

SKI DIPLOMACY BOOSTS SWISS-IRAN TIES

DARBANDSAR: As a fierce blizzard sweeps mountains outside Tehran, a team of elite Swiss ski instructors refuses to allow the deep freeze to stand in the way of warming ties with Iran. "The conditions are... interesting," laughed Vincent Pilet, a member of the Swiss team, as snow whipped sideways into the window of the cafe in Darbandsar resort, a two-hour drive from the Iranian capital. He said he could handle the weather—the bigger challenge was dealing with the huge numbers of Iranians who had shown up to be tested by the visitors from Switzerland. Pilet and two other instructors were on a two-week mission, scouting for the best skiers in Iran to receive Swiss-style training and start up a new generation of instructors.

They've been inundated. "We expected to have maybe 30 to 40 per day, and we've ended up with more like 70, or even 140 on one day," said Loris Ambresin, another member of the Swiss team. Iran is not an obvious destination for ski aficionados. Fresh powder, bombing snowboarders and wild apres-ski

are not the first images that leap to mind when one thinks of the Islamic republic. But the Alborz mountains above Tehran are home to a clutch of excellent pistes, even if some of the pre-revolution facilities look somewhat dated. "The chairlifts are a bit old but that just adds to the charm," said Pilet.

Skis from tree trunks

Skiing in Iran dates back around 80 years when Germans arrived to dig coal mines in the mountains north of the capital and introduced locals to the sport. "The people of the village began carving skis out of tree trunks," said Morteza Saveh Shemshaki, head of education for the Iranian Ski Federation. Resorts popped up and attracted international investors - at one point in the 1970s, a French-made cable car from northern Tehran was the longest in the world. But the Islamic revolution of 1979 put the industry on ice. Skiing has made a comeback. Whereas the pistes were until the mid-1990s divided by a long rope to segregate the sexes, now every-

one can ski together, although some controls remain. Some "don't like the idea that men and women are having fun together, but there's not much they can do about it up here", said one skier, asking not to be named.

When international business ties were rekindled by the 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and world powers, easing sanctions on Iran, one Swiss firm spotted an opportunity. Andrea Gabus, who heads the investment company SGCH, believes that building a cadre of world-class instructors will attract more skiers and ultimately more business interest, while also strengthening ties between Switzerland and Iran. "It's currently an elite sport in Iran, but because of the closeness of Tehran to the resorts, there is the potential to make it more democratic and bring it to more than just one social class," he said.

'Shouldn't be afraid'

Gabus knows these are tricky times. Iran's business environment is difficult at best, and

US President Donald Trump threatens to spoil Tehran's return to the world stage with fresh sanctions and instability. "Companies should not be afraid to come to Iran. There are a lot of barriers, but they're not insurmountable," said Gabus. "Although we might have a few very turbulent years ahead of us in terms of what's happening in the USA... the development of infrastructure for winter sports is very long-term. "Investment now doesn't mean dealing with the politics we have now. It means dealing with the politics we'll have in 25 years," he said. Up on the slopes, such concerns seem far away, despite some culture shocks for the ultra-organized Swiss.

"We come from a country where our ski system has been set up for years and years, and we get to a country where they have no structure, nothing. So we've had to adapt quite a lot," said Ambresin. The overall mood was upbeat, with locals grateful for the chance to train with foreigners and the Swiss planning more such missions in coming years. — AFP

SOUR MOOD AS EUROPE'S YOUNGEST STATE TURNS 9

60% OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN KOSOVO UNEMPLOYED

PRISTINA: Kosovo, Europe's youngest state, turns nine today, but 24-year-old Nazim Ahmeti is in no mood to celebrate. "Day after day I must fight just to provide a piece of bread for my child and my wife," says Ahmeti, who like 60 percent of young people in the tiny Balkan state is unemployed. Like others, he defies extreme cold as he waits for hours outside Pristina's vegetable market in hopes of being hired for a day's work that might earn a meager 15 euros (\$16).

Kosovo unilaterally declared independence from Serbia in 2008 and since has been recognized as a state by more than 110 countries, despite Belgrade's fierce opposition. In spite of its diplomatic success, the former southern Serbian province is scarred by poverty and corruption. Official statistics say the jobless rate fell to 26 percent last year. But people believe this is a vast underestimate. World Bank data shows average unemployment at 42.6 percent over the last four years.

A third of Kosovo's 1.8 million people meanwhile live below the poverty line and the average monthly salary is 360 euros—less than a quarter of monthly wages in the European Union, which Kosovo hopes one day to join. The 1998-1999 conflict between Serbian security forces and Kosovo Albanian guerrillas that was ended by a NATO air campaign claimed 13,500 lives, most of them ethnic Albanians.

