

# KENYA FOCUSES ON STRONG HEALTH SYSTEM

**NAIROBI:** When Grace's five-year-old daughter was admitted to hospital in Kenya with a chest infection, she didn't suspect HIV. It was only four years later, when Grace became so ill she had to be carried to hospital, that she found they were both HIV positive. The pair now receive free, world-class treatment at one of the capital's top private hospitals. Most of the 3,000 patients at Mater Hospital's Comprehensive Care Clinic, dedicated to HIV/AIDS treatment, come from nearby shanty towns. It is entirely donor funded, mainly by the United States President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). "If I hadn't come here I would be dead," said Grace, a 32-year-old single mother from Nairobi's Fuata Nyayo slum, who declined to give her full name.

Earmarked funding from donors like PEPFAR and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria has benefited millions of people like Grace. In Kenya, HIV prevalence among

adults has almost halved since the mid-1990s to 5.3 percent in 2014, according to UNAIDS. Around 60 percent of Kenya's annual \$1.25 billion health budget is spent on HIV/AIDS, the Thomson Reuters Foundation calculated, using government and UNAIDS figures. Of that, about three quarters comes from international sources, UNAIDS says.

Yet HIV/AIDS remains the leading cause of death in Kenya, responsible for nearly three in 10 deaths in the east African country, where 1.6 million Kenyans are infected, government data in 2014 shows. The disproportionate focus on HIV/AIDS has come at the expense of other diseases and the wider health system struggling to reach people in slums and remote arid regions, experts say. "We should have tackled the reproductive health issues and HIV together," said one Kenyan working with an HIV charity who declined to be named. "HIV got a momentum and... the rest... got forgotten."

## Stronger Health System

The new UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), due to be agreed by world leaders later this month, seek to build on the Millennium Development Goals by reducing maternal mortality and ending the AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria epidemics by 2030. One goal is universal health coverage - good quality, affordable health services for all - and greater recruitment, training and retention of health workers. If Kenya and other developing countries are to meet the SDGs, they need to shift investment away from diseases like HIV and towards strengthening health systems, experts say. Although maternity, under-five and emergency services are nominally free in Kenya, cash-strapped government facilities are overstretched, forcing patients to buy their own medicines. Grace and her daughter had to sleep on the floor when they were admitted to Nairobi's government-run Mbagathi Hospital

because all the beds were full. Patients have died because of an ongoing strike by nurses over non-payment of salaries, according to local media reports. Staff morale is low and patients often complain of abuse.

To build a better health system, Kenya must prioritise preventative and primary level care and eliminating wasteful systems, experts say. Half of Kenya's health budget is wasted through inefficiency and corruption, said Peter Kimuu, head of the health ministry's Directorate of Policy, Planning and Health Care Financing. Globally, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 20 to 40 percent of health budgets is wasted. "The agenda in the next 10 to 15 years is really... the efficiency agenda rather than the revenue-raising agenda," said Joseph Kutzin, a WHO expert on health financing. For example, a nutritionist hired to advise people with HIV on their diets could also be employed to counsel diabetic patients and pregnant women.

## Ebola

On the donor side, funders need to focus more on the long-term health picture and become more flexible in their funding, analysts say. "When there is a crisis, everybody is mobilised... It's very easy to get money," said the United Nations' resident and humanitarian coordinator in Kenya, Nardos Bekele-Thomas. Around 70 percent of UN spending in Kenya between 2009 and 2013 was on emergencies, such as hunger and displacement caused by drought, poverty and conflict. "There is nothing to show (for it)," she said. "We have to mobilise this energy and resources for preventing crises." Reform is under way. In Kenya, PEPFAR is phasing out Kenya Pharma, a parallel procurement system set up by US development agency USAID, to deliver HIV drugs. Instead, it is investing in the Kenyan government's supply chain. — Reuters



PEKANBARU, Indonesia: Indonesian men pray yesterday in thick haze. — AFP

## SE ASIA WHEEZES IN HAZE

### INDONESIA CRACKS DOWN ON LAND BURNING

**JAKARTA:** A worsening haze across northern Indonesia, neighbouring Singapore and parts of Malaysia yesterday forced some schools to close and airlines to delay flights, while Indonesia ordered a crackdown against lighting fires to clear forested land. Southeast Asia has suffered for years from annual bouts of smog caused by slash-and-burn practices in Indonesia's Sumatra and Kalimantan islands, but governments in the region have failed to address the problem.

