

37 killed in Russian hospital fire

AFP, Luka

Thirty-seven people were killed when a fire swept through an aged psychiatric hospital in northwest Russia overnight Thursday, the latest tragedy to hit the country's mental health institutions.

The pre-dawn fire was apparently started by a patient who was either smoking or deliberately set fire to his bed at the hospital in the village of Luka, 220 kilometres southeast of Saint Petersburg, officials said.

The single-storey wood-and-concrete building housed around 60 male patients including some who had amputated legs or were bedbound, and the institution had been previously warned by the authorities to improve its fire safety.

Novgorod region governor Sergei Mitin told AFP at the scene that 23 people had been rescued from the fire.

Local authorities said the hospital housed patients with grave psychological disorders, making evacuation even more complicated.

Investigators said they had opened a criminal probe into suspected negligence causing death.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev also instructed the labour and social development minister Maxim Topilin to travel to the village.

NEWSINbrief

Morsi supporters stage rallies in Egypt

AFP, Cairo

Thousands of supporters of ousted Islamist president Mohamed Morsi rallied in Cairo after Friday prayers chanting angry slogans against the military, with clashes reported elsewhere in Egypt.

Protests were also held in Alexandria and in the Nile Delta towns of Tanta and Mahalla, where tear gas has to be fired as pro-Morsi protesters clashed with residents.

Twitter launches IPO

AFP, San Francisco

Twitter announced Thursday, in a tweet, that it has submitted papers for the most hotly anticipated stock offering in the tech sector since Facebook's last year.

Twitter's market value has been estimated around \$10 billion based on early venture capital investments, but the initial public offering (IPO) is likely to bring a higher amount. The San Francisco company provided no details on the IPO dates or pricing.

DSK gets new job

AFP, Belgrade

Former IMF chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn has agreed to advise the Serbian government and is expected in Belgrade next week, Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic said yesterday.

Strauss-Kahn resigned from his IMF job following his 2011 arrest over an alleged sexual assault on a New York hotel maid, but eventually reached an undisclosed financial settlement with his accuser.

Qaeda chief calls for US attacks

AFP, Washington

Al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri, in a speech marking the 12th anniversary of 9/11, called Thursday for attacks on the United States and a boycott of the world's largest economy. The speech was posted on jihadi forums a day after America held ceremonies in honor of the nearly 3,000 people killed in the attacks of September 11, 2001. A summary of the roughly 72-minute address was made available by the SITE Intelligence Group.



Firefighters continue to extinguish fire in the charring remains of a burned out psychiatric hospital in the village of Luka in the northwest Russian Novgorod region yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

US consulate hit in Afghanistan

Taliban claim attack; one killed

AFP, Herat

Seven heavily armed Taliban suicide attackers struck the US consulate in the Afghan city of Herat before dawn yesterday, setting off two car bombs and sparking a shootout with US forces.

The sophisticated attack in the western city, a key business hub near the Iranian border, underscored how the Taliban are able to strike outside their main centres in the south and east.

At least one Afghan guard was killed in the attack and 18 other people wounded, but US officials said there were no US casualties with all consulate staff safe and accounted for.

The US State Department said the attackers appeared to be wearing suicide vests and detonated a truck bomb that "extensively" damaged the front gate.

Afghan security officials said six attackers took part in the assault, detonating a minivan bomb and then a four-wheel drive vehicle, before engaging in a gunbattle with security forces.

The attack comes days after Pakistan said it would soon release its top Taliban prisoner, former military chief Abdul Ghani Baradar, in what Afghan officials hope can ignite peace talks.

The Taliban publicly refuse to negotiate with the Afghan government, branding Afghan President Hamid Karzai a US puppet, but opened a liaison office in Qatar in June billed as a step towards talks with the Americans on a possible prisoner swap. The Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack, saying that there were several casualties on the Afghan and US side.

ARMS REACH SYRIA REBELS

US eyes pressure, but no real change

AFP, Washington

By delivering light weapons to Syria's rebels, the United States is seeking to pile pressure on Damascus and its patrons, rather than tip the balance on the battlefield, experts said.

