JORDAN NEWS

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WEATHER
Cloudy skies with a chance of rain.

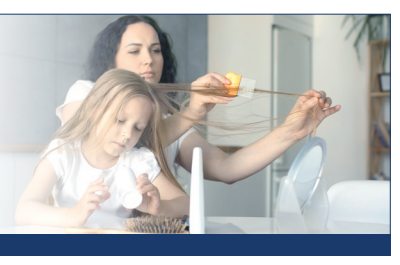
TODAY 14° 10° | WED 13° 10° | THU 15° 10°



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Palestinian issue is key to peace, stability in the Middle East — King

HM sends a letter to the chairman of the Committee on the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People



AMMAN (JNews) — His Majesty King Abdullah has reiterated that the Palestinian cause is key to peace and stability in the Middle East, reaffirming that Jordan will continue to prioritize it.

In a letter sent to Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People Cheikh Niang to mark the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People which falls on November 29, King Abdullah reaffirmed the Palestinians' right to self-determination and establishing their independent, sovereign, and viable state on the June 4, 1967 lines, with East Jerusalem as its capital, on the basis of the two-state solution and in accordance with international law and relevant UN resolutions.

His Majesty warned that undermining the historical and legal status quo in Jerusalem would lead to further escalation, violence, and extremism, adding that Jordan is committed to continuing coordination with the Palestinian Authority to preserve the historical and legal status quo, in line with the Hashemite Custodianship of Islamic and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem.

The King said Jordan will maintain coordination with regional and international partners to push towards the two-state solution by working to relaunch effective negotiations that lead to just and comprehensive peace and protect the rights of the Palestinians.

In the letter, His Majesty noted that prosperity and sustainable growth cannot be achieved without a comprehensive approach that engages the Palestinians in economic and regional projects, according to a Royal Court statement.

The King stressed the need for the international community to support UNRWA to sustain its role in providing education and healthcare services for Palestinian refugees, especially children, in accordance with its UN mandate.

His Majesty also commended the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People for its efforts in advocating for the rights of the Palestinians.

Royal Decree reappoints KAFD board

AMMAN (JNews) — A Royal Decree has been issued, reappointing the members of the King Abdullah II Fund for Development's board of trustees for the next two years, as of November 27, 2022.

Nasser Lozi was reappointed as chairman of the board of trustees, while Ayman Hatahet, Bishr Baker, Nour Jarrar, Laith El Qasim, Musa Saket, and Hussein Malhas were reappointed as members, according to a Royal Court statement.

Jordanian Consumer Sentiment Index shows a 4.3-point increase — Ipsos

AMMAN (JNews) — The Ipsos Jordanian Consumer Sentiment Index (JCSI) has shown a 4.3-point increase between the second and third quarters of 2022, unlike the global level index, which shows decline for the same period, according to the company's website.

Jordan's consumer sentiment index rose three spots and now ranks 19th globally amongst countries where Ipsos conducts the sentiment index survey, above Poland, Turkey, and others.

That said, almost seven in 10 Jordanians continue to have a negative outlook of the economic situation in Jordan, primarily driven by their concerns regarding the high cost of living/inflation and unemployment.

In addition, three out of five Jordanians cite inflation as one of the most worrying reasons at the moment. However, despite global headwinds, the economic recovery in Jordan is expected to remain steady in 2022.

Six out of 10 Jordanians believe they have a weak financial position, and almost half expect their current financial position to remain the same in the next six months. While sentiments regarding the future have historically been negative, this changed in the third quarter of 2022 as most Jordanians have an increasing and positive outlook.

Moreover, Jordanians' confidence in the investment climate increased by 4 points on the index, and this is reflected in the 7 percentage point increase in their ability to save money for their retirement or the education of their children.

There was also a 4 percentage point increase in their confidence in making large purchases (such as car or house) and a 5 percentage point increase in purchases of household durables.

Despite the financial concerns, unemployment is no longer a primary concern for Jordanians, as citizens view the current state of the labor market as having taken a more positive trajectory.

There is an 8 percentage point decrease in the number of Jordanians who reported having lost their job, or knowing people who lost their job, in the past six months, compared to the second quarter of 2022. Overall, this caused a 4 percentage point increase in confidence when it came to their job security, even though unemployment is an important concern for Jordanians.

The JCSI is a quarterly national survey that sheds light on consumers' attitudes toward current and future state of the local economy, personal finance situations, as well as savings and confidence to make large investments.

> ... Three out of five Jordanians cite inflation as one of the most worrying reasons at the moment. ...

Kuwait business delegation to visit Jordan

AMMAN (JNews) — Kuwaiti Ambassador to Jordan Aziz Al-Daihani said that a number of Kuwaiti businessmen will arrive in the Kingdom on Tuesday to explore investment opportunities, Hala News reported.

In a statement to Army FM radio, Daihani said that there are great investment opportunities various fields in Jordan, adding that the investment climate in Jordan is encouraging, and that Kuwait ranks first in terms of the volume of investment in the Kingdom, which amounts to $18 billion.

He indicated that the recent visit of HRH Crown Prince Hussein to Kuwait focused on investments and cooperation, and included meetings with Kuwaiti businessmen who were invited to visit the Kingdom to explore investment opportunities after the enactment of a new investment law.

According to Daihani, 63,000 Jordanians work in Kuwait.

No Israeli government can destabilize Jordan — Fayez

AMMAN (JNews) — Senate President Faisal Al-Fayez said that "no Israeli government can destabilize Jordan", according to Turkish Anadolu News Agency.

Fayez described the next Israeli government headed by Benyamin Netanyahu as "the most extreme right-wing government in the history of Israel, given the personalities it represents, but this will not affect Jordan's stability".

At the same time, he said that "frankly, Jordan cannot bear the burden of the Palestinian cause alone."

"We always coordinate with our brothers in Egypt and the Gulf Arab States to confront any Israeli attempt to sow discord in Jordan or attempt to infringe on the constant positions set by the King: that there is no alternative homeland, and Jerusalem and the Hashemite guardianship represent a red line."

Fayez added that "all Arabs will stand by Jordan in the face of any Israeli provocations."

"The Jordanian state is strong. Since the establishment of the emirate, in 1921, it has withstood serious challenges. Jordan is strong through its King and its conscious and educated people," Fayez said.

"Those who question Jordan's position must have a grudge against the Kingdom," he added.

Fayez stressed the importance of the Turkish role in resolving the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, stressing that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan "plays a key role in bringing views closer".

He described Amman's relations with Ankara as "strong", calling at the same time for a Turkish-Arab dialogue to achieve "more positivity".

Fayez called for concerted Arab efforts to find a solution to the Syrian problem, revealing that Jordan and Syria are in contact in this regard.

He also said that attempts to improve Arab relations with Iran depend on Tehran's position and foreign policy.

Fayez called for gradual political reforms to confront the political and economic challenges facing Jordan, especially after the coronavirus pandemic and the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

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Investor confidence index declines 11 points in second quarter of 2022

By Dana Al-Zyadat



High energy cost and rise of interest rates are among factors behind the reported decline in investors' confidence. *(Photo: Shutterstock)*

AMMAN — The Jordanian Investor Confidence Index issued by the Jordan Strategy Forum witnessed a decrease of about 11 points compared to the first quarter of the year; it reached 178.1 points in the second quarter of 2022, while in the first quarter of 2022 it was 189.3 points.

In all, the index of confidence in economic activity decreased from 200 points in the first quarter of 2022, to 178 points in the second quarter of 2022.

The value of foreign direct investment inflows also decreased, reaching JD132.4 million in the second quarter of 2022 from JD 260.3 million in the first quarter of the year.

The industrial production index increased from 90.3 points in the first quarter of 2022 to 94.3 points in the second quarter of 2022.

The confidence index in the monetary system decreased from 174.9 points in the first quarter of 2022 to 156.1 points in the second quarter of 2022.

Economist Zyan Zawaneh told *Jordan News* that the decline in investor confidence in economic activity is linked to a set of indicators, "most notably, the decline in the volume of investment flows and the chaos of managing the investment dossier in general, in addition to the high budget deficit, the decrease in the foreign currency reserves at the Central Bank of Jordan, and the rapid rise in interest rates on the dinar".

He added that the forecast recession and decline in global economic growth for the rest of the year and for next year, and the "anxious political and military reality in Europe and Britain deepen the state of uncertainty and make internal investors or owners of external capital cautious".

At the same time, he said, the positive local indicators are summed up in the US payment of aid, which will reduce the budget deficit and increase the central bank reserve, and in improved export and tourism numbers.

The state of uncertainty will deepen as indicators point to an upcoming recession, he added.

Economist Mazen Irsheid said that "this result is normal, especially in view of the rise in investment, manufacturing, and energy costs, and the rise in interest rates at a time when inflation is still at high levels."

"These reasons led to the difficulty of borrowing from banks," he told *Jordan News*.

"As a result, profit margins have shrunk for investors, and it has been noticeable recently that foreign investments in Jordan have declined," he added.

Economist Mohammad Al-Bashir told *Jordan News* that investor confidence declined during the last period due to various considerations, "most prominent of which are the high cost of the national economy, especially the sales tax, the rise in energy prices, and the high interest rate, in addition to the lack of seriousness in combating corruption and the absence of a fair distribution of wealth, which contributes to creating a gap between the income of citizens".

He called for reviewing the structure of the national economy and seriously reconsidering the investment file, "since it brings great benefits to the country, most notably helping solve the unemployment crisis, which has serious effects on society and families".

BRIEFS

Jordan, Saudi Arabia explore tourism cooperation

AMMAN (JNews) — Saudi Ambassador Naif bin Bandar Al-Sudairy met with Chairman of the Petra Development and Tourism Region Authority Sulaiman Al-Farajat and Executive Director of the Friends of Jordan Festivals Souha Bawab on Monday, the Jordan News Agency, Petra, reported.

The meeting tackled boosting tourism cooperation between the two kingdoms, as well as marketing in the sector, and exchanging expertise.

Minister, Irish envoy talk social development cooperation

AMMAN (JNews) — Minister of Social Development Wafa Bani Mustafa and Irish Ambassador Marianne Bolger met on Monday to discuss prospects of cooperation in the field of social work, according to the Jordan News Agency, Petra.

The minister stressed the importance of developing social services, and urged the international community to shoulder its responsibilities toward refugees and host communities.

The two officials praised the "deep-rooted and exceptional" bilateral ties, and affirmed the need to coordinate in the field of social development.

Mafraq authorities seize unprocessed organic fertilizers via drones

AMMAN (JNews) — Utilizing drones, authorities seized 2,900 tonnes of unprocessed organic fertilizer in the northern governorate of Mafraq.

Mafraq Governor Salman Njada told the Jordan News Agency, Petra, that the drones on Sunday detected three sites containing large amounts of unprocessed organic fertilizer, estimated at 2,900 tonnes, which unidentified persons were attempting to transfer to their lands for farming purposes.

Unprocessed fertilizer, he explained, violates agricultural standards, as it poses a risk to public safety and the environment, and leads to the spread of insects and pests that infect plants, and negatively impact the environment.

22,400 divorces in Jordan over past 5 years

AMMAN (JNews) — During the past five years, around 22,400 divorces took place, and 358,879 couples were married in Jordan, according to official statistics.

Al-Ghad News reported that the number of divorces totaled 5,335 in 2017, 4,690 in 2018, 4,608 in 2019, 3,400 in 2020, and 4,396 in 2021.

Marriages in Jordan over the past five years are distributed as follows: 77,700 in 2017, 70,734 in 2018, 67,696 in 2019, 67,389 in 2020, and 75,360 in 2021.

2021 statistics show 5,069 men in Jordan are polygamists

AMMAN (JNews) — Official statistics for 2021 show that 5,069 men in Jordan are polygamists, Khaberni reported.

The number of men with multiple wives are distributed among the Kingdom's governorates as follows: 1,700 in Amman, 906 in Irbid, 745 in Zarqa, 761 in Tafilah, 496 in Mafraq, 269 in Balqa, 178 in Madaba, 177 in Jerash, 176 in Karak, 128 in Aqaba, 115 in Ajloun, and 112 in Maan.

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King receives Yemen Presidential Leadership Council chairman



His Majesty King Abdullah meets with Chairman of the Yemen Presidential Leadership Council Rashad Al Alimi at Al-Husseiniya Palace on November 28, 2022. *(Photo: Royal Court)*

AMMAN (JNews) — His Majesty King Abdullah on Monday reaffirmed Jordan's support for all efforts to reach a political solution that restores security and stability to Yemen.

Receiving Yemen Presidential Leadership Council Chairman Rashad Al Alimi at Al-Husseiniya Palace, King Abdullah underscored the importance of ending the crisis in Yemen in a manner that safeguards the nation's unity, stability, and territorial integrity, noting Jordan's support for efforts to extend the truce.

Discussions also covered the deep-rooted ties between Jordan and Yemen, as well as the latest regional and international developments, according to a Royal Court statement.

The two sides agreed to maintain coordination and consultation on issues of mutual concern, in service of shared interests and Arab causes.

For his part, Chairman Alimi commended Jordan's efforts to end the Yemeni crisis, expressing appreciation for the Kingdom's support at the international stage for a political solution that restores security and stability to Yemen.

Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi and Director of the Office of His Majesty Jafar Hassan attended the meeting.

Illnesses like diabetes 'should be included in primary health coverage'

AMMAN (JNews) — A conference organized by the Ministry of Health and the Royal Health Awareness Society (RHAS), in cooperation with the World Diabetes Foundation (WDF), started on Monday in Amman to promote the integration of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) into primary health care.

Director of the ministry's primary health care department, Riyadh Shayyab, who opened the two-day conference on behalf of Minister Firas Hawari, said NCDs are responsible for more than three quarters of deaths in Jordan, according to results of the Jordan National STEPwise Survey of NCDs and their risk factors, issued in 2019.

According to him, the conference stresses the need for cooperation between stakeholders to combat such diseases and learn from challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pointing to the ministry's plans to fight and prevent diseases, he called for a healthy lifestyle to reduce the risks of being diagnosed with arterial hypertension and diabetes.

Jakob Madsen, senior advisor at the WDF, urged providing tests required for an early diagnosis, as "this problem cannot be solved without accurate data", and educating the public on NCDs.

Deputizing for World Health Organization (WHO) representative in Jordan Jamela Al-Raiby, Dr Bassem Zayed said 70 percent of global deaths are caused by chronic diseases, adding that WHO supports the ministry and partners' efforts in this regard.

RHAS Director General Amal Ireifij said the conference seeks to achieve its objectives by examining interventions, challenges, and gaps in the field of NCDs.

During the conference, topics such as risk factors, preventive care, health justice, access to non-communicable disease intervention programs and services, and lessons learned from the coronavirus pandemic will be raised under three main focus areas: clinic-based, school-based and community-based intervention programs.

Jordan should establish tech projects with S.Korea — minister

AMMAN (JNews) — Minister of Industry, Trade, and Supply and Minister of Labor Youssef Al-Shamali called for establishing joint projects with South Korea that employ the technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

The minister made the remarks at the opening of a symposium on the Fourth Industrial Revolution's present and future, which was jointly organized by the Korean embassy in Amman and the industry Ministry in honor of the 60th anniversary of the start of diplomatic relations between Jordan and Korea.

Since 1962, Jordan and South Korea have been committed to working together in a number of areas of shared interest, particularly in the fields of energy, communication, water, and community and youth empowerment, the minister said.

Shamali referred to South Korea's substantial experience with the fourth industrial revolution's applications, and noted that Jordan, which is rapidly advancing in its digital transformation, might profit from this knowledge, which includes greener automobiles, information technologies, and 5G networks.

Regarding digitization, the minister noted that the Kingdom has emerged as a pioneer in the MENA region in terms of fostering innovation, expanding job opportunities, and developing digital and information systems.

It has also served as a hub for some of the biggest international businesses in this sector.

Moreover, he added, Jordan has emerged as one of the top nations boasting competent experts in information technology, artificial intelligence, cyber-security, and other areas connected to the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

The Jordanian government established the "Jordanian Policy for Artificial Intelligence" and created the "National Charter for Artificial Intelligence Ethics", which addresses the best application of artificial intelligence technologies, in recognition of the significance of the industrial revolution and its role in enhancing lives and achieving sustainable economic development.

The ministers asserted that the government is committed to implementing initiatives for small and medium-sized businesses to enhance the capabilities of entrepreneurs, facilitate their access to financing, encourage them to adopt modern technologies for their businesses, and showcase their products and services through electronic commerce. The goal is to reduce production costs, maximize resource utilization, increase output and exports, achieve higher profit margins, and achieve greater competitiveness.

"We recognize Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies as a means to achieve these goals, and we look forward to using the 60th anniversary of Jordan-Korea diplomatic relations as a new beginning in building a Jordanian-S. Korean partnership to establish joint projects that employ Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies," Shamali said.

Korean Ambassador Lee Jae-wan emphasized the importance of joint action to increase cooperation between the two countries in various fields and fully leverage Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies in light of the opportunities available in both Jordan and South Korea.

Miyahuna, US firm sign deal to combat water leakage

AMMAN (JNews) — The Jordan Water Company Miyahuna and US firm LWF on Monday signed a memorandum of understanding to employ modern water leakage detection technology in Miyahuna's areas of operation.