The fires have been exacerbated this year by the effects of the El Nino weather phenomenon, as a prolonged dry season in Indonesia has parched the top soil, fuelling the flames. "The fire problems have reached a critical point," Luhut Pandjaitan, coordinating minister for political, legal and security affairs, told reporters. "Our neighbouring countries have protested for years. We are not playing around." President Joko Widodo, who was on an official visit to the Middle East, instructed security

forces late Monday to accelerate efforts to extinguish the fires and revoke land permits from companies found responsible. Nearly 3,000 military and police personnel, 17 helicopters and four cloud-seeding aircraft have been deployed to fight the fires, according to the country's disaster management agency. A state of emergency has been declared in Indonesia's Riau and Central Kalimantan provinces as an air quality index has hit "dangerous" levels, rising to as high as 984, officials said.

In Singapore, the index has fluctuated well above 100, levels considered "unhealthy", for the past few days, and reached as high as 249 on Monday night, putting it in "very unhealthy" territory. Indonesia has struggled for years to contain forest fires and the resulting haze despite repeatedly promising to punish perpetrators.

## Thousands Sick

The unhealthy air has caused acute respiratory infections for around 26,000 people in Indonesia's Riau province alone, a government official said. It has also increased the workload for doctors in Malaysia and Singapore, where the haze has clouded the build-up to the Formula One night race later this week. Malaysia said it was preparing to conduct cloud-seeding operations to reduce the haze as schools were closed in several states and some flights were disrupted due to poor visibility.

The smog is usually caused by firms and small-holder farmers clearing land adjacent to existing concessions for palm or pulp and paper. Major plantation companies like Asia Pulp and Paper say they have a "zero burning" policy but have often been criticised by green groups for not doing enough to stop the haze. Indonesian authorities plan to sanction this week three or four companies of the total 26 under investigation, said Environment Minister Siti Nurbaya Bakar, with the revoking of their land permits a possibility. — Reuters



KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's iconic Petronas twin towers and the capital's skyline are shrouded in thick haze yesterday. — AFP

## US BARS SALES OF 4 KINDS OF CIGS

**WASHINGTON:** US regulators yesterday ordered tobacco giant RJ Reynolds to stop selling and distributing four kinds of cigarettes because they are too different from previously approved cigarettes. The four products are Camel Crush Bold, Pall Mall Deep Set Recessed Filter, Pall Mall Deep Set Recessed Filter Menthol and Vantage Tech 13 cigarettes, the US Food and Drug Administration said in a statement. "The company's submissions for these products do not meet requirements" that the products be "substantially equivalent" to products already on the market as of Feb 15, 2007, the FDA said. "More specifically, the agency concluded the products have different characteristics than the predicate products and that the manufacturer failed to show that the new products do not raise different questions of public health when compared to them," said the FDA statement.

A key issue in the case of Camel Crush Bold appears to be the addition of a menthol capsule in the filter, which the FDA said may "affect consumer perception". The order means that the four products can no longer be sold, distributed, imported or marketed in interstate commerce in the United States. They were allowed on the market during a grace period established by the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act of 2009, which permitted companies to submit an application stating that any new products were substantially equivalent to those already for sale, which would then be reviewed by the FDA. "These decisions were based on a rigorous, science-based review designed to protect the public from the harms caused by tobacco use," said Mitch Zeller, director of the FDA's Center for Tobacco Products. "The agency will continue to review product submissions and exercise its legal authority and consumer protection duty to remove products from the market when they fail to meet the public health bar set forth under law." — AFP

## US PANEL BACKS ASPIRIN FOR HEART HEALTH IN SOME ADULTS

**WASHINGTON:** A government task force says a daily low-dose aspirin could help certain people in their 50s and 60s prevent a first heart attack or stroke - and they might get some protection against colon cancer at the same time. The US Preventive Services Task Force issued draft guidelines Monday recommending aspirin only if people meet a strict list of criteria - including a high risk of heart disease and a low risk of bleeding side effects. The guidelines said the recommendation is strongest for 50-somethings, but that doctors should decide aspirin therapy on a case-by-case basis for people in their 60s, who can expect a smaller benefit.

