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Chavez set for Venezuela victory

Chavez set for Venezuela victory

Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez is headed for re-election in Sunday's poll, preliminary results suggest.

With about 80% of votes counted, the left-wing president has secured more than 60% of the vote, according to official figures.

They suggest his main opposition rival, Manuel Rosales, is far behind.

If the results are confirmed, Mr Chavez would have obtained the strong majority he is seeking to complete his socialist revolution.

Street party

Hundreds of supporters took to the streets to celebrate as the early results were announced, letting off fireworks and playing pro-Chavez songs over loudspeakers.

It is a bigger party than New Year's Eve

Taxi driver, Caracas

"Chavez isn't going anywhere," they shouted.

"That should be the national anthem," one taxi driver from a shanty town told Reuters news agency as he drove around an affluent area of the capital, Caracas.

"People round here do not know what it is like in the slums. It is a bigger party than New Year's Eve," he added.

The company carrying out the poll interviewed more than 400,000 voters around the country. It has a margin of error of 1.5 percentage points, according to a local co-ordinator.

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More Pinochet surgery ruled out

More Pinochet surgery ruled out

Doctors treating former Chilean military leader Augusto Pinochet have ruled out performing a second operation on him, saying it would be too risky.

Gen Pinochet, 91, underwent surgery to widen a blood vessel after suffering a severe heart attack early on Sunday.

Doctors later performed a follow-up procedure. The general's condition is said to be serious but stable.

Gen Pinochet was in power from 1973-90, during which time more than 3,000 people were killed or "disappeared".

He is under indictment in two human rights cases and for tax evasion.

Last rites

The former ruler was taken to the Santiago Military Hospital following an "acute" heart attack and a build-up of fluid in his lungs, a statement from the hospital said.

Doctors had carried out "procedures that rescued him virtually from death," Gen Pinochet's son, Marco Antonio Pinochet told reporters gathered outside the hospital.

"He's in a pretty serious state...We're in the hands of God and the doctors."

The former leader received the last rites from a Catholic priest, a family spokesman said.

Gen Pinochet underwent angioplasty, a procedure designed to widen a narrowed or totally obstructed blood vessel, to stabilise his condition, he said.

Later on Sunday, one of doctors treating the general, Juan Ignacio Vergara, said: "No bypass has been performed and we expect no open heart surgery will be necessary."

He added that such surgery involved high risks for someone of Gen Pinochet's age.

'Political responsibility'

General Pinochet overthrew the elected government of the left-wing President Allende in 1973 in a bloody coup.

Today, close to the end of my days, I want to make clear that I hold no rancour toward anybody, that I love

my country above all else

Pinochet's birthday statement

He was placed under house arrest earlier this week over the abduction of two people in 1973.

The charges relate to the Caravan of Death - a military operation to remove opponents to Gen Pinochet's rule.

He currently faces two other indictments - one for human rights abuses and another for tax evasion.

As a former president he enjoys legal immunity, but the courts can strip him of this privilege on a case-by-case basis.

On 25 November, his 91st birthday, Gen Pinochet issued a statement in which he took "political responsibility" for acts that took place under his rule, saying that he had believed they were in Chile's best interests.

He also alluded to his failing health.

"Today, close to the end of my days, I want to make clear that I hold no rancour toward anybody, that I love my country above all else," he said.

Gen Pinochet has been in ill health in recent years. He suffers from diabetes and arthritis, and has also had a

number of suspected strokes.

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Youths want no migration controls

Youths want no migration controls

Four out of five youngsters believe people should be able to live in any country they choose, a BBC global survey of 15 to 17-year-olds suggests.

Two-thirds also say that they would emigrate to secure a better future, and one in seven said they would risk their life to reach another country.

The results come from a survey of 3,000 teenagers in 10 cities as part of the BBC's Generation Next series.

The young people were quizzed on a range of contemporary political issues.

The key areas of questioning were immigration, climate change, terrorism and war, crime, religion, education, global population and honesty.

The 10 key cities involved in the poll were New York, Nairobi, Cairo, Lagos, Rio de Janeiro, Baghdad, Delhi,

Jakarta, Moscow and London - though due to their sensitive nature, not all questions could be asked in all areas.

On the question of immigration, 79% thought that people should be able to live in whichever country they chose and 64% said that they would emigrate to secure a better future.

The proportion of respondents that would emigrate to secure a better future was highest in Nairobi (81%) and Delhi (81%).

An overwhelming majority said the so-called US war on terror was not making the world a safer place

In Baghdad, 50% of the sample said they would not emigrate - the biggest negative response of all 10 cities.

The results show the desire of young people to be highly mobile, with very little difference between developed and developing countries.

Integration issue

But the sample was split about whether those who wanted to move to a new country should keep apart to maintain their own beliefs and culture - with 38% saying they should and 49% calling for immigrants to integrate and adopt the

culture of their new country.

In New York, 61% thought immigrants should integrate, with only 11% saying they should keep apart. In Delhi, the figures were just 11% for integration and 81% for keeping apart.

When asked which was the most important issue globally right now, 36% of the respondents listed terrorism.

The issue caused most concern in New Delhi (66%), New York (63%) and Baghdad (59%).

And an overwhelming majority, 71%, said that the so-called US war on terror was not making the world a safer place. Just 14% of respondents disagreed.

Ninety-eight percent of Baghdadi respondents said the war on terror was not making the world a safer place.

This negative attitude was echoed in Rio de Janeiro where 92% felt the same.

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Army and police in Fiji standoff

Army and police in Fiji standoff

Fijian soldiers have taken up positions at the headquarters of the country's only armed police unit, amid continued fears of a military coup.

Soldiers are patrolling the perimeter while others have entered the compound.

However there has been no confrontation between the police and the troops, and the situation remains calm.

The army has threatened to unseat the government of PM Laisenia Qarase over controversial plans to grant amnesty to those behind a coup in 2000.

The commander of Fiji's military, Cmdr Voreqe Bainimarama, originally gave the government until last Friday to resign or face Fiji's fourth coup in two decades.

The army takeover did not take place - but in a TV interview at the weekend he said he expected Mr Qarase to step down on Monday.

Ongoing feud

Troops arrived at the headquarters of the police's Tactical Response Unit outside the capital, Suva, early on Monday.

Witnesses said soldiers loaded weapons belonging to police on to army trucks.

"The army asked to examine what weapons this unit has. It is not violent," assistant police commissioner Moses Driver told Fiji radio.

"We are hopeful that no confrontation of any sort is going to occur. The Fiji police appeal to members of the public to remain calm," he said.

Australia and New Zealand have warned of dire economic and social consequences if the military deposes Fiji's elected government.

The feud between the prime minister and the army chief goes back several months.

It relates to legislation that Mr Qarase is seeking to pass, which offers a pardon to people involved in the 2000 racially-motivated coup and allocates the ownership of coastal land to ethnic Fijians.

Cmdr Bainimarama played a key role in putting down the uprising and was at one point forced to flee for his life.

He has made it clear that he does not feel the government has done enough to bring its perpetrators to justice.

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Madagascar elects new president

Madagascar elects new president

Votes are being counted in Madagascar's presidential election.

The current leader of the island nation, Marc Ravalomanana, said he expected to win a second term and called on people to turn out and vote.

His 13 rivals include Roland Ratsiraka, the nephew of the former president. No violence has been reported so far.

In the last poll, in 2001, the island nation was pushed to the brink of civil war after then-incumbent Didier Ratsiraka refused to accept defeat.

Eventually, Mr Ratsiraka and many of his ministers went into exile in France, Marc Ravalomanana, took over.

