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March 16 - 22, 2010

Health & Travel security Insights from around the five continents

North America

March 16

Canada – Cross-border recall continues: The Canadian Food Inspection Agency is continuing to warn the public not to consume certain food products because they may be contaminated with salmonella. These foods contain dry powder and paste of hydrolyzed vegetable protein produced by Basic Food Flavors Inc. Traces of this contaminant have been found in foods produced by Lays Potato Chips (Smokey Bacon flavor), Amria products, No Name soups, to name a few. Consult the Agency's website for full recall details.

Canada – Norovirus outbreak: A general surgery unit at the Queen Elizabeth II Health Sciences Centre in Halifax (Nova Scotia) is closed to visitors because of an outbreak of the norovirus.

United States – Products recall: The Kroger Co. said it is recalling Kroger California Seasoning Blend Garlic Powder and Kroger Special Seasoning Blend Lemon Pepper sold in its retail stores because the Company has been made aware by a supplier that an ingredient in the product may have been contaminated with salmonella. Stores under the following names in the 31 states where Kroger operates are included in this recall: Kroger, Ralphs, Fred Meyer, Food 4 Less, Fry's, King Soopers, Smith's, Dillons, QFC, City Market, Foods Co., Jay C, Scott's, Owen's, Baker's, Gerbes, Hilander and Pay Less. No illnesses have been reported in connection with the Kroger products.

March 17

Canada – Class-action: Loblaws and Siena Foods are facing a class-action lawsuit over the latest meat recall due to Listeria contamination. The suit, filed Monday in Ottawa, states Siena was aware of the "potential toxicity" of several of its products but only chose to inform distributors, putting customers at risk.

Canada – Health Canada's approval: AstraZeneca announced that Health Canada has approved CRESTOR (rosuvastatin calcium) to reduce the risk of nonfatal myocardial infarction (heart attack), nonfatal stroke, and coronary artery revascularization in adult patients without documented history of cardiovascular or cerebrovascular events, but with at least two conventional risk factors for cardiovascular disease.

March 18

Canada – Salmonella food recalls: The Canadian Food Inspection Agency has announced two more salmonella-related food recalls. Consumers are urged to avoid La Cocina's Cheese Flavoured Tortilla Chips, or Grandma Emily's BBQ Lounge mix. Both products were made in Canada and distributed nationally. They contain dry powder and paste hydrolyzed vegetable protein (HVP), which has been recalled due to salmonella contamination. As well, the CFIA has announced an expansion of the March 15 recall of Frontier-brand spices.

March 19

Canada – Bauer recalls hockey sticks: A random product test by Health Canada has led to a massive recall of hockey sticks because of high levels of lead paint. Bauer Hockey, one of the largest makers of sports equipment in North America, recalled 100,000 sticks worldwide, including 67,000 in Canada.

March 19 – Canada – continued:

Health Canada discovered the yellow paint in one model of stick contained a lead level of 23,000 milligrams per kilogram, about four times above the allowable limit. Subsequent tests over a three-week period by Bauer on its remaining 200 models of children's sticks revealed that 12 others, made in a Chinese facility, were above the allowed lead limit.

March 22

Canada – Gastroenteritis outbreak: Health officials in the Quebec City region (Province of Quebec) are struggling to contain an outbreak of gastroenteritis. All of the hospitals in the region have been affected. The Saint-François d'Assise hospital has closed its doors to visitors to try to stop the spread of the illness, commonly known as the "stomach flu." Visits to the seventh floor of Hôtel-Dieu Hospital in Lévis are also being restricted, after more than a dozen cases were reported there. At Collège Jésus-Marie de Sillery officials said 15 percent of students were out sick. Officials closed the college's preschool and primary school on Friday after speaking with health care officials. The high school remained open, officials said.

Canada – Radiation exposure raises concern: At least one worker contaminated with radioactivity during an accidental release at the Bruce Power nuclear power station last November may have been exposed to amounts that exceed federally accepted regulations, according to a report submitted to Canada's nuclear industry watchdog. In November, nearly 200 workers -- mostly contractors -- were potentially contaminated with alpha radiation during restart of the Bruce A Unit 1 reactor at the plant in Tiverton, Ontario, near Lake Huron.

