

Japan emperor Naruhito says ill empress has 'ups and downs'

AFP | Tokyo

Japan's Emperor Naruhito has said his wife Empress Masako "still has ups and downs" as she battles to recover from a longstanding stress-induced illness related to her royal duties.

The health of Masako, who was fit enough to attend all of Naruhito's ceremonies when he was sworn in as emperor last year, is a major talking point in Japan.

Hopes were raised that she had recovered from her illness as she was present at a series of public events last year but Naruhito warned the empress was "still on the path to recovery".

"Her condition has its ups and downs and her fatigue tends to be prolonged after a big event or when events take place one after another," he told reporters at a news conference to mark his 60th birthday.



The health of the Empress is a major talking point in Japan

"I want her never to extend herself too much but continue to work on what she can do," he said, describing her as "a good consultant on both private and official matters".

The Harvard- and Oxford-educated Masako left behind a promising diplomatic career to marry into the royal family in 1993.

In 2004, the palace disclosed she had been undergoing treatment for stress-induced adjustment disorder, which has forced her to skip some royal engagements.

The couple's only child Aiko, 18, will study Japanese literature from April at Gakushuin University, of which Naruhito is an alumnus.

She cannot succeed her father as only a male heir can ascend the Chrysanthemum Throne.

Naruhito's younger brother Akishino is first in line to the throne. His son, 13-year-old Hisahito, is second.

Aiko would lose her royal status once she marries a commoner.

That has raised the prospect of a succession crisis if Hisahito does not have a son but the emperor refrained from commenting on the male-only rule.

He said he talks about the issue with Akishino but went no further than that.

A public gathering to celebrate his first birthday as the emperor was cancelled as fears grow over the spread of the new coronavirus in the country.

"I hope the spread of infections will stop as early as possible," he said while praying for the recovery of patients and thanking medical workers.

Trump says Russia leak meant to hurt Sanders, calls for probe

Reuters | Washington

President Donald Trump yesterday called for an investigation into an apparent leak of classified intelligence on Russian interference in the 2020 U.S. presidential campaign, and said it was meant to hurt Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders.

Speaking to reporters as he left the White House for a trip to India, Trump said he had not been briefed on intelligence that Russia was aiming to boost the campaign of Sanders, a U.S. senator from Vermont, and he took aim at a key Democratic lawmaker and foe for allegedly spreading the information.

A congressional source said on Friday that intelligence officials had told lawmakers Russia appears to be engaging in disinformation and propaganda campaigns to help both Sanders and Trump, who is seeking re-election.

"I read where Russia is helping Bernie Sanders. Nobody said it to me at all. Nobody briefed me about that at all,"



President Donald Trump departs to India

Trump said.

"They leaked it, Adam Schiff and his group, they leaked it to the papers and - as usual - they ought to investigate Adam Schiff for leaking that information," Trump said, without providing any evidence to back up his claims.

Schiff, a Democrat, served as the lead prosecutor in Trump's impeachment trial in the U.S. Senate and the two men have an antagonistic relationship.

Cancer drug shortages leave Mexican kids fighting for life

AFP | Mexico City

Five-year-old Dhana Rivas is fighting for her life on two fronts, fending off the acute lymphoblastic leukemia eating away at her frail body while her family simultaneously battles the shortage of cancer drugs plaguing Mexico.

Recurrent drug shortages during much of her short existence means the frequency of life-saving chemotherapy has slowed.

The shortages are partly a consequence of government policy and President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's efforts to revamp the healthcare system by tackling waste and corruption.

In August, authorities shut down seven Mexican factories producing methotrexate -- a major element of the anti-cancer cocktail.

Breaks occurred in Dhana's chemotherapy in September and October of 2018, and again the following February, for lack of medicines.

This was the case at the government clinic in her native Chiapas, in the south of the country. But following a transfer to Mexico City's Federico Gomez Children's Hospital designed to increase her chances of survival, nothing has changed.

"The new government promised that there would be no more interruption of treatment," Dhana's father Israel Rivas said. "That's not the case".

And the situation is worsening.

"There was not a single chemotherapy possible in January," Rivas says, his voice faltering.

Dhana isn't alone. The parents of other young cancer patients have made contact with Rivas via social media.

Together they raised the alarm over the lack of methotrexate, vincristine and other cancer medicines in hospitals around the country.

"In Federico Gomez, there are 530 children affected, but in Mexico as a whole there are many more," said Rivas.

He says he has received messages from parents living across



In August, authorities shut down seven Mexican factories producing methotrexate, a major element in the anti-cancer cocktail

the country, in Tijuana, Oaxaca in the south, Puebla in the center, Merida in the east, Guadalajara in the west, and Acapulco and Minatitlan in the south.

According to the Health Ministry, some 7,000 minors fall ill with cancer every year.

Catching and treating the cancer early gives them a 57 percent chance of survival, doctors say, but only if the right medicines are available.

The medical team looking after Dhana believe they can maintain her treatment for just another month.

Cancer doesn't wait

For Crisanto Flores, father of three-year-old cancer patient Cristal, the lack of medicines is inconceivable.

Of modest means, he was forced to move to Mexico City so that his daughter could receive treatment.

And in January, the family went through one of the most critical moments of his daughter's illness when the main treatment needed for Cristal's therapy was unavailable.

Flores knows that time is not in his daughter's favor, and his only recourse is to team up with

other parents to try to put pressure on the government.

"If the vincristine isn't available, the illness will gain ground," he said. His little girl has already lost the sight of one eye.

Another anxious parent, Esperanza Soto, is desperately hoping that the shortages don't affect her four-year-old boy, Hermes Soto, who is just two

months away from beating cancer.

"We only have three cycles of chemotherapy to go," she says.

Emmanuel Garcia in Baja-California and Alejandro Barbosa in the western state of Jalisco live nearly 2,000 kilometers (1,240 miles) apart.

Both are battling to obtain the same medicines.

"In Jal-

isco, there are three public hospitals affected by the shortage of medicines. We buy them from distributors certified by the government who bring them from abroad, which is very costly," said Barbosa.

The price of vincristine has soared because of the shortages. In less than a year, it has risen by more than \$23 to \$118.

Garcia has also signed up to the parents' pressure group since December. He says there are 81 sick children who, like others in Mexico, have suffered several interruptions to their chemotherapy treatment, despite a short respite when the hospital in Tijuana received a delivery.

"And what about the others in southern Mexico?" he asked.

Shortage without end

In a desperate bid to make themselves heard, the parents staged a demonstration and briefly blocked access to Mexico City's international airport.

The day after, Lopez Obrador was forced to address the subject, but without

proposing a solution.

"We will never run out of medicines," he promised, without further details.

Some demonstrations bringing together a few families have taken place in recent days, but with little response.

In Merida, the capital of the southeastern state of Yucatan, Flor Gonzalez, whose child Remi suffers from cancer, spends her days waiting.

"Doctors are applying incomplete treatments," she said, relating the case of a child who had relapsed due to the use of a replacement drug.

In Mexico, more than 26.4 million children have no access to any type of social security.

A "popular insurance" scheme in place since 2003, but cancelled in 2020, was one of the few programs allowing children to seek treatment.

For Dhana and the other cancer-stricken children, the countdown has started.

The next few days will tell if the sword of Damocles swinging above their heads is lifted.



Mexican toddler Cristal Flores, diagnosed with cancer, rests on a couch between her parents at a relative's house in Cuautitlan, Mexico