

Plague-like disease creates panic in Himachal: 3 killed

AP, New Delhi

Authorities have closed down schools and put paramedics on alert in the northern Himalayan foothills after three people died from what doctors say may be pneumonic plague.

Tests on seven infected patients to specify the disease should be available by yesterday, a hospital spokeswoman told The Associated Press on Saturday.

"It is contagious and symptoms are similar to pneumonia and plague," said Manju Wadwalkar, spokeswoman for the Postgraduate Institute Hospital in Chandigarh, capital of Punjab state.

The disease broke out early in the week in a village in Rohru district of neighbouring Himachal Pradesh state.

Panicked residents have been buying preventive doses of antibiotics in Rohru, and state authorities warned people to stay in their homes for the next five to seven days, the Hindustan times reported.

Experts from the National Institution for Communicable Diseases have reached Rohru, nearly 350 kilometers north of New Delhi.

"Eight people were hospitalised on Tuesday. One of them died on Wednesday and the rest were improving and their condition was

not serious," Wadwalkar said.

Two more children from the same village, who showed similar symptoms, were brought to Chandigarh and admitted on Saturday, she said.

"We are still observing the culture, once it is fully grown, we will identify the bacteria and then we will come to know whether it is plague," Wadwalkar said.

The victims suffered fever, cough, exhaustion and chest pain, the United News of India news agency quoted a government statement as saying in Simla, the capital of Himachal Pradesh.

The symptoms are those of pneumonia and pneumonic plague.

The statement said 35-year-old Randhir Singh was the first person to died after he had gone hunting in a forest last month. A woman relative who came to express condolences developed symptoms and died later in a hospital in Simla, the Himachal Pradesh state capital.

Plague, transmitted to humans from rats through flea bites, has emerged in India in isolated areas during the past century. Newspapers said there was an outbreak in the Himachal Pradesh region in the 1980s. The pneumonic form affects the lungs and leads to a quick death if not treated with antibiotics.

Sad tale

FROM PAGE 12

them after recording the case on February 8, four days after the incident.

"The OC kept me and my son in thana custody instead of arresting the accused. We were subjected to mental torture by OC Shaheen Mondol for withdrawing the case. But we did not submit to threats by the OC," she said.

They are now stranded at Sathkira because they can not return to their village because of threats by the rapists, she claimed.

"I was even threatened to be further raped in the bed of Ashashuni Health Complex where I was undergoing treatment", she said.

"On the night of February 1, the rapists came to Sathkira town from Ashashuni and threatened my school-going son with death".

She said she will kill her son and daughter and commit suicide if she does not get justice and security of life.

CJ sends list

FROM PAGE 1

Nurul Islam and Kazi AT Monwaruddin.

The list was sent to the law ministry, which will draft a proposal and send it along with the list to the prime minister for primary approval.

The prime minister will then forward it to the president for final approval. As per the constitution, the president cannot appoint a judge without the prime minister's advice.

The government in January 17 gazetted its decision to restructure the Appellate Division by adding two more judges to the existing five-member body.

Once the seven-member Appellate Division is created, it would be possible to form two to three benches, thus speeding up trials.

There are now over 5,000 cases pending with the Appellate Division.

Kibria blasts

FROM PAGE 1

"In order to protect our national interests, such a whimsical and impulsive decision must be resisted," he said, adding, "Bangladesh cannot be penalised due to the misplaced sense of pride of one man."

He said in taking the decision the BNP-Jamaat government forgot about the plight of the vast multitude of people living below poverty line.

Bangladesh has already received substantial benefits in terms of debt relief and expects to receive similar benefits in the future, he noted.

"It is an unacceptable luxury for a poor country to throw away these important concessions admissible only to the members of the LDC Group."

Kibria said the BNP-Jamaat government had certainly not done any thing in the last four months to claim that within this short period it has dramatically reduced poverty and raised the international status of Bangladesh.

In fact, he said, the condition of the common people has deteriorated during the last few months. However, the country did make significant progress during the Awami League period when "we achieved a growth rate close to six

per cent," said the finance minister of the last AL government.

Ample food production and low rate of inflation enabled common people to enjoy the benefits of the high growth.

Kibria observed no country likes or enjoys being in the LDC Group, but it is the objective conditions and the interests of the country rather than "false pride that should guide us in taking a decision on such an important matter".

