Swine flu death toll crosses 500 in India

AFP, *New Delhi*

More than 500 people have died from swine flu in India since the first fatality was reported in August, the health ministry said Monday.

The western state of Maharashtra has seen the largest number, with 207 deaths from the influenza A(H1N1) virus, the ministry said in a statement.

Besides the 502 deaths, more than 14,000 people have tested positive for swine flu across India since it was first detected here in May, it added.

More than 5,700 people have died worldwide since the virus was first discovered in April, with most of the deaths in the Americas region, according to the World Health Organization.

Musharraf 'a hypocrite'

Says Bilawal House spokesperson

ANI, *Karachi*

Criticising former Pakistan president general Pervez Musharraf for his verbal attack on President Asif Ali Zardari, Bilawal House spokesman Ejaz Durrani has called the former general 'a hypocrite'.

Referring to Musharraf's recent interview, in which he blamed Zardari for the country's current turbulent situation, Durrani said Musharraf was a hypocrite who fled the country to avoid trial for his numerous dubious actions, and that he was now seeking asylum abroad.

Durrani challenged Musharraf to return to Pakistan and face the charges filed against him across the country.

Meanwhile, Pakistan People's Party (PPP) Information Secretary Fauzia Wahab has condemned Musharraf's remarks against Zardari.

Wahab said Zardari had forced Musharraf to abandon Presidency through a well-thought and successful strategy, The Daily Times reports.

Musharraf, during an interview, had called the Pakistan President a "criminal", a "fraud" and a "third rater".

In an interview with famous US journalist Seymour Hersh, Musharraf said that Zardari would go to any extent to save himself.

Hersh, in a detailed report on Pakistan, wrote, "Musharraf did not spare his successor. 'Asif Zardari is a criminal and a fraud. He'll do anything to save himself. He's not a patriot and he's got no love for Pakistan. He's a third-rater'."

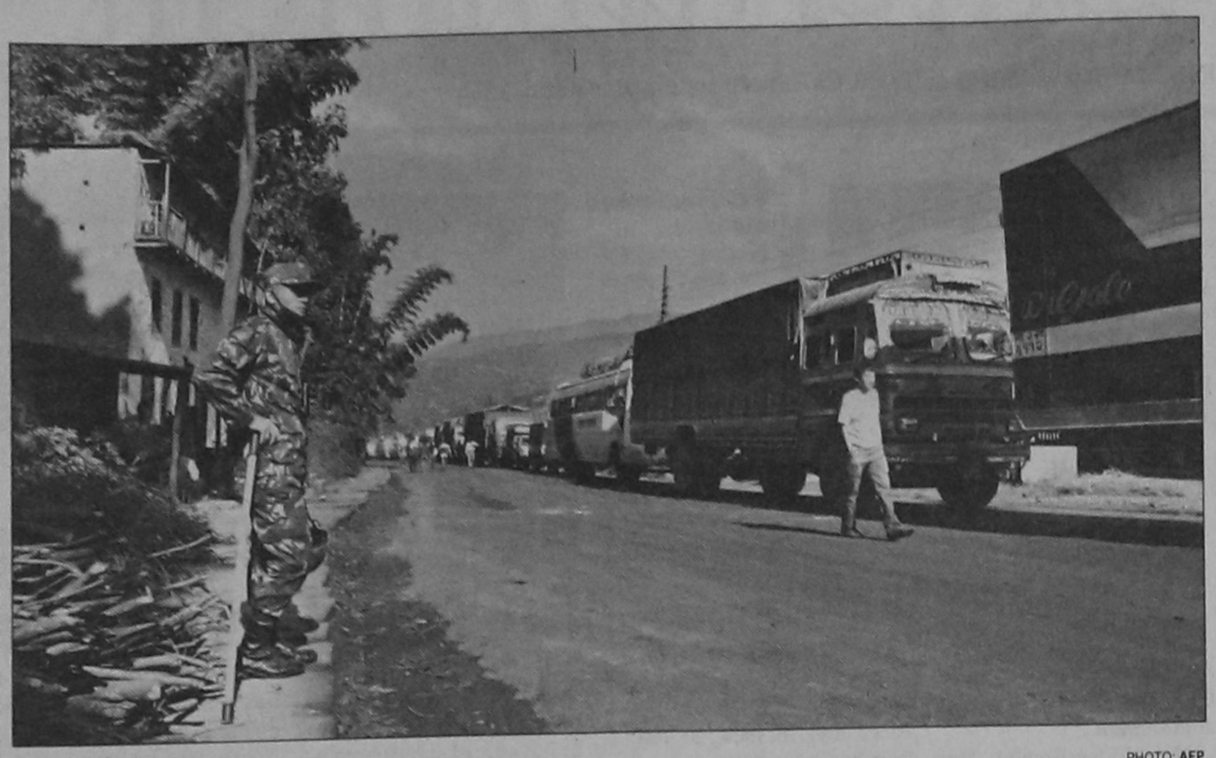

PHOTO: AFP

A Nepalese policeman (L) looks on at stranded vehicles as Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) supporters block all roads leading to capital Kathmandu in the latest stage of a two-week protest against the government in Thankot yesterday.

