

China's online users now 477m

AFP, Beijing

The number of Internet users in China, already the world's largest online market, hit 477 million at the end of March, a senior government official was quoted by state media as saying yesterday.

The official from the Telecommunications Administration Bureau, which falls under the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, announced the figure at a meeting in Beijing, the official Xinhua news agency reported.

The number of people using the Internet in China had hit 457 million at the end of 2010, meaning that more than one-third of its 1.3 billion-strong population were online.

Int'l Criminal Court seeks arrest of Gaddafi

AGENCIES

The International Criminal Court chief prosecutor is seeking the arrest of Libyan leader Col Muammar Gaddafi and two others for crimes against humanity.

Luis Moreno-Ocampo said Col Gaddafi, his son Saif al-Islam, and intelligence chief Abdullah al-Sanussi bore the greatest responsibility for "widespread and systematic attacks" on civilians.

"Today, the office of the prosecutor requested the International Criminal Court to issue arrest warrants," Luis Moreno-Ocampo said at a press conference in The Hague, where the International Criminal Court is based.

"Therein it will show that Gaddafi personally ordered attacks on unarmed civilians," he said.

A panel of ICC judges will now have to decide whether to accept or reject the prosecutor's application, based on his case file, adds AFP.

The Libyan government has already said it will ignore the announcement.

Deputy Foreign Minister Khalid Kaim said the court was a "baby of the European Union designed for African politicians and leaders" and its practices were "questionable".



Libya did not recognise its jurisdiction, like most African countries and the United States, and would ignore any announcement, he added.

'INNER CIRCLE'

Moreno-Ocampo said that after reviewing more than 1,200 documents and 50 interviews with key insiders and witnesses, his office had evidence showing that Col Gaddafi had "personally ordered attacks on unarmed Libyan civilians".

"His forces attacked Libyan civilians in their homes and in public spaces, shot demonstrators with live ammunition, used heavy weaponry against participants in funeral processions, and placed snipers to kill those leaving mosques after prayers," he told a news conference in The Hague.

"The evidence shows that such persecution is still ongoing as I speak today in the areas under Gaddafi control. Gaddafi forces have prepared a list with names of alleged dissidents, and they are being arrested, put into prisons in Tripoli and tortured," he added.

Mr Moreno-Ocampo said that Col Gaddafi had "committed the crimes with the goal of preserving his absolute authority".

"The evidence shows that Gaddafi relied on his inner circle to implement a systematic policy of suppressing any challenge to his authority."

"His second-oldest son, Saif al-Islam, is the de facto prime minister and Sanussi, Gaddafi's brother-in-law, is his right-hand man - the executioner, the head of military intelligence. He commanded personally some of the attacks."

The three "held meetings to plan and direct the operations", he alleged.



Pak premier Yousuf Raza Gilani, right, shakes hands with US Senator John Kerry at the Prime Minister's House in Islamabad yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

US senator Kerry warns Pak on frayed ties

REUTERS, Islamabad

Some lawmakers believe Osama bin Laden presence Pakistan may have frayed ties with the United States beyond repair, Senator John Kerry told Islamabad yesterday, but added that their strategic relationship was too important to let go.

Washington's already fragile ties with ally Islamabad took a beating after US special forces flew in from Afghanistan on a secret operation to find and kill bin Laden on May 2, nearly 10 years after he orchestrated the September 11 attacks on the United States.

His discovery holed up in the comfortable garrison town of Abbottabad, only 50 km (30 miles) from the Pakistani capital, has deeply embarrassed Pakistan's military and spy agency and revived suspicion that Pakistan knew where he was and has been playing a double game.

Pakistan has rejected that as absurd, and its parliament has condemned the U.S. raid as a violation of its sovereignty and called for a review of ties.

Kerry, a Democrat close to the Obama administration who is also chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, told Pakistan the United States has "grave concerns" that bin Laden was found in Pakistan, and that Congress was now scrutinizing Washington's ties with its strategically.

