

Swine flu-bird flu

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The World Health Organisation reported two new human cases of bird flu on Wednesday. One patient is recovering in Egypt, while another died in Vietnam, a reminder that the H5N1 virus is far from gone.

"Do not drop the ball in monitoring H5N1," WHO Director-General Margaret Chan told a meeting of Asia's top health officials in Bangkok on Friday by video link. "We have no idea how H5N1 will behave under the pressure of a pandemic."

Experts have long feared that bird flu could mutate into a form that spreads easily among people. The past three flu pandemics the 1918 Spanish flu, the 1957-58 Asian flu and the Hong Kong flu of 1968-69 were all linked to birds, though some scientists believe pigs also played a role in 1918.

Webster, who works at St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tenn., said bird flu should be a worry now. Bird flu is endemic in parts of Asia and Africa, and cases of swine flu have already been confirmed in South Korea and Hong Kong.

"My great worry is that when this H1N1 virus gets into the epicentres for H5N1 in Indonesia, Egypt and China, we may have real problems," he told The Associated Press. "We have to watch what's going on very diligently now."

Spokesman Dave Daigle said he could not comment specifically on how concerned the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention is about the scenario Webster describes, or what it is doing to study such a possibility.

Malik Peiris, a flu expert at Hong Kong University, said the more immediate worry is that swine flu will mix with regular flu viruses, as flu season begins in the Southern Hemisphere. It is unclear what such a combination would produce.

But he said there are indications that scenario is possible. Peiris noted that the swine flu virus jumped from a farmworker in Canada and infected about 220 pigs. The worker and the pigs recovered, but the incident showed how easily the virus can leap to a different species.

"It will get passed back to pigs and then probably go from pigs to humans," Peiris said. "So there would be opportunities for further reassortments to occur with viruses in pigs."

He said so far bird flu hasn't established itself in pigs but that could change.

H5N1 itself has not got established in pigs," he said. "If that were to happen and then these two viruses were both established in pigs in Asia, that would be quite a worrying scenario."

Michael Osterholm, an infectious disease specialist at the University of Minnesota who has advised the US government on flu preparations, said while flu experts are discussing the scenario, he has yet to see specific evidence causing him to think it will happen. "Everything with influenza is a huge guessing game because Mother Nature holds all the rules, and we don't even know what they are, so anything's possible," he said. "We don't have any evidence that this particular reassortment is that much more likely to pick up H5N1 than any other reassortment out there."

"We don't have to put these things together," he added. "This is not chocolate and peanut butter running into each other in the dark."

AL, BNP clash

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Left at least 16 people injured, said police.

The injured were admitted to Rajshahi Medical College, Lalpur Upazila Health Complex and Bagatipara Upazila Health Complex.

Injured Choyon succumbed to his injuries later in the night.

Police reinforcements have been deployed to keep the situation under control after tens on mounted in the area following the news of Choyon's death.

NSI man

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on Wednesday.

The former NSI director (security) was arrested at a residence on Green Road in the capital on May 3 for his alleged involvement in arranging transport vehicles for the firearms and ammunition hauled at Chittagong Urea Fertiliser Company Ltd (CUFL) jetty in the early hours of April 02, 2004.

The arrest was made following confessional statement of former NSI field officer Akbar Hossain Khan on May 2. In his statement, Akbar mentioned Sahab Uddin as one having link with the transport of the smuggled arms and ammunition, said sources in CID.

Delwar

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notice was sent for the second time to harass her politically. The chairperson already consulted senior leaders of the party after receiving the notice served by the Directorate of Military Lands and Cantonments, he said.

In Thursday's notice, Khaleda was asked to show cause as to why she should not be asked to return the estate, including the house, within the next 15 days. BNP did not disclose receiving of notice till midnight.

The cabinet cancelled the lease of the 2.72-acre mansion on April 8 on grounds that the leasing out process was faulty and she violated lease terms. On April 20, Directorate of Military Lands and Cantonments served the first notice upon Khaleda to vacate the house.

