

# JAPAN CAMERA MAKERS BATTLING SMARTPHONES

**TOKYO:** Highschooler Nao Noguchi is a perfect illustration of why Japanese camera sales have plunged the past few years - she uses her smartphone for everything and cannot understand why anyone would bother with a separate device for photos. "It is easy to take your smartphone out of your pocket if you want to take a picture of someone or something. And you can send the pictures to friends quickly" on social media, said the 17-year-old on a day trip to Tokyo's historic Asakusa district with her friend Rina. The selfie-stick toting pair are the camera industry's worst nightmare.

A rapid shift to picture-taking smartphones has torn into a camera sector dominated by Japanese firms including Canon, Olympus, Sony and Nikon - much like digital cameras all but destroyed the market for photographic film years ago. And the numbers paint a grim picture: 130 million cameras were sold globally in 2011. Four years later, that figure stood at just 47 million. The collapse was underscored this month as the firms published their latest financial results, with weak sales threatening a once-vibrant sector.

Now companies are having to scramble for a response, hitting back with upmarket options and offering web-friendly features, or in some cases simply moving away from the hard-hit business. While Apple and Samsung recently pointed to slowing sales of smartphones, they have proved a mighty rival, offering an all-in-one phone, computer and camera with comparatively high-quality pictures and Internet photo downloading.

The answer, the camera industry says, is to innovate and convince smartphone users to climb up the quality ladder. "It's kind of life insurance for the camera industry to always protect this superiority in terms of picture quality," said Heribert Tippenhauer, an analyst at market research firm GfK. "The competition from smartphones has almost killed the cheapest cameras, but at the same time so many people are taking photos, as never before in human history. "The smartphone is the first step into the topic of photography, then people want to upgrade, the potential is there."

### Betting on Nostalgia

For Canon, whose Sure Shot digital camera has been hit by smartphones, the response is to offer what a phone cannot, such as more powerful zoom options. "We have been offering cameras that offer features smartphones cannot provide," said company spokesman Richard Berger. "People who use smartphones are becoming interested in photogra-



**TOKYO:** This file picture taken on Aug 22, 2013 shows Japanese camera maker Fujifilm's instant photo system, the "Instax mini 90 Neo Classic", allowing a user to make card-sized prints instantly. — AFP

phy, they want to take better pictures, to be more creative so they are moving up to SLR (single-lens reflex) cameras."

Another battleground has been in mirrorless cameras, which can be made nearly as small as compact cameras but with picture quality that rivals their bulkier counterparts. Sony and Panasonic have teamed up with German rivals, including Leica, while Olympus is pushing further into the medical equipment business as a leader in endoscopes, which now eclipse camera sales.

But some like Konica Minolta have thrown in the towel on cameras altogether, opting to go into print and optical devices. Fujifilm, which was nearly put out of business by the drop in photo film sales, has also shifted focus to other businesses, including the health sector - one of the companies it acquired has developed a drug to combat the deadly Ebola virus. But Fujifilm has not abandoned the sector that made its name, and scored an unlikely win with the Instax, a nostalgic throwback to the retro Polaroid.

Users can sling the bulky gadget - available in a series of flashy colors - around their neck and print pictures they've just taken.

The latest versions sell for about \$140. After a slow start, the camera's appearance on a popular South Korean television series helped jack up Asian sales in recent years, with about five million units moved in the current fiscal year to March. The appeal of giving friends physical photos sold Calvin Lau on the Instax. "We never know how photos will come out until they're fully ready," said the 31-year-old Hong Konger who now lives in Tokyo. "It's fun and exciting for people taking Instax photos and those whose photos are being taken. I like the concept that the pictures you take are the one and only ones out there... We can give our friends unique, real pictures."

