

## UN SEES 'LIMITED' IMPACT OF BANGLADESH'S SUNDARBANS OIL SPILL

**DHAKA:** United Nations experts said yesterday they found "limited immediate impact" on the ecosystem of the world's largest mangrove forest in Bangladesh after a major oil spill early in December. Local forestry officials raised the alarm when hundreds of thousands of liters of furnace oil were spilled into the forest's vast network of rivers and canals after a tanker sank following a collision with another cargo vessel. They warned of a "catastrophic" impact from the spill, fearing harm to rare Irrawaddy and Ganges dolphins and to endangered species including Bengal tigers.

But a UN team sent last week to assess the damage ruled out any major fallout from the spill, saying the damage to the 10,000 square kilometer (3,850 square mile) wildlife sanctuary was not as bad as feared. "There seems to be limited immediate environmental impact to the mangrove and aquatic ecosystems," said Emilia Wahlstrom, the leader of the 25-member UN team, as she revealed a summary of its findings.

"The main shorelines — 40 kilometers (25 miles) up and downstream of the site show varying degree of pollution. (But) we could not observe any visible impact on the mangrove forest floor," she added. She said timely "tides" in the rivers "actually minimized the penetration of oil into the ecosystem. Much of the oil has been washed out along the Poshur and Shela rivers," she added. Wahlstrom praised the local communities' manual clean-up, in which hundreds of villagers scooped up oil using sponges, pots and pans.

The team saw some impact of the spillage on the mangrove seedlings but also observed new growth already, she said. Bangladesh's forest department said two rare otters and several birds died in the spill, while the carcass of an Irrawaddy dolphin was found several days after the accident. But Wahlstrom said the damage was not significant. "When it comes to wildlife, we see limited mortality and we find some visible oiling and again, limited," she said adding local villagers mopped up some 20 percent of an estimated 350,000 litres of oil which were spilled. However she said the accident was "a wake-up call" for the government and recommended a ban on the movement of vessels through the Sundarbans, which is a UNESCO-declared World Heritage Site. — AFP

# 5 THINGS TO KNOW: OBAMA HEALTH LAW AGAIN IN PLAY

**WASHINGTON:** New episodes in the nation's long-running political drama over health care are coming via your news feed in 2015. The fate of President Barack Obama's health care law again hangs in the balance as the Supreme Court weighs another legal challenge to the program, now covering millions of people. And a Republican-led Congress prepares for more votes to repeal the Affordable Care Act, ignoring threatened vetoes by the president. Five things to know about health care in the year ahead:

### The main event

The biggest health care news of 2015 probably won't come from Congress or the White House, but the Supreme Court. The court has agreed to hear another lawsuit that goes to the heart of Obama's strategy for providing health insurance to people who can't get coverage through their jobs. The case will be argued early in March, with a decision expected late in June.

The plaintiffs contend that the law as written only allows the government to subsidize coverage in states that have set up their own health insurance markets, or exchanges. With Washington currently running the markets in 37 states, much of the law's coverage expansion could unravel if the Supreme Court agrees. It would be a moment of truth for the law's opponents and its supporters alike.

### Does anybody have a plan B?

If the Supreme Court rules against Obama, both sides would need a fallback plan, and quickly. Opponents of the health care law would face the prospect of more than 4 million people losing federal subsidies that cover about 75 percent of their premiums. Most of those consumers would wind up uninsured again, and presumably none too happy. The president would have to contemplate going hat-in-hand to the Republican leadership of Congress to ask for fixes to his signature legislation, possibly opening up other contentious issues in the law. Republican governors and state legislators would have a choice, too. They could establish insurance exchanges, or watch many of their constituents lose coverage.

### Repeal-a-thon

With the Senate and the House both under Republican leadership, expect dozens more congressional votes to repeal "Obamacare," whether in whole or in part. It's not clear that full repeal can get through the Senate, where Democrats retain sufficient strength to block legislation by using procedural maneuvers.



**WASHINGTON:** In this Nov 12, 2014 file photo, the HealthCare.gov website, where people can buy health insurance, is displayed on a laptop screen, in Portland, Ore. — AP

But some provisions of the law are also unpopular with significant numbers of Democrats, and bills to roll those back may emerge from Congress. Examples: a requirement that 30 hours per week counts as fulltime employment, a tax on medical device manufacturers, and a Medicare cost control board.

### Thought health care was complicated? Try taxes

Obama's health care law uses the income tax system to deliver carrots and sticks. The subsidies that have made premiums affordable for millions are distributed as tax credits. And the penalties imposed on those who ignore the law's mandate to get health insurance are collected as additional taxes.

