

## SWINE FLU 22 dead in Sri Lanka over 2 months

AFP, Colombo

Swine flu in Sri Lanka has killed 22 people and infected more than 300 over the past two months, the island's health ministry said yesterday.

Official figures showed that 22 people infected with H1N1 -- swine flu -- had died since October 25 while 342 cases were reported during this period.

"The strain of influenza affects people's lungs and triggers off a strain of viral pneumonia. The heavy rains and the cold weather helped spread the virus," government epidemiologist Sudath Peiris said.

The ministry urged people to avoid crowded places and ordered those managing public phone booths to disinfect them at least eight times daily.

The World Health Organization declared the swine flu pandemic over in August, more than a year after the new virus spread around the world, sparking panic and killing thousands before fizzling out.

## Travel chaos as blizzards hit US

BBC ONLINE

Blizzards have swept north along the eastern coast of the US, forcing the cancellation of more than 2,000 flights and disrupting rail and road traffic.

The winter storm closed New York airports, stranding thousands of people in a busy post-Christmas travel period.

The New York area was in the bull's eye of the storm, receiving up to 46cm (18in) of snow on Sunday.

Massachusetts, Maine, Maryland, New Jersey, North Carolina and Virginia declared emergencies.

The southern states of Georgia and South Carolina had their first white Christmas in more than a century.

But Washington DC appeared likely to escape the blizzard, with a small amount of snowfall expected.

The National Weather Service said the monster snow storm was the result of a low pressure system which is currently intensifying southeast of New York's Long Island.

It said a full-blown blizzard - meaning winds of at least 35mph (55km/h) along with snow and low visibility - was pummeling eastern New Jersey, New York City and western Long Island.

Blizzard warnings remained in effect for coasts of the northern mid-Atlantic states. Officials in eastern Canada said they were also bracing for the storm.

The timing of the snowstorm travelling disruption for many thousands travelling after Christmas reunions and hampered the start of the shopping sales season and the return to work for many commuters.

There were no flights out of two airports serving New York - JFK and Newark Liberty International Airport - early yesterday, and very few out of LaGuardia.

Passengers camped out on floors in terminals.

A pedestrian caught in a blizzard in New York. Photo: 26 December 2010 The authorities have urged people to avoid unnecessary travel if possible.

Flights were also cancelled at other airports across the north-east and at airports in Washington, Baltimore and Chicago.

Delta spokesman Kent Landers said the airline expected cancellations yesterday morning across the north-east but "certainly by today morning we are aiming to resume normal operations throughout the east coast".

Other airlines were expecting more cancellations and operators were scrambling to rebook passengers.



People walk through the snow in the early morning hours in Manhattan's East Village yesterday in New York City. A winter storm is pounding the East Coast of the United States and is expected to deliver a foot of snow for New York City and New England while snarling post-Christmas travel.

## Bomb found at Greek embassy in Rome

AFP, Rome

A parcel bomb was found at the Greek embassy in Rome yesterday, police said just days after two explosive packages went off injuring two staffers at the Chilean and Swiss missions in the Italian capital.

"Bomb disposal experts are currently working to defuse it and determine whether it is similar to those who exploded last week or whether it is the work of someone trying to emulate it," a police spokesman said.

The spokesman said suspect packages found in the embassies of Monaco and Venezuela turned out to be false alarms. Italian media said alerts in the embassies of Denmark, Morocco, Sweden and Ukraine also proved unfounded.

## Fears of intervention grow in Ivory Coast

AP, Abidjan

Fears of a regional military intervention grew yesterday in Ivory Coast following a threat from West African neighbors to force out incumbent leader Laurent Gbagbo if he does not soon heed international calls to step down from power.

Dozens of people gathered outside the Nigerian embassy in Abidjan, holding signs that read: "We don't want a military intervention" and "Let Ivorians solve Ivorian problems." Nigeria has the strongest army in the region and is expected to play a major role if an operation is launched to oust Gbagbo.

Nigerians gathered outside the embassy said they feared they could be targeted in retaliatory violence if Nigeria and other neighbors intervene in the monthlong political crisis. Three presidents from the regional bloc ECOWAS are headed to Abidjan this week to confront Gbagbo before any intervention would go forward.

The U.N. declared that Alassane Ouattara won the presidential runoff election held nearly one month ago, but Gbagbo refuses to

concede defeat and leave despite admonitions from the U.N., United States, European Union and the African Union.

Ouattara's supporters stepped up for a general strike to begin yesterday to step up the pressure, but shops were open and it was business as usual in central Abidjan by midmorning.

In an interview with Associated Press Television News on Sunday, Gbagbo said he was not concerned about world opinion, insisting he was duly elected. He said of his detractors: "Maybe they do not want me, I admit it, but I am not looking to be loved by them. I respect and abide by the Ivorians' vote."

The U.N. has said at least 173 people have been killed in violence over the vote, heightening fears that the country once divided in two could return to civil war. The toll is believed to be much higher, though, as the U.N. mission has been blocked from investigating other reports, including an allegation of a mass grave.

