



Visitors attend the 'Hull Fair', one of Europe's largest annual travelling fairs, in Hull, northeast England on Monday. Showmen and women have brought their rides and stalls to the city for more than 700 years, first appearing in 1278. — AFP

Catalan leader steps back from declaring...

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A source from the central government's representative office in Catalonia said security had been tightened at Catalan airports and railway stations in anticipation of possible protests at Puigdemont's possible independence announcement. At stake is the future of a region of 7.5 million people deeply divided over independence, one of Spain's economic powerhouses whose drive to break away has raised concern for stability in the European Union.

Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has vowed to use everything in his power to prevent independence and has even refused to rule out imposing direct rule over the semi-autonomous region - an unprecedented move many fear could lead to unrest. EU President Donald Tusk also urged Puigdemont against making a decision that would make "dialogue impossible". But the Catalan president says the independence referendum that took place on Oct 1 despite a court ban justifies splitting from Madrid. Around 90 percent of those who cast bal-

lots voted for independence but the poll was poorly monitored and many Catalans opposed to secession boycotted an illegal plebiscite that was witnessed a violent police crackdown.

On Monday, Ada Colau, the popular mayor of Barcelona, warned that a unilateral declaration of independence would put "social cohesion" at risk. Pro-unity and pro-independence supporters have staged mass rallies in Barcelona over the past week, highlighting divisions in Catalonia. Anger over the police violence during the referendum swung some Catalans over to the independence camp. But both Madrid and the Catalan executive have come under fire for their dogged response to the crisis and a lack of dialogue.

Carolina Palles, a 53-year-old flower vendor in Barcelona's popular La Ramblas boulevard, said it was "a sad day", almost two months after the seaside city was hit by a deadly terror attack. Against independence, she was angry at both camps. "Rajoy's government handled things very badly," she said, accusing the separatists "of persisting until the very end, like martyrs".

The crisis has also caused deep uncertainty for businesses in one of the wealthiest regions in the eurozone's fourth largest economy. Spain's stock market shed nearly 1.0 percent ahead of yesterday's session and a string of companies have already moved their legal

the first of its kind in the Middle East and North Africa region, will act as a catalyst in strengthening Zain's and Kuwait's digital strategy."

Kharafi concluded by noting his appreciation of Director General for Kuwait Direct Investment Promotion Authority (KDIPA), Sheikh Dr Meshal Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah for "his efforts in attracting foreign investment in Kuwait and his support in facilitating and helping to overcome obstacles in the transaction process."

Issam Darwish, Executive Vice Chairman and CEO of IHS commented, "We are delighted to partner with Zain on this agreement which will expand our operating footprint into the Middle East. We look forward to a long-term partnership with Zain, where we can demonstrate our strong operating capabilities and service offering in support of their customers. We expect significant growth in wireless phone and data usage in a number of emerging markets over the next few years and we believe, given the significant experience we have gained in our African operations, we are well positioned to meet the growing needs of wireless network operators in these countries." Citigroup acted as exclusive financial advisor to Zain on this transaction.

UAE: Qatar must shun 'extremism' to host World Cup

DUBAI: A senior United Arab Emirates official said Qatar's hosting of the 2022 World Cup should depend on it rejecting "extremism and terrorism", in comments drawing the football tournament into in the worst diplomatic row between rich Gulf monarchies in years. The UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain severed diplomatic, trade and travel ties with Qatar in June, accusing it of sponsoring hardline Islamist groups, a charge Doha denies. Egypt, the Arab world's most populous state, also joined the boycott.

Kuwaiti and US attempts to ease the row have yielded little progress and media outlets backed by the opposing sides have unleashed a war of words that has aggravated tensions in the US-allied Gulf. "Qatar's hosting of World Cup 2022 should include a repudiation of policies supporting extremism & terrorism. Doha should review its record," UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash wrote on Twitter. "Hosting World Cup 2022 should not be tainted by support of extremist individuals & (organisations)/ terror-

ist figures, review of Qatar's policies a must," he added.

The World Cup is the centerpiece of a carefully crafted strategy to project Qatar onto the global stage via sport. In the run-up, Qatar is scheduled to host events across different sports aimed at improving infrastructure and expertise. Although the countries boycotting Qatar would not have a direct way of halting the World Cup, they are major powers in regional sport and could interfere with Qatar's wider plans. Egypt is the top-ranked football team in Africa, and Saudi Arabia and the UAE are both in Asia's top eight.

Last month officials from the states boycotting Qatar did not turn up to the draw for a Middle East soccer tournament in Doha and said they wanted to postpone the competition that could be an early test for the World Cup hosts. Qatari officials could not be immediately reached for comment on Gargash's remarks. Qatar has previously said that the rift has not affected its preparations to host the tournament and that alternative sources for construction materials had been secured.

Football's governing body FIFA has said it has been in regular contact with Qatar since the row erupted. Gargash made his comments after a former Dubai police chief wrote on Twitter this week that the Gulf crisis could end if Doha forfeited hosting the World Cup. Gargash said the official, Dhahi Khalfan, had been misunderstood in media coverage. — Reuters

Indian child brides sold in 'package...'

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commissioner of police in Hyderabad who is investigating the issue.

