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Buddhist nuns set off on a month-long bicycle journey on the outskirts of Kathmandu. — AFP photos



Buddhist nuns prepare for a month-long bicycle journey. — AFP

# 'Kung fu nuns' on bikes swap maroon robes for lycra leggings



A Buddhist nun (center) prepares for a month-long bicycle journey on the outskirts of Kathmandu.

About 200 "Kung fu nuns" kicked off a month-long journey from Nepal through India on Saturday, swapping their flowing maroon robes for lycra leggings to raise awareness about human trafficking and gender equality. The Buddhist nuns are trained in martial arts and frequently organize pilgrimages and cycling trips to promote gender equality. "We are starting our fifth cycle yatra (pilgrimage) today and our main mission is about increasing awareness about female empowerment, the environment and human trafficking," nun Yeshe Lhamo told AFP.

Each year thousands of women and children across South Asia are lured into cities and across borders with promises of lucrative jobs but are instead sold into modern-day slavery. Nepal has seen an upswing in the number of cases of trafficking since a devastating earthquake in 2015 left thousands homeless. The country's human rights commission estimated that there

were about 23,200 cases of trafficking or attempted trafficking last year. The nuns said they came across several cases of trafficking while volunteering in relief efforts for earthquake victims.

"That's how we had this idea of going on this cycle yatra to all the remote places and telling people we are

everything. They are not useless, they are not things to sell," said 23-year-old nun Jigme Konchok Lhamo. The nuns will cover a 3,000-kilometre route from the hills of Nepal's capital Kathmandu, peddling through south India to Delhi and then to Darjeeling. — AFP



Buddhist nuns prepare for a month-long bicycle journey.

## In rubble of Aleppo souk, tablecloth shop makes solitary comeback



A picture shows 62-year-old Mohammad Shawash sitting outside his textile shop amid the destruction in the old city of Aleppo. — AFP photos

It used to be one of the most vibrant marketplaces in the Syrian city of Aleppo, but today, the bombed-out streets of Khan Al-Harir are home to a solitary shop selling tablecloths. Mohammad Shawash's partly restored storefront stands amid a sea of smashed concrete and debris-laden roads. The 62-year-old with a snow-white beard and glasses decided to return to the historic souk five months ago to reopen the shop he had managed for years.

"I cried when I first came back. I found total destruction all around me. The stores were destroyed, the streets covered in rubble and rocks, and the buildings collapsed," he told AFP. "So I repaired it myself, to prove to the whole world that Aleppo's Old City still has a soul." Khan Al-Harir, or the Silk Market, lies in the celebrated Old City of central Aleppo, a UNESCO world heritage site. Its historic covered market was the largest in the world, with some 4,000 shops and 40 caravanserais in a labyrinth of alleyways selling everything from home ware to artisanal products.

For four years, the Old City was on the front line of battles between government troops in the city's west and rebels in the east. But a blistering, Russian-backed offensive saw Syria's army retake swathes of the country, and in December 2016 the government declared it was once more in control of the whole of Aleppo.

### 'I lost myself'

Much of the Old City remains scarred by fighting, but part of the Souk Al-Jumruk marketplace reopened last month. Other shopkeepers have slowly begun returning to assess the damage. Shawash, a native of

Khan Al-Harir, was one of them. "I was raised here and I used to open my shop from 7:00am until late at night. I knew everyone around me," he said. "The streets were full of passers-by, stalls, restaurants and people selling clothes, carpets and furniture. But now there is no one." When he returned earlier this year to check on his shop, he found a wall had collapsed, the goods were either gone or burned, and the streets were eerily empty.

"It's not just about losing money or stock. I lost my neighbors. I lost my people, I lost myself." For a week, Shawash piled bricks, cement, and stone in a small wheelbarrow and navigated it through the ravaged streets to repair his shop by hand. "I would arrive completely exhausted, because the streets are narrow and there was rubble everywhere, which meant cars couldn't get through," he said. He has since resumed his daily ritual, laying out multicolored plastic tablecloths and mats for display, many of them still wrapped in protective plastic.

Shawash then sits down on a plastic chair and waits for customers, his prayer beads in hand. For hours no one stops, so he packs up his goods, locks the metal door, and heads home. With a dearth of customers, he said he was barely making enough "to buy a falafel sandwich". "Before the war, I used to sell between 50,000 and 70,000 pounds (\$1,000 and \$1,500, depending on the exchange rate) worth of goods," he said. Shawash insisted Aleppo's young people must return to rebuild their city. "Aleppo is the symbol of civilization," he said. "I'm proud to be the first one to reopen my shop in this souk, but I hope that life returns to the market." —AFP



Christmas ornaments hang from a tree set up on the Waterfront in Washington, DC December 23, 2017. — AFP



A man dressed as Santa Claus waves to people as he rides in the sidecar of a motorcycle, ahead of the motorcade of Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Apostolic Administrator of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, while crossing through an Israeli checkpoint in the controversial separation barrier to attend Christmas eve celebrations in the West Bank city of Bethlehem yesterday. — AFP photos



Motorcyclist Giuseppe shows his beard decorated with small Christmas balls yesterday at a biker's meeting near Lake Hengstey in Hagen, western Germany. The bikers always meet on Christmas Eve for coffee, cocoa and a chat.

## What's for Christmas? \$300,000 in marijuana, says elderly couple

An elderly American couple's Christmas plans went up in smoke after they were caught by police with a giant stash of pot—which they said they planned to give as gifts. Patrick Jiron, 80, and his wife Barbara, 70, went on a cross-country road trip from California to Vermont to visit friends and family and brought with them a dizzying 60 pounds (27 kg) of marijuana, according to the York News-Times. They told police in Nebraska-

where they were detained about midway through their trip—that the approximately \$336,000 worth of pot were intended as Christmas presents, the newspaper said.

Police allegedly had pulled over the couple on Tuesday for traffic violations, and smelled a pungent odor emanating from their pickup truck. Patrick Jiron was arrested and charged with possession of marijuana with intent to deliver and having no drug tax stamp, according to the news-

paper, which said he had been released after posting 10 percent of his \$100,000 bond. Barbara Jiron was cited, but was not jailed due to unspecified medical conditions, the newspaper reported. Pot is illegal in Nebraska, even though a handful of states, including California and Nebraska's neighbor Colorado, have legalized the drug for recreational use. Vermont is among 29 states that have legalized marijuana for medical use. — AFP