In 2015, the law's connection to the tax system will become clearer for most people. All taxpayers will have to report on their 2014 tax return whether or not they had insurance. Those who got subsidies will have to show they

got the right amount. If they received too much, their refunds will get dinged. Those who remained uninsured will either have to pay the taxman, or show that they qualify for an exemption. Tax preparation companies are expecting lots of new business.

### How many covered, anyway?

At last count, about 6.7 million people got private coverage through the insurance exchanges in 2014. Another 9.7 million got on Medicaid, the insurance program for low-income people, expanded under the law by more than half the states. Some of those people would have switched from other coverage.

Still, the number of uninsured Americans has dropped significantly - by more than 10 million people as of mid-2014. While the economic recovery doubtless contributed, Obama's law does seem to be delivering on a core promise. — AP

## EBOLA WRECKS YEARS OF AID WORK IN WORST-HIT COUNTRIES EPIDEMIC HAS SET BACK PROMISING AID INITIATIVES

**DAKAR/KOIDU, SIERRA LEONE:** Ebola is wrecking years of health and education work in Sierra Leone and Liberia following their civil wars, forcing many charity groups to suspend operations or re-direct them to fighting the epidemic. More than a decade of peace and quickening economic growth had raised hopes that the nations could finally reduce their dependency on foreign aid and budgetary support; now Ebola has undermined those achievements, charity workers and officials say. "The impact of Ebola will take us completely back to it being a basket case," said Rocco Falconer, CEO of educational charity Planting Promise in Sierra Leone. "The impact on some activities have been simply catastrophic."

The two countries worst hit by Ebola have struggled to recover from the wars that raged through the 1990s until early in the 21st century, killing and maiming tens of thousands, and devastating already poor infrastructure. In Sierra Leone, aid made up one-fifth of economic output in 2010, according to officials, though this had been shrinking as growth accelerated thanks to a boom in the country's commodities exports. Britain and the European Union are the main donors with funds directed to health, education and social assistance.

But Planting Promise's experience typifies the problems of non-government organizations (NGOs) since Ebola hit West Africa, infecting more than 20,000 people and killing nearly 8,000. It had spent six years in Sierra Leone developing farms and using the profits to fund local schools. The project had just become self-financing for the first time when the outbreak was detected in March.

After that, things fell apart. Planting Promise was forced to withdraw its expatriate staff in June and the following month it closed its five primary schools where nearly 1,000 pupils had studied. It has also shut down its food processing factory. Though sales have dipped, it continues to pay about 120 staff, eating into its reserves. This has forced the group to return "cap in hand" to donors to ask for more money, Falconer said.

The highly contagious disease has brought normal activity to a near halt in the two countries. Governments have issued strict quarantine orders on communities, restricted people's movement and closed schools. They have also banned gatherings, communal work and markets. Paul Saquee, the chairman of the council of chiefs in Sierra Leone's eastern Kono region, said disruption to the long-term agricultural development projects of one NGO

would have knock-on effects. "It means the work they were doing before suffers and next year we will have less food supply," he told Reuters.

### Rethinking strategy

In Liberia, the epidemic dashed President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's hopes of shifting the focus of aid to investment. "Now Ebola is here and all of those efforts have been brought to a standstill. We could be starting from scratch again," said Jenna Scott, director of the Liberia Philanthropy Secretariat, a government agency. "That is very heartbreaking." The World Bank and other donors have pledged hundreds of millions of dollars in aid. But Scott is concerned that money will go mostly to United Nations agencies and large NGOs, rather than local organizations.

"We need to get more support to local NGOs because they are the ones who stay in Liberia," said Scott, whose organization channels around \$20 million in aid a year into Liberia. The WaterAid organization, which works to improve access to safe water, hygiene and sanitation services in developing countries, had to suspend plans to drill 100 boreholes in Sierra Leone and provide services to four

villages in Liberia. Apollon Nwafor, WaterAid's West Africa advocacy manager, said the countries hit by Ebola suffered from broken health systems and food insecurity as well as a lack of safe water, sanitation and hygiene.

WaterAid was now lobbying donors to step up funding in these areas. "Ebola has become a hydra-headed crisis," Nwafor said. OneVillage Partners, a rural development agency, started seven years ago with post-war reconstruction in villages in eastern Sierra Leone. It has since moved into other activities such as micro-loans for small business.

Since the Ebola outbreak, it has used its knowledge and relationship with villagers to educate them about Ebola, even though this was not its area of expertise. The group suspended its programs in July and laid off some staff. Now its activities include delivering soap and working with communities to stop the spread of the disease.