United States – FDA warning: The U.S. Food and Drug Administration warned patients and healthcare providers about the potential for increased risk of muscle injury from the cholesterol-lowering medication Zocor (simvastatin) 80 mg. Although muscle injury (called myopathy) is a known side effect with all statins, today's warning highlights the greater risk of developing muscle injury, including rhabdomyolysis, for patients when they are prescribed and use higher doses of this drug. Rhabdomyolysis can lead to kidney failure, and sometimes death.

South America

March 16

Argentina – Dengue fever: The advance of the dengue in the bordering provinces with Santiago of the Tideland worries the sanitary local authorities who they exhorted the population to continue with the measurements of prevention and notifying the appearance of some suspicious symptom.

March 17

Mexico – Cartel violence spreads to tourist areas: Two beheaded bodies were discovered on Scenic Avenue in downtown Acapulco and another two were found west of the city. Four other bullet-riddled bodies were discovered in different locations around Acapulco. In Tulcingo, a gunman shot dead five police officers on patrol. Eleven more people, assumed to be drug traffickers, died during an army raid and subsequent shootout in Ajuchitlan del Progreso, some 160 km (100 miles) north of Acapulco. Such violence is not often seen in resort areas, but such incidents have been increasing.

March 18

Honduras – Hemorrhagic dengue fever: Health authorities have reported an increased number of hemorrhagic dengue fever transmitted by mosquitoes.

Paraguay – Dengue fever cases: Health authorities have reported more than 1,191 cases of the mosquito-borne dengue fever and three deaths.

March 18

El Salvador – Bombings escalate: A police officer was wounded Thursday when a bomb exploded outside a government building in the Salvadoran capital, officials said. “One person, a member of the PPI (VIP protection unit), was wounded,” National Civilian Police, or PNC, emergency system chief Gersan Perez told Radio Nacional. The officer sustained slight wounds to a foot and was taken to a hospital emergency room, Perez said, adding that the blast did not cause much material damage. The bomb, based on “the characteristics” of the blast, appeared to have been home-made, but went off after the surrounding area was cordoned off. The bomb was left outside the Rio Lempa Hydroelectric Power Plant Executive Commission’s office, which is close to the central bank, several ministries and the Legislative Assembly.

March 22

Venezuela – Homicide numbers released: The number of homicides in Venezuela rose last year to 16,047, compared with 14,589 in 2008, according to a report by the Venezuelan Observatory of Violence, or OV, which names impunity and corruption as the chief causes. Such incidents are often caused by petty crimes, such as robberies but also include organized crime. Many suspect that the figure does not reflect the actual number of killing in the country.

Europe

March 16

United Kingdom – British Airways cabin crew to strike: Although Unite has stated that it would not hold any strikes during the Easter holidays (4 April), further industrial action may be planned after 14 April if the protesting cabin crew’s demands are not met. Meanwhile, BA has announced that about 6,000 staff, including 1,000 cabin crew members have volunteered to continue working. The airline is also prepared to make alternative arrangements, including hiring crewed planes, to continue operations from major airports.

March 17

France – Air France cabin crew to strike: Air France cabin crew plan to stage a strike on March 28-31 in protest at proposed changes to working conditions. Six trade unions have announced their support for the work stoppage. If the industrial action goes ahead as planned, it will coincide with a strike by the UK’s British Airways cabin crew. The strike is expected to disrupt Air France services, which are headquartered at the capital’s Paris-Charles de Gaulle Airport. However, the airline is accustomed to managing strikes and has ample time to make arrangements to at least partially replace the employees that observe the walkout. Residual delays can also be expected even after the unions resume work, as the airline attempts to restore normal services and clear the backlog of flights. There will also be an increased demand for alternative airlines and high-speed train services during the strike.

