

International

WHO warns of oxygen shortage as COVID cases set to top 10 million

Coronavirus has killed over 480,000 so far

GENEVA: The world faces a shortage of oxygen concentrators as the number of worldwide cases of coronavirus infection nears the 10 million mark, the World Health Organization head said on Wednesday. "Many countries are now experiencing difficulties obtaining oxygen concentrators," WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a news conference. "Demand is currently outstripping supply." The new coronavirus has hit 9.3 million people and killed more than 480,000 so far and is rising by about 1 million cases per week. This has pushed oxygen demand to 88,000 large cylinders per day, or 620,000 cubic metres of oxygen, Tedros said.

The sudden rise has created a dearth of oxygen concentrators needed to support breathing of COVID-19 patients suffering from respiratory distress. The health agency has purchased 14,000 oxygen concentrators from manufacturers and plans to send them to 120 countries in coming weeks, Tedros said. A further 170,000 concentrators - valued at some \$100 million - will be potentially available over the

next six months. The head of the WHO emergencies program, Dr Mike Ryan, meanwhile said the pandemic in many Latin American countries was still intense as deaths in the region surpassed 100,000 this week. Many countries had experienced 25-50% increases in cases in the past week, he said.

"I would characterize the situation in the Americas in general as still evolving, not having reached its peak yet, and likely to result in sustained numbers of cases and continued deaths," he said. The United States has criticized WHO's handling of the pandemic, calling the agency "China-centric". President Donald Trump demanded an immediate review and reforms and has pledged to quit the Geneva-based body. European governments are also working with the United States on an overhaul plan. While Tedros has pledged accountability and a post-pandemic review, Ryan said on Wednesday the agency was holding internal talks over its actions including what it has learned about controlling the virus. —Reuters



TEGUCIGALPA: A doctor carries an oxygen tank after disconnecting a man infected with COVID-19 from it at a field hospital set up in the yard of the School Hospital in Tegucigalpa. The authorities of the main hospital of the Honduran capital were forced to set up four tents to assist coronavirus patients since its rooms were overcrowded. —AFP

Net! no problem: Teachers in Chile take class to kids

CARAHUE: In the south of Chile, a rural school is bringing the classroom to students, deploying vans to help teach pupils who might not otherwise have access to education during the coronavirus lockdown. Students once rode in the vehicles to attend the Dream House School in the small town of Catripulli, located in Araucania, one of the poorest regions in Chile. In this cold, rainy and rural part of the country, the vans now travel to a handful of students' homes, after hundreds of children were left adrift when classes were suspended in March.

Approximately 70 percent of Dream House School's 101 pupils are Mapuche, an indigenous people who live in Chile and Argentina. Most don't own computers and even fewer have access to the internet, meaning the students can't take part in online classes. The coronavirus has emptied Chile's schools, forcing millions of children to follow their lessons online, but there are regions where up to 76 percent of pupils don't have access to the internet, according to a study by the Digital Country Foundation. And while children may have been supplied with school work on paper, they still don't have the sort of teaching support that is available online.

Preschool teacher Marcela Cea, 29, and van driver Alexis Araneda, 34, are among those who are traveling to pupils' homes to give lessons. "It seems super good to me, because there are tasks that one cannot understand, not even the parents, so the teachers can come and give extra classes," Katalina Zuniga, an 11-year-old student who receives lessons in front of her home said. Her mother, Modesta Caninuir, says the effort helps parents and now the "pupils are not going

to get behind on their homework." Araucania, around 500 kilometers south of the capital Santiago, is the third worst affected region in the country from coronavirus. Chile has recorded more than 254,000 cases and over 4,700 deaths from COVID-19.

Emotional care

Inside the van, measures are taken to prevent spread of the virus, such as social distancing, wearing of masks, and protective clothing and shoes. Pupils are given hand sanitizer and sit on chairs placed on carpets that are washed with chlorine. The aim is not just to look after the children's educational needs, but also their emotional ones. Before the class begins, the teacher speaks to the pupil to ascertain his or her state of mind. Cesar Mendez, a 12-year-old, likes science class best. The school on wheels "helps us do our classwork which I don't know how to do and neither does my mom," he said, before heading off to lock up goats in the family pen, a fun distraction now that he no longer spends his days in class. Meanwhile Zuniga, the 11-year-old, is learning about the Mapuche new year - We Tripantu - which is celebrated during the winter solstice from June 21-24. She says she has no doubt what she's wishing for in the new year: an end to the pandemic.

Most of the children's parents raise livestock and grow agricultural products. As of April, only four percent had internet access, and only six percent had access to a computer. The majority of the children speak Mapudungun, their native indigenous language, the school principal Marcela Araneda told AFP. Most schools in Chile are private, meaning public schools like this one rely on subsidies, and are trying to bridge the gap. Private schools "have technology, computers, access to the internet, the ability to download information, watch YouTube videos, and have all the tools," said Osmin Flores, a lead teacher. He said the aim of the mobile school is to "level" the playing field. Just because they are rural children does not mean "they're going to have fewer opportunities or be less intelligent," said Flores. —AFP

Roma across Europe seen as police target in lockdown

LONDON: Roma communities across Europe have become a police target in lockdown, a report found on Wednesday, amid a sharpening global focus on racial equality and law enforcement. The report by Amnesty International, a human rights organisation, said Roma communities had faced tougher quarantines than citizens who posed a greater health risk. People returning from places with high rates of the new coronavirus - such as Italy - were not targeted by authorities with the same stringent measures as Roma communities, who were quarantined en masse in whole apartment blocks or streets, Amnesty researcher Barbora Cernusakova said. "With Roma, the explanation always was a mixture that 'they congregate and live in bigger families and are not disciplined,'" Cernusakova told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "They came up with the idea that the Roma were somehow a source of infection ... Those things show very, very clearly that there is a very, very strong bias."

Many Roma live on the fringes of society and struggle for work - with those in small settlements facing legal problems when it comes to land ownership, human rights experts say. Sweeping lockdown measures have exacerbated social and economic difficulties faced by Roma communities and increased dependence on credit, with many quarantined and without work for weeks. Roma communities were largely targeted in Bulgaria and Slovakia - home to some of Europe's largest Roma minorities - while migrants were targeted in cities such as Calais in France, a common stopoff for refugees fleeing war and poverty. —Reuters