UN refugee agency seeking US$125 million for Afghan operations for 2004

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is seeking US$125.5 million for its Afghan operations during 2004. The funds would allow UNHCR to continue the repatriation, reintegration and assistance programs for Afghan refugees and returnees. The agency plans to close a number of offices in Afghanistan and reduce both its national and international staff by about 40 percent. The UNHCR staff in neighboring Iran and Pakistan is also being scaled back. According to an agency update, the “emergency” phase of mass repatriations has passed, necessitating a shift in UNHCR’s focus towards long-term issues, including the need for alternative approaches to Afghan displacement as well as aligning the agency’s programs with Afghanistan’s national priorities.

UK-based NGO suspends operations in southern Afghanistan citing increasing insecurity

The UK-based development and relief organization Tearfund is saying that it is suspending its operations in the southern Afghan province of Kandahar amid increasing insecurity in the region. In a press release issued today, Nigel Timmins, Tearfund’s Operations Manager for Afghanistan said, “It is with deep regret that we are having to suspend our work in Kandahar.” He added that, “The area is now too insecure for us to continue our work and the risk to our staff is unacceptably high. We hope to return to Kandahar as soon as the security situation allows.” Tearfund said it would continue to maintain a minimal office presence in Kandahar city through local staff until security conditions improve. Tearfund’s operations in other parts of Afghanistan and on the Pakistan border will not be affected. Violence in Kandahar, a known stronghold of the former Taliban regime, has been increasing in recent months. Last month (January 6) at least 13 people were killed and some 60 wounded when two bombs exploded within minutes of each other in Kandahar city. Security across Afghanistan, especially in the eastern and southern regions, continues to be a challenge for the Afghan government of President Hamid Karzai which has been struggling to extend its influence beyond Kabul. The UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has also warned that persistent insecurity, ongoing US-led military operations and lack of access to large areas in eastern and southern regions has slowed down the voter registration process which could potentially derail the nationwide parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for June this year.
Asia

WHO: No Asian country safe from bird flu; Health experts at FAO meeting in Rome come up with list of recommendations

Vietnam, the worst-hit Asian country from the bird flu virus which is sweeping the region, reported two more deaths today, while Thailand, the second-worst hit nation in Asia, reported another death. The fatalities bring the overall death toll for the region to 16. The two countries are the only two nations to report deaths from the disease. Meanwhile, around 40 health experts meeting at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) headquarters in Rome drafted a list of recommendations after the first day of talks yesterday. Today, experts were reportedly consulting with agriculture and health officials in Asia via video conference. “The recommendations will be looking for example at greater cooperation and collaboration between neighboring countries,” an FAO spokeswoman said. Peter Cordingley, World Health Organization (WHO) spokesman for the Manila-based Western Pacific office says that no part of Asia should feel safe from bird flu. “The speed with which the virus is spreading suggests that nowhere in the region is safe. The virus is spreading faster than we can get to it,” Cordingley said. He added that the bird flu virus in Asia appears to be older and more established than health experts thought: “We think the virus has been around a lot longer than initially thought. It’s quite well embedded in some areas.” He says that government’s slaughtering of poultry, the ban of import of poultry from affected areas, and improved hygiene should help control the spread of the virus.

Officials meet in Bali for anti-terror conference

Senior officials from some 33 countries are meeting in Bali, Indonesia for an anti-terrorism conference. Delegates met primarily to discuss battling the Southeast Asian terror group Jemaah Islamiyah, who many accuse of being linked to al Qaeda. Countries from outside the region, including France, Britain, Germany and Russia, as well as US Attorney General John Ashcroft are in attendance. Attendees are expecting to increase cooperation in intelligence gathering as well as offer aid for counter-terrorism for developing countries. “Terrorist groups are cooperating across the region, transiting borders using one country to train in, another to raise funds in and another for safe haven. They are working together to maximize the impact of their activities,” warned Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer. He warned that terrorist attacks in the region were inevitable. He also announced the opening of a transnational crime center that will open in Jakarta that will be run jointly by Indonesia and Australia. The center will offer anti-terrorism training. The two countries also signed an agreement on the exchange of intelligence to fight money laundering. Yesterday, the International Crisis Group also warned that JI posed a long-term security threat to Indonesia and also warned of smaller, breakaway groups.
UN Development Program (UNDP) says better disaster preparedness more instrumental in reducing casualties, damage

According to a global research study released by the UN Development Program (UNDP) today, efficient disaster management programs would help to reduce damage and casualties in natural disasters. The study, called “Reducing Disaster Risk: A Challenge for Development” said that nearly 70,000 people are killed each year. However, although wealthy countries represent 15 percent of the world population exposed to natural disasters, it has fewer than 2 percent of deaths. “In a sense, this report is arguing that there is nothing natural about these disasters,” said Andres Maskrey, head of UNDP’s disaster reduction unit in Geneva. “The impact of disasters can be sharply reduced if governments make an effort to reduce risk before a disaster happens, rather than…after the damage has been done.” The report argues that better disaster preparation not only cuts casualties, but also reduces obstacles to development such as the destruction of infrastructure and livelihoods. The report also said that Bangladesh has the highest vulnerability to tropical cyclone, followed by Pakistan, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea and Fiji. According to the study, about 60 percent of all deaths worldwide that are associated with tropical cyclones have occurred in Bangladesh from 1980-2000. Although the Philippines has three times higher exposure to cyclones each year, the number of deaths in Bangladesh is 10 times higher.