"Has Saifur Rahman done any study on the pros and cons of the issue, including, in particular, the economic and financial benefits that we have obtained from our membership of the Group? What are the findings of the study?"

He questioned the propriety of taking decision on such a matter without a thorough study. "Unless clearly negative conclusions are drawn from such a study, it would be a great disservice to Bangladesh, and in particular its export sectors, to quit the membership of the Group," he said.

Kibria urged the Finance Minister to refrain from such a step that, in his view, will cause serious damage to the vital economic interests of Bangladesh.

Gas regulatory body

FROM PAGE 1

Commission would be formed with a chairman and four members. The office bearers would require experience of at least 15 years in the fields of government, law, business, industry, commerce, engineering etc.

The commission shall be independent in exercising its powers to promote development of gas industry to meet the needs of different zones of the country, to promote competitive market conduct, prevent misuse of monopoly power, facilitate investors' entry into the sector and facilitate maintenance of a financially viable gas industry.

Gas industry operators would require to get licences from the commission for their operation. It would also ensure that licenses are given without any discrimination and with full transparency.

The law outlines rigorous imprisonment up to five years and fines for theft of gas including having illegal gas connection, use of gas without meters and tampering with meters or gas pipelines.

The commission would also be the licensing authority for providing

gas transmission and processing and distribution licenses to persons or companies.

While the commission would authorise gas transmission and processing tariffs, licensees would require making public all rates, charges and other terms and conditions.

The act says that all licensees should ensure that there would be no cross-subsidy among separately licensed activities or between customers or classes of customers.

Licensees shall ensure that the prices they charge for transmission, processing, distribution or supply of gas have been set in accordance with a cost reflective methodology agreed with the commission and have been publicly notified.

In deciding the appropriate level of gas transmission or gas distribution carriage charges, gas processing charges and gas supply charges, the commission should also protect consumers against monopolistic prices.

The commission would also make and modify regulations which define all technical and safety standards in respect of gas industry.

Customs officials

FROM PAGE 12

area," said one official.

Being chased, the driver and others left the area, leaving behind the microbus on the road for a while.

As the intelligence officials tried to bring the microbus, the regrouped smugglers attacked the officials with sticks, and at one stage, they threw hot water on them.

The miscreants also snatched a walkie-talkie from an official and damaged the jeep of the customs intelligence.

Seriously injured, customs officials are Superintendent Md Harun-ur-Rashid and inspectors Nure Alam and Rowshanul Huq.

Meanwhile, Customs Bond office in a letter to the National Board of Revenue (NBR), narrating the incident, demanded supply of effective logistics for patrols.

The Customs Bond and Intelligence has asked the NBR to ensure armed BDR security to the patrol teams.

The government has introduced patrols to check smuggling and evasion of tax and duties from December 1.

Clarification

FROM PAGE 1

taken to upgrade the warship by rectification of existing defects, addition of new weapon system and modification of its design, Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said yesterday.

On completion of the programme, the frigate will return to the operational fleet of Bangladesh Navy.

The clarification came following some newspaper reports on the recent decommissioning of the 100 million-dollar Daewoo-built frigate commissioned in June last year by the Awami League government.

It said, "Since the ship became unsuitable for operational deployment at the sea owing to faulty design of the SONAR System and other combat inadequacies, its decommissioning was essential."

According to naval traditions, the ISPR said, a naval vessel during the period of its decommissioning is known by the name of its type, not by the name given at the time of previous commission.

Therefore, the decommissioned frigate will be known by its pre-commission name "DN2000H" in keeping with the naval traditions, the clarification further noted to dispel confusion in public mind.

Maoists kill

FROM PAGE 12

said.

The rebels, who have been fighting since 1996 to overthrow the constitutional monarchy, then headed to the Acham district headquarters where they killed another 24 people including chief district officer Miohan Singh Khattari, intelligence officer Lok Raj and his wife.

The rebels virtually controlled the headquarters until 6:00 am yesterday but were driven off after para-troopers landed in the area, although an exchange of fire continued until 11:00 am.

A highly-placed home ministry source confirmed the attack but could not give details of the casualties. Communication with the area was cut off after the attacks, he said.