Three months since President Barack Obama promised military support to opposition forces, the Washington Post reported that the first deliveries of guns and ammunition began arriving two weeks ago, after an alleged chemical weapons attack that Western governments blame on the Syrian regime.

The leak came only hours before high-stakes talks in Geneva between top American and Russian diplomats on a proposal designed to avert possible US military action against President Bashar al-Assad's forces.

"I think the timing of the leak is more significant perhaps than the actual weapons going in at the moment," said Charles Lister, an analyst at IHS Jane's, a defense consultancy.

The arms shipments reportedly do not include anti-tank or anti-aircraft weapons coveted by the rebels, and as result, the deliveries will "have a relatively small impact in terms of the conflict itself," Lister said.

"But within the political dynamics, it might have sent much more of a significant message to the international community, to

RUSSIA'S SYRIA ARMS DEAL

Damascus have to join Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons

Declare locations of chemical arms

Allow OPCW inspectors access to sites

Have to destruct all chemical arsenals

President Assad, and to his supporters like the Russian government," he told AFP.

The CIA, which oversees the secret operation to arm the rebels, declined to confirm or deny the reports.

The rebels and their advocates have long demanded Washington deliver anti-tank and anti-aircraft shoulder-launched weapons, which they say could turn the tide in the two-year-old civil war.

"If only light weapons are delivered, then it will only help the rebels in a light way," said Christopher Hammer, a senior naval analyst at the Institute for the Study of War, a Washington think tank.

"Without delivering heavier, consequential weapons, the balance of power essentially remains unchanged."

While the White House maintains a majority of the opposition are "moderates," officials have worried that heavy weapons could fall into the hands of extremists with links to al-Qaeda.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar reportedly already have begun supplying the rebels with some heavier weapons, and US officials privately have not ruled out delivering more effective weapons in the future.

The initial US arms shipments could serve as a "test," to see if the weapons end up with the rebels Washington favors and that supply routes are sufficiently secure, according to Lister.



Indian students participate in an anti-rape protest in Hyderabad yesterday. An Indian judge yesterday sentenced to death four men convicted of the fatal gang rape of a student on a New Delhi bus, fulfilling the dying wish of the 23-year-old victim.

PHOTO: AFP

Iraq blasts target mosque; 30 killed

AFP, Baquba

Two nearly simultaneous bombs targeted worshippers streaming out of joint Sunni-Shiite prayers north of Baghdad yesterday, killing at least 30 people in the latest deadly surge in violence.

Unrest elsewhere left three others dead, as authorities grapple with Iraq's worst bloodshed since 2008. The country is stuck in a prolonged political deadlock as Syria's 30-month civil war causes regional instability.

Two roadside bombs went off outside the Al-Salam mosque, a Sunni place of worship in the confessionally mixed city of Baquba, at around midday as Sunnis and Shiites left after a joint prayer session.

Thirty people were killed and 24 wounded in the twin explosions, according to an army major and Ahmed al-Azzawi, a doctor at the city's main hospital.

Attacks also struck elsewhere in Diyala. Another bombing targeted a mosque in the town of Khanaqin, killing one person, and a car bomb at a market north of Baquba wounded five.

In the restive northern province of Nineveh, a shooting and a bombing killed a soldier and a municipal official.

Iraq has seen a spike in violence that has already left more than 4,000 people dead this year, sparking fears it is slipping back into the all-out sectarian war.



Australian completes round-the-world run

AFP, Sydney

An Australian man completed a gruelling run that looped the world Friday, having done the equivalent of a marathon a day for more than 20 months in what he hopes is a record.

Tom Denniss, 52, began his endurance test on December 31, 2011 at the Sydney Opera House and since then has travelled more than 26,000 kilometres (16,200 miles) on foot, crossing deserts and mountains over five continents.

His run, which has raised some Aus\$53,000 for the charity Oxfam, is yet to be certified but he hopes it will be a world record -- smashing the current circumnavigation on foot mark set by Dane Jesper Olsen in 2005 by 40 days, organisers said.