Ireland – Taxi drivers’ strike: Taxi drivers affiliated with the Irish Taxi Council (ITC) conducted three-hour strikes and go-slow protests at several locations across the country, including the capital Dublin, in protest at regulations they claim are detrimental to the industry. The union has called for a national strike on 22 March over the issue. If the nationwide action goes ahead as threatened, it can be expected to lead to an increased demand for alternative transport options, which are likely to be scarce. Associated demonstrations and go-slow protests, which could include the use of taxis to block major roads, are possible and could lead to significant travel disruption.

March 17

United Kingdom – Meningitis case: A female student at the University of Chichester was admitted to hospital last week with bacterial meningitis. The 18-year-old was admitted to St Richard's Hospital last Wednesday (March 8) and is described as being in a stable condition and responding well to treatment.

March 18

Greece – Electricity workers to strike: Employees of the Public Power Corporation (PPC) on 24-25 March are planning to stage a 48-hour nationwide work stoppage to protest against the 7 percent wage and 10 percent pension cuts, which constitute a part of the government's austerity measures. The company's labor union GENOP has stated that the industrial action will be undertaken if talks that are scheduled for 19 March with the ministers of finance and labor fail. In addition, petrol (gasoline) kiosk operators have threatened to conduct strikes during the Greek Orthodox Easter holiday on 2-5 April if the latest tax increase on fuel is not reviewed. Precedents indicate that the scheduled work stoppage by the PPC is likely to cause rolling power outages. A work stoppage by petrol station owners is likely to cause difficulties in obtaining fuel and long queues at petrol kiosks may disrupt travel. Demonstrations associated with the work stoppages are likely to be well attended and could become boisterous; government buildings in the capital Athens, particularly the parliament building, and the northern city of Thessaloniki (Thessaloniki prefecture) are among the most likely rally venues.

March 19

Ireland – Contaminated chicken: The food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) has called on retailers to source chicken from producers that use leak-proof packaging. The call came after a European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) study found the majority of chicken carcasses in Irish plants are contaminated with campylobacter, a bacteria that causes food poisoning. The FSAI said a study it carried out has also found the organism on the outside of more than 13 percent of chicken packets and on almost 11 percent of display cabinets. The effects can be severe and life threatening but the bacteria is destroyed by thorough cooking.

March 22

Iceland – Volcanic explosion: Authorities evacuated hundreds of people after a volcano erupted beside a glacier in southern Iceland, Iceland's civil protection agency said Sunday, but there were no immediate reports of damage or injuries. The eruption occurred around 11:30 p.m. Saturday (7:30 p.m. EDT) beside the Eyjafjallajökull glacier, the fifth largest in Iceland. Authorities initially said the eruption was below the glacier, triggering fears that it could lead to flooding from glacier melt, but scientists conducting an aerial survey in daylight located the eruption and said it did not occur below ice. Authorities evacuated some 450 people in the area 160 kilometers (100 miles) southeast of the capital, Reykjavik, as a precaution, said Vidir Reynisson, the department manager for the Icelandic Civil Protection Department. A state of emergency has been declared in communities near the 100-square-mile (259-square-kilometer) glacier, and three Red Cross centers were set up for evacuees in the village of Hella.

United Kingdom – Mumps outbreak: Hampshire residents are being urged to get vaccinated following an outbreak of Mumps in the south. Health chiefs at NHS Hampshire are calling on people of all ages to get an MMR jab to help prevent the spread of Measles, Mumps and Rubella (German measles). The warning comes after 45 students were struck down with the virus at both of Oxford's universities in the last three weeks.

Middle East & Asia / Pacific

March 16

China – Safety hazard: China has impounded shipments of imported designer clothing from famous labels such as Hermes and Versace after finding they contained potentially hazardous chemicals, authorities said. Among 85 batches of imported clothes tested, 48 batches containing items from 30 international brands from 11 countries were found to be sub-standard, the industry and commerce department in eastern Zhejiang province said. The hazards included excess levels of chemicals such as formaldehyde, which the agency said could cause respiratory and skin problems and in some cases lead to cancer. The brands affected also included Hugo Boss, Dolce & Gabbana, Tommy Hilfiger and Zara.

