

International

Ghana compelling its people of African heritage to 'come home'

'You feel freer, you feel more open to being who you are'

ACCRA: Sicley Williams was ready to escape what she found an unfriendly climate in the United States and take a leap of faith, leaving her native Chicago for Ghana. She had previously visited the West African nation on holiday and when she returned in 2017 found work practicing yoga and offering spa services. "The climate of the US was just really negative, especially the racial climate," said Williams. In Ghana, that tension disappeared almost entirely, she added.

"It's much more pleasant to be in a place where you feel more accepted, you feel freer, you feel more open to being who you are and, of course, you are around people who look like you." Williams has become an unofficial ambassador of a growing movement encouraging other African-Americans to move to Ghana. President Nana Akufo-Addo has designated 2019 the "Year of Return" both to commemorate the resilience of Africans forced into slavery and to encourage their descendants to "come home".

"We know of the extraordinary achievements and contributions they (Africans in the diaspora) made to the lives of the Americans, and it is important that this symbolic year, 400 years later, we commemorate their existence and their sacrifices," he said last September. His timing was based on the first recorded landing of a ship carrying Africans in Virginia in August 1619, said by historians to be an English warship that had plundered a Portuguese slaver. Celebrities including supermodel Naomi Campbell and actors Idris Elba and Rosario Dawson kicked off the year-long program by attending the Full Circle Festival in Accra in late December.

UKIP leader joins Le Pen's EU group

STRASBOURG: The head of British eurosceptic party UKIP and two more of its MEPs have joined a European parliamentary group led by French far-right leader Marine Le Pen's National Rally. Previously the UKIP delegation to the Strasbourg parliament under former leader Nigel Farage had been a member of the populist Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy group. But Farage, while still an MEP and chairman of the EFDD, has resigned from UKIP, criticizing what he sees as new leader Gerald Batten's association with toxic far-right figures such as anti-immigration activist Tommy Robinson.

'Upskirting' becomes illegal across the UK

LONDON: British lawmakers have outlawed the practice of "upskirting" — secretly taking pictures up women's skirts — following an 18-month campaign by a victim. Those found guilty face up to two years in jail, leading campaigner Gina Martin to praise the bill as "politics and society at its best". Members of the upper House of Lords on Tuesday gave the bill the final seal of approval, and it now only requires the formality of Royal Assent.

Prime Minister Theresa May personally backed the legislation, saying the practice left victims "feeling

degraded and distressed". The bill was briefly held up last year when a single MP blocked it by shouting "Object!" during a parliamentary vote. Christopher Chope, a member of May's Conservative Party, claimed he was objecting to the manner in which the bill was introduced, but was met with cries of "shame" from MPs.

Martin tweeted that she was "over the moon" about the vote, adding "I AM EXHAUSTED AND SO HAPPY!" From Liverpool in northwest England, Martin was attending a music festival in London's Hyde Park when a man rubbed against her while his friend lurked nearby. "Five minutes later, I saw that his friend... was watching a picture taken very close to a woman's crotch," she said earlier. "I knew it was me immediately." Martin grabbed the phone and showed the image to police officers, but "they said 'we can't really help you'." She then decided to campaign to make it illegal, collecting more than 100,000 signatures of support in an online petition. — AFP

Facebook to tighten political ad rules for 2019 elections

PARIS: Facebook said Tuesday it will tighten rules for political ads in countries with elections scheduled in the first half of the year, building on transparency efforts already underway in the United States, Britain and Brazil after a series of scandals. "As we prepare for major elections around the world this year, we're continuing our focus on preventing foreign interference and giving people more information about the ads they see across our platforms," the social media giant said in a post on its Business page.

In the US, Britain and Brazil political

advertisers must confirm their identity and location before they can run Facebook ads, which are also housed in a public, searchable library for up to seven years. "By shining a light on political ads, news organizations, regulators, watchdog groups and people anywhere in the world can hold advertisers and us more accountable," it said. For upcoming elections in Nigeria and Ukraine no foreign electoral ads will be accepted, Facebook said.

