



Crowds of people throw tomatoes at each other during the annual "Tomatina" tomato fight fiesta in the village of Bunol, 50 km outside Valencia in Spain yesterday. — AP

EGYPT PROMOTES BIRTH CONTROL TO FIGHT RAPID POPULATION GROWTH

CAIRO: Egypt is pushing to educate people in rural areas on birth control and family planning in a bid to slow a population growth rate that President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi said poses a threat to national development. The country is already the most populous in the Arab world with 93 million citizens and is set to grow to 128 million by 2030 if fertility rates of 4.0 births per thousand women continue, according to government figures.

In 2016, Egypt saw the birth of 2.6 million babies, the country's statistics agency CAPMAS said last month. "The two biggest dangers that Egypt faces throughout its history are terrorism and population growth and this challenge decreases Egypt's chances of moving forward," Sisi told a youth conference last month.

Egypt's health minister last month started Operation Lifeline, a strategy to reduce the birth rate to 2.4 and save the government up to 200 billion Egyptian pounds (\$11.3 billion) by 2030. Its target is rural areas where many view large families as a source of economic strength and there is resistance to birth control because of a belief that it is unlawful under Islam to aim to conceive a specific number of children.

Free Check-Ups

Egypt's Al-Azhar university, a 1,000-year-old seat of Islamic learning, endorsed the ministry's plan and said family planning is not forbidden. Ousted President Hosni Mubarak and his wife Suzanne set up a population control program decades ago but this is the first time the government says it is motivated by concern that rapid expansion saps the economy.

The health ministry said it would deploy 12,000 fami-

ly planning advocates to 18 rural provinces but gave no details of how it would attract more women to the program. The ministry runs nearly 6,000 family planning clinics where women receive free check-ups and can buy heavily subsidized contraceptives ranging from condoms at 0.10 Egyptian pounds to copper Intrauterine Devices at 2 Egyptian pounds. "Given how expensive the cost of living has become and the increase in prices, people have started becoming more aware. They know they can afford to have one or two children, but no more," Ahlam Saad, a nurse at a government-run family planning clinic on the outskirts of Cairo, told Reuters.

Inflation has surged in Egypt to record highs over the past year after the country floated its currency in November, a move which drove down the value of the pound. That drop created a shortage of medicines in pharmacies across Egypt, as scores of products including contraceptives became unprofitable to produce or import. "My fiance and I decided that we want to delay having a baby, I want to continue my studies and we're just not ready," said 30-year-old Sherin who sat in the waiting room with a score of others.

In line with government plans to reduce reliance on imports, the ministry contracted Acdima International, a subsidiary of the privately owned Arab Company for Drug Industries and Medical Appliances, to source locally produced hormonal contraceptives. The deal saves the government millions of dollars and covers 65 percent of local demand, Managing Director Tarek Abulela said, adding that the rest is exported throughout the region. — Reuters

FAITHFUL GATHER FOR START OF ANNUAL HAJJ...

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Risvana cradled her six-month-old baby who is accompanying her on the pilgrimage. "I've planned everything for him," said the young mother, pointing to a bottle of water in her bag. Saudi authorities have mobilized vast resources including more than 100,000 security personnel to avoid a repeat of the stampede in 2015 in which nearly 2,300 people were killed. This year the colossal religious gathering comes with the Islamic State group under growing pressure having lost swathes of territory it controlled in Iraq and Syria. But the group continues to claim attacks in the Middle East and Europe.

The hajj is one of the world's largest annual gatherings. Tens of thousands of air-conditioned tents have been set up in Mina to house pilgrims, and more than 700 Saudi cooks have been recruited to feed the faithful. On the esplanade of the Grand Mosque, authorities had placed misting fans to take the edge off the intense heat. On the eve of the first rites of the pilgrimage, the walkways thronged with people and the smell of musk wafted through the air.

Sitting in the shade of trees or reinforced concrete bridges, the faithful waited patiently for the next call to prayer. Others continued their march, protected by a prayer mat or a small umbrella on the head. Several times throughout the day, well-run teams of employees, mostly Asian, cleaned the esplanade with jets of water. As the hour for prayer arrived, a young woman sat at a table in an ice cream shop and prayed, her hands crossed on her knees. A few paces from the Kaaba, Egyptian pilgrim Fathiya Taha could not hide her joy. At 67 the oldest in her group, she sat in her wheelchair in Islam's most holy spot. "I've been looking forward to this pilgrimage for four years," she said.

For billions of Muslims who are physically and financially able, hajj is a mandatory act of worship. But the religious celebration also has a substantial impact on the environment. Environmentally aware worshippers say that should be reduced, while inspiring Muslims to adopt a greener lifestyle. "Hajj is all about living lightly and centering yourself around God," 28-year-old pilgrim Shanza Ali told the Thomson Reuters Foundation from Makkah. "We make many journeys in our life, and we go to many places, but this is the only journey that's physical, mental and spiritual," said Ali, who is chair of UK-based group Muslim Climate Action. She has found many similarities between hajj's message of simplicity and being environmentally conscious, and has tried to minimize her own carbon footprint and waste during the pilgrimage, which lasts for at least six days and takes worshippers to a series of holy sites in Saudi Arabia. For Husna Ahmad, author of "The Green Guide for Hajj", Muslims are doctrinally required to be stewards of the Earth.