More than 600 guerrillas and over 100 security personnel have been killed since the government imposed the state of emergency on November 26 last year following the series of attacks by the guerrillas on the government security forces after they broke a four-month-long cease-fire talks with the government on November 23 last year.

The six-year-long guerrillas insurgency has claimed more than 2,300 people, including soldiers, policemen, civilians and the guerrillas, in the Himalayan Kingdom.

Teacher strangled

FROM PAGE 1

Rahman filed a case with Gulshan Police in this regard. Police picked up Saiful Islam, a peon, and Absaruddin, a guard of a firm on the building's ground floor, suspecting their involvement in the murder.

In the other incident, Gazi Abbas, 45, a contractor and a BNP activist, was gunned down in front of his wife, who also suffered bullet injury, at their East Tejknipara residence in the city's Tejaon area.

Abbas was asleep in his bedroom at about 7:45am yesterday when a gang of three led by Nazrul and Ashik went there and fired gunshots, hitting Abbas in the head and chest. His wife Gazi Minu received bullet in her left hand. Abbas died on the spot.

Police said Abbas might have been murdered following a row over extortion in the Kawranbazar in the city.

Police recovered the body and sent it to the DMCH morgue for autopsy. Minu was sent to the DMCH for treatment.

Family sources said Abbas was a first class contractor of WASA. He left four sons and one daughter.

Supporters of Abbas brought out a procession, which paraded different streets in and around the Tejaon area, demanding arrest and punishment of the killers.

The duty officer of Tejaon police said last night that no case in this regard was filed yet.



PHOTO: STAR

DemocracyWatch brought out a colourful procession in the city yesterday to mark the International Mother Language Day.

Hajj begins Wednesday amid tight security

25m pilgrims expected this yr

AFP, Makkah

More than two million Muslims from all over the world converged on Makkah amid strict security yesterday for the annual Hajj pilgrimage to Islam's holiest shrine.

Saudi authorities have beefed up the security presence in and around Makkah to control anticipated record numbers for the first mass gathering of Muslims since the September 11 attack on the United States.

Police were controlling the main entrances to Makkah to prevent unauthorised people from entering the city at the heart of which stands the Grand Mosque.

Thousands of police and security personnel have also been deployed at the major sacred sites on the outskirts of the city, which pilgrims visit as part of elaborate three-day rituals that begin on Wednesday.

The authorities have mobilised some 60,000 employees and volunteers, in addition to 20,000 soldiers and security men for the Hajj.

Thousands of flights have landed at King Abdul Aziz International Airport in Jeddah, 75 kilometres west of Makkah, carrying hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from more

than 100 countries.

Experts predict a turnout of around 2.5 million pilgrims, some 500,000 more than last year.

Saudi authorities have appealed for a peaceful pilgrimage and warned they will not allow any political activity or protests, particularly against the United States.

"We have made all the arrangements. We will not permit, in any case, demonstrations or marches during the pilgrimage," Interior Minister Nayef bin Abdel Aziz told a press conference here.

"We are totally and firmly ready to face any incident with wisdom, firmness and force," he warned.

Imam of the Grand Mosque Osama Khayyat urged pilgrims during his Friday sermon to stay away from trouble and to focus on the benefits of Hajj. Some two million worshippers prayed at the mosque at noon Friday.

"Masses of the faithful dressed in two places of seamless white cloth and women with head cover thronged the Grand Mosque to circle the cube-shaped Kaaba seven times on arrival.

While making the rotation around the Kaaba stone, the faithful prayed passionately for Almighty Allah to forgive their sins and to accept their

pilgrimage.

Muslims believe a true pilgrimage absolves sins and cleanses the soul.

Pilgrims then make the "Sa'i", a walk repeated seven times between two hillocks, where Prophet Ibrahim's (AS) wife Hazera searched for water for baby Ismail until she found the Zamzam Spring, which still runs in the same place today.

The Hajj which every able-bodied Muslim must carry out at least once if he has the means, starts in earnest on Wednesday when the pilgrims move to Mina, a valley outside Makkah, where they will be housed in fire-proof tents.

They keep an all-night vigil in Mina, and on Thursday will move to "stand" on Mount Arafat, 12 kilometres away, the climax of hajj.

Here, they will stay until sunset, praying for forgiveness at the site of the Prophet Mohammad's (SM) last sermon 14 centuries ago.

