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Health & Travel security Insights from around the five continents

North America

February 9

United States – FDA warning: The U.S. Food and Drug Administration says the risk of developing a rare viral disease has been linked with Tysabri infusions. The FDA said it has notified healthcare professionals the risk of developing progressive multifocal leukoencephalopathy increases with the number of Tysabri (Natalizumab) infusions received. Tysabri is used to fight multiple sclerosis and Crohn's disease. Progressive multifocal leukoencephalopathy is a usually fatal disease that damages the material that covers and protects nerves in the white matter of the brain. The new safety information is based on reports of 31 confirmed cases of PML received by the FDA as of January 21.

February 11

Canada – Health Canada warning: Health Canada is advises of the importance of proper handling and preparation of powdered infant formula at home to prevent food borne illnesses in children. Unlike liquid infant formula, powdered infant formula is not sterile. *E. Sakazakii* can be present in powdered infant formula. While there have been no recent cases of illness due to *Enterobacter sakazakii* in Canada, there have been approximately 120 recorded worldwide.

February 12

United States – Listeria scare: The Ohio Department of Agriculture says a routine test last week found the listeria bacteria in chicken and dumplings prepared for the Western Reserve Area Agency on Aging, which provides lunch for senior centers in five counties. No illnesses have been reported. The food was supplied by Tom Paige Catering Co. in Cleveland, which says it's cooperating with health officials and having additional tests done to make sure any and all tainted food is destroyed. Listeria can cause fever, nausea, abdominal pain and diarrhea.

South America

February 9

Brazil – Dengue fever cases: Last month there were 1,383 cases of dengue compared to 323 in January 2009 in the State of São Paulo. The city of San José of Black Rio, with 502 cases, ranks first in number of infected, followed by Araçatuba (267) and Ribeirão Preto (246).

Peru – Machu Picchu to remain closed: The pre-Columbian Inca site Machu Picchu, a popular tourist attraction and UNESCO World Heritage site situated in the south-eastern department of Cusco, will remain closed for at least three more weeks after being damaged during recent severe weather. Two temporary bridges will be constructed to mitigate damage to the Transandino rail route, which is the primary means of transport to the site, thereby allowing tourists to gain access to Machu Picchu once it reopens. The areas around Machu Picchu remain under a state of emergency imposed by the government, and are reportedly still experiencing intermittent power outages and a shortage of essential commodities.

February 10

Paraguay – Heat wave: A heat wave has already left more than 30 elderly people dead, **Venezuela – Students protest:** Students from a number of universities, including the Universidad de Los Andes and the Universidad Nacional Experimental del Táchira (UNET), in the city of San Cristóbal (Táchira department) are planning to stage a rally to denounce the killing of a student during a demonstration in December 2009. Participants are expected to gather at the Universidad de Los Andes, before marching past the headquarters of the state electricity company Corpoelec, to Plaza de la Justicia. National Guard troops will be deployed along the route of the march to support the police and to ensure that the event remains peaceful.

February 11

Mexico – Flooding: Heavy rain and subsequent flooding continued to cause disruption in several parts of the states of Michoacán and Mexico. In addition, the highway connecting Mexico and Puebla states, which was shut on February 5 after severe flooding in the municipality of Chalco (Mexico), will remain closed for at least another week. A total of 41 people were killed and 12 others are missing due to landslides and other accidents resulting from the incessant rain; more than 3,500 people have been displaced in Michoacán, where the flooding has caused 30 deaths. A state of natural disaster was declared for the municipalities of Angangueo, Ocampo, Tiquicheo de Nicolas Romero, Tuxpan and Tuzantla (all Michoacán). Meanwhile, meteorologists have forecast further rainfall in Mexico state and Michoacán over the next 48 hours.