He is widely expected to defeat his challengers.

Fraud warnings

Voting started slowly with people queuing in torrential rain in the capital, Antananarivo. They were asked to choose a card with a photograph of their preferred candidate.

Bad weather caused power cuts in some areas, forcing officials to start counting ballots by candlelight.

Reuters news agency reported that voters burnt a ballot box in the coastal town of Toliara.

More than 14,000 observers are overseeing the vote. Some had warned of possible fraud.

Mr Ravalomanana had promised the ballot would be a model of democracy and transparency for Africa and the world.

"You know very well that it is a challenge for us to hold free, democratic and transparent elections," he told journalists after casting his ballot at a local school.

"I am very proud of the Malagasy wisdom," he added.

Ballot sheets

Mr Ravalomanana, a charismatic dairy tycoon known as "the milkman" needs to win 50% of the vote to avoid a second round run-off against any of the 13 other contenders.

The BBC's Jonny Hogg in Antananarivo says it is unclear whether he will achieve this.

There has been considerable controversy in the build up to the poll with accusations of unfair access to the media and unconstitutional electoral process.

An election observer told the BBC that ballot sheets for four of the candidates had not arrived at a substantial number of polling stations across the country.

When asked, President Ravalomanana told the BBC that he was not personally responsible and did not see it as a serious problem.

The vice prime minister in the former regime, Pierrot Rajaonarivelo, was stopped from returning to the country to enter the race and an army general whose candidature was refused attempted a military overthrow.

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Lawyers lodge Saddam appeal

Lawyers lodge Saddam death appeal

Lawyers for Saddam Hussein have lodged an appeal against the former Iraqi president's death sentence for crimes against humanity, court officials say.

The appeal was lodged just two days before the expiry of a deadline and a month after the sentence was imposed.

A panel of nine judges will review the verdict, which has been criticised by human rights groups as flawed.

Saddam Hussein was sentenced to death over the killing of 148 people in the mainly Shia town of Dujail in 1982.

Judges also passed death sentences on Saddam's half-brother Barzan al-Tikriti and Iraq's former chief judge Awad Hamed al-Bandar.

Violent aftermath

Much of Iraq has seen an upsurge in sectarian violence in the weeks following the verdicts, prompting US and Iraqi leaders to consider a re-think of security policies within Iraq.

Clearly, what US forces are currently doing in Iraq is not working well enough or fast enough

Donald Rumsfeld

Former US Defence Secretary

The country's interior ministry has said that civilian deaths in November rose by 44% compared to the previous month.

But a proposal by outgoing UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to convene an international conference to discuss the situation in Iraq has been rebuffed by Iraq's President Jalal Talabani.

Mr Talabani, a Kurd, insisted that a sovereign Iraq should be allowed to find its own solutions. His comments followed the rejection of the idea on Saturday by a top Shia leader, Abdel Aziz al-Hakim.

On Sunday, the US military confirmed that at least eight Iraqis, including two women, a child and five suspected insurgent fighters, died in an air strike near the western town of Falluja.

Three US soldiers also died in two separate attacks on Saturday, one in the town of Taji, near Baghdad, and another two in Anbar province.

The former US Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, who resigned after US elections early last month, was reported

on Sunday to have urged a "major adjustment" in Iraq policy just two days before he stepped down.

In a memo leaked to the New York Times, Mr Rumsfeld offered suggestions for changing US policy in Iraq, saying: "Clearly, what US forces are currently doing in Iraq is not working well enough or fast enough."

US national security adviser Stephen Hadley told ABC TV that President George W Bush agreed with Mr Rumsfeld's assessment of the situation in Iraq, adding that the president was considering his ex-colleague's "laundry list of ideas".

Trial criticised

Chief prosecutor Jaafar al-Moussawi told the Reuters news agency that defence lawyers visited the court on Sunday to lodge appeals against all three sentences.

The three have an automatic right of appeal under Iraqi law.

The nine appeal judges can amend any aspect of the verdict or sentence.

However, Iraqi law states that if they uphold the initial verdict, the death sentence must be carried within 30 days.

Iraq's prime minister has said the sentence, if upheld, should be carried out as soon as possible, perhaps before the conclusion of the current trial.

The chief defence lawyer complained last month that his team had been unable to file appeal papers in the period immediately following the verdict.

Iraq's government and trial prosecutors have insisted the trial was fair, despite criticism of its administration and procedures by US-based Human Rights Watch.

The group said the trial suffered from "serious administrative, procedural and substantive legal defects", and called the death penalty a "cruel and inhumane punishment".

Saddam Hussein is currently facing a second trial over the so-called Anfal campaign of 1988.

He and six co-defendants are accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity over the killing of at least 100,000 Kurds in northern Iraq.

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'Dozens of Taleban' die in battle

'Dozens of Taleban' die in battle

Nato forces in southern Afghanistan say they have killed about 70 Taleban fighters following an ambush.

Troops fought a four-hour battle after a large-scale insurgent attack near the town of Musa Qala in Helmand Province, the alliance says.

British troops recently brokered a truce with rebels to allow local forces in Musa Qala to police the area.

The attack may fuel suspicions the Taleban use Musa Qala as a safe haven, a BBC correspondent in Kabul says.

A Danish patrol serving alongside British troops came under fire outside Musa Qala and called in air support, a Nato spokesman said.

Between 70 and 80 suspected Taleban died in the battle and no Nato troops were killed, he added.

There was no independent confirmation of the death toll.

The attack happened outside the area of Musa Qala covered by the deal struck in October between British forces, Taleban fighters and local elders.

Ongoing conflict

The Musa Qala attack was just one incident in a violent weekend in southern Afghanistan.

In the city of Kandahar, a suicide car bomb exploded near a British convoy.

Three Afghans were killed and three British soldiers injured.

There were reports of further civilian injuries in clashes following the bombing.

Alliance officials also confirmed that a Nato-chartered transport helicopter carrying eight crew crashed in the north of Kandahar province on Saturday.

There was no sign that anyone had survived.

The Taleban said they shot down the helicopter, but this could not be confirmed.

Nato-led forces fighting in southern Afghanistan are facing the fiercest resistance from militants since the toppling of

the Taliban regime five years ago.

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Ethiopians meet Somali Islamists

Ethiopians meet Somali Islamists

Ethiopia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Tekeda Alemu, has held direct talks in Djibouti with senior representatives of Somalia's Union of Islamic Courts.

Ethiopia says it explained its policy of backing Somalia's transitional government against the Islamists.

Representatives of neighbouring nations also took part, as well as Kenya's ambassador to Somalia.

The two sides have clashed in the past month, with the Islamists pledging to force Ethiopian troops out of Somalia.

However, Ethiopia says it has held several meetings with the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC) to try to resolve their differences.

Last chance?

The BBC's Africa editor, Martin Plaut, says the news of contacts between the two sides is a surprising revelation.

Previously, there have been fears that the sporadic clashes would escalate to all-out war with the Islamists on one side, and Somalia's transitional government on the other side alongside the Ethiopians.

TIMELINE

30 Nov 2006: Ethiopia's parliament authorises all legal and necessary steps against any invasion by the UIC

27 Nov 2006: UIC accuse Ethiopian forces of shelling Bandiradley

Oct 2006: Ethiopian's PM says Ethiopia is "technically at war" with the UIC

Sept 2006: Somalia's president survives an assassination attempt

July 2006: Ethiopian troops cross into Somalia

June 2006: UIC takes control of Mogadishu

1996: Ethiopian forces defeat Islamist fighters in Somali town of Luuq

1964 and 1977: Wars fought over Ethiopia's Ogaden region

But our correspondent says there has been no indication from Addis Ababa of what message they communicated to the Islamists in Djibouti.

