

WORLD

China detects new case of H5N6 bird flu in Xinjiang region

Reuters | Beijing

China's agriculture ministry said yesterday it had found a new case of highly pathogenic H5N6 avian flu in a flock of about 150 wild swans in the

western Xinjiang region. One had died and another was sick, it said in a statement on its website. The ministry reported a case of the same strain of bird flu in swans in the region last week.

Taliban show 'willingness' to reduce Afghan violence



The US-Taliban talks were aimed at allowing Washington to begin withdrawing troops in return for various security guarantees

Islamabad

Pakistan's foreign minister yesterday said the Taliban has shown "a willingness" to reduce violence in war-torn Afghanistan after more than 18 years fighting the US, sparking speculation that a potential breakthrough in talks with the Americans may be near.

Negotiations between the Taliban and the US have repeatedly stalled, with Washington calling on the insurgent group to reduce violence before they can resume.

"Today, positive progress has been made, the Taliban have shown their willingness to reduce the violence, which was a demand... it's a step towards the peace agreement," said Pakistani foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi in a video statement.

He gave no further details. Zabihullah Mujahid, the official Taliban spokesman, told AFP the Taliban was looking into the comments.

The Taliban and the US were on the brink of announcing a withdrawal deal in September last year when President Donald Trump abruptly declared the process "dead", citing Taliban violence.

Talks were later restarted between the two sides in December in Qatar, but were paused following an attack near the Bagram military base in Afghanistan.

Islamabad has helped facilitate the talks between the militants and Washington in Qatar over the past year, seeking an agreement that would pave the way for a US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in return for various security promises from the insurgents.

Putin's new PM promises 'real changes' for Russians

Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin's new prime minister promised "real changes" on Thursday as he was approved by lawmakers after the Kremlin announced sweeping reform plans.

Putin tapped Mikhail Mishustin for the role as part of a series of bombshell announcements on Wednesday, which sparked speculation that Russia's long-time leader could be preparing his own political future.

The lower house State Duma voted overwhelmingly to approve Mishustin as premier, less than 24 hours after Russia's political order was shaken by Putin's announcement of constitutional reforms and the resignation of the government.

No MPs voted against his candidacy, although Communist lawmakers abstained.

Speaking before his approval, Mishustin called on parliament to work with him to urgently enact Putin's programme.

"People should already now be feeling real changes for the better," Mishustin said.

Longtime prime minister Dmitry Medvedev resigned along with the cabinet following the constitutional reform announcement.

Putin's current term as president ends in 2024 and observers say the 67-year-old could be laying the groundwork to assume a new position or remain in a powerful behind-the-scenes role.

Mishustin said his priority would be to "increase citizens' real incomes" but also said the government must "restore trust" with the business community and drive innovation,



Putin proposed significant changes to the country's constitution



Mikhail Mishustin has led Russia's Federal Tax Service since 2010

echoing the state-of-the-nation speech when Putin announced the reforms.

He assured lawmakers that Russia can afford salary hikes and social payouts announced by Putin, estimating they will cost about four trillion rubles (\$65 billion) over the next four years.

His appointment was finalised with a Putin decree. A second decree appointed Medvedev as deputy head of Russia's Security Council -- an advisory body -- a post that was created for him.

'Stay number one'

In his state of the nation speech, Putin said he wanted more authority transferred to parliament from the president.

He also called for the power of the State Council to be expanded and enshrined in the

constitution -- adding to conjecture that Putin could take it over after 2024 to preserve power.

Outlining the proposals, which would be the first significant changes to the country's constitution since it was adopted in 1993, Putin said there was a "demand for change" among Russians.

While his nominee Mishustin was speaking in parliament, Putin met his newly formed working group for amending the constitution.

Putin said the amendments "would have no effect on the foundations of the constitution" but would make authorities "more effective" and ensure Russia's development.

He said Russia would remain a presidential republic following the reforms, but it would be parliament not the president who would be picking the gov-

"
We decided to unanimously support the candidature suggested by our national leader for the post of the head of government

THE HEAD OF UNITED RUSSIA'S PARLIAMENTARY FACTION, SERGEI NEVEROV

ernment.

Opposition leader Alexei Navalny said on Twitter that Putin's only goal was to "remain the sole leader for life".

Medvedev, prime minister since 2012, posted a parting message on his VK social networking page yesterday, saying Putin's plans "demand a new approach" and thanking cabinet ministers for their work.

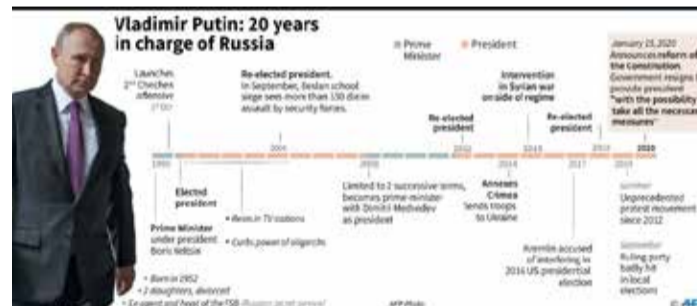
Hockey and pop music

Mishustin will have a week to propose a new government and ministers.

