

ANGOLA BACKS DOWN ON TOTAL ABORTION BAN

LUAND: Angola's ruling party has bowed to public criticism of a proposed law banning all abortions and instead accepted a revised bill allowing terminations in cases of rape or maternal health risk. The about-turn follows a rare rally in March when roughly 200 demonstrators protested against the

proposed bill under heavy police surveillance in the capital Luanda. "We have decided to listen to the pressure from society," the president of the ruling MPLA party's parliamentary caucus, Virgilio de Fontes Pereira, told reporters on Monday. The initial draft penal code brought before parliament in February

would have punished anyone who had an abortion or performed one with up to 10 years in jail with exceptions in cases of rape or risk to the mother's health. But the draft code was strengthened after lobbying by church leaders led to the removal of the limited exemptions, triggering a fierce public debate. Ninety

percent of Angolans are Christian.

The harshest version of the law was sharply criticized by President Jose Eduardo dos Santos' daughter Isabel, reported to be the richest woman in Africa. Isabel dos Santos used her Instagram social media account to denounce the "criminalization of

women". Angola, which has been ruled by Dos Santos since 1979, is updating a penal code which dates back to 1886 the Portuguese colonial era. "When the life of the mother is at stake, when there is a rape, we can imagine lifting the law's ban," said De Fontes Pereira.—AFP

EAVESDROPPING ON FISH SEX

PARIS: Scientists unveiled yesterday a unique new method for counting stocks of threatened fish eavesdropping on their love calls when the fish gather in massive mating throngs. Using underwater microphones and mathematical models, researchers from the US and Mexico were able to estimate population numbers for the Gulf corvina, a popular eating fish from Mexico's Gulf of California.

About two million corvina gather every spring for a frenzied breeding session in a shallow estuary of the Colorado River Delta, bringing the entire adult population to an area less than one percent of its usual home range. When the males start calling to attract mates, the sound is "deafening," said researchers from the University of Texas Marine Science Institute (UTMSI). At about 192 decibels, the sound could damage human eardrums on land. "It's louder than a rock concert," study co-author Brad Erisman said in a statement issued by the UTMSI. "It's louder than standing less than a meter from a chainsaw."

Unfortunately for the corvinas, the calls announce their presence to fishermen who gather for a seasonal frenzy of their own: netting more than a million fish in about three weeks. But now the sound may be used to save the fish, which are listed as "vulnerable" on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of threatened species. Though population numbers

have been hard to determine, there is evidence that landed fish are getting smaller and smaller, a sign of overfishing, the researchers said, which happens when fish of a species are caught faster than they can reproduce.

Herrings, sardines, sturgeons

Accurate population numbers are essential for setting sustainable fishing limits. But it is nearly impossible to get a headcount for fish, often flitting about in deep or murky waters, and many estimates are based on unreliable fisheries data. The new technique involves a mathematical model for determining stock density from the levels of sound the fish generate while spawning. Using this method, the team calculated there were over 1.5 million corvina at the height of their annual "spawning aggregation", a collective mass of more than 2,000 tones.

Their technique is inexpensive and not intrusive, the researchers said, and can be adapted for other species that form similar spawning groups and produce mating sounds. These include herrings, sardines, cod and haddock, croakers, groupers, sea bass, snappers, catfish and sturgeons. It may be particularly useful for determining the remaining stock of endangered totoaba, a large fish also from the Gulf of California, whose swim bladder is believed in China to hold medicinal powers, the team said.—AFP



AFGHANISTAN: A view over the lake from a birdwatching tower at the Kol-e-Hashmat Khan wetland in the outskirts of Kabul. A rare Afghan marsh that was once a royal hunting ground is set to come under the official protection of the UN environment agency, with the aim of saving hundreds of migratory bird species.—AFP

AUSTRALIAN NURSE DENIES RUNNING ILLEGAL SURROGACY IN CAMBODIA

PHNOM PENH: An Australian nurse denied running an illegal surrogacy service in Cambodia when her trial began yesterday, the first case of its kind in the country that recently banned the practice. Tammy Davis-Charles, 49, was arrested in late November with two Cambodians and accused of recruiting foreign couples and Cambodian surrogate mothers to a clinic in the capital Phnom Penh.