Last month Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi said the Islamists represented a "clear threat" to his country which

he said was prepared for conflict following repeated Islamist calls for a holy war.

The UIC, which is backed by Ethiopia's rival, Eritrea, and now controls much of southern Somalia, has denied claims by Ethiopia and the weak Somali transitional government that it has links to al-Qaeda.

The talks come as Somalia's interim government, formed two years ago, edges closer to securing regional and international approval for the deployment of foreign peacekeeping troops in Somalia.

When he came to power, interim President Abdullahi Yousef asked for foreign troops to bolster his position.

A regional grouping of African states has now backed that proposal in principle, with the African Union also offering support. The idea is now being considered by the UN Security Council.

The UIC strongly opposes any foreign presence on Somali soil, as do several members of Igad, including Sudan.

Our correspondent says the talks in Djibouti could be the last opportunity to head off all-out conflict in the Horn of Africa.

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Beirut protests keep pressure on

Beirut protests keep pressure on **Lebanon's political crisis is continuing as demonstrators remain camped in the centre of Beirut in an attempt to bring down the government.**

Thousands of supporters of Hezbollah and its pro-Syrian allies are on the streets calling for Prime Minister Fouad Siniora's government to go.

Mr Siniora is refusing to step down to make way for a government that would include more of Hezbollah's allies.

Arab countries are stepping up their efforts to help resolve the crisis.

The head of the Arab League, Amr Musa, is visiting Beirut to offer to mediate between the government and the opposition, and envoys from the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Tunisia are offering their help.

Mr Musa said stability in Lebanon was vital to the whole region:

"Lebanon is an important component of the Arab world and the Arab society of nations. The stability in Lebanon and moving towards a solution that would bring about a sure future for the country is one of our concerns."

There were clashes between Shia and Sunni Muslims in Beirut on Saturday in which one man was died and at least 12 others were wounded.

The dead man, a Shia Muslim, was shot in a Sunni district while returning home from the sit-in protest, officials said.

Cabinet seats

Protesters, led mainly by the Shia militant movement Hezbollah and its Christian allies, have been camping out in Beirut close to the prime minister's office since a huge anti-government rally on Friday.

They accuse Mr Siniora of being too pro-Western and anti-Syrian and of failing the Lebanese people.

The current crisis was sparked last month when five Shia ministers and a Christian ally quit the government.

Hezbollah had asked for cabinet seats that would give it and its allies power of veto but the majority group in parliament

refused.

The political tension was increased two weeks later with the assassination of a leading anti-Syrian minister, Pierre Gemayel.

Marathon

Despite the protests, several hundred runners took to the streets of Beirut for Lebanon's annual marathon.

The organisers said the route had been changed slightly, and police and soldiers were deployed along the route.

We appeal to all Lebanese, from every region and political movement... to rid us of an incapable government

Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah
Hezbollah leader

While the demonstrations have had the good nature of a pop concert or festival, this is an extremely serious crisis for Lebanon, says the BBC's Jon Leyne in Beirut.

International concern has been growing. On Saturday, UK Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett and German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier were in the Lebanese capital to express their support for the government.

Mr Siniora has vowed to stand firm against a protest movement he has called an attempted coup.

The US has denounced "threats of intimidation violence" in Lebanon and accused Syria and Iran of instigating the protests.

The government came to office last year in the first election after the withdrawal of Syrian troops originally stationed in Lebanon during the civil war.

Syria was forced to withdraw its forces after massive protests and international pressure, triggered by the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Story from BBC NEWS:

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Golf: Dubai get first Tiger course

Dubai to get first Tiger design

World number one Tiger Woods announced on Sunday that the site for his first golf course design will be in Dubai.

The Tiger Woods Dubai development will feature a par-72 course, a golf academy, 300 luxury villas, 20 mansions and an 80-room VIP hotel.

"I am excited about the challenge of transforming a desert terrain into a world-class golf course," said Woods.

"I have a vision of creating something that is uniquely mine and I want to realise this vision in Dubai."

The project is a joint venture between the course design firm the American set up last month, Tiger Woods Design, and Tatweer, an off-shoot of the government-affiliated Dubai Holding.

"I have been amazed by the progress of Dubai. From the time I first came to play here in 2000, I wanted to be a part

of this amazing vision," the 30-year-old star said.

The project is scheduled for completion in late 2009 at Dubailand, the oil-rich city's largest tourism and leisure development.

Woods, whose 12 major titles are second only to Jack Nicklaus' 18, won this year's Dubai Desert Classic, beating Ernie Els in a play-off, and is scheduled to return to defend his title in February.

According to the terms of his deal with the promoters, Woods will play in the event at least three times in the next four years.

Story from BBC SPORT:

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Tennis: Russia clinches Cup

Safin seals Russian Davis Cup win

Russia clinched their second Davis Cup title with a thrilling 3-2 victory over Argentina in Moscow.

Marat Safin, inspired by the passionate home crowd, claimed a 6-3 3-6 6-3 7-6 (7-5) win over Jose Acasuso in the deciding singles rubber.

David Nalbandian had earlier kept Argentina's hopes alive after beating Russia's Nikolay Davydenko in the penultimate singles match.

Nalbandian won 6-2 6-2 4-6 6-4 to draw the tie level at 2-2.

Safin, the former US Open and Australian Open champion, had been drawn to play Juan Ignacio Chela in the final match, but Argentina captain Alberto Mancini replaced him with Acasuso.

It was Acasuso's first appearance in the final although he was unbeaten in his four previous Davis Cup matches this year.

The Russian, who had won only one of his previous three meetings with Acasuso, came out strongly, breaking his rival's first service game to move ahead 3-0 and he served out the first set in 30 minutes.

I was afraid I could lose the match if I failed to win the tiebreak

Marat Safin

In the second the 24-year-old Argentine bounced back to break Safin's serve in the sixth game and level at one set all.

But boosted by his home crowd, including former Russian President Boris Yeltsin, Safin's confidence returned and he broke twice in the third set to put himself in control.

The fourth set was a tight affair that was decided by a tie-break, which Safin edged after Acasuso netted a forehand to spark wild celebrations.

"I'm happy to win in front of my home fans," Safin said after the match. "It was really hard to win as I experienced serious problems with the surface as I failed to adjust my playing to the carpet.

606: DEBATE

WS

"I'm glad I won in four sets. I was sure Nikolay (Davydenko) would win his match but after he lost I was pretty nervous.

"I also have problems with my heel and knees. I was afraid I could lose the match if I failed to win the tiebreak."

"I'm very happy for all of us and all of our fantastic supporters," he added.

Davydenko beat Chela in Friday's opening match but Nalbandian then beat Safin to even the score.

On Saturday, Russia took a 2-1 lead when Safin and Dmitry Tursunov got the better of Nalbandian and Agustin Calleri in the doubles.

Story from BBC SPORT:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/sport2/hi/tennis/6203988.stm>

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IMF scrutinises Zimbabwe economy

IMF scrutinises Zimbabwe economy

An International Monetary Fund (IMF) team is in Zimbabwe, which is suffering soaring inflation, to examine President Robert Mugabe's economic policies.

Zimbabwe has the world's highest rates of annual inflation - more than 1,000%. Poverty levels have risen and unemployment is around 80%.

The IMF will spend 10 days of talks, a year after Zimbabwe averted expulsion from the fund by clearing some arrears.

The visit will go towards deciding what to do about Harare's IMF debts.

