

International

Tap for trash: App seeks to clean up Zimbabwean waste-clogged cities

Government struggling to keep the cities clean

HARARE: The stench of decaying rubbish fills the air around Euphrasia Mangwe's house in the Zimbabwean capital, attracting hordes of green flies to the two plastic bins in the corner of her garden. It is an irritation to the 35-year-old mother of four who has become accustomed to. The rubbish bins in her neighborhood in Harare are supposed to be emptied once a week, but often they sit untouched for up to four weeks at a time.

So, Mangwe does what many other residents do. She waits until dark and then tosses her rubbish into an open space near her home. "It is horrible having to live near garbage. That we are not sick is a wonder when we are always surrounded by mounds of waste," she explained. "Waste collection is a basic right, the same as water. But not here." Constrained by a lack of fuel and funding amid the country's worst economic crisis in a decade, the government is struggling to keep its cities clean.

In Harare it manages to pick up only two-thirds of the 30,000 tons of garbage residents produce each month, Harare City Council (HCC) spokesman Michael Chideme told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. So, the private sector is sweeping in to help with a new mobile-based solu-

tion. The digital service from local waste management company Clean City Africa works through a popular ride-hailing app to connect households and workplaces with private waste collection firms. To use the on-demand, "Uber-type" service, which launched in July, a customer schedules and pays for garbage collections through the Vaya Africa app, explained Clean City Africa CEO Lovemore Nyatsine. Then one of the company's more than 200 franchisees picks up the customer's waste from their doorstep and takes it to one of the city's landfill sites - instead of customers having to do it themselves or filling in an online form.

Cholera outbreak

While Chideme at the HCC said the city's waste collection shortfall has been ongoing since early 2018, many residents complained they have not had regular rubbish collections for at least the past five years. Nyatsine said he first became aware of how acute the problem was during a cholera outbreak last year in Harare's highly-populated suburbs of Glen View and Budiriro which left at least 50 people dead, according to the World Health Organization. Officials said that the outbreak had been caused by burst

sewer pipes that contaminated the city's drinking water. The waste piling up around the city was exacerbating the health crisis, Nyatsine explained.

He was part of a team sent by telecoms giant Econet Wireless Zimbabwe to join other volunteers in trying to curb the outbreak by sweeping the streets, cleaning drains and picking up rubbish. But once they were finished cleaning an area, it became clear that the council did not have the capacity to dispose of all the garbage they had collected. "We realized it was not just a problem of the cholera-afflicted suburbs, but city wide," Nyatsine said.

In response, Econet subsidiary Cassava Smartech created Clean City Africa. Working with local authorities and its franchisees, the company can now cover more than 500,000 households in Harare and its suburbs, Nyatsine noted, and has plans to roll the service out to other cities in Zimbabwe by the end of the year. More than 50 illegal dump sites have been shut down across Harare since the company launched, he added.

Ease the pressure

Kudakwashe Ncube, a resident of the suburb of

Cranborne, said there has been a marked improvement in waste collection since the Clean City Africa initiative started. He and his neighbors had tried other private waste management companies, he added, but they never seemed to have enough trucks to cope with Harare's mounting waste problem. "Some residents were looking for alternatives such as dumping in common areas ... others were burning their litter in their yards, again polluting the environment."

As for the local authorities, Harare city councillor Norman Makondo said they welcomed any help they could get from private waste collection companies, adding that they eased the pressure on the government. "I'm happy to see companies like Clean City Africa come in, because they have the capacity to clean and collect garbage in (a) short period," Makondo said in a phone interview. "We could not keep up with collecting garbage." When announcing this year's budget in December 2018, HCC spokesman Chideme told reporters the council would increase the amount it spends on water and sanitation, which includes investing in more rubbish trucks. — Reuters

Could Egypt's rare anti-Sisi protests swell?

CAIRO: Rare protests erupted in Cairo and the port city of Suez over the weekend for the first time in three years, spurred by discontent over rising prices. Heavy security has been put in place, but could this trigger a wider movement against former general-turned-President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi?

What happened?