In India, the network will launch an Ad Library and enforce authorizations before spring elections, it said. In the EU, it is to roll out "transparency tools" in the runup to European Parliament elections in May. By the end of June, Facebook said it would provide a set of these tools to advertisers around the world. Facebook was forced to admit last year that Cambridge Analytica, a political firm working for Donald Trump in 2016, had hijacked the data of tens of millions of its users. — AFP

'Year of Return'

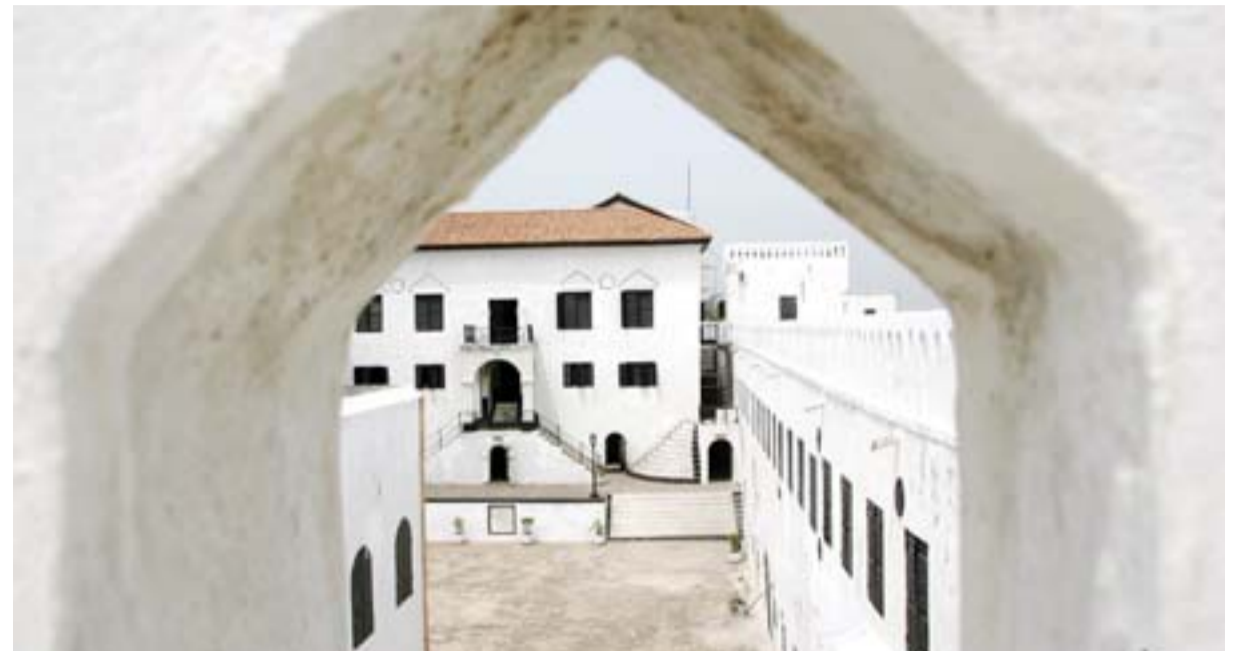
Ghana is still dotted with dungeons and castles established during the slave trade, which serve as a powerful reminder of the past to educate citizens and foreign visitors about slavery. US former president Barack Obama and his family visited the Cape Coast Castle in 2009 and described it as a place of "profound sadness". "It reminds us that as bad as history can be, it's also possible to overcome," he told reporters during the tour of the landmark, with its infamous "door of no return" in the dungeon. Akufo-Addo's invitation isn't the first from Ghanaian presidents.

In 2000, Ghana passed legislation designed to make it easier for people from the African diaspora to live and work in the country. Akufo-Addo has pledged to simplify the visa process. Tourism Minister Catherine Abelema Afeku is organizing music and culture festivals, including Ghana independence celebrations in March. There will also be Panafest, a theatre festival aimed at bringing together Africans on the continent and in the diaspora "around the issues of slavery".

Support and development

Christabel Dadzie hopes that 12 months of celebration will inspire Ghanaians in the diaspora to move back. After a decade working in the United States, Dadzie founded the Ahaspora Young Professionals to help those in the diaspora make the transition to Ghana. With a network of about 2,000 people, Dadzie and others help field questions like how to get a job, where to recruit a babysitter or even buy household goods.

The group also offers community services such as



ELMINA: This file photo taken on February 4, 2008 shows an inside view of Elmina Castle near Cape Coast, Ghana. Ghana is calling all those of African descent in the diaspora to "come home" to the West African nation in 2019, to mark 400 years since the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in the United States. — AFP

mentoring high school students in professional development and has raised funds and donations for disaster relief. Seeing those in the diaspora coming to Ghana "will be great for our tourism and camaraderie, getting

to know other people who are related to the country," said Dadzie, who is planning one of the events of the celebration. "They come home and do amazing entrepreneurial things so actually thrive here." — AFP

Terrified civilians hide, send their farewells, during Nairobi siege

NAIROBI: When an explosion and gunfire rang out at an upmarket hotel complex in Nairobi, people hid under desks, covered in bathrooms or hunkered down in their cars, some of them all through the 20-hour siege. Here are some of the stories from survivors of the attack claimed by the Somali Islamist group Al-Shabaab on an upmarket hotel complex in the Westlands district of the Kenyan capital.