But he also said both nations had to find a way to restore the trust between them, adding that U.S.-Pakistan ties were "too important to be stuck speculating."

"I emphasized to our Pakistani friends - and they are friends - that many in Congress are raising tough questions about our ongoing economic assistance to the government of Pakistan because of the events as they unfolded, and because of the presence of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan," Kerry said.

"The make or break is real. There are members of Congress who are not confident it (ties) can be patched back together."

Drug feud kills 27 in Guatemala

BBC ONLINE

The decapitated bodies of at least 25 men and two women have been found near Guatemala's border with Mexico on Sunday.

The bodies were discovered on a ranch in Peten province, 500km (310 miles) north of the capital.

Police said the killings could be linked to a battle between drug gangs fighting for control of the area.

Mexican cartels are increasingly moving into northern Guatemala, an important transit point for drugs smuggled from South America to the US.

"This is the worst massacre we have seen in modern times," police spokesman Donald Gonzalez told Reuters.

Army spokesman Col Ron Urizar told the Spanish news agency, Efe, that dozens of soldiers had been sent to the Mexican border to prevent any suspects from fleeing the country.

He said ground and aerial surveillance was being carried out in co-ordination with the Mexican authorities.

Officials said the victims, who were believed to have been workers on the ranch, appeared to have been ambushed by gunmen.

Their bound bodies showed signs of torture, police said.

They are investigating whether the deaths were related to the Zetas drug gang, which has been expanding its operations into Guatemala from Mexico.

There are also suspicions the massacre could be linked to the murder of the ranch's owner, Haroldo Waldemar Leon, who was shot in the same area on Saturday.



PHOTO: AFP

Libyan children play on a tank parked in Benghazi's Revolution square on Sunday. Gaddafi's prime minister offered on Sunday a truce to the visiting UN special envoy to Libya, Abdul-Ilah al-Khatib, in return for an immediate NATO ceasefire, as an anti-regime revolt entered the fourth month.

'Mass grave found' in Syrian protest hub

AFP, Damascus

Syria's brutal crackdown against pro-democracy protests took a chilling turn yesterday with the discovery of a mass grave in Daraa, the town at the heart of protests roiling the country for two months, an activist said.

"The army today allowed residents to venture outside their homes for two hours daily," said Ammar Qurabi of the National Organisation for Human Rights in Syria.

"They discovered a mass grave in the old part of town but authorities immediately cordoned off the area to prevent residents from recovering the bodies, some of which they promised would be handed over later," he said on the phone from Cairo.

Qurabi said the Syrian regime must bear full responsibility for the crimes committed against "unarmed" citizens and urged the

international community and civil society to pressure it to stop the "brutal repression" of its people.

He was unable say how many people were buried in the alleged mass grave.

His account could not be independently verified as Syrian authorities have all but sealed off the country to foreign journalists amid a brutal crackdown against unprecedented protests threatening the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

Qurabi said that 34 people had also been killed in the past five days in the towns of Jassem and Inkhil, near Daraa.

"I fear that dozens more casualties may be lying in nearby wheat fields and orchards because families have not been able to access the region which is encircled by security troops and snipers," he said.

Bin Laden was a US prisoner before being killed: Iran

AFP, Tehran

Al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden was a prisoner in US custody for "sometime" before he was killed by the American military, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said on Sunday.

"I have exact information that bin Laden was held by the American military for sometime... until the day they killed him he was a prisoner held by them," the hardline president said in a live interview on Iranian state television.

"Please pay attention. This is important. He was held by them for sometime. They made him sick and while he was sick they killed him," Ahmadinejad added.

He accused US President Barack Obama for announcing the al-Qaeda leader's death for "political gain."

"What the US president has done is for domestic political gain. In other words, they killed him for Mr Obama's election and now they are seeking to replace him with someone else," Ahmadinejad said without elaborating.