After two High Court benches felt embarrassed to hear the BNP chief's appeal against the first notice, a third bench is supposed to hold a hearing on it tomorrow.

Replying to a question, the BNP secretary general also claimed that the corruption allegations raised by ruling party's lawmakers against BNP leaders, including former speaker Jamiruddin Sircar, were baseless.

He said, "The speaker does not have any jurisdiction to form a probe committee like the one he formed to investigate allegations against Sircar. Would you take it as graft if the parliament had given him money?"

"Nobody raised questions before about the money given from the fund of parliament members," he added.

Landslide

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and Matamuhuri are the life-line of Bandarban. Flowing from a hill, the Shankha falls into the Bay of Bengal through the Karnaphuli.

The Shankha and Matamuhuri were the only sources of livelihood for the people of this area three decades ago," said Mong Ching Thwaing Marmar.

Over the years earth from nearby hills has almost filled the riverbed of the Shankha, creating large chasms. Due to lack of dredging and maintenance the river that flows over 170km of land has also narrowed down at several places.

The river is now less than 25-foot wide at the place where the landslide occurred.

Felling of trees on the hills on both sides of the river has caused drying up of several fountains, which used to feed the Shankha.

Environmentalists say if the situation continues, silt will increase on the riverbed, reducing the navigability of the rivers of the area and causing erosion of cultivable land.

Buddha Purnima

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national flag and the Buddhist religious flag atop all monasteries, recitation of sacred verses from the 'Tripitak' and breaking of fasting of monks.

Special prayers will be offered at all monasteries across the country, seeking peace, progress and prosperity of the nation. The day is a public holiday.

Newspapers will bring out special supplements and Bangladesh Betar, Bangladesh Television and private TV channels will air special programmes highlighting the significance of the day.

To mark the occasion sacred relics of Buddha in the casket at the Nandankanon Buddhist Temple remained opened for devotees from 9am to 10pm.

In the city main religious congregations were held at the Nandankanon Temple and Katalganj Navapandit Vihar.

President Zillur Rahman, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and Leader of the Opposition and BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia in separate messages greeted the country's Buddhist community on the occasion.

In his message, President Zillur Rahman said Buddha preached the message of non-violence and love for humanity for the well being of mankind.

He also welcomed Buddhists community on the occasion.

The ideology of Buddha is contribution towards building an ideal and peaceful world, he said.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has called upon the Buddhist community to work unitedly with other citizens irrespective of their faith for the country's welfare.

Sheikh Hasina in her message said great Buddha established the example of amity and love by preaching the message of non-violence and peace.

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia, in her message, also called upon the people to follow the path of truth and justice as shown by Gautama Buddha.

AL, BNP councils

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BNP Joint Secretary General Goyeshwar Chandra Roy said it would be tough to hold the national council within the stipulated time, as the party would have to complete councils in all organisational units before that.

He said if necessary they would request the EC to extend the time limit.

The registration rules require a party to have its provisionally amended charter ratified by its council and submit it to the EC by July 25. There is however no legal provision for the EC to take action against a party for default on the rules.

Earlier on March 28, AL Central Working Committee (ALCWC), highest decision-making body of the party, decided to hold council within the time limit. It also formed a high-powered committee to amend the organisation's charter in line with the RPO.

AL President Sheikh Hasina is chief of the committee that also has AL presidium member Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury as co-chairman and Nuh-ul-Alam Lenin as member-secretary.

The committee has finalised the draft amendments and declarations that will be placed at the next ALCWC meeting.

Still, sources said, the party may miss the EC deadline for holding the council as it would need more time to complete councils in districts.

Senior AL leaders may start touring different districts at the end of this month to prepare the organisational units for national council.

Obaidul Quader said they would be able to organise council by this year.

ACC probes

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The ACC is examining everything starting from the tender process to the completion of the construction work of the terminal.

