



SHANGHAI: This file photo shows a man grinding out his cigarette in an ashtray at a railway station in Shanghai.—AFP

SMOKING TO KILL 200 MILLION IN CHINA THIS CENTURY: WHO

CHINA, WORLD'S LARGEST CONSUMER, PRODUCER OF TOBACCO

BEIJING: Smoking-related diseases will claim 200 million lives in China this century and plunge tens of millions into poverty, a report said yesterday. China is the world's largest consumer and producer of tobacco and the industry provides the government with colossal sums. In 2015, it recorded 1.1 trillion yuan (\$160 billion) in profits, up 20 per cent year-on-year.

But a report by the World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Development Program (UNDP) said yesterday that the Asian giant will suffer an economic toll if it does not urgently reduce its smoking population. The paper-called "The Bill China Cannot Afford"—estimated that the total annual economic cost of tobacco use in the country in 2014 was 350 billion yuan, up tenfold from 2000.

"If nothing is done to reduce [the

death rate] and introduce more progressive policies, the consequences could be devastating not just for the health of people across the country, but also for China's economy as a whole," WHO China representative Bernhard Schwartlander said in a statement. The calculation includes both the direct costs of treating tobacco-related illness and the indirect costs such as lost work productivity.

"The rapid increase in costs associated with tobacco use in China is unsustainable," Schwartlander added. Twenty-eight percent of all adults and 50 percent of men in China are estimated to smoke regularly. Rural-to-urban migrants are more likely to be smokers, the report said, adding that they risk descending into poverty when smoking-related medical costs become too great a reality at odds with the government goal of eradi-

cating poverty nationwide by 2020. The organizations recommended a smoke-free policy across the country akin to laws in Beijing and Shanghai, where smoking is banned in most public places. However, enforcing anti-smoking measures can be difficult in China as the state-owned China National Tobacco Corp, which enjoys a near-monopoly, shares offices and senior officials with the national tobacco regulator. The report also urged further raising tobacco taxes to make smoking less affordable.

While retail tobacco prices increased following a taxation hike in 2015, the average price of a cigarette pack remains just ten yuan. A 50 per cent increase in the retail price of cigarettes would prevent 20 million premature deaths over 50 years, the report said.—AFP

US DOCTOR CHARGED WITH GENITAL MUTILATION ON GIRLS

NEW YORK: A US doctor in Detroit has been arrested and charged with carrying out female genital mutilation on girls aged six to eight, prosecutors said Thursday. Emergency room doctor Jumana Nagarwala, 44, of Northville, Michigan, is accused of carrying out the widely condemned practice-illegal in the United States—for 12 years from a medical office in Livonia, Michigan. She appeared in a US federal court in Detroit on Thursday and was remanded into custody until at least Monday, said a spokeswoman for the US attorney's office.

If convicted at trial she faces a maximum sentence of life behind bars. Congress passed a law in 1996 making it illegal to perform genital mutilation or cutting in the United States on anyone under than 18. Twenty-five US states also have laws prohibiting the practice. Prosecutors in Michigan say they believe it is the first case of its kind brought under the federal law. Some of Nagarwala's victims traveled from outside Michigan and were told not to talk about the procedure, prosecutors said.

"Dr Nagarwala is alleged to have performed horrifying acts of brutality on the most vulnerable victims," said acting Assistant Attorney General Kenneth Blanco. "The Department of Justice is committed to stopping female genital mutilation

in this country, and will use the full power of the law to ensure that no girls suffer such physical and emotional abuse." "The practice has no place in modern society and those who perform FGM on minors will be held accountable under federal law," said acting US Attorney Daniel Lemisch. In 2006, a court in Georgia found a man guilty of sexually mutilating his two-year-old daughter with a pair of scissors, in what was then the first recorded case of female genital mutilation in the United States. The Ethiopian immigrant was sentenced to 10 years in prison for aggravated battery and cruelty to children for the 2001 crime. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that 513,000 women and girls in the United States in 2012 were at risk of or had been subjected to female genital mutilation or cutting.

The estimate was three times higher than one based on 1990 data, due to increased immigration from countries where genital mutilation is practiced. Globally, at least 200 million girls and women alive today have suffered some form of female genital mutilation across 30 countries, according to the United Nations. While concentrated in Africa, it is common in some communities in Asia, Arab states and Latin America.—AFP

DUTCH PANDA MANIA AS GIANT BEARS ARRIVE FROM CHINA

THE HAGUE: Two giant pandas arrived by plane at Amsterdam's Schiphol airport Wednesday after a marathon 8,000 kilometer journey from China, the first breeding pair on Dutch soil in three decades. Female panda Wu Wen (Beautiful Powerful Cloud) and her male companion Xing Ya (Elegant Star) touched down at Schiphol at around 1730 GMT after leaving Chengdu in central China more than 10 hours earlier.

A giant television screen showed the pandas being lowered onto the tarmac from a passenger jet operated by Dutch national carrier KLM, surrounded by Dutch border police. Later they were put on display for more than 100 journalists and guests straining to catch a glimpse of the two animals in their specialized cages which included see-through plexiglass. "I'm so happy so many friends have come to welcome my two new colleagues," China's ambassador to The Netherlands Wu Ken told the crowd, speaking in Dutch.

"This is a huge step in bilateral relations between China and The Netherlands," Wu said. The pandas are headed for the Ouwehands Dierenpark zoo in Rhenen, where they'll stay on loan for the next 15 years as part of the park's Asian exhibition. The park has built a special enclosure for the two pandas at a cost of around seven million euros (\$7.4 million), Dutch media reported Wednesday. This includes separate indoor and outdoor spaces, night accommodation, a nursery, a cold store for their bamboo food supply, a special veterinary clinic and an area for their full-time keepers, the Ouwehands zoo said in a statement.

