First test flight of stratospheric solar plane

PAYERNE: The first solar plane aimed at reaching the stratosphere made an initial low-altitude test flight over Switzerland yesterday. The SolarStratos, a super-light, sleek, white two-seater aircraft with long wings covered with solar panels, took off from Payerne at 8:00 am, according to an AFP photographer at the airbase in western Switzerland. “The maiden flight of the prototype....went off without a hitch,” the SolarStratos team said in a statement.

Pilot Damian Hischier took the craft for a seven-minute test flight, reaching an altitude of 300 metres (nearly 1,000 feet), it said. “The seven-minute test flight, reaching an altitude test flight over Switzerland yesterday. —AFP

PAYERNE: Initiator of the solar-powered stratospheric SolarStratos plane project Raphael Domjan (right) poses with test pilot Damian Hischier after the first test flight yesterday in Payerne, western Switzerland. —AFP

India solar power: A shot in the arm for health centers

Health centers look for alternative ways to stay functional

CHENNAI: For Dr Vinayak Salunke, the sum total worth less than $10 each are one of the most valuable assets at the Vihamandra health centre in Aurangabad in India’s western state of Maharashtra. With the clinic serving a population of 48,000, Salunke must prepare for up to six hours of power cuts daily, rather like a surgeon scrubbing up for surgery. “We don’t have power back-up, so the torch batteries are vital. We check them every day,” he said. “We also monitor the temperature of our refrigerator constantly to make sure vaccines and drugs are safe. It’s become a way of life now.”

The health centre is one of tens of thousands in India with little or no power supply that are now looking for alternative ways to stay functional. Across several states in India, government health centers are gradually turning to solar energy for a reliable power supply to store their vaccines, operate infant warmers, sterilize equipment and cut the time spent caring for patients. Up to now, solar has been deployed at such facilities mostly on a small scale, not as the main source of electricity.

To change that, a pilot project launched by the Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Haryana states aims to set up replicable, cost-effective solar power plants at health centers - the first point of access to a doctor for rural residents - and evaluate their impact on healthcare delivery. The Indian Council of Medical Research and the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW), a non-profit research institute, are collaborating to light up three centers and meet their essential operational requirements. “The aim...is to create resilient health systems in rural India, benefiting primarily women and children,” said Soumya Swaminathan, director-general of the medical research council.

“Illnesses do not come based on the time electricity is available. Any time a patient comes, electricity should be available to enable quality health services.” Nearly 35 million people in rural India relied on un-electrified primary health centers as of 2015, according to government data. One in every two primary health centers has no electricity or suffers from power outages, Swaminathan said. A 2016 CEEW report states that only a fifth of primary health centers met Indian public health standards, which includes having functional infrastructure for electricity.

The last mile

Centres that are connected to the grid battle with an erratic, poor-quality power supply that puts at risk baby deliveries, paediatric emergencies and cold storage of vaccines, campaigners say. Electricity access is also needed for clean water supplies, communication services, mobile health applications and retention of skilled staff, they add. “We came across instances where long power cuts forced doctors to rush vaccines to another health centre 20-odd kilometres away, only to discover that there was no electricity there either,” said Aditya Ramji of the CEEW, which is collaborating with the government on the pilot project. “No power is making the last-mile delivery of health care extremely difficult,” he added. In many cases, diesel generators have become a lifeline for primary health centers, their constant hum the only assurance of sustained electricity to doctors and patients.—Reuters

Mysterious illness in Liberia linked to poisoning: 12 died

GENEVA: Evidence suggests a mysterious illness that has killed 12 people in Liberia is linked to food or drink poisoning and is not a viral infection, the UN said yesterday, confirming three new cases. The World Health Organization said that as of Wednesday the number of patients had risen to 28, with the sickness still unexplained although Ebola and Lassa fever have been ruled out. Results from ongoing tests at labs in the United States and Europe are still pending, but WHO spokesman Tarik Jasarevic told reporters in Geneva that “the overall risk of spread is low.” “These findings are indicative of a point source of infection”, he added, explaining that the leading theory being investigated was “food, drink or water poisoning.”

The fact that the cases appeared tied to one funeral further suggested that an isolated poisoning was to blame. Liberia first started registering incidents of the mystery sickness on April 23, triggering memories of the devastating West African Ebola epidemic that began in late 2013. WHO and medical charity Doctors Without Borders have said the warning system put in place in Liberia after the Ebola crisis prompted fast action following the recent deaths. The unexplained illness was first seen in coastal Sinoe County and has since been registered in the capital Monrovia. It causes fever, vomiting, headaches and diarrhoea.—AFP

First test flight of stratospheric solar plane

PAYERNE: The SolarStratos solar-powered plane takes off during its first flight, with test pilot Damian Hischier on board in Payerne, western Switzerland.—AFP