The investigation officer, who came to the port city from the capital for the investigation, also talked to former project director Sirajul Islam and a few existing officials of the project to know if there was any irregularity in giving the work order, how China Harbour raised the quoted price from Tk 331 crore to Tk 351 crore and also if there was any pressure from any quarter for sending the proposal for an additional Tk 20 crore to the shipping ministry.

Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) sources close to those in the NCT project said the magnitude and frequency of earthquakes in Chittagong and some other places of the country became higher during the construction of the terminal and that special earthquake resisting pillars with more strength were required for the construction. China Harbour

BNP decisions

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already decided to dissolve all district committees and bring changes to all associated bodies without any consultation with the NEC.

BNP Joint Secretary General Goyeshwar Chandra Roy told The Daily Star that the NEC will sit before holding the party council.

"The decision of holding the council and other related issues will come from the executive committee meeting," he said.

Some BNP leaders said the 251-member NEC could not function effectively due to lack of a proper system within the party to run its activities.

"All activities were run centring the party chairperson and her family members. That's why no proper system was established in the party for running its activities," said a senior leader wishing anonymity.

Meanwhile, many NEC members have remained inactive in the party since the 1/11 changeover. Besides, a few leaders, who sided with the party's reformist faction during the state of emergency, still keep distance from the party.

Party insiders said NEC members including Sayeed Iskandar, LK Siddique, Maj (ret'd) Kamrul Islam, Emran Saleh Prince, Lutfur Rahman Azad and Ehsanul Haque Milon have not been participating in party activities for long.

Some other leaders including joint secretary general Ashraf Hossain, office secretary Mofiqul Hasan Tripti, law affairs secretary Zainal Abedin and publicity affairs secretary Lutfuzzaman Babar had been expelled from the party on

the other hand, some BNP leaders said the party would hold its central council at "suitable time" after councils at upazila and district levels.

Meanwhile, BNP has decided to form convening committees to replace the district committees that are long past their tenure. The convening committees will first organise councils at upazila level and then those at district level.

BNP leaders said the party will hold central council after forming new committees through councils at district level.

Security

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deployment of additional forces, increased intelligence vigilance and setting up of police check posts."

AKM Hafiz Akter, deputy commissioner (DC) of Gulshan zone, said, "Such threats are issued often and security measures are also beefed up. We are taking this seriously and police patrol in the area has also been increased."

Officer-in-charge (OC) of Gulshan Police Station Kamrul Alam Mollah said they have increased the number police check posts to avert any subversive acts.

According to sources, the unknown criminals demanded \$100,000 for releasing their "German bomb engineer" detained in Malaysia. They also demanded that the embassies shut down their activities within seven days otherwise they would carry out attacks against them.

37 injured in Sirajganj clash

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Sirajganj

At least 37 people were injured, three critically, in a fierce clash between two groups of loom worker at Chandangari in Belkuchi upazila yesterday.

Police and local sources said the clash erupted around 8:30am over uneven wages of the workers.

Upazila parishad (UP) member Abdul Quddus Mollah and former UP member Azizul Haque soon arrived at the scene to calm the furious workers. However, they intensified the situation by taking sides, sources added.

The groups equipped with weapons chased each other and hurled bricks. Four houses, ten weaving factories and two shops were ransacked during the two hours long clash.

On information, police rushed to the spot and charged truncheons on the unruly weavers. Failing to bring the situation under control, they fired 20 shotgun shells and eight tear gas canisters.

The injured were admitted to Belkuchi Upazila Health Complex, Enayetpur Khaza Yunus Ali (RA) Hospital and Sirajganj Sadar Hospital.

A tense situation has been prevailing since and police had been deployed in the area to evade further untoward incident.

Gas rationing

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the industrial holidays," said a source.

Each of these seven industrial zones consumes around 50 mcmcf of gas. The zones are located in Savar, Manikganj, Narayanganj, Joydevpur north, Joydevpur south, Tongi and Gazipur.

"We have noticed a pattern in gas consumption. Throughout the week, except for Fridays, gas demand is way above the supply capacity," the source said.