Ecuador – Anti-government protest: Demonstrators gathered in the coastal city of Guayaquil in western Ecuador to protest against the government of President Rafael Correa. Current Guayaquil Mayor Jaime Nebot, a political conservative, called on Ecuadorians to stage the protests against what he described as Correa's leftist agenda. Approximately 200,000 people reportedly took part in the protest on October Avenue in the central part of the city. Police officers were on hand to monitor the demonstration, but there were no reports of arrests. Nebot has become one of the most vocal government critics since Correa took office in 2007.

February 12

El Salvador – Dengue fever epidemic: Salvadoran Minister of Health María Isabel Rodríguez has stated that a new dengue outbreak is imminent in the country with 1,126 new cases of the disease reported since the beginning of the year. While no fatalities have been registered so far, there have been 23 cases of the haemorrhagic type of the disease.

Dominican Republic – Demonstration advisory: The U.S. Embassy has received reports of individuals protesting on the streets of "La Belle," a small town on the road just east of Samaná. They are also burning tires and throwing rocks at passing vehicles. At last report, the Dominican National Police were in the process of dispersing the crowd. The demonstration is reportedly to protest the lack of electricity in the region. Demonstrations do not generally occur in areas frequented by tourists and are generally not targeted at foreigners. However, even demonstrations intended to be peaceful can turn confrontational and escalate into violence.

February 15

Colombia – FARC guerrillas attack: Five people were killed and four wounded after FARC guerrillas ambushed and attempted to kidnap a candidate for a governor's post in the southern province of Guaviare. The attack underscored the vulnerability of politicians in rural Colombia despite the progress made by President Alvaro Uribe's U.S.-backed security drive. The attack came as Colombia prepares for legislative elections in March and a presidential vote in May with Uribe still uncertain about whether he will run for a consecutive third term.

Europe

February 10

Greece – Protests against austerity plan: Taxi drivers' unions are planning to hold a nationwide 24-hour strike. Communist trade union All Workers' Militant Front (PAME) and the country's customs and tax officers are also planning to strike. The industrial action follows a 24-hour walkout by public sector workers nationwide today in protest at an austerity plan put forward by the government. The strike affected hospitals, schools and local administration; air traffic controllers also took part in the strike, causing significant disruption to flights in and out of the country. On the same day, thousands of striking workers rallied in the capital Athens, including outside the parliament, and the northern city of Thessaloniki. Although the protests were largely peaceful, the police reportedly used tear gas to disperse some demonstrators in Athens. The General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE), which represents private sector employees, on intends to stage a 24-hour strike February 24 in support of public sector workers.

February 11

Denmark – Lettuce behind gastro outbreak: At least 11 linked outbreaks of gastroenteritis with a total of 260 cases have occurred in the eastern part of the country in mid January 2010. Investigations showed that the outbreaks were caused by a norovirus of several genotypes and by enterotoxigenic E. coli. Lettuce, of the Lollo Bionda type grown in France, was found to be the vehicle.

Russia – Ingushetia shootout kills 20: At least 20 insurgents have been killed in an operation by Russian security forces in the restive republic of Ingushetia. Fighting erupted after troops surrounded a group of militants in a mountain forest near Chechnya's border. Fighting by Muslim militants against Russian rule has stepped up in the past two years in Ingushetia and Dagestan. Experts say many young men in the region have joined a hard core of Muslim militants to fight for independence as a result of poverty and widespread abuses by the security forces, including kidnappings and torture.

Spain – Hepatitis C outbreak: The government has confirmed an outbreak of hepatitis C virus in a dialysis clinic in Tarragona. At least a dozen patients at the Santa Tecla Renal Institute have been infected.

Switzerland – Fake drugs seized: More than 17,000 boxes of counterfeit pills were seized in a store in Geneva. Worth more than 2 million euro, it was the country's largest seizure.

