

India on the frontline of fight against tuberculosis

NEW DELHI: All the symptoms were there but it still took four doctors and several months of waiting before Bharti Kapar's cough and stomach pains were diagnosed as tuberculosis. Hailing from a poor town outside the smog-choked capital of New Delhi, Bharti, 24, was one of the 2.7 million new cases of tuberculosis last year in India - home to more than a quarter of the world's cases of the deadly disease. After five months of rigorous medical treatment and taking several pills a day, she was declared cured in April but still has to force herself to venture out of the small home she shares with her mother, two brothers and a sister-in-law.

"Sometimes I feel that my breathing is difficult, it's not normal. I do not have any energy, I do not want to go out, I do not want to do anything," she said. A major killer in the West until the mid-twentieth century, tuberculosis remains a menace in developing countries and killed 421,000 in India in 2017 according to the World Health Organization - more than AIDS and malaria combined. The Global Fund will meet in France on 9-10 October hoping to raise \$14 billion for the worldwide fight against TB, malaria and AIDS.

For its part, the government of Narendra Modi, which came to power promising development for India's 1.3 billion people, has set an ambitious target of overcoming India's TB "epidemic" - the world's largest - by 2025. It has created new patient monitoring systems and recently enlisted artificial intelligence to help screen for the disease. The government's call to arms "is not just rhetoric," said Dr Jamhoi Tonsing of the International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease, noting that the budget for TB in India has doubled between 2016 and 2018.

But its timetable may be too ambitious. TB incidence in India is currently declining by about two percent each year, Tonsing said. "To reach the 2025 target, we need to make this decline at least 10 per cent per year. A big jump has to happen." Transmitted



NEW DELHI: In this photograph taken on Sept 26, 2019, a tuberculosis patient consumes his daily dose of medicine at a DOTS (directly observed treatment, short-course) center. — AFP

by droplets of saliva when a contaminated person speaks or coughs, TB spreads easily in India's crowded cities, where immune systems are often already weakened by air pollution or poor sanitary conditions.

The bacterium mainly attacks the young and middle-aged men who make up much of the workforce, with the death or incapacitation of a breadwinner piling additional misery on families. "TB continues to be predominantly a poor man's disease," said Shibu Vijayan, Global TB Technical Director

at PATH, an NGO. "In that sense, an investment there (in fighting it) will probably uplift the economy, uplift the poverty part of it, uplift the overall health of the household."

In a modest neighborhood crisscrossed by congested lanes south of New Delhi, TB patients come to take their daily medication in a tiny clinic run by the NGO Operation ASHA. Some visitors wear masks or wrap scarves over their mouths to avoid contaminating others. A digital tablet displays the names and phone numbers of those sched-

uled to come in that day to take their medication, in an effort to ensure patients' programs are scrupulously followed.

Poorly administered anti-TB drugs or treatments interrupted before their term are a major worry for health workers, and responsible for the spread of multidrug-resistant strains of the disease. The WHO has noticed a form of TB resistant to traditional medicines that has a mortality rate of 50 percent - comparable to that of Ebola, highlighting the challenges that remain even

after the progress made against TB in recent decades.

With an estimated 600,000 multidrug resistant TB cases worldwide - and 135,000 in India - "we created a monster," says Sandeep Ahuja, co-founder of Operation ASHA. But, the renewed campaign in India is a cause for optimism. "We have created the demon, let's go out and cap it," he says. "The numbers are still manageable... We have enough equipment in our arsenal." — AFP

For Iran, Iraq unrest is plot to undo ties

TEHRAN: Since they erupted a week ago, deadly protests in Iraq have been tracked closely in Iran where they are seen as a plot to undermine ties between the neighbors. Tehran has close but complicated relations with Baghdad, holding significant clout among its dominant Shiite political groups. The two countries fought a devastating war from 1980 to 1988 and Iran's influence in Iraq grew after the US-led inva-

sion toppled longtime dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003.

Clashes that broke out in Iraq last week between protesters and security forces have claimed more than 100 lives, most of them demonstrators struck by bullets. The rallies began yesterday with calls to reduce corruption and unemployment but have spiralled into demands for the fall of the government and overhaul of the political system. The headquarters of some pro-Iranian political parties have been among those attacked during the violence, AFP correspondents in Iraq reported.

Chants of "Free Iraq, Iran out" have also been heard in social media videos said to be of the protests. A

(BJP) party. Modi and the government deny any misconduct, and in December, India's top court dismissed calls for an investigation into the deal, saying it saw no evidence of "commercial favoritism".