ZIMBABWE CRISIS

Life expectancy 30 years

High dependency on food aid

20% adult HIV prevalence

Shortages of basic foodstuffs

High unemployment

Inflation 1,200%

Zimbabwe avoided expulsion from the IMF with a \$9m debt payment. The country still owes the fund \$125m and its IMF voting rights are suspended.

The IMF report will be used by the fund's board to decide Harare's fate when it meets in Washington in February to review the overdue debt payments.

Government borrowing has forced the central bank to print more money to prop up the economy.

But Zimbabwe has now agreed to end inflationary policies used by the bank.

The IMF and other Western donors, including the World Bank, suspended aid to Zimbabwe more than six years ago over policy differences with Harare.

Donor agencies want to see less state control of the economy and a relaxation of foreign exchange controls.

Mr Mugabe's government says it is a victim of a Western sabotage campaign over its land reforms.

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Chad rebels capture eastern town

Chad rebels capture eastern town

Chadian rebels have captured the town of Guereda on the country's eastern border with Sudan.

A column of rebels in pick-up trucks mounted with heavy weapons stormed the town in heavy fighting on Friday.

The government had recently reinforced its soldiers in the town with more weapons and ammunition which may now be in rebel hands, correspondents say.

Rebels launched a campaign earlier this year aimed at overthrowing Chad's President Idriss Deby.

Pincer movement

The Chadian army had spent several days reinforcing its detachment at Guereda, flying in more soldiers, weapons and ammunition.

The army planned to trap the rebels nearby in a pincer movement, with more government troops coming from

Abeche.

But the rebels acted first and captured Guereda, and the government fears its weapons stocks are now in rebel hands, the BBC correspondent in Chad's capital N'Djamena says.

More than 80 people were being treated for bullet wounds in Guereda's hospital, aid workers said.

Last week, rebels attacked and briefly held the eastern town of Abeche before disappearing back into their strongholds in the mountains and desert.

Chad's government is being assisted by a military contingent from former colonial ruler France that includes jet fighters, Reuters news agency reports.

Amnesty International (AI) says it has evidence that attacks by Janjaweed militia from Sudan are taking place 150km (93 miles) inside Chad.

Guereda is about 30km (19 miles) from the border with Sudan's Darfur region.

On Friday, the United Nations refugee agency airlifted more than 100 tonnes of relief supplies to Chad to replace stocks which local people looted from a warehouse last weekend

when rebels took Abeche.

The goods were taken by local people, but some have been returned following house-to-house searches by the military.

The UN says about 90,000 Chadians have been displaced by the recent fighting.

Story from BBC NEWS:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/africa/6202020.stm>

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Rumsfeld urged Iraq tactics shift

Rumsfeld urged Iraq tactics shift

Former US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld proposed major changes to the Bush administration's strategy in Iraq just two days before he resigned.

He made the call in a classified memo to the White House, which has been obtained by the New York Times.

Mr Rumsfeld's memo says US strategy in Iraq "is not working well enough" and calls for "a major adjustment".

President Bush faces growing pressure to decide a new Iraq course with an advisory group due to report this week.

"In my view it is time for a major adjustment," Mr Rumsfeld wrote in the memo dated 6 November.

"Clearly, what US forces are currently doing in Iraq is not working well enough or fast enough."

US national security adviser Stephen Hadley told ABC TV that President George W Bush agreed with that

assessment, describing the memo as a helpful "laundry list of ideas".

Bad behaviour

Apart from President Bush, the combative Mr Rumsfeld was identified more than anyone else with the US administration's strategy of "staying the course" in Iraq.

So it seems extraordinary that behind the scenes he was calling for major changes, the BBC's James Westhead in Washington says.

Provide money to key political leaders (as Saddam Hussein did), to get them to help us get through this difficult period

Rumsfeld memo

However, in recent months he had begun to acknowledge publicly that US tactics were not working and needed to be more flexible, our correspondent notes.

The document, first published by the New York Times and subsequently confirmed by the Pentagon, contains no reference to Mr Rumsfeld's imminent resignation.

Mr Rumsfeld was replaced following Republican losses to the Democrats in the US mid-term elections.

His proposals in the memo include troop redeployments and base closures, in apparent contradiction with his public assertions that it is commanders in the field who determine troop levels.

The memo also suggests "beginning with modest withdrawals of US and coalition forces... so Iraqis know they have to pull up their socks, step up and take responsibility for their country".

The US should "stop rewarding bad behaviour", the memo says. Reconstruction efforts should be in those parts of Iraq that are behaving and no more reconstruction assistance should be given in areas where there is violence.

Mr Rumsfeld also urges President Bush to copy the tactics of Iraq's deposed leader: "Provide money to key political leaders (as Saddam Hussein did), to get them to help us get through this difficult period."

Among other options described as "Above the Line" are:

- Significantly increase the number of US trainers and transfer more equipment to Iraqi security forces
- Reduce quickly the number of US bases, currently 55, to five by July 2007
- Position substantial US forces near the Iranian and Syrian borders to reduce infiltration and Iran's

influence

- Withdraw US forces from vulnerable positions, such as patrols, and use them as a quick reaction force to help Iraqi security forces when needed

Any new approach should be announced as being on a "trial basis", giving the administration the ability to change if necessary and therefore not "lose", the memo says.

Withdrawal date

Mr Rumsfeld also outlined a number of "Below the Line" or less attractive options, including continuing on the current path, moving large numbers of US forces into Baghdad and increasing US forces substantially.

Other proposals include setting a firm withdrawal date and pushing an "aggressive" federalism plan to move towards three separate states - Sunni, Shia and Kurd.

News of Mr Rumsfeld's proposals comes as the Iraq Study Group, which brings together senior politicians and diplomats, is preparing to present its findings to Mr Bush.

Their recommendations are widely expected to include a gradual phased withdrawal of US troops over the next 18 months.

Mr Bush has indicated he will look closely at but not necessarily follow the group's suggestions.

"I want to hear all advice before I make any decision about adjustments to our strategy in Iraq," Mr Bush said in his radio address on Saturday.

Story from BBC NEWS:

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Philippines declares 'calamity'

Philippine mudslides a 'calamity'

Philippine President Gloria Arroyo has declared a national calamity following devastating mudslides which have left hundreds of people dead or missing.

The Red Cross has put the death toll from Thursday's tragedy at 406, with 398 missing, but the aid organisation said the toll could pass 1,000.

Hopes of finding many more survivors are fading.

The mudslides, triggered by the heavy rains of Typhoon Durian, struck near the Mayon volcano south-east of Manila.

Mrs Arroyo released 1bn pesos (\$20m, 10m) for reconstruction work and vowed further efforts to find survivors.

"All resources of the government will continue to be mobilised without let-up as we pin hope against hope on the search of survivors," she said in a statement.

Thick sludge

The relief effort is progressing slowly, with soldiers having to walk for hours to reach affected areas.

Whole villages were engulfed by mud that poured from the slopes of the volcano, some 350km (220 miles) from Manila.

The head of the local Red Cross, Richard Gordon, said the number of victims could well rise.

"There are many unidentified bodies. There could be a lot more hidden below. Whole families may have been wiped out," he told the Associated Press news agency.

The BBC's Sarah Toms, in the Philippines, says people have been using their bare hands to pull bodies from the thick sludge.

About 100 miners have arrived to help with rescue efforts and army commanders have asked for dog teams to help with the search.

The first funerals were carried out late on Saturday, as bodies decomposed in the heat.

Some victims were buried in a mass grave as a precaution against the spread of disease.

