected illegal migrants and human traffickers on board a cargo vessel Wednesday in waters off Kyushu in southern Japan, a Coast Guard official said.

"Of the group, 63 were arrested for having no passports, while the other five were arrested in connection with smuggling illegal migrants to Japan," said Shigeru Yoshihara of Japan Coast Guard.

A patrol boat from the Fukuoka Prefecture government spotted a suspicious cargo ship around 5 pm (1400 BST) Tuesday in waters about 30 km northeast of Okinoshima Island, and 900 km southwest of Tokyo, Yoshihara said.

The Coast Guard launched its own patrol boat to the area to monitor the vessel, which was still outside the Japanese territory.

Around 7 pm Tuesday, the vessel entered the Japanese waters, prompting coast guard officials to stop it for an inspection, Yoshihara said.

"Our people initially found more than 40 people on board the vessel and suspected that they had entered Japan illegally," he said.

The vessel, identified as the Zhe Dai 82213, was not flying any flags indicating its origin but she is believed to be from China, he said.

'Gladiator' leads Oscars with 12 nominations



PHOTO: AFP

US actress Kathy Bates (L) and President of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Robert Redme (R) announce the nominations for the 73rd Annual Academy Awards in Beverly Hills, CA, on Tuesday. Nominated in the Best Actress category are (clockwise from bottom L) Joan Allen ("The Contender"), Juliette Binoche ("Chocolat"), Ellen Burstyn ("Requiem for a Dream"), Laura Linney ("You Can Count on Me") and Julia Roberts ("Erin Brockovich"). The Awards will be presented on March 25 at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles.

REUTERS, Beverly Hills, California

"Gladiator" ruled, "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" pounced and "Erin Brockovich" got a valentine a day early as the Oscar nominations were announced yesterday with each of those films celebrating a big day.

Roman empire epic "Gladiator" score the most Oscar nominations, with 12, including best picture, best actor for Russell Crowe and best director for Ridley Scott, while Ang Lee's Chinese-language "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" was second with 10, the most nominations a foreign language has ever received.

"Crouching Tiger" won nominations for best picture and best foreign language film, marking only the third time a film has been nominated in both categories in the Oscars' 73-year history.

"Erin Brockovich," in which best actress nominee Julia Roberts portrays an environmental activist, and the drug war drama "Traffic" earned best picture nomi-

nations for director Steven Soderbergh.

As he was in the earlier Golden Globe awards in Hollywood, Soderbergh was nominated for best director, twice, for the two films becoming the first director to accomplish that feat since Michael Curtiz did it in 1938.

Rounding out the best picture nominees was "Chocolat," which proved to be a small surprise for many industry watchers because the movie, though well-liked by audiences, had been left out of many of the early awards.

Music categories were loaded with talent as rock music legend Bob Dylan earned a nomination for best original song with "Things Have Changed" from "Wonder Boys."

Joining Dylan in that category were Sting with "My Funny Friend and Me" from "The Emperor's New Groove;" Icelandic pop star Bjork with "I've Seen It All" from "Dancer in the Dark;" Randy Newman with "A Fool in Love" from "Meet the Parents," and Jorge Calandrelli



PHOTO: AFP

US actress Kathy Bates (L) and President of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Robert Redme (R) announce the nominations for the 73rd Annual Academy Awards in Beverly Hills, CA, on Tuesday. Nominated in the Best Actor category are (clockwise from bottom L) Javier Bardem ("Before Night Falls"), Russell Crowe ("Gladiator"), Tom Hanks ("Cast Away"), Ed Harris ("Pollock") and Geoffrey Rush ("Quills"). The Awards will be presented on March 25 at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles.

and Tan Dun for "A Love Before Time" from "Crouching Tiger."

The Oscars, handed out each year by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, are the top film industry honours in the United States. They will be awarded this year in a ceremony in Los Angeles on March 25.

Academy President Robert Redme called the group of films one of the most eclectic in recent years.

"This is a great selection of films, very diverse," Redme said. "In fact, it's the year of diversity."

Included with Crowe in the best actor category were Tom Hanks in "Cast Away," who is considered a favourite for playing a man stranded for years on an island. Longshots against Crowe and Hanks will be Javier Barde, who plays a Cuban poet and novelist in "Before Night Falls," Ed Harris playing the artist Jackson Pollock in "Pollock" and Geoffrey Rush as the infamous Marquis de Sade in "Quills."

Redme said he was delighted to see the Spanish actor Bardem, who is widely recognised in his home country but little known in the United States, nominated for an Oscar.

Best actress nominees included box office queen Roberts for "Brockovich" along with two actresses who received strong reviews but little popular attention in small, independent-style films. Laura Linney playing a single mom in "You Can Count on Me" and Ellen Burstyn portraying a TV-addicted mother in "Requiem for a Dream."

Also on the best actress list are Juliette Binoche for her role as the owner of a chocolate shop who turns a small French town upside down in "Chocolat" and Joan Allen for her performance as a female vice presidential appointee under political scrutiny in "The Contender."

Imelda to open museum for her shoes

AFP, Manila

Former Philippine first lady Imelda Marcos will open a museum showcasing part of her collection of several thousand pairs of shoes left behind at the presidential palace when she and husband bolted during a revolt.

The museum, to be opened Friday, will be housed in a 300-year-old Spanish adobe-and-brick structure at Marikina City, the country's shoe-making capital in an eastern Manila suburb, according to a spokeswoman for the city's mayor Bayani Fernando.

The government had allowed some 200 pairs of Marcos' sandals, pumps, boots and slippers previously kept at the Malacanang presidential palace museum to be moved for safekeeping and display at the new site, a statement from the mayor's office said.

Dictator Ferdinand Marcos was overthrown in 1986 after a popular revolt. The Marcos family was forced to flee to Hawaii where the ex-president died in 1989.

The several thousand pairs of shoes left behind by Imelda Marcos became big news, confirming reports of her extravagant, jetsetting lifestyle despite her country's poverty.