

# Bird flu fight is hit-and-miss across Asia

AFP, Hanoi

Bird flu is on the march again across Asia as winter ends, but the battle against the killer virus is being hobbled by stark differences between the region's diverse countries, health experts warn.

While Vietnam and Thailand have been hailed as poster adverts in the fight against avian influenza, new cases in hotspot Indonesia and population giant China have highlighted concerns the disease will be hard to stamp out.

Many Asian nations have learned much since the H5N1 strain erupted here in 2003, spreading as far as Europe and Africa last year, but gaps remain and the threat of a pandemic remains real, epidemiologists say.

New human infections in China and Laos and recent animal cases in Myanmar, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Hong Kong are reminders that the virus "is still entrenched," said World Health Organisation (WHO) spokesman Peter Cordingley.

"If you take a broad look at the region, I would say it's pretty much the same as last year, when we saw bird flu move all the way to Africa."

"We're seeing signs of that already. We're seeing human cases in Egypt, and inside Asia the virus is obviously becoming quite active."

Bird flu is now popping up in new areas, and risk factors for transmission have increased, said He Changchui, the Asia-Pacific head of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) based in Bangkok.

"Last year it seemed we had more association with migrating wild birds, but this year we are also finding trade and the movement of poultry across borders played a very large role," he said.

"The virus doesn't know any borders, and due to globalisation and increased border trade and more regional integration in goods flows and people travelling, we can easily carry a virus from one country to another."

# Al Fayed wins battle in Diana case

AP, London

Mohamed al Fayed won a court battle yesterday to have a jury preside over the inquest into the deaths of Princess Diana and his son Dodi Fayed.

In an unusual ruling, three senior judges at London's High Court overturned a decision by the deputy royal coroner Dame Elizabeth Butler-Sloss that she would sit alone without a jury. The judges decided that the coroner would hear the inquest and "shall do so sitting with a jury."

Earlier this week, lawyers had challenged a Butler-Sloss' decision, arguing her decision to act alone gave the appearance of impropriety. The legal appeal was launched by al Fayed along with the family of the couple's chauffeur and lawyers for the al Fayed-owned Ritz hotel in Paris.

Mohamed al Fayed, the millionaire owner of the Harrods department store, was dissatisfied with Dame Elizabeth Butler-Sloss' decision that she would hear evi-

dence and determine what caused the deaths of Diana and Dodi.

The lawyer for the Ritz, Michael Beloff, argued that because Butler-Sloss had been the deputy coroner of the Queen's Household, there would be the perception that she "lacked independence," to assess the allegation that Diana and Fayed had been murdered.

Butler-Sloss, Britain's former top female judge and a member of the House of Lords, made the decision last month to sit alone during the inquest, which is expected to begin in May. Butler-Sloss said in her January decision that a jury could find it difficult to cope with the volume and detail of the evidence.

The inquests could only begin after the investigations into the August 1997 deaths of Diana and Fayed, was complete. A two-year French investigation, a three-year Metropolitan Police inquiry and repeated legal action by al Fayed have delayed the inquest by nearly 10 years.



Participants at a workshop on 'Sustainable arsenic mitigation through community initiative and local government support' held in Jessore recently. Sitting from left are Jica Additional Resident Representative Shoji Futamura, Counselor of the Embassy of Japan Fukuda, Chief Engineer of DPHE Md Mostafizur Rahman and Dr Firoz Ahmed.

# Counterfeit medicines flood developing world

REUTERS, Vienna

Counterfeit medicines, some of them sold over the Internet, are swamping unregulated markets in developing nations with sometimes fatal results, the UN drug control watchdog said on Thursday.

Some 25 to 50 percent of the medicines used in developing countries were now believed to be fake, the International Narcotics Control Board said in its 2006 report, quoting World Health Organisation (WHO) findings. Providers ranged from makeshift village markets to Web sites.

"This market is believed to be increasing rapidly. (It) exposes patients to serious health risks by providing access to poorly or incorrectly labelled medicines that are ineffective, substandard and, in some cases, even lethal," it said.

The board spotlighted dangers inherent in graft-ridden, weakly-regulated markets, where bogus medicines had proliferated, and the widespread and growing misuse of prescription and weight-loss drugs.

The annual report also said Iranians had become the world's highest per capita abusers of opiates as they straddled export corridors from lawless Afghanistan, source of more than 90 percent of the opium produced globally.