China – Dead pigs threaten drinking water: Dozens of workers in Hangzhou are struggling desperately to retrieve the carcasses of dead hogs from a local river. It is suspected that farmers living upstream disposed of the dead livestock by throwing the pig remains into the water. The river, known as the lifeline of Hangzhou, the capital city of Zhejiang Province, provides drinking water for more than 3 million residents living downstream.

India – Flight disruptions: Private airport operator Delhi International Airport (DIAL) announced that it would close the main runway at Indira Gandhi International Airport (DEL) in the capital Delhi from 8 April until 20 September. Runway 28 will be shut for around five months to allow for maintenance and resurfacing work.

March 17

Fiji – Cyclone Tomas hits: Fiji has suffered overwhelming damage in a powerful weekend cyclone, the prime minister said March 17. There have been confirmed reports of houses blown away, trees uprooted, and roads blocked trickled in from regions cut off since the storm. One death has been reported, but the full extent of the damage has yet to be determined because communications to the hardest hit areas were cut off for days.

Kyrgyz Republic – Protest rallies: More than 3,000 people rallied outside the headquarters of the opposition Social Democratic Party in the capital Bishkek in defiance of a district court ruling banning the event. The gathering was organised to decry a recent increase in electricity and heating prices by the government, as well as the privatisation of state-owned companies responsible for electricity distribution and telecommunications. A demonstration over the same issue took place in the eastern town of Naryn (Naryn oblast province), where around 5,000 people gathered. A further demonstration by other opposition groups is due to take place on 23 March and will be held in the vicinity of the presidential administration building in the capital. The gathering will coincide with a presidential council meeting at which opposition parties will present the government with a petition detailing their demands.

Yemen – Increased security: The government announced that it had increased security at oil facilities and coastal installations, including ports and oil shipping lanes along the coast, in an effort to prevent any retaliatory attacks by militants following three air raids on March 14-15 by the security forces on suspected al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) militant hideouts in the Lawdar and Moudiya districts of the southern province of Abyan, located 300 miles (480km) south-east of the capital Sanaa.

March 18

India – Increased security: Security measures in Mumbai, the capital of Maharashtra state have been tightened following an alert from the Intelligence Bureau warning of a potential terrorist attack in the coming days. The security alert specifically warned of explosives-laden trucks targeting high-profile buildings, including the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE), the Gateway of India and Andheri railway station. According to the alert, other potential targets include luxury hotels, prominent car parks (parking lots), government installations and insecure areas, such as marketplaces, shopping centres (malls) and multiplex cinemas. The police have established a number of checkpoints on busy roads, increased their presence in crowded areas and begun searching car parks in sensitive locations. The new security measures follow the 14 March announcement of the arrest of two suspected militants believed to have been planning attacks in Mumbai. The suspected targets included storage tanks of the government-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corporation, as well as the Thakkar shopping center in the Borivli suburb and the Mangaldas Market, located near the famous Crawford Market.

March 19

Australia – E. coli in drinking water: Nerang residents on the Gold Coast (Brisbane) are being warned to boil their tap water before drinking it after an E coli outbreak was detected during routine testing. It is believed high levels of E coli in the nearby water supply have put more than 2500 homes at risk. Residents are being advised to boil all tap water for the next three days while Gold Coast Water completes investigations and water testing.

Sri Lanka – Protest rallies: Opposition activists staged a demonstration in the capital Colombo to denounce the recent arrest of a reporter with close ties to Sarath Fonseka. Demonstrations over Fonseka's detention are expected to continue in the coming days and weeks, and are likely to intensify in the run-up to and during his first court martial, which will be in April. Fonseka is the former army commander and a defeated presidential candidate. Potential protest venues in Colombo include the Supreme Court in the city's Hulftsdorp suburb, the access roads to which are likely to be blocked by the authorities in anticipation of gatherings, and the navy headquarters on Flagstaff Street, where Fonseka is currently being detained. While future rallies are likely to be well attended, the security forces are likely to react swiftly and forcefully to disperse any crowds that become rowdy or confrontational.

