



Top Stories

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Mauritania cuts ties with Israel, expels Israeli diplomats

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US unemployment rate reaches 8.1%

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his wife killed in a car accident south of Harare.

- A protestor from Plane Stupid throws green custard at United Kingdom Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Peter Mandelson during a low-carbon summit in London.
- Swedish writer Lotta Lotass succeeds the late Sten Rudholm at Seat 1 of the Swedish Academy.
- A Swedish pediatrician at Karolinska University Hospital is remanded on suspicion of manslaughter for injecting a lethal overdose of morphine and sodium thiopental into an infant.
- North Korea threatens the safety of South Korean civilian aircraft flying near its territory, on the eve of annual military exercises involving the United States and the South.
- Australia's Transport Safety Bureau finds that the autopilot of Qantas Flight 72, which made an emergency landing at Learmonth Airport in October 2008, received inaccurate information, causing a rapid change in altitude.

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put these up for auction.

The items were bought by the owner of the United Breweries group and Kingfisher Airlines, Vijay Mallaya, a Bangalore based Indian entrepreneur. The list of rare personal belongings included a Zenith sterling silver Pocket watch, a pair of eyeglasses used by Gandhi, a pair of leather sandals, his blood work from Irwin Hospital, New Delhi and a brass bowl and a plate set.

The initial bid price was \$20,000, but reached \$1 million in less than a minute. Mallaya eventually outbid all other bidders for the final price of \$1.8 million. The Indian government did not participate in the auction due to a restraint order from the Delhi High Court. The restraining order was passed by the court in response to a writ petition filed by the legal heir of Mahatma Gandhi, Navjivan Trust.

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As a result of the expulsion, the Israeli government has closed their embassy in Nouakchott and staff could be seen leaving the building. Military personnel were

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Zimbabwean Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai is injured and

also seen dismantling security features around the embassy and the guards have been ordered to stand down.

"The Mauritanian authorities have given staff at the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott 48 hours to leave the country. After General Aziz took the decision at the Doha summit, an envoy from the Mauritanian Foreign Ministry sent a letter to the ambassador of Israel to leave the country," said an unnamed Mauritanian official.

The official also adds that the country's decision to cut ties with Israel was made in January, during an Arabic nation summit in Qatar. Despite the decision, Israeli officials said they were not aware of the expulsions.

"We don't know what is happening there exactly. We are still checking. They did not tell us they intend to expel our ambassador," said an Israeli official. The official also said that the expulsions could be a show of power ahead of the visit of Muammar Gaddafi, the president of Libya. "Maybe they are just showing they're tough."

US unemployment rate reaches 8.1%

The official unemployment rate in the United States increased to 8.1% (seasonally adjusted), the highest level in over 25 years, after the Labor Department reported that 651,000 jobs were lost in February. The U-6 unemployment rate, an alternative measure also published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics that includes other categories of unemployed and underemployed workers, was reported to be 16%.

The US economy has now shed 4.4 million jobs since the recession began in December 2007. Half of

the job losses have come in the last four months, and the unemployment rate has jumped by 3.3% in the past year.

The Federal Reserve says that it doesn't expect the jobless rate to fall below seven percent until 2011.

The professional and business service sector lost 180,000 jobs last month, while manufacturing shed 168,000. The construction industry has lost 1.1 million jobs since January 2007 and 104,000 jobs last month. At the same time, the financial sector lost 44,000 jobs, bringing the total to 448,000 lost jobs since a peak in December 2007.

"The construction industry is in a near depression," said the General President of LIUNA, Terry O'Sullivan.

"We are staring into the abyss. The recession is intensifying and the economy is rapidly shrinking," said Steven Wood of Insight Economics.

US stock markets opened higher after the report.

Brawn GP take over Honda Formula One team

Brawn GP have completed their takeover of the Honda Racing F1 Formula One team. The management buyout, led by team principal Ross Brawn, was a result of Honda announcing their intention to withdraw from the sport in December 2008 as a result of the current economic climate.

Jenson Button and Rubens Barrichello, Honda's drivers for the 2008 season, will be retained by Brawn GP for the upcoming 2009 season. The team will continue to

be based at Honda Racing F1's Brackley headquarters in Northamptonshire, England. Engines for the cars will be made by Mercedes Benz.

Ross Brawn said of the announcement: "The vast experience and knowledge that both drivers bring to our team will prove invaluable as we aim to get up to speed in the shortest possible time to be ready for the first race of the season...I would also like to take this opportunity to pay due credit to our staff at Brackley. The levels of motivation and commitment that I have witnessed at the factory deserve the highest praise."

The Managing Officer of Honda, Hiroshi Oshima, said that the company was "very pleased that we could sell the team to Ross Brawn, with whom we have been partaking in the challenges of F1 competition, and are grateful for his decision. We offer our sincerest wishes for the new team which will be led by Ross."

