

Quarries offer hardscrabble wage to workers

MINYA, Egypt: Covered in fine white dust, laborers at a limestone quarry in southern Egypt toil in brutal conditions with little workplace safety for paltry pay. Laborers work in shifts at the quarry in the so-called White Mountain east of the river Nile outside Minya, about 265 km south of the capital Cairo. At noon, the morning shift clocks out and the afternoon workers arrive to begin their seven hour shift. But first they gather to share a communal lunch.

Under a makeshift palm frond shelter in the middle of the quarry, the workers sit on a ragged blanket to fill themselves on a humble meal of bread, cheese and eggs. Then they don goggles and wrap scarves around their faces in an attempt to keep out the clouds of white powder thrown up by the whirring machines. Huge electric saws on rails slice rows of blocks from the mountainside. Workers then stack the stone in long, neat rows.

The white bricks are destined to be used in construction, or ground down for use in ceramics. This same stone was the construction material of choice for cladding pyramids and tombs in ancient Egypt. The site AFP visited has 16 shift workers and a foreman. They handle the

dangerous machinery with finesse, and shrug off the dangers of a job where a mistake can prove fatal. "Workplace injuries here are severe - either death or permanent injury," Obeid Abu Ibram, a 34-year-old foreman, told AFP. "The machines were once secure and covered but over time the safety covers have popped off making them hazardous to those who do not take precautions," he said.

In recent years, authorities have closed a number of unlicensed quarries where there has been a growing toll from fatal workplace accidents. "Nearly 400 quarries have been closed east of the Nile but there are about 350 to 400 still operating," said Abu Ibram, who has been toiling in the same dangerous industry since he was 14. The daily wage for laborers is little more than 100 pounds (\$6), barely enough to support a family.

Abu Ibram would like to earn more, but sees no other career options for himself. "I have been working here for 20 years. I left my father and brother and I have no other field of expertise," he said. "But I don't like to complain much," he concluded. — AFP



MINYA, Egypt: Laborers work late at the "White Mountain" limestone extraction quarry site near this southern city on Nov 13, 2019. — AFP

Saudi Arabia takes over G20 reins

NAGOYA, Japan: Saudi Arabia took over the G20 presidency for a year after the kingdom's new foreign minister, a prince with diplomatic experience in the West, landed in Japan's Nagoya city on Friday to meet with his counterparts from the Group of 20 nations. Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud was appointed in October in a partial cabinet reshuffle, joining a new generation of royals in their 40s who rose to power under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, 34.

Diplomats say the G20 might help put Riyadh's problems behind it and could prompt it to close more disputed files such as the Yemen war and the boycott of Gulf neighbor Qatar, though they have yet to see much progress. King Salman has hailed the kingdom's G20 presidency as proof of its key role in the global economy.

Prince Faisal picked up the baton at a ceremony yesterday in Nagoya, where G20 foreign ministers have gathered for talks. Japan - which headed the G20 this year - was the kingdom's second-largest export market last year, at \$33 billion, according to IMF trade data. Apart from its reliance on Saudi oil, Japan has deepened its ties to the kingdom thanks to Japanese technology

conglomerate SoftBank Group. Riyadh has been a big supporter of SoftBank's massive Vision Fund.

Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi told Prince Faisal he was pleased to meet him for the first time and both sides wanted to boost relations, according to a read-out from Japan's foreign ministry. Motegi praised Saudi work to stabilize southern Yemen, where Riyadh orchestrated a deal to end a power struggle between Yemen's government, which it backs, and southern separatists.

King Salman also said this week Riyadh wants a political settlement in Yemen, where it has battled Iran-aligned Houthis in a nearly five-year war that has killed tens of thousands and drive parts of the country to the brink of famine. A diplomatic source said there had been an "apparent de-escalation" in Yemen's conflict in recent weeks.