In the few cases when the young brides did accompany their husbands back to their home country, they were forced into domestic servitude or sexual slavery, police said. About 30 people including brokers, qazis, prospective bridegrooms from Oman and Qatar and hotel owners were arrested last month and charged with human trafficking and sexual exploitation of children, said police officials.

In the crackdown, 14 girls, all under 18, were rescued before they had been married off. Nearly half the brokers arrested were women who had been victims of the crime themselves, police said. "Contract marriages in this part of Hyderabad have been going on for many years, but it has now become an organized, international trade (of girls), involving agents and qazis from different Indian cities and also the Gulf," Satyanarayana said.

Girls are easy to source and most marriages are performed after the festival of Eid which agents said is "season time" when tourists from the Gulf visit Hyderabad - which has links to Gulf Arab states dating back centuries. In the 19th century, men from what is now Saudi Arabia and Oman were recruited as soldiers by the Nizam (ruler) of Hyderabad - then a princely state in southern India. Their descendants continue to live in the city and older generations recall "good marriages" of Hyderabad girls to young Arab men visiting relatives in the city in the 1970s and 80s.

The trend turned into a business in recent years after a qazi was sanctioned by the government to perform "Arab marriages". "They think they will see the Burj Khalifa (Dubai's landmark skyscraper) and live in palatial homes like Atlantis (hotel) if they marry an Arab. They are ignorant of the consequences," Satyanarayana said.

Growing up in a one-room tenement that she shared with her five siblings and parents, an offer to marry a rich man seemed like the perfect escape for one seventh grader who did not want to reveal her identity. "I was 14 and our neighbor told us that a rich Arab boy was looking for a bride. We went to meet him. He was not a boy. He was 62," the girl told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "The broker convinced me that my life would change if I married him. I was promised gold, money and a house for my parents. I believed him."

She was married in a no-frills ceremony to the man who paid her mother 30,000 rupees (\$460). He paid another 50,000 rupees to the brokers and the qazi who performed the wedding - his second such "marriage" in five days. "The girl and the man had already spent a day at a hotel when we rescued her after his first wife, also a

teenager, alerted the police," said Rafia Bano, legal officer with Hyderabad District Child Protection Unit.

Following the marriage, the family moved house - unable to cope with the volley of uncomfortable questions that their neighbors and friends asked them. The girl resumed her studies, is now in the 11th grade and divorced. In the narrow streets that snake through the bustling Old City of Hyderabad - where the majority of residents are Muslim - there are countless stories of girls married as children, only to be sexually abused and divorced a few days later.

But government data underestimates the problem - Rafia Bano's office has recorded only seven cases in the last three years - as campaigners and police say a sex tourism industry under the garb of marriage is flourishing. In interviews with the Thomson Reuters Foundation, agents, qazis and police said brides were offered in "package deals" of 30,000 rupees or more, depending on the marriage duration. The packages included paperwork for the marriage, such as visa formalities if the bride was flying with her husband, or a hotel booking if it was a short-term stay.

The police have seized blank nikahnamas (marriage certificates) and divorce papers from the offices of qazis who were arrested in Hyderabad and Mumbai. "They are rich men from the Gulf and they know people are poor in Hyderabad, and girls available. Since they cannot touch a woman outside of marriage, they marry the girl and sign a blank paper for divorce at the time of marriage," said Qadir Ali, a fourth generation qazi in Hyderabad. "They are spoiling the name of Islam for their desire."

Hyderabad - once known for its polished pearls and the famous 16th century monument of Charminar - emerged as a major tech hub in the early 2000s, with Indian firms and global giants including Facebook and Google setting up offices in the city. But barely 20 km from the city's shiny IT district are the narrow lanes of the Old City where girls often drop out of school when they reach puberty.

Tabassum, 15, left school to help her mother stick glittering beads on bangles that tourists buy in the bazaar near Charminar, becoming easy prey for marriage agents. Her mother, Zareena, didn't think she was harming her daughter when she showed her to an old Omani man for marriage. "We are poor people and I had heard of girls getting married and getting a good life," she said. But in a rare act of defiance, Tabassum ran away and the marriage was called off. "This is a business," said Jameela Nishat, founder of charity Shaheen that works with victims of contract marriages. "The sale of one girl feeds many families."

Former agent Haji Khan is familiar with both sides of the business. "I made 50,000 rupees in one month last year. The money is good. But it is very sad for the girls," he said. He knows. His own wife was forced into a contract marriage, and was rescued three years ago by Khan who paid 100,000 rupees for her release. But he continued to source child brides for other Arab men until recently turning police informer. "It's the games we play for money," he said. — Reuters

Zain finalizes telecoms tower...

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The company has an ambitious team that is focused on expanding their operations across the Middle East and Africa."

Kharafi made special note of thanks to Kuwait's Communication and Information Technology Regulatory Authority (CITRA), and its Chairman and CEO Eng Salim Al-Othaina noting the positive impact their vision is having on the development of the ICT sector and raising the level of organizational efficiency of this vital sector in Kuwait. "CITRA has contributed significantly to the promotion of the telecommunications industry in the Kuwaiti market in keeping abreast of the recent developments in the mobile telecommunications services across the global markets. They are working hard to strengthen plans to build the information society and develop the country's telecommunications infrastructure, and we hope that this transaction,

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