Still, Seiko Mikie, who has about 20 years on Lau, thinks the Polaroid throwback is about as lame as it gets. "I'm not the least bit interested in a Polaroid-style camera - that is something from the Showa era," said the 50-year-old transportation company employee, referring to the last Japanese emperor's reign which ended with his death in 1989. "Back then, the picture quality was good enough for the time, but not any longer." — AFP

# KIDNAP CASTS SPOTLIGHT ON GULF 'SPORT OF KINGS'

**DOHA:** Every year the houbara bustard, a rare desert bird whose meat is prized by Arab sheikhs as an aphrodisiac, migrates from Central Asia to the far reaches of Iraq and Pakistan in search of a mild climate and a place to breed. Its arrival sets off another migration - as scores of wealthy Gulf Arabs descend on Iraq to hunt the bird with trained falcons through the winter months.

But the kidnapping of 26 Qataris in December in the Iraqi desert while hunting, including members of the country's royal family, has highlighted the risks of pursuing the "sport of kings" at a time of heightened regional turmoil. No one has claimed responsibility for the kidnapping, which happened in a region dominated by Shiite militia. But what is clear is the immense wealth of Qatar and the Doha government's past successes in freeing political prisoners in war zones has made its own citizens prey to those seeking to raise money or exploit the Gulf state's diplomatic clout.

"The kidnapping of the Qatari hunters dealt a painful blow to the reputation of all the southern areas of Iraq," said Abdul Rahman Hammoud, chief of the Iraqi Hunters Association in Samawa, where the Qataris were kidnapped. "We are a tribal community and Gulf hunters are our guests. After the abduction, not a single hunter from the Gulf is coming to Iraq anymore, fearing from being kidnapped. It will take a long time to repair the damage and convince Gulf hunters to resume their Iraq trips," he told Reuters.

It is perhaps the world's most elaborate blood sport - cargo planes fly tents, luxury jeeps, and falcons worth hundreds of thousands of dollars into custom-built desert airstrips. Mega-rich owners often keep their falcons in vast air-conditioned rooms and free-flying aviaries, and use helium-filled balloons and drones to train them at higher altitudes. Local communities can benefit from the hobby, which has for decades seen Arab elites channel cash - via hunting permit fees and jobs - into remote corners of the Middle East and beyond.

To curry favor with local communities whose land they descend upon to pursue prey, the Arab hunters have also built roads, schools and mosques in places like Pakistan's Baluchistan province and Afghanistan's Helmand, while residents also benefit from the international-standard airstrips that can spring up. New four-wheel drive vehicles brought in for the hunting season are left behind as gifts for local leaders. But critics say that hunting with falcons, a practice Arab nomads used

to survive life in the desert, is today a reckless hobby that threatens the houbara, a dwindling species, and funnels money into areas controlled by militias.

### Under Attack

The tradition of falconry is thought to date back thousands of years in the Middle East, and for centuries nomad hunters relied on falcons. But rapid urbanization and population growth, fuelled by the discovery of oil, swallowed the desert breeding grounds and habitats of falcons and their prey. In the 1960s, falconers began to extend their hunting grounds into Iran, Iraq and Pakistan, as well as countries like Azerbaijan, Mauritania and Morocco, to hunt in areas that cover thousands of square miles.

"It is dangerous," said Mohammed Al-Khater, a student at Qatar University who trains and breeds falcons in his spare time. "The hunters fly into hotspots because it's where you find the most prey. It's a risk - but then, it's their passion." But the hunts have proved divisive. The global houbara population is estimated at between 79,000 and 97,000, according to BirdLife International which lists the bird as "vulnerable". It says the population has declined by a third or more over the last 20 years due to hunting and habitat loss.

A ruling by Pakistan's Supreme Court last year banning hunting of the houbara - after complaints from conservationists that the bird was at risk of extinction - was overturned last month when the government argued it damaged relations with Gulf states, key investors in the country. A senior Gulf prince and his entourage killed 2,100 houbara over 21 days during a hunt in 2014, according to an official report leaked to Pakistani news media.