Diplomats said that Saudi Arabia plans more than a dozen G20 summits throughout the year on tourism, agriculture, energy, environment and digital economy. Top diplomatic and business contacts suggest Riyadh has already gotten over much of the opprobrium it received over journalist Jamal Khashoggi's murder, but it still struggles to attract foreign investors, said analyst Neil Partrick. A Saudi court charged 11 suspects in a secretive trial and Western allies imposed sanctions on individuals. Riyadh has sought to fix its image or turn attention to its social reforms since Khashoggi's 2018 killing at the hands of Saudi agents in Istanbul. — AFP



NAGOYA: Japan's Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi shakes hands with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan to mark the handover to the Saudis as future G20 hosts yesterday. — AFP

Palestinians risk all to work in Israel

MITAR CHECKPOINT: It is well before dawn when the first work deprived Palestinians arrive to sneak through a two-meter hole cut in the metal fence that is supposed to keep them out of Israel. The men are among the thousands of Palestinians working in Israel illegally, risking bad working conditions, exploitation and jail for a chance of employment. On the morning AFP visited, Yunis, from Dahariya in the southern West Bank, was one of hundreds running the gauntlet as police patrolled the area.

They play a cat and mouse game with Israeli security - sometimes making several attempts before crossing without being spotted. "I got here at 3:00 am and found police patrols ahead of us," said the bearded and wrinkled 55-year-old. "I know I am leaving my house and I may not come back but this bitter life drives us to adventure."

Around a kilometer or so away, Palestinians lucky enough to have permits queue in a long line at the Mitar crossing between Beersheba in southern Israel and the West Bank, waiting for their documents to be checked and their bags and bodies to be searched. Visibly tired, they wear winter jackets and carry small bags containing food and work clothes. Around 70,000 Palestinians have official work permits, according to the Bank of Israel.

While reliable numbers are hard to come by, thousands more are estimated to be working illegally in the country - mostly in construction and other manual labor. They can earn far higher salaries than in the West Bank, but can be arrested or exploited by employers. Amir, 20, who like others didn't want to give his full name, comes from the town of Yatta near Hebron in the southern West Bank. He sneaks through the separation barrier to make money to help his fami-

ly. "The police arrested me four times," said Amir, alleging that he was held for several hours and beaten. He also said that he and his peers had been chased by police dogs.

Asked by AFP, Israeli police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld described allegations of beatings as "incorrect" and "misleading". "All border police activities take place according to strict orders and a strict protocol", with illegal workers returned to Palestinian areas, and serial offenders liable to prison sentences or fines, he said. Even if he avoids the police at the fence and finds work, Amir has to be careful, knowing he could still be arrested on the street. "We worked for months on the site without washing," he said. "We just want to live with dignity."

On the Israeli side of the crossing, taxis line up to ferry the men to nearby cities - both those with permits and those without. Tayseer, 38, had snuck across and avoided police searches by mingling successfully with those who had permits. "We make 130 shekels (less than \$40) each day and pay 50 getting across. We stay on the work site a week or more and after that return home." He said employers often pay far less than they initially promise. "They don't give us the rest because they know we are working without permits."

Khaled Amro from near Hebron didn't realize when he dodged through the fence in October it would be his last time. The 50-year-old was employed without a permit, but fell from a height and died. The police report said he fell from an open elevator while going up to sleep on the roof of a building site near Ramle in central Israel, his brother Muntaser told AFP. Khaled had been arrested in the late 1980s so was refused a permit, Muntaser said. "He was the head of the family with three kids to support. There is no work in the West Bank," Muntaser said.

Dakhil Abu Zaid Hamid of the Israeli trade union federation Histadrut said most of the 81 people killed during work incidents this year were Arab. Of these 42 died while working on construction sites, according to Kav LaOved, a hotline for workers' rights. It says the



BEERSHEBA: Palestinian laborers wait for an Israeli police vehicle to leave in order to cross illegally into Israeli areas through a hole in Israel's illegal barrier wall on Nov 20, 2019. — AFP

rate of deaths of construction workers is 2.5 times higher than in the European Union, and blames a lack of proper monitoring of work sites.

Even those with permits face potential exploitation. A recent Bank of Israel study found that 20,000 Palestinian workers paid a total of 480 million shekels to middlemen and employers to obtain work permits in Israel. It recommended cancelling a requirement that

Palestinians work only for a predefined employer. Back by the fence, Yunis admits failure for the day - the police are out in force and in daylight his chances of crossing undetected are slim. In total around 80 people were arrested that morning, according to police figures. Yunis said he had little choice to try again another day. "I am not afraid of death, there is no alternative." — AFP

Lion cub mummies feature in huge...

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falcon and the ancient Egyptian god Anubis in animal form. The artifacts belong to the 26th Dynasty which dates

Pence avoids top Baghdad leaders...