The Vienna-based board is an independent judicial body elected by United Nations members to monitor the implementation of world drug control conventions.

Separately, the board denied accusations from rights groups that it was hampering efforts to prevent the spread of AIDS. It said it supported exchanges of sterile syringes for drug addicts but not what it called poorly supervised "drug injection rooms" because these only encouraged trade in illegal narcotics.

**INTERNET TRAFFICKING**

In order to meet the growing demand for cheap medicines, drug traffickers have increasingly turned to the Internet, postal and courier services to distribute their ersatz wares.

"The abuse and trafficking of prescription drugs is set to exceed abuse of illicit drugs. Demand for these products is so high that it has given rise to a new problem -- counterfeit products ... Progress made over the last 40 years in the control of illicit drugs is now being undermined," the report said.

Board president Philip Emafo said governments needed to enforce existing laws and rethink how to tackle Web crime.

The report said the UN Office on Drugs and Crime and WHO should help member states that have little financial means and are over-

whelmed by traffickers able to evade or buy off poorly-paid and equipped police forces.

Emafo, a Nigerian, said Iran had developed the highest rate of opiate abuse because it was the "unfortunate" first conduit point for opium pouring out of Afghanistan towards Europe.

"In the process of being transhipped, drugs are deposited along the route," he said. "It is possible that because of the Iranian government's enforcement activity, the drugs come in, but (some) are not able to go out."

Human rights groups have accused the board of promoting policies that ignore AIDS prevention and other public health issues, for example by discrediting programmes such as the use of methadone for treating addicts.

"Safe-injection facilities ... around the world ... reduce practices leading to HIV and hepatitis transmission, steer people to treatment for their addictions, and prevent death from drug overdose," said Joanne Cssete, the director of Canada's HIV/AIDS Legal Network on Thursday.

Emafo said the criticism was "misplaced and wrong".

# Workshop on arsenic mitigation held

A workshop on sustainable arsenic mitigation through community initiative and local government support was held in Jessore recently, says a press release.

The workshop was organised under the project titled 'Sustainable Arsenic Mitigation under the Integrated Local Government System' being implemented by Local Government with the technical cooperation of JICA.

The objective of the workshop was to share experience and outputs with other stakeholders and exchange views on tasks for next step towards the ultimate goal.

The speakers called upon the villagers to suggest what alternative water option is most suitable and sustainable for them.

Moyezuddin Ahmed, joint secretary to Local Government Division, was present at the workshop as chief guest while Fukuda, counselor of the Embassy of Japan, Shoji Futamura, addl resident representative of JICA, Dr Md Shajahan Biswas, DG of Health Services, Mostafizur Rahman, chief engineer of DPHE and Prof Dr Firoz Ahmed of BUET were present at the workshop as special guests.

# Top militant shot dead in Kashmir

REUTERS, Jammu

A top Kashmiri militant accused of killing 16 Hindus in the revolt-torn Himalayan region was shot dead in a gun battle with troops on Friday, a defence spokesman said.

Yaseen was a policeman before he joined the Hizbul Mujahideen group and went on to head one of its units, he said. He was accused of killing 10 Hindus in 2004 and six last year.

"He was a police deserter, a most wanted militant and involved in two massacres of minority community members in Rajouri district," Lieutenant-Colonel SD Goswami said.

# Canada scientists peer into Arctic abyss to see future

AFP, Ottawa

Canadian-led scientists plan to peer into big cracks in the Arctic ice cap hoping to glimpse the future of navigation along the famed Northwest Passage from Europe to Asia, a researcher told AFP Thursday.

The programme is sponsored by the International Polar Year, the largest global research effort of its kind, involving thousands of scientists from more than 60 countries and 220 research and outreach projects.

"There's been an incredible decrease in ice volume, and if the rate of decline continues, we're going to have a seasonally ice-free Arctic in 30 to 50 years," said Tim Papakyriakou, a lead researcher at the University of Manitoba.

Scientists believe that global warming could open up the Northwest Passage along Canada's northern coast to year-round shipping by 2050, reducing a sea trip from London to Tokyo by more than 5,000 kilometres (3,000 miles), and allowing Arctic resource exploitation.

By peering into cracks in the ice to the ocean floor, scientists hope to get "a first look at what we'd expect the situation to be like then," Papakyriakou told AFP.