"We opted to do this because we might have an epidemic, which could be expected because of the high number of evacuees and homeless," local official Gene Villareal told AP.

Foreign help

Officials say more than 40,000 people have been displaced.

Many of the survivors, who have lost not only their homes but their livelihoods after fruit trees and rice paddies were destroyed, have crammed into makeshift shelters in schools and churches.

Disaster agencies say there is an urgent need for fresh water, food and medicine for the survivors, and more body bags.

Canada has pledged more than US\$800,000 to help the relief effort and Japan says it will give more than \$170,000.

Durian - named after a spiky Asian fruit - was the fourth typhoon to hit the Philippines in the last three months.

Story from BBC NEWS:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/asia-pacific/6203110.stm>

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Bite kills Malaysia 'Snake King'

Bite kills Malaysia 'Snake King'

By Jonathan Kent

BBC News, Kuala Lumpur

A snake charmer who made a name for himself as Malaysia's Snake King has died after being bitten by a king cobra.

Ali Khan Samsudin, 48, had entered the record books for locking himself in small spaces with hundreds of snakes or scorpions for days at a time.

The old adage "once bitten twice shy" simply did not apply to Mr Ali Khan.

According to local press reports, he had his first altercation with a king cobra 27 years ago.

So when, on Tuesday, one of his subjects inflicted what was just the latest of many bites, he had not been unduly worried.

However, two days later, his condition worsened suddenly and his family rushed him to hospital. He died before he could receive treatment.

Ali Khan Samsudin found fame in the early 1990s when he lived for 12 hours a day for 40 days in a small room with 400 cobras.

That earned him the title of Snake King.

In 1997, he acquired another record - Scorpion King - after shutting himself in a box with 6,000 of the creatures for three weeks.

He was reportedly bitten 99 times in his life.

He leaves two wives, five children and a protege known as the Scorpion Queen, who he trained for her own record-breaking stunt two years ago.

Story from BBC NEWS:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/asia-pacific/6201292.stm>

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Spy death inquiry moves to Russia

Spy death inquiry moves to Russia

Counter-terror police are to travel to Russia as part of the inquiry into the death of Russian former agent Alexander Litvinenko, the BBC has learned.

It comes as Home Secretary John Reid said the inquiry into Mr Litvinenko's poisoning would expand beyond Britain.

Mario Scaramella - an Italian contact of Mr Litvinenko who is currently in hospital - is said to be "well".

Traces of radioactive polonium-210 have been found in his body. He met Mr Litvinenko the day the ex-spy fell ill.

'Wider investigation'

The BBC's Daniel Sandford said it was understood nine officers from the Metropolitan Police's counter-terrorism command could travel to Russia as early as Monday.

The specialist unit - which was launched in October to meet terrorist threats - is heading the investigation into the former

KGB agent's poisoning.

News of the visit came after Mr Reid said the investigation was set to widen.

Discussing various aspects of Mr Litvinenko's death, Mr Reid told Sky News: "Over the next few days I think that all of these things will widen out a little from the circle just being here in Britain.

"Tomorrow I will be at the European Council and I will certainly be sharing information and getting what we can from European counterparts.

"The health authorities are already starting to liaise with our European colleagues and the police will follow wherever this investigation leads; inside or outside Britain."

Minimal dose

Shadow home secretary David Davis welcomed news that the investigation was expanding.

He told BBC One's The Politics Show: "I think it's a good thing, I think it's very important that no channel is left unpursued, that this investigation goes right to its limit wherever that may be and that limit should not be a diplomatic limit, it should be the limit of the evidence."

There has been no change in the condition of Mr Scaramella, who is being monitored at University College Hospital, London.

Doctors said the academic - who was one of the last people to meet Mr Litvinenko before his death last month - was "well" with "normal" test results.

He is said to be displaying no symptoms of radiation poisoning.

Mr Scaramella's lawyer Sergio Rastrelli told Channel 4 News his client was "clearly worried".

"The doctors said he has definitely been contaminated with polonium but it's not radioactive," he said.

"So he has ingested or inhaled it, but in [an] extremely minimal dose, far less than that with which Litvinenko was poisoned."

Critic

Mr Litvinenko's death is being linked to the discovery of polonium-210 in his body.

Friends believe he was poisoned because of his criticisms of the Putin government.

The Scaramella file resembles a story from a spy novel

BBC security correspondent Frank Gardner

On Saturday, airline Easyjet said Mr Scaramella had flown on flight 3506 from Naples to Stansted, Essex, on 31 October and also on flight 3505 from Stansted to Naples on 3 November.

But the Health Protection Agency (HPA) said it had no "public health concerns" about those flights.

Transport Secretary Douglas Alexander also moved to reassure the public and said the government did have measures in place at airports to detect "radioactive materials".

Radiological assessment

The Health Protection Agency said just over 3,000 people had now called the NHS Direct line in the wake of the radiation scare in the UK, with 179 being followed up for further investigation.

Twenty-seven people were referred as a precaution to a specialist outpatient clinic for radiological exposure assessment.

A total of 70 urine samples, mainly from medical staff and ambulance workers, have been tested and found negative.

Story from BBC NEWS:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/uk_news/6203222.stm

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Serbs march in support of Seselj

Serbs march in support of Seselj

Thousands of people have marched in the Serbian capital, Belgrade, in support of nationalist leader Vojislav Seselj, currently on trial in The Hague.

His trial for war crimes during the break-up of Yugoslavia has been suspended since Friday because of his poor health due to a hunger strike.

Mr Seselj, 52, has been on hunger strike since 10 November.

He is accused of plotting the ethnic cleansing of former Yugoslavia in the 1990s wars. He denies any wrongdoing.

Thousands of supporters of Mr Seselj gathered near the United States embassy in Belgrade, waving Serbian flags.

Speakers condemned The Hague tribunal and the role of the United States.

Serbian nationalism

Supporters of Mr Seselj's Radical Party say the tribunal is biased against Serbia and takes its orders from the US.

His strong brand of Serbian nationalism still has appeal among many Serbs, says the BBC's correspondent in Belgrade, Nick Hawton.

"The Serbian Radicals' leader is not fighting in The Hague just for his rights," said Radical Party secretary Aleksander Vucic.

"He's not fighting just for his life. But he's fighting for all of us who are gathered here. Vojislav Seselj is fighting for Serbia!"

Mr Seselj went on hunger strike three weeks ago criticising The Hague for not permitting him to conduct his defence the way he wanted.

He boycotted the start of war crimes trial on Monday and lost the right to conduct his own defence.

He is currently leader of the Serbian Radicals - the biggest party in Serbia's parliament.

He is accused of forming a joint criminal enterprise with former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, which led to the extermination and deportation of non-Serbs from Bosnia

and Croatia.

Story from BBC NEWS:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/europe/6202624.stm>

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Qatar 'to pay Palestinian wages'

Qatar 'to pay Palestinian wages'

Qatar has agreed to pay the salaries of 40,000 Palestinian education workers for several months, Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniya has said.

Mr Haniya said the amount would total more than \$22m (11.1m) a month.

The Hamas-led Palestinian government has been struggling to pay its workforce since March when Western donors suspended direct aid.

They want Hamas to renounce violence and to recognise Israel. Hamas has rejected the demands.

The US and the European Union regard Hamas as a terrorist organisation.

FOREIGN AID

April 2006 - September 2006: \$420m

April 2005 - September 2005: \$230m

Source: IMF

The Israeli authorities have also been withholding tens of millions of dollars in tax revenues they collect for the

Palestinian government.

Palestinian teachers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip returned to work last month after ending a two-month strike over unpaid wages.