The detentions came just two weeks after Cambodia moved to outlaw the surrogacy industry, which critics say exploits poor women, after a similar ban in neighboring Thailand pushed the business across its borders. The trio were also charged with faking documents to obtain birth certificates for the newborns. In court on yesterday Davis-Charles said she played no part in arranging surrogacies. Instead she said her role was limited to providing medical care to a total of 23 surrogate mothers who carried babies for 18 Australian and five American couples.

"They find the clinic" by themselves, she said of the would-be foreign parents, adding that she was also not involved in the recruitment of Cambodian surrogates. The nurse said she received \$8,000 from each couple while received around \$10,000. All of the infants were born and moved out of Cambodia before her arrest, she added. Davis-Charles, who is from Melbourne, told the court she left Thailand more than a year ago after Bangkok out-

lawed commercial surrogacy and moved to Cambodia, which at the time lacked regulations on the industry. Two surrogate mothers testified in court on yesterday to receiving \$10,000 from Tammy.

Surrogate mother Hor Vanday said she gave birth to a baby girl who was whisked away for a foreign couple. "I did not see the face of the baby, but I know her father took her away," she recalled. She added that she did not miss the child as she knew it was never hers. Thailand for years hosted Southeast Asia's most thriving unregulated surrogacy industry that was particularly popular with same-sex couples. But several scandals in 2014 including tussles over custody spurred the government to bar foreigners from using Thai surrogates.

Surrogacy consultants say Laos, a poor and opaque communist country to the north, has since emerged as the next frontier for the "rent a womb" business in the wake of the recent bans by Cambodia, Thailand, Nepal and India. A number of Laos-linked surrogacy agencies and IVF clinics have cropped up in recent months, according to consultancy group Families Through Surrogacy. A Thai man was recently arrested for smuggling frozen sperm between the two countries. Some offer to carry out the embryo transfer in Laos and then provide pregnancy care for the surrogate in Thailand, a wealthier country with vastly superior medical facilities.—AFP

WAR-TORN KABUL BECOMES A PROTECTED SITE FOR BIRDS

UN DESIGNATES WETLANDS AS CONSERVATION SITE

KABUL: A rare Afghan marsh that was once a royal hunting ground is set to come under the official protection of the UN environment agency, with the aim of saving hundreds of migratory bird species. On the long, arid journey to the Caucasus and Siberia, across the Hindu Kush massif, the Kol-e-Hashmat Khan wetlands outside Kabul provide sanctuary for the thousands of storks, egrets, pelicans and flamingos that head north every spring from southern India.

But after 40 years of conflict and neglect, their habitat is being threatened by the growth in new homes, irrigation systems, rubbish and global warming which is gradually changing the local environment. Now the UN has designated the wetlands a conservation site, the Afghan government said on Sunday, as it also looks to help preserve the water supply of the capital. "There are probably more than 300 or 400 species that pass through, though without an accurate count it is hard to be sure," says Andrew Scanlon, head of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) in Afghanistan. They are migratory birds and "tourists" who stay for a very short period of time to find food, he adds. At daybreak, the marsh comes alive with the morning chatter of the birds hungry for breakfast. Binoculars in hand, Scanlon stands atop a tower that dominates the landscape. In the distance is the silhouette of Bala Hissar, an ancient fortress that defended the city for centuries. Opposite, mud houses and sturdier dwellings made from bricks seem to spring up at random, hurriedly erected during wars for tides of refugees and displaced people.

It was once a favored place for royals to go hunting, though Scanlon stresses any activity would have been carried out "in a sustainable way". But with the invasion of the Soviet army in 1979 and the succession of conflicts afterwards, including the civil war in the early 1990s, Afghans were preoccupied by their own survival and the environment suffered. War saw the marshes more or less abandoned until 2005, Scanlon explains.

Everybody is guilty

Scanlon says that land grabbing was common in the chaos of the 90s as Afghans fought for survival. The marshes became a sanctuary, providing safe haven and water. As Afghanistan's population swelled with the return of refugees after the Taliban were toppled in 2001, he says the situation became a "tragedy of the commons". The phrase refers to an economic theory in which individuals act in their own self-interest towards a shared resource but against the common good.