Maoists blockade Nepal's capital

AFP, *Kathmandu*

Maoist activists blocked all roads in and out of Nepal's capital Kathmandu in the latest stage of a two-week protest against the government yesterday.

Riot police stood on guard as hundreds of activists waving Maoist flags rallied at the main entry and exit points to the capital, but an AFP reporter at the scene said the protest appeared peaceful.

Nepal's Maoist-led government fell in May after the president halted their attempt to sack the head of the army, and the party is holding a fortnight of nationwide protests against the new administration.

"We want to hold a peaceful protest to reiterate our commitment to democracy," party worker Prakash Acharya told AFP. "In a democracy, peaceful protest should be allowed."

Police inspector Angur Gharti Chhetri said hundreds of people had been left stranded by the blockade.

"Not a single private or public vehicle has passed since early morning, although they are letting ambulances, diplomatic vehicles and tourist buses operate," he told AFP.

"The protest has so far remained peaceful."

The Maoists, who fought a 10-year civil war against the state before winning landmark elections in 2008, want the president to apologise for preventing the army chief's removal -- a move they say was unconstitutional.

Their protest will continue on Thursday and Friday with a blockade of government buildings in the capital.

Obama faces questions at Fort Hood

Maj Nidal emerges from coma

AFP, *Fort Hood*

President Barack Obama joins this shaken military community yesterday in mourning victims of a bloody rampage amid growing questions about the chief suspect's links to militant Islam.

In a television interview on the eve of his visit, Obama said the question being asked was, "Is this an individual who's acting in this way or is it some larger set of actors?"

Major Nidal Hasan emerged from a coma and was able to talk for the first time since he allegedly opened fire on fellow soldiers Thursday, killing 13 people and wounding 42 others before being gunned down by a female police officer.

Landslides kill 45 in Tamil Nadu

AFP, *Chennai, India*

Heavy rain in southern India triggered flash floods and landslides that killed 45 people in the last 24 hours and left about 1,000 tourists stranded, police said yesterday.

More than 70 deaths have been recorded across several districts in the state of Tamil Nadu in the last week, where downpours have caused widespread damage to buildings and ruined crops.

Police and fire officials worked to rescue about 1,000 domestic tourists who were trapped after two major roads were cut off in the hillside district of Nilgiris, about 450 kilometres (280 miles) west of the state capital Chennai.

Rescuers used cranes to remove giant boulders from railway tracks in the area, which received up to 61 centimetres (24 inches) of rain over two days, police said.

One village there was destroyed.

"The total number of deaths stands at 75. According to latest reports, 42 people have died in Nilgiris," an officer in the local police control room told AFP, referring to deaths overnight and on Monday.

Another three were killed overnight in more southern districts of Tamil Nadu.

Efforts were underway to help those trapped in debris, and authorities said most deaths were due to walls collapsing, drowning or electrocution.

Schools were closed in several districts and forecasters predicted more rain on Wednesday.

Indian Maoists blow up school building

PTI, *Jharkhand*

Maoists blew up a school building at Banbirua in Jharkhand's Latehar district, a senior police officer said yesterday.

A group of armed Maoists stuffed dynamites and triggered the blast late on Monday night in the school at Banbirua, Superintendent of Police Kuldip Diwedi said.

There was no loss of life in the incident, he said.

Maoists blew up the structure to prevent the security forces from using it as a makeshift camp during the ensuing five-phase assembly elections starting on November 25.

A team of police personnel has reached the spot and launched raids against the Maoist guerrillas, Diwedi said.

Myanmar will no longer dictate Asean ties: White House

Obama to meet Myanmar premier with Asean leaders

AFP, *Washington*

The United States said Monday it would no longer allow its row with Myanmar to hold its ties with Southeast Asia hostage, as President Barack Obama geared up for his debut official visit to the region.

Obama is due to hold the first-ever meeting between a US president and leaders of all 10 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) members, including Myanmar Prime Minister Thein Sein, on Sunday in Singapore.