The former head of an investment group who trained as an engineer, Mishustin has a PhD in economics and has led Russia's Federal Tax Service since 2010.

He shares Putin's love for hockey and has played in matches with security services officials. Passionate about the digital economy, he has also composed music for pop songs, newspaper Vedomosti reported.

Navalny, who has alleged wide-scale corruption among Russia's top politicians, yesterday said Mishustin possesses a fortune inconsistent with his public service career and called on insiders to share information about his secrets.



Sheep rescued from capsized ship await adoption in Romania

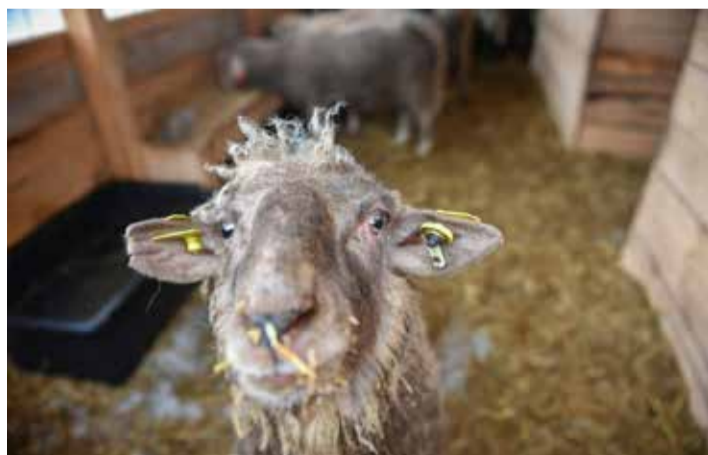
● The Palau-flagged Queen Hind cargo vessel overturned with 14,600 sheep aboard in the Black Sea in late November

Peris | Romania

The 180 sheep rescued from a cargo ship that capsized carrying 14,600 animals are staying in a shelter in Romania as they wait to be moved to sanctuaries or adopted, an activist group said Wednesday.

The sheep will spend the winter in a modern barn at a refuge in Peris, a rural town some 30 kilometres (19 miles) from the capital Bucharest.

"They were born a second time," Kuki Barbuceanu, head of Animal Rescue and Care (ARCA), the group which led the rescue operations, said.



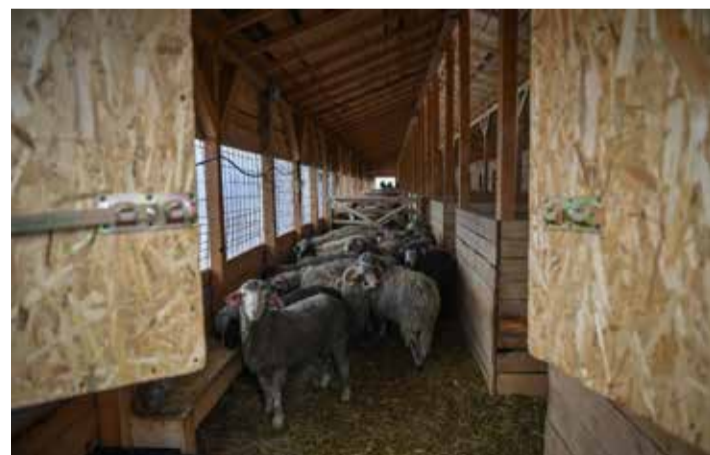
One of the 180 sheep saved from a capsized ship who will be able to live out their days after an outpouring of sympathy from the Romanian public

The Palau-flagged Queen Hind cargo vessel overturned with 14,600 sheep aboard in the Black Sea in late November for as yet unknown reasons shortly after leaving the port of Midia in southeast Romania.

The 21 crew members were all rescued, but only 180 sheep could be saved from the Saudi

Arabia-bound vessel. Barbuceanu said the sheep trapped inside the ship that didn't drown or were crushed to death died of thirst during the days when rescuers couldn't reach them.

Those that survived are largely healthy though some of them cough and others have suffered



The rescued sheep are sheltered for the winter in a modern barn, waiting to be moved to a sanctuary or be adopted

sprains.

"They will not be sacrificed and can take it easy until the end of their life, 12 to 15 years, because they deserve it," Barbuceanu said.

In spring, the sheep will be able to graze in the field surrounding the refuge that hosts them, together with five horses,

two donkeys and several dogs and cats.

As soon as the issue of ownership is resolved, some will be transferred to sanctuaries or given up for adoption.

Many Romanians, moved by the fate of the sheep, have donated money, including for their current upkeep, which amounts

to 5,000 euros (\$5,600) per month, including the rent for the refuge.

Nearly three months after the sinking, the freighter still lies on its side, a few hundred metres from the quay, while the carcasses have still not been removed.

But the authorities announced Wednesday that the port administration has awarded a tender launched in December to recover the vessel and burn the corpses.

Barbuceanu hopes that the disaster will have a long-term impact and convince Brussels to ban the transport of livestock.

Romania is the third-biggest producer of sheep in the European Union and has exported millions in the past two years, in particular to Jordan and Libya.

Animal rights groups have already criticised the conditions under which such shipments take place, especially during hot summer months.