March 20

Israel – Air campaign launched: At least 11 people have been injured by Israeli air strikes targeting Gaza's airport. The Israeli military confirmed the missile strikes near Rafah, in southern Gaza, which it said targeted militants. It was the second night of Israeli raids since a rocket fired from the Gaza Strip killed a worker on an Israeli farm on Thursday.

March 22

China – Sandstorm blankets Beijing: Beijingers woke up Saturday to find the Chinese capital covered in a film of yellow dust, as sandstorms caused by a severe drought in the north of the country and Mongolia swept into the city. The storm, which earlier lashed parts of northeastern China, brought strong winds and cut visibility in the capital. Authorities issued a rare level five pollution warning, signaling hazardous conditions, and urged residents to stay indoors. Dust storms frequently hit the arid north of China in the spring, when temperatures start to rise, stirring up clouds of dust that can travel across China, to South Korea and Japan and even as far as the United States. Scientists blame a combination of deforestation and prolonged drought in northern China for the phenomenon. Saturday's storm was expected to last until Tuesday, the meteorological agency said in a statement on its website.

March 22

China – Lead poisoning: Chenzhou Municipal Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine in central China's Hunan Province took in six more children sickened by lead poisoning. That has brought the number of patients tested to have excessive levels of lead in their blood to 19, of whom, 18 are children below the age of 14. Except several individuals complaining of stomachaches, most of the sick children have not developed obvious symptoms. The patients, with the oldest aged 64 years and youngest just 11 months, are mainly natives of two villages in Guiyang County. A company held responsible for discharging contamination has already been shut down. The Chenzhou government has ordered thorough inspections.

Pakistan – Transporters on indefinite strike: Public transport operators commenced an indefinite strike in the capital Islamabad and the neighboring city of Rawalpindi (Punjab province) because the government cancelled a fare increase in response to violent protests in the two cities.

Pakistan – Rolling blackouts: Many areas of Pakistan have experienced extreme unscheduled rolling blackouts (load shedding) since 18 March 2010 as a result of electricity demand that exceeds supply. The situation has been particularly severe in the southwestern province of Balochistan, which is experiencing blackouts of up to 20 hours a day as a result of both country-wide power supply issues and the recent sabotage of a power transmission facility. The power shortages have also affected towns and cities in Punjab, Sindh and the North-West Frontier Province, including Lahore, Sialkot, Faisalabad, Hyderabad, Khaipur, Nosheero Feroz, Ghotki, Obaro, Nawabshah, Jaccobabad, Mirpur and Larkana, which have reported power outages lasting eight hours. The blackouts have caused shortages of potable water in some areas, including in Lahore. In Karachi, an angry mob attacked the offices of the Karachi Electricity Supply Company in the Gulshan Hadeed area.

United Arab Emirates – Unfit food destroyed: Only 28 out of 135 food shops in the Musaffah industrial area – where thousands of laborers eat every day – met hygiene standards during a month-long inspection drive.

Africa

March 16

Guinea Bissau – TB progresses in the country: A responsible of the program against tuberculosis considered alarming the situation in the country, stating that near three thousand persons of Equatorial Guinea they were diagnosed with the disease.

Malawi – Measles cases: More than one hundred of cases of measles were recorded in the two greater cities of Malawi, Blantyre, and Lilongwe.

Madagascar – Cyclone disrupts road travel: At least 35 people were killed when Tropical Cyclone Hubert on made landfall in the town of Ikongo in Vatovavy-Fitovinany (Fianarantsoa province), located around 200 miles (330km) south of the capital Antananarivo. At least 85,000 others have been affected by the heavy rainfall and subsequent flooding in parts of the south-east. Landslides in the coastal Mananjary district of Fianarantsoa have damaged several houses and led to a number of deaths. Meanwhile, the government has begun delivering emergency supplies of food and water to the affected areas.