Gbagbo supporters say at least 36 of the victims were police or other security forces who were targeted by gunfire coming from protesters.

## Russian oil tycoon found guilty

AFP, Moscow

A Moscow court yesterday found jailed tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky guilty in his second fraud trial, a judgement seen as a pivotal moment in Russia's post-Soviet history that upset rights campaigners.

Khodorkovsky and co-accused Platon Lebedev were convicted of embezzlement and money laundering, said judge Viktor Danilkin, dashing the hopes of Russian liberals the trial would show a new approach from Russian courts.

The pair were charged with embezzling 218 million tonnes of oil from Khodorkovsky's Yukos oil giant between 1998 and 2003 and laundering 487 billion rubles (16 billion dollars) and 7.5 billion dollars received from the oil.

## N Korean provocations to increase in 2011

Says a security strategy report

AP, Seoul

North Korea could fire missiles at South Korea next year, analysts predicted yesterday, as the isolated North's hostility toward the outside world deepens while it undergoes a hereditary transfer of power.

Tensions are high on the Korean peninsula following a series of provocations from the North this year. More recently, however, as South Korea responded angrily with threats of its own, Pyongyang has shown some restraint.

Expect the pendulum to swing back in the other direction in 2011, the Institute for National Security Strategy warned in a report published last week and posted to its website yesterday.

The country could conduct a third nuclear bomb test and wage more attacks on front-line islands like Yeonpyeong, which was bombarded in shelling that killed four South Koreans last month the report said. North Korea may even fire missiles and more artillery at the those islands, chief researcher Lee In-ho told The Associated Press after the report was posted.

The Yeonpyeong attack came eight months after the deadly sinking of a South Korean

warship blamed on a Pyongyang in which 46 sailors were killed.

North Korea accuses the South of triggering the assault on Yeonpyeong by carrying out military drills from the island, and denies involvement in the sinking of the Cheonan.

However, such hostility is often used to drum up solidarity in the military at times of transition, and this year North Korea made the clearest sign yet that leader Kim Jong Il is grooming his third and youngest son Kim Jong Un as his successor. The 20-something was promoted to a four-star general and appointed to key ruling party posts in September to mark his formal political debut.

And the provocations are expected to become only more serious next year as North Korea pushes to cement the son's leadership and achieve its goal of building a "powerful, prosperous nation" in 2012, the 100th anniversary of North Korea founder Kim Il Sung's birth, said the report by the institute, which is affiliated with South Korea's main spy agency. The report was jointly written by about 20 institute researchers, but they say it does not represent their organization's official view.

## UK TERRORISM RAIDS

## Nine charged with conspiracy

BBC ONLINE

Nine men have been charged with conspiracy to cause explosions in the UK and with preparing for terrorism, West Midlands Police have said.

The men are aged between 19 and 28 and three are from Cardiff, two from east London and four from Stoke-on-Trent.

They will appear at City of Westminster Magistrates' Court later.

Twelve men were arrested in raids co-ordinated by the West Midlands Counter Terrorism Unit on 20 December. Three have been released without charge.

Those charged are accused of conspiring on dates between 1 October and 20 November to cause an explosion.

They are also accused under 5(1) of the Terrorism Act 2006 of engaging in conduct in preparation for acts of terrorism on dates between 1 October and 20 December.

Sue Hemming, head of the Crown Prosecution Service Counter Terrorism Division, said: "I have advised the police that nine men should be charged with conspiracy to cause

explosions and with engaging in conduct in preparation for acts of terrorism with the intention of either committing acts of terrorism, or assisting another to commit such acts.

"Lawyers from the CPS Counter Terrorism Division have been working with the police on this case from an early stage and were on hand to give advice while the men were interviewed."

Lord Carlile, the independent reviewer of UK counter-terrorism laws, told MPs at the time of the arrests that the allegations were of a "significant" plot.

The men charged from Cardiff are Gurukanth Desai, 28, of Albert Street; Omar Sharif Latif, 26, of Neville Street, and Abdul Malik Miah, 24, of Ninian Park Road.

Those charged from London are Mohammed Moksudur Rahman Chowdhury, 20, of Stanliff House, Tower Hamlets, and Shah Mohammed Lutfar Rahman, 28, of St Bernard's Road, Newham.

The four charged from Stoke-on-Trent are Nazam Hussain, 25, of Grove Street; Usman Khan, 19, of Persia Walk; Mohibur Rahman, 26, of North Road, and Abul Boshir Mohammed Shahjahan, 26, of Burmarsh Walk.

## Haiti PM criticises post-earthquake rebuilding efforts

BBC ONLINE

The prime minister of Haiti has criticised the international community for not allowing his country to play a bigger role in its own reconstruction following last January's earthquake.

Jean-Max Bellerive told the BBC his government had too little influence because aid money was channelled through outside agencies.

He added that only 20% of the aid pledged had been received so far.

Nearly one year on, more than one million Haitians still live in camps.