Saying goodbye

"Please tell my family I love them," 38-year-old Ronald Ng'eno wrote on Twitter in what he believed was his final goodbye. Ng'eno, who was rescued after 11 hours in hiding, told AFP he was in his office where he worked as a communications officer for the Commission on Revenue Allocation when he heard "a massive blast followed by unending gunshots". He and his colleagues tried to flee but quickly realized the gunmen were already inside.

"They started firing directly towards us and that was when we changed course and ran into the bathrooms located on first floor. Upon entering the bathroom I saw a small opening on the ceiling and that's where I hid momentarily." First he sent a tweet to police to ask for help. "But as the gunshots continued to grow louder and louder my hope of seeing my family again faded by the minute and that is when I decided to tweet my last message to my wife and two sons," he said.

Putin accuses West of 'destabilizing' Balkans

BELGRADE: Ahead of today's visit to Belgrade, Russian President Vladimir Putin has blamed Western countries for "destabilizing" the Balkans, returning an accusation often lobbed in his direction. "As for the situation in the Balkans, a serious destabilizing factor there is the policy of the US and some other Western countries aimed at securing their dominance in the region," he told the Serbian Vecernje Novosti newspaper in an interview published on the Kremlin website.

The Balkans are often cast as a battleground between Eastern and Western powers, though all countries in the region aspire to join the European Union and most are already allied with NATO. However Serbia, while also an EU candidate, remains a staunch Moscow ally and is set to welcome Putin with a parade today.

The two countries share Slavic roots and the Orthodox Christian faith, which Putin described as their "spiritual and cultural kinship". They are also united over the issue of Kosovo — the former Serbian province whose independence Belgrade refuses to acknowledge. Moscow has supported Serbia on this front and can use its veto to block Kosovo from the United Nations. The



NAIROBI: An injured woman is evacuated from the scene of an explosion at a hotel complex in Nairobi's Westlands suburb. — AFP

"If I die I love the Lord and believe I will go to heaven please tell my family I love them. I love you Caleb, Mark and Carol." Ng'eno's tweet read. After a while he climbed down from the ceiling to join about six others also hiding in the bathroom. He continued to communicate with the police until his battery died at around 11 pm, when the siege was still going on. "Luckily, police had told that they would knock on the door in a specific way so as to identify themselves and at 2.30 am on Wednesday we heard the knock and we knew help had finally come."

Saved by a flat battery

Brian Gatimu, a tour operator based inside the sprawling office park, which includes a luxury hotel and restaurants, credits his car's battery dying for his survival. "I had left the lights on. Talk of God's doings," Gatimu told Capital FM News. He said he was leaving his office and was delayed in the rooftop parking

lot as he looked for someone to help him jumpstart his car. Two minutes after his car's engine was ready, he heard a loud bang. "I saw huge smoke billowing from the entrance." He said he hid in his car for two hours, calling for help on Twitter, before police officers came to rescue him. "My car is tinted. I stayed inside hoping all is well. I was shaken," he said.

Barista to the attackers

Reuben Kimani, a barista working at the hotel, said he recognized at least one of the attackers, having served him coffee in the run-up to the assault. "I knew one of them because he had a big scar on one of his hands," he said. "I saw them. They shot six of my friends, four didn't die but two succumbed." He said the attackers yelled out "why are you killing our brothers and sisters in Somalia?" before opening fire. He was rescued after several hours trapped inside the hotel. — AFP



BELGRADE: A picture shows a mural depicting Russian President Vladimir Putin and bearing Cyrillic writing reading "Kosovo is Serbia". — AFP

US, a strong ally to Kosovo, has frequently accused Russia of meddling in the affairs of the region, including in last year's referendum in Macedonia to change its name, a prerequisite for joining NATO.

Putin however accused the West of pressuring Macedonia and Montenegro, a new NATO candidate, against the will of their people. The NATO expansion efforts are drawing "new dividing lines on the European continent," he told the newspaper Politika. In Moscow, Russian Foreign

Minister Sergei Lavrov also questioned the "legitimacy" of the Macedonia name-change referendum, which is an effort to end a long-running row with Greece.

"We do not oppose the name that has been proposed, we only question...the willingness of the United States to lead all Balkan states into NATO as soon as possible and to remove any Russian influence in this region," he said. "We cannot agree with those who say that Russia has no place in the Balkans," Lavrov added. — AFP