

Health

Malaria returns with a vengeance in Venezuela as economic crisis worsens

CARACAS: If it weren't for the Center for Malaria Studies in Caracas, Francis Pacheco would have been unable to get treatment for a disease she has contracted around 20 times. Pacheco, 25, sells clothes and cigars in the claustrophobic tunnels of gold mines in southern Venezuela's Bolivar state, where a type of malaria-carrying mosquito is particularly active. "If it weren't for (treatment) here, honestly I don't know what I would have done," Pacheco told AFP as she waited in the clinic for a new diagnosis, having spent several months in Bolivar state and neighboring Guyana, some 600 kilometers from her Caracas home.

The clinic, though, is not immune to Venezuela's economic crisis and is struggling to treat patients. This is a country that lacks 85 percent of the medicines it needs, according to the pharmaceuticals industry. With a tiny budget, the malaria clinic, which was opened in 1973, relies on donations. Between 20 and 30 people a day from all over the country come get diagnosed and receive medication to alleviate the symptoms of a disease that can be fatal.

'Zero funding'

Scientists who would later work for this clinic contributed in 1961 to helping Venezuela become the first country to eradicate malaria. However,

there was a resurgence seven years ago, worsening to become an epidemic in 2016, according to the Red de Epidemiologia NGO. Today the clinic is in a sorry state: yellowed microscopes, a dishwasher stained by purple chemicals, refrigerators corroded by rust.

Over the years, fridges, freezers and air conditioners have stopped working and there's been no budget to repair or replace them. Maintenance costs \$1,000 a month. Until 2007, the clinic received state funding for studies, but the money dwindled and then disappeared, Oscar Noya, the institution's director said. "In Venezuela, scientific and investigative funding is zero!" he said. The clinic has eight staffers who are paid salaries equivalent to \$7 to \$11 a month. "We're at extreme poverty levels," said Noya, adding that "a full-time researcher should earn \$4,000 to \$5,000 a month."

Despite this, the center continues to propose malaria research projects to universities in France, Spain or Scotland, which allows them to secure funding. According to the World Health Organization, Venezuela registered more than 400,000 malaria cases in 2017, making it one of the hardest-hit countries in the Americas. Noya, though, believes the true extent of the epidemic is "close to two million" people affected. The clinic treated 3,500 patients in 2018 alone, a figure that was "150

times greater than the past but with the same number of staff."

Surviving on donations

The government stopped publishing its epidemiology bulletins in 2016 when it acknowledged 240,000 cases. Venezuela is blighted by the worst economic crisis in its recent history with basic necessities such as food and medicine in short supply. Oil production, on which Venezuela is almost entirely dependent, has dropped alarmingly in the last decade while the International Monetary Fund predicts inflation will reach a staggering 10 million percent this year.

President Nicolas Maduro's government blames the country's woes on US sanctions, which the socialist leader claims have cost Venezuela \$30 billion. The malaria clinic survives on donations from NGOs such as Doctors Without Borders, Aid For Aids and the Rotary Club, as well as through international partnerships. The money raised is spent on medicine, quick test kits, gloves and chlorine to clean the facilities. In 2018, they also received anti-malaria medication from the Pan American Health Organization after two years without any, Noya said. "Today, we're on the mat... but we're fighters and that's why we're still here, even though we've had many offers to leave the country" for work, he added. — AFP

Albino panda caught on camera in China

BEIJING: A rare all-white panda has been caught on camera at a nature reserve in southwest China, showing albinism exists among wild pandas in the region, state media reported. The spotless, red-eyed animal was photographed while trekking through the forest mid-April in southwestern Sichuan province, said official news agency Xinhua on Saturday.

The panda is an albino between one to two years old, said Li Sheng, a researcher specializing in bears at Peking University, who was quoted in Xinhua's report. The Wolong National Nature Reserve — where the animal was spotted — told AFP it had no further details about the albino panda. More than 80 percent of the world's wild pandas live in Sichuan,

with the rest in Shaanxi and Gansu province. There were about 548 giant pandas in captivity globally as of November, reported Xinhua.

The number living in the wild has dwindled to fewer than 2,000, according to the World Wildlife Fund. Famed for its "panda diplomacy", in which China dispatches the rare animals to other countries as a symbol of close relations, Beijing has invested in different programs to protect its furry ambassadors in recent years. In 2018, China announced plans to create a bastion for giant pandas three times the size of Yellowstone National Park to link up existing wild populations and encourage breeding of the notoriously slow-reproducing animal. — AFP

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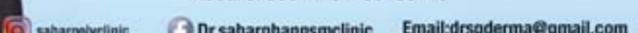
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