February 15

Germany – Neo-Nazis rally in Dresden: Thousands of protesters formed a human chain in Dresden, determined to stop neo-Nazis rallying on the 65th anniversary of the deadly Allied bombing in World War II. Heavy security including riot police was in place to prevent clashes between the two groups, and five police helicopters flew overhead to monitor the crowds. Neo-Nazis have caused outrage in the past by comparing the 1945 bombing of Dresden to the Holocaust. Organizers of a far-right protest characterized it as a "mourning march." Some 5,000 far-right supporters poured into the city, according to police, who limited them to a rally near a railway station rather than a march for security reasons after opponents staged sit-down blockades in streets nearby.

Middle East & Asia / Pacific

February 9

Azerbaijan – Major power outages: The power supply has failed in many areas of the capital Baku since midday (local time), though service has since partially resumed. The outages have affected the city's subway services, forcing the evacuation of passengers from trains. The blackouts occurred after the Mingachevir hydropower station and the Azerbaijan power station shut down due to overload. Recurring power cuts in parts of the capital have been reported since February 5. Power outages are common in Baku. While major businesses and business-class hotels are likely to have back-up generators, travel disruption should be expected.

China – Gas leak: More than 3,000 residents in Guangzhou's Nansha district were evacuated after a gas leak at a chemical plant resulted in 24 people being taken to hospital. A distillation pot overheated at the Sartomer Company's chemical plant on Xiaohu Island in Huangge town, releasing about five kilograms of vaporized acrylic resin into the air. Residents reported headaches, sore throats and nausea.

China – Tainted milk powder: Chinese authorities say they are trying to track down nearly 100 tons of milk powder tainted with the industrial chemical melamine, as the government struggles to prevent a recurrence of the large-scale milk contamination that killed six children and sickened about 300,000 others in 2008. The hunt for the adulterated milk powder, distributed by a dairy company in the northern region of Ningxia, follows reports of other batches of melamine-tainted products across the country in recent months. The government last week started emergency inspections to get contaminated goods off store shelves. The government's 10-day emergency inspection program is due to end February 11, before the country's Lunar New Year celebrations, which kick off this weekend.

Papua New Guinea – Cholera outbreak: Health authorities have reported over 2,000 cases of cholera in the province of Morobe, in the North of the country.

New Zealand – Toxic algae: The Otago Regional Council (ORC) is warning the public to be wary of swimming or allowing pets access to the Silver Stream in Mosgiel as toxic algae (Phormidium) has been found. Two dogs have already died after ingesting the algae. The full extent of the area affected is not yet known, but the algae has been identified in the Silver Stream running through Peter Johnstone Park. Phormidium is regularly found in Otago during the summer and is typically black and shiny, often on rocks or attached to weeds. However, the dried Phormidium on stream banks also poses a risk.

Thailand – More demonstrations: Supporters of the opposition United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD, commonly known as the "Red Shirts") are due to demonstrate outside the Royal Thai Police Headquarters on Rama 1 Road in the capital Bangkok. The rally will be followed by a protest February 12 outside the National Anti-Corruption Commission on Phisanuloke Road. UDD supporters will also gather on February 15 outside the Election Commission on Rama 1 Road, and a ten-day demonstration by the opposition group is scheduled to take place between February 16 and 26 at Suvarnabhumi Airport (BKK), which serves the capital. The authorities have reviewed and strengthened crowd-control measures ahead of the protests and from 15 February will deploy around 20,000 members of the security forces across the country. Approximately 6,000 security personnel will operate in Bangkok, where 200 checkpoints will be positioned around the city, while the remaining forces will be deployed across 38 provinces. In addition, the government has reportedly directed that security be tightened around key figures such as cabinet ministers and Supreme Court judges.

February 11

Indonesia – Chikungunya outbreak: Chikungunya has infected thousands of people in South Kalimantan. The number of people infected in Banjar regency alone has reached 4,500 people in the past 40 days. Among the affected sub districts were Kelumpang Hilir, Kelumpang Selatan, Kelumpang Barat, Sungai Durian, up to Pamukan Utara located near the border of East Kalimantan Province.