http://www.thedailystar.net/2004/02/05/d40205060265.htm
http://straitstimes.asia1.com.sg/world/story/0,4386,233349,00.html?
Bangladesh

Hotel manager kidnapped, foreign tourists robbed in Bangladesh’s restive southeastern Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT)

Tribal gunmen in the restive southeastern Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region today stormed a small tourist hotel and kidnapped its manager, but did not harm 24 foreign tourists at the hotel. The Bangladesh Army and paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles are currently searching for the hotel manager, Hasan Mahbub Bablu. The foreigners included 7 Americans and 3 French. The 14,200 sq km (5,480 sq mile) CHT was the site of a 25-year tribal insurgency until a peace deal was signed with the government in 1997. However, clashes between tribal groups that supported the treaty and those who do not, have continued, killing at least 200 people since 1997. In addition, a pro-treaty tribal group in December 2003 threatened to take up armed agitation again because of the government's slow implementation of the treaty. However, kidnappings or attacks on foreigners have been relatively rare. In February 2001, rebels kidnapped 2 Britons and 1 Dane who were working on a road project in Rangamati town. One Briton was released immediately, however, the other two were held for a month before their release was negotiated. Nearly half of the 1.3 million in CHT are Buddhists (mostly indigenous tribal groups), while the rest are Muslim Bengalis who were settled there in the 1970’s by the Bangladesh government in an effort to control a tribal insurgency there.

http://alertnet.org/printable.htm?URL=/thenews/newsdesk/DHA44070.htm

South Asia

Pakistan marks Kashmir Day as 3 civilians killed in continuing violence in Indian-controlled Kashmir (IcK)
Pakistan observed its annual Kashmir Day today, to mark its stand that the Kashmiri people should be allowed to choose a merger with India, Pakistan or independence according to a UN mandate. The public holiday comes before India and Pakistan’s landmark first attempt on composite peace talks to take place in Islamabad on February 16 – 18. So far, a ceasefire agreement between the two countries brokered in November 2003 has held. However, violence continued in Indian-controlled Kashmir (IcK) as militants there have vowed to continue a bloody armed struggle that has killed at least 65,000 people since 1989. Yesterday, one Muslim woman was killed when soldiers attacked a civilian household that was reportedly forced to exploit daughters to the militants. Two Muslim youths in Doda and Pulwama districts were also kidnapped and killed, while 6 militants and 1 soldier were killed in separate clashes. Thirteen people, including 2 soldiers, were injured when militants threw a grenade at a military vehicle in Budgam district.

Thailand

Thailand’s Disaster Prevention Department sets up anti-drought centers for forecasted long drought

According to the Bangkok Post today, Thailand’s Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Department has set up anti-drought centers nationwide to cope with an unusually long dry period that has been forecasted for this year. The Department’s Director-General Saroj Kachamart said today that the drought would affect more than 10 million people in 68 provinces. Most of the provinces that would be spared are in the central region. He said that the problem was already affecting 27 provinces, with about 540,000 people and 380,000 rai (152,000 acres) of farmland. Thailand’s annual monsoon season usually runs between June to October.

Thai official hacked to death, plantation worker shot in the latest attack in troubled south

In the latest in a series of attacks in Thailand’s troubled southern region, an irrigation official was hacked to death by unidentified assailants while on a morning jog in Pattani province. The machete attack was the sixth of its kind in recent weeks. Three Buddhist monks and 2 Muslim students have also been hacked to death by assailants on motorcycles in killings that have shocked the nation. All in all, 15 people have died in recent weeks from attacks on civilians or civil servants in locations other than their workplace, such as their homes. Earlier this month, 6 soldiers and policeman were killed in the initial outbreak of violence. Over the weekend, a patrolman overtaking teaching duties at a school was killed in Yala, and 3 released suspects in the case were later kidnapped yesterday. Local leaders have blamed authorities for the kidnapping of the suspects, who are unlikely to be found alive, after Defense Minister Thammarak Isarangura vowed unspecified retaliatory killings. Community leaders have
warned against heavy-handedness against locals in the Muslim-dominated area would create local resentment. Thailand is majority Buddhist. Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh is currently in the region, and said that there have been many other minor incidents in the region, while Public Health Minister Sudarat Keyuraphan was also visiting the region to improve healthcare services. Yesterday, the government announced 3 taskforces to deal with security, development and social order issues in an effort to tackle the violence.

http://www.nationmultimedia.com/page.print.php3?usrsess=1&amp;id=107709&amp;clid=2
http://www.bangkokpost.com/News/05Feb2004_news06.php

Other World News

Madagascar

Cyclone Elita hits Madagascar for the second time in a week, killing four more people

The United Nations Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) news reports that at least 4 people have been killed and some 13,000 left homeless after cyclone Elita hit Madagascar for the second time in a week. “The situation can be said to be very serious but there is still uncertainty about the extent of the damage, although we have received information that 90 percent of the buildings in Maineirano district (northwest Mahajanga province) have been destroyed by the rains. This has affected 7,000 people,” UN Resident Coordinator Bouri Sanhouidi said. Elita first hit the island nation on January 28 and left two people dead and some 5,000 homeless. IRIN reports that Madagascar officials have not yet launched an appeal for international assistance. However, when the storm hit in January, officials had appealed for rice, sugar, mosquito nets and building materials.

http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=39298&amp;SelectRegion=Southern_Africa&amp;SelectCountry=MADAGASCAR