Minister of Water and Irrigation Mohammad Najjar said that the memorandum will serve the Kingdom's water loss reduction strategy and help transfer know how and modern technology to water companies across the country.

The minister warned that potable water sources are shrinking year by year, adding that the water loss reduction strategy aims to cut losses by 25 percent by 2040.

According to the memorandum, field surveys of 20km-long water lines will be conducted; the entire cost will be borne by the American company.

Following that, the Water Authority and Miyahuna will evaluate the technology used, its results, and its feasibility, for use on a larger scale.

Jordan participates in EUMedRail conference

AMMAN (JNews) — Jordan participated in the closing ceremony of the Euro-Med Transport Project Conference (EUMedRail) that was recently held in Brussels, Belgium, Al-Ghad News reported.

The meeting brought together 16 high-level officials and experts from the Euro-Mediterranean countries, in addition to representatives from the European Committee of the Regions, and the EU Agency for Railways, the European Commission, the Union for the Mediterranean, and the Intergovernmental Organization for International Carriage by Rail.

A statement issued by the Ministry of Transport said that the Jordanian delegation participating in the conference made a presentation on the progress made in the national railway network project and the details of the first phase of the project, which will link Aqaba with Amman.

The delegation told the conference that there is a plan to prepare a feasibility study for the rehabilitation of the Hijaz Railway on the Amman-Zarqa portion, and toward Queen Alia International Airport, as part of the Jordanian transport sector strategy for the years 2022-2027.

EUMedRail reviewed the achievements and results of the technical assistance provided in 2022 to the participating countries.

The EUMedRail project was operational between 2017 and 2022; it was funded by the Directorate General for Neighborhood and Enlargement of the EU Commission, with a budget of 2 million euros, for the purpose of transferring technical assistance to the Euro-Mediterranean countries.

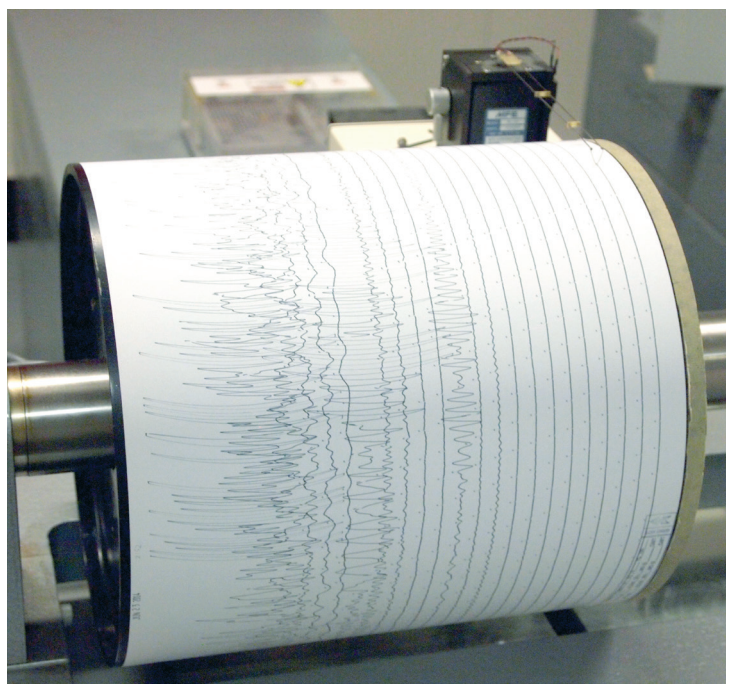
Jordan opens 23rd seismic station

AMMAN (JNews) — The Jordan Seismological Observatory has installed a new earthquake monitoring station near the Wadi Arab Dam in the north of the Kingdom, the Jordan News Agency, Petra, reported.

Head of the observatory, Ghassan Sweidan, said the new station houses two types of seismometers and a strong motion seismograph for measuring earthquake displacement and acceleration.

The new station is the 23rd of the total seismic monitoring stations operating in Jordan and distributed to strategic facilities such as dams, power plants, major city centers, and locations of seismic activity in the Kingdom.

The observatory is the only official body in Jordan authorized to monitor seismic activity, analyze local and regional earthquakes and archive seismic data to build a data base as a reference for official bodies.



(Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

Senate president, Yemen Presidential Council team discuss ties

AMMAN (JNews) — Senate President Faisal Fayez met on Monday with Chairman of Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council Rashad Al-Alimi and the accompanying delegation, according to the Jordan News Agency, Petra.

Fayez pointed to the "brotherly" and deep-rooted relations with Yemen, and said that Jordan, upon His Majesty King Abdullah's directives, is keen on further cementing ties, based on mutual respect and a common interest to develop and advance cooperation in various fields.

He said that Jordan stands by Yemen and its legitimate government, and supports all Arab and international efforts to restore security and stability to the country, safeguard its territorial integrity and end the suffering of its people.

Jordan, he added, stresses the need for a political solution to the Yemeni crisis, based on the Gulf Initiative, the outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference and relevant UN Security Council resolutions, rejects Iranian interference in Yemen's affairs and calls for adhering to the truce, and for opening roads and safe passages to Taiz.

"We, in Jordan, under the directives of His Majesty the King, put all our resources at the disposal of the legitimate Yemeni government, to help it overcome challenges and achieve security, stability and the unity of its people," he said.

Alimi also commended the deep relations between the two countries, and thanked Jordan for its support of the legitimate Yemeni government and for hosting Yemeni people.

He stressed the importance of strengthening political, economic and security relations, adding that Jordan and Yemen agreed on the need to operate Yemeni Airlines flights from Houthi-controlled areas, and blaming the Iranian-backed militia for exacerbating the crisis by rejecting the renewal of the truce and attacking oil and other vital installations.

Jordanians complain of repeated water supply interruptions

By Aysheh Alghabin

AMMAN — Following an announcement by the Jordan Water Company, Miyahuna, that water supplies pumped to dozens of areas will be temporarily halted to allow technicians to perform maintenance angered Jordanians, who complained of repeated interruptions even before the announcement.

Last week, Miyahuna said that water pumped through the national network to 110 districts in Jordan's central region will cease as of November 27, due to maintenance work on the Disi Water Conveyance Project and Zay Water Purification Station.

Jordanians, however, complained that there had been several water interruptions, even before this planned maintenance, which deprived some households of water for several weeks, or months, forcing them to buy water from vendors distributing it in water tanks.

Some Jordanians urged the government for quick and radical solutions to the water problems in Jordan, a parched desert nation which heavily relies on rainfall as the main source of water supplies.

But with climate change, the Middle East, Europe, and many other parts of the world were struck by drought.

Retired military officer Abdulrahman, 43, a resident of Jerash, said that water is pumped to his area for two days every three weeks. "This makes it impossible to have water during that long period without buying it from private companies," he said, insisting not to be identified further.

"Besides paying water bills every three months, we are obliged to put money aside to buy water tanks since we cannot live without water for one day," he told *Jordan News*.

Mohammad, 38, an accountant and father of three, lives in Berain Village in Zarqa. He said his area receives water once every two months.

"When we complained to Miyahuna, the response was that there are continuous water thefts and attacks on the pipes in the area, and that the company is working on resolving the matter," he told *Jordan News*.

"For a family of five, we have three water tanks, each one is 2sq.m., which is barely enough to last for more than 10 days," he said.

Water expert Elias Salameh, a professor of Water Sciences, told *Jordan News* that water supply interruption "is caused by the scarcity of water resources in Jordan, as well as the increased population density".

He called for the necessity to move forward with water projects, and to find effective solutions to the water shortages.



Water pouring out of a piple. *(Photo: Envato Elements)*

"One of the most important solutions is the desalination of the Red Sea water in Aqaba," he said. "This solution will ensure water availability to all citizens."

Omar, a public school teacher and a father of two living in Amman's Al-Taj neighborhood, said that he buys water tanks every week because water is only pumped to his area for half a day each week.

"Water tanks are expensive," he groaned. "Even for a small family like mine, we pay around JD100 every month only for water tanks, in addition to the water bill."

"It is like we are paying twice for our water consumption," he said.

Omar Salameh, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Water and Irrigation, told *Jordan News* that there are certain measures being taken by the ministry to resolve the water shortages.

"We have implemented plans for the northern regions, and established conveyor lines to solve the problems in the northern regions, keeping in mind that the number of complaints is constantly decreasing when compared to previous years," Salameh said.

"The water cycles are regular, but there are problems that we encounter, and we try to solve them," he added.

91% of MENA football fans agree short videos build community

AMMAN (JNews) — The pioneering global short video platform Likee said a survey obtained from its football report found that most football fans opt for short videos to remain apprised on sports developments, saying the medium builds a sense of community.

A Likee press statement said for the ongoing World Cup championship, football fans around the world are glued to their screens, and this is especially true for the MENA region.

With Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Tunisia qualifying, and this year's tournament being held in Qatar, there is more reason than ever for regional football enthusiasts to tune in and cheer on loudly, the statement said.

To understand and analyze the behavior and preferences of viewers across the MENA region during the World Cup, Likee compiled the Likee Football Report featuring 1,215 respondents from 50 cities across 17 Arab countries.

The report contributes to filling a large gap in data and insights about the sports preference of the younger generation.

The key insights of the report include:

Sports Preference & Behavior

Across the MENA region, football remains to be the most popular sport with over 80 percent of respondents ranking the sport as their favourite. Basketball, billiards and E-Sports followed football as the most favorable sports within the region.

More than 60 percent of the fans surveyed, revealed that they try to follow their favorite sports multiple times per week to ensure that they are up-to-date on the latest developments.

To stay connected to their favorite teams, 46 percent of fans try to either play the sport whenever they can, and 44 percent of enthusiasts watch the games live as they are played. The remainder of the respondents try to remain engaged by either following the social media of their favorite teams, join team fan groups, or try to buy merchandise to support their teams.

While analyzing the most preferred methods to remain connected to sports, traditional social networking apps seem the most prevalent at 53 percent.

However, "with short video content's popularity rapidly rising in the region, short-form video platforms are being touted by fans as their next best option to follow sports," the statement said.

"This is due to the power of short videos in which every second is designed to grab the audience's attention," it said. "Platforms such as Likee are helping create high quality creative and diverse, yet easy to consume content which continues to provide more accessibility for viewers and content creators."

Over the years, social media has become a source of finding sports related news, and allows fans with new avenues to interact and share opinions about their teams during global sporting events.

The survey found that remixes of match video clips seem to be the most preferred viewing content by over 30 percent of respondents.

This is followed by in-depth strategy analysis videos at 24.2 percent, football tutorial videos at 13.8 percent, and funny and dramatic football video clips at 11.6 percent.

World Cup Preference

There is an obvious sense of excitement across the region with 93 percent of respondents confirming their interest of following the World Cup this year.

While roughly only 40 percent of people surveyed would be travelling to Qatar for the tournament, the remaining respondents expressed their pleasure of following the spectacle online.

With the recent rise of innovative technologies, there are many ways for football enthusiasts to follow the World Cup this year.

This sentiment was also expressed in Likee's report findings, which indicated that over 65 percent of respondents preferred watching sports at their own convenience either at home on the television, outside at a sports venue displaying the game, or anywhere outside at all on their mobile devices, rather than watching it live at a stadium.

In terms of World Cup favorites, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Morocco are the most supported regional teams followed by Argentina, Brazil, and Germany among surveyed Arab youth.

Most peculiarly, previous world cup winners, France were favored below Tunisia (ranked 10th) and ranked 11th in terms of teams being supported this year.

Egyptian Mohammed Salah and Saudi Arabian Salem Al-Dawsari were among the most favorite players from the MENA region.

However, with the ongoing tournament being one of the final World Cup competitions for football legends, Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo, they were the most celebrated players this world cup.

Football Communities

The World Cup brings fans together in a lot of ways and short videos platforms, with their intelligent algorithms, enable everyone to be able to share their stories, and find like-minded people.

With this in mind, more than 90 percent of fans agree that short-form videos build a sense of community for interacting with people of similar interests, and up to 93 percent of these respondents are willing to join a vibrant football community on short video platforms, such as Likee, according to the statement.

Based on the findings of the report, "people look forward to joining football communities to mainly receive up-to-date match information at 44.7 percent, livestream matches with others at 30.8 percent, have friendly communications with similar minded individuals at 17.6 percent, and discuss match predictions as well at 16.7 percent," the statement said. The football community on Likee has been able showcase their talents by making innovative content in every imaginable niche, and in turn, inspire the youth to play with their friends, hone their skills and attempt the amazing shots that they witness during games.

During the start of the World Cup, Likee introduced the World Cup event page under the platform's community feature, Loop to foster and strengthen the community of passionate football fans on the application providing an interactive experience for users to support their favorite teams, join fan groups, keep up with match agendas, and so much more. "Since the launch of the feature, users have been able enjoy a more interactive, immersive and entertaining experience while following the World Cup this year," the statement said.

"The recent performances of the teams from MENA have been a spectacle to behold and we are glad that our users from the region have access to an ideal platform in Likee to connect with football enthusiasts." said Gibson Yuen, head of Likee global operations. "This year's world cup is like no other, and the excitement around the World Cup has not dropped ever since the start of the competition in November," he said. "Over the past few weeks, we have seen various great content being developed by football communities on Likee across the world."

"We are glad to support the unifying element of football of bringing people together to celebrate this great football season," he added.



(Photo: Likee)

Jordan to host 2 brokerage events on multifunctional olive systems

AMMAN (JNews) — With the aim of supporting innovation in Agroforestry systems, the National Agricultural Research Center (NARC), the Regional Forest Agency for Land and Environment of Sardinia, and the entire LIVINGAGRO Consortium announced the opening of registration for two brokerage events that will take place at the Movenpick Hotel in Amman, according to a press statement.

It said the "Brokerage event to foster innovation in Multifunctional Olive Systems" will be held on December 13, and the "Brokerage event to foster innovation in Grazed Woodlands" will convene on December 15.

Both events "represent a unique opportunity to emphasize the growing socioeconomic role of agroforestry in olive groves and grazed woodlands for countries around the Mediterranean basin," according to the statement.

It said that the meetings will "focus on highlighting state-of-the-art innovations, identifying the challenges that economic stakeholders and operators of the sector are facing, as well as underlining and co-designing the most workable high-tech solutions to maximize profitability, sustainability, and biodiversity considering limited resources and environmental constraints."

Entrepreneurs, local administrators, researchers, private companies, policy makers and multiple stakeholders interested in agroforestry issues, especially those related to olive systems and grazed woodlands, are invited to register and attend the event.

It said attendance is either in person or online, for a series of discussions, roundtables, and one-on-one meetings with a professional panel of acclaimed guest speakers.

"These meetings will allow participants to share innovative technologies, initiate cross border co-operations and find new business partners," the statement said.

The Cross Border Living Laboratories for Agroforestry Project is co-funded by the EU through the ENI CBC Med Program 2014-2020, and implemented in Italy, Greece, Lebanon, and Jordan.

The project aims to support education, research and development, innovation, and technology transfer, including sharing of research results, by establishing two Living Labs, one for multifunctional olive systems and the other for grazed woodlands.

Area of licensed buildings rises by 3.9% in January–September

AMMAN (JNews) — The total area of buildings licensed in the period of January—September 2022 nudged up by 3.9 percent to 6.538 million square meters (sqm), against 6.292 million sqm in the same period of 2021, the Department of Statistics said on Monday.

The number of new building licenses issued in the first nine months of the year declined by 4.1 percent to 18,938 licenses, compared with 19,742 licenses in the same period of last year, the Jordan News Agency, Petra, reported.

Similarly, the area of buildings licensed for residential purposes decreased by 1.5 percent, to 5.435 million sqm, against 5.518 million sqm during the same period last year, the figures showed.

As for buildings licensed for non-residential purposes, their area jumped to about 1.103 million sqm, up by a whopping 42.5 percent, compared to about 774,000 sqm for the same period last year, according to the figures.

Buildings licensed for residential purposes accounted for 83.1 percent of the total area of certified buildings, leaving 16.9 percent for buildings used for non-residential purposes, according to the department.

In its geographic breakdown of the data, the department said that the Kingdom's central region accounted for 65.5 percent of the total area of licensed buildings, followed by the northern and southern regions at 25.1 and 9.4 percent, respectively.

Jordan hosts regional workshop on pesticide management

AMMAN (JNews) — Jordan hosted a regional workshop on the proper management of pesticides in the MENA region, with the participation of 12 regional countries, Al-Mamlaka TV reported.

Monday's workshop was organized by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), in cooperation with the Jordan Ministry of Agriculture.

Pesticides play an important role in agriculture, food security, and improving farmers' livelihoods, an FAO representative said. However, the negative effects of pesticides on the environment, non-targeted organisms, and human health are often much greater than the benefits of using them.

Growing international concerns about the hazardous impact of pesticides on human health and the environment have led many stakeholders to begin addressing this problem, he added.

The workshop aimed to enhance participants' capacities in terms of pesticide registration, sharing information and experience on pesticides, identifying gaps and needs for updating the legal framework and institutional capacities, determining priorities, and developing proposals for enhancing pesticide management in the region, according to the FAO representative.

