

BAD SMOG AHEAD: BEIJING TELLS STUDENTS TO STAY INDOORS

BEIJING: Authorities in Beijing warned yesterday that heavy pollution will persist this week, urging the suspension of outdoor school activities and construction projects.

The warning comes in the form of an orange alert, the second highest in a four-tier system. The alert signifies there will be three consecutive days of smog starting Thursday at particularly dangerous levels on the Chinese capital's air quality index. A red alert is issued if pollution is forecast to persist for more than three days.

Kindergartens and primary and middle schools were advised to cancel outdoor activities. There was no word on such an advisory for Beijing's high schools, which focus mainly on indoor test preparation. Construction sites that dot the ever-expanding city were targeted by authorities for the exhaust, dust and other pollution they add to the already toxic mix in the air.

Launched three years ago amid rising public

concern, the warning system is one way authorities are attempting to clean up China's dirty air after decades of breakneck economic growth that led to the construction of hundreds of coal-fired power plants and soaring car ownership.

Authorities say they're making progress. Environmental officials in Beijing said Monday that a key indicator of poor air quality - the density of the particulate matter PM2.5 - decreased in the first 10 months year-on-year.

Also Monday, the environmental campaign group Greenpeace East Asia reported that levels of the heavy metals arsenic, cadmium and lead in the PM2.5 in Beijing had fallen rapidly since 2013. It said the decline was directly linked to the closure of coal-fired power plants around the city.

The Beijing Municipal Environmental Monitoring Center acknowledged that the city's air was likely to worsen as the coal-powered winter heating system kicks in across northern China. — AP



BEIJING: A woman and a child wearing masks for protection against pollution exit a kindergarten with their children after finishing their classes yesterday. — AP



NEW YORK: In this Nov. 9, 2016, file photo, President-elect Donald Trump speaks during a rally. — AP

TRUMP'S PATH ON HEALTH CARE LAW INTERSECTS WITH A LAWSUIT

OBAMACARE INTO A FREE-FALL?

WASHINGTON: President-elect Donald Trump says he wants to preserve health insurance coverage even as he pursues repeal of the Obama-era overhaul that provided it to millions of uninsured people.

How his administration handles a pending lawsuit over billions of dollars in insurance subsidies will reveal whether Trump wants an orderly transition to a Republican-designed system or if he'd push "Obamacare" over a cliff. Stripping away the subsidies at issue in the case would put the program into a free-fall.

The question in the House v. Burwell case couldn't be more technical: whether the Affordable Care Act specifically states in its hundreds of pages that the government can pay money to help reduce out-of-pocket costs for low-income consumers on HealthCare.gov and state insurance markets.

Those subsidies for deductibles and copayments are paid directly to insurers, on top of the law's tax credits that reduce premiums for consumers. Since the ACA's basic coverage is fairly skimpy, the cost-sharing subsidies make it work for millions of people when they seek treatment. For example, subsidies can bring a \$1,500 hospital copayment down to \$100.

Republicans and Obamacare

House Republicans have taken the Obama

administration to court. They argue that the law lacks a specific congressional "appropriation" for the subsidies, estimated to total \$9 billion next year. A federal district judge in Washington, DC, agreed with the House and the case is now on appeal. The Obama administration has argued that the spending is automatically approved, or "appropriated," under the law. Otherwise lawmakers would have designed a system that they knew wasn't viable. More than half of health law customers are currently receiving cost-sharing subsidies.

The White House says the courts are not the place to try to settle funding disputes. The government's final brief in the case is due on Jan. 19, the day before Trump is to be inaugurated.

Trump, who has vowed to start taking apart the health care law on the first day of his administration, has a tailor-made opportunity: His administration could simply agree with the House that the payments are unconstitutional, and stop contesting the lawsuit.

"The Trump administration could immediately turn off the tap for making cost-sharing payments," said Mark Regan, legal director of the Disability Law Center of Alaska in Anchorage, and a defender of the law. "Turning the payments off would come close to destroying the market." Insurers could be stuck with massive losses because they would still have a

legal obligation to cover patients' out-of-pocket costs, but would get no reimbursement from the government.

Another approach might involve setting a deadline. "What Trump should do is on Day 1 say, 'We are not going to fight that lawsuit - those payments end at the end of calendar year 2017,'" said Michael Cannon, health policy director at the libertarian Cato Institute think tank. Cannon was one of the main proponents of an earlier legal challenge to the law's premium subsidies in certain states. That case was decided by the Supreme Court in favor of the administration.

A deadline would give consumers and insurers some time to adjust, and help focus Congress on the need to pass legislation to replace the ACA. But legally that could get complicated. If the Trump administration were to agree with the House that the subsidies are unconstitutional, how could it continue to make any payments at all? Congress would have to provide some sort of stopgap authority.

House Speaker Paul Ryan, R-Wis., is reviewing the issue. "We are in contact with the Trump transition team as we consider the House's options," said spokeswoman AshLee Strong. Insurers are worried. In a brief filed with the appeals court, they warned of \$1,000 premium increases and a market exodus by consumers and insurers. "A seismic shift," they called it. — AP

THOUSANDS OF KIDS DYING IN NORTHEAST NIGERIA, SAYS SURVEY

LAGOS, NIGERIA: Thousands of children have died of starvation and disease in Boko Haram-ravaged northeastern Nigeria, Doctors Without Borders said Tuesday quoting a new survey that is forcing Nigerian officials to stop denying the crisis.

The Paris-based organization hopes that official recognition of the calamity in which "thousands are dying" will help bring urgent aid before older children also start dying. Natalie Roberts, emergency program manager for northeast Nigeria, told The Associated Press.