Somalia – Major offensive: The security situation in the capital Mogadishu was improving, with businesses reopening and public transport resuming, and that there had been no fresh reports of significant fighting between government forces and the Islamist al-Shabab group. Al-Shabab is the armed youth wing of the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), which is fighting the government for control of the capital city. At least 100 people have been killed and more than 150 injured during fighting between government forces and the militants, which erupted on 10 March in the capital, especially in the Islamist strongholds of Shangaani, Cabdulcasiis, Yaaqshid and Kaaraan.

March 16 – Somalia – continued:

Despite the temporary improvement in the situation, the security environment in the capital is likely to remain tense as both sides have vowed to continue fighting. The transitional federal government (TFG) controls only a few blocks in central Mogadishu and the security forces are unable to guarantee security in the capital. The TFG has signaled an intention to launch an offensive against Islamist groups to regain control over Mogadishu and if such a full-fledged offensive is begun, this would mean a prolonged spell of fighting. Armed Islamist groups may retaliate by targeting hotels and foreign interests in the capital.

March 17

Mali – Truckers' strike: Truckers' unions, including National Carrier Mali, which have been on strike for several days, significantly disrupted travel at the country's borders and on the outskirts of cities. Hundreds of trucks remain stranded at the northern and southern entrances to the capital Bamako; a similar situation reportedly prevails in the western city of Kayes (Kayes region) and the southern town of Zegoua (Sikasso region).

Nigeria – Increased tension: At least 11 people had been killed in an attack on a village that took place around 01.30 (local time) in the Riyom area, about 20 miles (32km) south of the central city of Jos (Plateau state). Unconfirmed reports suggest that Muslim locals dressed in army fatigues attacked a Christian village. Many villagers have reportedly fled the area fearing communal violence akin to that which took place earlier in the month.

Uganda – Increased security: Security was increased in the capital Kampala due to riots by thousands of supporters of Ronald Mutebi, the king of the southern region of Buganda. The unrest followed the burning of the tombs of Bugandan kings on the previous day in the capital's Kasubi hill area. Unconfirmed reports indicate that at least one person was killed when the police fired into the protesting crowd; the police have alleged that the demonstrators attacked police officers and soldiers.

March 18

Madagascar – Renewed protests: The security forces fired tear gas to disperse a small group of anti-government protesters that attempted to block roads in the capital Antananarivo; no injuries were reported. Earlier on the same day, the African Union (AU) imposed targeted sanctions against President Andry Rajoelina and at least 108 other members of his ruling High Authority of Transition (HAT). The sanctions, which include visa restrictions and the freezing of bank accounts, were imposed following the expiry on 16 March of a deadline issued one month earlier to demand progress in power-sharing negotiations.

South Africa – Rift Valley fever cases: The National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD) has confirmed 32 human laboratory cases of Rift Valley Fever (RVF) and two deaths. RVF is a viral disease that can cause severe disease in a low proportion of infected humans. Humans become infected from contact with infected tissues of livestock and less frequently from mosquito bites. The Health Department said most of the cases reported direct contact with RVF-infected livestock and or linked to farms with confirmed animal cases of RVF.

March 19

Gambia – Increased security: The authorities had tightened security at Banjul International Airport (BJL) and in the western city of Brikama (Western division) amid the trial of a group of senior military and police officials and businessmen charged with treason and an attempted coup d'état. Soldiers are reportedly stationed at the main gate of the airport carrying out stringent identity and luggage checks. Meanwhile, the authorities have reportedly deployed troops in armored vehicles to Brikama.

Niger – Meningitis cases: The Nigerien government reported 525 cases of meningitis which has caused 49 deaths this year. The landlocked central West African country reported 2,926 cases last year, including 147 deaths.

H5N1 - Avian Influenza Updates

Outbreak in birds:

Bangladesh: A District Livestock Department culled 117,626 chickens at Kazi Farms Limited in Sadar Upazila.

Nepal: Avian flu has been found in a number of villages in Nawalparasi district in western Nepal.

Romania: In the eastern community of Letea, Tulcea county, (located in the Danube Delta) an avian flu outbreak has been confirmed.