The team have three weeks remaining until the opening round of the 2009 Formula One World Championship in Australia on March 23.

Philippines is culling 6500 hogs after Reston ebolavirus outbreak

The Philippine Department of Agriculture (DA), local health and agricultural teams Sunday have started slaughtering, burning and burying roughly 6,500 hogs at a farm in Pandi, Bulacan in Central Luzon on Sunday after three farm workers became infected with Reston ebolavirus (ERV) of the virus group Ebola, as a precautionary measure and to protect the local livestock industry.

"We culled around 300 heads—piglets and growers—in two and a half hours; we tried to start the process at 5 p.m. Sunday; after three hours we disposed of 442 hogs; that includes transporting the hogs to an area in the farm where they will be disposed of; with this rate and with some improvements in the procedure tomorrow, we expect to complete the depopulation by Wednesday," Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI) head Davinio Catbagan said. "With the problems we encountered last night, we may go beyond Thursday," he added.

But according to Dr. Eric Tayag, the 56-man team's five captive bolts used in stunning the pigs malfunctioned, for which reason, they decided use instead .32 caliber pistols. "We need to finish this off because sometimes it rains," he said. But due to other problems, 12 policemen were ordered to use instead .22 caliber guns for 80-120 kilograms pigs. The pig depopulation in the Pandi farm has reached 1,237 Tuesday amid strong rains as schedules have been set from 5 a.m. to 9 a.m. and from 4 p.m. to 9 p.m. daily, Cecilia Yacob, head of the Bulacan Provincial Public Affairs Office, said.

Monday's culling was witnessed by representatives from the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO), animal welfare observers, Bulacan Gov. Joselito Mendoza and Pandi Mayor Roberto Oca. The slaughter has been estimated to cost 16 million Philippine pesos (₱), which include hog farm owners' compensation and the cost of culling for five to seven days.

"As of late Tuesday the depopulation teams have culled 2,663 pigs, compared to 442 on

Sunday, 795 on Monday and 1,426 on Tuesday; as of early afternoon on Wednesday, the numbers have reached 3,482," said Dr. Davinio Catbagan. According to Agriculture Secretary Arthur C. Yap, the culling team has slaughtered 2,078 pigs, bringing the total to 4,741 on Wednesday. The number of hogs had increased to 6,500 from 6,000 as some mother pigs gave birth amid the depopulation.

But according to Dr. Joy Gomez, provincial public health officer of Bulacan, six members of the depopulation team at the Pandi "Win Farm" have complained of fatigue, headache and dizziness, and have been closely observed by a team of doctors.

The state will compensate the farmers, however "it cannot be [100% of the market price.] A range of about 25%-50%, but it has to be discussed [with the farm owner]. At 25%-50%, the government may pay the farm owner ₱6.28 million-15.625 million, plus the cost of animal culling operations," said Yap.

A polymerase chain reaction test to check the virus' presence was conducted by the United States Centers for Disease Control (US-CDC) to verify ongoing transmission. "Of 160 pig blood samples that were positive for antibodies, 133 came from Bulacan and 27 from Pangasinan as reported by RITM. Those from Bulacan were traced to pigs at different age groups while those in Pangasinan were found in sows and just one piglet. This means that there is on going viral transmission in Bulacan but past infection with recovery was the case in Pangasinan," Yap explained.

The agriculture officials earlier

announced that the depopulation will be carried out in a "humane" manner, following current Office international des Épizooties (OIE) procedures that ensure protection of animal welfare in the Bulacan farm. According to Philippine Department of Health (DOH) Secretary Francisco Duque, the quarantine of the hog farm in Palauig, Manaoag, Pangasinan has been lifted after finding no traces of viral transmission.

According to Yap, test results conducted by a joint mission of FAO, the World Animal Health Organization, WHO and their local counterparts, reveal that viral transmission continues to exist in Pandi hog farms, which is only 0.5% of the 13 million pigs raised throughout the country.

DOH officials also say a pig farm worker in Cabanatuan City in Nueva Ecija, who had no direct contact with sick hogs, has tested positive for Immunoglobulin G antibodies against the Reston ebolavirus, which is non-lethal, unlike the ZaÔre, Bundibugyo, CÔte d'Ivoire and Sudan strains, according to FAO.

"The additional positive human sample, showed signs of antibodies for Ebola Reston, was traced to a slaughterhouse male worker and was not sick during visits by the investigation team. He does not recall any direct contact with sick pigs but remembers having flu-like sickness in the past twelve months," a DOH statement said, also confirming four pig farm workers and a butcher from Bulacan and Pangasinan tested positive for the antibodies last month.

