

WHO seeks over \$ 2 billion to tackle drug-resistant TB

AFP, Geneva

The World Health Organisation (WHO) said yesterday it is seeking 2.15 billion dollars in its fight against drug-resistant strains of tuberculosis, amid warnings of a "return to the pre-antibiotic era" if they spread unchecked.

Between 400,000 and 450,000 people worldwide suffer from multi-drug resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB), and an estimated 25,000-30,000 from the more severe extensively drug-resistant TB (XDR-TB), WHO tuberculosis expert Paul Nunn told journalists in Geneva.

At least 37 countries worldwide have reported at least one case of XDR-TB, he added.

The WHO and Stop TB Partnership's "Global Response Plan" aims to save the lives of 134,000 MDR and XDR-TB patients over the next two years, by working to better diagnose and treat "basic" TB before drug-resistance occurs, and also to develop treatments that are effective against the new strains.

"We're anticipating, if this plan is fully funded, a tenfold increase in the number of cases diagnosed and treated for MDR-TB," by 2007-8 from 2005, Nunn said.

Some two thirds of MDR-TB cases are in China, India and Russia, with China alone account-

ing for at least 140,000 cases each year, he noted.

So far, only Hong Kong has reported a case of XDR-TB, but Nunn said it would be "rather surprising" if no such cases had occurred on the Chinese mainland. The problem is that China does not have sufficient laboratory capacity to detect such cases, he said. The WHO first became concerned about XDR-TB in March 2006, and a deadly outbreak among HIV patients in South Africa's Kwazulu-Natal province later that year only confirmed their fears, Nunn said.

In a worst case scenario, the 8.8 million annual cases of treatable TB worldwide could be replaced by an equivalent number of XDR-TB cases, he warned, noting that each one case of TB infects between 10 to 15 other people each year.

"The possibility is that you could replace that epidemic with a drug-resistant epidemic, in other words you could have 8.8 million cases of drug-resistant TB wandering around -- and then you will be back to the pre-antibiotic era," Nunn said.

"The paradox is that the frightening XDR-TB is fully preventable by properly diagnosing people and treating them as prescribed with effective drugs," said Leo Reichmann of the Stop TB Partnership.

Nunn echoed this point and stressed the need for a massive increase in laboratory capacity to diagnose and treat patients, particularly in the world's poorest countries.

EU team in Manila to help curb human rights abuses

AFP, Manila

A European Union delegation has met Philippine officials to help Manila address human rights abuses, including political murders blamed on the security forces, a presidential aide said yesterday.

"The mission is here to assess the needs of the Philippine government, to see how the EU might be able to extend technical assistance," Eduardo Ermita, President Gloria Arroyo's chief aide, told reporters.

The delegation arrived in Manila on Monday to meet with the military and the police, which have been accused by independent investigators of extra-judicial killings.



PHOTO: STAR

After picking up rotten leaves and branches of trees from Osmani Uddyan in the city yesterday, a cleaner dumps them into a water body inside the park, thereby polluting water and the environment.

Amnesty renews calls for immediate closure of Guantanamo prison

AFP, London

Amnesty International on Friday renewed its call on the United States to immediately close its naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where it holds detainees from its "war on terror".

The London-based human rights group's statement came after the White House denied media reports that it is close to deciding the closure of the camp.

"Every day that this prison camp remains open is a day too many," Amnesty said, calling on other countries to "do all they can to bring an end to this human rights scandal and actively consider accepting released detainees".

"It is more than a year since (US)

President (George W.) Bush first said he would like to close Guantanamo," the statement added.

"While there are undoubtedly challenges to closing the facility, the solution in principle is simple, and the government must turn its energies to this end.

"It should either charge the detainees with recognisable criminal offences and bring them to trial in the ordinary civilian courts, or it should release them with full protections against further abuses."

There are now about 375 "war on terror" detainees being held in Guantanamo Bay, according to Pentagon figures, many of whom have been detained for more than five years without being charged.

Lanka slammed over press rights

AFP, Colombo

International media rights activists yesterday described Sri Lanka as one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists due to a worsening climate of violence and censorship.

Killings and attacks against journalists remained unsolved leading to fears that media freedom is being deliberately and violently suppressed through threats, abductions and attacks, a team of media freedom campaigners said.

"Since August 2005, eleven media workers have been killed in Sri Lanka. Ten of them were killed in government-controlled areas and no one has been caught so far," said Jacqui Park from the International Federation of Journalists.

"Jaffna is one of the most dangerous cities in the world to be a journalist," she said of the northern, government-controlled peninsula cut off

from the rest of the country by Tamil Tiger-held territory.

"Authorities seem reluctant to investigate murders and attacks," she said at the end of a five-day visit by international press activists, who last visited the embattled island last October.

"It does not help when senior government ministers endanger lives of media workers by insulting them," said Tom Hughes from International Media Support.

"Authorities must show their bonafides by solving these murders and bringing the culprits to trial," he said, lamenting that there has been "no change" in the situation in Sri Lanka since their last visit.

The fact-finding mission also said the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and paramilitary forces were instilling a climate of fear in media workers through threats and intimidation.

Blackout traps 20,000 in Tokyo trains

AFP, Tokyo

Nearly 20,000 passengers were trapped yesterday for more than four hours in packed commuter trains in suburban Tokyo due to a power failure, with some 45 people falling ill, officials said.

Six trains carrying 18,300 people came to a halt during morning rush hour at stations near Saitama north of Tokyo, said an official of JR East, which operates the line.

Television footage showed hundreds of passengers carefully walking on the tracks in the rain after getting out of the trains, guided by rail company officials.

At least 45 passengers complained of illness because they had stayed in the crowded trains for up to four and a half hours without air conditioning, a fire department spokesman said.

"Of them 27 passengers were sent to hospital and one of them was in a slightly serious condition," the spokesman said.

The JR East official said the blackout was caused by a cut in overhead wires on the rails near Saitama station and that the firm had launched an investigation.