

CLINICS ASK JUDGE TO BLOCK NEW ALABAMA ABORTION RESTRICTIONS

MONTGOMERY, Alabama: Lawyers for abortion providers have asked a federal judge to block new Alabama laws that ban abortion clinics near schools as well as the procedure most commonly used in the second trimester. The American Civil Liberties Union filed a request for a temporary restraining order before the laws go into effect August 1. The group said the location restriction would close two of the state's busiest abortion clinics, while the procedure ban would severely curtail second-trimester abortion access in Alabama.

"In recent years, the State of Alabama has engaged in relentless attacks on abortion rights, enacting a

multitude of restrictions designed to shut down clinics and impose burdens on women seeking abortion services," ACLU lawyers wrote in the July 6 request to block the law. US District Judge Myron Thompson held a Monday telephone conference on the request, but has not issued a ruling. Alabama Gov Robert Bentley in May signed into law a ban on abortion clinics within 2,000 feet of public K-8 schools. He also approved a ban of a common second-trimester abortion procedure known as dilation & evacuation, or D&E.

The location bill targeted the Alabama Women's Center for Reproductive Alternatives in Huntsville. The clinic moved to a new location in 2013 in order to

comply with a new state law requiring clinics to meet the same building code requirements as outpatient surgical centers. The new location is down the street from a K-8 magnet school. The restriction could also affect a Tuscaloosa women's clinic. The clinic is more than a mile's drive to the nearest school. However, its property and the school's campus back up to the same wooded area.

According to Alabama Department of Public Health data, the Huntsville and Tuscaloosa clinics performed 5,833 abortions in 2014, 72 percent of all abortions in the state that year. Legislation supporters said abortion clinics should not be close to schools. Dilation &

evacuation, or surgical abortions, are used in the majority of procedures in the second trimester, after 13 weeks of pregnancy, according to the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.

In the procedure, the cervix and the contents of the uterus are removed. Alabama lawmakers who supported the bill called surgical abortion "barbaric" and likened it to medieval forms of punishment. Legislation opponents called the bill an attempt to interfere with a woman's medical decisions. Similar procedure bans were enacted in Kansas and Oklahoma but those laws were temporarily blocked by the courts. — AP

AUSTRIAN BIOTECH PLANS ZIKA VACCINE CLINICAL TRIALS

BIOSCIENCE SIGNED A LICENSE DEAL WITH THE FRENCH RESEARCH INSTITUTE

AUSTRIA: An Austrian biotech company working with the Institute Pasteur said yesterday it planned to start clinical trials with an experimental Zika vaccine in the next 12 months, marking a further acceleration of research in the field. Themis Bioscience has signed a license deal with the French research institute giving it extensive rights to the Zika vaccine candidate, which is based on established measles vaccine technology.

More than a dozen small biotech firms and

other organizations are working on vaccines against mosquito-borne Zika, which has been linked to birth defects and neurological disorders, although most work is at a very early stage. Erich Tauber, chief executive of Themis, believes his company's project will benefit from the proven track record behind the technology used to immunize against measles. French drug maker Sanofi, the only big drug maker working on a Zika shot, last week struck a deal with the US Army to speed up the development of another

vaccine, which should be ready for testing on humans in October.

Global health officials are racing to better understand the Zika virus, which has caused a major outbreak that began in Brazil last year and has spread to many countries in the Americas. The World Health Organization has said there is strong scientific consensus that Zika is a cause of the birth defect microcephaly, or small heads in babies, as well as Guillain-Barre syndrome, a neurological disorder. — Reuters



INDIA: Indian para-military force soldiers plant saplings on the outskirts of Allahabad, India. — AP

INDIA STATE AIMS TO PLANT 50 MILLION TREES IN A DAY

LUCKNOW, India: Hundreds of thousands of people in India's most populous state jostled for space Monday as they attempted to plant 50 million trees over 24 hours in hopes of shattering the world record. Officials in Uttar Pradesh distributed millions of saplings to be planted across the state to help India's efforts to increase its forest cover, and to get into Guinness World Records for the most trees planted in a day. The current record is 847,275, set in Pakistan in 2013.

More than 800,000 people, including students, lawmakers, government officials, housewives and volunteers from nonprofit organizations, headed out Monday to plant the saplings at designated spots along country roads and highways, rail tracks and forest lands. Uttar Pradesh's top elected official, Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav, said that planting 50 million trees would spread awareness and enthusiasm about afforestation and environmental conservation.

Maximum oxygen

"The world has realized that serious efforts are needed to reduce carbon emissions to mitigate the effects of global climate change. Uttar Pradesh has made a beginning in this regard," Yadav told volunteers in the city of Kannauj, 250 kilometers (155 miles) southwest of the state capital, Lucknow. India's government is encouraging all 29 states to start tree-planting drives to increase the country's forest cover as part of commitments made at last year's climate change summit in Paris.