The so-called flaw leads develop between the permanent polar ice cap and coastal ice.

More than 200 researchers from 14 countries will embark on this first roving year-round exploration of the Arctic aboard a retrofitted Canadian ice-breaker, focusing on the western fringe of the Arctic Islands.

Researchers will probe the depths of the Arctic Ocean and spy on its fragile ecosystem, hoping to discover new species and measure how they adapt to changing sea temperatures.

Aboard their floating laboratory, the scientists will analyse water columns and atmospheric changes, and map the ocean bottom to better understand the

possible impact of future development in this frigid environment, Papakyriakou said.

Since 1978, the extent of Arctic sea ice has been shrinking by 2.7 percent on average each decade, with the summer ice declining by about 7.4 percent, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

## Triplets for Indonesian who lost three girls in tsunami

REUTERS, Banda Aceh, Indonesia

An Indonesian woman whose husband lost his three daughters in the 2004 tsunami has given birth to three healthy baby girls, hospital staff said yesterday.

Darmi, the father of the triplets, lost his wife and three daughters when huge waves from the Indian Ocean tsunami devastated Aceh province on Indonesia's Sumatra island.

"I am very grateful. God has given me back my children I lost in the tsunami," said Darmi, who remarried after the tragedy. Like many Indonesians he goes by one name.

Darmi said doctors had thought his wife might have to undergo a caesarean section but in the event the babies were delivered normally.

"After my female triplets were born, all the worries have gone and turned to happiness," the 43-year-old civil servant said.

Asma Sulaiman, a midwife at the Permata Hati maternity hospital, said the babies were in good condition but remained in intensive care.

"They can be taken home when they weigh 2 kg (4.4 lb) because with that weight they can adapt to the outside environment."

# Peru ruins remains of 2,300-yr-old solar observatory

AFP, Lima

Thirteen towers aligned on a hill in Peru are the remains of a 2,300-year-old solar observatory and calendar, which pre-dates even the Inca civilisation, according to a study published Thursday.

The walled, hilltop Chankillo ruins, some 400km north of Lima, have long puzzled scientists, says the study published in the March 2 edition of the US review Science.

But Peruvian archeologist Ivan Ghezzi and his British colleague Clive Ruggles now believe that the

sequence of towers erected between 200 and 300 BC "marked the summer and winter solstices" and that Chankillo "was in part a solar observatory."

The towers "are built north-to-south on a hill in the centre of the complex. Sites to the east and west are adorned with known relics of sacrificial material and were likely observing locations.

"From these sites, the towers mark the annual rising and setting arcs of the sun. They also serve as a calendar accurate to within a few days," Science reported.

The towers were evidence of earlier sophisticated sun cults than the Incans, which were known to be carrying out studies of the sun some 1,500 years ago, it added.

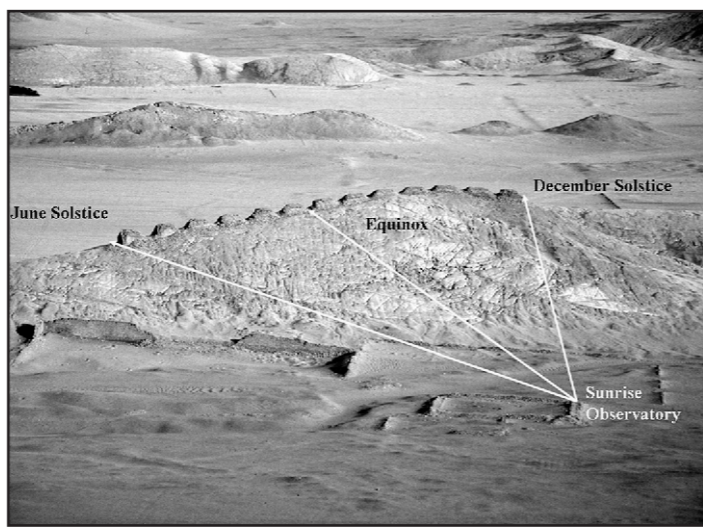


PHOTO: AFP

This image released by Yale University shows a diagram superimposed over what archaeologists from Yale and the University of Leicester claim is the earliest observatory in the Americas with alignments covering the entire year. The diagram shows how the observatory might have been used.