



Java Mud Mystery

A massive flow of noxious, steaming mud that began spewing from the depths of the earth at an Indonesian gas well in May has so far forced 12,000 people from their homes. Some geologists said the flow could have been triggered by a crack about 6,000 feet beneath East Java province's Banjar Panji exploratory well. But a group of international experts now believes the mudflow might be a natural phenomenon, which could continue to spew until underground pressure is finally released 10 to 100 years from now. Gushing out at more than 1.7 million cubic feet per day, the mud has submerged half a dozen villages and 20 factories. The disaster is thought to have been caused by gas-charged fluids breaching coral mounds on top of limestone rock, a "magmatic" reaction generating gas, a newborn mud volcano or hydrothermal fluids arriving from neighboring areas.

Antarctic Ozone Hole

The hole in Earth's protective layer of stratospheric ozone over Antarctica was larger during the just-ended southern winter than last year, and U.N. weather experts say it neared the record size that occurred in 2000. "The ozone depletion started quite late, but when it started it came quite rapidly," said Geir Braathen, the World Meteorological Organization's top ozone expert. While use of ozone-depleting chemicals has waned since a worldwide ban went into force in 1989, Braathen said large amounts of chlorine and bromine remain in the atmosphere and will keep causing large holes in the ozone level over Antarctica for decades. Ozone depletion causes increased UV exposure and a greater risk of skin cancer.

Alaskan Rumbings

A volcanic mountain near the mouth of Alaska's Cook Inlet appears to be coming back to life after lying dormant for thousands of years. The Alaska Volcano Observatory (AVO) reports that vents in Fourpeaked Mountain are spewing smelly volcanic gasses, and the agency believes that an eruption is possible during the next few weeks. Steve McNutt, acting coordinator for the AVO, said infrasound waves from the rumbling mountain were detected by microphones as far away as Fairbanks. The observatory has installed a network of geophysical instruments at the previously unmonitored mountain.

Amazon Reforestation

The Brazilian state of Acre has launched a project to reforest land in the Amazon previously cleared for ranching. It is establishing a nursery for growing various trees, which will be issued to large landowners. Up to 4 million mahogany, Brazil nut, palms and other trees are to be cultivated, and new laws will require ranchers to use the trees to reforest up to 30 percent of their property. Acre's governor Jorge Viana says he wants to shift the state's economy away from ranching to concentrate on sustainable logging, Brazil nuts, berries, rubber and medicinal plants.

Earthquakes

Two minor earthquakes shook northeastern South Carolina within three days, breaking some windows in Marlboro County.

- Earth movements were also felt in Maine, northwest California, northwestern Argentina, southern Iran, western Japan and Indonesia's Sulawesi Island and Maluku Islands.

Tropical Cyclones

Flash flooding from the remnants of Tropical Storm 17W killed at least three people and inundated homes, farmlands and roads along the central Vietnamese coast. The tropical cyclone had attained storm force for only a brief period before striking the country.

- Typhoon Xangsane, the worst such storm to strike the Philippines in 20 years, killed at least 14 people and caused a massive blackout across Luzon Island. Numerous trees and billboards were toppled by fierce winds at the height of Xangsane's onslaught in Manila, making many roads impassable. The storm was predicted to later strike central Vietnam.
- Cyclone Mukda made a loop across the waters of the Arabian Sea.

Nothing to Sneeze At

A U.S. biotech firm has begun selling what it calls the world's first specially bred hypoallergenic cats. Allerca says it managed to selectively breed the sneeze-free felines by reducing a certain type of protein that triggers allergic reactions. By finding a small portion of the cat population that does not carry the glycoprotein Fel D1 in its saliva, fur and skin, the company was able to breed cats that do not threaten the health and quality of life for millions of cat allergy sufferers. The new cats come in all coat colors and patterns, according to the San Diego-based company. The coat is advertised as medium-length with low maintenance and minimal shedding. Even with a price tag of just under \$4,000 per cat, the company says it already has a waiting list of customers wanting to get one.