

VENEZUELA EPILEPTICS STRUGGLE WITH SEIZURES AMID SHORTAGES

MAIQUETIA, Venezuela: Venezuelan plumber Marcos Heredia scoured 20 pharmacies in one day but could not find crucial medicines to stop his epileptic 8-year-old from convulsions that caused irreparable brain damage late last year. The once giggly and alert boy, also called Marcos, could no longer sit on his own and began to shut off from the outside world. "I called people in the cities of San Cristobal, Valencia, Puerto La Cruz, Barquisimeto, and no one could find the medicine," Heredia, 43, said in the family's bare living room in a windy slum overlooking an international airport in the coastal state of Vargas. "You can't find the medicines, and the government doesn't want to accept that."

Heredia ended up traveling 860 km by bus to the Colombian border to pick up medicine a cousin had bought him in the neighboring country. He was back at work

the next day. Venezuela's brutal recession is worsening shortages of medicines from painkillers to chemotherapy drugs. With 85 of every 100 medicines now missing in Venezuela, anti-convulsants are among the toughest drugs to find, Venezuela's main pharmaceutical association said.

An estimated 2 million to 3 million Venezuelans suffer from epilepsy at some point in their lives, according to Caracas-based support organization LIVECE. Patients have been struggling to find specific anti-convulsive medicines as far back as 2012. Due to untreated convulsions, progress has evaporated for otherwise functional people and those with severe disabilities who had managed to improve their mobility or speech.

Like Heredia, patients and families try anything they can to get hold of drugs: barter diapers, frantically engage in WhatsApp groups created specifically for pharmaceuti-

cal exchanges, use expired medicines or, if they can afford it, ask friends to bring them in from abroad. But the shortages are so extreme that patients sometimes take medicines ill-suited for their conditions, doctors warn. Neurologist Beatriz Gonzalez of LIVECE said she was worried about epileptic mothers giving birth to deformed children because they take the wrong medicine, or losing the child because they cannot find the drugs.

'Heart in my mouth'

The problem goes much further than just those with epilepsy. Unexpected convulsions can also afflict feverish children, accident victims or people with other neurological conditions. Two-year-old Carlos Baute unexpectedly started to shake and choke when he had a fever in January. Holding his tongue down with two fingers to keep him from swallowing it, his mother visited multi-

ple under-equipped hospitals before one finally treated him. Baute's mother said she could not find medication and was worried that her son, an active boy who has recovered and likes to dash around the clinic where he is being treated, may yet suffer another fit.

Leftist President Nicolas Maduro blames the shortages on a right-wing plot to overthrow him, but in a recent speech, he said he had approved "major dollar investments" to boost drug availability, without providing details. Venezuela is set to open three medical labs with Palestine, he added last week. "(We must) solve this very delicate issue that has been affected by the economic war," said Maduro. Venezuela's Information and Health Ministries, as well as the Social Security Institute, which oversees some hospitals and drug distribution, did not respond to requests for comment. —Reuters



EICHENAU, Germany: This file photo taken on April 25, 2016 shows an employee of a car workshop checking the emission levels of a vehicle. — AFP

POLLUTION FROM RIGGED GERMAN VWs TO KILL 1,200

PARIS: Pollution from 2.6 million Volkswagen cars sold in Germany between 2008 and 2015, rigged to appear eco-friendly, will cause 1,200 premature deaths in Europe, a study of the fraud's health impacts said yesterday. "The researchers estimate that 1,200 people in Europe will die early, each losing as much as a decade of their life, as a result of excess emissions generated," said the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which took part in the study. This corresponded to about \$1.9 billion (\$2 billion) in health costs and lost labor productivity, the paper said.

Germany will account for about 500 lives lost, only 40 percent of the projected European toll, according to findings published in the journal *Environmental Research Letters*. Poland is in second place with 160 deaths, followed by France with 84, the Czech Republic with 72, Italy 55, Austria 47, Switzerland 40, Hungary 32, Britain 30 and Romania 27. The same researchers had previously estimated that excess emissions from 482,000 Volkswagens sold in the United States in the same period would cause 60 premature American deaths.

Volkswagen admitted in 2015 to having installed software in 11 million diesel engines worldwide to circumvent emis-

sions tests. This was to make the cars seem compliant with pollution limits while in fact they were emitting health-harming pollutants. In Germany, 2.6 million rigged Volkswagens were sold under the brands VW, Audi, Skoda and Seat, said the researchers - a fifth of the country's total diesel fleet.