Mandated to be able to deal with two conflicts at once - with China and Pakistan - the Indian Air Force is meant to have 42 squadrons but struggles to put together 33, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies. "Combat aviation for them is... a strategic asset," said Jean-Paul Palomeros, former chief of staff of the French Air Force and an expert at the CEIS strategic intelligence firm. "As such, its renovation is both political and a high military priority."

As part of Modi's "Make in India" program to encourage local manufacturing, the Rafale contract provides for domestic "offset" deals. "Nearly 60 French companies are already established in India... and in the future more companies will come," said Parly, the French defense minister. The Rafale has been used by the French army since 2004 but struggled for several years to land foreign clients.

France finally secured contracts with Egypt and Qatar in 2015, for 24 jets each, on top of the Indian deal. In 2017, Doha took out an option on 12 more. The 36 Indian Rafales will be based in Ambala, near Kashmir and the Pakistani border, and at Hasimara in West Bengal state near the border with Bhutan. — AFP

Javad Zarif urging "respect for Syria's territorial integrity" in a call to Ankara.

Turkey says it wants to establish a "safe zone" on the Syrian side of the border where it could send back some of the 3.6 million refugees from the eight-year civil war. Erdogan said Monday that the operation into Syria could "come any night without warning". Kurds argue that Ankara's goal is to dilute their dominance in the region with an influx of mostly Sunni Arab refugees now living in Turkey.

Trump has faced a barrage of criticism, including from close allies in Washington, for appearing to leave the Kurds to their fate. Many officials were caught off-guard, with Pentagon spokesman Jonathan Hoffman warning Turkey of destabilizing blowback to the region if it invades. "The Department of Defense made clear to Turkey - as did the president - that we do not endorse a Turkish operation in Northern Syria," he said on Monday.

A Turkish attack also raises the specter of what will happen to some 10,000 Islamic State fighters currently being held in Kurdish detention centers. Around 2,000 of them are IS "foreign fighters", and Trump assailed US allies in Europe for not taking back their nationals. If they escape or are released, they could reconstitute the Islamic State, less than one year after it was defeated and its "caliphate" disintegrated. Trump declared that it would be the responsibility of Turkey and other countries to deal with the IS prisoners. — AFP

string of Iranian officials have come out since yesterday with statements accusing their country's arch-foes of being behind the unrest. "Enemies seek to sow discord but they've failed & their conspiracy won't be effective," supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said, quoted on his office's Twitter account. "Iran and #Iraq are two nations whose hearts & souls are tied together... This bond will grow stronger day by day."

State news agency IRNA said the supreme leader was reacting to the violence in Iraq. The news agency also weighed in with its own commentary, accusing the US, Saudi Arabia and Israel of fomenting the Iraq protests in order to spoil Iran's ties with Iraq and Syria. "Unprecedented protests in Iraqi cities... show that some forces inside and outside of the region are seriously concerned about the closeness and cooperation" of Baghdad, Damascus and Tehran, it said.

Iran's government spokesman Ali Rabieci opened his weekly news conference on Monday with a statement on the Iraqi crisis. He said there "are ill-wishers who seek to sabotage any opening between us and those neighbors who've had differences of opinions in recent years". The spokesman called on "the great people of Iraq to show more self-restraint and seek democratic and legal means to achieve their demands". "As always, the Islamic Republic of Iran expresses its readiness to stand beside Iraqi brothers and sisters and help them," he said. "No form of propaganda can sever the people of Iran and Iraq."

Iran has accused its foes of deliberately stirring

trouble in Iraq at a time when vast numbers of pilgrims are heading there for one of the world's largest religious events. A top military adviser to Khamenei said those behind the unrest would be unable to deter the faithful, however. "They want to scare people into not going to Arbaeen, but even if it rains arrows and stones, Hussein's lovers will not be afraid," Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi was quoted as saying by Tasnim news agency.

Arbaeen marks the end of the 40-day mourning period for the seventh-century killing of Imam Hussein by the forces of the caliph Yazid. Last week, Iran urged citizens who were planning to head to Iraq to delay their travel for the pilgrimage that culminates on Oct 17. IRNA said the fact that the "provocations" came ahead of Arbaeen showed Iran's enemies were "scared".

Judiciary chief Ebrahim Raisi said those responsible for the unrest in Iraq aimed to undermine Arbaeen. "The seditionists intend to undermine and sap enthusiasm for this great event," he said, quoted by state television's website. "The vigilant people of Iraq exposed this sedition. But everyone must be careful. The seditionists are seeking new tricks at any moment to overshadow the Arbaeen ceremony and to undermine it." The headline Kyberan newspaper said "evidence" pointed to the Americans, Saudis and Israelis being involved. A columnist in the reformist Shargh daily also suggested the Americans, Israelis and Saudis might be the "hidden hands" behind the Iraq protests. — AFP

India takes first Rafale delivery...