Several national authorities in the MENA region face serious challenges that impede the effectiveness of the pesticide registration system. These include insufficient staffing, lack of an adequate registration system, limited expertise, lack of risk assessment measures, and limited access to information, all making pesticide registration difficult, if not impossible, he said.

Aid fund suspended payments to 774 families, began disbursals to 1,253 in October

AMMAN (JNews) — The National Aid Fund suspended monthly financial aid payments to 774 families, and added 1,253 new families to the aid program in October, according to a local news outlet.

Media spokesperson Najeh Sawalha said on Monday that the fund's specialized committees conduct periodic field surveys to identify any changes that have occurred in the situations of families benefiting from the monthly financial aid program, which aims to alleviate financial burdens on Jordanians in light of their economic conditions.

When a family's need for support is proven, the fund will begin monthly aid disbursals, he said. Families can register to receive support on the fund's platform via the following link: https://takaful.naf.gov.jo/Account/Register.

Germany, US top list of donors to UNHCR in Jordan

AMMAN (JNews) — Germany and the US topped a list of countries and organizations supporting the refugee agency UNHCR in Jordan, with approximately $117 million in funding disbursed since the beginning of 2022, Al-Mamlaka TV reported.

The UNHCR said its financial requirements in Jordan amount to $408.4 million, while the funding gap is $222 million, or 54 percent, until November 24.

Since the beginning of 2022, the US donated to The UNHCR in Jordan $89.8 million, followed by $27.8 million from Germany, $12 million from the EU, and $7 million from UK.

Jordan hosts more than 1.3 million Syrian refugee who fled their homes since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011. They include 673,837 Syrian refugees registered with the UNHCR.

Eight civilians killed as hours-long Somalia hotel siege ends

MOGADISHU (AFP) — Somali security forces on Monday ended an hours-long siege by Al-Qaeda-linked insurgents who killed eight civilians after storming a prominent hotel in the capital Mogadishu, the police said.

Al-Shabaab militants attacked the Villa Rose, a hotel popular with politicians and government officials, in a hail of bullets and explosions at around 8pm on Sunday.

Around 21 hours later, national police spokesman Sadik Dudishe told reporters that "the clearance operation in the Villa Rose hotel has ended."

Terrorists "killed eight civilians who stayed in the hotel and the security forces succeeded in rescuing about 60 civilians, no one among the civilians was wounded," he added.

One member of the security forces also died in the attack, he said.

"There were about six attackers involved — five of them were shot and killed by the security forces and one of them detonated himself."

The authorities have given no details about the identities of the casualties.

The heavily-guarded Villa Rose is located in a fortified area of the capital a few blocks from the office of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud.



National police spokesperson Sadik Dudishe speaks to the press in Mogadishu, Somalia, on November 28, 2022. *(Photo: Twitter)*

Its website describes the hotel as the "most secure lodging arrangement in Mogadishu" with metal detectors and a high perimeter wall.

Al-Shabaab, which has been trying to overthrow Somalia's central government for 15 years, claimed responsibility for the attack.

On October 29, two cars packed with explosives blew up minutes apart in Mogadishu followed by gunfire, killing at least 121 people and wounding 333 others.

It was the deadliest attack in the fragile Horn of Africa nation in five years.

At least 21 people were killed in a siege of a Mogadishu hotel in August that lasted 30 hours before security forces were able to overpower the militants inside.

Closely guarded zone

The latest hotel siege has raised questions as to how the militants managed to reach the closely guarded heart of Mogadishu's administrative district undetected.

Armed checkpoints block roads into the area, which also hosts a detention facility for high-value terror suspects overseen by the National Intelligence and Security Agency.

Somalia's environment minister, Adam Aw Hirsi, who lives in the Villa Rose, said the attack was not a demonstration of an "emboldened" Al-Shabaab.

"To the contrary, the desperate move shows that the terror kingpins running for dear life are throwing their last kicks. We'll not let up the war," he posted on Twitter.

The UN said earlier this month that at least 613 civilians had been killed and 948 wounded in violence this year in Somalia, mostly caused by improvised explosive devices attributed to Al-Shabaab.

The figures were the highest since 2017 and a rise of more than 30 percent from last year.

Tunisia ex-speaker in court again over alleged terror links

TUNIS (AFP) — The speaker of Tunisia's dissolved parliament appeared on Monday before a judge investigating accusations his party helped Tunisian extremists travel to fight in Iraq and Syria.

Rached Ghannouchi, an arch-rival of President Kais Saied and also head of the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party, arrived in the morning at the anti-terror court in a suburb of the capital Tunis, said one of his lawyers, Mokhtar Jemai.

At the end of the hearing, the judge is expected to decide whether or not to charge the 81-year-old.

Several other Ennahdha officials have been questioned on the "shipment of jihadists" case since Saied sacked the Ennahdha-supported government and seized full executive authority in July 2021.

After Tunisia's 2011 revolt which toppled dictator Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and sparked the Arab Spring, thousands of Tunisians joined terrorist groups in neighboring Libya as well as Daesh in its strongholds in Iraq and Syria.

Rivals of Ennahdha, which dominated Tunisian politics from 2011 until Saied's power grab, accuse the party of helping them leave.

The party has repeatedly rejected those accusations as "fabricated" and says authorities are trying to distract public attention from "economic and social concerns and the deterioration of people's living conditions".

Ghannouchi also appeared before a judge on November 10 as part of a case involving money-laundering and "incitement to violence".

Turkey says to discuss NATO bids with Swedish, Finnish FMs

ISTANBUL, Turkey (AFP) — Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said on Monday that he would meet with his Swedish and Finnish counterparts to discuss their bid to join NATO on the margins of the alliance's meeting in Bucharest on Tuesday.

"We will come together with Swedish and Finnish foreign ministers tomorrow in Bucharest under a trilateral format," Cavusoglu was quoted as saying by the private NTV broadcaster.

Ankara has accused the two Nordic nations of providing a safe haven for outlawed Kurdish militants it deems "terrorists" and held back on ratifying their NATO membership despite an agreement in June.

"The process is progressing positively, but there are still steps to be taken," Cavusoglu said.

"In fact, Sweden is the country that needs to take more steps."

Finland and Sweden dropped decades of military non-alignment and scrambled to become NATO members in May, after Russia invaded Ukraine.

New Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson visited Ankara early this month to meet with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan as Stockholm hoped to secure Turkey's approval.

Ahead of that trip, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg, who met with Cavusoglu and Erdogan in Istanbul, said both countries were committed to working with Turkey to address its concerns, adding it is time to welcome them.

Among all NATO members, only Hungary and Turkey are left to green-light their application.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban said last week parliament would approve Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO next year.

As Palestinian flags fly at World Cup, Israeli symbols hidden

DOHA (AFP) — Palestinian flags are flying everywhere in Qatar but Israeli fans are staying low-key as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict makes its presence felt at the first World Cup on Arab soil.

Despite moves by some Arab countries, not including Qatar, to normalize relations with Israel, the Palestinian cause is being embraced by many Arab fans and some officials.

Terse interactions between Arab supporters and Israeli media have gone viral, including footage shot by an AFP journalist of a Saudi fan berating an Israeli TV reporter that has been viewed more than 5.2 million times on Twitter.

"There is only Palestine, there is no Israel, ... you are not welcome here," the fan shouts at Moav Vardi, a reporter for Israel's public broadcaster Kan.

The Arab fans flooding Qatar have been refusing to speak with Israel media, while some yell "Long Live Palestine" in front of Israeli television cameras.

"We find it very difficult to work here," Vardi told AFP, adding that he understood the Arab anger.

Many Qataris have put the Palestinian flag next to their own national emblem, hanging from the windows of their luxury cars.

Some Qataris sitting in a stadium VIP section have worn armbands showing the Palestinian kuffiyeh, while the Palestinian song "Ali Al-Kuffiyeh" (Raise Your Kuffiyeh) is regularly played in fan zones.

"Some foreigners do not know the Palestinian flag and ask us about it," said Yahya Abu Hantash, a 33-year-old Palestinian living in Doha.



A fan holds up a "Free Palestine" scarf in the crowd after a World Cup football match on November 22, 2022. *(Photo: AFP)*

"This is a golden opportunity to introduce our cause," said Hantash, who wore a Qatar football shirt while holding a Palestinian flag.

Qatar has no relations with Israel and remains a supporter of the decades-long Palestinian cause for statehood.

Doha supports Hamas and provides vital financial aid to residents of the coastal enclave blockaded by Israel since 2007.

Qatar criticized moves by other Arab nations — including the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco — to normalize relations in 2020.

While Palestinian symbols are ubiquitous, an Israeli fan, who gave his name as Haim, said Qatar was his fourth World Cup but the first where he has not brought the national flag.

"I feel like I'm watching the World Cup in disguise. The atmosphere towards us is hostile," said Haim, who has also taken off the silver Star of David that normally hangs around his neck.

The Israeli government advised football fans to hide Jewish "symbols" as part of its "Safe World Cup" campaign.

Direct flights

About 10,000 Israelis are expected in Qatar for the football tournament, according to diplomat Alon Levy who was in Doha to organize consular coverage.

FIFA hailed a deal allowing Palestinians and Israelis to travel to the Gulf emirate on special charter flights from Tel Aviv as a platform "to improve relations across the Middle East".

Qatar insisted that Palestinians be allowed to travel with Israelis as a condition for allowing the direct flights, which will stop after the December 18 World Cup final.

Travel officials indicated there were no Palestinians on the first two direct flights, although some were expected on the third, flying on Tuesday.

A Palestinian official, who requested anonymity, said "no one" spoke about the flights agreement with the Palestinian Authority, which is based in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. "We learned the news from television."

Israel has occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank since the 1967 Arab-Israeli War.

Most Palestinians get to Qatar through Jordan or Egypt, as Israel severely restricts access to Tel Aviv airport, the official said.

About 250,000 Palestinians live in Qatar which has a population of around 2.9 million, most of them foreigners.

Together with fans who number in the tens of thousands, at least, from other Arab countries including World Cup participants Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Morocco, pro-Palestinian support is strong.

Suhaib Al-Issa, a 16-year-old Jordanian, said flying the flag was a sign of "peaceful resistance to express our rejection of normalization with a country that occupies Palestine".

The Qatar government did not comment on the handling of Israeli nationals during the World Cup.

Saudi unveils plan for massive new airport in capital

RIYADH (AFP) — Saudi Arabia on Monday announced plans for a new airport in Riyadh intended to spur rapid growth in the capital while advancing the kingdom's ambitious aviation goals.

The airport, set to accommodate 120 million travelers by 2030 and 185 million travelers by 2050, will be named after King Salman and was announced by his son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, according to the official Saudi Press Agency.

"The airport project is in line with Saudi Arabia's vision to transform Riyadh to be among the top 10 city economies in the world and to support the growth of Riyadh's population to 15–20 million people by 2030," SPA said.

The city's current population is fewer than 8 million.

Saudi Arabia's aviation goals, part of Prince Mohammed's wide-ranging "Vision 2030" reforms, include more than tripling annual traffic to 330 million passengers by the end of the decade.

It also wants to draw $100 billion in investments to the sector by 2030, establish a new national flag carrier and move up to 5 million tonnes of cargo each year.

The new airport is expected to be able to process 3.5 million tons of cargo by 2050, SPA said.

It "will boost Riyadh's position as a global logistics hub, stimulate transport, trade and tourism, and act as a bridge linking the east with the west," SPA said.

The announcement did not provide information about the cost of the project, which has been designed to cover 57sq.km.

"With sustainability at its core, the new airport will achieve LEED Platinum certification by incorporating cutting edge green initiatives into its design and will be powered by renewable energy," SPA said, referring to the green building certification program.

Turkish threats leave Syria Kurds in fear for symbolic city

KOBANE, Syria (AFP) — In the Syrian Kurdish city of Kobane, gripped by fear of a Turkish offensive, Saleh Abdo Khalil passes an open-air "museum" of buildings reduced to rubble.

"Daesh destroyed these buildings," the local baker said.

That danger has passed, but now, he says: "Turkey wants to destroy the rest of the city."

Since Sunday, Turkey has carried out air strikes against Kurdish controlled zones in north and northeastern Syria, and across the border in Iraq.

Those raids, which started in Kobane, have killed 58 Kurdish fighters and Syrian soldiers as well as a Kurdish journalist, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Ankara has threatened a ground offensive and made clear that Kobane, also known as Ayn Al-Arab, would be a primary objective.

US-supported Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), now the Kurds' de facto army in the area, led the battle that dislodged Daesh fighters from the last vestiges of their Syrian territory in 2019.

Years before, in 2015, Kurdish forces drove the terrorists from Kobane, on the border with Turkey, and the city became a symbol of their victory against Daesh.

To keep the memories of the combat alive, Kurdish authorities erected a cordon around a group of destroyed buildings, burnt-out vehicles, and missile remnants, dubbing the area the Kobane "museum".

'People don't sleep at night'

While the football World Cup in Qatar has captured some residents' attention, tension can be read on their faces.

Most fled the combat with Daesh before slowly returning and rebuilding.

"We fought Daesh for the whole world, and today the world closes its eyes and acts like an ostrich while Turkey bombs," said the baker Khalil, 42.

One week after a bombing in Istanbul on November 13 that killed six people and wounded 81, Ankara said it launched air strikes from "70 planes and drones" against Kurdish bases in Iraq and Syria, starting with Kobane.



A general view of the "Free Woman" square in Kobane, Syria, on November 20, 2022. *(Photo: AFP)*

Turkey blamed the Istanbul bombing on the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) — designated a terrorist group by the EU and US — and said it was ordered from Kobane.

The PKK has waged an insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984, and Turkey alleges that Syrian Kurdish fighters are the group's allies.

Kurdish groups denied any involvement in the Ankara blast.

Turkey then hit other areas including the SDF bastion of Hasakeh province, in the northeast, and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan vowed Tuesday that Turkey would "soon" begin a ground operation.

"The situation in Kobane is bad. People don't sleep at night" out of fear that the city could be "bombed at any moment", said Nabo Jumaa Ramadan, who opened a minimart in Kobane after he returned from Lebanon in 2019.

"Kobane is a symbol for the Kurds and she defeated Daesh," Ramadan said with pride.

Erdogan wants to "break the will of Kurds in the city," according to Ramadan.

"If Kobane falls, all Rojava will fall," he predicted, using the name Kurds in Syria give to the area they administer.

'Under the bombs again'

The Kurds faced an earlier Turkish incursion in 2019 when Ankara's forces and its Syrian proxies grabbed a swathe of land along the frontier.

Under a deal between Moscow and Ankara, Kurdish forces which controlled nearly a third of Syria had to pull back to a line 30km from the border.

The withdrawal included Kobane.

On Thursday despite fears of a new ground incursion, there was no visible Kurdish military mobilization in the streets of Kobane, AFP correspondents said.

A civilian vehicle traversed the city center, calling residents through a loudspeaker to join a demonstration against Turkey's strikes.

Even when bombs aren't falling, Turkey's proximity is hard to avoid, and its flags can be seen along the border from several districts of Kobane.

Flags of Syria and Russia — a major ally of Damascus — are also visible, on a nearby hill with a post for government troops.

"We're afraid of bombs. We are poor, without possessions or land," said Amina Youssef, 65, in front of her home.

"We only have this house. What does Turkey want? We don't know what to do."

The trauma spans generations.

"We came back years ago and began to rebuild our homes," Sherwan Hami, 39, said, sheltering from rain inside a shop.

"The city and the markets prospered and people went back to work," he said. "But there's a new war. We're living under the bombs again."

China moves to curb, censor COVID lockdown protests



Protesters gather during a rally for the victims of a deadly fire as well as a protest against China's harsh COVID-19 restrictions in Beijing on November 28, 2022. *(Photo: AFP)*

SHANGHAI, China (AFP) — Chinese security forces detained people and appeared to prevent a planned protest on Monday as authorities worked to stamp out widening dissent seeking political freedoms and an end to COVID lockdowns.

People have taken to the streets in major cities and gathered at university campuses across China in a wave of protests not seen since pro-democracy rallies in 1989 were crushed.

A deadly fire last week in Urumqi, the capital of northwest China's Xinjiang region, was the catalyst for the public anger, with many blaming COVID-19 lockdowns for hampering rescue efforts.

Beijing accused "forces with ulterior motives" for linking the fire to COVID measures, saying on Monday local authorities had "made clear the facts and refuted this information and smears".

At an area in the economic hub of Shanghai where demonstrators gathered at the weekend, AFP witnessed police leading three people away. China's censors also worked to scrub signs of the social media-driven rallies.

A planned protest in the capital Beijing later on Monday came to nothing as several dozen police officers and vans choked a crossroad near the assembly point in western Haidian district.

Police vehicles lined the road to nearby Sitong Bridge, where a lone protester hung banners last month denouncing President Xi Jinping before being detained.

Demonstrators had planned to march to the bridge following a successful rally the day before near the Liangma River.

In Hong Kong, where mass democracy protests erupted in 2019, dozens gathered at the Chinese University to mourn the victims of the Urumqi fire, an AFP witness said.

People also displayed banners and held flowers in the financial hub's Central district. Beijing imposed a sweeping national security law on the city after the 2019 protests.