"One of the frustrations that we've had with policy toward Burma over recent years has been that the inability to have interaction with Burma has prevented certain kinds of interaction with Asean as a whole," said Obama's top Asia policy aide Jeffrey Bader.

"The statement we're trying to make here is that we're not going to let the Burmese tail wag the Asean dog."

Bader said the meeting was a multilateral session, and not intended to serve as an opportunity for Obama to have a conversation with a Myanmar leader -- though did not categorically rule out such an encounter.

"We're going to meet with all 10 and we're not going to punish the other nine simply because Burma is in the room, but this is not a bilateral."

White House urges Iran's swift reply on N-deal

AFP, *Washington*

The White House on Monday pressed Iran to quickly respond to a deal that would supply the Islamic Republic with enriched nuclear fuel, or else risk fresh sanctions.

"The events of the next few days and the past few days are important for Iran to contemplate as they make decision moving forward," White House spokesman Robert Gibbs said.

"They have to essentially agree to their previous agreement on the research reactor, and I think the world is watching and waiting for their conclusive decisions on that," he stressed.

Govt staff may get pay rise before Eid

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The new pay scale will be declared today if it is approved in the cabinet meeting, Muhith said.

He told newsmen at a press briefing at the Economic Relations Division that if the cabinet decides on the new pay scale today the public servants would have it. He said if any minor corrections are required to the pay scale its declaration might be delayed by a day or two. He said the government wants to give the pay scale at the earliest.

The finance minister did not say anything about the range of the pay. Sources, however, said the lowest pay would be Tk 4,100, while the highest will be Tk 40,000.

Pointing out discrepancy in house rent and transportation, he said these should not be equal for public servants posted in Dhaka and outside. "I wanted to create an equity in real income in the pay scale this time. But it could not be done."

An expectation has been created among the civil servants about the probable salary scale before the government declared the new pay scale. Muhith said, "If I suggest highest salary of Tk 35,000 and minimum salary of Tk 3,500 now the civil servants would crack my head."

In response to a query, Muhith said the government has no immediate plan to increase retirement age of the government officials.

The 7th pay commission was formed in September last year with the then finance secretary Mustafizur Rahman as its chairman. The commission submitted its report in last April.

On the basis of the report, the cabinet formed a secretary committee to finalise the pay scale. The committee also recommended separate pay scales for the judges and the armed forces personnel, which would be placed in today's cabinet meeting.

If the cabinet approves the pay scale it would come into effect from July last and the civil servants would get only basic salary according to the new pay scale in the current fiscal year, sources said.

About Tk 3,500 crore additional allocation has been made in the current fiscal year's budget to meet the extra money required for materialising the new pay scale.

PHOTO: AFP

Young Indian Buddhists wear red ribbons at a special prayer session 'Avalokesteshvara Initiation' for Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama at Yid-Gha-Choezin in Tawang, in the northwestern corner of Arunachal Pradesh state, yesterday. The Dalai Lama held a mass audience with tens of thousands of devotees November 9 on a "non-political" visit to a region near India's border with Tibet that has drawn shrill protests from China.

Tragedy saw rise of an unsung hero

FROM PAGE 1

No doubt, in his daily practice as a doctor he saved the lives of many patients, but it was in fact his role as a whistleblower exposing the dangerous practices within the country's pharmaceutical sector that saved more lives, and particularly deserves the country's praise.

His exceptional work however remains largely unacknowledged and -- sadly -- he continues to be resented by those within the health and pharmaceutical establishment who care little about safe drugs but a lot about making money.

Dr Hanif first came to experience the tragedy of hundreds of children dying from kidney failures in 1982, when he started his career as a resident doctor in PG Hospital in Dhaka. Every day, patients were being admitted with both kidney failures and fever, and despite being treated with dialysis, were still dying.

"I remember, so many children were dying! It was clear that we simply could not do anything to help the children recover. At the end of my shifts, the nurses would tell me again and again that I should just write death certificates for the children, as it was clear that during the night some of them would die. There was nothing we could do."

He was at PG Hospital for four years, and in 1986 moved to Shishu Hospital. "The same thing was happening there. I went away to Australia for further studies for a year, and when I came back in 1988, not much had changed, children were still dying from renal failures completely inexplicably," he said.

He recalled being contacted by Bangabhaban Hospital. "They said the children of staff working at the prime minister's and president's houses, were suffering from renal problems and then dying. I think almost twenty children had died. We checked the water and did other tests at the president's house to see what could be the problem. But we could find nothing that explained what was happening to the children."