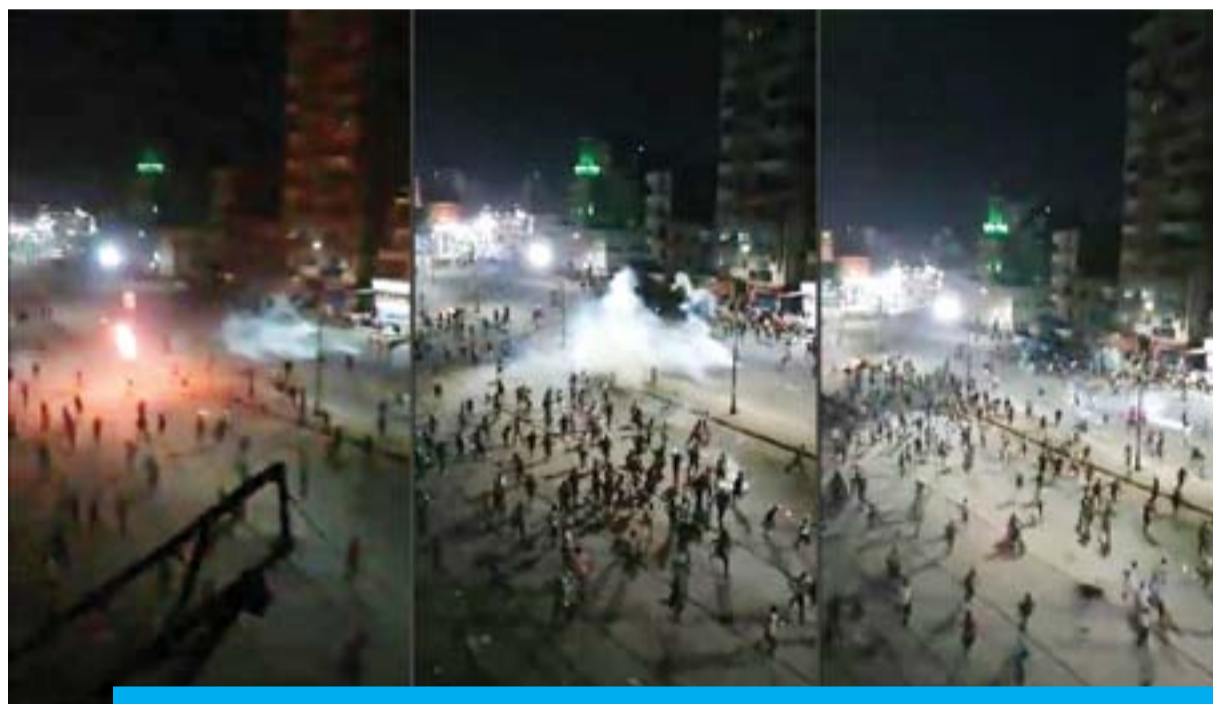
Just after a highly awaited derby between two rival Cairo football clubs last week, scores of protesters gathered in the capital's iconic Tahrir Square - the epicenter of the 2011 revolution. Demonstrators in other major cities also joined in a spontaneous outpouring of chants against Sisi's regime calling for the "downfall of the military regime" and shouting "Leave, Sisi". The protests had been called for by Mohamed Aly, 45, an exiled Egyptian businessman in Spain, who in recent weeks has leveled accusations of corruption at Sisi in a series of viral videos which have sparked unprecedented public debate. Alleging how taxpayer money went into building lavish palaces for Sisi, they have struck a chord with Egyptians who have been bearing the brunt of stringent economic reforms his government has introduced since 2016.

Why are Egyptians protesting?

"The image with which Sisi wanted to present himself as Egypt's savior from Muslim Brotherhood rule... has been completely dismantled", said Hassan Nafaa, a veteran political scientist at Cairo University. Sisi led the military ouster of Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in 2013. Nafaa explained that Egyptians "have been shouldering the burdens of Sisi's policies". He referred to the austerity measures imposed since the pound was floated in 2016 as a prime example fuelling discontent. "Mohamed Aly came out of nowhere to become a hero in a certain sense. He managed to unmask Sisi," Nafaa said. The Egyptian leader has flatly denied the graft allegations as "lies and slander".

Who is protesting?

Egypt passed a restrictive anti-protest law in 2013 after Morsi's overthrow and a renewable state of emergency remains in effect. Sisi's government has waged an ongoing



SUEZ: Combo pictures shows confrontations between Egyptian security forces and protesters in Al-Arbaeen Square in the centre of the port city of Suez. — AFP

wide-scale crackdown jailing thousands of Islamists, secular activists and even bloggers and comedians. The latest example being Mahienour El-Massry, an award-winning human rights lawyer, arrested on Sunday.