Chants and banners

Protesters have notably used the rallies to call for greater freedoms. Some have even demanded the resignation of President Xi, recently re-appointed to a historic third term as China's leader.

Large crowds gathered Sunday in Beijing and Shanghai, where police clashed with protesters as they tried to stop groups from converging at Wulumuqi street, named after the Mandarin for Urumqi.

Hundreds of people rallied in the same area with blank sheets of paper and flowers to hold what appeared to be a silent protest on Sunday afternoon.

The BBC said one of its journalists had been arrested and beaten by police while covering the Shanghai protests, although China's foreign ministry said the reporter had not identified himself as such.

A British government minister denounced the Chinese police's actions as "unacceptable" on Monday.

In Beijing, at least 400 people gathered on the banks of the Liangma for several hours, some shouting: "We are all Xinjiang people! Go Chinese people!"

State censors appeared to have largely cleaned Chinese social media of any news about the rallies by Monday.

The search terms "Liangma River" and "Urumqi Road" had been scrubbed of any references to the rallies on the Twitter-like Weibo platform.

'Boiling point'

China's strict control of information and continued travel curbs tied to the zero-COVID policy make verifying numbers of protesters across the vast country challenging.

But such widespread rallies are exceptionally rare, with authorities harshly clamping down on all opposition to the central government.

Spreading through social media, the protests have been fuelled by frustration at the central government's virus policy, under which authorities impose snap lockdowns, lengthy quarantines and mass testing campaigns over just a handful of cases.

Protests also occurred on Sunday in Wuhan, the central city where COVID-19 first emerged, while there were reports of demonstrations in Guangzhou and Chengdu.

At the scene of the Beijing riverside rally, where rows of police vehicles were in place on Monday, a jogger in her twenties told AFP she had seen the protests on social media.

"This protest was a good thing, it sent the signal that people were fed up with too strong restrictions," said the jogger, who asked not to be identified.

State-run newspaper the People's Daily published a commentary Monday morning warning against "paralysis" and "battle-weariness" in the fight against COVID, but stopped far short of calling for an end to the hardline policy.

"People have now reached a boiling point because there has been no clear path to end the zero-COVID policy," Alfred Wu Muluan, a Chinese politics expert at the National University of Singapore, told AFP.

"The party has underestimated the people's anger."

China reported 40,052 domestic COVID-19 cases Monday, a record high but tiny compared to caseloads in the West at the height of the pandemic.

Italy landslide death toll rises to 8, warnings 'ignored'

ROME (AFP) — Search parties on Monday recovered the body of an eighth victim of a landslide on the small Italian island of Ischia, as a former mayor said his calls for an evacuation had been ignored.

A wave of earth and debris crashed through the small town of Casamicciola Terme amid heavy rains on Saturday, destroying houses and sweeping cars down to the sea.

The latest body to be recovered was a 15-year-old boy, killed along with his younger brother and sister. Four people are still missing, authorities said.

As the island mourned its dead, including a 21-day-old baby, it emerged Monday that former mayor Giuseppe Conte had called four days earlier for at-risk areas to be evacuated.

He sent 23 emails to authorities, but "nobody answered me," he told the Corriere della Sera.

Geologist Aniello Di Iorio told the Corriere della Sera daily there were "high risks" of further landslides on parts of Ischia, a lush island near Capri that is thronged with tourists in summer.

Experts said the disaster was caused by a fatal mix of deforestation, overdevelopment, and a lack of mitigation strategies.

National Council of Architects head Francesco Miceli said it was "a tragedy foretold".

"This is not an isolated case, the risk areas are numerous and affect many regions of our country," he said.

Italy needs to "quickly define more incisive territorial control strategies (and) concrete intervention programs, and disburse adequate resources", he said.

The devastation in Ischia comes just weeks after 11 people died in heavy rain and flooding in the central Italian region of Marche.

Pakistan Taliban end ceasefire, order nationwide attacks

ISLAMABAD (AFP) — Pakistan's Taliban said Monday they have called off a shaky ceasefire agreed with the government in June and ordered fighters to stage attacks across the country.

The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a separate entity from the Taliban in Afghanistan but sharing a similar Islamist ideology, have been responsible for hundreds of attacks and thousands of deaths since emerging in 2007.

They agreed to a truce earlier this year after Afghanistan's new Taliban rulers took a prominent role in brokering peace talks, but negotiations made little progress and there were frequent breaches.

"We ... have shown our continued patience so that the negotiation process is not sabotaged," the TTP said in a statement.

"But the army and intelligence agencies do not stop and continue the attacks, so now our retaliatory attacks will also start across the country."

Less than two weeks ago the TTP claimed an ambush that killed six policemen in northwest Pakistan, claiming they were plotting a "raid" on their base in the area.

Since Friday the military has been patrolling the area in an attempt to root out militants, with helicopter gunships shelling their hideouts.

Faltering peace

The TTP was founded in 2007 by Pakistani extremists who fought alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 1990s before opposing Islamabad's support for American intervention there after September 11, 2001.

For a time they held vast tracts of Pakistan's rugged tribal belt, imposing radical Islamic law and patrolling territory just 140km from the Pakistan capital.

The Pakistani military came down hard after 2014 when militants raided a school for children of army personnel and killed nearly 150 people, most of them pupils.

Its fighters were largely routed into neighboring Afghanistan, but Islamabad claims the Taliban in Kabul are now giving the TTP a foothold to stage assaults across the border.

In the year since the Taliban took over Afghanistan, Pakistan has seen a 50 per cent surge in militant attacks, according to the Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS).

Lawmakers and business owners in northwest Pakistan have also told AFP that instances of TTP blackmail in the area have increased.

The presence of militants in the area is a deeply sensitive topic for Islamabad, which has long struggled to establish a writ there.

Analyst Saad Khan, a Peshawar-based retired brigadier, played down the significance of the TTP statement, saying the ceasefire was barely observed anyway.

Newspapers urge US to drop hunt for Assange

LONDON (AFP) — Five of the Western world's leading newspapers issued a joint call Monday for the US to drop its prosecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

The Australian publisher remains in custody in Britain pending a US extradition request to face trial for divulging US military secrets about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Publishing is not a crime," argued the editors and publishers of The Guardian, Le Monde, The New York Times, El País, and Der Spiegel in an open letter to the US government.

The letter marked the 12th anniversary of the newspapers collaborating with Assange to release excerpts from more than 250,000 US diplomatic cables that had been obtained by WikiLeaks.

A year later, Assange published unredacted excerpts of some of the cables. The five newspapers criticized him then for potentially endangering the lives of US intelligence sources.

"But we come together now to express our grave concerns about the continued prosecution of Julian Assange for obtaining and publishing classified materials," the letter said.

It noted that when Barack Obama was president and Joe Biden his vice president, the US administration had held off on indicting Assange, as journalists involved could also have had to face prosecution.

That changed under Donald Trump, when the US justice department charged Assange under the 1917 Espionage Act, "which has never been used to prosecute a publisher or broadcaster".

"This indictment sets a dangerous precedent, and threatens to undermine America's (constitutional) first amendment and the freedom of the press," the letter to the Biden administration argued.

"Obtaining and disclosing sensitive information when necessary in the public interest is a core part of the daily work of journalists," it said.

"Twelve years after the publication of 'Cablegate', it is time for the US government to end its prosecution of Julian Assange for publishing secrets."

Assange, 51, has been held in a high-security jail in London since 2019, after serving time for skipping bail in a previous case and spending years holed up in Ecuador's embassy.

He is appealing against UK approval of his extradition to the US. He could face decades in jail if found guilty.



Julian Assange

Ukraine war increases chemical weapons threat — watchdog

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AFP) — Russia's invasion of Ukraine has increased the threat from weapons of mass destruction including chemical munitions, the head of the world's toxic arms watchdog said on Monday.

The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) was closely monitoring the situation in Ukraine, its chief Fernando Arias told the regulator's annual meeting.

"The situation in Ukraine has again increased the real threat posed by weapons of mass destruction, including chemical weapons," Arias told the meeting in The Hague.

"It has exacerbated existing tensions to a point where unity of the international community on common global challenges related to international security and peace cannot be presumed."

International disarmament bodies like the Nobel Peace Prize-winning OPCW "now have become places for confrontation and disagreement", Arias lamented.

Threats and allegations about the possible use of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons have been traded since the war in Ukraine began in February, but with no evidence they have been deployed.

Arias reminded Russia and Ukraine that they were among 193 countries that have "solemnly and voluntarily committed never under any circumstances to ... use chemical weapons".

He said the OPCW "continues to closely monitor this serious situation and remains in contact with the permanent representations of the Russian Federation and Ukraine".

The OPCW has provided Ukraine, at its request, with training for first responders for chemical attacks and for the detection of chemical leaks, Arias said.

'Preposterous'

Russia's ally Syria meanwhile remained in "serious failure to comply" with the watchdog on its chemical weapons, the director-general said.

Damascus had refused to give a visa to an OPCW inspector and had failed to complete any of the measures demanded by the regulator, said Arias.

Syria denies the use of chemical weapons and insists it has handed over its stockpiles under a 2013 deal, prompted by a suspected sarin gas attack that killed 1,400 in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta.

But Syria was stripped of its OPCW voting rights in 2021 after a probe blamed it for further poison gas attacks.

Western countries criticized both Russia and Syria at the meeting.

US under secretary of state for arms control and international security, Bonnie Jenkins, slammed Russia's "preposterous, unfounded, and alarming" allegations about Ukrainian use or plans to use chemical arms.

Jenkins also accused Russia of chemical weapons use in the Novichok nerve agent attacks on former Russian spy Sergei Skripal in the English city of Salisbury in 2018 and Kremlin opponent Alexei Navalny in Russia in 2020.

Russia denies any involvement in either incident.

Syria meanwhile "has shown only contempt" for the OPCW, the US official said.

British junior defense minister, Annabel Goldie, said that "Russia's war (in Ukraine) is not something we can ignore here in the OPCW".

Hawaii volcano, world's largest, erupts for first time in decades

LOS ANGELES, United States (AFP) — Hawaii's Mauna Loa, the largest active volcano in the world, has erupted for the first time in nearly 40 years, US authorities said, as emergency crews went on alert early Monday.

Flows of lava remained "contained" within the summit caldera of Mauna Loa, but the eruption could pose a threat to nearby residents should conditions change, the United States Geological Survey (USGS) reported at 11:45pm local time Sunday some 15 minutes after the eruption inside Hawaii Volcanoes National Park.

"At this time, lava flows are contained within the summit area and are not threatening downslope communities," the USGS said on its website, noting that residents of the area should review preparedness procedures.

While the eruption on the main island of the remote US state in the Pacific remains confined within the basin at the top of the volcano, called the caldera, "if the eruptive vents migrate outside its walls, lava flows may move rapidly downslope," according to the USGS.

Hours later on Monday morning the USGS volcano monitoring office tweeted: "Lava does seem to have flowed outside the caldera, but for now the eruptive vents remain confined to the caldera."

The agency said the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory was in consultation with emergency management personnel and its staff would conduct an aerial reconnaissance over the 4,168m volcano as soon as possible.

About the IMF's fifth review



YUSUF MANSUR

A few days ago, the IMF concluded its fifth review under the Stand-By Arrangement with Jordan. The review will bring the total of IMF disbursements over 2020-24 to around $2 billion, and signal to donors that Jordan is well on its way to effecting reform, which would encourage their loans and grants. Still, reading the review elicits skepticism and questions.

The review starts with statements like "despite turbulent global economic conditions" (as if excusing whoever and whatever for the performance of the economy); the "negative impact of the fuel and food subsidies" (or any type of subsidy that is of any significance, which anyways is scant these days), which gives a pat or two on the shoulder of the government for either increasing taxes or broadening the tax base. It explains away the lackluster performance of the economy and the persistently low economic growth rate; praises austerity, and when it comes to monetary policy, the review eloquently stresses that the monetary policy should be focused on maintaining the stability of the Jordanian dinar-US dollar peg (never really stating how and by what means, other than matching the US Federal Reserve's discount rates).

The age-old modus operandi that is espoused by the IMF for Jordan (and most likely everywhere else, since cookie-cutter policies are easier to implement, and have been tried and defended everywhere else) is to exercise a frugal fiscal policy and cut spending on subsidies.

... difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from old ones.

Little is said of the quality of spending and where the loans go (usually to pay government salaries, pensions and other loan repayments), and even less is underscored regarding the required capital expenditures to fix the energy, water, public transport and other sectors that are either dilapidated or becoming non-existent (nearly true when it comes to public transport and the vanishing water supply).

In short, the conclusion is that the government should do less and the private sector should do more, which is no more than a convoluted demonstration of a brilliant statement by (my favorite economist of all time) John Maynard Keynes: "Capitalism is the astounding belief that the wickedest of men will do the most wickedest of things for the greatest good of everyone."

When the IMF reviews address needs and deficits (other than the budget deficit), one sees them discarding or pushing away imminent problems such as low economic growth (usually blamed on some regional or global turbulence), rising unemployment and poverty rates, and declining trust in the institutions of the state.

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Such apathy is baffling in many respects. The usual remedy is slow, broad-brush-like, and long-term in nature: "steady progress on structural reforms to boost female and youth employment; enhance labor market flexibility; promote competition; and enhance governance and transparency". Such recommendations invoke Keynes' famous statement in response to the classical economists' infamous reform (or lack thereof): "In the long run we are all dead," which also means that we have no time to wait, we need a significant positive transformation now.

On the other hand, public sector economic pundits' "difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from old ones" to paraphrase Keynes.

Given that the rational thing to do is to motivate greater economic growth through quality spending that enhances the productivity of the economy rather than the IMF's tried and failed economics, will Jordan ever depart from this paradigm and accept other alternatives? One can only be hopeful.

The writer is CEO of the Envision Consulting Group and former minister of state for economic affairs.


(Photo: Shutterstock)

How China is rewriting history with the colonial West

RAMZY BAROUD

THOUGH brief, the exchange between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Indonesia on November 16 has become a social media sensation. Xi, assertive if not domineering, lectured the visibly apprehensive Trudeau about the etiquette of diplomacy. This exchange can be considered another watershed moment in China's relationship with the West.

"If there is sincerity on your part," the Chinese president told Trudeau, "then we shall conduct our discussion with an attitude of mutual respect, otherwise there might be unpredictable consequences."

At the end of the awkward conversation, Xi was the first to walk away, leaving Trudeau uncomfortably making his way out of the room.

For the significance of this moment to be truly appreciated, it has to be viewed through a historical prism.

When Western colonial powers began the process of exploiting China in earnest — early to mid-19th century — the size of the Chinese economy was estimated to be one third of the world's entire economic output. In 1949, when Chinese nationalists managed to win their independence following hundreds of years of colonialism, political meddling and economic exploitation, China's total GDP accounted for merely 4 percent of the world's total economy.

In the period between the first Opium War, in 1839, and China's independence, over a hundred years later, tens of millions of Chinese perished as a result of direct wars, rebellions and famines. The so-called Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901) was one of the many desperate attempts by the Chinese people to reclaim a degree of independence and assert nominal sovereignty over their land. The outcome, however, was devastating, as the rebels, along with the Chinese military, were crushed by the mostly Western alliance, which involved the US, Austria-Hungary, Britain, France, and others.

The death toll was catastrophic, with moderate estimations putting it at over 100,000. And subsequently, once more, China was forced to toe the line as it has done in the two Opium Wars and many other occasions in the past.

China's independence in 1949 did not automatically signal a return to its past grandeur as a global, or even as an Asian, power. The process of rebuilding was long, costly and sometimes devastating: trials and errors, internal conflicts, cultural revolutions, periods of "great leaps forward", but sometimes also great stagnation.

Seven decades later, China is back at the center of global affairs. Good news for some. Terrible news for others.

The 2022 US National Security Strategy document released on October 22 describes China as "the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military and technological power to do it".

The US position is not at all surprising, because the West continues to define its relationship with Beijing based on a colonial inheritance, a legacy that spans hundreds of years.

For the West, the re-rise of China is problematic, not because of its human rights record, but because of its growing share of the global economy which, in 2021, accounted for 18.56 percent. This economic power, coupled with growing military prowess, practically means that Beijing will soon be able to dictate political outcomes in its growing sphere of influence in the Pacific region, and also worldwide.

The irony in all of this is that, once upon a time, it was China, along with most of Asia and the global south that were divided into spheres of influence. Seeing Beijing creating its own equivalence to the West's geopolitical dominance must be quite unsettling for Western governments.

For many years, Western powers have used the pretense of China's human rights record to provide a moral foundation for meddling. Purporting to defend human rights and champion democracy have historically been convenient Western tools that provided a nominal ethical foundation for interventions. Indeed, in the Chinese context, the Eight-Nations Alliance, which crushed the Boxer Rebellion, was predicated on similar principles.

The charade continues until this day, with the defense of Taiwan and the rights of the Uyghurs and other minorities being placed on top of the US and Western agendas, respectively.

Of course, human rights have very little to do with the US-Western attitude toward China. Human rights and democracy were hardly the motivator behind the US-Western invasion of Iraq in 2003. The difference between Iraq, an isolated and weakened Arab country at the height of American military dominance in the Middle East, and China today is massive. The latter represents the backbone of the global economy. Its military power and growing geopolitical import will prove difficult — if at all possible — to curtail.

