



How many women can have a baby in S. Korean cities?

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea’s government has closed a website that drew fury for showing the number of women of childbearing age by each city district and region. The Ministry of the Interior’s website featuring the pink birth map remained closed a day after its launch, showing instead a notice that the site is undergoing corrections. The website went offline after just a few hours following criticism the government is trying to shame women for not having babies. The site also featured a ranking of regions by the number of women between ages 15 and 49. The government had touted it as a tool to increase the public’s understanding of the country’s low birth rate. South Korea is struggling to boost its rock-bottom birth rate, one of the lowest among rich countries.

North Korean defector impressed by Seoul political protests

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — A high-profile North Korean defector has told South Korean lawmakers the massive protests that led to the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye still feels strange to him, but he sees the demonstrations as the country’s strength. The office of lawmaker Lee Cheol Woo said former North Korean diplomat Thae Yong Ho commented in a closed-door briefing to legislators that he was impressed with the South’s democracy because its government continued to function despite the protests. The South Korean government in August announced that Thae, the former North Korean deputy ambassador to London, defected to the South with his family because of his disgust with the North’s government under leader Kim Jong Un.

Cheetah bones, ivory shipped from Mozambique seized

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia (AP) — Cambodia has made one of its biggest seizures ever of smuggled animal parts, including more than a ton of ivory, according to a wildlife protection group. The Wildlife Alliance said 1.3 metric tons of ivory, 10 cheetah skulls, 180 pounds of cheetah bones, and 301 pounds of pangolin scales were found December 16 concealed in three containers shipped from Mozambique. The group said in a statement that another shipment of illicit ivory by the same company was intercepted in Vietnam in October. The Wildlife Alliance said Cambodia has made 19 seizures of ivory and rhino horn from six African countries since 2014. A major international conference on wildlife trafficking was held in November in Vietnam, one of the major transit points and consumers of trafficked ivory and rhino horns. The pangolin is considered the world’s most heavily trafficked mammal, sought for its meat, eaten as a delicacy, and for its scales, which are used in traditional medicine.

James Taylor cancels concert over Duterte’s drug war

MANILA, The Philippines (AP) — James Taylor has cancelled his February 25 concert in Manila, saying reports of summary executions of suspected drug offenders in the Philippines without judicial proceedings are “deeply concerning and unacceptable.” The American singer-songwriter tweeted that he had been looking forward to performing in Manila and that it saddened him to cancel the concert. He apologized to his Filipino fans and said all tickets sold for the performance at Manila’s Mall of Asia Arena would be fully refunded. Since taking office in June, President Rodrigo Duterte has overseen a crackdown on illegal drugs that has left more than 6,000 people dead. While acknowledging that drug addiction is a worldwide problem that seriously harms society, Taylor criticized the anti-drug campaign. “For a sovereign nation to prosecute and punish, under the law, those responsible for illegal trade in drugs is, of course, understandable, even commendable,” Taylor tweeted. “But recent reports from the Philippines of summary executions of suspected offenders without trial or judicial process are deeply concerning and unacceptable to anyone who loves the rule of law.” Dozens of tweets from people reacting to Taylor’s message praised the musician and voiced respect for his stand. Others urged artists to follow his lead, while a handful of Duterte supporters said Taylor should see the situation for himself instead of basing his opinion only on media reports.