Tackling climate change is no longer about preserving the planet for future generations as its effects are evident now, she said. The majority of Muslims live outside Saudi Arabia and could collectively influence the greening of the sacred rituals, she added. "Consumer power is something

that people need to think about in terms of flights, what they take, what they wear, the rubbish they throw, plastic bottles and all those sorts of things. We have to be conscious of that," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Muslims need to move away from a fast, disposable society, she added, with hajj being the potential start of that journey. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has taken steps to green the hajj, such as setting quotas for pilgrim numbers and developing the Makkah metro system to limit pollution. The Saudi Green Building Forum, a Riyadh-based non-governmental group recognized by the United Nations, has recently been tasked with auditing green efforts in Madinah, the country's second holy city where Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is buried and a site visited by millions of pilgrims.

Forum secretary-general Faisal Alfadl said his team will measure the green credentials of the holy cities of Makkah, Madinah and others against international guidelines on energy use, waste, water, transport and human well-being. People now realize it is politically and culturally incorrect not to respect the environment, said Alfadl. "We have moved forward," he said, noting a shift in the public mood from desert Bedouins to city dwellers on the importance of protecting the environment, with the focus now on action rather than simply raising awareness.

Reviving traditional practices could help - for example, sharing water among pilgrims from a communal source, which was common before plastic bottles became ubiquitous. And the white marble stones surrounding the Kaaba in Makkah naturally prevent the heat-island effect found in other urban areas, Alfadl said.

Recycling may not be at the top of pilgrims' minds, but Muslims have a duty to recognize the creator of the environment and reflect on Islamic teachings not to harm animals, waste water or cut down trees unnecessarily, said Fatima Ragie of Green Deen South Africa, a Muslim environmental network. Ragie, who completed hajj in 2009, urged greater efforts once the pilgrimage ends - for instance, ensuring food is not wasted when millions of animals are slaughtered, marking Abraham's near sacrifice of his son and the start of the Eid holiday. More mosques and Muslim leaders should also speak up about climate change and the environment, she said.

From Bangladesh to North Africa, climate change is a reality for many Muslims, as floods and droughts fuel instability and conflict, said Nana Firman, who participated in the UN Climate talks in Morocco last year for the Global Muslim Climate Network. "A lot of people feel like they don't know what to do, so it's really important that we engage (them)," she said. Indonesia - which has the world's largest Muslim population, according to the Pew Research Center - has launched initiatives, from a phone app showing pilgrims how to enjoy a green hajj, to offsetting carbon emissions from flights by planting trees, and limiting the number of times each person can undertake the pilgrimage, said Firman. She urged hajj pilgrims to "reflect and make a change in their lives when they go back, and care more for the environment". — Agencies

UN CHIEF CALLS FOR LIFTING OF GAZA BLOCKADE

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He later said it was "important to open the closures", in a reference to Israel's decade-long blockade of Gaza and its border with Egypt that has remained largely closed in recent years. Guterres made the comments at a school run by the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, in the northern Gaza Strip. At least 70 percent of Gazans are dependent upon international aid. UNRWA plays a major role in the strip, with the same percentage of the population classified as refugees.

Palestinian militants in Gaza and Israel have fought three wars since 2008. Israel says the blockade is necessary to keep Islamist movement Hamas, which runs the enclave, from obtaining weapons or materials that could be used to make them. The blockade also serves to isolate Hamas. Guterres also made reference to Hamas' weaponry, saying "it is important to avoid the build-up of militarism that can also undermine the confidence between the two peoples", adding that he had a dream to "come back to Gaza one day and to see Gaza as part of a Palestine state in peace and prosperity".

UN officials say the enclave is fast becoming unlivable due to deteriorating humanitarian conditions. Hamas welcomed Guterres' trip, calling on him to make "all efforts to lift the siege on the strip and end the suffering for two million Palestinians living in the largest prison in the world". UN officials' contact with Hamas is limited and Guterres was not expected to meet directly with leaders of the group, which is considered a terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union.

Demonstrations also occurred during Guterres' visit to

the strip. At one protest, around 25 people held a fake coffin with a sign that said "Welcome to the largest prison in the world". Dozens of people also demonstrated as Guterres' convoy crossed the border with Israel into Gaza, calling for action in support of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel. They included prisoners' relatives.

Before entering into the strip, Israeli officials gave Guterres a tour of the Gaza border area and he was shown a tunnel crossing from the enclave into Israel. Such tunnels, used by Hamas for attacks in the past, are a major concern for Israel. Guterres held talks with Israeli and Palestinian leaders in Jerusalem and Ramallah on Monday and Tuesday. He gave a speech in Tel Aviv later yesterday before his departure. His trip was meant in part to express strong support for the imperiled two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu heads what is seen as the most right-wing government in his country's history, and has signalled he has no intention of evacuating settlements in the occupied West Bank. Israeli settlements are built on land the Palestinians see as part of their future state.

Prominent members of Netanyahu's government advocate annexing most of the West Bank, which would make an independent Palestinian state impossible. US President Donald Trump has said he wants to reach the "ultimate deal", but he himself has cast doubt on the two-state solution, saying he could support a single state if this meant peace. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is meanwhile unpopular and likely incapable of making major concessions, many analysts say. His Fatah party, based in the West Bank, also remains deeply divided from Hamas. — Agencies

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