

VIETNAM FACES WORST DROUGHT IN HISTORY

HANOI: Vietnam's southern Mekong Delta, the country's main rice growing region, is experiencing the worst drought and saline intrusion in recent history that has affected more than half a million people, officials said Thursday.

The drought could result in the loss of up to 1 million tons of rice, but is not expected to affect Vietnam's status as the world's third largest exporter of grain, said Ma Quang Trung, a department director at the Agriculture Ministry. Vietnam exports an average 7 million tons a

year, behind Thailand and India. Thailand too has been hit hard by the drought.

The water shortage could drive many farmers into poverty, especially if there are no rains between now and the peak of the dry season in late April, Trung said. He blamed the drought on the El Nino weather phenomenon and excessive construction of more than 10 hydropower dams on the upper stream of the river.

Vietnamese Foreign Ministry spokesman Le Hai Binh told reporters that neighboring China

has doubled the amount of water discharged from a dam to help alleviate the crisis. Binh also said the ministry was working with China and other Mekong River countries toward sustainable use of the river's resources. The level of inland saline intrusion was unprecedented, resulting in damage to some 180,000 hectares (444,780 acres) of paddy fields, Trung said. The government has provided some \$1.5 million in aid to farmers in three most affected provinces in the delta, according to state media. —Agencies

N KOREA TEST FIRES BALLISTIC MISSILES

SEOUL: North Korea test-fired two medium-range ballistic missiles yesterday, just days after leader Kim Jong-Un promised a series of nuclear warhead tests and missile launches amid surging military tensions. Friction on the divided Korean peninsula has deepened since the North carried out its fourth nuclear test on January 6, followed a month later by a long-range rocket launch that was widely seen as a disguised ballistic missile test. US defense officials said they had tracked two launches—both believed to be medium-range Rodong missiles fired from road-mobile launch vehicles.

The Rodong is a scaled-up Scud variant with a maximum range of around 1,300 kilometers. South Korean military officials said the first missile was launched from Sukchon in the country's southwest at 5:55 am (2055 GMT Thursday) and flew 800 kilometers before splashing down in the East Sea (Sea of Japan). The second, fired about 20 minutes later, disappeared off radar early into its flight. They came a day after US President Barack Obama signed an order implementing tough sanctions adopted earlier this month against North Korea by the UN Security Council, as well as fresh unilateral US measures.

Strike threats

For the past two weeks, Pyongyang has maintained a daily barrage of nuclear strike threats against both Seoul and Washington, ostensibly over ongoing, large-scale South Korea-US military drills that the North sees as provocative rehearsals for invasion. To register its anger at the joint exercises, the North fired two short-range missiles into the East Sea on March 10.

A few days later, Kim Jong-Un announced that a nuclear warhead explosion test and firings of "several kinds" of ballistic missiles would be carried out "in a short time". South Korea's defense ministry said Friday's launches were clearly the result of Kim's order.

"North Korea appears to be speeding up test launches to advance its nuclear capabilities," said ministry spokesman Moon Sang-Gyun. Calling the move a direct challenge to the UN Security Council and the international community, Moon said the South's military stood ready to respond immediately to any North Korean threat to national security.

Existing UN sanctions ban North Korea from the use of any ballistic missile test, although short-range launches tend to go unpunished. A Rodong test is more provocative, given its greater range, which makes it capable of hitting most of Japan. The last Rodong test was in March 2014, when two of the missiles were fired into the East Sea.

Japan ruffled

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe condemned the launch and said his government would coordinate its response with the US, South Korea and other nations concerned. "We strongly demand North Korea exercise restraint," Abe told a parliamentary committee. The US State Department urged Pyongyang to refrain from any actions that could "further raise tensions."

While North Korea is known to have a small stockpile of nuclear weapons, its ability to deliver them accurately to a chosen target on the tip of a ballistic missile has been a subject of heated debate. Most experts believe it is still years from developing a working inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) that could strike the continental United States.

But Kim's announcement of further tests on Tuesday came as he monitored a simulated test of the warhead re-entry technology required for such a long-range nuclear attack. The test was a complete success, state media said, and provided a "sure guarantee" of the warhead's ability to withstand the intense heat and vibration of re-entering the earth's atmosphere. —AFP



BEIJING: Facebook's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, and friends jog past Tiananmen Gate. —AFP

ZUCKERBERG'S RUN IN BEIJING'S TOXIC AIR STIRS CHINESE PUBLIC CEO ACCUSED OF PANDERING TO BIG POLITICIANS

BEIJING: A photo of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg jogging yesterday morning in downtown Beijing's notorious smog has prompted a torrent of amusing comments and some mockery on Chinese social media. Zuckerberg is a favorite personality among the Chinese public, despite Facebook being banned in the country alongside other overseas social media platforms. He's also become somewhat notorious for persistent yet so far futile efforts to woo leaders enforcing China's strict online censorship.

The young tech tycoon is in Beijing to attend an economic forum over the weekend, when some of the world's business and finances leaders will rub shoulders with senior Chinese politicians. Zuckerberg posted the photo to his Facebook page of him and five others running through Tiananmen Square with the famous gate to the Forbidden City imperial palace in the background. None wore the air-filtering face masks

that are ubiquitous in Beijing and other Chinese cities.

At the time the photo was taken, Beijing's air pollution index was well into the hazardous zone at about 15 times of the level considered safe by the World Health Organization. Health experts urge people to avoid any outdoor activities on such heavily polluted days. Chinese residents wondered aloud whether Zuckerberg's jog was yet another gesture aimed at pleasing the Chinese authorities who claim they are gradually winning the battle against air pollution.

'Kissing up?'

Previous efforts include Zuckerberg's telling China's top Internet official on a visit to Facebook's California headquarters in 2014 that he was engrossed in Chinese President Xi Jinping's collected speeches. The same year he famously engaged his audience in halting Chinese at a forum at prestigious Tsinghua University while avoiding mention of the

government ban on Facebook.

"Kissing up?" commented Tom Wang, a Chinese environmentalist, who reposted Zuckerberg's running photo and added a graphic of Beijing's air quality readings from yesterday morning. Journalist and avid runner Peng Yuanwen joked that Zuckerberg's lungs had single-handedly filtered Beijing's smog after the city's air quality noticeably improved by early afternoon.

"The human-flesh smog vacuum is better when it's American-made," teased Peng, playing on a joke among Beijing residents that they filter the city's air with their lungs by inhaling harmful particles. Others noted that Zuckerberg's run took him through the square where hundreds of thousands of Chinese students gathered in the spring of 1989 to demand democracy. The movement ended in the early hours of June 4 after troops and tanks crushed all resistance, killing hundreds, possibly thousands of protesters. —AP