

Expo 2020 site rises from Dubai desert

DUBAI: With a year to go until the Expo 2020 trade fair, the mammoth venue in Dubai's desert is currently a tangle of steel, concrete and dust. But the emirate, hit hard by a downturn, hopes the event will deliver an economic shot in the arm when it launches in October next year. Dubai, defined by its skyscrapers and mega-projects, may boast the most diverse economy in the Gulf region, but its vital property, tourism and trade sectors have been badly weakened.

The total value of real estate deals plunged 21.5 percent last year, while tourist arrivals remained stagnant at around 16 million. This year, Dubai seems to be on the same path, hosting 8.3 million visitors in the first six months. But officials in the emirate, known for its giant malls, luxury resorts and unlikely attractions including an indoor ski slope, are hoping the global trade fair will turn things around.

On a tour yesterday of the sprawling site, much of it off limits to the media, organizers said construction was "on track". Dozens of trucks, some loaded with building materials, zipped in and out of the venue, on sand dunes in the south of Dubai. Countless workers in yellow and orange vests plied the scaffolding of vast unfinished structures. The

first few white feathers are now recognizable on the wings of the United Arab Emirates pavilion, built in the shape of a falcon in flight. When completed, the four-storey structure's vast wings will move to capture or repel sunlight.

The Al Wasl Plaza taking shape at the heart of the complex has a 550-tonne steel dome that forms a vast projection screen for light shows and images. Some 200 countries will take part in the fair, which runs from Oct 20, 2020 to April 10, 2021. Organisers say the \$8-billion Expo, with more than 200 restaurants and dozens of events each day, is much more than a six-month trade show.

"This is the first time that there's an Expo happening in this part of the world," said Sanjive Khosla, Expo 2020's Chief Commercial Officer. "From a business event to a concert or festival, it is really diverse programming," he said. After the party is over, the goal is to turn the 4.4 sq km site into a district including homes, an exhibition center and headquarters for scores of companies. "The plan for the future development is that it becomes Dubai's innovation district... that will then be the true legacy of Expo 2020," said Nadimeh Mehra, vice-president for the new mini city. — AFP



DUBAI: View of ongoing construction work yesterday at the site of the Expo 2020. — AFP

Mosul strains to revive manufacturing past

MOSUL: Its wool could once be found in French marketplaces and its cement as far away as Singapore. But after years of fighting, Iraq's Mosul has yet to regain its former industrial glory. The city's factories were pulverized by Islamic State group militants and its export routes remain choked by informal customs points, while cheap imports flood the market. Those challenges have hamstrung the northern city's recovery from three years of brutal jihadist rule that ended in mid-2017, its business owners say.

"Under IS' strict measures, the factories closed, the economy regressed and Mosul was cut off from the rest of the world," said 33-year-old Issam Abdallah. Abdallah owns a dairy factory in the city's west, most of which was bombed into ruin in the final phase of fighting to oust the

militants. "Sixty percent of my factory was destroyed, but I borrowed from relatives and reopened it a few months after Mosul was recaptured," he told AFP.

His modest factory churns out white cheeses packed into medium-sized pots that are sold on store shelves in Mosul for 2,000 Iraqi dinars, or a little over \$1.50. But there's new competition in town, and the same money can buy a much larger vat of cheese imported from Iraq's northern neighbor Turkey.

A storied past

Unproductive and isolated, the state of Mosul today is a far cry from during the city's industrial golden days. It was a crucial overland trading post along the Silk Road to China beginning under Umayyad rule in the 8th century. Wheat from surrounding fields was processed and stored in Mosul, and the region became known as Iraq's "breadbasket". Wools and tanned hides sourced from surrounding ranches were exported to Europe and contributed to the city's expanding growth in the 1800s.

By the 20th century, oil was discovered, the government invested in manufacturing, and Mosul produced more than one million tons of cement - some of which reached halfway around the world to the Far East. In 2013, the city boasted 350 food stuff plants, dozens of tanneries and furniture factories, and other facilities for juicing, processing metal and more. The following year, IS overran the city, transforming the trade hub into the Iraqi seat of its self-styled "caliphate".

Factories were shut, with 70-80 percent of their equipment sold or repurposed to make weapons, according to the World Bank. Skilled workers fled and demand plummeted as residents only spent what they absolutely had to. Now, factory owners are trickling back - but finding a near-unrecognizable market. No reliable electricity and water, high rents and no distribution channels are the top complaints, according to a poll by the International Organization for Migration.

"Before 2014, we exported our products to the rest of Iraq safely and easily," recalled Hashem Al-Najjar, 22. His

family's business in east Mosul made bright plastic pipes, buckets and other inexpensive household products shipped out in bulk along the network of highways linking Iraqi cities.

