

NEWS DIGEST

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African virus may be spreading

■ A strain of encephalitis, transmitted by mosquitoes, kills four and infects 37 New Yorkers.

NEW YORK (AP) — A rare African strain of encephalitis that has already killed four people around New York City could spread to other parts of the country as infected birds fly south for the winter, health officials said Tuesday.

The virus is transmitted to humans by mosquitoes that have bitten infected birds. New York City, New Jersey and Connecticut have been spraying pesticides to kill mosquitoes, and scientists in southern states are testing dead birds there for the virus.

The African strain has never before been seen in the Western Hemisphere.

So far, there is no evidence that the virus has spread outside the New York City area, and the fed-

eral Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has not made any recommendation as to what other states should do.

But "it's possible that it could be seen in other parts of the country," said Dr. Ned Hayes, a CDC epidemiologist.

Thirty-seven people, including the four who died, have tested positive for the West Nile-like virus in the New York metropolitan area since August. The cause of their ailments was reclassified Tuesday by the CDC, which originally blamed the similar St. Louis strain.

Encephalitis is an inflammation of the brain. The symptoms of West Nile encephalitis — fever and a headache — are similar to those of St. Louis encephalitis but are generally milder. In rare cases, the virus can cause neurological disorders and death. The elderly, the young and those with weakened immune systems are most vulnerable.

The disease is not transmitted from person to

person or from birds to people.

As of Tuesday, the virus had not appeared in any dead birds — mostly crows — being tested in areas from Maryland to Florida, said Roger Nasci, a CDC entomologist. He said the number of dead birds in those Southern regions is within the norm.

New York State Health Commissioner Dr. Antonia Novello said 520 dead birds — most of them crows — have turned up from Connecticut to Suffolk County on Long Island. In Suffolk, officials also are investigating the deaths of nine horses.

Scores of dead birds in New Jersey have also been sent for testing.

Dead birds that tested positive for the West Nile virus include one in Westport, Conn., and another in Scarsdale in Westchester County, north of New York City.

The West Nile strain probably entered the United States in infected birds, officials said. But exactly how isn't clear.

High court to rule on victims' rights

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court agreed Tuesday to judge the constitutionality of a federal law that lets rape victims sue their attackers, a test of how far Congress can go in fighting sex discrimination.

The justices, who have curtailed Congress' power in recent years, will decide whether former Virginia Tech student, Christy Brzonkala, can sue two football players under a provision of the 1994 Violence Against Women Act. She says they raped her.

A federal appeals court threw out the lawsuit, saying Congress' power to regulate interstate commerce and assure equal protection to all citizens did not authorize it to allow rape victims to sue their attackers for financial damages.

The Clinton administration, which filed its own appeal to the top court, told the justices the appeals court ruling "places unwarranted limits on Congress' authority to address a national problem of the first magnitude." Gender-based violence harms victims' ability to work and costs the economy billions of dollars a year, government lawyers said.

Brzonkala's lawyer, Martha Davis of the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, said she hopes the Supreme Court "will draw a line around the decisions they've been reaching recently to rein in Congress' power and recognize Congress' his-

toric responsibility when dealing with gender discrimination."

But Michael E. Rosman, a lawyer for Antonio J. Morrison, one of the athletes, said, "We feel confident" the justices will invalidate the provision allowing lawsuits over gender-based violence.

The justices will hear arguments this winter, and a decision is expected by late June.

Brzonkala, who has allowed her name to be disclosed, became the first person to utilize the federal law when, in late 1995, she sued Morrison and James Crawford, alleging they raped her in a dormitory room. She did not report the alleged rape for several months. No criminal charges were filed against the two men.

Morrison and Crawford challenged the constitutionality of the provision letting rape victims sue their attackers, and a federal judge in Virginia ruled for them.

A three-judge panel of the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals reinstated Brzonkala's lawsuit. However, the full 4th Circuit Court ruled 7-4 last March the provision was unconstitutional.

Calling the law's purpose "unquestionably laudable," the appeals court nevertheless ruled that Congress "sought to reach conduct quintessentially within the exclusive purview of the states."

Thousands fleeing Russian airstrikes

MAKHACHKALA, Russia (AP) — Regions around the restive Russian republic of Chechnya faced a humanitarian crisis Tuesday as tens of thousands of frightened Chechens fled a sixth day of Russian airstrikes.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said Russia was not planning another ground war, after the one that devastated Chechnya in 1994-96. But he cautioned that "other possible steps would be considered" if the airstrikes failed to wipe out rebel operations.

Chechnya-based Islamic rebels have twice invaded neighboring Dagestan in recent weeks, and are blamed for a series of apartment explosions in Russia that killed some 300 people this month. Russia says its air campaign is aimed at the rebels, not at Chechnya's government or people.

