

Sanctions-hit Iran struggles to produce cancer drugs

KARAJ, Iran: A lab-coated technician leans over a bioreactor at an Iranian pharmaceutical plant producing cancer drugs - a tall order since equipment imports fell victim to US sanctions. A huge corridor bathed in artificial light and smelling of disinfectant leads to the bioreactor room at the Actoverco factory, to which AFP was given rare access. Six hundred people run production lines at the facility in an industrial district of Karaj, some 40 km northwest of Tehran.

Technicians wear scrubs, face masks, gloves and surgical caps as they work. In the bioreactor, cells are multiplied then transferred to tanks for use as cultures to produce medication. "Much of the equipment that we are using either in production or in laboratory, they are considered as dual-use and they are sanctioned," said plant manager Reza Mostofi. "We have many issues at the moment. Because of the sanctions, usually we can't either transfer the money or the supplier is not willing to sell the machinery that we need."

Production stoppage

As the new coronavirus spreads in Iran, many people have struggled to find medicine - an issue linked to sanctions reinstated by the United States in 2018 after it withdrew from a landmark nuclear deal. In retaliation, the Islamic republic has gradually reduced its commitments to the deal since May 2019. On paper, humanitarian items are exempt from US sanctions, but in reality banks tend to decline transactions involving Iran to avoid being exposed to potential litigation. "The equipment that we are using, the spare parts and everything, now we have a big issue for repairing the

spare parts that are needed," said Mostofi.

For the past six months, he said, the plant has been unable to produce a drug that is essential for treating leukaemia. "For some time we have not been able to import the ingredients of this material, so our line... is now stopped," said the English-speaking manager. The company hopes to produce the active ingredient itself, with a "very big" bioreactor, but it faces almost insurmountable difficulties because of the sanctions.

Iran's health ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour voiced concern about the situation. "Regarding cancer patients, we had no problem because we are producing the medicine ourselves... (but) our companies want to renew, rebuild and replace their industrial equipment," he told AFP. According to him, there are 500,000 cancer patients in Iran, and it is the second biggest cause of death in the country, claiming 30,000 lives a year.

Actoverco, part of a family business established 40 years ago, also produces the drug interferon beta-1a, used to treat multiple sclerosis. "We cannot provide the patients as much as we want," said the company director. "I hope there would (be) a political solution for this because at the end of the day these are people who are suffering" because of medicine shortages. He also voiced concern about the new coronavirus. "Maybe next year there would be a vaccine available (in) some places, but it might not be available here," he said. "This winter we had shortages of vaccines" for flu.

With the sanctions, "work has become more and more difficult, you feel it every day", said medical physicist Maryam Yafian. The 30-year-old works at Roshana,



KARAJ, Iran: Pharmaceutical factory workers prepare drug ampoules at the Actoverco plant about 40 km west of Iran's capital Tehran on Feb 18, 2020. — AFP

private clinic that opened in Tehran three years ago and is equipped with modern facilities. She points to the difficulty of obtaining supplies including medicine and spare parts for two radiotherapy machines bought from an American company prior to the sanctions. For troubleshooting, staff at the clinic hold video conferences with Iranian technicians based abroad.

The sanctions have also caused prices to skyrocket for the clinic which is absorbing some of the increase on behalf of its patients, said its director Touraj Norouzi. In one room, mother of two Sevedeh Hosseini is receiving chemotherapy. Thanks to financial help from her brothers and father, she feels "lucky" to have been able to undergo treatment for bowel cancer with chemo drugs and an imported infusion pump.

Many patients or their relatives seek chemo treatment abroad as they do not trust the quality of local products. The director of a Tehran pharmacy, Shahrzad Shahbani, said she had sought treatment abroad at all costs for her mother, who ultimately lost her battle with cancer. Nevertheless, she said, "If I had a chemo patient right now, I would not advise them to take local drugs." — AFP

New 7-kilo gold coin unveiled to celebrate James Bond film

LONDON: Britain's Royal Mint yesterday unveiled a seven-kilogram gold coin with the highest face value in its 1,100-year history in honor of the latest James Bond film. The one-of-a-kind new coin celebrating the release next month of the 25th movie in the legendary franchise, "No Time To Die", has a face value of £7,000 (\$9,000). At 185 mm in diameter, it is also the largest coin ever made by the Royal Mint, Britain's official coin-maker.

The piece is engraved with an image of the fictional British spy's favorite car - an Aston Martin DB5 - and its famous BMT 216A number plate surrounded by a gun barrel. It is part of a collection of several coins and metal bars launched to mark the release of "No Time To Die", which premieres in London later this month. The ensemble includes gold coins weighing two kilograms, one kilogram and five ounces - with face values ranging from £10 to £2,000 - as well as a number of silver and other coins. The mint did not release the price tag for the seven-kilo gold piece, but the recommended retail price of the two-kilo coin is an eye-watering £129,990.