"All the attention is a bit overwhelming from being out in the middle of nowhere for so long," Denniss told reporters as he ran across the finish line at the Opera House to cheers from a crowd.

The ultra-distance runner said he put himself up for the arduous journey for the adventure and "just to see the world in a very different way to most people".

Early childhood deaths halved since 1990

AFP, Washington

Early childhood deaths around the world have been cut in half since 1990 but some 18,000 children under five still die every day, according to a new report out yesterday.

Around 6.6 million children perished before their fifth birthday last year, compared to 12.6 million in 1990, said the report by UNICEF, the World Bank and the World Health Organization.

The report credited more effective and affordable treatments, new ways of delivering healthcare to the poor, as well as political commitment for the gains.

But it also underscored that much remained to be done. "This trend is a positive one. Millions of lives have been saved," said UNICEF's executive director.

However, "most of these deaths can be prevented, using simple steps that many countries have already put in place. What we need is a greater sense of urgency."

All regions except Oceania and sub-Saharan Africa saw more than a 50 percent decline.

In eastern Asia, early childhood deaths have dropped by 74 percent and in Northern Africa the decline was 69 percent.

But child mortality rates were still elevated in some regions, with around 80 percent of under-five deaths in 2012 still taking place in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

Wacky Ig Nobel announced

AFP, New York City

The tongue-in-cheek Ig Nobel awards were handed Thursday to dozens of scientists, including those who confirmed drunk people think they are more attractive and studied the onion enzyme that makes us cry.

The Nobel prize spoof honors achievements "that first make people laugh and then make them think," according to a press release.

The Ig Nobels invite real Nobel laureates to confer honors on serious scientists for work that is generally only unintentionally funny.

There is also a peace prize, which this year was jointly awarded to the president of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko, for making it illegal to applaud in public, and to the Belarus police "for arresting a one-armed man for applauding."

The safety engineering prize went to late American researcher Gustavo Pizzo, who invented a system to trap airplane hijackers, seal them into a package and parachute them into the hands of police.

A team from the Britain, Netherlands and Canada were awarded the probability prize for determining that the longer a cow has been lying down, the more likely it is it will soon stand up. They also discovered that once a cow stands up, you cannot easily predict how soon it will lie down again.

The physics prize went to researchers who discovered that some people would be physically capable of running across the surface of a pond -- if those people and that pond were on the moon.

A joint award in biology and astronomy was given to a team from Sweden, Australia, Germany, Australia and the UK, who uncovered the fact that when dung beetles get lost, they can navigate their way home by looking at the Milky Way.

The study by researchers who confirmed



drunk people really do think they are more attractive won the Psychology Prize.

The archaeology prize went to a US-Canada team who parboiled a dead shrew, swallowed it without chewing, and then carefully examined their excretions to see which bones dissolve inside the human digestive system.

It was the 23rd edition of the Ig Nobels, awarded at the uber-prestigious Harvard University in Boston.

Iran urges Russia's help in solving nuke crisis

AFP, Bishkek

Iran's new centrist leader Hassan Rowhani yesterday urged Moscow to help solve Tehran's nuclear crisis as he met President Vladimir Putin for a key meeting at a security summit in Kyrgyzstan.

"As far as the Iranian nuclear problem is concerned, we would like this problem to be solved as soon as possible within the framework of international norms," Rowhani told Putin in televised remarks translated into Russian in Bishkek.

The two leaders were meeting for the first time on the sidelines of a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation held in Kyrgyzstan.

Putin in turn praised Moscow's long-standing regional ally as a close neighbour in Rowhani's first meeting with a major world leader since he won June elections.

Putin was reportedly going to offer for Russia to build a second nuclear reactor at Iran's Bushehr nuclear power plant, according to a diplomatic source quoted by Kommersant daily on Wednesday.

Putin was also reportedly offering the renewal of a contract to supply Iran with sophisticated S-300 air defence missile systems, after the deal was cancelled under international pressure in 2010.