

Nations gear up for bird flu defence

AFP, Bangkok

Nations from Asia to Europe and the Americas stepped up their guard yesterday against the rapid spread of the bird flu virus, a day after Thailand reported its first fatality from the virus in a year.

A Thai farmer who slaughtered and ate a sick chicken became the world's 61st victim of the H5N1 avian influenza virus, which experts fear could cause a pandemic if it mutates into a form easily transmissible between people.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) said on its website that each additional human case was making it easier to develop human-to-human transmission and turn into a global catastrophe.

"While neither the timing nor the severity of the next pandemic can be predicted, the probability that a pandemic will occur has increased," the organisation said.

Thailand slaughtered poultry around the outbreak, and the dead farmer's seven-year-old son was being checked for the virus at a Bangkok hospital.

"Sometimes testing for the virus takes time. If the results are not clear, many tests are required so that our analysis is unambiguous," Thai Health Minister Suchai Chareonratanakul said.

In Europe, a preliminary test by a British laboratory showed no evidence of bird flu in a suspect turkey sent by Greece, but the continent remained braced against the virus's advance into Russia, Romania and Turkey.

The European Commission formally banned imports of pet birds and feathers from nearly all Russian territory in an emergency procedure, after an outbreak of lethal bird flu south of Moscow.

Ukraine's parliament slapped a six-month ban on imports of poultry and poultry products following the discovery of the H5N1 strain in neighbouring Russia and Romania.

EU health ministers agreed on the

Anti-graft chief held for graft

AFP, Hanoi

Vietnam's anti-corruption chief has been arrested over allegations he took bribes and abused his position, police said yesterday, in an embarrassing setback for the country's fight against rampant graft.

Luong Cao Khai, head of Vietnam's anti-corruption inspection taskforce and deputy director of the government's inspection department, was arrested at his home here on Thursday, an investigative police source told AFP.

The official, who was suspended earlier this month by Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, was appointed to probe state-owned oil and gas giant PetroVietnam between 2002 and 2003 but failed to prove any major incidences of corruption.

Police later uncovered several cases of serious wrongdoing.

"He is accused of receiving money and land from some oil and gas officials to use for private purposes and abusing his position to provide his relatives with jobs in oil and gas sector," the Tuoi Tre daily newspaper said Friday.

After receiving the money, he modified the contents of his inspection to underestimate the wrongdoings his teams had uncovered, the paper said.

On Wednesday, seven oil and gas officials received sentences ranging from four years to life imprisonment for being involved in falsifying a 17-million dollar contract that resulted in millions of dollars in losses to state coffers. The communist regime has vowed to stamp out rampant corruption that permeates the government and state sector, and the National assembly is due to vote a comprehensive anti-corruption law on November 26.

BPC fuel stoppage

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Dismayed at 'no initiatives' from Biman to pay the dues, Mahmudur Rahman said, "The situation has worsened to the extent that Sonali Bank has declined to open L/Cs for the BPC. I'll meet the finance minister on Sunday and apprise him of the situation."

He went on, "Forget about its (Biman's) outstanding fuel bills of Tk 500 crore, it is not even paying any heed to our inability to continue supply of fuel on credit. We expect that at least from now on Biman will buy fuel on cash."

He quoted BPC figures to claim that in the last one year, excepting two months, Biman did not make full payment for its monthly fuel purchase. "This can't go on for ever. If we allow this to happen, the whole financial discipline will break down."

Mir Nasir however told this correspondent last night "Biman paid Tk 321 crore in fuel bills during the period 1996-2001 of the Awami League rule, leaving outstanding dues of Tk 558 crore that we had to inherit."

He claimed Biman paid Tk 929 crore in fuel bills to the BPC over the last four years. But it could not clear its accumulated previous dues largely

need for a continental stockpile of vaccines, with a formal decision likely to come at a December 8-9 meeting in Brussels.

In a joint statement, they stressed the "critical nature" of giving clear information "to reduce the likelihood of confusing messages."