Bin Laden was shot dead on May 2 in a US commando raid on a heavily fortified compound near Islamabad, Pakistan.

German hairdresser lifts 'best beard' trophy

AFP, Trondheim



Elmar Weisser

Weisser, 47, beat 160 hopefuls from 15 countries to take first prize in the World Beard and Moustache Championship, held this year in Trondheim.

Weisser is a veteran of the competition, held every two years, having won several times before.

He said his sister helped him with the creation, starting work at 7:00am.

"When my beard isn't styled, it goes down to my waist. It is sort of folded up," he told AFP.

Weisser took the title in 2005 in Berlin with his beard in the form of the landmark Brandenburg Gate, and two years later won in England for his recreation of the Tower Bridge.

He did not compete in the 2009 competition in Alaska. Germany and the United States traditionally dominate the eccentric contest which began in 1990 and has been running regularly since 1995.

Moustaches are judged in six categories: natural, English, Dali, Hungarian, imperial and freestyle.

Jayalalithaa sworn in as Tamil Nadu chief minister

AGENCIES, Chennai

All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) chief Jayalalithaa was sworn in as Tamil Nadu Chief Minister for a third term along with 33 others in her Cabinet yesterday.

The swearing-in ceremony took place around 12:45pm at the historic Madras University's centenary auditorium where Gujarat CM Narendra Modi, former Andhra Pradesh CM N Chandrababu Naidu and CPI general secretary AB Bardhan were also present.

The details of the swearing-in ceremony and the ministers to be inducted were taken at a meeting Jayalalithaa had with Governor SS Barnala shortly after she was elected leader of the AIADMK legislature party.

In keeping with Tamil Nadu's political practice, it will be a single-party government despite AIADMK winning the elections in alliance with some other parties.

Hawking: Heaven is a fairy tale

REUTERS, London



Heaven is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark, the eminent British theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking said in an interview published yesterday.

Hawking, 69, was expected to die within a few years of being diagnosed with degenerative motor neurone disease at the age of 21, but became one of the world's most famous scientists with the publication of his 1988 book "A Brief History of Time".

"I have lived with the prospect of an early death for the last 49 years. I'm not afraid of death, but I'm in no hurry to die. I have so much I want to do first," he told the Guardian newspaper.

"I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark."

When asked how we should live he said: "We should seek the greatest value of our action."

Hawking gave the interview ahead of the Google Zeitgeist meeting in London where he will join speakers including British finance minister George Osborne and Nobel prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz.

Addressing the question "Why are we here?" he will argue tiny quantum fluctuations in the very early universe sowed the seeds of human life.

The former Cambridge University Lucasian Professor of Mathematics, a post once also held by Isaac Newton, has a history of drawing criticism for his comments on religion.

Quakes 'could rupture Himalayan glacial lakes'

BBC ONLINE

Glacial lakes in the Himalayas could pose a major hazard to population centres if they are ruptured by earthquakes, scientists say.

The true risk to settlements and infrastructure downstream in the Hindu-Kush-Himalayas region is difficult to assess.

But the Himalayan region is dotted with glacial lakes and is in a seismically active zone.

Experts say that, on the basis of past records, a large quake in the region is overdue.

Many glacial lakes are said to be growing - some of them alarmingly - because of melting glaciers.

Some are at risk of rupturing, which would flood areas downstream. There have been at least 35 glacial lake



outburst events in Nepal, Pakistan, Bhutan and China during the last century, according to the United Nations Environment Programme (Unep).

But the increased risk from the quake-induced rupture of glacial lakes has been rarely discussed.

"Such a disaster is very much possible, more so, when we are expecting a big earthquake in the region now," says Sushil Kumar, a geophysicist with the Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology in India.

"If the acceleration is very high in the epicentre of the earthquake, everything will be in the air as things will not be stable. So, naturally the liquids like waters in glacial lakes will burst out."

A number of these lakes are located near seismic faults.

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