The health ministry has prepared some 21 hospitals and 300 medical centers, with a capacity of 7,000 beds, in Makkah, the surrounding sites and the city of Medina, some 450 km to the north. An extra 9,000 medical staff have been drafted in.

AL: Ekushey

FROM PAGE 12

movement in brief and mentioned the contribution of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to the language movement.

The function, presided over by senior Awami League leader Abdus Samad Azad, was also addressed by AL leader Abdur Razzak, educationist and drama artiste PR Montazuddin Ahmed, writer MR Akhtar Mukul, journalist Waheedul Huq and columnist Abed Khan.

Poets Nirmalendu Goon and Mahadev Saha recited their self-composed poems.

Writer Waheedul Huq said the Bengali language is the greatest achievement and pride of the nation.

Referring to rapes and killings in post-election violence, he said: "BNP-Jamaat government turned a brother into a rapist. They have made Bangladeshers into beasts."

Prof Montazuddin Ahmed said, "this nation is mine, this language is mine, no one will be able to snatch my mother tongue."

"We had sacrificed blood for my language, for my country, but now the whole nation and our language are in danger," he said.

Former Minister Obaidul Quader conducted the function, which opened with the national anthem.

PM calls

FROM PAGE 12

Dr Mohammad Yunus presented a paper on the overall development of ICT in Bangladesh and intensive participation of the private sector.

The Prime Minister listened to the specialists in the sector and gave a directive for organising a special meeting of the taskforce to look into the proposals, recommendations and problems identified in Dr Yunus' paper.

She recalled that the present four-party alliance government gave importance to the ICT sector. She mentioned the government decision to supply computers to schools to raise a pool of computer professionals.

"Poverty-alleviation programme, employment generation for youths, manpower export, increase in remittances and the country's other exports have now become ICT-dependent," she said.

Other speakers at the meeting focused on other problems, including telephone connections for Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and obstacles to participation of the private sector in the development of ICT.

Israel fires missiles into West Bank

Suicide bombers kill 2 Israelis

REUTERS, Nablus

Israeli helicopter gunships launched missile strikes against Palestinian targets in the West Bank city of Nablus yesterday in apparent retaliation for a deadly suicide bombing at a Jewish settlement.

The Israeli army said it struck a Palestinian Authority building, a second government building and a police compound.

There was no immediate word on casualties or damage caused by the missiles.

The missile attacks took place just hours after a Palestinian suicide bomber blew himself up in a crowded shopping centre in a West Bank settlement on Saturday night, killing two Israeli teenagers and injuring 20 other people.

Three Palestinians were killed in a gun battle with Israelis in Gaza earlier in the day, and a Hamas militant died when his car blew up in the West Bank in what the militant Islamic group said was an Israeli assassination that would be avenged.

After dark, a suicide bomber strapped with nail-studded explosives blew himself up outside a pizzeria in an open-air shopping centre in the Karnei Shomron settlement, police said.

He died along with two Israelis. Twenty other people were wounded, at least six of them seriously, officials said.

The blast sprayed body parts, half-eaten food and debris across the settlement's central plaza. Blood splattered the pavement. Facades were ripped apart and windows shattered.

Ron Agunar, 17, said he was driving past the shopping centre when he "a loud boom and screaming". "I got out of my car and ran to the site and saw a body in the pizzeria and chunks of human flesh all over. It was the bomber's body. I started giving first aid (to the wounded)," he said.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the blast at Karnei Shomron, a settlement of about 6,000 people between the Palestinian-ruled cities of Qalqilya and Nablus.

The bombing took place just hours after German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, following a meeting with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, said the situation was deteriorating from "bad to worse" and appealed for an immediate ceasefire.

Israeli government spokesman Avi Pazner said the bombing was "a continuation of the campaign of carnage and murder of Yasser Arafat and his Palestinian Authority".

Arafat has always denied Israeli accusations of complicity and has accused Israel of provoking violence with its crippling blockade and military raids in Palestinian areas.

Hajj at govt expense

FROM PAGE 1

During a visit to the Secretariat yesterday, almost all the rooms at the religious affairs ministry were found closed and not even a peon was seen.

An assistant secretary represented the ministry at an inter-ministerial meeting held to chalk out plans to remove garbage from the city after the Eid-ul-Azha.