"Ebola Reston poses a low risk to human health at this time," said DOH Secretary Dr. Duque. "147

human samples have been tested for Ebola, but only six have tested positive. But stay away from kilawin, and half-cooked pork," he added. The laboratory tests of 147 blood samples from workers in the affected areas were conducted by the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine (RITM) and the US-CDC. RITM has also reported that "1039 pig blood samples collected by the expert mission yielded negative results on antigen tests," the DOH said.

The 24 other workers tested were all found negative for ERV infection. "To date, all close contacts of humans with positive anti-bodies who were tested remained anti-body-free signifying absence of illness in affected humans that can lead to possible human-to-human transmission," Dr. Duque said. The RITM and the US-CDC also tested 160 pig blood samples: 133 of which came from the Bulacan farm and 27 from the Pangasinan farm; of the 133 blood samples from Bulacan, 19 tested positive for ERV; none of 27 samples from Pangasinan were affected.

Global experts said they will continue to conduct research studies of the Ebola strain to determine how it can be controlled. FAO of the United Nations has initially committed ₱10 million to buy additional kits. "We support the Bureau of Animal Industry to expand surveillance in other areas," said Kazuyuki Tsurumi, FAO representative in the Philippines. "We have not committed any amount of money... [but] we are ready to support a wider surveillance and capacity-building for more tests," Tsurumi explained.

"We can't speculate. We don't know the source of this virus, how

it's being transmitted. We're studying that," said Soe Nyunt-U, WHO Representative in the Philippines. "Our current issue is that the test kits are limited because we are depending on the [United States] CDC [Center for Disease Control and Prevention] to send those kits. If we are going to extend the surveillance both in the animal and human side, we need more test kits," he added.

Both the DA and DOH officials have decided to expand the scope of the testing for the Reston ebolavirus by inspecting and monitoring hog farms in the whole of Central Luzon, Calabarzon, Southern Luzon and Pangasinan province after the culling of the 6,500 pigs.

"As a precautionary measure, while there are many questions left unanswered, these ERV-contaminated pigs should be extinguished so we can move forward and study the virus," said BAI Director Davinio "Dave" Catbagan.

"In six months we might be finished testing Regions 3 and 4 depending on the assurance of the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention [in Atlanta, Georgia, USA] to give test kits. In Region 3 alone, the government would need to test farms in 566 villages that would require around 36,000 kits, but the country only has 10,000 kits" Mr. Catbagan said. "The expanded tests will cover the provinces of Aurora, Bataan, Bulacan, Nueva Ecija, Pampanga, Tarlac and Zambales in Central Luzon, and Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal and Quezon in Calabarzon," Mr. Catbagan added.

Mr. Catbagan has assured infected hog farm owners in Pandi they would be properly indemnified

after the country's first large-scale animal depopulation process. "We are finalizing the indemnification contract. But we will make sure the indemnification would not be open to abuse," he said. Fatteners and piglets cost an average of ₱3,000-4,000 per head, boars cost ₱25,000-30,000, and sows cost ₱14,000-15,000.

Juan Lubroth, senior officer of the Infectious Disease Group of FAO's Animal Health Service, has arrived on Wednesday to discuss in detail with government officials how the agency can support in the wider surveillance. The DA and DOH officials and other government agencies met last Thursday to discuss and finalize the procedure in the burning of 6,500 pigs in Pandi, Bulacan.

"The Bureau of Animal Industry and the provincial government of Bulacan, experts carrying out the ₱500,000 five-day depopulation would observe three guidelines, namely: the main disposal, water safety, and environment protection. The depopulation process will involve stunning the pigs unconscious, burning them in a 6-foot deep pit, then burying them at the site. We want to make sure that our means would not violate the Animal Welfare Act. We are also ensuring that there would be no seepage," Governor Mendoza explained.

"Local authorities have decided to use electric prods and a ₱70,000 captive bolt pistol with a blunt rod to stun the 6,000 pigs in Pandi, prior to slaughter burning using rice hulls before burying them in a pit dug inside the hog farm," said Dr. Davinio Catbagan.

"About 40 health workers — clad in special hog mask suits and are tasked to facilitate the

depopulation — would then dump the pigs into 10 30x30-foot pits that can accommodate 600 pigs each. The pits are located some 30 feet from the infected pig farm," said Mr Eric Tayag, head of the National Epidemiology Centre. "The cull could take up to seven days to complete," Mr Tayag added. A truckload of disinfectants was prepared amid rice husks to be used in the burning.

The Pandi culling will be the first large-scale depopulation because of a disease, according to Samuel B. Animas, chief of BAI's animal health division. "Only one to three pigs are slaughtered at a time in backyard farms during the foot and mouth disease infection [in the 1990s]," he added.