"Everyone is taking a piece to survive but all together this is a tragedy, it's no one's fault but everybody is guilty," he says. Taking advantage of the chaos, factional and party leaders built houses on the water's edge. According to the UN, about 50 hectares of wild land were taken over, which the Afghan environmental protection agency, created in 2005, is now trying to recover. "Some politicians are reluctant" to act, but attitudes are changing, said Muhibullah Fazli, the agency's biodiversity expert. The most important thing, he says, is to educate local residents. "The problem is the people taking their cattle to graze or cutting the reed, local people also pour their garbage in the river, they don't know the scientific value of this area," he said. Together with Qargha reservoir, Kol-e-Hashmat Khan, a marsh some eight meters deep at its centre, is one of Kabul's two water sources.

But experts are already worried about its

falling water levels. NGO Afghanistan Youths Greens was ordered by UNEP to organize waste collection and educate the villagers who will continue to live on the shores. "At the beginning people didn't accept us but finally we managed

to convince them," says the organization's director Mohammad Shafaq. "I told them what the Holy Koran has said," adds Fazli. "Birds are a community just like yours... they need a habitat and they need food."—AFP

COSTA RICA SAYS NO TO ANIMAL CRUELTY

SAN JOSE: Thousands of animal lovers packed a major San Jose avenue Sunday, many with pups in tow, to celebrate Costa Rica's new animal cruelty law and its fines and jail time for violators. Bikers, animal rights activists and many animal lovers were on hand dancing to traditional tunes to support the law, signed this month by the Central American nation's President Luis Guillermo Solis. "We have got to demand that there be no more impunity; that whoever abuses an animal be punished," Solis said, raising cheers from the crowd.

The parade marshal for the day was Duke, a dog that became well known in local media after someone hacked him with a machete and left him for dead. In another grim case, local teenagers seriously injured a toucan, pummeling its bill with stones. "We have just seen too many horrific acts against animals. So it's time that we have a law to ensure that they are punished," said Antonio Pacheco, who turned up with his sweater-wearing schnauzer Tony in tow. Cockfighting and dog fights also have been outlawed, and can earn criminals jail time.—AFP



SAN JOSE: A woman takes a selfie with a dog as she joins thousands of people celebrating in the streets of San Jose.—AFP

MALAYSIA SEIZES PANGOLIN SCALES

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysian customs officers have seized almost 300 kilograms of pangolin scales being smuggled through the main airport, officials said yesterday. The 288-kilogram haul was found at Kuala Lumpur International Airport last Friday in 12 boxes labeled as oyster shells on the waybill. The scales worth around 3.69 million ringgit arrived from Ghana on a Turkish Airlines flight, the customs department said in a statement.

Authorities are investigating. The scales of the endangered pangolin, the world's most heavily trafficked mammal, are highly prized in Vietnam and China where they are mis-

leadingly touted as having medicinal properties. Malaysia last month made its largest haul of such scales, 712 kilograms estimated to be worth more than nine million ringgit.

Pangolins are indigenous to the jungles of Indonesia, parts of Malaysia and areas of southern Thailand, and their meat is considered a delicacy in China. Four pangolin species can also be found in Africa. Increasingly they are smuggled to Southeast Asia from Africa, but the majority goes to China. Soaring demand has seen an estimated one million pangolins plucked from Asian and African forests over the past decade.—AFP



MALAYSIA: The photo shows seized pangolin scales during a press conference at the Malaysian Customs Complex in Sepang. Malaysian customs officers have seized almost 300 kilograms of pangolin scales being smuggled through the main airport.—AFP

WHO: MALDIVES, BHUTAN HAVE ELIMINATED MEASLES

NEW DELHI: The World Health Organization said yesterday that Bhutan and the Maldives have eliminated measles, becoming the first countries in their region to stop the highly contagious disease. The Maldives has not reported any case of indigenous measles since 2009, and Bhutan since 2012, WHO said. "WHO commends them for this momentous public health achievement," said Poonam Khetrapal Singh, regional director of WHO Southeast Asia. Bhutan and the Maldives launched immunization programs around 40 years ago with a strategy of mass vaccination of high-risk populations.

"The strongest political commitment, alongside the concerted efforts of health workers, offi-

cial and partners at all levels, has helped achieve this landmark success," Singh said. WHO has set a deadline of 2020 for the elimination of measles in the 11 countries that it categorizes as the Southeast Asian region. The region has averted an estimated 620,000 measles deaths in 2016 alone following vaccinations carried out by the 11 member countries, a WHO statement said. Last year, North and South America were declared free of measles, but last month an outbreak was reported in Minnesota. Measles, a viral disease which is spread through coughing and sneezing, can lead to pneumonia, brain inflammation, hospitalization or death, mainly among children.—AP