"It is important to distinguish between avian flu, normal seasonal flu and pandemic flu," they said.

In Romania, authorities said tests had confirmed new cases of H5N1.

Migratory birds may next take the virus to Africa, the Food and Agriculture Organisation said this week, warning that the continent would be an "ideal breeding ground" because of close contact between people and animals.

Scientists have said east African Rift Valley countries Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania, along with Uganda, were particularly threatened as they host millions of migratory fowl that fly to warmer climes during the European winter.

Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda put veterinary experts on high alert and imposed new bans or strengthened existing restrictions on poultry and wild bird imports.

Experts have warned that poverty-stricken African nations whose populations are already at risk from hunger and vulnerable immune systems could be overwhelmed if the virus appears and jumps to humans.

Nigeria said it had sent vets to its northern wetlands to inspect migrating birds for signs of H5N1.

Pamphlets have been prepared to warn farmers of the danger, poultry imports from infected countries will be banned and quarantine rules are set to be stiffened.

A union representing Greek meat sellers said sales of poultry had plummeted 60 to 70 percent since Monday due to the bird flu crisis.

In France, a national federation of supermarket chains said sales of poultry had dropped 20 percent in five days.

Albanian television said about 3,600 chickens imported from Greece had been buried alive -- thrown into a pit and covered by a bulldozer without any disinfection process -- because of bird flu fears.

In Australia, authorities banned imports of birds from Canada after a scare caused by three pigeons certified as healthy by Canadian officials which tested positive for avian flu antibodies.

Hong Kong said Friday it was monitoring the outbreak of bird flu in China after warning it may close the border with the mainland if the virus begins infecting humans there. China announced its first reported outbreak of bird flu in more than two months on Wednesday.

In Washington the US Senate directed the Transportation Department to take proper precautions to deal with the possibility of an airline passenger flying into the United States infected with the virus.

Mexico said it was earmarking 46 million euros to buy vaccines.

Rab beats up

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Assistant Sub-inspector Nazmul Imam surrounded and beat him up with sticks and butt of guns.

"At this stage I told them I'm a journalist, but they did not bother and kept on beating," Titu added. He received treatment at Meherpur General Hospital.

Contacted, Captain Iftekhar, Rab in-charge of Meherpur, regretted the incident. "My men who set up a check-post heard someone yelled at them," he told The Daily Star last night.

"The Rab is not used to hear that kind of arrogant voice," Iftekhar said, adding, "Moreover, he [Titu] should have given his identity to avoid the incident."

He said the Rab will take departmental action against the responsible ones after an investigation into the matter.

4 US troops killed in Iraq

REUTERS, Baghdad

Three US Marines were killed by a roadside bomb west of Baghdad and in a separate attack a US soldier was killed in Hit, northwest of the capital, the US military said yesterday.

The latest deaths bring the number of US servicemen and women who have died in Iraq since the March 2003 invasion to at least 1,992.

The US military said the three Marines had been on patrol when their vehicle was hit by an improvised explosive device.

"During the subsequent engagement, Marines killed two insurgents and detained four others suspected of involvement in the attack," the statement said.

The soldier killed in Hit died of wounds sustained in "an indirect fire attack," a term usually applied to mortar or rocket attacks.

Nuke deal

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agreement in place by the time President George W. Bush arrives on a visit to India expected early next year.

Under the terms of the civilian nuclear cooperation agreement, New Delhi has to separate civilian and military nuclear programs in exchange for advanced civilian nuclear technology.

India would place its civilian nuclear reactors under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspection while Washington would lobby the 44-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group to allow civilian nuclear sales to India.

In return, Washington would give India access to technology normally reserved for nations that have signed the nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT).

The deal also commits Washington to persuade countries constituting the 44 member Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) to lift restrictions on India in civilian nuclear technology trade.

Burns conceded that some members of the NSG in a meeting in Washington on Wednesday had questions about lifting the embargo on civilian nuclear technology trade with India.

"I don't expect this to be an impediment," in implementation of the deal, he added.