Vietnam: An outbreak of avian flu (A/H5N1) has been reported in the northern province of Bac Ninh province. The latest outbreak brought the total number of affected provinces to six, including Bac Ninh, Ca Mau, Dien Bien, Ha Giang, Khanh Hoa and Tuyen Quang.

Human cases:

Vietnam: Ho Chi Minh City's Department of Health confirmed a child contracted the avian flu virus strain A/H5N1. The three-year-old child from the southern province of Binh Duong fell ill on March 10 with symptoms of high fever and coughing.

Special – A/H1N1 - Swine Flu – Updates

Pandemic A/H1N1 2009 – update: More than 213 countries and overseas territories or communities have reported laboratory confirmed cases of pandemic influenza H1N1 2009, including at least 16,713 deaths. The most active areas of pandemic influenza transmission are currently in Southeast Asia; however, lower levels of pandemic virus circulation persist in other parts of Asia as well as in Eastern and South-eastern Europe. In West Africa, limited data suggests that pandemic influenza virus transmission may be increasing in the region. Of note, seasonal influenza B viruses have been increasingly detected in Asia and appear to be spreading westward.

India – Virus shows genetic mutation: The swine flu virus isolated from the throat swab samples of three H1N1-infected patients at the National Institute of Virology (NIV) has shown a small genetic mutation in the polymerase 2 (PB2) gene. However, the institute stated there was no cause for worry as the virus was still not resistant to oseltamivir, the active ingredient in Tamiflu. A small genetic mutation was earlier detected in the haemagglutinin (HA) region of the virus as well. The PB2 mutation has previously been associated with increased efficiency of replication and possible virulence changes in other influenza A viruses. "However, we did not find such increased efficiency of replication or increased virulence in the isolates of the swine flu virus in which we have noticed mutation of the PB2 gene. The mutation is not very significant in that sense," said the NIV's director. Consulting microbiologist and immunologist Siddharth Dalvi said, "The PB gene makes a protein that is responsible for viral replication. Since this enzymic protein is not directly involved in the immune responses, point mutations in this gene may not be of immediate clinical impact. However, it may, in theory, change the way the virus replicates." Most RNA viruses (including influenza virus) replicate their genome by using the viral enzyme to make copies from the parent RNA. "This enzyme has a weak proof-reading activity that is, checking if the right nucleotides have been incorporated in the genome. Hence, over time, point mutations are bound to happen in the genome of these viruses. In fact, we would be surprised if they don't. The majority of these mutations may not have any significance, either for the virus, or for the host," said Dalvi.



From Around the World

Bottle-fed infants have highest levels of Bisphenol A: Infants fed from plastic bottles are found to have the highest estimated levels of Bisphenol A (BPA), with exposures falling with rising age, according to a study. The findings are important because BPA is thought to impact human development and is classified as an endocrine disrupting chemical, potentially putting developing infants at risk, as well as fetuses if pregnant mothers are exposed. The Swiss study examined 17 different sources of potential exposure across nine age/gender groups in the German/Swiss/Austrian population and found the most potentially exposed group is bottle-fed infants from 0-6 months of age. The group had estimated mean dose rates of nearly 0.8 micrograms per kilogram body weight per day, well below the TDI. For adults, the highest dose comes from canned foods. Researchers also concluded that additional research needed on production processes for canned soup, canned meat. The study has been published in the latest issue of the journal Risk Analysis.

Pregnant women with gum disease more likely to give birth prematurely: Pregnant women with gum disease are more likely to give birth prematurely than mothers-to-be with good oral health, according to a new U.S. study. The research by scientists at the University of Pennsylvania suggests that successful treatment for gum disease can cut the risk of pregnant women giving birth early. The study of 160 women showed that those whose gum disease was not treated successfully were three times more likely to give birth before 35 weeks. It has been previously established that severe gum infections cause an increase in the production of prostaglandin and tumor necrosis factor, chemicals which induce labor, to be produced. The study enrolled women who were between six and 20 weeks' pregnant. The results showed a 'strong and significant association' between successful treatment and full-term births. Those whose treatment did not work were 'significantly more likely' to give birth before 35 weeks. However, UK experts warned that this was a small study and further research was needed. The study was presented to the annual conference of the American Association for Dental Research.