Potential candidates should have at least a 10 percent risk of a heart attack or stroke over the next decade, have a life expectancy of at least 10 years and be willing to take daily aspirin that long, and not have other health conditions that cause bleeding, the guidelines said. That's because prolonged aspirin use can trigger serious bleeding, in the gastrointestinal tract or brain.

Aspirin therapy has long been recommended for heart attack survivors, but who should try it for what's called primary prevention - protection of a first heart attack or stroke - is less clear. And while studies suggest years of daily aspirin use may lower the

risk of colon cancer, no major health organizations recommend taking it solely for that reason.

Neither do the task force guidelines - the aspirin decision is supposed to be made on the basis of patients' heart health - but it concluded the cancer information would be useful as doctors and patients discuss the choice. "If you're a person trying to decide whether to take aspirin, you'd want to be aware of all the potential benefits and the potential harms," said Dr. Douglas Owens, a Stanford University professor and task force member.

The task force said there's not enough evidence to assess aspirin therapy for those under 50 or over 69. The updated guidelines back aspirin for a narrower age range than the last time the task force weighed the question, but for the first time adds information about the possible cancer benefit if people use aspirin long enough. The guidelines are in line with American Heart Association recommendations, said Dr. Elliott Antman, a Harvard University professor and former AHA president who welcomed them. In contrast, the Food and Drug Administration last year ruled that there wasn't enough evidence to support marketing aspirin for prevention of first heart attacks. — AP

## CHANGING MINDSETS ON EGGS, GRANDMAS AND MOTHERHOOD

**NAIROBI:** Taboos about eating eggs, the power of grandmas in the home and the best age to become a mother are under scrutiny in the run-up to a summit at which world leaders will sign up to new United Nations development goals later this month. Having achieved one of the expiring Millennium Development Goals - halving hunger globally by the end of 2015 - governments are shifting their attention to the more complex problem of malnutrition. Children become malnourished if they do not eat enough of the right types of food, such as proteins, vitamins and minerals.

The new UN Sustainable Development Goals, replacing the MDGs, include ending malnutrition by 2030 and cutting stunting - children being short for their age - by 40 percent by 2025. Around 165 million children worldwide are stunted as a result of poor nutrition in the first 1,000 days of life - in the womb and up to their second birthday. "I am happy that we have managed to get stunting on the agenda because... the consequences are dire," Joan Matji, a nutrition adviser with the UN children's fund in east Africa, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Children who are stunted have poor cognitive development and health, achieve less at school and, as adults, earn less than children who had adequate nutrition, studies show. In Ethiopia, stunting costs \$4.7 billion a year, or 16 percent of GDP, because of people's ill health and productivity losses, according to the World Food Programme. Solving the problem, which affects one in three people in the world, requires better diets - and changes to some deep-rooted beliefs. "In some countries, they'll say if you give a child before age two an egg, they will become a thief," said Mary Hennigan, a nutrition expert with Catholic Relief Services.

Other communities believe that girls should not eat eggs - an important source of

protein in poor families - because it makes them mature too quickly, Matji said. These beliefs often come from older women, such as grandmothers, who need to be educated to change child feeding practices in the home, nutrition experts said. There is a new focus on targeting men, the experts told a conference in Kenya on nutrition on Monday and yesterday.

Men often control the purse strings and, as farmers, decide what to grow on the family farm. "If the father understands eggs are important for the child, milk is important... they become very supportive and we have seen changes," said Yewesew Abebe, technical director for nutrition with the Alive and Thrive project, which seeks to improve child feeding practices in Ethiopia. Ethiopia is one of east Africa's success stories, cutting stunting from 52 to 40 percent since 2008, according to UNICEF. Rwanda, Tanzania and Malawi are also reducing the prevalence of stunting as a result of their governments' leadership in rolling out national nutrition plans. The region has some of the highest stunting rates in the world, with Burundi at 58 percent, followed by Madagascar at 50 percent and Eritrea at 44 percent, UNICEF data shows.