The group normally restricts cooperation with countries, like India, that are not NPT members. India carried out nuclear weapon tests in May 1998, which were matched by rival Pakistan, leading to economic sanctions by the United States on both countries which were waived in 2001 in return for support in the "war on terrorism".

"I think by the time that President Bush visits New Delhi in early 2006, we will see that both of our countries would have met our commitment in this landmark agreement," Burns, who was instrumental in developing the partnership agreement, said.

Saddam lawyer

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diplomatic source said.

"We are over the moon at the news," Rory's father Joe Carroll told Ireland's RTE state television after hearing the voice of his son.

Carroll was kidnapped in the eastern Baghdad neighbourhood of Baladiyat by gunmen who bundled him into a car with one of his companions, according to the newspaper.

"Interior ministry services arrested some members of the group that kidnapped him, there was an interrogation, and we freed him," a ministry official said.

On Thursday Iraqi officials also announced the capture of Saddam's nephew Yasser Sabawi for allegedly funding insurgent violence, and the US military said a senior lieutenant to al-Qaeda frontman Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi had been killed during raids.

US spokesman General Rick Lynch told reporters that a total 376 foreigners had been detained this year in Iraq, including 78 from Egypt, 66 from Syria, 41 from Sudan and 32 from Saudi Arabia.

Bush unsure

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work hard to lay that foundation so that the process becomes irreversible," the US President told reporters.

"I'm a heck of a lot more confident today than when I was in I first came into office," said Bush, who praised Abbas's efforts to crack down on anti-Israel violence but said more action was a precondition for peace.

"The way forward must begin by confronting the threat that armed gangs pose to a genuinely democratic Palestine," said the US president, echoing Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's position.

At the same time, he warned Israel to stop expansion of settlements in Palestinian territories and said "we hold people to account for their promises made on the road map" -- a reference to the blueprint for peace drafted by the United States, United Nations, Russia, and European Union.

Despite his show of optimism about Palestinian statehood, Bush seemed to be qualifying comments he made just after his reelection in November 2004, when he said: "I would like to see it done in four years. I think it is possible."

Opposition plans

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year by the opposition parties. "We will elaborate the nine points," he added.

Acting general secretary of AL Obaidul Quader yesterday told The Daily Star that the process of formulating the programme is on. "We will soon give the government an ultimatum to meet our demands for electoral reforms and stop its misdeeds," he said.

"The party is also considering resigning from parliament at an appropriate stage in the anti-government movement," the AL leader added.

"We are preparing the programme to inform the people of our plan for the country's overall development," Hasanul Haq Inu, president of the JSD, told The Daily Star.

He said the top leaders will make commitments in public that they will carry out the programme if the countrymen vote them in.

The opposition combine's common programme will focus on some preferential sectors including education, health, industry, commerce, manpower and employment, mineral resources, social security, information technology and women and child affairs.

'Free' treatment

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Tk 5,000 as well as many other essential items required for the operation.

Originally, the operation would have cost him Tk 120,000 altogether, but Speaker Jamiruddin Sarker, who has taken up his cause, requested that the hospital bring down the cost to Tk 50,000. So, the hospital authorities have now told Ali they will perform the operation if he can manage at least Tk 50,000.

But, Ali cannot even afford to pay for Verospiron, which costs Tk 3, three times a day. One of his neighbouring patients is presently providing for that expense.

This is a common scenario in many government hospitals. Patients who can normally be treated in one month often have to stay for six, as they fail to collect the required money for operations and medicine. In this way they not only risk aggravating their diseases but also keep hospital beds occupied -- a dangerous situation given that space is not easily available at Dhaka Medical College and Hospital (DMCH) or other government hospitals. As a result, critical patients are often forced to huddle together in the veranda, which can exacerbate their illnesses while also creating terrible jams.

Mr Ferdous Hossain, 48, a homeopath doctor, has kidney stones. He has been lying on Extra Bed 4/B in the Urology Department of DMCH since August. He needs Tk 7,000 for his operation but does not have a single

Besides, it will incorporate the commitment to ensure trial of the war criminals and force them off the administration and the political stage.

