

SPACE STATION ASTRONAUTS GIVE MASSIVE TRASH CAN THE BOOT

CAPE CANAVERAL: The International Space Station just got a whole lot tidier. A pair of NASA astronauts released a capsule loaded with 1.5 tons of trash Friday as the space station soared over Bolivia. The capsule should re-enter the atmosphere and burn up harmlessly over the Pacific on Saturday.

NASA supplier Orbital ATK launched the capsule to the space station in December, full of food, clothes and other goods. The astronauts removed the precious contents, then filled it with garbage and old equipment for incineration.

Commander Scott Kelly and Timothy

Kopra, the Americans on board, sent computer commands to set the Cygnus free. The stunning 250-mile-high view showed the capsule slowly backing away, its two circular solar wings looking like open umbrellas. Kelly, who's less than two weeks from wrapping up an unprecedented yearlong mission for NASA, thanked everyone who worked on the Cygnus - "this great vehicle."

"It's been a pleasure," he noted. "A beautiful release," replied Mission Control. Virginia-based Orbital ATK plans to launch another Cygnus with more supplies from Cape Canaveral, Florida, late next month. The flight was delayed

a few weeks after black mold contaminated some of the cargo bags. Technicians had to disinfect everything.

SpaceX, meanwhile, another commercial cargo carrier for NASA, is aiming to make a delivery in the next few months. The company is working to get back on track following a launch accident last summer. NASA has handed off space station shipments to private business so it can focus on getting astronauts beyond low-Earth orbit, namely to Mars. It hopes to do the same with space station crews next year. For now, US astronauts are hitching rides with the Russians. — AP



This photo taken from NASA TV shows a capsule loaded with 1.5 tons of trash, released from the International Space Station. — AP



BANGKOK: Chalit Pongpitakwiset with his girlfriend as they wait for a boat at a pier along a canal. — AFP photos

BLACK MARKET HORMONES: THE HURDLE FOR THAI TRANSGENDERS

'I AM IN THE HANDS OF DOCTORS'

BANGKOK: Chalit Pongpitakwiset has always felt like a man. Now the 25-year-old wants everyone else to see it too. But unlike most transgender people in Asia, who are left to self-administer hormone supplements, Chalit is being helped by a pioneering clinic.

"I am in the hands of doctors," said Chalit, who was born female, but identifies as a man. "I'm not doing it by myself, so it isn't dangerous," the software

company worker said. Several days after receiving his first testosterone injection, Chalit returned to get a blood test at Tangerine, the new clinic inside a Red Cross centre in downtown Bangkok.

The centre is a pilot program that organizers hope could be replicated across Asia. Its location is no accident—Thailand has a large and visible transgender population and is one of the world's top des-

tinations for sex-reassignment surgery. But just like elsewhere in Asia-Pacific, a region home to more than nine million transgender people according to UN estimates, long-term care for patients is patchy at best.

The clinic is a rare place providing follow-up treatment, both physical and mental, for those who have undergone sex-reassignment surgeries, procedures where patients are often at risk of infection. "Most of the centers where the surgery is performed only provide short-term post-surgical care," explained Nittaya Phanuphak, the head doctor at Tangerine.

Unregulated hormones

In Thailand, hormones are commonly purchased on the Internet or in local pharmacies, and administered on advice gleaned from friends or web forums. Recent university graduate Benyapon Chimsud, who was born a man but identifies as female, said she has been taking hormones for two years.

"I have been taking hormones by myself for two years, I consult with my friends," to determine the proper doses of contraceptive pills, she explains. She also gets monthly black market oestrogen injections at a rudimentary neighborhood clinic. That leaves her cut off from regulated healthcare, prone to receiving inaccurate medical advice and at risk of over-consuming hormones in a rush to see rapid results. Chalit, on the other hand, met with a psychiatrist several times before receiving his first injection to prepare for the changes to his body.

"The psychiatrist asked me how long I've wanted to be a man, and whether my friends and other people around me would accept it if I changed," Chalit said. Now he is getting hormone injections every two weeks. "The hormones will stop my periods, change my voice, give me a beard and moustache, and develop my muscles," he said. "All things that will help me no longer be a woman anymore." That should insulate him from the dangers of taking the wrong doses of hormones which experts say can lead to liver and cardiovascular problems. HIV is also always a risk if needles are shared. Rights groups like the Asia-Pacific Transgender Network (APTAN) say this public health issue is largely neglected by the mainstream medical community. "There are no official guidelines on the administration and monitoring of hormones among trans people," said Joe Wong of the Asia-Pacific Transgender Network (APTAN).

Discrimination still commonplace

Although Thailand can appear tolerant on transgender issues from the outside, many segments of society remain deeply conservative. The kingdom's transgenders, often men who become women and are known colloquially as "ladyboys," are over-represented in the entertainment and sex industries.

Despite high levels of education, many struggle to secure full-time work or prominent positions in the workplace. Same sex marriage is also still not legally recognized, and up until 2012, transgenders were considered mentally ill by the army. Tangerine doctor Nittaya says discrimination remains widespread in medical centres, making access to proper healthcare a challenge for many transgenders.

But Chalit is one of a small number of people to have been made aware of the dangers and commitment that comes with long-term hormonal therapy. Several days after starting his treatment, Chalit, who is considering an operation, got a tattoo of the testosterone molecule on his arm. "I have to take hormones for the rest of my life," he said. "This tattoo will also stay with me for the rest of my life." — AP



BANGKOK: This picture taken on January 14, 2016 shows Thai transgender Chalit Pongpitakwiset, who is undergoing a hormone treatment to change into a man, showing off a tattoo of the testosterone molecule on his arm outside his home.