Meanwhile, at the 18th hog farmers convention, which was launched on Monday at Club Filipino, the president of the National Federation of Hog Farmers, Albert R. T. Lim, Jr., said hog farmers have feared the effects of Reston ebolavirus virus on industry, since hog exports were banned due to the outbreak. "We are also apprehensive that if we keep on talking about this thing, some people might just misconstrue or misunderstand what they are talking about and people might get scared," Lim said.

The government has spent about ₱10 million to maintain the two quarantined hog farms in Bulacan and Pangasinan. "Anyway, we always have our hog producers in Mindanao to supply Luzon if necessary. I am more concerned about our exports although the Ebola scare also somewhat affected local demand," Lim said.

Amid the nationwide ERV scare and probe, local authorities have

seized more than 200 kilograms of rotten pork meat at a local market in Pasay City Wednesday.

Barangay officials in Maricaban district have intercepted the banned 'hot meat' and arrested Roberto Clet and Rafael Fruelda, who were indicted under the "Consumer Act of the Philippines." The statute punishes the illegal sale of unsafe products like double-dead meat with penalty of ₱1,000 to ₱10,000 and not less than six-months but not more than five years of imprisonment.

Local police has also arrested four vendors and seized their 3,000 kilos of "botcha" (rotten pork meat or "double dead meat") at MC Market in Balintawak, Quezon City Wednesday evening, and allegedly delivered from Bulacan. The four suspects were charged for violation of the Consumer Act of the Philippines and Republic Act 9296 or the Meat Inspection Code.

In December, international experts initially probed outbreak among Philippine pigs, wherein about 6,000 pigs at Pandi and Talavera farms were tested for the Reston ebolavirus.

"There is no salmonella outbreak in Eastern Visayas, Region 8, said Dr. Archie Lluz, Chief of Regional Animal Disease and Diagnostic Laboratory of the Department of Agriculture in the region. But hog specimens from Leyte and Babatngon, where 270 swine deaths and cases of sick pigs were reported, were examined by lab tests. The results revealed cutaneous "Pasteurella hemolytica", a type of bacterial infection which causes swine deaths due to loss of appetite, dehydration, fever and diarrhea.

According to the DA, sick pigs had been culled from Babatngon,

Tacloban City, Alangalang, Santa Fe, Palo, Pastrana, Dagami, Burauen, Tabontabon, Lapaz, Mayorga, and Abuyog in Leyte; Sogod in Southern Leyte; Catbalogan, Calbiga, Daram, and Santa Rita in Samar; and Lope de Vega in Northern Samar. Swine infections have spread to 18 towns and one city in Eastern Visayas.

The Reston ebolavirus is suspected to be a subtype of the Ebola virus or a new filovirus of Asian origin. It was first discovered in crab-eating macaques from the Philippines at a laboratory in Reston, Virginia. The same lab then recorded an outbreak of viral hemorrhagic fever among monkeys imported from the Philippines in 1990. The Reston ebolavirus strain was discovered among monkeys in the Philippines in 1996, and in Italy in 1992.

African strains of the virus caused deaths of about 50 percent to 90 percent of those infected with prior symptoms of lethal bleeding and organ failure, the WHO said. "Since the 1970s, scientists, veterinarians, microbiologists and physicians have been looking at thousands of species to see if they can find this elusive reservoir, and we have been pretty much empty-handed," Juan Lubroth, head of infectious diseases in the animal health unit of the Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome, explained.

"Unlike the three subtypes, Zaire, Sudan and Ivory Coast, which can cause hemorrhagic symptoms, Reston does not. There has been no evidence that Reston can cause significant illness in humans. When Reston was previously found in monkeys, few animal handlers were infected but only one had very mild symptoms," the DOH's official website announced.

In January 1997, the Philippines Department of Environment and Natural Resources ordered the immediate slaughter of some 600 monkeys in Ferlite, a breeding farm in Laguna, to prevent an outbreak of Reston ebolavirus.

Today in History

161 – Following the death of Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus agreed to become co-Emperors in an unprecedented arrangement in the Roman Empire.

1799 – Napoleonic Campaign in Egypt: Forces of Napoleon I of France captured Jaffa, present-day Israel, and then proceeded to kill more than two thousand Albanian captives.

1862 – American Civil War: Union forces engaged Confederate troops in Pea Ridge, Arkansas, fighting to a victory one day later that essentially cemented their control in Missouri.

1936 – Nazi German forces re-occupied the demilitarized Rhineland, violating both the Treaty of Versailles and the Locarno Treaties that were signed after World War I.

1950 – The Soviet Union issued a statement denying that German nuclear physicist Klaus Fuchs had served as a Soviet spy.

March 07 is Teachers' Day in Albania

Quote of the Day

Three things are necessary for the salvation of man: to know what he ought to believe; to know what he ought to desire; and to know what he ought to do.

~ Thomas Aquinas

Word of the Day

Tom Jones n

1. (rare) A desirable man of loose morals, prone to having sex with many women.

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