Cartel violence affecting greater numbers of Americans: More Americans in Mexico are falling victim to a wave of drug violence sweeping the country, a change driven home by the recent killing of a U.S. Consulate employee and her husband who were gunned down after leaving a children's birthday party. The number of U.S. citizens killed in Mexico has more than doubled to 79 in 2009 from 35 in 2007, according to the U.S. State Department's annual count. No figures were available for the first two months of 2010. While only some of the killings are specifically listed as "executions" or "drug-related," the increase in homicides appears to be related to drug battles. In Ciudad Juarez, the northern border city hardest hit by drug violence and where the consulate employee was killed, homicides of Americans rose to 23 in 2009 from two in 2007. The annual murder rate for the estimated 500,000 American citizens in Mexico at any one time has risen — but still remains lower than in some U.S. cities: about 15 per 100,000. Baltimore's 2009 homicide rate was 37 per 100,000 residents. American deaths make up only a tiny fraction of Mexico's 17,900 drug-related killings since December 2006, when President Felipe Calderon launched a military-led drug war. Cross-border kidnappings have also increased and American law enforcement officials have begun to fear that the lure of the Cartels' massive finances may lead to further corruption within the US. Such realities have forced stricter border regulations at check points in Arizona, Texas, California and New Mexico, leading to increased traffic congestion.

Our Environment

A risk of poisoning the deepest wells: Fertilizing the oceans with iron has been proposed as a way of fighting climate change. The idea is that iron will promote blooms of phytoplankton that will remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere through photosynthesis. When the phytoplankton dies and sinks, the carbon will effectively be sequestered in the deep ocean. Enthusiasm for the idea has waned, in part because of concerns about large-scale manipulation of ocean ecosystems. Now, a study in The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences points out a specific risk: by promoting the growth of certain organisms, iron enrichment may result in the harmful production of a neurotoxin. Charles G. Trick of the University of Western Ontario and colleagues studied several species of diatoms of the genus *Pseudonitzschia*. These organisms produce domoic acid, which they use to help grow but that is toxic to many organisms, including marine mammals and humans. Large blooms of *Pseudonitzschia* in coastal waters have led to poisonings of sea lions that eat tainted shellfish. Previous studies had suggested that in mid-ocean, the diatoms did not produce the toxin. However, *Pseudonitzschia* collected in mid-ocean and subjected to shipboard experiments produced plenty of domoic acid. "If we were to seed with iron, the amount of toxin would go up." The researchers found evidence that increased domoic acid production enabled *Pseudonitzschia* to outcompete other phytoplankton. "So it's more toxic than it was before," Dr. Trick said, "and there's more of it."

Your Healthy Column – Vitamin D

Vitamin D can prevent heart disease, kidney failure, other ills, Utah research finds: Taking vitamin D supplements could reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, kidney failure, depression and death, according to research by Intermountain Medical Center. In a presentation made today at the American College of Cardiology's annual conference in Atlanta, researchers showed that patients who increased their vitamin D levels to 43 nanograms per milliliter of blood or higher reduced their risks of the chronic diseases. That is higher than the amount that is considered "normal," which is 30 nanograms. Many North Americans don't even reach that benchmark. Two-thirds of residents are vitamin-D deficient, Intermountain researchers previously estimated. That situation is likely because the vitamin is found in few foods and mainly comes from sun exposure. While sunscreen blocks absorption Vitamin supplements are available and inexpensive. One of the authors of the study, Brent Muhlestein, director of cardiovascular research at Intermountain, said in a news release that taking 1,000 to 5,000 international units a day might be appropriate. First, patients should have their vitamin D levels checked through a blood test. The tests are typically covered by insurance if deemed medically necessary. Such research may contribute to stemming the growing number of North Americans who develop diabetes and heart conditions. Such improvements are desperately needed as heart disease continues to be the greatest natural killer in North America.

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