



In this picture taken on Thursday, men smoke cigarettes during lunch in a restaurant in the Yurakuchu neighborhood of Tokyo. — AFP

SMOKING PARADISE JAPAN TRIES TO KICK THE HABIT

POWERFUL TOBACCO LOBBY SEEKS TO STUB OUT MEASURES

TOKYO: Japan is moving to pass its strictest-ever smoking laws, but the country's powerful tobacco lobby wants to stub out measures that were adopted years ago by other developed nations. The government is keen to change Japan's image as a puffing paradise—smoking is still allowed in most bars, restaurants and cafes—as Tokyo gets set to host millions of visitors for the 2020 Olympics.

The health ministry is to submit a proposed law to parliament by June that would ban smoking in many restaurants, as well as public facilities. If approved, rule-breakers would face a penalty of 300,000 yen (\$2,600). But the proposals, unveiled last week, have already been watered down from an initial push for a broad ban on indoor smoking, which ran up against strong opposition from former state monopoly Japan Tobacco (JT) and many small business owners, who fear they'll lose customers.

Establishments can build a separate smoking room under the latest proposal. And places with less than 30 square metres (320 square feet) of floor space would not be affected by the restrictions at all—excluding a huge number of establishments in space-challenged Japan.

"It would be better if it's completely banned" in restaurants, Kumiko Tanaka, a 27-year-old non-smoker, told AFP. "But I don't mind as long as smoking areas are strictly separated."

Even the less-expansive rules could be headed for trouble, however, as opposition brews within the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). Gaffe-prone finance minister Taro Aso recently questioned the long-established link between smoking cigarettes and lung

cancer. And this week, the LDP's parliamentary affairs chief Wataru Takeshita bemoaned the proposals, as a group in his party suggested restaurant owners instead be allowed to choose—and display their smoking status on the door. "As a cigarette lover, I feel like this is not a good idea—how would I live if smoking is banned everywhere?" Takeshita told reporters.

'Really late'

Japan's government gets billions of dollars annually in cigarette tax revenue, and still owns a one-third stake in JT—the third-biggest global tobacco company with brands including Winston, Camel and Benson & Hedges. This conflict leaves anti-smoking campaigners fuming in a country where cigarettes sell for around 430 yen (\$3.75) a pack, and carry only modest health warning labels.

It is a far cry from other developed nations, including Australia and France, which have wide-ranging bans on smoking in public places and large, graphic health warnings on cigarette packs, which sell for two or three times more than in Japan. Almost 50 countries have blanket bans on smoking indoors. "We are really late," said Yumiko Mochizuki, a board member at the Japan Society for Tobacco Control (JSTC).

"And we were given a very bad score by the World Health Organization." The global health body has given Japan its lowest rating for efforts to prevent passive smoking—just 10 percent of restaurants are non-smoking. Japan even scores poorly among other Asian nations with smoking cultures such as China and South Korea.

"Countries such as the Republic of

Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand, Vietnam and cities including Beijing and Shanghai China... have already introduced comprehensive smoking bans," said Susan Mercado, a Manila-based director at the WHO. Smoking kills some 130,000 people in Japan annually, with another 15,000 dying of second-hand smoke related illnesses, Mercado added.

Despite its many smoking venues, tobacco use in Japan has been falling in line with a broader global trend. More than half of Japanese men smoked in 2000. That number dropped to just below 30 percent in 2016.

'Unbalanced, unreasonable, excessive'

Japan Tobacco said the proposed smoking rules are cause for concern. "We are worried that the bill would be unbalanced, unreasonable and excessive," the company said. Japan cannot be compared to other nations with strict indoor-smoking bans because outdoor smoking is limited to certain designated areas, JT said. More than 240 Japanese municipalities restrict lighting up on city streets, meaning smokers must get their fix in clearly marked smoking zones.

But the decade-old bylaws were brought in more to promote good manners and keep cigarette butts off the streets rather than for public health reasons. Campaigners said less smoking will be a hit with millions of tourists visiting for the Olympics in three years, and might just enhance Japan's famous service culture, known as *omotenashi*. "It's the last ingredient that we need to give people our best hospitality," said JSTC president Manabu Sakuta. —AFP

SEA TURTLE FLAPS FLIPPERS IN 1ST REHAB SWIM AFTER SURGERY

BANGKOK: Bank the green sea turtle flapped her flippers with vigor in her first swim after a life-saving operation to remove a heavy mass of swallowed coins from her stomach. Veterinarians in Bangkok put the turtle in water Friday for the first time since her surgery four days ago to see how well she could move. The turtle was gently lowered into a large plastic tank and very quickly began swimming as best as she could in the restricted space.

"It's fantastic! She is responding very well," said Dr Nantarika Chansue, who led the team from Chulalongkorn University's Veterinary Faculty. "Now she is very happy and looks like normal turtle."

The 25-year-old turtle was rescued from a pool in the seaside town of Sri Racha by the Thai navy. The cause of her ill health was revealed by 3D scans that showed she had been eating the coins thrown into her pool by passers-by who believed doing so would bring them luck or longevity.

Over the years, the loose change got stuck in the turtle's digestive tract, cracking her ventral shell and causing a life-threatening infection. The surgeons needed four hours to remove 5 kilograms (11 pounds) of money, counting 915 coins of various currencies. Some are still inside. Veterinarians hope Bank will pass them naturally.

Her rehabilitation has involved manipulating her limbs to make sure the muscles don't stiffen up after being out of water for a prolonged period, and checking that the surgical scar does not get infected. But there are lingering concerns.

"The wound healing seems to be OK and there is no secondary infection because we are using sterile seawater," said Nantarika, "but we have checked her blood and her nickel concentration is very high so we have to work on that." —AP



BANGKOK: Head of Chulalongkorn University's veterinary medical aquatic animal research center Nantarika Chansue, left, injects saline solution as part of rehabilitation treatment for 25-year-old green sea turtle "Bank" in Bangkok yesterday. —AP

VIENNA ZOO CULLS 20 PELICANS AFTER BIRD FLU VIRUS FOUND

VIENNA: An Austrian zoo culled 20 pelicans yesterday after it found the entire group was infected with the highly contagious H5N8 bird flu virus, the zoo said.

Vienna's Schoenbrunn Zoo tested its pelican flock, one of the largest of any zoo worldwide, after the virus was found in one pelican earlier this week. The virus has spread widely

across Europe and the Middle East since late last year, leading to the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of poultry and the confinement of flocks indoors.

The zoo's Dalmatian pelicans had been kept in a tent since December as a preventive measure but one of them became acutely ill on Monday and was killed. —Reuters