Yemen – Ceasefire announced: President Ali Abdullah Saleh announced a ceasefire with Shiite Houthi rebels beginning at midnight local time. The rebels accepted the government's six demands, which include withdrawing from Saudi territory and dismantling roadblocks. Rebels were instructed to cease attacks, though militants reportedly ambushed a vehicle carrying a top-ranking general in the Iqab district of Saada province. As part of the terms of the truce, the rebels will get to appoint Houthi representatives to sit on a committee that will monitor the ceasefire. While the ceasefire appears likely to end the most recent round of fighting, several previous ceasefire agreements have collapsed since the insurgency in northern Yemen began in 2004. The Houthis' longstanding grievances with the national government remain. In addition, Yemen has become an arena in the proxy battle between Saudi Arabia, which supports the Yemeni government, and Iran, which has provided support to the rebels. The situation has the potential to escalate once again with little notice.

February 12

Australia – Measles outbreak: Queensland could be on the cusp of a deadly measles outbreak on a scale not seen in 50 years. Health authorities issued an alert for parts of the state's north yesterday after it was revealed a French tourist infected with the disease had spent nearly a week in contact with locals and other travellers in the Whitsundays. Hundreds of tourists may have been exposed to the highly infectious measles virus, with authorities on alert for a possible outbreak in Airlie Beach. The tourist is understood to have gone on a boat cruise, swum in the public lagoon and dined at various restaurants in the popular north Queensland tourist village.

China – Weather warning during the Lunar New Year: Huge rain and snow storms are predicted to hit the north of the country this weekend on the eve of Lunar New Year, spelling potential travel chaos as millions head home by rail and road. The Lunar New Year, or Spring Festival, is China's most important holiday, reuniting families around the vast nation and triggering an exodus believed to be the world's largest annual human migration. Authorities are hoping to avoid a repeat of the chaos seen when a massive cold wave and freezing rain hit southern and central China in 2008.

India – New state of Telangana: The federal government released the "terms of reference," or guidelines, for the proposed creation of a separate Telangana state out of what is now Andhra Pradesh. The Joint Action Committee (JAC) for Telangana has rejected the terms of reference, as they stipulate that the committee should also consider arguments in favor of a united Andhra Pradesh. The JAC announced that pro-Telangana members of Parliament and members of the Andhra Pradesh Legislative Assembly will resign immediately. The student wing of the JAC, which is based at Osmania University in Hyderabad, has announced a one-day bandh (strike) in the Telangana region February 13. Travelers should anticipate protests and transportation disruptions.

India – Movie star sparks protests: Theatres in Mumbai turned into fortresses for the release of a Bollywood film whose star is locked in a duel with a radical Hindu group. Most cinemas began showing 'My Name is Khan' by the afternoon after initial reluctance for fear of attacks by the hard-line Shiv Sena party. The controversy was sparked by the film's hero Shah Rukh Khan's recent criticism that no Pakistani cricketers had been picked for the Indian Premier League. Thousands of police in riot gear were deployed to protect cinemas. Police detained 2,000 Shiv Sena members as a precaution, and beat back protesters outside some theatres. Protests also spread to some other Indian cities.

February 15

India – Bomb kills 9: A bomb left in an unattended bag at the Germany Bakery, a venue popular with tourists, killed nine people and wounded 60 in the western city of Pune. It was the first major terrorist attack in India since the 2008 Mumbai massacre when Pakistan-based militants stormed the country's financial hub. Security forces were immediately put on high alert at airports, train stations and markets across India. The bombing came just a day after nuclear rivals India and Pakistan set a date for their first formal dialogue since the Mumbai attacks prompted New Delhi to suspend wide-ranging talks aimed at normalizing relations after six decades of hostility.