While the virus has set the clock back on years of promising aid initiatives, the immediate work of showing local people how to avoid becoming infected is vitally important. "Everywhere we looked, there was just wholesale denial and a lot of misinformation going around about Ebola," said Chad McCordic, Community Project Manager at OneVillage Partners. — Reuters



**Hong Kong:** A truck is used to take away bags of dead chickens after they were culled in Hong Kong after the deadly H7N9 virus was discovered in poultry imported from China. — AFP photos



**Hong Kong:** A worker prepares bins during a chicken cull in Hong Kong yesterday, after the deadly H7N9 virus was discovered in poultry imported from China. — AFP photos

## HONG KONG CULLS 19,000 BIRDS AMID AVIAN FLU ALERT

**HONG KONG:** Hong Kong culled thousands of chickens yesterday after the potentially deadly H7N9 bird flu virus was discovered in poultry imported from China, days after a woman was admitted to hospital with the disease. Authorities found the virus in samples taken from 120 chickens imported from the nearby Chinese city of Huizhou and slaughtered nearly 19,000 birds, including 11,800 chickens.

"The rapid testing showed... that this batch of chickens carries the H7N9 virus," the city's health minister Ko Wing-man said yesterday. Televised images showed authorities culling yesterday morning, with health officials in white hazmat suits dumping chickens into green plastic bins. The bins were then pumped with carbon dioxide to kill the birds, a spokeswoman for the city's agriculture department told AFP.

The carcasses were sent to landfills for disposal after the operation was completed at around 5:30 pm. Poultry imports from the mainland have been banned for three weeks. A 68-year-old woman was admitted to hospital with the virus on December 25 after returning to Hong Kong from the neighbor-

ing southern Chinese city of Shenzhen, although it has not been confirmed how she contracted the disease.

She remains in critical condition. In response to the new case-the city's first since early 2014 — Hong Kong announced it was raising its response level in hospitals to "serious" from "alert", with extra precautions implemented from Sunday. Ten people had previously been diagnosed with H7N9 in Hong Kong, including three who died. All had contracted the virus in mainland China, according to Hong Kong's Centre for Health Protection. The H7N9 outbreak emerged on the mainland in February 2013. Hong Kong last conducted a mass cull in January, slaughtering 20,000 chickens after the virus was found in poultry imported from the neighboring southern Chinese province of Guangdong. A four-month ban on live poultry imports from mainland China was imposed at the time to guard against the disease. South Korea has culled millions of chickens this year in an attempt to stem the spread of bird flu. Japan this week ordered 37,000 chickens culled after the third bird flu outbreak there in less than a month. — AFP

## AUSTRALIA BANS COMMERCIAL SUNBEDS OVER CANCER FEARS

**SYDNEY:** Most Australian states and territories are set to ban commercial sunbeds from today, in a crackdown on artificial tanning in a country that has one of the highest rates of skin cancer in the world. The ban-which comes into force in the states of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania, Queensland and in the Australian Capital Territory today-will make Australia the second nation after Brazil to impose such a restriction, campaigners said.

Western Australia has said it would also implement a ban, though it has yet to announce a start date. There are no commercial solariums in the only other part of Australia-the hot and humid Northern Territory. Cancer Council Australia welcomed the ban, which it has long pushed for, adding that it would help to reduce rates of skin cancer, which affects two out of three Australians by age 70.

"Australia has one of the highest rates of skin cancer in the world," advocacy director Paul Grogan said in a statement to AFP. "Solariums expose users to extremely high levels of UV (ultraviolet) radiation, greatly increasing their risk of melanoma and other skin cancers." Australia is sometimes referred to as the sunburnt country, where beaches are thronged with bathers basking under blue skies and the rates of melanoma, a potentially fatal form of skin cancer, are the highest in the world.

### The sunburnt country

Public health campaigners have long pushed to promote awareness of the dangers of exposure to the sun, urging people to wear sunscreen, hats and sunglasses. They have also warned that tanning on a sunbed is not safe. "Queensland already has the highest rate of skin cancer in the world and there is no question there's a direct link between regular sunbed use and the incidence of malignant melanoma," the state's interim Health Minister Mark McArdle told Australian Associated Press. The incidence of skin cancers in Australia is two to three times the rates in Canada, the

United States and Britain, the Cancer Council said.

More than 2000 Australians died from skin cancer in 2011, the majority from melanoma, which is caused by harmful ultraviolet light from the sun, the council added. Australia's proximity to Antarctica, where there is a hole in the ozone layer which normally filters out UV rays, also increases the risk. Previous research suggested that the use of sunbeds by people aged 18 to 39 increases their risk of developing melanoma, the most common form of cancer among young Australians, by an average of 41 percent.

The ban was supported by a majority of Australians, the council said, in a recent survey of 6,300 people, while fewer adults and youths said they had used a solarium in the past year. About one percent of adults and 0.3 percent of youths used a sunbed, the data showed, down from 2.2 percent and 1.2 percent a decade ago. Several European countries and American states have also banned the use of sunbeds by minors, according to research published in the journal Nature. — AFP