A survey of two refugee camps in the northeastern city of Maiduguri shows a quarter of the expected population of under-5 children is missing, assumed dead, according to the organization. Under-5 mortality rates in the camps are more than double the threshold for declaring an emergency, Roberts said in a phone interview from Paris.

Speaking on her return from northeastern Borno state, the birthplace of Boko Haram's Islamic uprising, she said the absence of young children was striking. "We only saw older brothers and sisters. No toddlers are straddling their big sisters' hips. No babies strapped to their mums' backs. It's as if they have just vanished," Roberts said.

Sounding the alarm

Doctors Without Borders first sounded the alarm in June but senior officials of the National Emergency Management Agency managing the camps as late as September denied any child was suffering malnutrition and accused the doctors of exaggerating the crisis to attract donations. That was after The Associated Press published images of matchstick-thin children fighting for their lives at an intensive feeding center in Maiduguri, run by the France-based

medical organization, also known as Medecins Sans Frontieres, or MSF.

The crisis is aggravated by alleged theft of food aid by emergency management officials being investigated by Nigeria's senate. "The difference now is that our figures have been checked by the statistician general, and we have official recognition from the government that they believe this is happening," Roberts said.

An estimated 75,000 children could die within a year because donors have provided only one-third of requested funding and twice as much, \$1 billion, is needed for the rest of the year and into 2017, says the United Nations.

A vital funding conference in Geneva next month could save the day, otherwise "it won't be long before we could be in the painful position of having to turn away sick and starving children," says the US-based Save the Children.

Some 2.6 million people including more than 1 million children have been driven from their homes by Nigeria's 7-year-old insurgency that has killed more than 20,000 people, left food-producing fields fallow, disrupted trade routes and destroyed wells, bridges and entire towns.

President Muhammadu Buhari last month set up a presidential committee to coordinate aid and the rebuilding of the northeast, even as an end to the rainy season has brought a predictable upsurge in attacks on military outposts and urban suicide bombings by the Islamic extremists.

Buhari and Nigeria's military have said aerial bombardments and a ground offensive that have forced the insurgents out of most towns has the extremists on the run. But aid agencies say they can barely venture outside Maiduguri for fear of attack and are using helicopters to reach dangerous areas. — AP



MAIDUGURI, NIGERIA: In this Monday, Aug. 29, 2016, file photo, a malnourished child is weighed on a scale at a clinic run by Doctors Without Borders. — AP

CHOLESTEROL DRUG SHOWS PROMISE TO HELP REVERSE HEART DISEASE

NEW ORLEANS: For the first time, a new drug given along with a cholesterol-lowering statin medicine has proved able to shrink plaque that is clogging arteries, potentially giving a way to undo some of the damage of heart disease.

The difference was very small but doctors hope it will grow with longer treatment, and any reversal or stabilization of disease would be a win for patients and a long-sought goal. The drug, Amgen Inc.'s Repatha, also drove LDL, or bad cholesterol, down to levels rarely if ever seen in people before. Heart patients are told to aim for below 70, but some study participants got as low as 15. "There doesn't appear to be any level at which there is harm" from too little LDL, and the lower patients went, the more their plaque shrank, said one study leader, the Cleveland Clinic's Dr. Steven Nissen.

Results were published Tuesday by the Journal of the American Medical Association and discussed at an American Heart Association conference. Statins such as Lipitor and Crestor curb cholesterol production. Repatha and a similar drug, Praluent, block PCSK9, a substance that interferes with the liver's ability to remove cholesterol from the blood. Too much cholesterol, along with other substances, can build up and form plaque in arteries.

Drawbacks

The new drugs have drawbacks, though. Statins are pills sold as generics for as little as a

dime a day. The new ones are biotech drugs that are expensive to make - Repatha costs \$14,000 a year and insurers often won't pay. They must be given as shots every two weeks or once a month. People can do it themselves with a penlike device.

In the study, about 900 heart disease patients were given a strong statin and monthly shots of either Repatha or a dummy solution. Ultrasound images were taken of an artery with plaque at the start of the trial and 18 months later.

The average for bad cholesterol stayed around 93 for people given only the statin, but dropped to 37 for those on both drugs. The amount of artery plaque stayed about the same for the statin-only group but shrank 1 percent in those also given Repatha. Some people with more dramatic LDL declines saw plaque shrink 2 percent. "It's small, but it probably took patients 60 years to accumulate that plaque," so to see any change after just 18 months of treatment is good, said a cholesterol expert, Dr. Raul Santos of the University of Sao Paulo. — AP



NEW ORLEANS: This undated image provided by Amgen Inc. shows the cholesterol-lowering drug Repatha. — AP



WHANGAPARAOA, NEW ZEALAND: This undated handout photo received yesterday by Domino's Pizza shows a drone designed to deliver pizzas in flight. — AFP

PIE IN THE SKY: NEW ZEALAND MAKES PIZZA DRONE DELIVERY

WELLINGTON: The world's first pizza drone delivery was claimed yesterday by the New Zealand division of fast food giant Domino's, as it looks to grab a slice of a potentially hot future market.

Domino's said it used an unmanned aerial vehicle to deliver two pizzas to a customer at Whangaparaoa, just north of Auckland. The firm's boss Don Meij said drones were set to become an essential part of pizza deliveries. "They can avoid traffic congestion and traffic lights, and safely reduce the delivery time and distance by travelling directly to customers'

homes," he said. "This is the future. Today's successful delivery was an important proof of this concept." He said tests would continue at Whangaparaoa this week, with a view to expanding the delivery area next year.

Domino's said it was also examining using drones in Australia, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Japan and Germany. In March, the company unveiled a robot cart being trialed in New Zealand that it claimed was the world's first driverless pizza delivery vehicle. — AFP