But Chechen officials said eight people were killed when a schoolhouse was bombed on Tuesday in the village of Staraya Sunzha on the outskirts of Grozny, the Chechen capital, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported. The military said Tuesday's raids also hit a television station, oil derricks and industrial facilities.

The raids have terrified ordinary Chechens. About 60,000 have fled to the neighboring republic of Ingushetia, according to Ingush President Ruslan Aushev. Between 8,000 to 12,000 more have headed for the neighboring regions of Dagestan, North Ossetia and Stavropol, the

Federal Migration Service reported, according to the ITAR-Tass news agency.

The exodus threatens to overwhelm the already-meager facilities in the impoverished Caucasus region.

"We urgently need humanitarian aid — temporary housing, warm clothes and blankets — because we are on the doorstep of winter," Aushev said.

Russian Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu flew to Ingushetia on Tuesday and ordered that refugee camps be set up within 24 hours.

Shoigu also ordered that the Defense Ministry be informed of the camps' locations to keep them "safe against Russian anti-guerrilla air raids," Interfax reported. It was not clear if this meant Russia was considering expanding the airstrikes to regions outside Chechnya.

The minister called the situation serious, but said talk of a refugee disaster was premature.

"The government will not allow a catastrophe," Shoigu said, according to Interfax. He added that 40 tons of aid, including tents, food and blankets, would be flown to Ingushetia soon.

There is only one refugee camp set up, accommodating 850 people, Interfax reported. Thousands of people who fled in cars were backed up several miles on Tuesday at the Ingushetia border.



Los Angeles Beatty may address possible campaign

LOS ANGELES (AP) — More than seven weeks after he hinted at a White House run, Warren Beatty is still teasing the political and entertainment worlds about his intentions. That is unlikely to change with his anticipated speech Wednesday, friends and associates say.

Beatty is to be honored in Beverly Hills by a group that shares his liberal philosophy, the Southern California Americans for Democratic Action.

"I've just heard he wants to lay out a specific set of policies and issues, and does not plan to lay out his intentions of whether he plans to seek the Democratic nomination or any nomination for president," said Art Torres, chairman of the state Democratic Party.

Washington Congress OKs keeping agencies open for 3 weeks

WASHINGTON (AP) — With fiscal 2000 dawning Friday, Congress approved a resolution Tuesday to keep federal agencies open for three weeks as the GOP and White House grapple over schools, public housing and other issues that have delayed spending bills.

White House officials have said President Clinton would sign the bill. That would avert for now the possibility of a federal shutdown, which neither party — especially the Republicans — wants at this point.

The three-week grace period would give Republicans time to smooth internal disputes and pass as many of the remaining spending bills as they can.

London Pinochet's lawyers say Spain has no case

LONDON (AP) — Torture charges filed against Gen. Augusto Pinochet cannot be tied to him, and some of them amount to little more than "low-level" police brutality, the former Chilean dictator's lawyers argued Tuesday.

During the second day of a hearing to determine whether Spanish prosecutors can extradite him, Pinochet's lawyers contended Spain has no authority to try the former dictator because neither he nor his alleged victims are Spanish.

Bradley proposes health care plan

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Presidential candidate Bill Bradley unveiled a \$65 billion plan Tuesday to dramatically expand the federal health care system, and accused Al Gore of shying away from the challenge to insure all Americans.

Bradley, who called health care coverage an unalienable right — as much as the guarantees of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" — would allow Americans to enroll in the same health care coverage provided for members of Congress and federal employees, potentially exploding the size of the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program.

The poor would get subsidies, parents would be told to seek insurance for their newborns, the Medicaid system would largely be scrapped and tax breaks would go to all Americans who

pay insurance premiums.

Gore's campaign called Bradley's plan to provide universal coverage "wildly unrealistic" and "wildly expensive," defending the vice president's more limited approach that would expand federal efforts to insure all children and incrementally extend coverage to uninsured adults.

Bradley, for his part, made clear what he thought of the Gore plan. "I think that what he has proposed is definitely timid compared to what we have proposed," he said at a news conference following the speech.

The sweeping, expensive nature of the program fits with Bradley's promise to be the candidate of "big ideas." But his proposal also opens the former New Jersey senator to criticism that he is pushing liberal, big-government solutions to a complicated problem.

Mindful of the failure of President Clinton's 1993 health care plan, Bradley said he would not create "a massive bureaucracy."

Bradley is mounting a stiff challenge to Gore in early primary states, largely because of his support among independents and moderate Democrats. Yet, on health care and other issues, Bradley is generally more liberal-leaning than the vice president as he seeks to carve into Gore's political base.

Under his plan, people and families at or near the poverty line would get subsidies, either for private insurance or to opt into the expanded federal system.

Americans of all incomes and ages would be able to exclude from their taxable income whatever they pay in health care premiums, a benefit Bradley designed for middle-class Americans who don't qualify for subsidies.

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