Meanwhile the metal bars, which will be available in gold and silver, are set to have all of the 25 official



LONDON: Royal Mint designer Laura Clancy poses with a special edition James Bond themed seven-kilogram gold coin to celebrate the upcoming release of the 25th James Bond film yesterday. — AFP

James Bond film titles engraved on them. "The design series focuses on iconic imagery from the Bond films," designers Christian Davies and Matt Dent said in a statement. "Finding the balance between design detail and what can be accomplished in production was a challenge, nowhere more so than the intricate spokes of the DB5's wheel," they added.

The latest installment of the British spy saga, due to start hitting cinemas around the world in early April, sees Bond drawn out of retirement in Jamaica by his old friend and CIA agent Felix Leiter. It is expected to be actor Daniel Craig's last outing as 007, after starring in four previous films. — AFP

2 more weeks of school closure...

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Harbi added that extending the school suspension is up to the health ministry's assessment. "We cannot decide on our own but we are ready for any contingency," the minister underlined, noting that contracting the curriculum is not a problem, but it might affect the accreditation of certificates. "So extending the school year would be the best option," he added, noting that any teacher diagnosed with the coronavirus will be suspended until proven healed, and in case of shortages, teachers will be deputized to fill in.

An interior ministry source meanwhile said yesterday that the issuance of visas has not been suspended but massive restrictions have been ordered and a total ban on several infected countries in addition to Egypt and Syria has been imposed. The source said the ministry has imposed a total ban on visit visas on several countries including China, South Korea, Iran, Thailand, Iraq, Italy, Egypt and Syria as a way to prevent the spread of the disease. The source insisted that the issuance of visas to other nationalities has been tightened and applications are being studied on a case-by-case basis.

Only Egyptians who hold legal residencies in Kuwait are allowed to return but after being subjected to extra measures before boarding the plane in Cairo and after arriving in Kuwait. However, there has been no official confirmation by the interior ministry in this regard. MP's Saleh Ashour, Abdulkarim Al-Kandari and Yousef Al-Fadhlah called on authorities to stop suspend flights arriving from Italy and Egypt to prevent the spread of the disease.

Civil aviation authorities have stopped using fingerprint machines for identification and have introduced iris scans instead as a precautionary measure against the virus. The Public Authority for Civil Information (PACI) also temporarily closed their halls dealing with the public and resorted to online applications for all civil ID transactions. The health ministry also denied rumors that one of the 56 cases has been cured, but insisted that all the patients are in stable condition. The commerce min-

istry said that it had received a shipment of 3.6 million masks that will be distributed, some with ration cards.

The death toll from the new coronavirus epidemic surpassed 3,000 yesterday as more people died in China, Iran and the US, and Europe raised its state of alert. The virus has now infected more than 89,000, spread to over 60 countries and threatens to cause a global economic slowdown - after first emerging in China late last year. With fears of a pandemic on the rise, the World Health Organization urged all countries to stock up on critical care ventilators to treat patients with severe symptoms.

WHO yesterday sent its first planeload of assistance to help fight coronavirus in Iran, the second-worst hit country after China, as the death toll rose by 12 to 66 in the Islamic republic. Iran's confirmed cases leapt by 523 from the previous day to 1,501, said Deputy Health Minister Alireza Raisi. US President Donald Trump had Saturday offered that "if we can help the Iranians with this problem, we are certainly willing to do so... All they have to do is ask".

Tehran yesterday however rejected the offer from Trump - who has heaped sanctions and a campaign of "maximum pressure" on Iran - charging he had made it "for propaganda purposes". "We are suspicious of the intentions of the Americans and do not count on this aid," said foreign ministry spokesman Abbas Moussavi, as quoted by the official agency IRNA.

China's foreign ministry said an expert team from the Chinese Red Cross had arrived yesterday in Tehran "to provide what assistance it can in terms of epidemic prevention and control and medical relief". The WHO meanwhile dispatched six medics with tons of medical equipment and test kits aboard a UAE military aircraft to Iran's capital, where it arrived later yesterday. The six-member medical team is made up of doctors, epidemiologists and laboratory specialists to help the Islamic republic detect and control the virus, the first WHO team to be sent to Iran since the crisis began.

The UAE provided the military transport plane for the flight to Tehran despite having downgraded its relations with the Islamic republic amid fierce rivalry between Iran and regional power Saudi Arabia. "Aid should reach all people regardless of their background," Sultan Mohammed Al Shamsi, the UAE's undersecretary

Half of world's beaches could vanish by 2100

PARIS: Climate change and sea level rise are currently on track to wipe out half the world's sandy beaches by 2100, researchers warned yesterday. Even if humanity sharply reduces the fossil fuel pollution that drives global warming, more than a third of the planet's sandy shorelines could disappear by then, crippling coastal tourism in countries large and small, they reported in the journal Nature Climate Change.