On Fridays, the demand and supply remains close because of lower industrial demand. "So, the government wants to replicate virtual Fridays in gas consumption throughout the week," said an official.

"Each of the gas-fired fertiliser factories actually goes for 30 to 45 days' maintenance. If we can synchronise this maintenance shutdown, we can reap the benefit of saving the gas and use it for other consumers," he added.

Similarly, the power plants are also supposed to go for annual maintenance, each for a month. But due to chronic power crisis, they cannot do so in time. Often they go for maintenance after some technical disasters.

"If we can make a schedule, again we can save gas in an organised way. This will give the power plants respite and longevity," he said.

Budget demand

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Besides \$300 million (Tk 2,100 crore) will be available as budget support.

Of the expected foreign aid the government has estimated project aid at \$1.84 billion (Tk 12,850 crore), which is 24 percent higher than that of the current fiscal year.

Although foreign aid utilisation in power, energy and agriculture sectors is very low in the current fiscal year, higher estimate has been made for the sectors in the next fiscal year.

In the power division, the estimate is Tk 2,189 crore as foreign aid investment programme, which was originally Tk 1,835 crore in the current fiscal year and revised to Tk 1,491 crore.

In energy and mineral resources division, the estimate is Tk 220 crore as foreign aid investment programme, which has been estimated at Tk 127 crore in this fiscal year's revised budget.

In the agriculture sector, the foreign aid investment programme has been estimated at Tk 393 crore in the next fiscal year, which was Tk 196 crore in the current fiscal year's revised budget. The original estimate was Tk 294 crore but it has been cut as it could not be utilised.

In the same way, foreign aid estimation for the next fiscal year has been increased in the education sector by 44 percent and in the health sector by 24 percent over the revised budget of the current fiscal year.

ERD sources said although foreign aid utilisation was not very good in the current fiscal year, the ministries say they will take initiative for good utilisation of the aid from the beginning of the next fiscal year.

High officials at the ERD said they hope that more foreign aid could be utilised in the next fiscal year than they have planned.

10 largest US banks

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how they intend to raise the money they need by private means such as asset sales, rather than having to secure any additional government loans.

'No surprises'
The 19 banks that were tested by Treasury Department and Federal Reserve officials account for two-thirds of the total assets of the US banking system, and more than half of the total amount of credit in the US economy.

The banks that require extra capital have been given until 8 June to finalise their plans to do so, and get them approved by regulators.

Mr Geithner said earlier on Thursday that no US bank being screened by regulators was at risk of insolvency, comments echoed by Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke.

The treasury secretary said he believed that while the majority of the banks would be able to raise any additional money they need from private sources, if they were unable to do so the government may have to provide them with more taxpayer money.

Analysts broadly welcomed the results of the stress tests.

"It seems to be that the leaks were very accurate, so there doesn't seem to be any major surprises," said Eric Kuby of North Star Investment Management.

"The fears of nationalisation or of failure have more or less disappeared."

The other five banks that have been told they require additional capital are Regions Financial (\$2.5bn), SunTrust Banks (\$2.2bn), KeyCorp (\$1.8bn), Fifth Third Bancorp (\$1.1bn), and PNC Financial Services (\$600m).

Those that do not require extra funds are Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan Chase, Bank of New York Mellon, MetLife, American Express, State Street, BB&T, US Bancorp and Capital One Financial.

Some of the banks that need extra funds have been quick to announce how they intend to do so.

Bank of America said it would raise the \$33.9bn it

needs through the sale of assets and other measures, while Citigroup, Morgan Stanley and Wells Fargo are to issue or exchange shares.

Citigroup chief executive Vikram Pandit said his bank's actions would "give it the financial strength to weather an adverse stress scenario".

Criticism
Some commentators have questioned whether the tests have been strict enough.

Professor Nouriel Roubini and Professor Matthew Richardson of New York University said that the doomsday scenario that the banks' books have been subjected to is actually no worse than the current economic situation.

And as such, they said "the stress test results will not be credibly interpreted as a sign of bank health".