There will be directions also about ways to curb corruption and arrest the spiralling prices of essentials.

The opposition leaders will commit themselves to reopening the state-run mills and factories and creating new jobs for the youth. Reducing the prices of agricultural inputs, implementing the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) accord and ensuring safety of the religious and ethnic minorities will figure prominently in the programme.

After the announcement, the opposition parties will go on cross-country tours to mobilise popular support in favour of the programme, sources said.

The opposition combine has also been considering forming a liaison committee to make policy-decisions on the planned united movement and participation in the next national polls.

The liaison committee will also make suggestions regarding the election manifesto, election strategies and formula to share constituencies among the allies.

penny and has already missed two operation schedules.

There are many more like him. And as the capacity of government hospitals' 'social help' sections, funded by contributions from the government and wealthy donors, is very limited, it means poor people cannot expect much help from that side.

DMCH social welfare officials say that the hospital has some 1,700 beds and that most of the patients admitted here are very poor. "Here everybody needs financial help. And we try our best. But those who need major operations and a lot of money are often left in the lurch, because we cannot provide them full support," one official says.

The conditions of 'social help' chapters in other government hospitals are even poorer compared to that of the DMCH.

In Ali's case, officials of the patient welfare fund of the hospital said they could have borne the OT charge and cost of medicine, which has already been deducted by the hospital authorities. But they can do nothing to help reduce the Tk 50,000 charge asked for the operation.

As with many poor patients, Ali is still awaiting the benefits of free treatment. "I have seen a number of patients with the same problem getting operated and cured and leaving the hospital happily. But I do not know when, if ever, I will be able to leave the hospital cured," he says.

Beximco Pharma

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blazing a trail. This huge response of the foreign investors to our shares at the very beginning has made us happy," Salman said.

"We are very happy to be the first Bangladeshi company as well as the first company from the Muslim world to have been listed on the AIM of the London Stock Exchange," he told the brief opening ceremony.

He also said Beximco Pharma is the first firm to have issued GDR (global depository receipt) on the Alternative Investment Market of the London bourse with more than 2,800 companies quoted on the market worth over £3,580 billion.

Salman announced Beximco Textiles will soon follow suit and get listed on the London capital market in a year.

Responding to a question whether the listing will have any impact on the Bangladesh capital market, Salman said the local investors would be able to track the price on AIM through Beximco Pharma's ticker code on the LSE, which is BXP. As the opening price has shot beyond Tk 80-mark, it may push up share prices on Dhaka and Chittagong bourses, Salman said.

Asked why Beximco Pharma chose to venture into the London market, Salman said one of the main objectives was to exploit the world market under the WTO regime where India and China have lost the rights to patent copying, creating huge scope for large-scale export of pharmaceutical products from Bangladesh.

"We needed to go for expansion to boost the production, which calls for huge investment. But as it is not easy to raise such massive funds from Bangladesh market, we've turned to London market," Salman said, adding that the expansion will create more than 500 new jobs.

Among the least developed countries that have been allowed to copy the patent until 2015, only Bangladesh has vast experience in the pharmaceuticals and there is a huge prospect, he also said.

Timms, the British minister, said he hopes trading of a Bangladeshi company on the London bourse would shore up the image of Bangladesh as well as confidence of prospective overseas investors. He was sanguine that such after his reelection in November 2004, when he said: "I would like to see it done in four years. I think it is possible."

Taskforce

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ministry and health and family welfare ministry. A round-the-clock monitoring cell has been opened at the DG Fisheries and Livestock office.

"The forest department has been ordered to keep local poultry out of contact with guest birds and also take strict security measures so that they cannot be hunted or sold in the market," Noman said.

The government also asked the officials concerned in the district and upazilla headquarters for bio-safety preservation.

Meanwhile, the government banned imports of poultry products from Kazakhstan on Thursday.

The government had earlier banned poultry products from Turkey, Romania, Greece and Russia following the detection of bird flu in those countries.