In fact, language emanating from Washington indicates that the US is taking the first steps in acknowledging China's inevitable rise as a global competitor. Prior to his meeting with President Xi in Indonesia on November 15, Biden had finally, although subtly, acknowledged the uncontested new reality when he said that "we're going to compete vigorously but I'm not looking for conflict. I'm looking to manage this competition responsibly".

Xi's attitude toward Trudeau at the G20 summit may be read as another episode of China's so-called Wolf Diplomacy. However, the dramatic event — the words, the body language and the subtle nuances — indicate that China does not see itself only as deserving of global importance and respect, but also as a superpower.

The writer is a journalist, author and the Editor of The Palestine Chronicle. He is the author of six books. His latest book, co-edited with Ilan Pappé, is 'Our Vision for Liberation: Engaged Palestinian Leaders and Intellectuals Speak out'. His other books include 'My Father was a Freedom Fighter' and 'The Last Earth'. Baroud is a Non-resident Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Islam and Global Affairs (CIGA). His website is www.ramzybaroud.net

The eight billionth question

AFSHIN MOLAVI

THE world just passed a quiet milestone, topping 8 billion people on Earth. Embedded in this demographic story is an important developmental one: we are healthier, wealthier, and better educated than at any time in human history.

And yet, macro numbers offer little solace to the 800 million people who still lack access to electricity, or the roughly same amount who go to sleep hungry.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many of the existing inequalities in our world and added a range of new problems, from supply chain-induced food insecurity to trillions of dollars in economic losses worldwide.

A deep dive into the latest United Nations World Population Prospects report reveals that the fastest growing populations are concentrated in low-income and developing countries. These youthful, growing societies can be a demographic gift or a burden. Thus, a key question facing these countries, and the world, is: what's the best way to ensure that fast-growing, large populations become a dividend to be multiplied rather than problems that could metastasize?

Let us start with the eight countries that the UN estimates will account for about half of the world's population growth over the next three decades: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Tanzania. If the world hits 9.7 billion people by 2050 — as the UN projects — roughly 850 million new souls will reside in one of these countries.

None of these fast growing eight have a history of good governance or sound economic management, but all of them are brimming with talented and innovative people who could contribute immensely to their own countries and the world — if their talent is unleashed.

Every government faces the fundamental challenge of helping their people thrive and prosper. It is a 21st century corollary to that Enlightenment idea that government should seek to "maximize the greatest happiness for the greatest number". Happiness, of course, is hard to measure, but human development is not — nor is income per capita.

Of the eight countries expected to fuel future population growth, only one cracks the top 100 on the UN Human Development Index: Egypt, squeaking in at number 97. All, except for Egypt, fall into the two lowest categories of the index — medium or low development. They all sit at or near the bottom of income per capita classifications.

Are these countries prepared for the demographic deluge? Will they be overwhelmed, or will they flourish?

Large populations in failing and flailing economies are inherently destabilizing — both within their borders and beyond them. On the other hand, large populations in booming economies with strong human development can act as a powerful force multiplier that can lift many boats at home and abroad.

Beyond Egypt and the other seven countries, where does the Middle East and North Africa stand? The fastest growing, large populations in the region are Sudan, Yemen, and Iraq. The Population Reference Bureau, a non-profit research center, projects Sudan's population to grow by 80 percent through 2050, tipping it over 84 million people. Iraq could approach a population of 75 million by the end of 2050, while Yemen could see its population swell to 55 million.

By contrast, other populous countries in the region — like Iran and Morocco — are growing slowly, with Iran's fertility rate of 1.7 births per woman on par with notoriously slow-going Scandinavian countries. Sudan's fertility rate, for comparison, clocks in at 4.5.

On income per capita scores and human development rankings, Gulf Cooperation Council countries tend to rise above the rest of the MENA region. Surely, oil and gas wealth has played a role in those rankings, but sound governance, particularly in the most advanced countries like the UAE (ranked 26 in the world on the UN's Human Development Index, ahead of Spain and France) is also an important factor.

Years of mismanagement, inefficiency, corruption and, in some cases, civil or regional wars have left several countries in the region perennially playing catch-up, the gap widening each year. What is to be done?

Unfortunately, the region holds many examples of what is not to be done. From Beirut to Tripoli to Tehran, corrupt elites have siphoned off the wealth of their people, while squandering their present and future. All three countries — Lebanon, Libya, and Iran — possess strategic geography, talented populations and, in the case of Libya and Iran, immense natural resources.

While there is no one-size-fits-all model, it is clear by now that countries that invest in education and health care, promote a healthy and vibrant private sector, create regulatory environments conducive to entrepreneurship, tamp down corruption, and build the infrastructure of connectivity tend to be those that sit atop the rankings of development indexes.

There are no secrets in developing a country's success. We know what must be done. The countries that have been doing it thus far — and continue to do it — will be winners in the 21st century. Most importantly, their peoples will be in positions to achieve the most important human development goal of all: reaching their full potential.

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Palestinians unload their catch from the boat's hold after fishing in the Mediterranean at a port along the Gaza Strip, on July 25, 2022. *(Photos: NYTimes)*

Amid Israeli blockade on Gaza, a fishing fleet limps along



Repair work on a fishing boat outboard motor in the Gaza Strip, on July 26, 2022.

GAZA CITY, Palestinian Territories (NYT) — Not far from the edge of the port in the Gaza Strip lies its boat cemetery: two rows of beached fishing vessels that even Gazan ingenuity cannot salvage.

Motors and propellers have been stripped. The once-bright blue, green, and yellow paint on more than two dozen fishing boats is peeling. The fiberglass on some looks as if it has been eaten away.

The boats began piling up in Gaza 15 years ago after Israel, aided by Egypt, imposed a land, air, and sea blockade on the small Palestinian coastal enclave in 2007. The blockade severely restricts the movement of Gazans out of the strip and limits imports or bans them completely, including medical equipment and construction material.

For Gaza's fishermen, the blockade has prevented them from buying motors, propellers, fiberglass, and many other items needed to repair the boats and maintain a functioning fishing fleet. It has damaged a vital but shrinking part of the strip's economy while crimping the supply of an important but increasingly out-of-reach part of the local diet.

Repairs and maintenance that were once easy and affordable became too costly or scarce, causing some fishermen to just give up and dump their unsalvageable boats in the cemetery.

"This is a war on our livelihoods," said Miflih Abu Rial, a fisherman and official in the fishermen's union, standing on the bow of one of his family's boats, which has been in the cemetery for years.

Gazan and industry officials warn that if Israeli restrictions are not eased, the strip's fishing sector could completely collapse in the next few years as more and more boats are removed from service.

Israel says the blockade and restrictions are for its "security" and intended to prevent Hamas from using "dual use" items — products that Israel says can be used for both civilian and military purposes.

"Some items that serve the fishing industry are defined as dual-use materials," the Civil Administration, the Israeli authority that carries out civilian policy in occupied territories under the command of the military, said in a statement.

Israel's blockade has devastated Gaza's economy, in which poverty is widespread and unemployment hovers around 50 percent. Palestinian officials and human rights groups have long maintained that the blockade amounts to collective punishment of Gaza's two million residents in the densely packed enclave.

"The fishing sector now works at 50 percent capacity and every day it is decreasing," said Jehad Salah, head of the fisheries directorate in Gaza. "When they ban the equipment needed for maintenance, then they are forcing people to leave this industry."

A UN-initiated program to allow maintenance and repair materials to be sent in was finally just put into place after months of negotiations, a UN official said.

The agreement allows individual fishermen to request orders of dual-use materials needed to repair their boats. Each request must be approved by both the Palestinian and Israeli sides.

Once approved, fishermen can make the order, and the importation and distribution of the materials will be overseen by the UN.

Only a few dozen have had their orders approved so far.

On November 13, the first batch of materials entered Gaza, the first since 2007, a shipment that included 227kg of fiberglass, 500kg of polyester resin and a total of 31kg of blue, white, and yellow paint.

Next month, motors will be allowed in, Salah said. He added that he was withholding judgment on the program's success.

The Israeli civil administration said the materials will be brought in under strict security and supervision.

For Gaza's fishermen, the negative effect of the blockade is multifold. In addition to the limits on goods coming in, the naval blockade restricts how far out into the Mediterranean Sea fishermen can go and thus how much and the type of fish they are able to catch.

Palestinian fishermen are at risk of being shot at by Israeli coast guard and being detained or having their boats confiscated by Israel if they get too close to the boundaries of the permitted fishing areas. There have been more than 300 shooting episodes this year, according to the UN, with 14 fishermen injured. At least 47 have been detained by Israel.

In June 2016, the brothers of Abu Rial, the fisherman, were on one of eight boats owned by their family when it was seized at sea by Israeli forces. The boat was returned to them nearly two years later but needed extensive repairs to make it seaworthy again. Family members did not have the money, nor could they find the necessary parts, so the boat was put in the cemetery.

Now Abu Rial, 44 and a third-generation fisherman, uses another aging boat with a motor that has been on its last legs for the past two years. Sometimes the mechanic must fix it three times a week. Other times, Abu Rial goes weeks without fishing because the motor will not work.

Recently, he had to sell some of his wife's gold jewelry to pay bills.

"After I get the motor fixed, I just pray that it will last a week or even a day," he said, standing outside his family's storage room at the port. Inside, the walls are covered with graffiti scrawled by their children, who occasionally visit the port to begin learning the family trade. A rusting refrigerator laid on its back is filled with old and spare boat parts.

Farther down the port, along a breakwater built using rubble from previous wars in Gaza between Hamas and Israel, Methat Redwan Bakir's boat has been tied up for years.

"The Israelis took it for three years and returned to me with no nets and no engine and no lights," he said. "It hasn't moved since it came back."

Bakir's brother and 11 other fishermen were on the boat in 2016 along the northern fishing limit when they were shot at by the Israeli coast guard, which also fired water cannons at the vessel, he said. The boat was confiscated and all 12 crew members detained. Ten of them were released the next day, and Bakir's brother was detained for 18 days before being let go. Another man was imprisoned for five years.

For decades, the boat supported five families on which they could make up to $1,000 a day from fishing.

It would have cost Bakir, 57, a father of four daughters, several thousand dollars to fix. So, he tied it up and abandoned it.

In the green murky waters nearby, Bakir watched as a group of young men learned the trade, working to unravel fishing nets and preparing to go out to sea. But it remains unclear how long this industry can survive here.

Now, Bakir goes out on a 6m-long flat-bottomed boat with a 20-year-old motor that breaks down as often as it works. And instead of using nets, he relies on a rudimentary mix of equipment: fishing rods, plastic bottles, and multiple baits.

In the sand next to his boat lies a small banner from a past solidarity protest: "Viva Palestina", it reads, and, "End the occupation".

With a dwindling number of functional motors in Gaza, increasing numbers of fishermen are using paddle boards to continue their trade. On any morning, men standing atop wide two-person boards, loaded with nets, can be seen going out to sea.

"The paddle board is a new thing, but it is very dangerous," said Salah, the fisheries director.

Ashraf Al-Aawoo, 47, had been using a paddle board for months after his boat fell into disrepair.

But one day in the spring, he and a partner found the fish plentiful. The net bulged with fish, but the paddle board could not take the heavy weight and sank.



Palestinians unload their catch after fishing in the Mediterranean at a port along the Gaza Strip, on July 29, 2022.



Palestinians mend their fishing nets at a port in the Gaza Strip, on July 29, 2022.

Aawoo, deeply tanned from a lifetime on the water and under the sun, had to swim more than a half a kilometer back to shore with his fellow fishermen.

The Gazan coast guard fished the paddle board out of the water.

Even if he had the money to repair it, there is not any fiberglass in Gaza to buy, Aawoo said.

In frustration, he dragged the board from the sandy shore to the entrance of the port and left it on the road shoulder as a statement — like a sole cemetery plot for another Gazan boat.

HEALTH

Lice outbreak? A comb, shampoo, and some patience will do the trick

By Rifaat Al-Nasser



Head lice are by far the most common form of human lice. They can reside anywhere on the scalp, but commonly prefer the hairs on the back of the neck and around the ears, where it is warmest. *(Photo: Freepik)*

CHILDREN seem to have a knack for getting injured and contracting illnesses. Their awareness, motor coordination, and perception are still developing, leading to frequent tumbles and falls, and poor personal hygiene and very close contact with other children facilitate the spread of germs. Usually, the diagnosis is the common cold, a flu, a twisted joint, or a scratch, and after a few days, things go back to normal. However, one other condition that often spreads between children is especially difficult to treat and prevent, and takes more time to combat: lice, the tiny bugs that make their homes and grow their families in people's hair.

Lice are considered parasites because they require a host in order to survive. They are small, wingless, blood-sucking insects that infest areas with hair. These parasites suck the blood from the scalp for nutrients, feeding roughly four to five times a day, and rapidly reproduce. The most prevalent area for lice infestations is the head — head lice in medical nomenclature are known as Pediculosis capitis.

From tiny egg to sesame seed

Adult lice are quite small, roughly the size of a sesame seed, making them incredibly difficult to spot. They range in color from white to brown or tan, so they usually blend in with the color of the scalp. A female adult louse will lay up to six eggs per day directly onto the shaft of a hair. The eggs are attached to the hair via a secretion which acts as glue, which can make the removal of the eggs extremely difficult. The eggs are roughly the size of a pinhead and are usually tan to grayish-white — they are more noticeable. In about a week, the eggs will hatch and the baby louse, known as a nymph, will undergo three growth spurts to reach adult size within another week. Lice are obligate parasites, which means that they cannot survive without a human host. Furthermore, the species that infests humans is specific to humans; they cannot be spread by animals.

All kinds of lice

As previously mentioned, head lice are by far the most common form of human lice. They can reside anywhere on the scalp, but commonly prefer the hairs on the back of the neck and around the ears, where it is warmest. There are only two ways that head lice are transmitted from person to person. The first is direct head-to-head contact such as during hugging. The second means of transmission is through sharing items that have a high chance of infestation. This includes hats, hair ties, or combs and brushes.

Another form of lice is known as body lice, or medically, Pediculosis corporis. They are similar to head lice in many regards but differ in certain ways. The most important distinction is that body lice reside and lay their eggs on clothing, and only go to the skin to feed. Unfortunately, this type of lice is also capable of carrying a number of diseases such as louse-borne typhus, relapsing fever, and trench fever. Fortunately, body lice can be treated and prevented much more easily than other types — by washing clothes.

The last type of human lice, pubic lice or Pediculosis pubis, are commonly referred to as crabs since they look like crabs under a microscope. They are the smallest type of lice and reside on the hair in the pubic area. They are transmitted via direct contact during sexual activity.

How to tell if you have lice

It is first important to note that preschool and elementary school children are at the highest risk of getting head lice. This is due to the fact that children tend to play closely with one another. As a result, families with school-aged children as well as those who work in close proximity with children are also at a higher risk. Lice are easily transmitted and can be spread if precautions are not taken. This means that anyone can get lice, regardless of risk factor.

Lice are not associated with poor personal hygiene. It is a common misconception that those who skip showering or other hygiene-related steps are at a greater risk of lice. In fact, lice prefer clean hair, as it makes it easier for them to lay their eggs.

Regardless of the type of lice infestation, the symptoms are generally the same. The main symptom is itchiness, which is caused by the bites from lice. Additionally, you may have the sensation that something is crawling around the infected area. Lastly, sores and scabs are also common as a result of both bites and scratching.

Lice in Jordan

Data on lice in Jordan is quite limited and varying. One study found that 13.4 percent of Jordanian elementary school-aged children were infested with head lice, while a later study found that 26.6 percent were infested. Although the two studies varied on school-aged prevalence of head lice, one finding was consistent: girls were significantly more likely to be infested with head lice than boys. This is likely due to a difference in playing patterns, and the fact that girls are more likely to touch each other's hair.

In Jordan, unfortunately, studies have shown that parents have limited knowledge about head lice. The vast majority of Jordanian parents whose children had head lice reported feeling ashamed after learning their child was infested, and most said they felt too embarrassed to seek help from a healthcare provider. A study also showed that the most common home remedy was applying kerosene to the scalp, at 61 percent — an unadvisable treatment option. However, the government does implement an awareness campaign on the treatment and prevention of head lice.

Treatment and prevention

There are many ways to treat a lice infestation, all of them revolving around killing the lice and eggs as well as treating contaminated areas and clothing. The US CDC does not recommend any natural or alternative products. Similarly, home remedies are generally not effective. Kerosene and other flammable liquids should never be used on the scalp. Mayonnaise is another common home remedy and, although it may suffocate adult lice, it does not remove the eggs.

The most effective treatment is medical shampoo that kills the lice. Additionally, there are special combs that can carefully remove the eggs from the hair shaft. It is also important to clean the home or any other area where hairs might have fallen. Clothing and bedding should be machine washed in hot water. There is no product or method that can completely ensure that lice will not spread; the best means of prevention is to avoid head-to-head contact, and not to share personal items.

Earth now has 8 billion humans. This man wishes there were none.



