

COURT REJECTS CHALLENGE TO DELHI CAR RESTRICTIONS

NEW DELHI: A Delhi court yesterday rejected a legal challenge to driving restrictions aimed at reducing pollution in the smog-choked Indian capital. The court said the Delhi government could continue to ban most private cars from the city's roads on alternate days until Friday, when a 15-day trial of the scheme is due to end.

The restrictions are part of a slew of initiatives announced last year by the Delhi government, under pressure to improve air quality in the world's most polluted capital. A number of challengers had argued that they were not effective in bringing down pollution, and that the city's public transport system was not up to the task.

"All the petitions challenging the odd-even policy have been dismissed. We will continue with the scheme," the government's lawyer Rahul Mehra said. However, the court said the Delhi government

should consider such concerns before implementing permanent restrictions.

Authorities have already said the scheme may be extended beyond Friday if it is successful. Environmentalists have welcomed the restrictions, but say they are unlikely to make a dramatic difference in the short term. The US embassy in Delhi put PM2.5 levels at 97 yesterday afternoon-lower than earlier in the day, but still nearly four times World Health Organization safe limit of 25.

PM2.5 refers to microscopic particles that penetrate deep into the lungs and are particularly harmful to health. Delhi's air quality traditionally worsens in winter as the cooler air traps pollutants and people start lighting fires. A 2014 WHO survey of more than 1,600 cities ranked Delhi as the most polluted, partly because of the 8.5 million vehicles on its roads. —AFP

CANCER NOW NO 1 KILLER IN 22 STATES

NEW YORK: Cancer is becoming the No 1 killer in more and more states as deaths from heart disease have declined, new health statistics show. Nationwide, heart disease is still the leading cause of death, just ahead of cancer. While death rates for both have been falling for nearly 25 years, heart disease has dropped at a steeper rate.

As a result, cancer moved up to the top slot in 22 states in 2014, according to the latest government figures. It's also the leading cause of death in certain groups of people, including Hispanics, Asians, and adults ages 40 to 79. The trend is noted in the American Cancer Society's latest annual report released Thursday.

The cancer death rate has fallen 23 per-

cent since its peak in 1991. The decrease is attributed to declining smoking rates and advances in cancer detection, treatment and prevention. The heart disease death rate fell 46 percent in that time. The cancer society predicts there will be nearly 1.7 million new cancer cases this year, and nearly 600,000 deaths.

Government figures for 2014 show cancer was the leading cause of death in Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Delaware, Idaho, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oregon, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia and Wisconsin. —AP



BEIJING: In this picture taken on January 10, 2016, a woman poses for a photo in front of a beluga whale at a zoo. — AFP

SECONDHAND SMOKE HITS ALMOST HALF OF TEENS WHO DON'T SMOKE

RESEARCH SAYS IT'S STILL AFFECTING MILLIONS OF KIDS

CHICAGO: Even though fewer US teens are smoking, secondhand smoke remains a big problem for them, a government study found. Nearly half of nonsmoking kids in middle school and high school encountered secondhand tobacco smoke in 2013, and rates were even higher among smokers.

Earlier studies on teens and secondhand smoke in specific places, such as cars or indoors, indicate that the problem has declined in recent years but the new research suggests it's still affecting millions of kids. "These findings are concerning because the US Surgeon General has concluded that there is no safe level of secondhand smoke exposure," said lead author Israel Agaku, a researcher at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Secondhand smoke has been linked with several illnesses in children, including breathing problems, ear infections, bronchitis and pneumonia. In adults, it has been linked with heart disease and lung cancer. The study results are based on a national survey of more than 17,000 middle school and high school kids. Exposure was defined as being around tobacco smoke at least once within the past week.

Nearly 1 in 4 nonsmokers who reported any exposure said they were around tobacco smoke daily. Settings included home, school, cars and public places. It's not clear how many had only brief exposure. The study was published online yesterday in the journal Pediatrics.