Bullets, firearms

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AK47 with 200 bullets, four broken LMGs and some firearms making materials.

During August-September this year, the security forces recovered 20 AK47s, eight SMGs, 32 pistols, grenades, landmines, and 40,000 bullets of different categories in Jarulachhari, Lembuchhari, Lengra Murongjhiri and Horinjhiri under Dodari union along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, army sources said.

He said, "Let alone the day labourers allegedly stored by the Rohingya militants in Jarulachhari Hill area, 21 kilometres away from the upazila headquarters, the BDR has kept the area sealed off for the last three months, sources said.

'Criminal' dies

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construction building at Aftabnagar Project yesterday at 1:15am.

Police said Manik's accomplices opened fire on the DB team, which countered the attack.

"Manik tried to flee the spot and was bullet-hit during the shootout," a police press release said. He was pronounced dead on arrival at Dhaka Medical College and Hospital (DMCH) at 2:00am.

The DB seized one revolver with three bullets from the spot. Sub-inspector Bazul Rahman was injured during the firefight and was admitted to Razarbagh Police Lines Hospital, the release claimed.

In Rajarbagh, police recovered Kader's body from the bank's bathroom at 12:10am yesterday. The police said three -- Kader, Abul Kashem and Taleb Ali -- were on duty during the killing, which was committed sometime between 7:00pm and 9:30pm on Thursday.

Police have picked up the other guards for quizzing.

Judiciary

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sought 21st extension of time in separating the judiciary from the executive as per the Supreme Court's 12-point directive, Dr Kamal said.

"The government itself has admitted that it failed to implement the 12-point directive of the apex court to separate the judiciary from the executive. Now, the government cannot interfere in the functions of the lower courts, and if anybody does it, that will be tantamount to contempt of court. All of us, including the Supreme Court, will have to be aware so that none can further interfere in the lower court," he added.

"Anybody can file contempt petitions in the higher judiciary against the government if it further interferes in the functions of lower courts," he said.

The country's leading jurist said the Appellate Division itself brought a contempt charge against nine bureaucrats for distorting the judgment of the apex court.

The Supreme Court on Thursday refused to entertain a government petition seeking another four months' time for separating the judiciary from the executive as per the Supreme Court's 12-point directive. The apex court also refused to exempt nine bureaucrats from the contempt charge.

The Appellate Division, however, fixed February 1, 2006, for hearing of the contempt rule issued by the apex court against nine bureaucrats on charge of distorting the judgment of 1999 Masdar Hossain case, popularly known as judiciary separation case.

Cold weather

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life in the capital and elsewhere was paralysed, as many of the streets went under water or experienced heavy erosion, often preventing a smooth traffic movement.

The highest rainfall of 54 millimetres (mm) recorded by the metro-office yesterday was at Khepupara in Patuakhalhi, followed by 40mm at Majidee Court in Noakhali, 37mm at Patuakhalhi Sadar, 36mm at Hatuya, 32mm in Khulna, 25mm at Syedpur and Bogra, and 15mm in Dhaka.

The highest temperature recorded yesterday was in Teknaf at 33 degrees Celsius and the lowest at 20 degrees at Syedpur and Rangpur.

Exodus to cities

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Kurigram bus terminal, Chilmari river port and Ulipur railway station, waiting for low-fare buses, launches and trains.

"I had no other way but to borrow 1,000 taka at 20 percent interest a month from a neighbouring money-lender. Of that sum, I have left 500 taka with my wife for food of my three family members. And with the rest of the money, I am off to Munshiganj to hunt for a job," said Shakwat of Chargujipara under Hatia union of Ulipur upazila.

Abdul Gafur of Noyadanga under Jorgachh union of the same upazila is heading for Dhaka. He sold his lone mango tree at his homestead for Tk 1,600. He said, "I am going to Dhaka with 500 taka only. I have left the rest of the money with my mother to run the family for at least the next one month."

"I will return home when the Aman harvest begins, when work in the field becomes available again," Gafur added.

