

Meningitis kills 1,670 in Africa in 2 months

REUTERS, Geneva

Meningitis has infected nearly 16,000 people and killed 1,670 in sub-Saharan Africa in the last two months, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said yesterday.

The United Nations agency said it was working with Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) to contain the outbreak with vaccinations in Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and Uganda.

Some 1.5 million people in the four affected countries have been targeted by mass vaccination campaigns so far, though large numbers of displaced people and those living in hard-to-access areas have presented a challenge, the WHO said.

Outbreaks are worse during the dry season in the "meningitis belt" that runs from East to West Africa.

Transmitted by coughing or sneezing, meningitis is an infection of the thin lining that surrounds the brain and spinal cord. It can cause brain damage and deafness, and kills between 5 and 10 percent of those infected.

Japanese tycoon jailed

REUTERS, Tokyo

Takafumi Horie, the 34-year-old Internet entrepreneur who rattled corporate Japan with his celebrity lifestyle and brash takeover bids, was found guilty and sentenced to two years and six months in jail yesterday for his role in a securities fraud at his former company Livedoor.

The punishment contrasted with past sanctions meted out to Japanese executives convicted of white-collar crimes, who often receive suspended sentences after pleading guilty and showing remorse.

Experts said the ruling symbolised a new determination by regulators to clamp down on corporate misdeeds, while Horie's defiant insistence on his innocence may have marked him for tougher treatment.

"I think this is a message that they have rules and are going to start enforcing them," said Keith Henry, director of Asia Strategy, a consultancy that advises firms on policy and regulatory issues in Japan.

"If he had just sort of shut up and taken his knocks like a 'good Japanese', I don't think he would have been punished as much."

A dropout from the prestigious University of Tokyo who used savvy marketing and an aggressive string of acquisitions to build a \$50,000 start-up into a conglomerate worth \$6 billion at its peak, Horie had called the charges "malicious" and blamed his chief financial officer for the accounting mess.



PHOTO: STAR

A woman weaves a cloth at an exhibition titled 'Weavers of Bangladesh' at Radisson Water Garden Hotel in the city yesterday. Bangladesh Design Council organised the exhibition on the occasion of Commonwealth Week 2007.

Immense ice deposits found at south pole of Mars

REUTERS, Washington

A spacecraft orbiting Mars has scanned huge deposits of water ice at its south pole so plentiful they would blanket the planet in 36 feet of water if they were liquid, scientists said on Thursday.

The scientists used a joint Nasa-Italian Space Agency radar instrument on the European Space Agency Mars Express spacecraft to gauge the thickness and volume of ice deposits at the Martian south pole covering an area larger than Texas.

The deposits, up to 2.3 miles thick, are under a polar cap of white frozen carbon dioxide and water, and appear to be composed of at least 90 percent frozen water, with dust mixed in, according to findings published in the journal Science.

Scientists have known that water exists in frozen form at the Martian poles, but this research produced the most accurate measurements of just how much there is.

They are eager to learn about the history of water on Mars because water is fundamental to the question of whether the planet has ever harboured microbial or some other life. Liquid water is a necessity for life as we know it.

Characteristics like channels on the Martian surface strongly sug-

gest the planet once was very wet, a contrast to its present arid, dusty condition.

Jeffrey Plaut of Nasa's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, who led the study, said the same techniques are being used to examine similar ice deposits at the Martian north pole.

Radar observations made in late 2005 and early 2006 provided the data on the south pole, and similar observations were taken of the north pole in the past several months, Plaut said.

Plaut, part of an international team of two dozen scientists, said a preliminary look at this data indicated the ice deposits in at the north pole are comparable to those at the south pole.

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"Life as we know it requires water and, in fact, at least transient liquid water for cells to survive and reproduce. So if we are expecting to find existing life on Mars we need to go to a location where water is available," Plaut said.

"So the polar regions are naturally a target because we certainly know that there's plenty of H2O there."

Some of the new information even hints at the possible existence of a thin layer of liquid water at the base of the deposits.

But while images taken by Nasa's Mars Global Surveyor spacecraft made public in December suggested the presence of a small amount of liquid water on the surface, researchers are baffled about the fate of most of the water. The polar deposits contain most of the known water on Mars.

Plaut said the amount of water in the Martian past may have been the equivalent of a global layer hundreds of meters deep, while the polar deposits represent a layer of perhaps tens of meters.

"We have this continuing question facing us in studies of Mars, which is: where did all the water go?" Plaut said.

"Even if you took the water in these two (polar) ice caps and added it all up, it's still not nearly enough to do all of the work that we've seen that the water has done across the surface of Mars in its history."

Plaut said it appears perhaps 10 percent of the water that once existed on Mars is now trapped in these polar deposits. Other water may exist below the planet's surface or perhaps some was lost into space through the atmosphere, Plaut said.

High blood sugar tied to increased cancer risk

REUTERS, New York

Results of a study involving nearly 65,000 people point to an association between cancer and abnormally high blood sugar levels.

These results "have obvious implications for lifestyle guidance, as it is well known what factors cause blood glucose increases," Dr Par Stattin from Umea University Medical Centre, Sweden noted in comments to Reuters Health.

By avoiding excessive fat and other dietary risk factors, and by getting regular exercise, "you can decrease your risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes -- and cancer," he added.

Type 2 diabetes is associated with an increased risk of liver, pancreas, colon cancer, as well as other cancers, Stattin and colleagues note in the journal Diabetes Care. However, less is known about the effect on cancer risk associated with moderately elevated blood sugar levels among non-diabetic subjects.

To investigate further, the researchers examined data from 31,304 men and 33,293 women who participated in a larger study and had glucose (blood sugar) measurements available. In total 2,478 cases of cancer were identified in this group.

In women, the total cancer risk increased with rising blood sugar levels. The relative risk of cancer was 26 percent higher for women with the highest fasting blood sugar compared with women with the lowest fasting blood sugar.

Adjustment for errors in measurement further increased the relative risk of cancer for women with abnormally high blood sugar levels.

Overall, there was no significant association between total cancer risk and blood sugar measurements in men.

However, for men and women, high fasting glucose was significantly associated with an increased risk of cancer of the pancreas, endometrium, urinary tract and malignant melanoma.

These associations were independent of body weight.

These findings, the authors say, provide "further evidence for an association between abnormal glucose metabolism and cancer."