SATURDAY, OCTOBER 22, 2016

NEW DELHI: City authorities have closed a sprawling park in the heart of New Delhi after eight birds died of suspected bird flu, days after the city zoo was closed to the public after nine birds died there. New Delhi’s Development Minister Gopal Rai said yesterday that eight bird deaths were reported to city authorities on Thursday. These included two more bird deaths in the Delhi Zoo and two dead birds found in the Hauz Khas Deer Park.

City officials said three dead crows were also found in a residential neighborhood near the zoo. Autopsies were planned on all the dead birds. The zoo was closed to the public Tuesday after autopsies confirmed at least three birds had died from H5N1 avian influenza, Rai said autopsies results of the birds that died Thursday were not known yet but the government was taking the precaution of closing the park.

H5N1 poses no apparent threat to humans, but highly pathogenic strains can be deadly to domestic poultry and rarely, wild birds. Delhi’s Hauz Khas Deer Park is home to hundreds of deer, peacocks and other birds. Described as one of the few “green lungs” of the highly polluted capital, the park is popular with joggers and walkers.

At this time of the year, bird sanctuaries, wildlife parks and water bodies around northern India are crowded with migratory birds flying south for the winter. Rai said vaccinations had been canceled for all employees of the city’s animal husbandry department in case more dead birds are found. Animal health officials visited the capital’s main poultry markets and took samples from different batches of chickens brought for sale. “We are closely monitoring bird sanctuaries, poultry farms and chicken wholesale markets,” Rai said. Meanwhile, 15 storks have died over the past three days in a zoo in the central Indian city of Gwalior. Zoo official Pradeep Srivastava said zoo authorities were waiting for the autopsy reports on the painted storks to determine if avian influenza was present before deciding whether or not to shut the zoo. — AP

BANGLADESH: Dead militant leader behind cafe attack

DHAKA: A militant who died in a raid in Bangladesh this month was a senior member of a militant group blamed for a deadly attack on a cafe that killed 22 people, mostly foreign arrivals, security officials said yesterday. Abdur Rahman leapt to his death from a five-storey building as he tried to escape the raid on Oct. 8 on the outskirts of the capital, Dhaka, by the police-led Rapid Action Battalion, an elite force spearheading the counter-terrorism effort.

Battalion chief Benazir Ahmed said several documents, emails and letters retrieved during the raid confirmed Rahman was head of a new faction of Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), known as New JMB, and went by the name Abu Ibrahim al-Hanif. "Rahman’s real name was Sarwar Rahman," he said. "Bashar, who left college before finishing school, was a world away from the young man's hometown. But, he recalls, "when I arrived, I was puzzled to see small children working in the streets, begging or selling flowers and I wondered how come they have to do this in a posh capital city".

Outdoor school offers new hope for Islamabad’s poor

ISLAMABAD: In the corner of a pristine park in an upmarket district of Islamabad, an open-air classroom run by an aging rescue-worker offers a beacon of hope to the city’s poorest. For the past 30 years, “Master” Muhammad Ayub, whose day job includes defusing bombs and putting out fires, has cycled from his office to the makeshift school to teach children from surrounding slums for free.

There are no walls, no roof and no chairs—and students dutifully rise to move en masse as the sun makes its way across the sky—it is their only source of lighting so they must follow it. In a country where education is underfunded and 24 million children remain out of school, grey-haired Ayub, 58, is hailed as a hero for providing his charges with hope for a better future.

“I was rescued from the darkness of illiteracy by an angel in the shape of Master Ayub when I was nine and collecting firewood,” Farhat Abbas, now 20, said. "Abbas now assists Ayub with classes while he studies for a bachelors degree at a local university. Such testimonies are common among the thousands of children who attended the school, many of whom have taken up jobs in the government and businesses that would have been otherwise been out of reach.

Belated recognition

Founded in 1960, Islamabad was envisaged as a city for the country’s political and bureaucratic elite but has been criticized for lacking public housing for the poor, who work in menial jobs and as domestic servants for the wealthy. As a consequence, numerous slum areas cropped up throughout the city, but because their domiciles are not legally recognized, many find it hard to get their children enrolled in registered schools.

Hina Shabbaz, 17, said she moved with her parents to Islamabad two years ago, “but because of the paperwork needed I couldn’t get admitted into a school right away”. She started attending Ayub’s classes, while he used his contacts among local officials built over the years to get her enrolled at a formal school. She continues to come and help out by teaching younger students, while receiving maths tuition from her old teacher. “I like science and I want to become an engineer,” she said. — AFP

ISLAMABAD: In these photographs taken on August 30, 2016, pupils take part in a lesson at a makeshift school in a park. — AFP photos

Humble start

The story of Master Ayub’s school began in 1986 when he moved to the recently-built capital from the sleepy agricultural town of Mandi Bahauddin. With its wide boulevards arranged in a grid, stunning views of the Margalla hills and impressive monuments, Islamabad was a world away from the young man’s hometown. But, he recalls, “when I arrived, I was puzzled to see small children working in the streets, begging or cleaning cars or selling flowers and I wondered how come they have to do this in a posh capital city”.

One day he came across a boy washing cars in at the market place and asked him why he wasn’t in school. “I asked him if wanted to study and he said ‘yes’. Right there I gave him a notebook, a book, a pencil and an eraser and started teaching him,” said Ayub, a high school graduate himself who left college before finishing his degree. “The next day the boy brought another with him, and within a week there were 50 children in my class.”

He began by teaching them in a corner of the marketplace, but was shooed away by the shopkeepers. From there he moved to outside a government school but authorities asked him to pack up after influential people living nearby complained they were causing a nuisance. He finally shifted to his current location in the park, which is adjacent to some of the most expensive houses in the city valued at over $1 million—but also near a slum where minority Christian families reside.