Yet some others said they have sold their labour in advance to arrange the travel costs. They will have to pay the money back with labour during the Aman season.

This year the lashes of Monga are felt more fiercely helped by the price spiral of essentials, including rice, salt, edible oil and vegetables, observed Mukul, chairman of Thanarhat Union Parishad (UP) of Chilmari upazila.

He said, "Let alone the day labourers, even the middle, small and marginal farmers of the district are facing difficulties to manage two meals a day

due to the continuous price hike."

But, according to Kurigram Deputy Commissioner Azizur Rahman Mollah, the Monga situation is not as alarming as some media reports have been claiming. Only the families who have taken shelter on the river embankments may be facing food scarcity, he reckoned.

The DC said the government has already launched VGF (Vulnerable Group Feeding), VGD (Vulnerable Group Development) and rural food ration programmes in all upazilas in the district to ease the Monga situation.

Besides, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) is giving 30kg rice to each of the 42,306 families in five upazilas and two municipalities of the district, while the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has promised Tk 120,000 for the vulnerable families of all the upazilas, DC Mollah went on.

He said he has already received the approvals and orders to launch the government's routine programmes -- Test Relief, Food for Work and Money for Work -- but he is yet to start implementing them. However, he asserted, "Monga will sure be driven away once these programmes start."

In this regard, Chinnai UP Chairman Nurul Hoque said the Monga could be brought under control provided the government distributes rice under the VGF, VGD and rural food rationing programmes at least twice a month during the lean period.

Wilma slams Mexico

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and residents of southern Florida stocked up on drinking water and gas to prepare for Wilma, which hammered the coasts of Mexico and Belize with winds of around 150 mph (240 kph).

Mexican authorities said close to 22,000 tourists and locals residents had been evacuated from low-lying coastal areas. In one gymnasium shelter in Cancun, 1,600 people spent the night on mattresses on the floor. One local entrepreneur sold T-shirts, perhaps prematurely, with the logo: "I survived Hurricane Wilma," at \$10 each.

About 100 bored-looking foreign tourists stood talking in groups under chandeliers in the cavernous marble lobby of the Hotel Royal Porto Real, near the sea front in Playa del Carmen, another resort just south of Cancun.

"It was meant to be the fortnight holiday of a lifetime," said 28-year-old Simon Hayes, one of four friends on holiday from Britain. "This is not how I envisaged it working out."

Conditions were far tougher for hundreds of migrant construction workers, mostly from the impoverished southern state of Chiapas, who were evacuated from temporary digs in outdoor camps and buildings sites.

In a kindergarten near Playa del Carmen's beachfront, 50 men sat on the concrete floor of a classroom, too cramped for them to lie down, digging into cans of donated tuna fish with their hands. "This sucks," said Juan Cruz Perez, a 21-year-old migrant metal worker from the Gulf state of Tabasco.

Still, at one hotel doubling as a shelter because of its distance from the beachfront, Welshman Lee Watkins

praised the Mexican emergency services and local people for their help in the evacuation.

"They got us out in plenty of time and as soon as we got here, the food started coming," said Watkins, a sales manager. "Mexican people have come here to cook for us."

"It's fantastic." Wilma became the strongest Atlantic storm on record in terms of barometric pressure on Wednesday. It weakened to a Category 4 hurricane, then picked up again as it headed for Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, where it was expected to hit around noon on Friday.

At 2 a.m. EDT (0600 GMT), Wilma was 90 miles southeast of Cozumel, Mexico, and was moving northwest at roughly 6 mph (9 km/h).

Forecasters said it would strike densely populated southern Florida late on Sunday.

The hurricane season has six weeks left and has already spawned three of the most intense storms on record. Hurricane experts say the Atlantic has entered a period of heightened storm activity that could last 20 more years.

Wilma was expected to miss Gulf of Mexico oil and gas facilities battered by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in August and September, but Florida's orange groves were at risk.

The island of Cozumel, one of the world's best spots for scuba diving, faced a possible direct hit.

Authorities in the Keys, connected to mainland Florida by a