

News

in Brief

Egypt says international organs network arrested

CAIRO: Egyptian authorities announced Tuesday the arrest of 25 members of an international network allegedly trafficking in human organs, including university professors and doctors. "Today at dawn, the largest international network for trading human organs has been captured," the country's Administrative Control Authority said in a statement on its website. The network "is made up of Egyptians and Arabs taking advantage of some of the citizens' difficult economic conditions so that they buy their human organs and sell it for large sums of money," it said. The authority, which is responsible for tracking corruption cases in state institutions, said 25 people were arrested including university professors, doctors, medical workers, owners of medical centres, intermediaries and brokers. They were found in possession of "millions of dollars and gold bullion", it said. Ten medical centers and laboratories had been searched and the authorities had found documents related to the charge and computers with trading information. Egypt's parliament passed a law in 2010 banning commercial trade in organs as well as transplants between Egyptians and foreigners, except in cases of husband and wife. A World Health Organisation coordinator at the time, Luc Noel, named Egypt that year as one of the top five countries in illegal organ trade. The law aimed to regulate organ transplants in a bid to curb illegal trafficking and tourism for such operations.

Korea expands cull to contain bird flu

SEOUL: South Korea yesterday said it was expanding a cull of chickens and ducks to try to contain a damaging bird flu outbreak. The H5N6 virus was first confirmed on November 18 at a farm in central South Korea and has since spread to farms around the country, with the total number of cases now standing at 28. The agriculture ministry said in a statement that it has culled more than 4.4 million birds and would slaughter another 2.7 million. Health authorities agreed to issue a so-called "standstill" order to restrict workers at poultry farms from moving around the country if the virus continues to spread, the ministry said in a statement. There have been no cases of human infections from H5N6 in South Korea, although between 2014 and April 2016, the virus killed six people in China, according to the South's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The World Health Organization warned earlier this year that the strain "has caused severe infection in humans" but added "until now human infections with the virus seem to be sporadic with no ongoing human to human transmission".

Sick abandoned as Kenyan doctors' strike continues

NAIROBI: Sick Kenyans were turned away from hospitals, and patients left stranded in their wards as a crippling strike by doctors and nurses demanding pay rises entered a second day yesterday. Several patients are reported to have died as a result of lack of care in public hospitals, many of which are completely unstaffed. Kenyans have been directed to private clinics that are unaffordable to the majority of the population. "We have had a lot of patients leaving our facility because we have no services offered due to the ongoing strike," said David Mukabi, the superintendent in charge of Busia hospital in western Kenya. He said a 24-year-old patient had died on Monday night as a result of the stayaway. Meanwhile two women died at the Port Victoria Hospital in western Budalangi. "Two patients died last night ... because of the strike because there was no one to attend to them," said an official at the hospital. Local media reported tales of patients suffering burns or in labour left stranded in front of hospitals. At one hospital in western Kenya a security guard had to help a woman give birth, while in another an orphaned child was left alone in an empty ward with no parents to organise her transfer, The Standard daily reported.

RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN WORKS WITH NASA ON MARS SUIT

BETTER, MORE AGILE SUITS A REQUIREMENT FOR MARS MISSION

PROVIDENCE: When scientists are trying to figure out how to live in near-isolation in a dome to simulate a Mars mission, the last thing they'll need is an ill-fitting space suit - so one of the nation's top design schools has come to the rescue. Staff members and students at the Rhode Island School of Design have come up with a new, adjustable suit that closely resembles an actual space suit.

Real space suits are designed to work in zero gravity, meaning they're too expensive and too heavy to use at the NASA-funded Mars simulation mission in Hawaii. The simulated space suits that are used instead wear out quickly and aren't all that comfortable. They're small and provide poor ventilation. The new suit, unveiled Monday in Providence, is expected to be tested during the next Mars simulation mission in 2017 in Hawaii. A yearlong Mars simulation mission ended in August. It was the fourth HI-SEAS, or Hawaii Space Exploration Analog and Simulation. NASA funded the study, run through the University of Hawaii. Andrzej Stewart was the chief engineering officer on that mission. At 6 feet 2, Stewart couldn't zip up the simulated suits, so he wore a hazmat suit instead, which he said was easy to wear but not very realistic.

The entire crew saw a need for a better suit, said Sheyna Gifford, the mission's space doctor. A realistic suit is important, so crew members can see what experiments they can do and what tools they can use while wearing it, and how the habitat should be designed to accommodate it, she said. "What we're aiming for is the best possible simulation, to inform NASA about what we learned on that simulation so they can succeed in the real thing," she said.