Les Knight, the founder of the Voluntary Human Extinction movement, at his home in Portland, Oregon, on October 29, 2022. *(Photo: NYTimes)*

PORTLAND, United States (NYT) — For someone who wants his own species to go extinct, Les Knight is a remarkably happy-go-lucky human.

He has regularly hosted meteor shower parties with rooftop fireworks. He organized a long-running game of croquet in his backyard. Even Tucker Carlson proved no match for Knight's ebullience. During a 2005 interview with Knight on MSNBC, Carlson criticized him for espousing "the sickest" of beliefs but then added, "You are one of the cheeriest guests we've ever had."

Knight, 75, is the founder of the Voluntary Human Extinction movement, which is less a movement than a loose consortium of people who believe that the best thing humans can do to help the Earth is to stop having children.

Knight added the word "voluntary" decades ago to make it clear that adherents do not support mass murder or forced birth control, nor do they encourage suicide. Their ethos is echoed in their motto, "May we live long and die out," and in another one of their slogans, which Knight hangs at various conventions and street fairs, "Thank you for not breeding."

On November 15, the Earth became home to a record 8 billion human beings. Despite declining birthrates, the number is forecast to peak at 10.4 billion in the coming decades, in large part because of increases in life expectancy and decreases in child mortality.

Knight is among those who believe that overpopulation is a main factor in the climate crisis, but that idea can be fraught. Poor countries that are heavily populated, such as India, contribute relatively little per capita to the greenhouse gas emissions that are heating the planet. Wealthy countries with relatively smaller populations like the US are generating most of the pollution that is driving global warming.

"The problem that is spiraling out of control is consumption," said John Wilmoth, director of the United Nations' population division, who said that focusing on population limitation as a potential climate fix diverts attention from the urgent need for everyone to ditch fossil fuels and more efficiently use resources. "We have to transform the economic incentives that make it possible to profit off of polluting the environment."

The idea that population must be controlled has also led to forced sterilizations and measures that have proved inhumane or have been linked to racist theories like eugenics.

Yet Stephanie Feldstein, director of population and sustainability at the Center for Biological Diversity, said while greater human longevity and health were good things, they have come at a cost to other living things on the planet.

As the human population doubled in the last half-century, wildlife populations declined by 70 percent. Although lowering fertility rates today will not change emissions in the short-term, she said surges in the human population would put increasing pressure on dwindling natural resources and the intricate web of animals, birds and plants that depend on them.

"The loss of biodiversity can be just as devastating as it unravels the ecosystems we need to survive," Feldstein said. "We're already using nearly twice as many resources as the Earth can replenish in a year."

One of the most effective ways to combat global warming, say both climate activists and those concerned about overpopulation, is to expand access to education for girls around the world, in addition to birth control and family planning. Nearly half of all pregnancies worldwide, some 121 million a year, are unintended.

But it is rare to find anyone who publicly goes as far as Knight, who never had children and got a vasectomy in 1973 at the age of 25. Beyond advocating for universal access to birth control and opposing what he calls reproductive fascism, or "the lack of freedom to not procreate", Knight said that despite our many achievements, humans are a net detriment to the Earth.

"Look what we did to this planet," Knight said during a chat in his sunlit backyard one warm morning this fall. "We're not a good species."

It is unclear how many adherents are in Knight's group or what the extent of its reach is. After being largely underground, the group took off in popularity when Knight created a website in 1996. Text-heavy yet breezy, the site includes quotes from philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer and cartoons by artist Nina Paley, as well as arguments against procreation and for adoption. It has been translated into some 30 languages and remains a haven for many.

"It was very nice news for me that this kind of group existed, because one usually, with this kind of philosophy, feels alone," said Mario Buenfil, 73, a water engineer in Mexico City who has been involved with the movement for 20 years.

Still, the words "voluntary human extinction" often elicit reactions of spluttering horror, and terms like "eco-fascist" and "Malthusian" are often lobbed at the group. John Seager, the president of Population Connection, a nonprofit that advocates population stabilization through voluntary means, likened it to a sideshow. Yet if the group's provocative name and seemingly pugilistic stance suggest an embittered or even menacing founder, Knight seems anything but.

Tall and gentle, Knight comes across as clear-eyed and thoughtful, like a mashup of Bill Nye and Fred Rogers. While Knight may be against the creation of more humans, he shows great compassion for the ones that already exist.

A high school substitute teacher for most of his working life, Knight is fondly regarded by students. He spends hours each Sunday morning picking up litter from the nearby main road. During an interview, he paused to appreciate two juicy garden spiders taking in the sun on gossamer webs spun between the hedges and lawn chairs. The sight was a cause for celebration, Knight said, after so many critters were killed during last year's heat dome in the Pacific Northwest. A self-professed serial monogamist, he lives alone, but his girlfriend lives next door and is fully on board with his cause.

"He doesn't have a giant ego that he struts around with. He doesn't try to argue with people," said Marv Ross, Knight's former college roommate and a long-time friend. "He was always about humor, to make it as fun as possible to get his message across, and I saw him do it many times. He'd deflect people getting upset with a joke or a smile."

As a child growing up in a tolerant family in Oregon, Knight watched timber companies chop down the state's forests. After being drafted in the US Army during the Vietnam War (he served but never got deployed), he attended Oregon College of Education and joined the local chapter of Zero Population Growth, which cemented his resolve not to have children. "It was always because of the ecology, because of the damage that humans do to the environment," he said.

His beliefs were rooted in deep ecology, which challenges assumptions of human dominance and argues that other species are just as significant. Knight came to see humans as the most destructive of invasive species, and as super predators.

"We came to be and then ran amok," Knight said. "And because we're smart enough, we should know enough to end it.

"People mention music and art and literature and the great things that we have done. It's funny they don't ever mention the bad things we've done," he continued. "I don't think the whales will miss our songs."

While the US saw an increase in births during the coronavirus pandemic, reversing the country's declining birthrate, a 2020 poll found that one in four Americans who had not had children cited climate change as a reason. Research has shown that having one fewer child is perhaps the most significant way to reduce one's carbon footprint, and while Knight does not like to push his beliefs on people, he likes to think there are some humans who do not exist because of his efforts.

Feldstein said Knight succeeded at grabbing people's attention and starting conversations.

"He's advocating for so many of the same things as the rest of us, trying to make sure everyone has the ability, autonomy and resources they need to choose if and when to have children," she said.

And though the world's population is at a record high, Knight said, it is not getting him down.

"I never expected to succeed," he said. "I think that's the secret to not burning out."

HEALTH

Pulses to their brains and two women's binge eating went away



Robyn Baldwin, who had a device implanted in her brain and reported no longer feeling irresistible urges to binge eat, in Citrus Heights, California, on November 6, 2022. *(Photo: NYTimes)*

(NYT) — What if an uncontrollable urge to rapidly eat large amounts of food is rooted in an impaired brain circuit? If that were the case, people who live with binge eating disorder — a psychiatric diagnosis — might be no more at fault for overeating than a patient with Parkinson's disease is for their tremors.

That question led doctors to try a new treatment different from anything ever attempted to help people with this common but underreported eating disorder. At least 3 percent of people have it, said Dr Casey Halpern, a neurosurgeon at the University of Pennsylvania.

He and his colleagues decided to try deep brain stimulation, a method routinely used to quell tremors in patients with Parkinson's. It involves placing electrodes in the brain to regulate aberrant signals. The wires, connected to the electrodes, are placed under the scalp, where they are invisible and unobtrusive. For the binge eating treatment, the device only stimulates neurons when the device detects a signal to start a binge.

The pilot study, funded by the US National Institutes of Health and published earlier this year in the journal Nature Medicine, involves two women and will be expanded in a few months to include four more people living with binge eating disorder who regained the weight they lost after bariatric surgery. Before the treatment can be approved by the Food and Drug Administration, researchers will need to rigorously test the method in at least 100 people in multiple medical centers. Such a study would take several years to complete.

The two women whose devices were implanted a year ago will be followed for up to three years. They had the option to have their devices removed after 12 months, but both wanted to keep them because they no longer felt irresistible urges to binge.

One of them, Robyn Baldwin, 58, of Citrus Heights, California, described herself as a "chunko child" who had "always been big". She tried a wide range of diets. Once, she consumed only protein shakes for a month.

In 2003, she had bariatric surgery, which usually involves altering the digestive system so that the stomach is smaller and food is more difficult to digest. It has enabled many people to lose weight when other methods failed. But for Baldwin, the weight she lost came back.

Lena Tolly, 48, the other patient from the study, lives in Sacramento, California. She also tried a large number of diets and remedies for obesity. Her parents gave her a month at a vegan camp as a graduation present from college. While there, she walked 10 miles a day.

In August 2005, Tolly had bariatric surgery. She lost 100 pounds, but the weight crept back on.

"It has to be more than willpower," she said.

In her case — and in Baldwin's — it was. Their binge eating is not what most people call bingeing, as when they occasionally start on a bag of chips or a gallon of ice cream and just keep going. Instead, their condition is in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. It involves bingeing multiple times a week. The binges are accompanied by a feeling of being almost in another state in which they lose all control, quickly consuming large amounts of food. Many, embarrassed by their behavior, binge in secret. It is common to feel disgust and shame when the binge ends.

The study that Baldwin and Tolly participated in is part of a movement to use deep brain stimulation to treat a variety of disorders that may be caused by problems with electrical signals in the brain. They include movement disorders and psychiatric conditions such as depression and obsessive compulsive disorder, said Dr Edward Chang, a professor of neurosurgery at the University of California, San Francisco, who was not involved in the binge eating study.

Researchers have found precise brain circuits, often in areas just about a millimeter in diameter, that regulate the symptoms of some of these disorders. The discoveries open the way for studies of deep brain stimulation.

Halpern led the pilot experiment with Baldwin and Tolly. But first he and his colleagues began with mice that were prone to obesity. The animals had been fed, but when the researchers put butter in their cage, they devoured it, eating more than 25 percent of their daily calories in one hour.

The area of their brains that was activated was the nucleus accumbens, a key hub of the brain's reward center, located deep in the center of the brain. In mice, neurons in the nucleus accumbens became active just before a binge. When the researchers used deep brain stimulation to calm those neurons, they were able to prevent the mice from bingeing.

But could it work in humans?

The group of scientists began advertising for people who had regained all their weight after bariatric surgery, believing that it might be due to binge eating disorder.

Baldwin and Tolly replied. Neither realized they had a binge eating disorder. But binge eating is "really, really common in individuals who present for weight loss surgery," said Lauren Breithaupt, a psychologist at Massachusetts General Hospital who studies eating disorders.

When Baldwin and Tolly met with Halpern, both weighed more than they had before weight loss surgery.

As part of the study, the researchers provided each woman with a 5,000-calorie feast of their favorite foods when they were not hungry. The women described the specific emotional triggers that could set off a binge: for Tolly, thoughts of her mother, who had recently died; and for Baldwin, thoughts of her work schedule and responsibilities at home. They agreed to allow the researchers to prompt them to binge with those triggers as part of the study.

The researchers recorded electrical impulses in the women's nucleus accumbens as they ate, determining that neurons were firing just before the binge and that those electrical impulses were correlated with the women feeling a loss of control. A direct brain stimulator might have been able to intercept the signals and prevent the women from wanting to binge.

After connecting the devices into the women's brains, the investigators told Baldwin and Tolly that they would activate the devices at some time during the next couple of months but would not tell them when. Both women said they knew immediately when the devices were activated. Suddenly, they no longer felt insatiable eating urges.

Now their weight is slowly coming down. Both say that without actively thinking about it, they are eating differently.

"It's not self-control," Tolly said. "I make better choices." But she hasn't begun eating foods that never appealed to her. "I am not signing up for kale."

Baldwin said she noticed a change in her food preferences. She had loved peanut butter and would find herself eating from the jar with a spoon. Now she doesn't crave it.

"I would get these habits like going into a pharmacy to get a prescription, but I might make a detour to Ben and Jerry's," she said.

Once the device was activated, she said, "I could go into the pharmacy and not even think about ice cream."

She also finds that her tastes have changed. Now her favorite foods are savory instead of sweet.

"It's not like I don't think about food at all," Baldwin said. "But I'm no longer a craving person."

But does this show direct brain stimulation can be the answer for people with extreme bingeing? Breithaupt is cautious.

"It's just two people," she said.

Some breast cancer patients could skip surgery, study suggests

(NYT) — The conventional approach to fighting breast cancer is to deploy all the tools modern medicine has to offer. Surgery to excise the tumor is considered a critically important step, along with drugs, radiation, and hormone treatments and immunotherapy when appropriate.

A new study questions that approach, suggesting surgery may not always be necessary for all patients. The study, an early-stage clinical trial, found that a carefully selected group of patients who responded remarkably well to chemotherapy could skip surgery altogether.

Fifty patients older than 40 with two types of breast cancer and early-stage disease were enrolled in the trial.

All patients underwent chemotherapy, followed by biopsies to determine whether their tumors had responded well to the treatment. Thirty-one patients — about 60 percent — responded remarkably well and were able to forgo surgery, the researchers found.

The participants went on to receive radiation treatment and were still in remission after a median follow-up period of two years and two months, said Dr Henry Kuerer, the principal investigator of the study, which was published last month in Lancet Oncology.

The elimination of surgery for invasive breast cancer is "the ultimate form of breast-conserving therapy", he said.

Breast surgery can lead to complications like infections, and even breast-conserving procedures like lumpectomy can change the shape of the breast, leave scars or indentations, a tugging sensation, or lasting nerve pain.

"Breast cancer is so common, and there are always going to be people who would rather not have surgery," said Kuerer, a professor of breast surgical oncology at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston.

Some patients prefer radical surgery even if it does not improve survival, he noted, while for others even a minor procedure to remove the tumor can be emotionally grueling, even if it goes well.

The work is part of an approach to cancer treatment called de-escalation: an effort to individualize treatment to a specific subtype of the disease, achieving the same results with less treatment and fewer interventions.

Some women with breast cancer are able to forgo chemotherapy if gene tests determine that it will not be helpful and other drugs are available, sparing them short-term side effects and long-term complications; some lung cancer patients are also able to forgo chemotherapy. Breast-conserving lumpectomy rather than mastectomy is also part of de-escalation, as is forgoing surgery altogether, as in this trial. In a separate clinical trial, Kuerer is also examining whether radiation is always necessary.



Surgeries can lead to complications like infections, scars or indentations, and lasting nerve pain. A new study suggests that it may not always be necessary to perform surgery on all breast cancer patients. *(Photo: Shutterstock)*

"What I really appreciate about the study is that it takes the next step and asks a bold question: How do we take all the advances that we've made in more tailored and specific cancer therapy, and convert that to reducing the number and types of interventions any one patient needs to incur?" said Karen Knudsen, the CEO of the American Cancer Society. "Asking whether we can scale back surgery is a reasonable next consideration for the future of cancer care."

Pamela Romero, who participated in the trial and was deemed eligible to skip surgery, had traveled from her home in New Iberia, Louisiana, to MD Anderson in 2018 to get a second opinion shortly after discovering a small lump near her breast bone. Her tumor was HER2-positive and about the size of a grape.

A HER2-positive tumor contains cells with receptors for human epidermal growth factor 2. Only women with HER2-positive tumors and triple-negative tumors, which contain cells that lack receptors that respond to estrogen, progesterone, and human epidermal growth factor 2, were included in the trial.

"The doctor asked, 'How do you feel about surgery?' and I said, 'I'm scared to death of it,'" Romero, 66, recalled in an interview. "I said, 'If I can get rid of the cancer without having surgery, I'm all for it.'"

She had never had surgery before, she said: "I did not want to be put under, or go under the knife."

After four chemotherapy infusions, Romero said, the doctor told her that the tumor had shrunk by about 85 percent, and that she could avoid surgery if she wanted to. After two more treatments, the regimen was complete.

Romero underwent radiation treatment and immunotherapy, and recently marked her third anniversary of completing treatment, remaining disease-free.

While the surgery-free regimen appears so far to have been successful, the trial included only a small number of carefully screened women, and they have been followed for a median period of 26 months.

It is a significant period of time, especially for the specific types of cancer studied, which tend to recur within the first few years. Still, experts said a larger trial with a comparison group would be needed to see if changes in medical practice are warranted.

"The big picture is that this is a tiny study," said Dr Monica Morrow, the chief of breast surgery at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York. "It is in no way definitive. It will in no way change practice."

The patients in the trial had small tumors and would have qualified for breast-conserving lumpectomy surgery, along with biopsies of the sentinel lymph nodes, she said.

"That's hourlong outpatient surgery," she said. "You can get it done, and yes, you will have some discomfort and soreness." But women who get lumpectomies would not have been candidates for major surgeries, like mastectomy, in the first place, she added.

Patients in the trial who qualified to skip surgery had undergone biopsies to determine whether they had what is called a pathological complete response, meaning a lack of any signs of cancer in tissue samples. Only those who had a complete response to chemotherapy were permitted to defer surgery.

Improved chemotherapy agents have increased response rates significantly, and 60 percent to 80 percent of patients with triple-negative or HER2-positive breast tumors manage to avoid surgery. But certain image-guided biopsies can produce errors, including false-negative results, and must be carried out under strict protocols to achieve high levels of accuracy.

Kuerer said the results of the new trial were promising, but cautioned that surgery was still necessary for most breast cancer patients. "It's important for patients to know that this is the very beginning of a new type of treatment for select patients," he said.