The culture of early marriage and motherhood also needs to change so that children get better nutrition in the womb. "There's an intergenerational cycle of malnutrition," said Matji. "Young girls get married or have their sexual debut, fall pregnant and they are still children themselves." These young mothers, with small bodies that are still growing, often give birth to low-weight babies because they do not get enough nutrients during pregnancy, she said. Keeping girls in school can help address malnutrition in many ways: Delaying pregnancy, improving their hygiene and nutrition knowledge and their ability to retain information, the experts said. — Reuters

## DELHI HOSPITALS COULD LOSE LICENCES AFTER TURNING AWAY DYING CHILDREN

**NEW DELHI:** The city government in India's capital is threatening to cancel the licences of private hospitals over allegations by distraught families that they turned away dying children during a lethal outbreak of dengue fever. The worst outbreak in five years of the mosquito-borne disease, for which no vaccine exists, has exposed inadequate public health measures to combat it and overwhelmed both government and private hospitals. Authorities have ordered surprise inspections at private hospitals to ensure they comply with last month's order not to turn away dengue patients. Doctors' leave has been cancelled to help cope with the influx of sick people.

The measures were ordered after reports two children died after being denied treatment at prominent city hospitals. "It is heartbreaking," said Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal. "We have become blind in the race to make more and more profit. We shouldn't forget our humanity." A six-year-old boy died after allegedly being turned away by five hospitals, his family has said, including one owned by Max India Ltd, one of the country's largest healthcare providers. A

spokesman for Max did not immediately respond to a request for comment. At the weekend, the parents of a seven-year-old boy jumped from a four-storey building in south Delhi, after their only child died of dengue. The couple left a one-page suicide note saying his death had prompted them to end their lives. The boy's medical reports showed he was referred to five prominent private hospitals in the capital. He was eventually admitted to another private hospital, but died soon after.

More than 1,800 dengue cases have been recorded in the city this year - the highest number since 2010, when more than 6,000 were reported. Doctors say the actual number may be much higher, as many go unreported. In the past, Delhi's private hospitals have been accused of refusing free treatment to poor patients - a condition they must agree to, in return for getting land at cheap rates. Dengue is common in India and the number of cases generally peaks in October, after the end of the monsoon rains. Symptoms include a sudden fever, headache, muscle and joint pains. The disease is also known as "breakbone fever" for the intense pain victims can suffer. — Reuters

## US NAVY TO LIMIT EXPLOSIVES, SONAR NEAR MARINE MAMMALS

**LOS ANGELES:** In a court settlement described as "historic" by conservation groups, the US Navy has agreed to limit its use of sonar equipment and explosives that harm whales, dolphins and other marine mammals. The settlement, approved on Monday by a federal judge in Hawaii, concerns navy activity off the coast of southern California and Hawaii. Environmental groups that had filed two lawsuits against the Navy for years have been arguing that training and testing in the two regions and beyond are harmful to sea creatures and their habitats.

David Henkin, an attorney with Earthjustice, one of the firms involved in the lawsuits, said the settlement was "historic" in that it showed the Navy could play war games while at the same time respecting marine life. "For years, the Navy has said it is impossible for them to keep out of biologically important areas for marine mammals," Henkin told AFP. "They have now acknowledged that they can." Zak Smith, an attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council,

which was also involved in the lawsuits, said Monday's settlement was a "huge victory" in that it means the Navy will finally be complying with the law. "The Navy had for years done a very good job of advancing our understanding of the impact their activities were having on whales and dolphins," Smith said. "But they chose to do the minimum."

Both Henkin and Smith said the settlement will allow the Navy to continue with its training exercises while reducing the hazard to marine life. Environmentalists had argued that Navy-funded studies had shown the damage wreaked on marine life by training activities, including the use of sonar and explosives that can damage the hearing of whales and dolphins. "If a whale or dolphin can't hear, it can't survive," Henkin said. "By agreeing to this settlement, the Navy acknowledges that it doesn't need to train in every square inch of the ocean and that it can take reasonable steps to reduce the deadly toll of its activities." — AFP