Hunters say they breed houbara to replace those they kill and complain that the royal visits are being unnecessarily politicized. Farooq Al-Elji, a falconer who works for the Al Gannas Society, a Qatari association of hunters, defended the practice. "These people are falconers, you cannot take that away from them. Even if you take the trips away it is in their personality. Every human emotion is connected to being a falconer. It's very deep-rooted," he said. "It's a traditional trip, they like to maintain it to recapture the mood of being a survivor in the desert. That's the beauty of it, it's a wonderful vacation for them." But the vacation is over for now, at least in Iraq. In the wake of the kidnappings, Colonel Mahmoud Abbas at Iraq's interior ministry said Gulf citizens would no longer be able to secure visas "until further notice". — Reuters

# MPS AGAINST SUBSIDY CUTS, END DEBATE...

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He said the country's economic situation has deteriorated not as a result of the fall in oil prices, but because of the failure of the policies of the previous and current governments. "If the decision to raise petrol prices and cut subsidies for electricity and water is taken by the government unilaterally, the prime minister must be grilled," Azemi said.

Islamist MP Abdulrahman Al-Jeeran said the rationalization the government is talking about is negative because if oil prices rebound, the government will abandon all these proposals. He also criticized the government for listening to the advice of the International Monetary Fund and accused the ministers of failing to collect state dues from private sector companies.

MP Faisal Al-Kandari warned that all the good achievements of the Assembly will evaporate if subsidies were lifted, and warned the minister of commerce if he fails to prevent merchants from raising prices if subsidies are cut. If this is allowed to happen, the people will be hurt twice, exactly as it happened when diesel and kerosene prices were raised. MP Ahmad Al-Azemi lashed out at the government, claiming it has failed. He said the lifting of subsidies is totally rejected and

urged all lawmakers to oppose the government's plans. Finance Minister Anas Al-Saleh reiterated that there is an urgent need to rationalize public spending in the face of the sharp fall in oil prices. He said that during the past decade, public expenditures increased from around KD 6 billion to over KD 21 billion, and the wage bill also increased manifold. He said that it is not acceptable to withdraw from the state reserves to finance the budget deficit and "we need to introduce a comprehensive program of economic reforms", calling for referring the issue to the financial affairs committee. The Assembly was then adjourned until March 1.

Separately, well-informed ministerial sources revealed that the government will start discussing the privatization of some official bodies in a Cabinet meeting on Sunday. The sources added that the government is seeking to privatize the ministry of communications now that the telecom authority has been established. The sources added that the same would be done with the ministry of electricity and water, and that a special authority would be established to be responsible for building power plants. "A major part of the information ministry will also be privatized," added the sources, pointing out that several health ministry sectors would be included in the plan.

# UAE NAMES WOMEN MINISTERS FOR HAPPINESS...

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ministries and appointing several state ministers. The move could be seen as an attempt to cut expenditure as Gulf oil-exporters struggle to adapt to the sharp drop in their revenues after crude prices nosedived to record low levels. An oil-rich federation of seven Gulf sheikhdoms, the United Arab Emirates is considered a safe haven spared in the wave of Arab Spring uprisings that hit the region. Last year its rulers sought to widen the country's nascent democratic credentials with about a quarter of its one million citizens given the right to vote. Eighty-seven of the 330 candidates were women, who play a much larger role in public life in the UAE than in neighboring Saudi Arabia.

But the authorities have been deeply cautious and in 2014 introduced sweeping new counterterrorism legislation that rights groups have criticized as paving the way for a crackdown on dissent of all sorts. Citizens account for a small minority of the UAE's population of nine million which is overwhelmingly made up of for-

ign workers. The female ministers include also Noura Al-Kaabi, as Minister of State for the Federal National Council, or parliament, Jamila Al-Muhairi, as Minister of State for Education, and Najla Al-Awar as Minister of Community Development.

Reem Al-Hashimi was moved to the post of State Minister for International Cooperation Affairs, while Maitha Al-Shamsi kept her post as a state minister. Several key ministries remained in the hands of members of the ruling families. Sheikh Saif bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, a son of the late founder of the UAE and a member of Abu Dhabi's ruling family, has kept the portfolio of interior. His brother Sheikh Abdullah stayed at the helm of the ministry of foreign affairs, now merged with the portfolio of international cooperation, while his other brother Sheikh Mansour remains vice prime minister and minister of presidential affairs. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid himself kept hold of the defense portfolio and his brother Sheikh Hamdan stayed as minister of finance. Oil Minister Suhail Al-Mazroui remained in office. — AFP

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