Particle physics pushing cancer treatment boundaries

GENEVA, Switzerland (AFP) — Researchers at Europe's science lab CERN, who regularly use particle physics to challenge our understanding of the universe, are also applying their craft to upend the limits to cancer treatment.

The physicists here are working with giant particle accelerators in search of ways to expand the reach of cancer radiation therapy, and take on hard-to-reach tumors that would otherwise have been fatal.

In one CERN lab, called CLEAR, facility coordinator Roberto Corsini stands next to a large, linear particle accelerator consisting of a 40m metal beam with tubes packed in aluminum foil at one end, and a vast array of measurement instruments and protruding colorful wires and cables.

The research here, he told AFP during a recent visit, is aimed at creating very high energy beams of electrons that eventually could help to combat cancerous cells more effectively.

They are researching a "technology to accelerate electrons to the energies that are needed to treat deep-seated tumors, which is above 100 million electron volts" (MeV), Corsini explained.

The idea is to use these very high energy electrons (VHEE) in combination with a new and promising treatment method called FLASH. This method entails delivering the radiation dose in a few hundred milliseconds, instead of minutes as is the current approach.

This has been shown to have the same destructive effect on the targeted tumor, but causes far less damage to the surrounding healthy tissue.

With traditional radiation therapy, "you do create some collateral damage," said Benjamin Fisch, a CERN knowledge transfer officer. The effect of the brief but intense FLASH treatment, he told reporters, is to "reduce the toxicity to healthy tissue while still properly damaging cancer cells."

FLASH was first used on patients in 2018, based on currently available medical linear accelerators, linacs, that provide low-energy electron beams of around 6-10 MeV.

At such low energy though, the beams cannot penetrate deeply, meaning the highly-effective treatment has so far only been used on superficial tumors, found with skin cancer.

But the CERN physicists are now collaborating with the Lausanne University Hospital to build a machine for FLASH delivery that can accelerate electrons to 100 to 200 MeV, making it possible to use the method for much more hard-to-reach tumors.

"It is the ones which we don't cure at the moment which will be the targets," Professor Jean Bourhis, head of CHUV's radiology department, told AFP.

"For those particular cancers, which may be one third of the cancer cases, it could be a game-changer."

There are particular hopes that the FLASH method, with its far less harmful impact on surrounding tissue, could make it possible to go after tumors lodged in the brain or near other vital organs.

Bourhis said it might not relegate deaths from stubborn cancer tumors to the history books, "but at least there will be a new opportunity for more cures, if it works."

GAMING

Yet another Pokémon game: 'Scarlet and Violet' review

By Eyad Elkhatib



(Photos: IGDB)

IT is no surprise that the Pokémon franchise, which recently celebrated its 25th anniversary, is ever-flourishing, with hordes of die-hard fans around the world. However, with 35 Pokémon titles released over the last quarter of a century, one would expect to see a spectacular increase in visual appeal as well as overall mechanics. Unfortunately, the opposite seems to be the case — as the years go by, the games' overall quality has been dropping.

That is not to say that later releases are objectively bad, but simply rather lackluster on a number of levels. Earlier this year, Legends Arceus made a boom with the reinvention of the Pokémon dynamic, switching up the formula with an open-world experience emphasizing the lore of the Pokémon universe. To many fans across the globe, it was a welcome change to say the least, but there were definitely many aspects that did not quite hit the mark — take for example, the overall world design and the below-average visual complexity.

Then, just a couple weeks ago, Game Freak release another title in the franchise: Pokémon Scarlet and Violet. How does it measure up? Let us take a look.

A breath of fresh air, minus the visuals

Pokémon Scarlet and Violet may look like it was released 10 years ago in terms of visuals, and it does have its fair share of issues, but if you are a Pokémon fan, or just a general enjoyer of the franchise, then you are probably going to have a blast playing the game.

Let us start with the story, which is the one aspect that should feel familiar to anyone who has played a previous Pokémon release. You choose your character, then choose one of three starter Pokémon, and you have a brief tussle with a rival before you are sent off on a Pokémon adventure.

In a new spin, players choose one of three paths to follow in Scarlet and Violet: the Path of Legends, which tasks you with hunting down and capturing abnormally large Pokémon scattered around the world; Operation Starfall, which has you playing through the storyline of what is essentially this game's "Team Rocket"; and the ever-so-familiar Victory Road, where you battle it out with the gym leaders and earn their badges.

The presence of these options provides a breath of fresh air, as the game allows players to explore the world in whatever way and order they choose.

Scarlet and Violet builds on the open-world experience featured in Legends Acreus, with a truly open world design this time around. This, unfortunately, is overshadowed by a sense of emptiness pervading this world, which has an extreme number of vacant spaces made even more noticeable by sub-par graphical fidelity.

This is not a reason to put you off from playing the game, but simply a caution of what to expect when you pick up your controller.

'Let's go' exploring

Scarlet and Violet offers a plethora of mechanical choices. For starters, the farther you end up moving away from the main city, the stronger the Pokémon you encounter become. This in itself can shape how you choose to explore the world, as the more daring you are with your exploration, the more difficult the gameplay you encounter. The developers hit the nail on the head with this feature, since it adds a much-needed depth that previous Pokémon titles tend to lack.

In another interesting change, there is essentially no required order for approaching gyms, meaning that you can start at the hardest one if you choose to — this can provide a challenge for players who do not want to breeze through the game, making them have to plan out different tactics to potentially net a satisfying victory.

Just like Legends Acreus, Scarlet and Violet also has multitudes of Pokémon scattered wherever you look — this, paired with the fact that the Pokémon behave in a natural manner, adds a sense of realism to the overall experience. You will find Pokémon who only travel in packs, Pokémon relaxing near bodies of water, and so much more depending on the type of creatures you encounter across your journey.

Now, if you are worried you will encounter the typical "grindy" Pokémon experience, the "Let's go" mechanic should set your mind at ease. With this new mechanic, you can essentially just have the first Pokémon in your team's roster auto battle for you. This does net you less experience overall, but the amount of time you save should make up for all of that.

The most notable change in this new Pokémon release is the "terastal" feature. This, essentially, is an energy that emerges from beneath the surface of Paldea, the world of Scarlet and Violet, where every single Pokémon has a terastal form. This form gives Pokémon the opportunity to briefly add a second sub-type to their existing one, allowing for more counter-play and opportunities that previous games simply did not have.

The bottom line

Objectively, Pokémon Scarlet and Violet is not a bad game — there is a clear effort to revitalize a formula that people have grown accustomed to over the past 25 years. With new mechanics, different means of gameplay, and a story that is genuinely catered to pleasing Pokémon fans everywhere, Scarlet and Violet is definitely a game that every Pokémon fan needs to be playing right now.

Unfortunately, even though this deliberate effort shines forth in some aspects of the game, there is a clear lack of it when it comes to how the world is built and the quality of graphics and textures — but this could not to stop dedicated fans from powering up their Nintendo Switches and having a blast.

GAMES & HOROSCOPES

• 29/11/2022

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HOROSCOPES

BY MAGI HELENA

ARIES
You could debate someone who is headstrong but sincere. If you engage in flirtatious banter, however, you may end up in a difficult situation. Spend extra time investigating sound financial and business tactics.

CANCER
Be frugal with your money and generous with your heart. A change of attitude can solve a problem with a friend or a dilemma about how to achieve a goal. A loved one might share a clever business strategy.

LIBRA
Make the most of your time and get things done in the most efficient way. Afterward, you might want to find someone to hang out with. Social activities or an innocent flirtation can brighten up your day.

CAPRICORN
Someone may challenge you to think outside the box. The fastest route between two opposing points is always a straight line. Be direct and to the point to make your job easier when dealing with others.

TAURUS
It would be a better plan to conserve resources now, even if you are tempted to frivolously spend some money or pick up a big tab. Never compromise your long-term well-being to earn some brief outside validation.

LEO
Honor old obligations, but if they're no longer relevant, have a conversation. Financial plans that require intelligent long-term strategies can be more profitable than impulsive knee-jerk reactions to the markets.

SCORPIO
This is not a good time to buy something for your home or listen to advice from family members. Your business strategies can be more successful if you think them through and wait for better timing to act.

AQUARIUS
Facts and figures might give you a stronger grip on a key relationship than the whisper of sweet nothings. Sure, you would like to have fun and socialize, but there may be a point of contention to settle first.

GEMINI
It may be smarter to avoid an argument than to start one. There are times when it is necessary to defend yourself but, in most instances, you can pass up a challenge. Speak up if a loved one or partner makes a poor decision.

VIRGO
If you worry about pleasing the crowd, you could do something dumb rather than something smart. Decisions that could impact your home or family should go on the back burner while you gather more information.

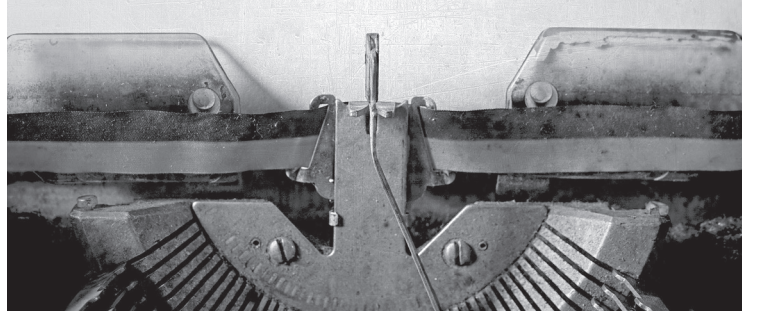
SAGITTARIUS
A heavy dose of wisdom might be needed to navigate an array of fleeting tensions. A loved one or business partner may push you to be more active and sociable. Avoid making important decisions today.

PISCES
Enjoy an opportunity to escape the restrictions of dull routines. Your judgement may not be at its best, so put important decisions aside. You might be able to achieve your goals if you pay attention to a friend's original ideas.

WORD OF THE DAY

Bonfire (noun)

A large, controlled outdoor fire lit to celebrate something or as a signal.



DATA COLLECTED FROM WIKIMEDIA FOUNDATION.

TODAY IN HISTORY

On November 29, 1963, "I Want to Hold Your Hand", which was recorded on October 17, 1963, was released by the Beatles in the UK.



CROSSWORD

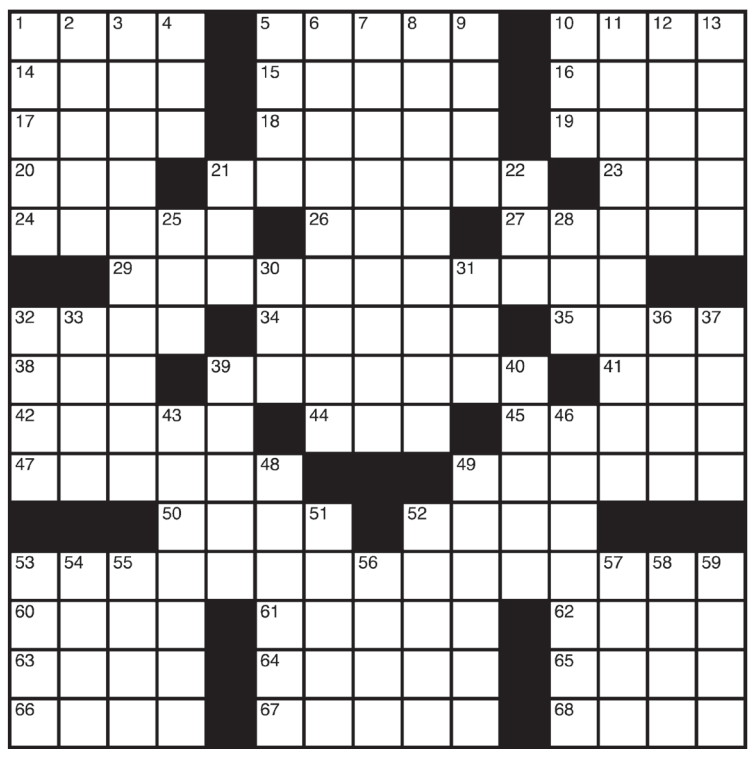
BY JOYCE NICHOLS LEWIS AND RICH NORRIS

Across

1 Spanish tennis great Nadal, familiarly
5 Upgrade, as machinery
10 Uncertain
14 Cabbage buy
15 Glazer of "The Afterparty"
16 Skating commentator Lipinski
17 Analogy words
18 Bridal path flower piece
19 Stash, as gear
20 Japanese drama
21 Cookbook contents
23 Author Rand
24 Genre for composer Terence Blanchard
26 Informal "You're oversharing"
27 Caramel candies
29 Like some dangerous isotopes
32 Curry of the NBA
34 Bike part
35 Quintet for most starfish
38 Prefix for a lifesaving "Pen"
39 Not so big
41 Knock
42 Try to hit
44 Tell it like it isn't
45 Speed skater Ohno
47 Act parts
49 Past the point of caring
50 Michelle of "Crazy Rich Asians"
52 Neighborhood
53 *Secretive email option
60 Uncommon
61 Assertion
62 Cookie used as a 12-Down topping
63 Admit frankly
64 Omit in speech
65 Spreadsheet unit
66 Soaks up the sun
67 Calf-roping event
68 Diet that's high in fats and low in carbs, as illustrated by parts of the answers to the starred clues

Down

1 Safari herbivore
2 Fabulous writer?
3 *Figure often depicted with a scythe and an hourglass
4 Hubbub
5 Ready for picking
6 __ college
7 *Pakistani-born chef who was posthumously honored with a James Beard Award
8 Up the creek
9 Story
10 Part of FWIW
11 *Serious software problem
12 Dessert from 16 Handles, familiarly
13 Signs of boredom
21 "Wicked!"
22 __ Lanka
25 Sidelines cheer
28 Fertility lab cells
30 Maker of the Deep Blue chess computer
31 Workout top
32 Bodies of water
33 __ fail
36 Timbuktu's land
37 Predicament
39 Fine horse
40 Black bird
43 "What's the latest?"
46 NBC symbol
48 Abby Wambach's sport
49 Juliet's cry
51 Winnie-the-Pooh greeting
52 Tolerate
53 Sassy kid
54 Chocolate __ cake
55 Waffle maker
56 "Kills bugs dead!" spray
57 Hockey Hall of Famer Willie
58 Hit, as with snowballs
59 "Seize the day" initialism



Yesterday's Solution

W	E	E	P	■	■	C	R	U	S	H	■	S	R	S
A	C	L	U	■	B	E	A	N	I	E	■	P	E	A
S	T	E	P	B	R	O	T	H	E	R	■	R	A	G
P	O	P	T	A	B	■	I	O	N	■	V	I	C	E
■	■	H	E	N	■	M	O	O	N	L	I	G	H	T
G	R	A	N	D	M	A	■	K	A	O	S	■	■	■
P	I	N	T	S	I	Z	E	■	■	W	A	F	T	S
A	C	T	■	■	Z	E	L	D	A	■	■	A	O	L
S	O	S	A	D	■	■	L	I	F	E	T	I	M	E
■	■	■	R	O	A	D	■	S	T	A	R	R	E	D
B	A	C	K	T	R	A	C	K	■	R	U	S	■	■
I	D	E	S	■	C	H	A	■	T	E	T	H	E	R
L	E	A	■	H	A	L	F	A	N	D	H	A	L	F
E	L	S	■	O	R	I	E	N	T	■	I	K	I	D
S	E	E	■	T	O	A	S	T	■	S	E	A	S	■

SUDOKU

LEVEL 1 2 3 4

Complete the grid so each row, column and 3-by-3 box (in bold borders) contains every digit, 1 to 9. For strategies on how to solve Sudoku, please visit *sudoku.org.uk*

Yesterday's Solution

6	7	4	3	9	5	2	8	1
3	1	5	7	2	8	6	9	4
9	8	2	4	1	6	3	5	7
2	3	8	1	4	7	5	6	9
5	4	7	6	3	9	1	2	8
1	6	9	5	8	2	4	7	3
4	5	6	8	7	1	9	3	2
7	9	3	2	5	4	8	1	6
8	2	1	9	6	3	7	4	5

	7	4				1	3	
8	1	6						
				8				
6	8		4					
	3		9		6		1	
					1		4	5
			7					
						4	9	1
	4	3				2	6	

FIFA WORLD CUP Qatar2022 RESULTS

CAMEROON 3 – 3 SERBIA

SOUTH KOREA 2 – 3 GHANA

Kuds double for Ghana sinks South Korea at World Cup

DOHA (AFP) – Mohammed Kudus scored twice as Ghana beat South Korea 3-2 in a pulsating World Cup encounter on Monday to keep their World Cup hopes alive and leave Paulo Bento's side facing an early exit.

Mohammed Salisu opened the scoring against the run of play midway through the first half at Education City Stadium and Ajax midfielder Kudus doubled the Black Stars' lead.

But the Asian side, who looked toothless in the first half, roared back after the break, pulling level through a quickfire double from forward Cho Gue-sung either side of the hour mark.

Ghana looked shell-shocked as the Korean fans celebrated wildly but they were back in front in the 68th minute when Kudus finished calmly at the back post after Inaki Williams failed to connect with a cross from the left.