Africa

February 9

Côte d'Ivoire – Renewed violence: A government building was set alight during a demonstration by more than 1,000 people in the town of Vavoua (Haut-Sassandra region), located about 90 miles (146km) north-west of Yamoussoukro. The protesters also attempted to attack the town hall, before they were dispersed by the police, who reportedly fired live ammunition into the air. The event was held in protest at alleged attempts by President Laurent Gbagbo to delay the presidential elections, which are scheduled for late March, by claiming electoral list irregularities. Further demonstrations are likely over this and other contentious issues related to the March elections, including any further postponements of the vote, which has been delayed six times since 2005. Such events may turn violent with little or no warning.

Guinea – Continued tension: Clashes recurred overnight between members of the local Christian Guerze and the Muslim Konian (also known as Koniankes or Malinkés) communities in the city of Nzérékoré (Forest region), located approximately 530 miles (850km) south-east of the capital Conakry, despite the imposition of a curfew from 19.30 to 05.00 (local time). At least one person was killed and nine others were injured in the violence, while some businesses owned by the Guerzes were also targeted and set alight. The security forces fired shots in the air to disperse violent mobs in the city and erected several roadblocks in Nzérékoré as part of their efforts to restore order. Security forces can be expected to employ robust measures, including the use of batons, tear gas and potentially live ammunition, to quell any further disturbances.

Sudan – Unknown disease: There have been reports about a strange illness that has swept the village of Umm Marahil, in Al-Khuwi county in North Kordofan. Health officials are still trying to determine the disease. Over 100 people have been affected so far.

Zimbabwe – Public sector protest: Members of several public unions, including health workers, school teachers and university lecturers, staged a protest rally in the city of Bulawayo, approximately 273 miles (439km) south-west of the capital Harare, to demand higher wages. No reported incidents of violence took place during the rally. Further demonstrations are planned for the cities of the Gweru and Mutare. Services at several government offices and hospitals have been affected.

February 10

South Africa – Killer measles outbreak: The Eastern Cape Health Department is battling to contain a measles outbreak that has claimed three lives since January. At Zithulele Hospital, 243 people have been admitted with measles symptoms since November.

February 11

Côte d'Ivoire – Voters registration suspended: The government suspended the voter registration process for the presidential elections for an indefinite period, citing rising tensions in the country. The decision came as the authorities increased security in the central city of Bouaké (Vallée du Bandama region), where a local court on February 13 is scheduled to announce its verdict in a case regarding alleged irregularities in voter lists. Security was also stepped up in the towns of Man (Dix-Huit Montagnes region), Katiola (Vallée du Bandama region) and Divo (Sud-Bandama region), where unruly protests over the issue have taken place in recent days. The court's decision is expected to attract a significant number of political activists to Bouaké and rallies at the courthouse are probable regardless of the verdict; however, a ruling in the government's favor would be more likely to prompt an angry response from opposition demonstrators. Such events may turn violent with little or no warning. Increased security measures should be anticipated across the country, particularly in opposition strongholds.

Egypt – Textile workers' protest: Hundreds of protesting textile workers clashed with police near the Parliament building and Tahrir Square in the centre of the capital Cairo. Further protests over unpaid wage are possible in the coming days, particularly in the vicinity of the central Tahrir Square; a heavy security presence and associated travel disruption should be expected in the vicinity of demonstrations. The security forces are not averse to using heavy-handed tactics to suppress such protests, posing an incidental risk to bystanders.

Mozambique – Cholera becoming endemic: Health officials in the northern province of Cabo Delgado have expressed fears that cholera might now be endemic in that part of the country.

Togo – Elections postponed: The government announced that presidential elections have been postponed from February 28 until March 3 in an effort to address several problems concerning electoral lists. Presidential elections have historically been a tense period of time in Togo. The threat of violence, including the possibility for widespread unrest, will remain elevated throughout the election time-period.

