

Avalanches sweep through Swiss, Italian Alpine slopes

BOLZANO, Italy (AP) — Avalanches swept down Alpine slopes at the height of the ski season Monday, killing three skiers in Italy and three in Switzerland.

In Italy, back-to-back avalanches in the northern Venosta Valley trapped a group of seven Germans and one Italian skiing on an unauthorized route, alpine rescue official Luigi Weger said.

Searchers recovered the bodies of two women and one man and accounted for the remaining five skiers, Weger said. At least one was hospitalized with severe hypothermia. The valley is about 90 miles from the northern Italian city of Bolzano.

In Switzerland, police blamed an avalanche near the popular Davos ski resort on a German man and his son who skied into an area of deep snow despite avalanche warnings.

The two set off a snowslide that covered the father and two Swiss men skiing farther down the mountain on a prepared course, police said. Only the son survived.

Recent heavy snowfall followed by blue skies and sunshine Monday had prompted avalanche alerts in Switzerland and Italy.

In central Switzerland, an avalanche next to a children's ski area caught an adult and three children at the Lasenberg



ski area near Erlenbach. The adult and two of the children managed to climb the snow by themselves and pulled a 6-year-old girl to safety. Italian schools are out this week for what is known as "white week," freeing pupils for family ski trips. Many Swiss youngsters also are given week-long vacations during the winter — most frequently in February — to go skiing. In 1999, alpine avalanches killed 12 people in Italy and 36 in Switzerland, according to an Italian avalanche center.

KGB to penetrate Russia's Internet

MOSCOW (AP) — The successor to the KGB is now also spying on the Internet, raising fears that the information it collects could be used for blackmail and business espionage.

"The whole Federal Security Service will be crying tomorrow over your love letters," warns one of the banners angry Russian Web designers have posted on the Internet.

Russian human-rights and free-speech advocates say the security service has already forced many of the country's 350 Internet service providers to install surveillance equipment.

"Most Internet providers in Moscow, including all the large providers and many in the provinces, have opened a hole" for security agents to peep at traffic, said Anatoly Levenchuk, a Russian Internet expert.

Like its counterparts in other countries, the Federal Security Service may argue it needs the monitoring system to catch spies, terrorists and bandits, and to combat black-market businesses and capital flight.

The system has raised particular alarm in Russia, where memories of KGB surveillance and repression remain fresh. And the abundance of secretly filmed, juicy videotapes and transcripts of telephone conversations in Russia seems to justify the fear of blackmail by renegade security agents or others who get hold of the information.

Free-speech activists fear that the Internet surveillance is evidence of the security services' resurgence under acting President Vladimir Putin, a 15-year KGB veteran. They have already accused him of chipping away at press freedoms championed by former President Boris Yeltsin.

Last week, a government official for the first time publicly acknowledged the existence of the Internet control project, called the System of Operative and Investigative Procedures or SORM-2, its Russian acronym.

Alexei Rokotyan, the Communications Ministry's electronic communications department chief, denied that the project was aimed at "total control of the information that is transmitted via the global network."

"Security organs and special forces have the right — and now the capability — to monitor private correspondence and telephone conversations of individual citizens according to the law," *The Moscow Times* daily quoted him as saying.

Levenchuk and others said the Federal Security Service has been quietly implementing the system at least since 1998. "As you look at all these Orwellian things you understand it's coming — total control, total surveillance," Levenchuk told a round table held in St. Petersburg.

Federal Security Service officials apparently view the steps simply as an extension of SORM regulations enacted in the mid-1990s, which allow security agents with a warrant to tap telephones and Internet traffic.

At a series of meetings with Internet providers in 1998, security service officials described a system that would involve a box installed in providers' computers that would route electronic traffic to the local security service headquarters through a high-speed link.

The project still seems a far cry from Echelon, a high-tech spying network which, according to a European Parliament report, is coordinated by the U.S. National Security Agency and involves "routine and indiscriminate" monitoring of electronic communications around the world.

Russia's Internet freedom activists are still raising the alarm. Levenchuk's www.libertarium.ru site is filled with accounts from mostly provincial providers that say they were forced to install SORM-2 equipment.

Coca crops continue to thrive

RIO NEGRO, Colombia (AP) — In nearly a decade of U.S.-sponsored fumigation, planes have sprayed hundreds of thousands of gallons of herbicide on illicit drug crops in vast expanses of Colombia's highlands and rainforests.

Drug cultivation in the world's No. 1 cocaine-producing nation is at a record high and climbing. Crop yields are also improving as traffickers plant more potent strains of coca and opium poppy, the sources of cocaine and heroin.

The stubbornness of the plants seems matched only by the determination of U.S. and Colombian officials to continue the chemical counterattacks.

As President Andres Pastrana awaits action in the U.S. Congress on a \$1.6 billion aid package that will fund an accelerated spraying effort, estimates show coca cultivation up 20 to 30 percent last year. Since 1998, it has more than doubled, according to the Colombian and U.S. figures.

Pastrana, who expressed reservations about fumigation's effectiveness during his first months in office, has toned down the criticism and now welcomes the U.S. assistance.

"If anyone has been tough on trafficking it's me," he told *The Associated Press* earlier this month. Colombian and U.S. officials, including White House drug czar George W. Bush, who arrives Tuesday for a three-day visit, argue that drug use would be expanding even more rapidly if there wasn't any attempt to curb their proliferation.

Even a recent effort to show the spraying effort ended up highlighting the many questions surrounding it, including its distressing impact on this Andean nation's diverse and fragile ecosystem.

Flying with anti-narcotics police an opium poppy field in the southwestern state of Huila, the view of the Bell 212 helicopter window is filled with huge scars in the forests, of what is denuded by clear-cutting.

"That's the ecological crime of narcotics," national police spokesman Carlos Perdomo says, gesturing at deforested ridges around Rio Negro.

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