Bellerive said donors and the international community were not working with Haitians to find solutions when channelling aid to those who need it. He said greater control of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) was needed.

"Let's be clear, I have nothing against NGOs - we need them. What I need is to have control over what they do in my country, where they do it and with whom they are doing it, and at what cost," he said.

Bellerive said he was constantly being asked why there were no visible results from donated money.

"It's very difficult for me to give explanation for the use of money that I never receive," he said.

## Pakistan test-fires missiles

PTI, Islamabad

The Pakistan Navy yesterday successfully test-fired several surface-to-air missiles to assess its air defence capabilities, officials said.

Three surface-to-air missile tests were carried out in Sonmiani area of Sindh province, a navy spokesman said, adding all missiles hit their targets precisely.

Naval chief Admiral Noman Bashir and Air Defence Commander Vice Admiral Tayyab Ali Dogar witnessed the drill.

"The successful testing will add to the defence capability of the Pakistan Navy," Mr. Bashir said.

A combination of surface-to-air missiles was tested, the navy said in a statement.

The "fire and forget" missiles are equipped with highly sensitive infrared homing heads that can intercept high speed aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles.

## LATEST LEAKS

## Syria supported embassies attacks in caricature row

AFP, Oslo

Syria backed attacks on Scandinavian embassies in Damascus as violent protests erupted in early 2006 over the publication of caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed, according to newly-leaked US government cables.

Syrian Prime Minister Mohammed Naji Otri "instructed the Grand Mufti Sheikh Hassoun to issue a strongly worded directive to the imams delivering Friday sermons in the mosques of Damascus without setting any ceilings on the type of language to be used," a cable from the US embassy in Damascus read.

The document was obtained by WikiLeaks and published yesterday in English by Norwegian daily Aftenposten.

The information in the cable was provided to US officials in Syria by "one of the most influential Sunni religious figures in Damascus," whose name is erased in the cable.

The religious figure told US officials the Syrian government had "allowed the rioting to continue for an extended period" and reacted with serious threats of force to stop it when it felt that "the message had been delivered."

"This is what you will have if we allow true democracy and allow Islamists to rule," was Damascus' message to the West in doing so, the unnamed religious official told the US embassy.

## Nepal cracks down on Internet cafe criminals

AFP, Kathmandu

Police in Nepal yesterday ordered Internet cafes to keep a record of the identity of every user in what they said was a bid to cut down on criminal activity, including kidnapping.

In the capital Kathmandu, kidnappings for ransom have become increasingly common in recent years as political instability and rampant corruption have led to growing insecurity.

Police say the Internet cafe order was issued after several businessmen reported receiving threatening emails through computers at Internet cafes.

"We have found that the criminals have used fake email addresses to send emails demanding money," Kathmandu police deputy superintendent Rana Bahadur Chand told AFP.



PHOTO: AFP

Three two month old Tiger cubs play with their mother at Assam State Zoo in Guwahati yesterday. The tiger population of the zoo increased to eight after the birth of the three cubs. Animal-rights groups say the tiger population in India has fallen from 5,000 to fewer than 2,000 in the last five years, despite the allocation of 32,000 square kilometres of sanctuary space.

## Istanbul talks can resolve nuclear row: Iran

AFP, Damascus

A senior Iranian official said in Damascus yesterday that next month's talks in Istanbul between world powers and Tehran could resolve their dispute over Iran's nuclear programme.

"We think (the negotiations), in line with the agenda decided in Geneva, could clear the way to resolving problems," said Ali Baqiri, the deputy of Saïd Jalili, Iran's nuclear negotiator.

"Continuing the negotiations in Istanbul could bring gains to both the parties concerned," Baqiri told a news conference after talks with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

But he criticised the West's two-pronged policy of negotiations at the same time as sanctions, warning it would "lead nowhere."

Despite four sets of UN sanctions slapped on Tehran over its controversial nuclear programme, Iran was "carrying out the most extensive economic programme in its history, showing its level of political, economic and social stability."

Negotiations "based on dialogue and cooperation could bring the other parties out of their impasse," said Baqiri.

Assad, quoted by the state news agency

SANA, called in his talks with Baqiri for "a diplomatic compromise guaranteeing Iran's right to possess peaceful nuclear energy."

Last week on a visit to Istanbul for a regional summit, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad urged the world powers to choose cooperation over confrontation at the nuclear talks in late January.

"We think this meeting will be very important," he said.

The negotiations would be the second round between Iran and six world powers -- Britain, China, France, Russia, United States and Germany -- after talks resumed in Geneva earlier this month following a 14-month hiatus.

"We have suggested that in the forthcoming Istanbul meeting confrontation be replaced with cooperation and... this will be in the interest of all sides," he said through an interpreter.

"In cooperation we will have a win-win situation. There is no failure or defeat for any party."

The West suspects that Tehran is developing an atomic bomb under the guise of a nuclear energy programme. Iran denies the charges and insists its activities have a purely peaceful purpose.