Mosul was spared from the anti-government protests earlier this month which rocked Baghdad leaving more than 100 dead. But even though Najjar's factory reopened a few months ago, obstacles abound. "Electricity is unreliable and there are a lot of difficulties in transporting the products outside the city," he told AFP. Indeed, roads leading from Mosul into the autonomous Kurdish region or south to Baghdad are dotted with checkpoints collecting informal customs fees.

According to a Chatham House report this year, these fees are "critical for armed groups" which are desperate to remain relevant now that fighting has slowed down. Iraq's government has repeatedly ordered the checkpoints removed, with little effect: one paramilitary group made up of minority Shabak fighters recently blocked access through one of these valves for days in a show of force. — AFP



SINGAPORE: A Volocopter unmanned air taxi flies over Marina Bay during a test flight with a safety pilot at the 26th Intelligent Transport Systems World Congress (ITSWC) yesterday. — AFP

Hover-taxi whizzes over S'pore; firm...

Continued from Page 1

to four years, and Volocopter then hopes to introduce the vehicles in traffic-clogged Asian cities.

Prices for a trip in the aircraft have not yet been determined but Volocopter is aiming for just above the fare of a taxi ride. "We generally consider Asia to be a huge opportunity to benefit from this new technology, and we intend to have a strong presence in Asia starting here in Singapore," Volocopter chief executive Florian Reuter told AFP. The company wants to bring the service to sprawling cities like Jakarta, Manila and Bangkok, as well as parts of India and China, he said. Many Asian mega-cities are notorious for monster traffic jams, which leave millions of commuters facing long journeys, and can delay executives trying to dash to airports or reach important meetings on time.

In China, Volocopter plans to partner with automaker Geely, which owns a stake in the German aviation

company, to mass-produce flying taxis for the Chinese market, Reuter said. The flying taxi will be used in Singapore to provide quick travel on routes such as from Marina Bay to Sentosa island, home to several tourist attractions and luxury hotels, or to ferry people from ships anchored offshore to port.

Earlier this week in the city-state, Volocopter unveiled the "VoloPort", a flying taxi port at the water's edge with a landing and takeoff pad as well as a passenger terminal. The port was not used for yesterday's test flight because it has not been certified yet. Volocopter faces some competition, including from Uber and Kitty Hawk, a firm backed by Google co-founder Larry Page.

"We feel we are at the humble beginnings of a new mode of transportation that ultimately will transform the way we see mobility in cities," Reuter said. "This might sound sci-fi futuristic to many people, but I think we are now starting to grasp what implications this technology can actually have." Singapore has become a center for testing self-driving vehicles, and earlier this year conducted a public trial of autonomous buses booked through an app. The city-state is currently hosting a major transport technology conference. — AFP

Erdogan hails agreement with...

Continued from Page 1

obligations under a US-brokered truce to withdraw forces from a border area with Turkey in northeastern Syria, a senior administration official said earlier yesterday. "A letter came in from General Mazloum...that he had carried out all of his obligations under the arrangement that we had done with the Turks...to withdraw all YPG forces out of the Turkish-controlled safe zone," the senior administration official told reporters, referring to Mazloum Abdi, the head of Washington's former allies in the fight against Islamic State.

Ankara and Washington have been in close contact to agree that the withdrawal has taken place, the official

said and therefore Turkey's pause in its military offensive into Syria would turn into a permanent halt of the campaign, as agreed under a deal in Ankara last week.

The five-day truce in Turkey's cross-border offensive to allow the withdrawal of Kurdish YPG fighters from the border area ended at 10 pm (1900 GMT) yesterday, and Erdogan had said Turkey could then press on with fighting. "We think that Turkey in the end will agree that the withdrawal has taken place under the terms of the agreement. This means that the Turkish pause becomes a Turkish halt in military operations," the official said.

But he warned that if Ankara fails to cease operations, US sanctions will follow. "Any Turkish kinetic military operation that moves forward at the end of this 120 hours, when they're supposed to move into an even more...rigid and formal ceasefire under the name halt...will lead to us concluding that Turks have violated our agreement with inevitable sanctions." — Agencies

Trudeau needs help to form ...

Continued from Page 1

The Conservatives won 121 seats but beat the Liberals in the popular vote, taking 34.4 percent to their 33.1 percent. Scheer issued a warning to Trudeau. "Canadians have passed judgement on (Trudeau's) Liberal government," noting that the Liberals shed more than 20 seats. "We have put him on notice, his leadership is damaged and his government will end soon and when that time comes, the Conservatives will be ready and we will win!"