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been held up by corruption allegations leveled by the opposition Congress party. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has accused Congress of undermining the country's security, saying the Kashmir skirmishes would have ended "better" for India if it had had the Rafales.

French plane-maker Dassault in 2012 won a contract negotiated under a Congress-led government in 2012 to supply 126 jets to India, with some built in France and the rest in India by state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL). But on a visit to France in 2015, Modi scrapped the deal, replacing it with an order for 36 jets - all to be built in France. The deal was estimated to be worth \$9.4 billion at the time.

The new agreement, signed the following year, named Reliance group, a conglomerate owned by billionaire Anil Ambani that has little experience in aviation, as Dassault's local partner. Ambani is reported to be close to India's governing Bharatiya Janata Party

Turkey ready for Syria...

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offensive in northern Syria have been "completed". Meanwhile, the Syrian government has welcomed the upheaval, spying an opportunity to bring the country's Kurds back into its fold. The Kurds have been "tossed aside" by Washington, Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad told the pro-government Al-Watan newspaper. Trump rejected that interpretation, tweeting: "We may be in the process of leaving Syria, but in no way have we abandoned the Kurds, who are special people and wonderful fighters."

Britain said it was "deeply concerned" by Turkey's plans to attack Kurdish fighters, who lead the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and say they lost some 11,000 fighters as the main frontline force against the Islamic State group. A spokesman for Prime Minister Boris Johnson said London had been "consistently clear with Turkey that unilateral military action must be avoided as it would destabilize the region". Iran, a key backer of the Syrian government, also opposed a Turkish incursion, with Foreign Minister Mohammad

Trio wins Nobel for dark matter...

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Using theoretical tools and calculations, he drew a link between the temperature of the radiation emitted after the Big Bang and the amount of matter it created. His work showed that the matter known to us - such as stars, planets, and ourselves - only make up five percent, while the other 95 percent are made up of "unknown dark matter and dark energy".

In a telephone interview at the press conference, Peebles said that what those elements actually are is still an open question. "Although the theory is very thoroughly tested, we still must admit that the dark matter and dark energy are mysterious," Peebles said. He also advised young people contemplating a career in science that, while awards were "charming" and "very much appreciated, they should do it for the love of it". "You should enter science because you are fascinated by it. That's what I did."

Peebles, 84, is Albert Einstein Professor of Science at Princeton University in the United States, while Mayor, 77, and Queloz, 53, are both professors at the University of Geneva. Queloz also works at the University of Cambridge in Britain. Using custom-made instruments at their observatory in southern France in October 1995, Mayor and Queloz were able to detect a gaseous ball similar in size to Jupiter, orbiting a star 50 light years from our own Sun.

Harnessing a phenomenon known as the Doppler effect, which changes the color of light depending on whether an object is approaching or retreating from Earth, the pair proved the planet, known as 51 Pegasus b, was orbiting its star. The Nobel jury noted that the discovery "started a revolution in astronomy" and since then over 4,000 exoplanets have been found in

our home galaxy. "Strange new worlds are still being discovered," challenging our preconceived ideas about planetary systems and "forcing scientists to revise their theories of the physical processes behind the origins of planets".

In a statement, the two astronomers hailed their win as "simply extraordinary", saying the discovery was "the most exciting of our careers". Professor Martin Rees of the University of Cambridge said this year's awards also seemed to show a "welcome broadening of the Nobel criteria". "In the past, astronomy has been included primarily when the discovery involves some new physics," Rees said.

The prize consists of a gold medal, a diploma and the sum of nine million Swedish kronor (about \$914,000). The trio will receive the prize from King Carl XVI Gustaf at a formal ceremony in Stockholm on Dec 10, the anniversary of the 1896 death of scientist Alfred Nobel who created the prizes in his last will and testament. In 2018, the honor went to Arthur Ashkin of the US, Gerard Mourou of France and Donna Strickland of the US for laser inventions used for advanced precision instruments in corrective eye surgery and in industry.

This year's Nobel prize season kicked off on Monday with the Medicine Prize awarded to Americans William Kaelin and Gregg Semenza, and Britain's Peter Ratcliffe. They were honored for research into how human cells sense and adapt to changing oxygen levels, which opens up new strategies to fight such diseases as cancer and anemia. The winners of this year's Chemistry Prize will be announced today.

The Literature Prize will follow tomorrow, with two laureates to be crowned after a sexual harassment scandal forced the Swedish Academy to postpone the 2018 award, for the first time in 70 years. On Friday the action moves to Norway where the Peace Prize is awarded, with bookies such as Ladbrokes backing Swedish teen climate activist Greta Thunberg. The Economics Prize wraps up the Nobel season on Monday, Oct 14. — AFP