A senior minister was seen desperately trying to contact a senior or mid-ranking official of the religious affairs ministry to confirm Hajj flights to be availed by pilgrimages from his area. He did not find any one.

State Minister for Religious Affairs Mosharrarf Hossain Shahjahan is leading a 20-member Hajj delegation which includes his wife, Jute Minister Hafizuddin Ahmed, parliament members Abu Yusuf Khalilur Rahman and Mashiur

Rahman, Chairman of Red Crescent Society ZA Khan and some BNP leaders.

Over Tk 1.23 crore is being spent from the public exchequer for the delegation.

Moreover, a 23-member doctors' delegation and a good number of 'Hajj volunteers' left for Saudi Arabia earlier at government expenditure. Most of the doctors and volunteers allegedly belong to ruling BNP and its front organisations.

Talking to The Daily Star informally, the senior minister said a section of party leaders and workers become 'crazy' to perform Hajj when the party comes to power.

"Although these people are affluent, they want to perform Hajj at government expenditure. They don't desire to perform Hajj while in opposition," he said.

Ershad on matchhunt

FROM PAGE 1

His first words on arrival at the airport implied the very possibility of his tilt towards the ruling coalition as he regretted that his desertion of the BNP-led alliance was a "mistake", which threw up an electoral debacle for his party.

Then in power, the AL reportedly forced Ershad to quit the alliance to have the anti-AL vote bank divided. But the fractured alliance harvested the pro-Islam nationalist votes against those in the Awami fold. And Ershad's disqualification for the electoral race dented the prospect of his party that bagged only 14 seats.

Now, he came in from abroad having a different political perspective in which the AL is boycotting the parliament blaming the coalition government for political and religious persecution. Ershad may cash in on the BNP-AL bitterness and lend political support to the BNP-led government, political analysts believe.

"I have returned because I will have to return," he told reporters Saturday, claiming that he did not have any talks with the government.

Still, he left a scope for an understanding with the government saying, "But I don't know if my party had any such talks as I was out of the country." A confident Ershad further said he did not fear arrests because he was on bail.

Ershad's JP declined from its status as a third force with 30-plus seats both in 1991 and 1996 to only 14 in the last parliamentary polls following splits in the party twice, both caused by his frequent political switches. One of the breakaway factions is now with the ruling coalition, while the other is still away from the big parties. The fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami emerged as the third party in the new parliament, which helped the BNP-led alliance get a two-thirds majority.

Ershad's political future and chance of free movement largely depend on his latest course of action as regards his relations with the two big parties, analysts say.

More power plants

FROM PAGE 12

within next three months, PDB Chairman Syed Abdul Mayeed told The Daily Star.

Converting a number plants including those at Rajuan, Fenchuganj, Shahjibazar into SBUs is also being considered, officials said.

State Minister for Power Iqbal Hasan Mahmood also told this correspondent that the government has plans to turn more power plants into SBUs.

Asked whether the government preferred only turning more plants into SBUs, he said the concept of holding company would also be implemented.

The draft Bangladesh Power Reforms Act 2002 approved by the ministry last week also proposes unbundling of the power sector by converting power plants into holding companies or SBUs, sources said.

Asked why employees prefer the SBU concept, Zafrul Hasan, general secretary of Bangladesh National Electricity Workers and Employees Union, said once a power plant is made a holding company, PDB has to pay regularly for purchasing power from it.

If PDB fails to make payment for the purchase, the association leader fear, there is possibility of handover of the plant to private sector as it would no more remain a

profit making one.

But in cases of a SBU, there will be scope for internal arrangement if PDB fails to make payment for the power purchase, he said.

Besides, PDB officials feel that SBUs will not be a threat to PDB's existence as those will remain partially autonomous units under PDB.

The concept of giving a percentage of the operational surplus to officials and employees is a key factor for which they prefer SBU than any other concept, senior officials of PDB said.

Officials and employees of Haripur plant got eight bonuses last year, they mentioned.

Browsing

FROM PAGE 1

highly competitive in the last five years.

Ershad Chowdhury, general secretary of the ISP association, said the Internet users would be paying much higher prices due to the increased tariff. Last month, the government raised line rent of each telephone being used by the ISPs by 600 per cent from Tk 150 to Tk 1000 per month.

"The new fees would certainly worsen the fate of the Internet users as well as the service providers in Bangladesh," he cautioned.