CDC data show that youth smoking has fallen steadily in recent years, reaching about 9 percent



ALABAMA: In this Saturday, March 2, 2013, photo, a cigarette burns in an ashtray at a home in Hayneville. A government study released yesterday shows that even though fewer US teens are smoking, exposure to secondhand smoke remains a big problem. —AP

among high schoolers in 2014. At least 26 states have smoke-free laws affecting indoor public places and worksites, and more than 80 percent of U.S. homes have no-smoking rules. The researchers say the study results show efforts are needed to expand smoke-free zones. —AP



KAZAKHSTAN: British astronaut Tim Peake, member of the main crew of the expedition to the International Space Station (ISS), prior the launch of Soyuz TMA-19M space ship at the Russian leased Baikonur cosmodrome. —AP

ASTRONAUT PAYS TRIBUTE TO 'STARMAN' BOWIE IN SPACE

LONDON: Here he is, sitting in a tin can, far above the world - and saying goodbye to David Bowie. Messages of condolence for the late rock star flowed yesterday from around the world - and from space, where British astronaut Tim Peake tweeted from the International Space Station.

"Saddened to hear David Bowie has lost his battle with cancer - his music was an inspiration to many," Peake wrote Monday. The outer-space tribute seemed fitting. Unique and otherworldly, Bowie often seemed like a creature from another planet, the "Starman" of one of his 1970s hits.

The cosmos fascinated him from his first big hit, "Space Oddity." Released in 1969, the year of the first moon landing, it told the story of Major Tom, an astronaut adrift, "sitting in my tin can, far above the world." The song caught the world's imagination again in 2013 when Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield strummed it on his guitar while orbiting Earth aboard the space station. The video was viewed millions of times, and Bowie gave the rendition his seal of approval, calling it "the most poignant version of the song ever created." —AP

EBOLA SURVIVORS' BLOOD NO HELP TO PATIENTS IN GUINEA

LONDON: Giving the blood of Ebola survivors to patients didn't seem to make a difference, doctors found in the biggest study so far on the approach, prompting some scientists to say it's time to abandon the strategy.

With no licensed treatment for the devastating disease, doctors have sometimes used blood from survivors to treat the sick, hoping its infection-fighting antibodies might help patients defeat the virus. It seemed to help some patients in the past but there was no clear proof. Amid the world's biggest outbreak of Ebola in West Africa in 2014, scientists decided to put the treatment to the test in Guinea.

At a clinic in the capital Conakry, scientists found no difference in survival between 84 patients who got survivor blood compared to about 400 patients treated some five months earlier, according to the study published in New England Journal of Medicine Thursday. "We would have liked to have seen more dramatic results," said Johan van Griensven of the study in Guinea, the paper's lead author. "But this doesn't mean (blood) plasma treatment doesn't work by definition."

He said antibody levels are often low in patients who have only recently recovered from Ebola and that doctors might need to use blood from long-term survivors to get a better effect. Van Griensven and colleagues studied people who got two transfusions of plasma - the clear part of blood that contains antibodies - in Guinea last year. The plasma came from 58 Ebola survivors, most of whom had recovered from Ebola within six months of donating

blood and are thought to have immunity to the strain. Scientists didn't know what the antibody levels were in the donated plasma and said it was possible some plasma was more potent than others.

Worth pursuing

A similar study on the blood of Ebola survivors in Liberia was discontinued because there weren't enough patients and another study in Sierra Leone had treated just three patients by last October. To date, the outbreak first noted in 2014 has killed more than 11,000 people in West Africa. Ebola was declared over in Guinea last month, the first time all three affected countries have stopped the virus' spread.

Some said the disappointing results should be enough to convince scientists to abandon this strategy. "From the data presented, it doesn't look like this is worth pursuing," said Thomas Geisbert, an Ebola expert at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, who has done similar studies in monkeys. He was not connected to the latest research. "The idea that antibodies from a person who survived Ebola could save lives was always a long shot, but it was too good an idea not to test," said Ben Neuman, a virologist at Britain's University of Reading. "The most valuable thing this study provides is clarity," Neuman wrote in an email. "Finally, the idea of using (survivor's blood) can be crossed off the list and other more promising drugs and vaccines can be tested." —AP

EPA: PESTICIDE HARMS BEES IN SOME CASES

WASHINGTON: A major pesticide harms honeybees when used on cotton and citrus but not on other big crops like corn, berries and tobacco, the Environmental Protection Agency found. It's the first scientific risk assessment of the much-debated class of pesticides called neonicotinoids and how they affect bees on a chronic long-term basis.