Future missions

At RISD (often spoken as "RIZ-dee") on Monday, Stewart donned the new suit to see how it fit, how he moved in it and how well the ventilation and radio communications worked. Gifford was an observer, along with a NASA spacesuit engineer who will provide feedback to ensure that the design best resembles the architecture of suits NASA may use for future exploration missions. It was the suit's first rigorous test. Stewart said that the ventilation kept him cool and that the suit restricted his movement like a real suit would.

"It's great to finally be able to put on a full suit and be able to walk around, be able to move in it," Stewart said. "It makes me feel a lot more like an astronaut." The white suit is made of heavy-duty nylon fabric; carbon fiber that forms a hard shell for the upper torso area; and foam that replicates the pressurization of an actual suit. It comes in 16 pieces; components can be replaced or resized easily to fit the short and the tall. It weighs about 50 pounds.

Work began after Gifford told Michael Lye, the adjunct faculty member who coordinates projects between the school and NASA, about the opportunity to make a more realistic suit. Gifford said the new suit is great, especially its modularity, because it will fit whomever is on the crew, though the exterior ventilation tubes will have to go inside the suit so they don't get caught on something or crushed. The suit, the only one RISD made, will be shipped to HI-SEAS, Lye said. The materials for the suit cost about \$10,000, paid for with grants from the HI-SEAS program and the Rhode Island Space Grant Consortium, Lye said. Students in the industrial design and apparel design programs worked on it. RISD is one of the country's top art and design schools and has a large industrial design department. It has worked with NASA before, including on a project to design space gloves. — AP



PROVIDENCE: In this Monday, Dec 5, 2016 photo, Andrzej Stewart, the chief engineering officer on a year-long Mars simulation mission that ended in August, puts on a new space suit at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). — AP

ASIAN COUNTRIES DOMINATE, SCIENCE TEACHING CRITICIZED IN PISA SURVEY

PARIS: Asian countries dominated the top places in the latest PISA survey that measures skills among high school students released yesterday, but the report criticized the teaching of science in many countries. The survey of 72 countries and economies found that the quality of science lessons was more important than equipment or even staffing levels. And it confirmed earlier findings that loading students down with homework was rarely the key to success in science.

Singapore came top of the table for its teaching of science, reading and mathematics. Its students scored an average of 556 points, compared with the average among Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries of 493. Where once Finland led the way in educational excellence, Singapore is now the example to other countries, the report said.

"Everyone used to go to Finland. Now you have to go to Singapore to see what they are doing," OECD Chief of Staff Gabriela Ramos told reporters ahead of the report's launch. Nearly a quarter of all students in Singapore (24 percent) also scored in the top two categories in science tests, compared with just eight percent across the OECD countries.

The five top-performing countries in the PISA tests, which were carried out in 2015, were Singapore, Japan, Estonia, Taiwan and Finland. The report found however that around six percent of students in

OECD countries, many of them in Europe, reported they did not get regular science lessons.

These students scored significantly lower in the tests. Schools that did not offer dedicated science lessons tend to be in poorer areas of countries, the report noted. The problem was particularly bad in Austria, Belgium, Croatia, France, Germany, Slovakia and Taiwan.

Homework not the answer

The results also suggested that the key to success in science teaching, even more than well-equipped and well-staffed departments, was how much time was spent teaching the subject. Those teachers who actually demonstrated scientific ideas and who adapted their teaching to meet students' needs produced better results, the report said.

That tended to happen in smaller classes, and students who received this kind of teaching were more likely to go on to a science-related career, it added. "Students score five points higher in science for every additional hour spent per week in regular science lessons, after accounting for socioeconomic status," the report noted.

But the results also suggested that the study needed to be done in school, not at home. "School systems where students spend more time learning after school, by doing homework, receiving additional instruction or in private study, tend to perform less well in science," said the report.

Last month, parents in Spain staged a strike to protest the amount of homework schools were handing out. Spain scored 493 points in the latest PISA tests corresponding exactly to the OECD average.

Perhaps predictably, head teachers told the researchers that truancy was one problem that hindered student learning the most. But another significant factor they reported was staff resisting change. Bullying and students' use of alcohol or illegal drugs were reported as far less significant.

Asian countries dominate

Asian countries dominated the top 10 of the PISA table, with Japan recording the second-highest average score behind Singapore. Macao, Hong Kong and the mainland Chinese territories that were tested also featured in the top 10, as did Taiwan and Vietnam. But the top-ranked European country, Estonia, took third place. The only other European country in the top 10 was Finland, in fifth.

Canada was seventh on the list, well ahead of the United States, which ranked 25th among OECD countries. PISA, the Programme for International Student Assessment, was devised by the OECD to measure countries' performance in teaching 15-year-olds the core subjects. PISA tests are carried out every three years and in 2015 they covered all 35 OECD countries and 37 partner countries and economies. — AFP

CLINIC PAGE



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