UN CLIMATE CHIEF TO STEP DOWN IN JULY

STOCKHOLM: UN climate chief Christiania Figueres says she will leave her post in July after six years in charge of the diplomatic effort to fight global warming. The Costa Rican diplomat's announcement Friday comes two months after a historic international agreement on climate change was adopted in Paris.

In a letter to governments and observers of the talks, the 59-year-old Figueres said she would "not accept an extension" when her term ends in July. Figueres helped rescue the climate talks after a tumultuous 2009 summit in Copenhagen and put them on a path that culminated with the Paris Agreement, the first deal asking all countries to rein in their greenhouse gas emissions.

"The Paris Agreement is a historical achievement, built on years of increasing willingness to construct bridges of collaboration and solidarity," she wrote in the letter. "It has been an honor to support you along this path over the past six years."

Figueres said UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon "will soon initiate the search" for her successor. Alden Meyer of the Union of

Concerned Scientists, a veteran observer of the climate talks, said Figueres would leave on a high note. "She was an essential part of the success in Paris," he said. "She had the knowledge of the issues, the understanding of the politics and the willingness to engage with non-state actors and use them to build momentum."

Set to take effect in 2020, the Paris Agreement requires all countries to submit plans for climate action and to update them at regular intervals. The plans themselves are not legally binding. The UN's expert panel on climate science says soaring emissions of greenhouse gases, primarily from the burning of fossil fuels, are the main reason for the rise in global temperatures since the middle of the 20th century.

Also Friday, the executive director of the Green Climate Fund, Hela Cheikhrouhou, said she will step down when her three-year term ends in September. The fund is one of the main channels of climate finance to help poor countries reduce their emissions and adapt to rising sea levels, droughts, floods and other impacts of climate change. — AP

SHARP RISE OF DENGUE ON CHILE'S EASTER ISLAND

SANTIAGOP: Chile's remote Easter Island over the past two weeks has seen a dramatic increase in dengue, with a total now of 16 confirmed cases, including one serious enough to require hospitalization. Health officials in Santiago said two new dengue cases were confirmed Saturday on Easter Island in two women, ages 20 and 52.

"One of them required hospitalization after displaying serious symptoms," Chile's health department said in a statement, who said the woman at present is in good condition. Authorities said they are also monitoring the population for Zika virus, and that about a dozen people suspected of having the disease are under observation.

Both dengue and Zika are transmitted by the same mosquito, aedes aegypti. Officials worry that the dengue outbreak could hurt tourism, a major source of revenue. Several nations in Latin America and the Caribbean have seen serious outbreaks of Zika, which officials suspect of causing birth defects in infants, and other potentially serious health concerns.

Easter Island, a Chilean Pacific territory of just 5,761 people, is a volcanic outcrop of Polynesian culture some 3,500 kilometers from the Latin American continent. It is famous for its archaeological sites, including some 900 mammoth ancient statues of human figures, which are a major tourist attraction. — AFP

EL NINO WEAKENS BUT US WON'T FEEL IT FOR MONTHS

WASHINGTON: Meteorologists see signs that the super El Nino is weakening ever so slightly, but they caution months will pass before people in the Americas will feel it. The World Meteorological Organization said Thursday that El Nino has passed its peak based on specific temperature, wind, and atmospheric pressure conditions.

That's technically true, but Michelle L'Heureux, lead El Nino forecaster for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Climate Prediction Center, said there's a few months lag time before the changes affect the Americas.

El Nino is the occasional but natural warming of the central tropical Pacific which, along with changes in the atmosphere, alters weather patterns worldwide. It often brings more rain to California and parts of the US West and South, raises temperatures globally a bit, and causes droughts elsewhere in the world.

In December and January, El Nino measurements showed it tied 1997-1998 for the strongest since records started being kept in 1950. "It's still strong, but it has reached a peak value and it's starting its decline," said University of Oklahoma meteorology professor Jason Furtado. "It's still there;

it's not like we don't have El Nino anymore. We can still expect (El Nino) like conditions in March and April and even into May, as well."

Mike Halpert, deputy director of the climate prediction center, said this El Nino hasn't brought drought-struck California as much moisture as previous strong El Ninos, but there are still two months to go to get significant rainfall.

With El Nino still kicking, NOAA forecast a spring that's wetter than normal throughout the US South, much of the West and part of the East. Only the Great Lakes region and Pacific Northwest are forecast to be dry. It also predicts warmer than usual weather along the entire West Coast and most of the country north of Colorado, Missouri and Tennessee, with only Texas, parts of Oklahoma and New Mexico cooler than normal.

The International Research Institute at Columbia University forecast that once this El Nino fades, there's a 50 percent chance it will be followed directly by El Nino's flip side, a La Nina. La Nina often means droughts in parts of the US Great Plains and Southwest with more rain in the Northwest. La Ninas often mean warmer winters in the US Southeast and cooler winters in the Northwest. — AP



DHAKA: Bangladeshi man Abdul Bajander rests a day after a surgery at Dhaka Medical College Hospital in Dhaka yesterday. A Bangladeshi man dubbed 'tree man' due to large bark-like warts growing on his hands and feet underwent successful surgery on February 20 to remove some of the growths. — AFP