The government has designated more than \$6.2 billion for tree-planting across the country, in keeping with its pledge to push India's forest cover to 95 million hectares by 2030. In Lucknow's Kukrail Reserve Forest, eighth-grader Shashwat Rai said he was planting a "peepal," using the local name for the fig species *Ficus religiosa*. "I've read in a book that this tree releases maximum oxygen," Rai said. "There is so much pollution in the city, we need trees that produce oxygen."

Shashwat said he would be checking on the tree frequently. "I don't want this plant to die," he said. The long-term survival of trees planted in such mass campaigns remains a concern, officials said. Senior forest official Sanjeev Saran said the sites where the trees have been planted would be monitored through aerial photographs taken at regular intervals to check how many of the saplings were thriving. Usually, only 60 percent of saplings survive, with the rest succumbing to disease or lack of water, officials said. Meanwhile, auditors from Guinness World Records were moving around in the state to check on the numbers. "We are trying to maintain full transparency," Saran said. "They are out in the field and are supervising the plantation drive," he said. "We do not know who they are or where they are at this point in time. They are working incognito, and this suits us." Last year, Uttar Pradesh entered Guinness World Records for the largest distribution of saplings by donating more than 1 million trees that were planted at 10 locations in the state. — AP



MINNESOTA: Adele fans arrived for her show at Xcel Energy Center in pouring rain in St. Paul, Minnesota. — AP

STORMS, TORNADOES CAUSE DAMAGE IN NORTH-CENTRAL MINNESOTA

LITCHFIELD, Minnesota: At least two tornadoes, torrential rain and powerful winds damaged homes, forced the evacuation of a nursing home and flooded highways in north-central Minnesota. Up to 20 homes were damaged by a tornado in Meeke County on Monday afternoon, authorities said. The communities of Litchfield and nearby Watkins were hard hit by the storms. Fifty residents were removed from the Hilltop Health Care Center in Watkins after the home lost part of its roof. The American Red Cross said it is assisting the evacuees.

In Litchfield, about 70 miles west of Minneapolis, Mayor Keith Johnson said there was serious damage, but that no one was injured. "I've lived in this town 52 years and I've never seen a storm like this in our community," Johnson said. Diane Kelbing tells KARE-TV she and her husband heard the tornado warning siren, left their home and raced to their mobile home park shelter. "Well, the garage is gone, the shed is gone, the snowmobile trailer is gone. We've got a snow plow in the tree," Kelbing said.

Audrey Schoenberg took shelter at a nearby restaurant after a tornado flipped her

home off its foundation. "I'm numb. I'm numb. I don't know really what I do feel right now. It's quite a shock to see that everything is gone," she said. Law enforcement also reported a tornado touchdown around 6:30 p.m. Monday three miles east of Rockville, in Stearns County, according to the National Weather Service. The storms generated a deluge of heavy rain causing the Crow Wing County Sheriff's Office to advise against travel late Monday because of flooding.

In St. Cloud, powerful rain flooded street and left some motorists stranded in high water. In a Baxter industrial park, a foot of water covered the roadways. The National Weather Service reported 11 inches of rain fell in the east-central Minnesota city of Sturgeon Lake. The agency also issued a flash flood warning for much of northwestern Wisconsin after as much as 9 inches of rain fell in some areas. Parts of eight counties were under the flash flood warning until early yesterday morning. The weather service said it received reports from law enforcement that state, county and local roads were under water in the warned areas, including Grantsburg, Spooner, Hayward, Ashland, Iron River and Trego. — AP

ACTION NEEDED AS DECLINE IN HIV CASES STALLS, AIDS AGENCY SAYS

LONDON: Global efforts to prevent the spread of HIV infection must be stepped up after a long-term decline in the number of new cases in adults stalled, the United Nations AIDS agency warned on yesterday. In a report on the worldwide epidemic, UNAIDS said an estimated 1.9 million adults had become infected with HIV every year for at least the past five years. Globally, some 36.7 million were now infected. New HIV infections among adults were now rising in Eastern Europe, central Asia, the Caribbean and Middle East and North Africa, the report said.

"We are sounding the alarm," said Michel Sidibe, executive director of UNAIDS. "The power of prevention is not being realized. If there is a resurgence in new HIV infections now, the epidemic will become impossible to control. The world needs to take urgent and immediate action." The epidemic of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) that causes AIDS has had a devastating impact since it began some 35 years ago.

Since then, 35 million people have died from AIDS-related illnesses and an estimated 78 million have become infected with HIV. The World Health Organization says all people diagnosed with HIV should have immediate access to antiretroviral AIDS drugs, which hold the virus in check and give patients a good chance of a long and relatively healthy life. But the UNAIDS report found only around 17 million patients worldwide - less than half of those diagnosed as HIV positive - are currently on treatment.

The UNAIDS report said significant progress had been made in stopping new HIV infections among children, with new cases down by more than 70 percent since 2001. But the decline in new infections among adults had stalled, at a time when donor funding for the fight against AIDS had dropped to its lowest levels since 2010, it said. International donor contributions fell from a peak of \$9.7 billion in 2013 to \$8.1 billion in 2015. — Reuters

TANZANIA SEIZED \$2 MILLION WORTH OF ELEPHANT IVORY

TANZANIA: Tanzanian police said yesterday it had seized elephant ivory worth more than \$2 million and arrested nine suspected smugglers in June in an operation supported by Interpol and police forces in the region. Poaching has risen in recent years across sub-Saharan Africa. Gangs kill elephants and rhinos, both endangered animals, and ship their tusks and horns to Asia for use in ornaments and medicines.