The first test of Trudeau's future government will follow in the coming weeks with a speech to parliament outlining his legislative priorities and a confidence vote. For now he faces the tough task of forming a government, for which he will have to take into account the demands of minority parties. Yves-Francois Blanchet, head of the Bloc Quebecois, a down and out party that scored a big comeback on Monday, said he can work with the new government if the interests of French-speaking Quebec are preserved. "If what is proposed is good for Quebec, you can count on us," said Blanchet, whose party will have 32 seats in the next legislature.

Jagmeet Singh, the leader of the New Democratic party, promised to be constructive. The leftist former criminal defense lawyer is the first non-white leader of

a federal political party in Canada, and is now a king-maker. "In the days ahead, I'll be meeting with my new caucus, to talk about how we will deliver for people," Singh said in a statement. "We'll approach building the new parliament with open minds and open hearts," he added. He added: "The real winner of this election is not a party or a leader. Canadians sent a clear message: they want a government that works for them, and they are not satisfied with the old ways of doing politics."

Trudeau, a 47-year-old former school teacher, dominated Canadian politics over the four years of his first term, but faced a grilling during the 40-day election campaign, which he described as one of the "dirtiest and nastiest" in Canadian history. Trudeau and Scheer exchanged barbs as attack ads and misinformation multiplied. Trudeau evoked the bogeymen of past and current Tory parties fostering "politics of fear and division" while Scheer called the prime minister a "compulsive liar," "a phony and a fraud."

Going into the election Trudeau's golden boy image had already been damaged by ethics lapses in the handling of the bribery prosecution of engineering giant SNC-Lavalin. His popularity took a further hit with the emergence during the campaign of old photographs of him in blackface makeup. Some 27.4 million Canadians were eligible to vote in the election, and the turnout was reported to have been large, at almost 65 percent. A record 97 women were elected to parliament, including Canada's first indigenous attorney general, Jody Wilson-Raybould, who ran as an independent candidate after Trudeau kicked her out of his caucus. — AFP

Hezbollah under rare...

Continued from Page 1

Popular dissatisfaction with the government peaked last week following protests over taxes, corruption and dire economic conditions. South Lebanon - a bastion of the regional Shiite movement since the group liberated the region from Israeli occupation in 2000 - was not spared. Protests have been reported in the cities of Nabatiyeh, Bint Jbeil, and Tyre, where Hezbollah and its political affiliate the Amal Movement hold sway. With the exception of Tyre, they were not as big as other parts of the country.

But "the novelty here is that some of these protesters are party loyalists," said Sara. "They support Hezbollah, but they are suffocating." Among his supporters, Nasrallah is revered as an icon, with his pictures inundating highways, shops and homes. In the past, his followers have mobilized against anyone who tried to criticize him, often ostracizing opponents as supporters of rival Israel.

But anti-government protests that started in Beirut on Oct 17 and quickly spread across the country left no politician unscathed, not even the Hezbollah leader. "All of them means all of them, Nasrallah is one of them," protesters chanted in Beirut. Criticism of Nasrallah even aired on the Hezbollah-run Al-Manar TV, in a scene that was previously unfathomable for watchers of the movement's propaganda arm.

In a live interview from central Beirut, one protester urged Nasrallah to "look after his people in Lebanon" instead of focusing on regional enterprises like Syria, where he has deployed fighters to defend President

Bashar Al-Assad's regime. Nasrallah acknowledged the mounting criticism against him in a speech on Saturday: "Curse me, I don't mind." Speaking on the protesters' demands, he warned against calling for the resignation of the government - saying it could take a long time to form a new one and solve the crisis.

Hatem Gharbeel, a protester in Nabatiyeh, said Hezbollah loyalists felt let down. "The messages being addressed to Nasrallah by his own supporters in Nabatiyeh is that the resistance is not just about fighting Israel or terrorism," he said. "It should also be about supporting people's livelihoods." Other party heads have come in for even greater criticism. Prime Minister Saad Hariri, Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil and Speaker Nabih Berri have been the targets of strong insults and slurs by demonstrators, even in areas where they are popular.

But the relatively toned-down criticism of Nasrallah has broken taboos, said Gharbeel. "The barrier of fear has been broken," he said. "It shows that people are not blindly following their political or sectarian leaders anymore." Lokman Slim, an independent political activist and an outspoken critic of Hezbollah, said that resentment among Lebanon's Shiite community "is not born out of a single event or a single moment". "Frustration has been fermenting over the past few years over an economic crisis hampering not just the Lebanese state but also Hezbollah's statelet."

Hezbollah has filled in for the weak central government in areas where it has influence, creating social welfare institutions and provided an array of public services, including education and health services. But the group has come under financial strain due to tightening US sanctions since President Donald Trump assumed office, forcing Nasrallah to appeal to his popular base for donations earlier this year. "The Shiites have nothing to lose anymore," said Slim. "This is why they are out on the streets." — AFP