



A customer samples wines at Vinexpo, Asia's largest wine and spirits exhibition in Hong Kong on May 27, 2008. ANTONY DICKSON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

France to fall from world wine leadership

By AURELIAN GIRARD
Epoch Times Staff

PARIS—Once the biggest wine consumer and exporter in the world, France has just lost its leadership, according to Vinexpo, the organizer of the world largest wine and spirits exhibition.

The trend, already anticipated in 2006, has now been confirmed, and will make Italy the number one consumer in 2009. However, with an anticipated 28 million hectoliters per year (about 3.7 billion bottles), the U.S. will soon beat both France and Italy, each with around "only" 27 million hectoliters—"only," because an average Italian or French-

men will still drink 5 times more wine than an average American, but have populations of around 60 million, compared to the 300 million of the U.S.

Italy will take number one position in 2009 because of both its own stable consumption, and the regular 2 percent annual decline in France.

In 2007, France has also lost its position of first world wine exporter, due to the stagnation of its sales, whereas Italy took the lead with nearly 8 percent annual growth over the last decade.

A consolation for the French, Champaign is still enjoying a high trend, with nearly 5 percent growth a year.



A surf lifesaver patrols the beach on the Gold Coast just north of the Tweed River where a male surfer was attacked by a shark. SERGIO DIONISIO/GETTY IMAGES

Expert blames shark attacks on overfishing

By JOHN MAYNARD
Epoch Times Staff

A noted shark expert in Australia is blaming a spike in shark attacks on overfishing.

Vic Hislop, a veteran shark hunter and known authority on big whites in Australia, says many years of overfishing Australian waters had forced big sharks to seek "gentler" prey, such as dugong, turtles and dolphins.

"That's what's in their stomach now every day," he told Macquarie Radio.

"As the turtles disappear, which is inevitable, and the dugong herds disappear, humans are next in line on the food chain.

"It will definitely get worse."

There have been three shark attacks in two days. Attacks have been recorded in New South Wales, Tasmania and Western Australia in the last few weeks. A 25-year-old man was bitten in the calf on Monday January 12 while snorkelling near a boat ramp at Windang, at the mouth of Lake Illawarra south of Wollongong. Separate attacks last weekend left a 31-year-old male surfer at Tweed Heads, in far north NSW, and a teenage girl in Tasmania, with serious leg wounds.

In the first attack, by a suspected bull shark, the surfer escaped with a 30cm tear to his thigh.

Hours later, a five metre great white shark bit into the leg of 13-year-old Hannah Mighall at Binalong Bay near St Helens, in Tasmania's north-east.

Her older cousin, Syb Mundy, fought off the "monster", describing the scene as something out of the movie Jaws.

"I just remember seeing her head go diagonally down towards the water and then she just disappeared," he said.

"I was just praying for her to come back up and she did, She was slapping it and screaming: 'Get it off me, get it off me'."

"It still had hold of her I think. It came up and settled for a while in the one spot and I just started paddling towards her."

Mr Hislop said humans are as appealing to sharks as any other marine creature.

"Don't ever believe this rubbish about 'they take a bite; they don't like humans,'" he said.

"That is just so wrong. They take a bite and wait for their victim to bleed to death to finish them off. And that's why we escape."

Marine animals bitten by sharks naturally panic, swim around and bleed to death before the shark moves in again to devour them, he explained.

Mr Hislop said he believes commercial fishing levels and the fact great white sharks are protected in Australia would result in more attacks on humans.

"Common sense tells you that you cannot keep fishing out the oceans and protect the end of the food chain. You're heading for disaster."

Dr Wayne Sumpton from the Queensland Department of Primary Industries (DPI), however, says there is no evidence that shark behaviours and patterns of feeding are changing.

"There's nothing out of the ordinary. The patterns of shark movements and when they're around are basically the same as it's been since we've been looking at it," he told the ABC.

"Sharks do move inshore and they do move around a bit, but realistically...more fisherman are fishing in close to shore than out deeper, so you'd expect them - if they're responding to fishing - to be moving away from where the fishing is."

Dr Sumpton said it could be the use of berley (the blood and flesh of fish put in the water by fishermen to lure in bigger fish) that was attracting sharks.

"We always discourage berley in areas where there are bathers and these sorts of things. It's pretty irresponsible to do it in estuaries and those sorts of places."

Dr Sumpton says this time of year always sees increased shark movements because it is spawning season.