The EPA found in some cases the chemical didn't harm bees or their hives but in other cases it posed a significant risk. It mostly depended on the crop, a nuanced answer that neither clears the way for an outright ban nor is a blanket go-ahead for continued use. Both the pesticide maker and anti-pesticide advocates were unhappy with report.

The issue is important because honeybees are in trouble and they do more than make honey. They are crucial to our food supply: About one-third of the human diet comes from insect-pollinated plants, and the honeybee is responsible for 80 percent of that pollination.

Some advocacy groups target neonicotinoids - the chemical works on insects' central nervous systems and are often called "neonics" - and call for bans on the chemicals. Recent scientific studies have pointed to problems and pesticide makers dis-

pute those studies and this one from the EPA. Europe banned the pesticide class, and then lifted the ban.

Don't expect any future action on this pesticide to solve the dwindling bee problem because it's not just this pesticide alone, but a complicated puzzle that includes lack of food for bees, parasites, disease and the way different pesticides and fungicides interact, said bee expert May Berenbaum at the University of Illinois.

"Anything to reduce stress on bees is helpful," said University of Maryland entomologist Dennis vanEngelsdorp. "I am not convinced that neonics are a major driver of colony loss." Before it acts on a pesticide, EPA wanted more specific and targeted research. The risk report released Wednesday is the first of four on this class of chemicals. The study was done by the EPA and California's environmental agency, with a similar one done by Canada.

'Significant effect'

EPA analysis of detailed tests found a clear level of concentration of the pesticide imidacloprid, the most common neonicotinoid, in which things start to go awry. If nectar brought back to the hive from worker bees had more than 25 parts per billion of the chemical, "there's a

significant effect," namely fewer bees, less honey and "a less robust hive," said Jim Jones, EPA's assistant administrator for chemical safety and pollution prevention. But if the nectar chemical level was below 25 parts per billion, it was as if there were no imidacloprid at all, with no ill effects, Jones said. It was a clear line of harm or no harm, he said.

Levels depended on the crop, Jones said. While nectar of cotton and citrus fruits were above the harmful concentrations, the levels were not harmful for corn - the nation's top crop by far - most vegetables, berries and tobacco. Other crops weren't conclusive and need more testing, including legumes, melons, tree nuts and herbs.

Also, the controversial practice of treating seeds with the chemical seemed not to harm bees, Jones said. The problem crops of cotton and citrus are No 7 and 9 in US production value in 2014, according to Agriculture Department statistics. The study looked just at commercial honeybees because they are a good surrogate for all pollinators, Jones said. But Lori Ann Burd, environmental health director of the advocacy group Center for Biological Diversity, criticized the agency for ignoring wild bees, like bumblebees, which studies show are much more sensitive to the pesticides, calling the report

"weak."

Jones said this is a draft of a scientific report, not a regulation. After public comments and the report is finalized, then EPA may act. Imidacloprid-maker Bayer Crop Sciences said EPA "appears to overestimate the potential for harmful exposures in certain crops" and ignore its benefits. "With hundreds of studies conducted and their demonstrated safe use on farmland across the country, we know more about the safe use of neonics to honeybees than any other pesticide," Bayer Vice President Dana Sargent said in a statement.

University of Maryland's van Engelsdorp said in email that all too often farmers use the pesticide to protect "against pests that are simply very scarce or not found in the landscape. There are studies (including EPA's) that show no benefit to production when these products are used."

Last year the EPA proposed banning use of many pesticides that harm bees when crops are in bloom and bees are being used as commercial pollinators and the federal government is also trying to increase wild flower planting to give bees more food. Honeybees pollinate more than 90 flowering crops, including citrus, peaches, berries, melons, apples, nuts, avocados, soybeans, asparagus and cucumbers. —AP