Shishu Hospital set up a committee with Prof Hanif as the chair. "Two things happened around 1990 that made us realise that it was something to do with the paracetamol the children were taking. We realised about then that we had children coming to the hospital in need of minor operations like circumcisions, who had no renal problems of any kind. They would have the operation, and then a few days later they would start having renal failures. For those children, it was clearly something inside the hospital was causing the renal failures."

Prof Hanif read a Newsweek article that talked about adulteration of paracetamol in Nigeria.

He was now absolutely convinced that it must be adulterated paracetamol that was causing the deaths. Now the struggle was to convince the government authorities to do something.

"We sent a sample of Adflame's Flammodol to the government drug laboratory asking for it to be tested for diethylene glycol. I never heard back from them. Then we asked the Directorate of Drug Administration itself to take a sample and send it to the drug laboratory. I never heard back from them either. We sent a sample to Japan but we could not read the results. We sent a sample to Fisons but they said their tests could not find any diethylene glycol, but I was convinced that could not be right," remembered Dr Hanif.

"Then I thought we had to find a totally independent and high quality laboratory to do the tests -- and so sent a sample to a person I knew who worked in Massachusetts. He found a government laboratory willing to do the analysis. The test proved positive for diethylene glycol."

Prof Hanif wanted to go public, but others were asking him to wait and make sure that the results were conclusive. "There came a time when I could not wait any longer. Myself and my colleagues had just completed a study that showed that most of the unexplained child deaths could be explained by their taking of paracetamol. So I booked a room and invited all the press and explained the results of the study, and that Adflame's Flammodol had tested positive for diethylene glycol."

It was only when it had been made public that the government started to act, banning the use of all paracetamol syrups, undertaking its own tests, and when the results proved positive, prosecuting those people in four companies alleged to be responsible.

Rather than lauding him as a saviour of children, sections of the media, egged on by a part of the pharmaceutical sector, however started to attack Prof Hanif. "It was alleged that I was trying to destroy the reputation of the Bangladesh pharmaceutical sector. When I went to meetings in the health ministry, I was treated really badly. In meetings I was even threatened," he recalled.

17 years on -- with no justice for the thousands of families whose children were killed in the 1980's and early 90's -- Prof Hanif was again the person who blew the whistle on Rid Pharma this year, for selling adulterated paracetamol causing deaths of at least 28 children.

Sitting in his small office, Prof Hanif hopes that there will never be a third time, but questions the capacity or the willingness of the government to take steps to regulate the import of toxic diethylene glycol, and to properly regulate the pharmaceutical sector.

"The Directorate of Drug Administration is just so corrupt and inefficient," he remarked as he said goodbye and walked off to his next round through wards.

Shocked, they demand

FROM PAGE 1

not normal for cases to be delayed for such a long time." He added, "It is unfortunate both for the judiciary and for the nation that those responsible for dealing with those cases, and those who were in power did not take any initiative in the last 15 years."

Law Minister Shafique Ahmed told The Daily Star that he did not know anything about the cases, but accepted that things like this could happen since 'corruption is rampant and the system is often manipulated to delay adjudication of cases'. The minister, however, stated that stern actions will be taken against those who are found to be responsible in this case, and he is trying to take actions to stop this kind of conduct from happening in the future.

Mahbubey Alam, the incumbent attorney general, said in his experience on many occasions influential people manage to keep cases filed against them 'concealed or shelved'. "We do try and take necessary measures if such matters come to our notice," he added.

Others demanded an investigation. Eminent human rights activist Sultana Kamal said, "There should be a probe into the causes for the longstanding delay in adjudicating the cases, and punishments for those found to be responsible. It is a most serious violation of the children's families' right to justice."

Human rights lawyer Sara Hossain asked, "What is the state going to say to the families who lost their children. Those people found to be responsible for failing to prosecute the cases and do their jobs properly, must be made accountable."

Barrister Shahdeen Malik noted when cases are stayed for long periods, it becomes very difficult to prosecute those successfully. "Even a five-year stay on the proceedings of a case can destroy it entirely," he said. "Witnesses cannot be found after even five years of stay. Where would you find witnesses after 17 years?" he added.

He said an incident like this can only be possible due to 'influence of the accused on relevant government officials and institutions'.

Khandker Mahbub Hossain, the lawyer responsible for arguing for the stays on behalf of the defendants in 1994, said he has not been in touch with his clients since obtaining the stay orders.

He however agreed, "Initiatives must now be taken to hold hearings on the pending cases. The Directorate of Drug Administration must take immediate steps to restart the proceedings of the cases that have remained stayed for such a long time."

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