"We were able to seize 666 pieces of elephant ivory, weighing 1,279 kilograms valued at 4.6 billion shillings (\$2.11 million)," Diwani Athuman, director of criminal investigation, said in a statement. Among the suspects arrested were two citizens of Guinea and one Ugandan. Interpol and police forces in eastern and southern Africa took part in the operation, he said. The elephant population in Tanzania shrank to around 43,000 in 2014 from 110,000 in 2009, according to a census released last year, with conservationists blaming "industrial-scale" poaching. The rhino population is much smaller.

The East African country relies heavily on revenues from safari tourism and new President John Magufuli has pledged to root out poaching as part of a wider war on corruption. A prominent Chinese businesswoman Yang Feng Glan, 66, dubbed the "Ivory Queen", is facing trial in Tanzania on charges of running a elephant ivory smuggling network. — Reuters

SKY HIGH BILLS LEAVE NIGERIAN MOTHERS AND NEWBORNS TRAPPED IN HOSPITALS

UMUAHIA, Nigeria: Four months after giving birth in Umuahia, the capital of Nigeria's southeastern Abia state, 23-year-old single mother Amarachi Amadi is still in hospital with her baby girl. While the mother and her daughter are in good health, they are not allowed to leave the public hospital until Amadi settles the 543,000 naira (\$1,900) bill for their care.

Amadi, who makes a living selling stones to construction workers for 40 naira (\$0.15) per sack, fears she may never be able to clear her debt - leaving her and her baby trapped in the Umuahia Federal Medical Centre (FMC) for the foreseeable future. "I have really suffered ... and they do not allow me to go out," said Amadi, who relies on her mother to bring food into the hospital and to help her care for her baby, Oluebubechi.

New mothers like Amadi are stuck in maternity wards across Nigeria - forbidden from leaving until their debts are settled. Known as Awaiting Bill Settlement (ABS) patients, these women are responsible for looking after and feeding themselves and their newborns. Few Nigerians have health insurance, leaving many patients clinging to

the hope their bills will be waived by hospital directors or covered by visiting well-wishers.

Meanwhile, whenever the maternity ward at the hospital is full, many ABS patients are forced to sleep on the floor. "Sometimes, we place all the babies on one bed while the mothers sleep in chairs," said one nurse, who asked not to be named as she was not authorized by the hospital to speak. "Some babies have stayed here until they started crawling," the nurse said, adding that some mothers had managed to escape the hospital with their babies when no one was watching.

Hoping for charity

Like Amadi, nine other nursing mothers in the FMC's maternity ward are stuck in limbo, having been discharged by the doctors but trapped within the hospital grounds by their debts. Janet Moses, 19, said the father of her twin boys had stopped visiting or answering her calls over the past month. She believes he has been scared off by the bill. No one visits Moses or brings her food, so she depends on other patients to share their meals with her.

Other patients on the ward are slightly

more fortunate. Adaku Mmaduabuchi, a 25-year-old housewife who gave birth to her first child in May, is brought meals daily by her husband. But they too have been struggling to pay off their debt. "I have been phoning my friends and relatives to see if anyone can lend me the money," said her husband, Ihunze, who has so far only paid a third of the 200,000 naira (\$700) they owe.

There are a large number of ABS patients at the FMC due to the hospital's policy of treating every patient who arrives, regardless of whether they can afford to pay upfront for their treatment, said Chuku Abali, the director of the hospital. Abali said he frequently waives the bills of the hospital's patients, many of whom are nursing mothers, with amounts ranging from 10,000 naira (\$35) to 1.5 million naira (\$5,300).

"But if we continue to run on charity, we will fold. Things have to be paid for," Abali told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. Many patients wait in the hope that philanthropists, who sometimes visit during Easter and Christmas holidays, will clear their debts when they next visit, the hospital director said. "We also conduct investigations to find

out if patients have any relatives who can afford to pay, then we write to them."

Call for insurance

Other hospitals, like the University College Hospital (UCH) in the southwestern city of Ibadan, are taking a more novel approach when it comes to dealing with their ABS patients. The UCH has set up a fund which allows hospital staff to make voluntary monthly contributions from their salaries towards patients' bills. Abandoned teenage mothers are given priority. Yet these contributions alone are not enough to solve the problem, said Adefemi Afolabi, the UCH's deputy director. "There is no day I get to my table without seeing letters from people applying for cancellation of bills," Afolabi said. The health ministry announced plans earlier this year to build 10,000 health clinics across the country, which could provide maternity care at a lower cost, according to Afolabi. "The government also needs to extend the National Health Insurance Scheme so it goes to the grassroots," he said. "Only government workers and some private workers are entitled to it." — Reuters