Mass protests in Sofia, Bulgaria, after protest ban

By KREMENA KRUMOVA
Epoch Times Staff

SOFIA, Bulgaria—During recent protests in Bulgaria, twenty buses with nearly 1000 policemen gathered on Jan. 14 at the National Parliament building in Sofia, the capital, to disperse almost 2000 people protesting against the government. At least 17 protestors and six police officers were injured in the clashes, according to AFP.

The BGNES news agency reported that protesters were throwing snowballs and heavy stones, injuring policeman and smashing windows of nearby shops. More than 50 protestors have so far been arrested, while ambulances are periodically transporting injured citizens to hospitals. Tensions constantly escalating.

Clashes started after Sofia Mayor Boyko Borisov issued a ban of anti-government protests. He said he did so after receiving word from the Ministry of Interior that a bomb will be exploded at the square before Parliament, during the protest. Mass protests initiated by stu-

dent, ecological, political, rural and other civic groups unsatisfied with government policies are planned to be held on Jan. 14, 15 and 16 in front of the Parliament, the Council of the Ministry, and President's office.

Bulgaria, a recent member of the European Union, is currently being ruled by a triple coalition consisting of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, the liberal-oriented National Movement Simeon II (named after King Simeon Koburg-Gotha, who is chair of the party) and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (lead by Muslim minority representatives).

According to Reuters, 70 percent of the 7.6 million population of Bulgaria want the government brought down, while 75% do not approve of governmental policies, due to lack of progress in fighting against corruption.

Last year, Transparency International, an international anti-corruption group, declared Bulgaria the most corrupt country in the European Union, as well as the poorest.



Recent anti-government protests in Bulgaria saw the police send out armed guards in response. DIMITAR DILKOFF/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

EU premiers plead with Ukraine and Russia for gas

MOSCOW/KIEV (Reuters)—EU states cut off for days from Russian gas in freezing temperatures pleaded with Moscow and Kiev on Wednesday to end wrangling which has stalled a deal to restore fuel supplies.

But Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, returning from high-level talks in Moscow and Kiev, said he did not expect Russian gas supplies via Ukraine to resume soon.

"The course of the talks allows us to state that we cannot expect early resumption of gas supplies to Slovakia," Fico told a news conference after returning from Moscow where he and Bulgarian Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev met Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

European Commission chief Jose Manuel Barroso called the crisis "unacceptable and incredible" and said the EU executive would advise the bloc's firms to sue Russian and Ukrainian energy companies unless gas supplies were restored quickly.

The Kremlin called a gas users' summit in Moscow for Saturday, inviting EU chiefs, European states that use Russian gas and transit states.

Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko backed the idea but opposed Moscow as a venue and

in Brussels there was concern the summit could be a Russian attempt to divide the bloc, which has so far been relatively unified in its line in the dispute.

A deal brokered by the EU, which gets a quarter of its gas from Russia, was supposed to get supplies moving on Tuesday, with international monitors in place to ensure that Ukraine was not siphoning off any gas, as Moscow has alleged.

Russia began pumping gas meant for Europe via Ukraine on Tuesday but the EU said little or none was flowing yet to countries downstream suffering urgent energy shortages.

Russia accused Ukraine of deliberately cutting gas to Europe while Kiev said Russia had so far provided so little gas there was not enough pressure in the pipelines to pump it on.

Slovakia and Bulgaria, whose leaders visited the two protagonists on Wednesday, are among the worst affected EU states. They called for a swift end to the crisis, with signs that patience is wearing thin with both sides.

"The biggest risk for both Russia and Ukraine is the issue of trust," Stanishev told Putin.

"The dispute has been running for a few years but it should not turn

third countries into hostages," he said. Temperatures plunged as low as minus 21 Celsius this week in Bulgaria.

Fico told his Ukrainian counterpart Yulia Tymoshenko in Kiev that his country had just 11 days of gas reserves left.

"After 12 days, we will be obliged to resort to measures never seen in our history. May I simply ask how long this will go on?" he asked Tymoshenko.

Slovakian officials later said, however, they had secured new supplies to cover consumption until the end of January.

Slovakia, which gets almost all its gas from Russia, declared a state of emergency on January 6, under which gas deliveries to large clients were reduced. About 1,000 companies were forced to shut down or cut production.

The Slovakian government said Fico had stressed Ukraine's responsibility for the crisis and said it had "negatively affected Ukraine's credibility."

Tymoshenko told Fico that Ukraine was "the same hostage in the dispute as the European Union" while Russia's Putin told his visitors the European Union should put more pressure on Kiev.

"In my view, European officials could do more to put pressure on the transit country to ensure European interests," he said.