Mr Haniya made the announcement in the Qatari capital, Doha.

He said Qatar was also studying giving an additional \$7m per month to the Palestinian health sector.

Qatar has not commented.

Aid increase?

Foreign aid - despite the economic boycott - has still been reaching both the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinians.

In September, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said more foreign aid had been received by the PA over six months - April to September 2006 - than in the same period last year.

The bulk of this aid came from Arab donors - even though most of the money did not go directly to the Hamas-led administration.

Donors deposited the funds in the bank account of the Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

Mr Abbas is the head of the Fatah organisation, which recognises Israel, and is not subject to the economic boycott.

Story from BBC NEWS:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/6203940.stm

Published: 2006/12/03 13:07:45 GMT

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'Militants' held in Saudi Arabia

'Militants' held in Saudi Arabia

The Saudi authorities say they have detained 136 suspected militants, including a potential suicide bomber.

The arrests were made over the past few months in several cities, and those held include members of al-Qaeda-type cells, the interior ministry said.

A ministry spokesman told the BBC that 115 of the suspects were Saudi nationals - the rest were foreigners.

They are accused of planning to bring down the Saudi royal family and attack Western targets.

Militants began a campaign in Saudi Arabia in 2003 with attacks on Western housing compounds.

However violence has declined in recent years in the face of tough security measures.

The only known attempted operation by Islamic militants this year was a foiled attack against the country's largest and most important oil facility.

Religious decrees

The interior ministry spokesman, General Mansoor al-Turki, said some of the militant groups had been about to carry out attacks in Saudi Arabia while others were still in the preparatory stages.

He said the authorities had withheld the announcement of the arrests until all the suspects had been rounded up.

"We're talking about eight different cells that were caught all over the kingdom, in almost all areas," Mr Turki told the BBC.

Some of those arrested were recruiting others to fight in "unstable countries", he added.

Others were allegedly recruiting militants to be trained abroad and then sent back to Saudi Arabia to carry out attacks.

Story from BBC NEWS:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/6202974.stm

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Bangladesh strike stops traffic

Bangladesh strike sparks clashes

One person was killed and more than 50 injured in Bangladesh as supporters of rival political groups clashed during a nationwide transport strike.

The violence took place in Sylhet in the north-east, where fighting broke out between people at rival rallies.

It comes as the country's two main political blocks are deadlocked over upcoming elections.

One of them, the Awami League, ordered the transport stoppage in a bid to force electoral reform.

The Awami League and its allies are also demanding the resignation of the head of the country's interim government, President Iajuddin Ahmed.

They say he is biased towards the outgoing Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

'Stones and bombs'

This is the third time the transport system has been shut down in a month.

Schools and businesses in the capital, Dhaka, were closed and 20,000 police were said to be on the streets. Roads and train lines were blocked.

Public life has been stopped and all transport links have been severed

Khan Sayeed Hasan

Thousands of Awami League activists marched through the city, chanting slogans.

Most of the violence took place in Sylhet district, 190 km (120 miles) north-east of Dhaka.

"Supporters of the parties threw stones and small bombs at each other at each other and exchanged gunfire," police official Saffaet Hossen told the French news agency AFP.

Police fired tear gas to disperse the crowd, he said, and a BNP activist died from a bullet wound.

In Dhaka, protestors vandalised and set fire to cars whose owners defied the strike, ATN Bangla TV reported.

Areas all over the country were affected by the stoppage.

"Public life has been stopped and all transport links have been severed," Khan Sayeed Hasan, a police official in northwest Rajshahi region, told AFP.

The Awami League and its allies say roads and railways will remain blocked until their demands are met.

More talks

These demands also include the removal of some election commissioners - who they say are biased - and changes to the voter role before elections in January.

Yesterday Mr Ahmed held talks with Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina, as well as BNP head Khaleda Zia, but failed to resolve the political deadlock.

He met today with his temporary cabinet and after the meeting council member Mahbubul Alam said more talks were planned.

"We will sit again with the leaders of the Awami League and BNP. We have some messages and then we will discuss the responses of the leaders," he said.

But, says the BBC's Roland Buerk in Dhaka, such is the bitter hatred between the two women few are hopeful that there will be a breakthrough soon.

Story from BBC NEWS:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/south_asia/6203328.stm

Published: 2006/12/03 16:43:02 GMT

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Indian bridge collapses on train

Indian bridge collapses on train

A derelict bridge over a railway line in India has collapsed onto a passenger train, killing 34 people and injuring 17 others.

The bridge, built 150 years ago, was being dismantled when it crashed onto a carriage at Bhagalpur station in the eastern state of Bihar.

Rescue workers pulled out survivors, removing the rubble with cranes, bulldozers, and their hands.

An investigation into the incident has been launched.

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar called it an "avoidable tragedy".

Clouds of dust

"There was a loud roar and the heavens seemed to have crumbled over us," passenger Anil Yadav told the Press Trust of India news agency.

"Thick clouds of dust streamed into the compartment, leaving me gasping for breath."

It took rescue workers several hours to remove the debris and reach the crushed section.

Railway minister Lalu Prasad Yadav said a criminal case had been lodged against the agency involved in dismantling the bridge.

The colonial-era pedestrian bridge was being dismantled after a replacement had been built.

The workers, who had been working overnight, were not on duty at the time the bridge collapsed.

Story from BBC NEWS:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/south_asia/6203042.stm

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Fireworks depot blaze kills two

Fireworks depot blaze kills two

A mushroom cloud was seen rising above the factory

Eyewitness footage

Two fire crew members have been killed in a major blaze at a fireworks depot.

At least 12 others have been injured, some seriously, in the fire at the Festival Fireworks factory near Halland, East Sussex.

Emergency services rushed to the scene at The Broyle from 1350 GMT. A 200-metre exclusion zone is in place.

Eye-witnesses reported seeing a huge mushroom cloud of smoke from several miles away and explosions of fireworks which sent debris through the air.

Sussex Police said a 49-year-old fire officer and a 63-year-old member of the fire support staff - a retired officer - had died.

Nine fire service workers were injured along with two members of the public and a police officer.

Twelve ambulances, 10 fire engines, and an air ambulance attended the premises.

Lewes MP Norman Baker said: "It is a terrible event and I feel deeply sad for the families that have lost firefighters.

"It is always sad when someone dies, but particularly when they are serving other people and part of the emergency services and essentially putting their lives on the line for other people."

It was like a fireworks display with a fire in the middle of it

Eye-witness Richard Mitchell

Seven casualties were taken to the Royal Sussex County Hospital, in Brighton, including five from the emergency services.

Two of the seven are said to be in a serious but stable condition.

The other patients are being treated for burns and what are described as "limb injuries".

Jim Parrott, south-east region secretary for the Fire Brigades Union, said: "We are extremely sorry for the loss and feel for the families of the two firefighters.

"We will take every step to co-operate with the East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service in their investigations."

BBC reporter Rob Smith said the fire was still raging and fireworks were going off hours after the blaze started.

'Colossal smoke'

John Winter, whose brother owns the depot at Marley Farm, in Shortgate, told BBC News 24 there had been "an almighty bang, and the place shook".

He said his brother and family had managed to get out of the building safely, but their house had burnt down.

Meanwhile, Jason Winter, nephew of the depot's owner, said the family's pets had died.

"They have lost everything, even down to their dog, their dog's in the house, the dog has died," he said.

"They have lost the house, they have lost garages, offices, all the buildings, they've lost their vehicles, their lorries, they have even lost their guinea pigs."

Residents in the area have been evacuated to Ringmer Community College and a 200 metre exclusion zone put in place.