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Around 350 people have been killed and 15,000 wounded since demonstrations erupted on Oct 1 amid outrage over rampant government corruption and lack of jobs. Protesters are demanding a total overhaul of the ruling system in place since the US-led invasion of 2003 that toppled then-dictator Saddam Hussein. The US then dismantled Iraq's security forces and tried to rebuild the country's institutions by working closely with a newfound political class. But ties are now at their "coldest" since 2003, American and Iraqi officials have told AFP.

Abdel Mahdi, in office for the past year, has yet to visit Washington amid frustrations in the White House that his office was "too close" to Tehran. Tensions between the US and Iran have spiralled since Washington unilaterally pulled

back to the seventh century BC, Enany said.

The trove also boasts a collection of ancient Egyptian deities in the form of 73 bronze statuettes depicting the god Osiris, six wooden statues of Ptah-Soker and 11 statues of Sekhmet, the warrior goddess of healing. Egypt has sought to promote its unique heritage as a way to revive its vital tourism sector, which has been badly hit by political insecurity and attacks. However, critics say archaeological sites and museums suffer from negligence and poor management. — AFP

out of the 2015 deal over the latter's nuclear program and began imposing a series of crushing sanctions. Baghdad, which has close ties with both countries, has feared being caught in the middle. Washington has already slapped sanctions on Iraqi officials, military factions and institutions with ties to blacklisted Iranian organizations.

In July, the US singled out the leaders of two paramilitary groups in Iraq that Pence accused of being tied to Iran. Rayan Al-Kildani and Waad Qado - the former a Christian and the latter a member of the Shabak minority - were both sanctioned over "serious human rights abuse" by them or their organizations. Kildani reacted to Pence's visit yesterday, tweeting: "To the American vice president who came to Iraq stealthily... You are not welcome on Iraqi territory."

Kildani and Qado's factions belong to the Hashed al-Shaabi, a powerful Shiite-majority paramilitary network that includes many groups with close ties to Tehran. Hashed leaders and Iran have been widely criticized in the recent protests, accused of defending the very government the demonstrators want to bring down. Many of their offices have been burned in Iraq's restive south, the scene of new protests yesterday. —AFP

First Saudi woman races...

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chief, had touted it as a "watershed" moment for the kingdom. "Reema will have thousands cheering her on, as a professional racing driver," the prince told AFP.

Juffali, who made one of her first appearances in competitive racing at the F4 British Championship at Brands Hatch in April, has only about a year of professional racing experience under her belt. But she has had a passion for fast cars since her teenage years and grew up watching Formula One. She passed her driving test after she moved to the United States to study some years ago, and is now one of only a handful of Saudi women to have obtained a "racing license" in her home country, a mandatory requirement to race professionally.

Even outside the kingdom, only a few Saudi women have raced professionally. "For a lot of women who haven't had the opportunity to learn how to drive, to get behind the wheel is definitely something scary," explained Juffali. "For a lot of women in Saudi it's something so far away." Juffali said her dream is to one day race at Le Mans - a 24 hour competition in France that is one of the world's most prestigious and gruelling competitions. In Riyadh she raced against the season's veterans but will

not score any points.

Prince Mohammed has sought to shake off his country's ultraconservative image by allowing greater freedoms for women, including easing so-called "guardianship" rules that give men arbitrary authority over female relatives. But around a dozen women activists who long campaigned for the right to drive are on trial after being arrested last year, sparking widespread condemnation.

The driving reform has been transformative for many Saudi women, freeing them from dependence on private chauffeurs or male relatives. Newly mobile Saudi women are now embracing what was previously deemed a male entitlement - fast cars. Many are defying the perception that only dainty cars in bright colors are popular with women drivers.

Auto showrooms tapping women clients have rolled out a line-up of cherry red Mini Coopers, but sales professionals say many exhibit an appetite for muscle cars like the Chevrolet Camaro or the Mustang convertible. Some women are taking up drifting - oversteering the car to slip and skid or even spin, and other high-speed daredevilry - which is illegal in public but tolerated in the controlled environment of some theme parks.

Clad in skinny jeans and Harley-Davidson T-shirts, some women are also training to ride motorbikes at a Riyadh driving school, a scene that is still a stunning anomaly in the conservative petro-state. "Many (people) are surprised by all the changes happening in Saudi," said Juffali. "Seeing me in a car, racing... For a lot of people it's a surprise, but I am happy to surprise people." — AFP