Massive migration

So analysts believe it is more than radical Islamism that is to blame for some 300 Kosovo Albanians joining jihadists in Syria and Iraq. The same dire poverty and lack of economic progress have also pushed youngsters to emigrate to western Europe, more often illegally than legally. In fact Kosovo's population has shrunk to 1.87 million from an



PRISTINA: Women walk past a graffiti reading Kosovo Republic in the capital Pristina. Kosovo, Europe's youngest state, turns nine today. —AFP

estimated 2.1 million in 2008, and a key subject of talk recently has been winning visa liberalization to ease travel to the European Union countries. "Just look at their faces. There is not a single smile," said political analyst Ramush Tahiri, pointing to a crowd of youngsters at the main Mother Teresa square in central Pristina. "None of their dreams has come true," he said.

Kosovo must provide "an economic perspective to its citizens in order to make them stay here, to prevent the social and other crises that made them look for solutions outside Kosovo," Prime Minister Isa Mustafa said. He said his government was doing its best to attract foreign investment.

But an editorial in the leading Koha Ditore daily said that "the government has not even come close to meeting the expectations of the young." Normalizing ties with Serbia appears to be a necessary step.

Talks between the two that have been underway since 2011 are slowly progressing although tensions return from time to time.

Endemic corruption

Despite strained relations, Kosovars and Serbs have never stopped trading. Excluding allegedly significant amounts of smuggled goods, Serbia in 2016 exported some 400 million euros of goods to Kosovo, notably food, while tiny Kosovo exported 40 million euros worth—or four million more than to its big brother Albania. Another obstacle to development is endemic graft. Kosovo is ranked 95 of 175 countries on the 2016 corruption perception index list of Transparency International. Government's finance department chief Zahir Bajrami was recently suspended on suspicion of corruption.

Economist Mehmet Gjata said Kosovo cannot become a "functional country without developing an economy able to address high jobless and poverty rates, its two major challenges." "The fact that the elite is abnormally rich shows that economic development has not been their priority," he added. But Ahmeti cannot hide his disillusion. "I did not expect independent Kosovo to become America overnight. — AFP

SHETLAND ISLANDS FLIRT WITH INDEPENDENCE AFTER BREXIT

LERWICK: Of all the ramifications of the Brexit vote, the fate of the Shetland Islands in the North Atlantic and their oil fields and fisheries may not top the list for negotiators in London and Brussels. But the prospect of a new bid for Scottish independence as Britain leaves the EU is making some residents of these rugged islands think again about whether they would be better off alone. "It would be wonderful," Andrea Manson, a Shetland councillor and a key figure in the Wir Shetland movement for greater autonomy said at the guesthouse she runs, the Mid Brae Inn. The movement's name means "Our Shetland" in the local Scots dialect, a derivation of Middle English which has replaced the islands' original Germanic language, Norn.

The remote archipelago, already fiercely independent in spirit, is geographically and culturally closer to Scandinavia than to Edinburgh, and politically more aligned with London and Brussels. In the past 1,300 years, Shetland has been overrun by Scandinavian vikings, pawned to Scotland as a wedding dowry by Denmark, subsumed into the United Kingdom in 1707, and dragged into the European Economic Community against its will in 1973. The Shetlands were the only part of Britain, along with the Western Isles of Scotland, that voted against EEC membership in a 1975 referendum.

'Control of the seabed'

Many Shetlanders are sceptical of Scottish separatism. In the final tense days of the 2014 independence referendum, the local MP Alistair Carmichael, who was minister for Scotland at the time, said the islands could try to remain part of Britain if the rest of Scotland left. In the end, 55 percent of Scots voted to stay in Britain. The unionist vote in the Shetlands was 63.7 percent—one of the highest levels in Scotland. Now Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has warned that a second independence referendum is "highly likely" following the Brexit vote—and Shetland is once again considering its position. "We would like control of the seabed around us, the fishing ground around us, and the freedom to get rid of some of the bureaucracy that comes down from the EU, Westminster and the Scottish parliament," Manson said.

"Our seas are being plundered by foreign boats. We also contribute an enormous amount of money to the national economy through taxes, through the oil revenues, and yet we don't get back our fair share." Scotland has around 60 percent of the EU's oil reserves and the second-largest volume of proven natural gas reserves, most of it located around Shetland. The islands also land more fish than ports in England, Wales and Northern Ireland combined. —AFP