It is understood the fireworks store is a concrete complex with steel doors.

Gary Walsh from East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service said the blaze had been contained to one building.

Sussex Police Assistant Chief Constable Jeremy Paine said the fire was likely to remain burning until Monday before it could be brought fully under control.

"The advice from the Fire and Rescue Service is that the fire needs to be allowed to burn for a while because of health and safety concerns around acetylene tanks that may be present."

Jo Hyne, who lives about 500m from the depot, said she heard a loud bang which she had thought at first was thunder.

Pieces of wood [were] falling, hissing into puddles around us, at which point we left pretty sharpish
Eye-witness Claire Freeman

She said there was "a colossal amount of smoke, and rockets going off", before a much larger explosion that shook her house.

Another eye-witness, Richard Mitchell, watched the drama unfold from outside a pub in Lewes Road, Ringmer.

"It was like a fireworks display with a fire in the middle of it," he said.

Claire Freeman, from Ringmer, had been eating in the Wok Inn next door to the depot when the fire broke out.

She said diners were evacuated to the car park at the time of the largest explosion.

She told the BBC news website: "Pieces of wood [were] falling, hissing into puddles around us, at which point we left pretty sharpish."

Are you in the area? Have you seen anything? If you have any information you would like to share with the BBC you can do so using the form below:

*You can also send pictures and video to:
yourpics@bbc.co.uk or to send via MMS please dial:
07725 100 100 .*

Do not endanger yourself or others, take any unnecessary risks or infringe any laws.

Name:

Email address:

Town and Country:

Phone number (optional):

Comments:

Story from BBC NEWS:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/uk_news/england/southern

Published: 2006/12/03 22:23:47 GMT

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Virgin Atlantic move to save fuel

Virgin Atlantic move to save fuel

Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Atlantic is to conduct a trial using 13 of its planes which could cut aviation fuel use and slash carbon dioxide emissions.

By towing its Boeing 747-400 aircraft to take-off areas at London airports during December it said it could save up to two tonnes of fuel per flight.

Aircraft will be towed to Heathrow and Gatwick runways to cut fuel burning.

Virgin said a reduction of 120,000 tonnes in carbon emissions a year could be made if extended across its fleet.

'Starting grids'

It is hoped to reduce the time engines are running before taking off to about 10 minutes.

"Towing aircraft from a stand substantially reduces the amount of time they need to taxi with their engines running

and reduces the time spent queuing before take-off," said Virgin Atlantic spokesman Paul Charles.

Virgin Atlantic is working alongside airport operator BAA and National Air Traffic Services (Nats) during the trial, with a longer run-out expected in the first quarter of 2007.

Aircraft will be towed from their stand at the airport to so-called "starting grids" - which are holding areas, close to a runway, consisting of several parking bays for aircraft.

It means that aircraft can be towed closer to a runway before take-off.

Teams from Virgin Atlantic are also holding talks with the international airports in San Francisco and Los Angeles, as well as JF Kennedy airport in New York, about the timing of similar trials.

Greenhouse gases

Virgin Atlantic is half owned by Sir Richard Branson and the other half by Singapore Airlines. The other aircraft in the fleet are five Airbus A340-300, and 17 Airbus A340-600.

Airlines are in the spotlight over the amount of carbon emissions which the industry is producing following falling fares and the growth of low-cost operators..

Aircraft are one of the fastest-growing sources of greenhouse gases and environmentalists are calling on the government to take action to reduce their output of carbon.

Carbon dioxide emissions from aviation doubled during the 1990s while those from the rest of the economy fell.

Currently, aircraft produce about 5.5% of UK emissions.

In September Sir Richard said that up to 25% of the world's aviation carbon dioxide emissions could be cut if airlines, airports and governments worked together.

He has also pledged Virgin Group profits worth \$3bn (1.6bn) towards renewable energy initiatives.

Story from BBC NEWS:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/business/6203636.stm>

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Thinness 'poses miscarriage risk'

Thinness 'poses miscarriage risk'

Women who are very underweight before they become pregnant are 72% more likely to miscarry in the first three months of pregnancy, a study suggests.

A London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine team looked at 600 women who had miscarried and 6,000 whose pregnancies continued past 12 weeks.

They found that eating fruit and vegetables, and also chocolate, daily helped reduce the risk of miscarriage.

Those classed as underweight had had a body mass index under 18.5.

While we still don't have all the answers, these findings are going to help women who want to reduce their risk of losing a baby in pregnancy

Miscarriage Association spokeswoman

An estimated one in five pregnancies in the UK will end in miscarriage, affecting around 250,000 women in the UK every year.

There are a number of well-established risk factors, such as increased maternal age, a previous history of miscarriage, and infertility.

But the causes of the majority of miscarriages are not fully understood.

Many supposed risk factors, such as alcohol consumption, smoking and caffeine intake, are deemed controversial or are unconfirmed.

The latest work is published in the British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology.

It looked at the diet and lifestyles of adult women. All the miscarriages had taken place since 1995, while the successful pregnancies had occurred since 1980.

Year of conception and a history of miscarriage were taken into account by the researchers.

Risk factors

Underweight women were 72% more likely to miscarry in the first trimester, they found.

But the two-thirds of women who took vitamin supplements during early pregnancy reduced their risk by around 50%.

The effect was most pronounced among those taking folic acid or iron and multivitamins containing these.

Eating fresh fruit and vegetables daily or on most days was also found to halve the odds of miscarriage.

Eating chocolate every day, as half the women did, also appeared to lower the risk.

Single women were at an increased risk of miscarriage, as were women who had had a previous abortion (60% higher risk) and those who had had IVF (40% higher risk).

Those who described their pregnancy as "planned" had 40% reduced odds of miscarriage.

But out of this group, those who took more than a year to conceive were twice as likely to miscarry as those who had conceived within three months.

The study also confirmed the widely-held belief that morning sickness is an indicator that the pregnancy is progressing well.

Women who suffered from nausea and sickness in the first 12 weeks were almost 70% less likely to miscarry, and the more severe the sickness, the better the odds of the pregnancy continuing.

Stay positive

The researchers, led by Noreen Maconochie, a senior lecturer in epidemiology and medical statistics, said: "It is likely that advice to encourage a healthy diet and to try and reduce stress and promote emotional well-being might help women in early pregnancy, or those planning a pregnancy, reduce their risk of miscarriage."

Dr Donald Peebles, of the Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynaecologists said: "I would want to stress, as much as possible, the positive findings. This is not about castigating women."

The Miscarriage Association added: "We speak to thousands of women who are desperate to find out why they miscarried and what they can do to prevent it happening again.

"While we still don't have all the answers, these findings are going to help women who want to reduce their risk of losing a baby in pregnancy."

Story from BBC NEWS:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/health/6198472.stm>

Published: 2006/12/04 00:03:54 GMT

New crops needed to avoid famines

New crops needed to avoid famines

By Richard Black

Environment correspondent, BBC News website

The global network of agricultural research centres warns that famines lie ahead unless new crop strains adapted to a warmer future are developed.

The Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) says yields of existing varieties will fall.

New forecasts say warming will shrink South Asia's wheat area by half.

CGIAR is announcing plans to accelerate efforts aimed at developing new strains of staple crops including maize, wheat, rice and sorghum.

At the network's annual meeting in Washington, scientists will also report on measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from farmland.

We're talking about the return to large-scale famines in developing countries

Louis Verchot

"We're talking about a major challenge here," said Louis Verchot of the World Agroforestry Centre (Icraf) in Kenya, a member institute of CGIAR.