Avian Influenza

Outbreaks in birds:

Burma: in the south on a poultry farm with 2500 chickens. **Cambodia:** on a large poultry farm in central part of the country. **Nepal:** in the south on a small poultry farm.

Human infection:

Egypt: The Ministry of Health has reported three new cases of H5N1 avian influenza infection. The first case is a 40-year-old female from Banha district in Daqahliya Governorate. She was hospitalized on February 2. The second case is a 29-year-old female from Elsadat district, Menofya Governorate. A 37-year-old male from Helwan district, Helwan Governorate was hospitalized February 6 and is in critical condition. There have now been 7 cases during the 1st few weeks of 2010, but no fatalities so far.

Indonesia: A man from Bekasi, West Java province, died from the H5N1 infection. The victim was possibly infected from direct contact with poultry. A three-year-old from Jakarta also contracted avian influenza but has since recovered.



From Around the World

Study reveals poor quality of anti-malaria drug: Almost half of the remedies against malaria sold in three countries of Africa have poor quality, according to a report released today. Between 16 percent and 40 percent of artemisinin remedies for malaria sold in Senegal, Madagascar, and Uganda contained impurities or did not present sufficient quantities of active ingredient. In many cases the low quantity of the active ingredient meant the parasitic disease became resistant to artemisinin, the only financially viable drug that can fight malaria.

Breast cancer death risk may be increased by antidepressant: A popular antidepressant could interfere with a breast cancer drug and lead to a greater risk of death, researchers have said. Women taking the antidepressant paroxetine (brand name Seroxat) alongside tamoxifen for breast cancer were more likely to die from the disease than women on other antidepressants, a study found. The researchers, writing in the British Medical Journal (BMJ), said their results had "major implications for clinical practice". Tamoxifen is taken by thousands of British women each year and works by blocking the female sex hormone oestrogen, which can fuel tumor growth. It is generally given for up to five years after initial treatment or surgery. The latest research was led by a team from the Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre and the University of Toronto in Canada. Up to one in four women with breast cancer experiences some degree of depression and antidepressants are also prescribed for hot flashes. A total of 2,430 women over the age of 66 took part in the research, which looked at those having treatments between 1993 and 2005. All the women were taking tamoxifen and one of five anti-depressants known as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), including paroxetine, which was the most commonly prescribed drug.

Chemicals in food "can lead to obesity": Certain toxins found in common food can make you fat, says an expert. According to Stephen Perrine, author of "New American Diet," there are all sorts of chemicals in foods, pesticides, growth hormones, antibiotics, and plastic pollutants, to name a few. He says they are not only bad for the environment, but can also harm human bodies. The chemicals that disrupt the function of our hormonal system are called obesogens. Obesogens can cause heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and high cholesterol. These chemicals can be found in many of the most popular foods we eat and enter our body through a variety of sources: natural compounds found in soy products, artificial hormones fed to the animals we consume, plastic pollutants in some food packaging, chemicals added to processed foods, and pesticides sprayed on our produce.



Your Healthy Column – Herbal medicines

Herbal medicines can be potentially lethal: Herbal medicines if taken in large quantities, injected, or combined with prescription drugs, can prove potentially lethal, experts have warned. Professor Roger Byard, University of Adelaide, highlighted the highly toxic nature of many herbal substances that often mistakenly considered safe. The forensic pathologist said: "There's a false perception that herbal remedies are safer than manufactured medicines, when in fact many contain potentially lethal concentrations of arsenic, mercury and lead. These substances may cause serious illnesses, exacerbate pre-existing health problems or result in death, particularly if taken in excess or injected rather than ingested." He also warned of the risks arising from the interaction between herbal medicines and prescription drugs that could lead to serious health problems, including liver, renal and cardiac failure, strokes, movement disorders, muscle weakness and seizures. Professor Byard said: "Herbal medicines are frequently mixed with standard drugs, presumably to make them more effective. This can also have devastating results." The study was published in the US-based *Journal of Forensic Sciences*.

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