The result takes Ghana into second in Group H on three points.

Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal will have six points and secure qualification for the last 16 if they beat Uruguay in the later kick-off in Qatar.

Despite their efforts, South Korea look likely to crash out of the tournament at the group stage for the third straight World Cup.

The Asian side, captained by Son Heung-min, were quicker to settle, forcing a succession of corners as they dominated possession but they were unable to fashion a shot on target in the entire first half.

Son looked uncomfortable in the black face mask he is wearing after having surgery for a facial injury he suffered while playing for Spurs, constantly readjusting it.

Ghana, who lost their opener 3-2 to Portugal, struggled to gain a foothold in the game.

But the match totally changed complexion in the 24th minute when the impressive Jordan Ayew, playing down the left for Ghana, swung in a cross following a free-kick.

South Korea failed to clear and Southampton center-back Salisu finished with his left foot, sparking wild scenes of celebration among the Ghana fans decked out in red, white and green.

The goal revitalized the African nation, who reached the quarterfinals in 2010, with South Korea struggling to deal with their physicality and direct approach.

Now playing with flair and confidence, Ghana poured forward and doubled their lead in the 34th minute when Kudus powered a header home after a pin-point Jordan Ayew cross from the left.

Captain Andre Ayew – the brother of Jordan – called his men into a team huddle on the pitch and the players got soaked by the sprinklers before they went off for their half-time beak.

The Koreans at last produced an effort on target in the 53rd minute, when goalkeeper Lawrence Ati Zigi punched away a header from Cho.

But the Korean found the net just minutes later, heading home a cross from substitute Lee Kang-in, who had just been brought on by Bento.

And they were level just three minutes later when Cho headed home Kim Jin-su's ball from the left, sparking scenes of delirium among the Korean fans.

Now Ghana were rocking but they restored their lead midway through the second half through Kudus.

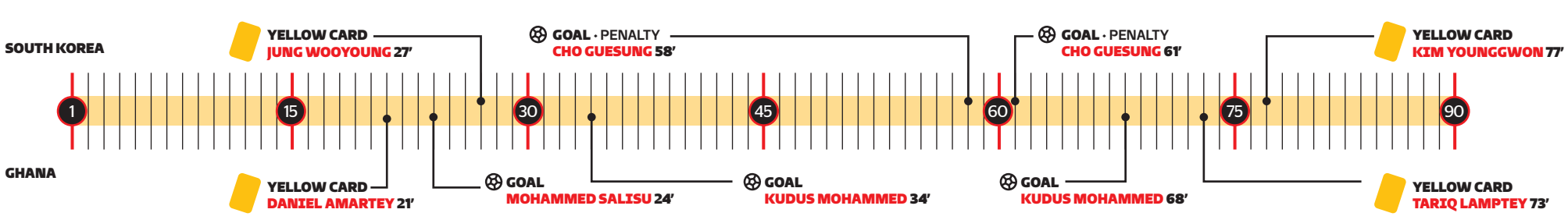
South Korea came back again. Zigi was forced into a scrambling save to push away a free-kick while Salisu cleared off the line.

The fourth official held up a board for 10 minutes of added time. South Korea continued to pour forward but they could not find the net and a number of their players collapsed to the turf at the final whistle.

Bento was sent off for protesting at the end of the match.



South Korea's forward #09 Cho Gue-sung (left) celebrates scoring his team's second goal during the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group H football match between South Korea and Ghana at the Education City Stadium in Al-Rayyan, west of Doha, on November 28, 2022. *(Photo: AFP)*





Cameroon's midfielder #05 Gael Ondoua shakes hands with Serbia's forward #10 Dusan Tadic during the Qatar 2022 World Cup Group G football match between Cameroon and Serbia at the Al-Janoub Stadium in Al-Wakrah, south of Doha on November 28, 2022. *(Photo: AFP)*

Cameroon fight back to draw World Cup thriller with Serbia

DOHA (AFP) – Cameroon kept their hopes of making the last 16 of the World Cup alive on Monday after fighting back from two goals down to draw a thrilling Group G encounter with Serbia 3-3.

Rigobert Song's team looked almost dead and buried after goals from Strahinja Pavlovic, Sergej Milinkovic-Savic and Aleksandar Mitrovic gave Serbia a 3-1 lead early in the second half.

But substitute Vincent Aboubakar and Eric Maxim Choupo-Moting snatched a draw with two quick-fire strikes just after the hour mark to leave both Cameroon and Serbia on a single point, two behind group leaders Brazil and Switzerland.

Had they lost, Cameroon would have been relying on the Swiss beating Brazil in order to not be eliminated with a game to spare, but instead the west Africans still have a chance of getting out of the group stage for the first time since 1990.

Cameroon have a tough task ahead as they play Brazil in their final match, which according to reports they will play without first-choice goalkeeper Andre Onana who was dropped from the match-day squad just hours before kick-off following an unspecified disciplinary issue.

Media reports suggest that Onana has been sent home from the World Cup after a disagreement with Song, but that pre-match turmoil didn't stop Cameroon putting in a fighting display against a Serbia team who probably deserved to win on the balance of play.

Mitrovic was almost invisible in Serbia's defeat to Brazil but here he was involved from kick-off, the Fulham forward unlucky not to give Serbia the lead in the 11th minute when he crashed a shot off the post from a tight angle following a neat exchange of passes with Dusan Tadic.

Cameroon comeback

But Mitrovic only had himself to blame for not opening the scoring six minutes later, shanking an awful first-time finish wide when, after a mix up in the Cameroon defense, the ball dropped at his feet with only Onana's replacement Devis Epassy to beat.

And Castelletto punished the Serbs for Mitrovic's miss in the 29th minute with the simplest of finishes after ghosting in at the back post to meet Nicolas Nkoulou's flick-on at a corner.

Pierre Kunde then passed up a golden opportunity to double Cameroon's lead in the 43rd minute when he first shot straight at goalkeeper Vanja Milinkovic-Savic and then smashed the rebound wide.

It was Cameroon's turn to be undone at a set-piece as the half crept into first-half stoppage time when Pavlovic brilliantly headed home Dusan Tadic's floated free-kick.

The Serbs' tails were up and Sergej Milinkovic-Savic flipped the match on its head two minutes later with a superb left-footed finish after Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa sloppily gave the ball away just outside his own penalty area.

Mitrovic finally had the goal his strong display deserved seven minutes after the break, tapping in Andrija Zivkovic's pass unopposed at the end of beautiful move guided by Milinkovic-Savic and Tadic.

The match looked over but from nowhere Cameroon sprung back into life thanks to Aboubakar's odd goal.

The Al-Nassr forward raced through onto Castelletto's launched pass over the top and scooped an improbable finish over the Serbia 'keeper, beaming with delight after his goal was awarded following a VAR check.

Aboubakar's pace caused Serbia all kinds of problems and he laid on Choupo-Moting's leveler, bursting down the right and laying on a simple finish for the Bayern Munich forward, which sparked wild celebrations on the pitch and in the stands.

Neither side could find a winner in an end-to-end finish to the game and their bids to make the knockouts will go down to the final game.

An odyssey: Two Syrian sisters' journey with hope



(Photos: Twitter)



By Israa Radaydeh



SARAH and Yusra Mardini have made headlines before. From their leap into the Aegean Sea in hopes of rescuing their dinghy loaded with asylum seekers crossing to Europe to their journey to the Olympics, the Syrian sisters' story is nothing short of inspiring.

Directed by Sally El-Hosaini, "The Swimmers" examines the life of the two swimmers in a stunning sequence of their journey towards safety in Germany.

The film was made available on Netflix on November 23 and is based on a true story. It presents raw performances from real-life sisters Nathalie Issa (Yusra) and Manal Issa (Sarah) on the complexities of family dynamics, dreams, and opportunities during war.

With breathtaking accuracy, the film displays smiles amidst destruction, the innocence of sisterhood, and shared hope despite harsh circumstances. The director was able to collaborate with Yusra and Sarah to be as faithful as possible to their story, while staging some fictitious passages. In a short two hours and 14 minutes, we are continuously taken by surprise by the series of very real events that have shaped the lives of the Mardini sisters.

Set starting in 2015, when the war in Syria had been raging on for four years, the film shows the Mardini sisters practicing swimming with their father. Due to a series of war-caused deaths — and after a bomb landed in the Olympic pool in Damascus — the sisters, pushed largely by Sarah, decide to leave the country with just 10,000 euros, scrimped by their now indebted father and their DJ cousin.

The money becomes a necessity to pay some bogus smugglers, but what becomes essential to saving both their lives and the lives of others is their swimming ability.

The journey is gut-wrenching from the start. Produced largely in English – with Arabic weaved in here and there — there is a dedication to understanding laced into the film's most intimate scenes. Migrants are shown through a human lens otherwise lost amongst headlines and policies. Stories, meetings, and hardships bring a true sense of solidarity while making the deadly crossing into Europe on a faulty dinghy.

A life and death match

The movie presents a real-world tour before arriving in Berlin. Bypassing all-inclusive hotels and resorts, but miraculously avoiding assaults and police captures, the characters are put to the true test of survival, and bystanders are not always kind.

Devastation reigns when the sisters realize that surviving a three-hour swim in an uncertain sea poses just the start of their journey. From the back of one truck to another, followed by a third, then a bus, we are left wondering: Is this the right stage, or will the sisters return to square one? And while "The Swimmers" remains conservative in its level of harshness, it never shies from revealing the unending path of migrants, their resistance and their resilience, and our complicit passivity.

There is an unclear cloud masking the movie — a question of who or what awaits the migrants next. A friend, an enemy, someone indifferent, violent, or welcoming? But as they reach Germany, a kind German swimming coach (Matthias Schweighöfer as Sven) signals the end of an exhausting life-and-death match and the start of a 200m butterfly.

After extensive training, Yusra participated in the Rio Olympics in 2016 as part of a team of 10 refugee athletes.

Reality is less sweet

Although Yusra won her series of 100m butterflies, she did not manage to reach the semifinals. However, while Yusra continues swimming, her sister Sarah meets a grimmer reality. Since reaching Germany, Sarah was determined to return to Greece to become a volunteer to help those making the trip she once endured.

But on August 21, 2018, while on a mission on the island of Lesbos, she was arrested with her German colleague Sean Binder by the authorities. As reported by L'Orient Le Jour in February 2022, she is accused of "espionage, human trafficking, money laundering, fraud, and belonging to a criminal organization", and risks up to 25 years in prison.

After three months of preventive detention, Sarah and Binder were released on bail.

According to the latest news, Sarah returned to Berlin awaiting her trial but would not be able to attend her hearing, being "subject to a judicial ban on entering Greek territory".

MORE TRENDING ONLINE
jordannews.jo

Iranian actors stage silent protest without headscarves

PARIS (AFP) — A group of Iranian actors have staged a silent protest without their headscarves in a gesture of solidarity with demonstrations sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini, a video posted on social media showed.

The death of Amini, 22, who had been arrested by the notorious Tehran morality police, has triggered more than two months of protests which pose the biggest challenge to the clerical regime since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

In the video, the actor and director Soheila Golestani, wearing black, walks into the shot, and turns around to reveal she is wearing no headscarf. She stares into the camera. Nine other women then join Golestani to make the same gesture, as do five men.

Golestani posted the video on her Instagram account late Sunday, writing: "The performance is over and the truth has been revealed."

"Our real heroes are the unnamed people," she added.

A constant presence in the shot is Iranian director Hamid Pourazari, who also posted the video on his Instagram account.

Several Iranian actors have during the protest movement made taboo-breaking gestures of removing their headscarves, with have been mandatory for women in public since four years after the 1979 revolution.

Earlier this month, Taraneh Alidoosti, one of Iran's best-known actors remaining in the country, posted an image of herself on social media without the mandatory headscarf.

Alidoosti vowed to stay in her homeland at "any price", saying she planned to stop working and instead support the families of those killed or arrested in the protest crackdown.

Iranian cinema figures were under pressure even before the start of the protest movement sparked by Amini's death.

Prize-winning directors Mohammad Rasoulof and Jafar Panahi remain in detention after their arrests earlier this year.

Celebrated Greek cheesemakers brought low by inflation

NAXOS, Greece (AFP) — On his bougainvillea-covered farm on the Greek island of Naxos, Yannis Karganis milks his sheep, wondering anxiously how he will cope with soaring costs and keep his cheesemaking business afloat.

After the war in Ukraine sparked an inflationary spiral in the price of cereals, fuel, and other goods, farmers on Naxos and across the country have been left fearing for their survival.

"I earn nothing from my cheeses," says the septuagenarian, who makes Naxos graviera, a hard yellow cheese popular throughout Greece and beyond.

"I work day and night and despite this, I still cannot live."

Inflation in Greece rose to 12 percent in September before dropping to 9.1 percent in October.

Even though the government announced nearly 280 million euros ($291 million) in support benefits for young farmers earlier this year, there is still heavy pressure on the country's agricultural sector, which employs 11 percent of the workforce.

"Last year, a bag of feed cost 14 euros. This year it's 21 euros. Gasoline has skyrocketed to 2.30 euros per liter at the moment," the greying Karganis sighs, stirring a large cauldron to make cheese in his small kitchen.

Throughout the country, social pressure is rising in the face of soaring energy prices.

In November, a general strike on the issue paralyzed Greece.

Dimitris Kapounis, head of the union of Naxos agricultural cooperatives, warns that if nothing changes "in the medium term, there will be no more milk on the Greek market, no meat, potatoes, or anything else."

Naxos graviera — made from 80 percent cow's milk and 20 percent sheep or goat's milk — is one of Greece's most popular cheeses.

The Greeks like it sprinkled on pasta, fried, or as a table cheese.

But even carrying the vaunted European Protected Designation of Origin label, and exporting to a dozen countries including the US and Germany, has not helped stem the slide in output as costs ramp up.

This year, the usual annual production of more than 1,250 tonnes has already fallen by 130 tonnes, the cooperative said.

Lack of milk

The squeeze on animal feed and fuel has resulted in a fall in milk production, explains local shepherd Yannis Vavoulas.

"We can't maintain feeding them properly," the 42-year-old says. "We feed them two or three times (a day) with little food," which means the animals produce less milk.

The crisis is so acute that some farmers have had to slaughter part of their herd, further reducing milk production.

Yorgos Margaritis, who owns 250 cows, is one of the local farmers to have already made this painful decision.

He gestures to some of his nearby animals which he says would normally have been inseminated by now for producing calves.

"(Instead), they will be slaughtered," he says.

The cost of transporting goods from the Greek mainland is also becoming prohibitive — it takes more than five hours by boat to get from the main Greek port of Piraeus to Naxos.

In an act of desperation, the Naxos cooperative in April went as far as neighboring Bulgaria to buy animal feed, where prices are lower.

"If the milk producers are not helped... then we are all lost," warns Yannis Kavouras, head of the largest cheese factory in Naxos.

And as the EU's protected status regulations permit only the use of local milk, shipping it in from elsewhere is not an option either.

"If the producers don't bring any more milk, what am I going to use — water?" wonders Kavouras.



Shepherd Yannis Karganis milks his animals at his farm on the Aegean island of Naxos on November 11, 2022. *(Photo: AFP)*



Tobagonian actor Winston Duke (left) and Guyanese actress Letitia Wright arrive for the world premiere of Marvel Studios' "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood, California. *(File photo: AFP)*

'Wakanda' still reigns on weak Thanksgiving weekend in North America

LOS ANGELES, United States (AFP) — "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" again ruled the North American box office this weekend, while two new high-budget releases had "weak" openings, analysts said.

Disney and Marvel's "Wakanda" took in an estimated $45.9 million for the Friday-through-Sunday period, or $64 million for the full Thanksgiving weekend starting on Wednesday, industry watcher Exhibitor Relations reported Sunday.

But the drop-off was sharp after that popular superhero tale, despite the holiday weekend. Overall, the weekend's top dozen films had 12 percent less in ticket sales than the top 12 of a year earlier.

In second place was Disney's computer-animated sci-fi movie "Strange World", at $11.9 million for three days and $18.6 million for five days. Variety.com called that a "catastrophic" result for a film with a $180 million budget.

And in third was another new release, Sony's "Devotion", which took in $6 million for three days ($9 million for five). David A. Gross of Franchise Entertainment Research called that "a weak opening for a war action movie". The story about the friendship of two US fighter pilots during the Korean War had a $90 million budget.

Fourth place went to Searchlight's horror-comedy "The Menu", at $5.2 million ($7.3 million). Ralph Fiennes plays a celebrity chef with some dark surprises on the menu.

And in fifth was superhero film "Black Adam" from Warner Bros., which took in $3.4 million ($4.7 million). Dwayne Johnson stars.

Netflix has not released numbers for another much-anticipated film, "Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery", but Gross said the sequel to 2019's "Knives Out" took in an estimated $9 million in limited release over just three days — "a terrific result".

Rounding out the top 10 were:
"The Fabelmans" ($2.22 million for three days; $3 million for five)
"Bones and All" ($2.20 million; $3.6 million)
"Ticket to Paradise" ($1.9 million; $2.6 million)
"The Chosen Season 3: Episodes 1&2" ($1.5 million; $2.1 million)
"She Said" ($1.1 million; $1.5 million)

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