

Health

# Power stacked against Asia's poor as China dams Mekong

Daily catch has been shrinking by the year

## Toll from listeria outbreak reaches 61 in South Africa

**JOHANNESBURG:** The number of deaths from a year-long outbreak of listeriosis, caused by a food-borne bacteria, has jumped to 61, South Africa's health minister said yesterday. Listeriosis is caused by *Listeria monocytogenes*, a naturally-occurring germ typically transferred through contaminated food, although it is readily treatable with antibiotics. A total of 727 cases have been confirmed since January 2017, Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi said in a statement.

As of December 5, the confirmed death toll stood at 36, but has since risen to 61. Because of the disease's "rapid spread and unusual or unexpected behavior", it has been elevated to the country's list of inten-

sively monitored, serious conditions, Motsoaledi added. A poultry abattoir in the capital Pretoria was identified by health officials as suffering from listeriosis contamination but it was unclear whether the facility was the source of the outbreak, the statement said. *Listeria* bacteria can be found in soil, water, vegetation and the faeces of some animals. Contamination in humans can result in flu-like illness, infection of the bloodstream and, in severe cases, infection of the brain which can prove fatal. People with compromised immune systems, like some of those living with AIDS and pregnant women, are at a heightened risk, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). — AFP

**KANDAL:** Cambodian fisherman Sles Hiet lives at the mercy of the Mekong; a massive river that feeds tens of millions but is under threat from the Chinese dams cementing Beijing's physical and diplomatic control over its Southeast Asian neighbors. The 32-year-old, whose ethnic Cham Muslim community live on rickety house boats that bob along a river bend in Kandal province, says the size of his daily catch has been shrinking by the year.

"We don't know why there are less fish now," he told AFP of a mystery that has mired many deeper into poverty. It is a lament heard from villages along a river that snakes from the Tibetan plateau through Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam before emptying into the South China Sea. Nearly 4,800 km long, the Mekong is the world's largest inland fishery and second only to the Amazon for its bio-diversity. It helps feed around 60 million people across its river basin. Yet control over its taps rests to the north with China, whose premier Li Keqiang will land in Phnom Penh on Wednesday to lead a new regional summit that could shape the river's future. Beijing has already studied the Mekong's upper reaches with six dams and is investing in more than half of the 11 dams planned further south, according to International Rivers.

Environmental groups warn the blockages pose a grave threat to fish habitats by disrupting migrations and the flow of key nutrients and sediment—not to mention displacing tens of thousands of people with flooding. Communities in the lower Mekong countries have reported depleted fish stocks in recent years and are blaming the dams. Experts say it is too early to draw full conclusions given a lack of baseline data and the complex nature of the river's ecosystem. But what they do agree on is that China has the upper hand over a resource that serves as the economic lifeblood of its poor southern backyard. The lower Mekong countries are "not able to stand up to China geo-politically," said Thitinan Pongsudhirak, a foreign policy expert at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University. That allows Beijing to keep "undermining habitats and millions of livelihoods downstream."



**KANDAL PROVINCE:** This photo taken on January 5, 2018 shows fishermen pulling their nets in the Mekong river. — AFP

### China rewrites the rules

With control over the headwaters of the river-known there as the Lancang Beijing can dam its section of the river while the impacts are felt downstream. It can also modulate water levels, a powerful bargaining chip displayed in 2016 when China opened dam gates on its soil to help Vietnam mitigate a severe drought.

The regional superpower is now asserting its authority through the nascent Lancang-Mekong Cooperation forum, while appeasing its Southeast Asian neighbours with investment and soft loans. Leaders from all six Mekong countries will attend the LMC this week in Cambodia. China's foreign ministry bills the forum, which also covers security and trade issues, as a way to foster "economic prosperity, social progress and a beautiful environment". But environmentalists say the LMC aims to replace the long-standing Mekong River Commission—a regional body that has tried to manage development along the river—albeit without China. "There is major concern that China's leading role and relative influence

will see it prioritising its own interests over meaningful co-operation," warned Maureen Harris, Southeast Asia programme director at International Rivers. Chinese companies are investing billions of dollars in many of the dams but have so far failed to carry out full environmental and social impact assessments. Firms and state agencies from Thailand, Vietnam and Laos also stand to gain from their investments in the hydropower projects.

"Much of the benefit will be reaped by the financial and business interests involved, with impacts to hit hardest local communities along the river," Harris said. Calls to protect the river have largely gone unheeded in Southeast Asia, where governments are eager to meet energy needs and unwilling to stand up to China or resist its cash. That makes the Mekong's dependents, such as fisherman Sles Hiet, an afterthought. "We depend on the Mekong river," he said. "Even though there are less fish we are still trying because we don't have any other jobs and we have no land to farm." — AFP

## SpaceX launches Zuma mission

**MIAMI:** SpaceX on Sunday blasted off a secretive US government payload known as Zuma, a mission whose nature—and the agency behind it—remains a mystery. "Three, two, one, ignition and liftoff," said a SpaceX commentator as the Falcon 9 rocket launched under cover of darkness from Cape Canaveral, Florida, at 8:00 pm (0100 GMT Monday).

The launch was initially supposed to take place in November but was postponed so the California-based company could take a closer

look at potential problems with the fairing, or the nose cone part of the rocket that protects the payload. Just what exactly needed such special protection and secrecy is still unknown. Northrup Grumman, the maker of the payload, said it was for the US government and would be delivered to low-Earth orbit, but offered no other details.

SpaceX and the Pentagon did not respond to requests for comment about the nature of the mission. SpaceX has launched national security payloads in the past, including a spy satellite for the National Reconnaissance Office, and an X-37B space plane for the US Air Force. The company's live webcast did not show video coverage of the Zuma spacecraft after it separated from the first stage of the rocket, but confirmed that the fairings deployed and the payload was well on its way to low-Earth orbit. — AFP

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