

International

In Ukraine, the latest COVID surge is attacking more kids

Ukraine hit hard by the latest wave of infections

KIEV: Three-month-old Misha has spent 10 days in a Kiev paediatric hospital - including three in intensive care - due to pneumonia triggered by COVID-19. He is one of an influx of young patients to the infectious diseases hospital in Ukraine's capital, which has seen the coronavirus pandemic hit children much harder in recent months. "It's difficult when your baby suffocates, it's very scary," says Misha's mother Katya Verbina. Fixing an oxygen mask on her son, the 29-year-old adds that she has lost seven kilograms due to anxiety since he fell ill.

The Kiev Paediatric Infectious Disease Hospital, a 100-bed facility reserved for children suffering from COVID, began seeing more patients with serious respiratory disorders when Ukraine's latest surge of infections began this autumn. "In the spring, each patient needed 10 liters of oxygen per minute on average", but now "it's 60 liters per minute", says Alina Riazanskykh, the 32-year-old head of the intensive care unit. The latest wave has already brought the first Covid deaths in the hospital since Ukraine's outbreak began in spring 2020: two babies and a disabled eight-year-old boy.

"The treatment didn't work," laments Riazanskykh. One of Europe's poorest countries, ex-Soviet Ukraine has been hit hard by the latest wave of coronavirus infections driven by the Delta variant, which is more contagious and dangerous for children. Yesterday, the country of around 40 million people recorded 752 new deaths from the virus over 24 hours - the third-highest toll in the world after the United States and Russia.

Vaccine hesitancy

A low vaccination rate has worsened the outbreak in Ukraine, where people are hesitant to get a jab despite repeated calls from the authorities and four available vaccines - Pfizer, Moderna, As-



KIEV: A woman holds an oxygen mask over the face of her baby suffering from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in a ward of a children's hospital in Kiev. — AFP

traZeneca and Chinese-made Coronavac. While the vaccination drive has accelerated in recent weeks after authorities imposed restrictions on the unvaccinated entering public places, less than a third of adult Ukrainians were fully vaccinated as of today.

Faced with a jab-sceptic population, President Volodymyr Zelensky announced this week payments of around 35 euros (\$40) to everyone who is fully vaccinated. The initiative has been denounced as "populist" by Zelensky's opponents, but 49-year-old infectious

disease doctor Vitaliy Yevtushenko sees it as "a normal practice" and pleads for children to be vaccinated as well.

Ukraine last month authorized minors aged from 12 to 17 to be able to get the Pfizer jab. So far only some 30,000 young people have received at least one dose, the health ministry told AFP. Out of nearly 3.2 million total coronavirus infections, almost 180,000 cases, including 288 fatalities, have involved minors. Like many other mothers of hospitalized children, Sasha Voytenko, 23, plans to be vaccinated "quickly" after she leaves the hospital with her one-month-old daughter.

Schools closed

But many Ukrainians are against doing so - sometimes even those whose children are infected with the virus. Oksana Potapchuk - who herself is vaccinated - has spent three days in hospital with her 8-year-old son Roman, who is fed up with wearing his oxygen mask and taking endless blood tests. But Potapchuk is against her 12-year-old daughter getting the jab.

"I have not seen reliable studies on these vaccines," the 32-year-old manicurist says. Liliya Gorodskykh, whose 2-year-old son is in intensive care suffering from pleurisy, is among the few who plan to vaccinate their children. "We will likely vaccinate him" if he becomes eligible, said the 27-year-old teacher, comforting her crying boy.