"Apart from tourism, sandy beaches often act as the first line of defence from coastal storms and flooding, and without them impacts of extreme weather events

will probably be higher," lead author Michalis Vousdoukas, a researcher at the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, told AFP. "We have to prepare."

Some countries, such as the United States, are already planning extensive defense systems, but in most nations such massive engineering schemes will be unfeasible, unaffordable or both. Australia could be hit hardest, according to the findings, with nearly 15,000 km of white-beach coastline washed away over the next 80 years, followed by Canada, Chile and the United States. The 10 countries that stand to lose the most sandy shoreline also include Mexico, China, Russia, Argentina, India and Brazil.

Sandy beaches occupy more than a third of the global coastline, often in highly populated areas. But new construction, sea level rise, storm surge from hurricanes or typhoons, and reduced sediment from dammed rivers are all eroding these shorelines, threatening livelihoods and infrastructure. To assess how quickly and by how

5-hour workday for private school...

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hours of work from teachers daily. The circular also addressed the issue of e-learning, although an official

decision in this regard remains to be finalized by the education ministry.

Mutairi confirmed that private schools are not allowed to require students or teachers or any worker to come to school. "The period of suspension of work in schools determined by the decision of the Council of Ministers referred to March 1 to 12," he said. There are dozens of foreign private schools in Kuwait with thousands of teachers living and working in the country.

for humanitarian affairs, said at Dubai's Al Maktoum International Airport.

Iran's IRNA agency meanwhile reported the death of Mohammad Mir Mohammadi, 72, a member of the Expediency Council which advises the supreme leader. It did not specify the cause of death but said he had died at Tehran's Massih Danechvari Hospital, the capital's main center for patients suffering from the new coronavirus.

Saudi Arabia yesterday announced its first case of the new coronavirus, a Saudi national returning from Iran through Bahrain, the health ministry said. The ministry said on its official Twitter account that the individual, who is in quarantine in hospital, had not disclosed his visit to Iran when entering Saudi Arabia. The official Saudi Press Agency, citing the health ministry, said people who had interacted with the infected man had been isolated and were being tested.

Qatar's health ministry said yesterday that medical tests had revealed four new cases of coronavirus infection in the country, state news agency QNA said in a tweet. Two Qatari citizens, and two domestic workers who were accompanying them in travel, were diagnosed with COVID-19, the ministry was quoted as saying. They were among a group of citizens who were evacuated by the government on a private plane from Iran on Feb 27, the ministry said.

Egypt yesterday reported its second case of novel coronavirus, more than two weeks after announcing the first confirmed infection in Africa. The foreigner is showing "minor symptoms" and has been quarantined, the ministry and the WHO said in a joint statement. Other people who had contact with the patient are undergoing medical tests, it added. Cairo has been cooperating with French and Canadian authorities after they both announced seven confirmed cases of the virus from travellers coming from Egypt.

With the number of cases rising in the Gulf, Qatar imposed a temporary ban on visitors coming from Egypt via transit points on Sunday citing the spread of COVID-19. Kuwait stopped short of a flight restriction but added extra screening measures for travellers boarding their flights from Egypt.

Egyptian Health Minister Hala Zayed travelled to China yesterday amid mounting criticisms and satirical

posts on social media of her ministry's handling of the outbreak. At a news conference at Cairo airport, she praised Beijing's efforts to contain the spread of the virus. That same evening, Egypt projected the Chinese flag in solidarity with Beijing on some of its most historical monuments.

Jordan said yesterday a man who had flown in from Italy had tested positive for the new coronavirus, the first case confirmed in the country, state news agency Petra reported. The Jordanian citizen had flown back nearly two weeks ago on a plane with around 100 passengers, health minister Saad Jaber told a news conference. The man was quarantined at his home with strict controls on his movement and was in "stable" condition, Jaber said. Another Jordanian was under close observation, the minister added.

An Italian national tested positive for coronavirus in the western Indian state of Rajasthan, a major tourist destination, a hospital official said yesterday, taking the number of people who have tested positive in the country to six. The patient had initially tested negative for the virus but a second test came out positive, a hospital official in Rajasthan's capital city of Jaipur told Reuters. "The patient has been moved to an isolation ward," the official said, adding that a third test would be conducted.

Separately yesterday, the Indian government said two other people had tested positive for the coronavirus. The news hammered already rocky stock markets. One of the new cases was detected in the capital, New Delhi, while the other was in the southern state of Telangana, the government said in a statement. The New Delhi patient had been in Italy and the one in Telangana had been in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, the government said; both were stable and being closely monitored.

In Jaipur, the hospital official said that at least 15 doctors, staff and patients who may have come into contact with the Italian patient would be tested. Meanwhile, the three other patients who had tested positive for coronavirus in India have all been discharged from hospital, and were in quarantine in their homes, the government in Kerala state said last week. All three had returned from Wuhan, the Chinese city at the epicenter of the outbreak.