No borders

Diesel cars emit nitrogen oxides, or NOx - poisonous gases that contribute to acid rain and combine with ammonia to create particles that can penetrate deep into the lungs and cause cancer, chronic breathing problems and premature death. Air pollution "doesn't care about political boundaries; it just goes straight past," said study co-author Steven Barrett of MIT. "Thus a car in Germany can easily have significant impacts in neighboring countries, especially in densely populated areas such as the European continent," he said in a statement.

If Volkswagen were to recall and retrofit all affected German-sold vehicles by the end of 2017, "this would avert 2,600 additional premature deaths and 4.1 billion euros in corresponding health costs," the study authors said. In 2012, the World Health Organization's cancer research agency classified diesel engine exhaust

as cancer-causing. The European Environment Agency estimates that more than 400,000 people die prematurely every year due to outdoor air pollution in urban Europe - about half of it from traffic emissions.

Volkswagen's rigged cars emitted NOx at levels that were on average four times the European limit, said the MIT statement. The researchers combined data on Volkswagen emissions, how far and often Germans drive their cars, and pollution-impacting weather phenomena such as wind and rainfall. They produced a map of pollution which they overlaid on population density charts of Europe. With these, they calculated Europeans' exposure to German-derived excess emissions from the Volkswagen deceit, and their increased risk of premature death.

"It ends up being about a one percent extra risk of dying early in a given year, per microgram per metre cubed of fine particles you're exposed to," Barrett explained. "Typically, that means that someone who dies early from air pollution ends up dying about a decade early." Excess emissions are calculated as the difference between the limits set by European authorities, and actual pollution that took place under the fraud. — AFP

CITY NOISE TIED TO HEARING LOSS

PARIS: Urban noise pollution and hearing loss are closely linked, according to rankings of 50 large cities in both categories released yesterday. High-decibel urban areas - such as Guangzhou, New Delhi, Cairo and Istanbul - topped the list of cities where hearing was most degraded, researchers reported. Likewise, cities least afflicted by noise pollution - including Zurich, Vienna, Oslo and Munich - registered the lowest levels of decline in hearing.

This statistical link does not necessarily mean the constant din of city life is the main driver of hearing loss, which can also be caused by infections, genetic disorders, premature birth, and even some medicines. The findings are also preliminary, and have yet to be submitted for peer-reviewed publication. "But this is a robust result," said Henrik Matthies, managing director of Mimi Hearing Technologies, a German company that has amassed data on 200,000 people drawn from a hearing test administered via cell phones. "The fact that noise pollution and hearing loss have such a tight correlation points to an intricate relationship," he told AFP.

Researchers at Mimi and Charite University Hospital in Berlin explored the link by constructing two separate databases. The first combined information from the World Health Organization (WHO) and Norwegian-based technology research group SINTEF to create a noise pollution ranking for cities around the world. Stockholm, Seoul, Amsterdam and Stuttgart were also among the least likely to assault one's ears, while Shanghai, Hong Kong and Barcelona came out as big noise makers.

Paris - one of the most densely populated major cities in Europe - scored as the third most cacophonous. The ranking for hearing loss drew from Mimi's phone-based test, in which respondents indicated age and sex. Geo-location technology pinpointed the cities.

'Silent epidemic'

The results were measured against a standard for age-adjusted hearing. On average, people in the loudest cities were ten years "older" - in terms of hearing loss - than those in the quietest cities, the study found. Stacked side-by-side, the two city rankings are remarkably similar, suggesting more than an incidental link. The findings highlight the need for better monitoring, the researchers said. "While eye and sight checks are routine, ear and hearing exams are not," said Manfred Gross, head of the department of Audiology and Phoniatrics at Charite University Hospital. "The earlier hearing loss is detected, the better the chances are for preventing further damage."

Collaborations between scientists and private companies that collect health-related information from consumers are becoming more common in the era of Big Data. California-based DNA genetic testing company 23andMe, for example, has worked extensively with university researchers to ferret out rare genetic disorders by combing through mountains of anonymous data from its clients. Also yesterday, World Hearing Day, the WHO released figures showing annual costs of unaddressed hearing loss of between \$750 billion and \$790 billion globally. —AFP

BIRTH DEFECTS JUMP 20-FOLD IN ZIKA-HIT MOMS

WASHINGTON: Pregnant women infected with the Zika virus last year were 20 times more likely to bear children with birth defects than those who gave birth prior to the epidemic, US health officials said Thursday. Researchers for the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention compared birth outcomes prior to the Zika epidemic's outbreak in 2015 - using data from three US state registries - to those of mothers infected by the virus in 2016. The defects included microcephaly - a crippling deformation that leads to babies having very small brains and heads - as well as poor cranial development, neural tube defects and other brain or eye abnormalities. The study found that those defects were seen in about three live births per 1,000 in 2013 and 2014.