The gas dispute has hit 18 countries in the depths of winter, shutting down factories and leaving householders shivering.

EU president Barroso told the European Parliament that failure to honour supply agreements would mean Russia and Ukraine could no longer be regarded as reliable.

"If the agreement sponsored by the EU is not honoured, the Commission will advise EU companies to take this matter to the courts," he told EU lawmakers.

Gazprom is demanding Kiev hand over \$614 million for unpaid gas bills and pay \$450 per 1,000 cubic meters of gas in 2009. That is similar to rates paid by EU customers but a big rise on last year's price of \$179.5.

Analysts in Kiev say Ukraine, saddled with debt and hard hit by the global slowdown, cannot afford that price.

The gas row reflects poor political relations between Russia and Ukraine. Moscow is vehemently opposed to moves by Ukraine's pro-Western leadership to join the U.S.-led NATO alliance.

Drug war in Mexico hurts U.S.

CONTINUED FROM FRONT P1

"As you look at these events as they take place in the cities, the homicides and so forth, what you're finding is that the cartels have that capability in carrying out violence in inner cities around the United States," Burton said. "So they can, for example, order a hit from Mexico inside the United States. They can order a home invasion. They can order a kidnapping."

The war taking place between the cartels in various border towns are over the control of trade routes into the U.S. and other spots of interest to the DTOs. Yet beyond that, the cartels are gaining influence over crime in the U.S. through their connections with street gangs and criminal enterprises.

"As you look at it from the aspect of homeland security, meaning we invaded Afghanistan, we've invaded Iraq, under the auspices of the war on terror to secure our homeland here, and yet we have violent insurgent-kind of activities taking place in Mexico with cross-border operations, cross-border abductions," he said.

Mexico's President Calderón is making the drug war a main priority. When he took office in 2006 he deployed thousands of military troops and federal police officers to various spots in Mexico to try and end the operations of the drug cartels. A war has raged between the cartels and Mexican forces since.

An estimated four cartels control most territory in Mexico. The cartels are among the primary smugglers of drugs such as methamphetamine, marijuana, cocaine, and heroine into the United States. Street gangs within the U.S. then act as contacts who distribute the drugs. The cartels also carry out their own criminal operations inside the U.S., such as kidnappings and the murdering

of rivals.

"We've had cross-border abductions, we've had children snatched in cities like Austin," Burton said. "We've had cartel members dressed up like Phoenix S.W.A.T. cops take down a Jamaican drug dealer's house and kill a drug dealer [then] get involved in a firefight with the cops."

The Mexican cartels control the drug distribution networks within many U.S. cities including Atlanta, Dallas, and Phoenix. "Which also means they control the street violence and crime, because again, it's about geography and the supply chain," Burton said. "This is not just a border issue. This is an issue that affects our entire country."

According to Alex Alonso, an expert on U.S. street gangs and the founder of the website, www.streetgangs.com, it is relatively easy for the cartels to seek out drug buyers and distributors. "I could probably go to Phoenix and find out who the main drug dealers are in a matter of days," said Alonso. "If you're talking about a Mexican cartel that has resources and the strength, it's not going to be too difficult to find out who is a good contact on the U.S. side."

"You've got a handful of gangs in these cities on the U.S. side and it's pretty easy to make a connection with the gangs there because they're always trying to make money," he said.

"I would agree that the street gang situation is very disorganized. But what you do see is that there are always a handful of individuals in one particular gang that have that business savvy. That's either the individual that's going to be sought after by a cartel or that's the individual who is going to look to better his financial situation by trying to create these connections and networks."

In the face of the growing conflict, Mexican officials have called

for more support from the U.S. Maureen Meyer, the associate for Mexico and Central America from the Washington Office on Latin America said that the issue will play a major role in the connection between the U.S. and Mexico.

"I do think there are ways to work with Mexico to tackle this drug-related violence," said Meyer. "It's going to be a key part of the relationship for President-elect Obama and Calderón for the next few years."

According to Meyer, the conflict is making life very difficult for people living in Mexico. "We've seen a lot of schools that have been closing

down, given threats to the teachers, bodies are appearing in different parts of the cities. It's just a mentally taxing situation where you're faced with the violence all the time. It's not something you can avoid anymore because it's on the street on a day-to-day basis," she said.

"This is a long-term problem and I don't think there's any magic bullet to how to address drug problems and drug violence in Mexico and in the United States."

"As long as there's a demand for drugs in the United States there will be a way for drugs to come into the country."

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