Aid groups warn of crisis as Mongolia hit by harsh winter

BEIJING (AP) — Another unusually harsh winter in Mongolia that’s decimating livestock and sending temperatures to minus 70° Fahrenheit may create a humanitarian crisis, with worse conditions still to come, aid groups warn. Save the Children and the International Federation of the Red Cross say this winter will likely see vast swathes of the Mongolian steppe affected by the extreme weather phenomenon known in Mongolia as *dzud*. A *dzud* typically happens once a decade, but could strike for the second consecutive year. The *dzud* last year killed more than 1 million animals, afflicting the majority of Mongolians who depend on livestock for food, milk, and income. The Mongolian government said it met with international organizations including Save the Children, the Red Cross, and the United Nations Development Program to discuss efforts to deliver heating fuel and medical supplies amid “worsening” conditions and heavy snowfall since October. Aid groups say the situation is compounded by last year’s harsh winter and a deep recession amid a market bust for Mongolia’s mineral exports. The country is struggling to repay debt with its hard currency stocks while household savings have also evaporated. Red Cross disaster program manager in Mongolia Davaajargal Batdorj said more livestock deaths are expected this year with far northwestern areas of the country already buried under one yard of snow. The organization will begin sending cash to herder families in the far west in the coming weeks. “It’s a natural disaster on top of an economic crisis,” Davaajargal said.



RYUGYONG MYSTERY. The 105-story, pyramid-shaped Ryugyong Hotel towers over residential apartments that form the skyline of Pyongyang, North Korea. Thirty years after work began on what was then one of the tallest hotel projects ever attempted, the inside of the structure has yet to be completed and mystery swirls over whether it will ever open for guests. (AP Photo/Wong Maye-E)

Huge but empty pyramid hotel a sphinx-like North Korean mystery

By Eric Talmadge
The Associated Press

PYONGYANG, North Korea — Pyongyang’s pyramid-shaped Ryugyong Hotel, which poetically enough was built with some help from Egyptians, is one of the world’s strangest landmarks and most conspicuous construction-project fails. Intended to be the world’s tallest hotel, it has yet to host a guest, even though it’s nearly as old as North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

The perennial mystery: Will it ever?

Nearly 30 years after ground was broken, the tower looms eerily dark in the Pyongyang night, a single light at the top blinking a silent warning to aircraft. By day, residents walk quickly to and from the nearby subway station with nary a glance upward at its 105-story presence.

In December, however, a video showing lights toward the top of the tower, combined with a visit to Pyongyang by the hotel’s Egyptian investors, sparked speculation among foreign Pyongyang watchers that construction was resuming and the hotel might even open in 2017. Not to be outdone, some British tabloids were soon reporting that the hotel had already opened its doors for guests.

Fact check: It hasn’t. And those lights on the upper floors have gone dark again.

But the idea that Kim might be interested in finally finishing the biggest project started in the name of his grandfather, “eternal president” Kim Il Sung, isn’t particularly outlandish. Since assuming power five years ago, Kim has ordered the construction of a number of skyscrapers that have significantly changed the Pyongyang skyline.

And while the possibility something is afoot

at the Ryugyong can’t be ruled out, for the time being Kim appears to be putting his money elsewhere. An apartment building is now nearing completion in the newest project, on Ryomyong Street. It’s about 70 stories and the North’s tallest building outside of the Ryugyong. Earlier this year, a cluster of new, futuristic-looking high-rises was completed on Scientists’ Street, including one at 50 stories.

Construction of the Ryugyong tower began in 1987 and was supposed to take about two years.

For various reasons, it drew on until 1992, which was a very bad year — and the beginning of a very bad decade — for North Korea. The Soviet Union collapsed in late 1991, taking with it most of the North’s communist bloc benefactors and setting the stage for a major economic crisis heightened by a series of droughts and a famine that brought North Korea to the verge of collapse.

The country survived what it now euphemistically calls the “arduous march,” but construction of the Ryugyong didn’t start up again until 2008.

With a \$30-million injection of funds from Egypt’s Orascom Telecommunications Holdings — which was in the country to pursue a joint venture to establish a North Korean cellphone network — the building’s exterior was completed in 2011.

In a prospectus from June 2012, Orascom said it expected the partial completion of the Ryugyong’s 360,000 square meters of floor space, which would include apartments and offices along with hotel facilities, by the end of the year. It added that Orascom was planning to kick in another \$15-million loan “to be repaid when the tower becomes operational.”

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