But in 2016 abnormalities were found in some 60 infants and fetuses per 1,000 when their pregnant mothers were infected by Zika. Among infected women, the virus was also responsible for 48 percent of miscarriages and 66 percent of premature births, with fetuses frequently suffering from neural tube defects or other brain abnormalities in early stages of development. —AFP

SATELLITE SHIFTS COURSE TO AVOID MARS MOON

CAPE CANAVERAL, Florida: A NASA science satellite orbiting Mars was forced to make a rare evasive maneuver to avoid a collision next week with one of the planet's two small moons, the U.S. space agency said on Thursday. Flight controllers at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, commanded the MAVEN spacecraft, which is studying Mars' vanishing atmosphere, to fire up its engine on Tuesday to boost its speed by about 1.3 feet per second (0.4 meters per second).

The acceleration was necessary to slightly shift MAVEN's orbit and steer the satellite clear of the Martian moon Phobos, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration said in a statement. —AFP

IN KENYA, FAIRER SHARING OF RIVERS HELPS KEEP PEACE

NAROK, Kenya: Kelena Ole Nchoe hopes efforts to share river water in the Ewaso Nyiro South basin in Kenya's Rift Valley will help avoid the violence that has erupted elsewhere between herders and farmers as a drought crisis shrinks pasture. But he is sure there will be competition for water in the near future. Ole Nchoe is the chair of 12 associations for water users along the Enkare Narok tributary, south of Nairobi, which strive to use the scarce resource wisely, complementing the work of nine groups on the main Ewaso Nyiro River. Together they cover a 188-km stretch that flows into Lake Natron near the Kenya-Tanzania border.

On each river, there is a center that trains and supports the associations' members, hosting private and community farms and carrying out water conservation activities. Ole Nchoe said the centers advise farmers not to cultivate crops near the river but to plant trees along its banks instead. This helps prevent soil erosion that will eventually block the river with sediment and alter its course, inconveniencing people downstream.

Fair sharing of natural resources is key to keeping the peace among communities that depend on the river, he added. "When using the river, you must be mindful of other people who are also using it - including wild animals - or else there will be trouble," he said. With the backing of the associations, funded by the Dutch government, farmers have adopted techniques to keep the land near the river well-watered and healthy, ranging from bee-keeping and irrigation

to tree planting. Communities have also constructed small dams to collect and retain rainwater, and carried out work to preserve springs along the Ewaso Nyiro River, such as erecting fences.

Chemical Contamination

Daniel Naikuni, a farmer who belongs to one of the Enkare Narok associations, is worried about declining water volumes, as well as rampant pollution of the river near Narok town. "People are doing horticulture cultivation along the river and are spraying the crops with chemicals that get into the river," said the testicular cancer survivor. "This poses a health threat to the people downstream." Other people are releasing raw sewage into the river at night since the town does not have a sophisticated sanitation system, he said. Chemicals contained in both farm waste and sewage expose residents to diseases, he added.

The centres educate farmers about the importance of leaving a 15-m gap between their cultivated land and the river on which to plant trees, Naikuni said. They are also discouraged from using generators to pump water from the river and from building furrows on their land. Instead, the recommendation is to start using drip irrigation. Tago James, a member of the Naroosura association, said he uses this kind of precision irrigation, together with greenhouses, to cut water use and help protect the Ewaso Nyiro River.

Any drop in water levels could lead to conflicts between people and wildlife as animals move onto homesteads in

search of water, he warned. Peter Tajeu, vice chairman of the Olkiramatian conservancy in Narok County, some 130 km south of Nairobi, said the Ewaso Nyiro River is a lifeline for both wild animals and livestock. Animal watering points have been constructed along the river as it flows towards Lake Natron a few kilometres away, he said. These watering points prevent vegetation on the banks being destroyed by animals, helping protect wetlands and swamps in the semi-arid area of Magadi, he explained. Other efforts include tree-planting and keeping charcoal burners at bay.

Confiscated Pumps

Julius Muriuki, who manages the Ewaso Nyiro South centers for the non-profit African Conservation Centre, said farmers along the rivers need to be offered new sources of income to deter them from intensive cropping and animal rearing, which drain water from the river. Alternative activities include bee-keeping, feeding animals in one place - known as zero-grazing - and greenhouses, he said. However, if farmers are prevented from cultivating their land, they could resort to poaching and other vices, he warned. Those who want to continue growing crops should start water harvesting projects for irrigation and drill wells away from rivers, he added. "Any time the Ewaso Nyiro River dries up in Magadi, residents say people in Naroosura have taken our share, water is becoming a scarce resource and soon the Ewaso will be depleted," said Muriuki. — Reuters

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THE LEADING INDEPENDENT DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF

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