To curb the spread of the virus among children, Kiev authorities ordered the closure of schools in early November, in a move that angered many parents. Medical workers, however, support the decision. "We feel the effect," says doctor Riazanskykh, whose unit now has only one patient out of six beds - all of which were occupied just last week. But with schools reopening Monday, the break may have been limited. "We'll see what happens in a week," Tetyana Kaminska said. "There will most likely be another outbreak." — AFP

Down in a hole: Bosnia miners fear green revolution

BREZA: For years, life in Bosnia's Breza revolved around its coal mine, but the global shift from fossil fuels to renewables threatens the industry that was once the pride of communist Yugoslavia. Armel Jekalovic and other miners, once hailed as local heroes who brought home steady incomes, now fear theirs could be the last generation to earn a living from Bosnia's coalfields. "This situation around the energy transition worries us," says Jekalovic, 36, who oversees the operations at the mine northwest of Sarajevo. "Production is constantly decreasing, as are the number of employees. People don't feel safe and are looking for an alternative."

The recent COP26 agreement in Glasgow saw nations agree a pledge to "phase down" the use of coal, one of the world's leading sources of pollution. Experts anticipate that none of Bosnia's remaining 11 coal mines will remain operational in the coming decades as eco pressure grows and the country seeks to clean up as it courts EU membership. The Breza mine employs 1,100 people, supporting more than 70 percent of the 14,000 inhabitants living in this area of central Bosnia, according to Jekalovic.

But the spectre of green reforms is not the only challenge facing the industry's workforce. Miners often struggle to move on and retire due to their employers' years-long failure to contribute to their pensions. The unpaid contributions alone account for half of the industry's 500 million euros debt pile, leading to protests that have done little to improve the situation. "The miner was once respected, he was an icon," explains Jekalovic, whose father and grandfather were both miners. — AFP

Trump ally in Congress publicly shamed over violent video

WASHINGTON: US lawmakers censured a Trump loyalist on Wednesday for posting an animated video depicting the legislator killing a colleague and attacking President Joe Biden, in a rare move underlining the enmity between opposing sides of Congress. Far right congressman Paul Gosar was forced to endure a public shaming by the House of Representatives as he was called to present himself in the "well" of the lower chamber for the "pronouncement of the censure."

The Arizona Republican was made to listen in silence as Democrats spent more than an hour rebuking him for what they called workplace harassment and encouraging violence against women. "We cannot have members joking about murdering each other or threatening the president of the United States," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said before the censure.

"This is both an endangerment of our elected officials and an insult to the institution of the House of Representatives." A censure resolution is the most severe form of punishment in the House and just a handful of members have faced the sanction over the last century - most recently 11 years ago. Gosar also joined fellow Trumpist agitator Marjorie Taylor Greene as the second House Republican to lose their position on House committees this year.

Gosar removed the video - which received millions of views - after a backlash but has not expressed any regret in

public or apologized to his targets. In a defiant speech before lawmakers, Gosar argued that he was the victim of censorship, absurdly comparing himself to Founding Father Alexander Hamilton, who was the target of a failed censure vote in the late 18th century.

'Inflammatory language'

He denied that the video represented a threat of violence, arguing that he was trying to start a conversation about illegal immigration. He did not explain why a video about undocumented migrants would single out Ocasio-Cortez, a third generation New Yorker and a lifelong American citizen with roots in Puerto Rico, a US territory. Opposition lawmakers have complained that there should have been an ethics investigation before any punishment was meted out, and only two out of 213 voted to hold Gosar to account. House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy downplayed the conspiracy theorist's behavior, and suggested Democrats should be concentrating on addressing inflation rather than bringing Gosar to account. He accused the majority party of double standards over their softer handling of congresswomen Maxine Waters and Ilhan Omar, who have both been criticized for inflammatory language.

"They're destroying this institution, silencing the minority, and therefore silencing millions of Americans," he said. Ocasio-Cortez accused McCarthy of displaying a nihilistic contempt for the work of the House. "It is a sad day in which a member who leads a political party in the United States of America cannot bring themselves to say that issuing a depiction of murdering a member of Congress is wrong and instead decides to venture off into a tangent about gas prices and inflation," she said. "What is so hard what is so hard about saying that this is wrong?" —AFP