

International

Serbs take to their phones to raise millions for sick children

Budget for funding treatment abroad for children 'not adequate'

BELGRADE: For Serbian mother Timea Gajodi, watching her eleven-month old baby grow is a nerve-racking race against the clock to raise more than \$2 million to treat his rare disease.

Her only way to find such a sum has been to put her baby's face on a billboard in the type of fundraising campaign that has taken Serbia by storm in recent years, raising millions for medical treatments abroad. Her son Oliver suffers from spinal muscular atrophy (SMA) which makes the muscles weaker and affects about one in 10,000 births. Without treatment, it results in death or the need for permanent ventilation by the age of two in 90 percent of cases. "I never know what's waiting for me when I go into the intensive care unit. He is currently stable, but it doesn't mean he will be in half an hour," Gajodi told AFP of her son, who is on a ventilator in a hospital in the northern city of Novi Sad.

"I just want to save his life," the 28-year-old mother added. Oliver has received treatment in Serbia which his mother said helped him "immensely". But she has her hopes pinned on another drug, which he would have to go abroad to receive but, she believes, would "halt the disease's progression altogether".

Known as the "world's most expensive drug", Zolgensma is a one-time gene therapy. Pharmaceutical giant Novartis which produces it says the cost reflects the fact that gene therapy is a transformative new type of treatment and is 50 percent cheaper than current alternatives.

Selling homes

Gajodi's fundraising campaign is powered by text messages, allowing people to donate 200 dinars each, around 1.7 euros (just over \$2). Oliver is one of five babies in Serbia suffering from SMA whose parents have turned to the public in this way since May.

Their campaign has attracted near-daily media coverage. Within half a year, the poor Balkan country—where average wages are under \$600 (483 euros) a month—has raised some eight million euros to secure the treatment for four of the babies. More than 100,000 people have also signed an online petition demanding local municipalities divert the budget for this year's coronavirus-plagued New Year's Eve celebrations to helping the five infants. Seven municipalities have done so, though not big cities like Belgrade and Novi Sad.

Oliver is the last of the five babies and has so far received around 300,000 text donations, amounting to more than 150,000 euros. According to local media, some donors have gone as far as selling their summer homes to help or auctioning off other assets online. Earlier this month, half a million viewers logged on to watch Serbian pop star and 2007 Eurovision winner Marija Serifovic's online fundraising concert for 14-month old Minja Matic, also suffering from SMA. "I will sing as long as I have a voice, until we collect the money for Minja," Serifovic said. Shortly after, the family announced it had met its target.

Billboards with children's faces have become a reg-



Billboards showing children's faces have become a common sight in Serbia as a way of raising funds for overseas medical treatment.

ular sight across Serbia and even refugees have organized fundraising in four migrant reception centers. Not all the campaigns are for such costly treatments. Healthcare in Serbia is free but has limited reach when it comes to innovative or consistent treatments, humanitarian organizations say. Katarina Danojlic, of the Podrzi zivot fundraising foundation, said that parents contact her organization daily, often in a panic because

they have been shrugged off by the state. "If the health system did its job, our organization wouldn't have to exist," she told AFP. Serbia has a budget for funding treatment abroad for children with rare diseases but, according to humanitarian organizations, it isn't enough. Slavica Vasiljevic, whose six-year-old son Jovan has cerebral palsy, raised almost 60,000 euros for him to be treated in neighboring Croatia. —AFP

US intel agencies warn cyberattack on govt 'ongoing'

WASHINGTON: US intelligence agencies have warned a "significant" cyberattack on several federal departments uncovered over the weekend remains ongoing as the government rushes to assess the extent of the breach. "This is a developing situation, and while we continue to work to understand the full extent of this campaign, we know this compromise has affected networks within the federal government," the FBI, the director of national intelligence and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) said in a joint statement late Wednesday. The March attack on software created by Texas-based IT company SolarWinds—in which hackers installed malware—continued for months until it was discovered by cybersecurity company FireEye.

Both companies have pointed the finger at hackers linked to the Russian government. Hackers reportedly breached software used by the US Treasury Department and the Commerce Department, allowing them to view internal email traffic. The agencies did not confirm the targets of the cyberattack. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also pointed to Moscow on Monday, saying the Russian government had made repeated attempts to breach US government networks. —AFP

Snowstorm blankets US east coast, threaten vaccine rollout

WASHINGTON: A major snowstorm hit the US east coast during yesterday's early hours, creating extra challenges in the midst of a coronavirus pandemic and a mass vaccination rollout taking place across the region. The winter storm, moving over New York, Pennsylvania and other northeastern states, leaves millions facing more than a foot of snow a week before Christmas, potentially disrupting coronavirus testing and delaying holiday deliveries. It also left more than 60 million people under bad weather warnings from Maine to South Carolina. New York City, if hit as badly by the storm as predicted, would be facing the most snow from one storm in more than four years, after it was hit with two feet in January 2016. Officials in New York state and Pennsylvania said they were prepared to deal with the bad weather to ensure that vaccine delivery schedules went ahead as planned.

Delivery companies FedEx and UPS said they had also put measures in place to mitigate the storm's effects. Snowfall rates in both states were two inches per hour, with more than 12 inches in total, according to the US National Weather Service (NWS).

It said snow could reach up to two feet in some parts of the states, which both dispatched plows to keep the roads clear. Boston, the most populous city in Massachusetts, imposed an emergency and issued a parking ban on key roads for workers.

"Confidence is high that this major winter storm will result in significant impacts including travel disruptions and power outages across much of the



NEW YORK: A man removes snow in Times Square yesterday in New York, the morning after a powerful winter storm hit the US northeastern states. —AFP

northern Mid-Atlantic, southern New York and southern into central New England," the NSW said in a tweet late Wednesday.

Despite the potential disruption, people rushed to play in New York City's famous Times Square—some dressed as characters such as Elmo and Batman and others having snowball fights—as it became blanketed in white. While the snow brought joy for some, restaurants stacked chairs and tables and shuttered after a snow alert effectively put an end to outdoor dining, the last hope of custom for some business owners because of social distancing rules.

In Pennsylvania, the transport department told drivers to limit journeys and introduced new speed restrictions to prevent accidents. Hundreds of schools announced they would close and again retreat to online learning, bolstered by the experience of the pandemic. Airlines also canceled hundreds of flights on Wednesday, preventing many—some returning home for Christmas—from traveling. —AFP