"We're talking about challenges that have to be dealt with at every level, from ideas about social justice to the technology of food production," he told the BBC News website.

"We're talking about large scale human migration and the return to large-scale famines in developing countries, something which we decided 40 or 50 years ago was unacceptable and did something about."

The most significant impact of climate change on agriculture is probably changes in rainfall. Some regions are forecast to receive more rain, others to receive less; above all, it will become more variable.

But increasing temperatures can also affect crops. Photosynthesis slows down as the thermometer rises, which also slows the plants' growth and capacity to reproduce.

Research published two years ago shows rice yields are declining by 10% for every degree Celsius increase in

night-time temperature.

A study from the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (Cimmyt) in Mexico, yet to be published, projects a major decline in South Asia's wheat yield. The vast Indo-Gangetic plain produces about 15% of the world's wheat - but the area suitable for growing is forecast to shrink by about half over the next 50 years, even as the number of mouths to feed increases.

"The livelihoods of billions of people in developing countries, particularly those in the tropics, will be severely challenged as crop yields decline due to shorter growing seasons," said Robert Zeigler, Director General of the International Rice Research Institute (Irri), a CGIAR affiliate.

Conversely, rising temperatures will open up areas of the world which are currently too cold for crop cultivation, in regions such as Siberia and northern North America. And the same Cimmyt study forecasts that wheat will become viable in parts of Alaska.

But the CGIAR figures suggest that extra yield from these regions will not fill the shortfall in the tropics - added to which there are questions of how poorer tropical countries will afford to buy food from richer temperate states.

All this means, CGIAR says, that research into the technological, social and economic dimensions of future farming needs to accelerate.

Climate-proof crops

Boosting photosynthesis of rice is like supercharging a car engine

John Sheehy

Within the CGIAR network, various research initiatives are already under way to develop "climate-proof" varieties.

Scientists at Irri in the Philippines have developed strains which can survive floods of several weeks. Serious flooding is forecast to worsen in some Asian countries, notably Bangladesh.

Conversely, some already arid regions of Africa are forecast to become even drier. With sorghum, the line of research being pursued at the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (Icrisat) is to develop strains which can survive drought.

One of the most exciting initiatives aims to make a fundamental modification to rice so it becomes more efficient at using the Sun's energy.

MODERN PLANT-BREEDING TOOLS

Traditional cross-breeding

Comparative genomics - analysing genes responsible for key traits

Marker-assisted selection - genetic and genomic analysis is used to select varieties to cross

Embryo rescue - plant-breeder's equivalent of special care baby unit, where embryos from difficult crosses are raised in special conditions

Genetic engineering

Rice is a so-called C3 plant. Other crops, including maize, use a better photosynthesis mechanism called C4, and Irri scientists aim to develop rice strains which also use the C4 mechanism.

"Boosting the photosynthetic efficiency of rice by changing it from C3 to C4 photosynthesis will be like supercharging a car's engine by fitting a new fuel injection system," said Irri's John Sheehy.

Despite reservations in other parts of the world, notably western Europe, genetic modification is becoming one of the staple tools of researchers aiming to enhance developing world agriculture.

"I can understand the opposition to GM, and I sympathise to a certain extent with it," said Dr Verchot.

"But in developing countries we're dealing with a crisis situation; and whatever tool is available, we need to apply it to that situation."

Fertile ground

Away from the field of crop improvements, CGIAR scientists will also be detailing approaches to reducing greenhouse gas emissions from farming.

One simple method which is proven, but which by no means all farmers are aware of, is no-till or minimum-till agriculture, where fields are ploughed and disturbed as little as possible. This keeps carbon in the soil rather than sending it into the air as carbon dioxide.

Nitrous oxide (N_2O) is a more potent greenhouse gas than CO_2 , and is released when fertiliser breaks down.

Scientists with Cimmyt and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (Ciat) have developed a hand-held sensor using light and infra-red radiation which can tell farmers whether plants need more fertiliser or not; less fertiliser use means less N_2O produced.

All this and more will be discussed at the Washington meeting, along with a key question - is enough money going in to fund the acceleration which the CGIAR believes is

needed?

Louis Verchot answers with a simple statistic - CGIAR centres, with a mandate to find solutions for the whole of the developing world, have less to spend on research each year than France, for example, spends on research for its own farms.

"We're seeing awareness coming, we're seeing a shifting of resources, but we're clearly well below where we need to be," he said.

"It's much easier to solve a problem before we get to a crisis. With climate change we're definitely talking about a crisis, and it's coming within our lifetimes."

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Wii console makes Japanese debut

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Thousands of Japanese video-game fans queued outside shops as Nintendo's Wii console went on sale.

More than 1,000 people were reported outside some Tokyo stores as eager customers waited for shops to open.

About 400,000 consoles were available, but some customers were said to have left empty-handed as demand outstripped supply.

Nintendo says it had sold more than 600,000 Wii consoles in the US since the launch on 19 November.

The Wii console is the last of the new generation of game-playing gadgets to go on sale in Japan.

Sony launched the PlayStation 3 in Japan on 11 November and Microsoft's Xbox 360 has been on sale in the country for almost 12 months.

'Homage to Nintendo'

Many Japanese gamers were said to have pre-ordered their console to be sure of getting one, but those that had not were forced to queue.

At electronics store Bic Camera in Tokyo, more than 3,000 people stood in line, shop spokeswoman Naoko Ito said.

Staff began turning customers away at 0540 local time (2040 GMT) as stocks ran out, she said.

Student Kentaro Watanabe, who queued all night, had come dressed as a remote control.

"I made this (costume) by myself yesterday," he said. "This is a homage to Nintendo."

Although the Wii does not boast the high-definition graphics of the Xbox 360 or the PlayStation 3, its innovative controller and low price have won it early praise.

Motion sensors allow players to control on-screen characters and perform actions by moving the hand-held controller rather than just by pressing combinations of buttons.

Some early reviewers in the US have complained that the vigorous action demanded by the Wii controller has left

them feeling stiff after a long game session.

In Japan the Wii console is priced at 25,000 yen (113). By comparison the complete PlayStation 3 console package costs 60,000 yen (270).

The Wii console goes on sale in Europe on 8 December. Nintendo said it hoped to have sold about four million consoles by the end of 2006.

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Stasi film in European awards win

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The Lives of Others revolves around a secret police officer

A film about a secret policeman in the former East Germany has taken top prize at the European Film Awards in Warsaw.

The Lives of Others - or Das Leben Der Anderen - beat Spanish production Volver by Pedro Almodovar, although this still came top in five categories.

These included best director for Almodovar, top actress for Penelope Cruz plus the people's choice award.

Oscar-winning film-maker Roman Polanski also returned to his Polish homeland to collect a lifetime achievement award.

'Changed my life'

The Lives of Others is a drama about how East Germany's secret police, the Stasi, destroyed the lives of ordinary

people.

Ulrich Muehe won the best actor trophy for his portrayal of a policeman who becomes engrossed in a playwright and his girlfriend, both of whom he is spying on.

Director Florian Henckel Von Donnersmarck, who also won the best screenplay, told the audience it meant a lot to win the award in Poland, "since my father was born in this country".

Polanski was equally gracious about his accolade, saying that it was a "moving" occasion because "only good things" happened to him in Warsaw.

"When I was working in a theatre as a child in Krakow after the war, we came here once, and I won an award at a festival," he said.

Cruz dedicated her best actress prize - for her role as a mother who covers up the murder of her husband - to Almodovar.

"Thank you so much for giving me the chance to play this part," she said. "You have changed my career and my life."

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