Others say that the tests do not take account of the banks' varying business models.

Bahrain rule

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"This is something that the Human Rights Society in Bahrain has been asking and pushing for because [the sponsorship system] contradicts international conventions on human rights," he said.

"It will make a big difference. This will help migrant labourers to have more opportunities of better work, rather than being restricted by one sponsor who will control them all the time."

Under the new system, the government will take over the responsibility for providing foreign employees with work permits issued for renewable periods of two years, Al Ahmed Randhi, chief executive of Bahrain's labour market regulatory authority, told AFP.

Randhi said the system will help Bahrain "conform to international regulations and human rights norms".

Foreigners make up about a half of Bahrain's population of just more than a million people.

Many low wage jobs in oil rich Gulf nations are filled by foreign workers, whose residency permits are often linked to a sponsoring employer.

Bahrain will become the first Gulf Arab nation to end the sponsorship system, Al Jazeera reported.

140 Taliban killed

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General Athar Abbas announced.

"During the last 24 hours approximately over 140 militants have been killed in different areas," he said. Seven soldiers had also died, he added.

About 143 militants were killed in Swat while in the neighbouring district of Buner six were killed. People fleeing the area, however, have accused the military of also killing civilians in the fierce bombardment.

It was impossible to confirm the death tolls independently, given ongoing operations across three districts which began late last month when the hardline insurgents advanced to within 100 kilometres (60 miles) of Islamabad.

The UN refugee agency has warned up to one million people have been displaced in northwest Pakistan, with tens of thousands streaming out of Buner, Lower Dir and Swat, registering in camps or sheltering with families.

"The provincial government estimates between 150,000 to 200,000 people have already arrived in safer areas of North West Frontier Province (NWFP) over the last few days," UNHCR said in a statement.

It said another 300,000 were "already on the move or about to move".

Those fleeing the latest escalation of hostilities join another 555,000 previously displaced Pakistanis who fled their homes in the tribal areas and NWFP since August 2008 and are already registered, the agency said.

Bedraggled refugees flooded out of Swat, some on foot leading goats and cattle, others crammed into cars with bags, blankets and bundles of clothes.

A teacher joining the convoy of refugees fleeing Swat's main town of Mingora said it was completely under Taliban control.

"Whenever I see jets and helicopter gunships, I see death hovering overhead," said Zubair Ahmed, a teacher escaping on foot from Mingora with eight members of his family.

"Mingora is totally under

Taliban control. They are roaming the streets with mortars and kalashnikovs. There are no security forces in sight anywhere."

The fighting has sunk a controversial February deal between the government and an Islamist hardliner that aimed to put three million people under sharia law in a bid to end a Taliban uprising. Islamabad is now saying it will fight to the end.

Fighter jets pounded militant hideouts in the towns of Matta, Kabal and Khawazakhela in Swat district after a night of intense gunfire in those Taliban bastions, a local military official said.

Abbas told reporters the military was battling 4,000 militants in the Swat valley, including Uzbeks and Tajiks who may have crossed the porous border from Afghanistan, which is also battling a Taliban uprising.

The full-scale offensive was launched after Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani late Thursday appealed for unity against extremists whom he said were risking the sovereignty of the nuclear-armed nation and violated the peace deal.

He said the armed forces had been called on "to eliminate the militants and terrorists" to restore the "honour and dignity of our homeland."

President Asif Ali Zardari, in Washington for talks aimed at quelling the chronic unrest that has alarmed the United States, vowed military operations would last until "normalcy" had returned to Swat.

"It's a regional problem, it's a worldwide problem," he said after meeting key Congressional leaders urgently trying to complete a 7.5 billion-dollar aid package to shore up the weak civilian government.

US President Barack Obama has placed Pakistan at the heart of the struggle against Al-Qaeda, and has branded extremists in the northwest as the biggest terror threat facing the West.

Critics said the February deal emboldened the Taliban, and have welcomed the renewed military offensive, which also has broad public support.