"A warm welcome awaits them, which will naturally be in an entirely panda-themed manner," the park added. The pandas will be housed at the park at a cost of around one million dollars per year for the rest of their stay, Dutch daily tabloid Algemeen Dagblad reported. The Ouwehands zoo said it "will make a substantial financial contribution each year to support nature-protection activities in China."

The zoo, with help from the Dutch government, has been negotiating for 16 years to bring the pandas to The Netherlands. The deal to bring the pandas to The Netherlands was clinched during a state visit to China by Dutch King Willem-Alexander and Queen Maxima in October 2015, the zoo added. Meanwhile, panda mania has gripped The Netherlands ahead of the bears' arrival, with Dutch newspapers devoting pages of space to the bears' arrival and the hashtags #Pandas #pandakoorts (panda fever) trending on the Dutch Twitter feed.

The last time there were pandas in The Netherlands was in 1987, when two giant pandas were on show at a Dutch safari park for four months. An expectant Dutch public however will have to wait to catch a glimpse of the animals: the bears will now be kept in quarantine for up to the six weeks before an official opening date, yet to be announced.—AFP



SCHIPHOL, Netherlands: Wu Wen, one of the panda cubs, is pictured as they are introduced to the public at Schiphol airport in Amsterdam after arriving from China.—AFP

SWISS OASIS FOR LEGAL CANNABIS, WITHOUT THE HIGH

LAUSANNE: A grey-haired woman in her early 60s daintily lifts small trays topped with different varieties of marijuana to her nose, sniffing each of them carefully. "Which one would you recommend for someone with medical issues?" she asks salesman Paul Monot, co-founder of the DrGreen shop in western Switzerland. Posters of bright green cannabis plants advertise its wares, which, like those sold openly in a growing number of shops across Switzerland, are completely legal.

There is a catch however: They won't make you high. "There is no psychotropic effect of our weed," says Monot, at his store in Lausanne. On display are four varieties of legal cannabis boasting familiar names such as Skunk and Purple Haze, and an identical appearance and smell as their illegal counterparts. Since 2011, cannabis containing up to one percent tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) — the component that gets recreational users high — can be sold and consumed legally in the wealthy Alpine country.

That compares to a 0.2-percent limit in most European countries, which effectively blocks all sale of cannabis flowers since crossbreeding plants to consistently contain below that level of THC has so far proved impossible. Switzerland was eager to enable large-scale production of non-drug cannabis, especially to exploit another active component, cannabidiol (CBD), used in a range of products, from cosmetics to pet food, and increasingly valued for its potential health benefits.

Taxed liked tobacco

It has taken years for the low-potency cannabis business to develop and demand to grow, but recently shops like DrGreen have been booming. Monot and his partner launched in December and are already raking in sales of up to 100,000 Swiss francs (\$99,500, 93,400 euros) a month. Swiss media have cited estimates that sales of legal cannabis are currently about 100 million Swiss francs annually. Trade really took off after health authorities in February ordered the low-THC cannabis be taxed like tobacco and carry similar health warnings, making it clear just how legal the product is.

"For the past month or so, it has just been exploding,.... and we're surfing the wave," Monot told AFP. Aziza, 37, said she only discovered a few weeks ago that legal cannabis was on sale in shops near her Geneva home. "I love this stuff," she said, adding she had become increasingly concerned about the rising THC-levels in the illegal product she liked to smoke. "With this stuff, I feel the same relaxation as before, but since there is no high, I can still get things done and play with my kids," she said.

Sort of oasis

Monot buys the cannabis he sells in bulk from a producer in northern Switzerland, KannaSwiss, which has also seen an explosion in sales. "Switzerland has become sort of an oasis" for legal cannabis, said KannaSwiss co-founder Corso Serra di Cassano. KannaSwiss counts

around 10,000 square meters of outdoor growing space and plans to soon triple the 800 square meters it has indoors. "Demand in Europe is very big, and we're the only country at the moment that has laws that make this possible," Serra di Cassano said.

Canada has just unveiled legislation to fully legalize recreational marijuana use, making it only the second country to do so, after Uruguay. For many, the Swiss offer seems too good to be true. "So this stuff is 100 percent legal?" asks a man in his 20s with several visible piercings and tattoos as he sniffs the DrGreen Skunk. "Can I smoke it on the street?"

Monot says he spends much of his time advising customers how to use his products without getting into trouble. If police are suspicious, they can demand to test the cannabis in a laboratory for THC levels and hand the bill to the user if it is above one percent, along with a fine for illegal possession. Monot urges the man to smoke discreetly and suggests he hold onto his receipt, pointing out that as long as the seal on the plastic container is not broken, the product inside is guaranteed to be legal.

Calming

The cannabis plants KannaSwiss and others specialise in are bred not only to have low THC levels but also high levels of CBD. CBD is considered anti-inflammatory and to have numerous potential therapeutic benefits, such as for panic attacks or as pain relief. "It really calms the



LAUSANNE: Dried flower buds of legal cannabis are photographed at Dr Green shop in Lausanne.—AFP

nervous system, but without any psychoactive effects," Serra di Cassano said. Many people also buy the low-potency cannabis to help wean themselves off the illegal variety. Legal cannabis currently sells for between seven and 18 Swiss francs a gram, on a par with the street price for the THC-loaded illegal marijuana.

Wild West

KannaSwiss specializes in making CBD oil, also used for therapeutic and relaxation purposes, which sells for between 17 and 50 francs a gram depending on its concentration. But while that business is booming, Serra di Cassano says the regulation of legalized cannabis is not yet tight enough. —AFP

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THE LEADING INDEPENDENT DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF

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