The new wave of demonstrators "had not been political before engaging with Aly's videos. They were shocked with the detailed information he gave," said Nafaa. Aly pinpointed villas Sisi had built in recent years in Mediterranean resort towns in Egypt that triggered the ire of many citizens. "The protesters are those who are socially crushed. They say to themselves 'we have nothing to lose' by protesting," Nafaa added.

How have authorities responded?

Sisi, currently in New York to attend the UN General Meeting this week, has not commented publicly on the outbreak of small-scale protests. His office did not respond when asked by AFP on Saturday about the demonstrations. Pro-Sisi Egyptian media have gone to great lengths to show that the country is stable and public squares are under control, broadcasting nightly images of

traffic moving smoothly. The government's foreign media accreditation body released a statement late Saturday cautioning international journalists that their reporting of events "should not be exaggerated", without explicitly mentioning the protests. Security has been heavy with anti-riot police stationed in Tahrir Square in Cairo and in Suez where anti-Sisi protesters congregated for a second night in a row on Saturday.

What will come next?

Aly, the building contractor, has called for a "million-man march" this Friday dubbing it a "people's revolution" vowing to unseat Sisi. Analysts assessing the fluid political situation believe that anger is swelling which would translate to more protests in the coming days. "What happened on Friday is a worrying sign for the authorities. People went out to demonstrate even in the midst of a heavily securitized environment," said political analyst Mustapha Al-Sayyid. "I believe these protests won't stop at this point, but it's also difficult predicting what comes next", he added. — AFP



TEHRAN: President Rouhani attends a farewell ceremony at the Mehrabad airport in Tehran, shortly before leaving Tehran for the UN General Assembly in New York. — AFP

US emphasizes diplomacy in Iran standoff

WASHINGTON: The United States said it will make its case against Iran at the United Nations this week, insisting it wants to give diplomacy "every opportunity to succeed" in the wake of a devastating attack on a vital Saudi oil complex. Settling the stage for President Donald Trump's address to the annual UN General Assembly today, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo put aside threats of US military retaliation against Iran for the attack.

"President Trump and I both want to give diplomacy every opportunity to succeed," Pompeo said in an interview with ABC's "This Week." "Our administration's taking this on in a serious way and we are working diligently to see that this has a diplomatic outcome," he said. "But make no mistake about it, if we're unsuccessful in that and Iran continues to strike out in this way, I am confident that President Trump will make the decisions necessary to achieve our objectives."

The United States has accused Tehran of carrying out the sneak air attacks that set aflame Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq plant and the Khurais oil field September 14, knocking out half the kingdom's oil production. Pompeo called it "one of the largest attacks on the global energy supply in history." But despite initial warnings by Trump that US forces were "locked and loaded," the US president quickly softened his rhetoric, brushing off Republican hawks who warned that the absence of a forceful response would be read as weakness in Tehran.

Trump has so far ordered stepped up sanctions against Iran, and a relatively modest deployment of US troops to the Gulf, primarily focused on defensive missions like air and missile defense. On Fox News, Pompeo said the administration was "deeply aware of the risks" of a miscalculation leading to conflagration in the tinderbox region. "It's why we want to resolve this in a way that doesn't resort to kinetic action if it's at all possible to achieve that," he said.

On Sunday, before leaving the White House on a trip to Texas, Trump once again left open the possibility of an unscheduled meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. — AFP

Yemen upcycles shot-up buses to ease water shortage

TAEZ: Once a bus wreck peppered with bullet holes, the pristine white water tanker parked in front of a Yemen university now delivers water to students in the war-torn and cholera-hit south. Sitting among still battle-scarred buses, the tanker was repurposed by student welfare officer Nashwan El-Rebasi, who has made a mini fleet of water transporters for the university at the foot of the Taz mountains. "The idea was born out of the water shortages in the region and the total lack of a reservoir at the university," said the 35-year-old.

Taz, Yemen's third city located in the country's mountainous southwest, has been rocked by violent clashes between pro-government forces and Houthi rebels, as well as between different loyalist factions. The ongoing civil war has ravaged Yemen since its outbreak in 2014. The conflict has been thrust back into the spotlight after the Houthis claimed an audacious attack on Saudi oil infrastructure on September 14 that took out half the kingdom's production. Washington and Riyadh have roundly rejected the claim, with the finger of blame pointing towards Iran instead.

Filled with rainwater

Taz's 600,000 people have remained under the control of pro-government forces with the backing of Saudi Arabia, while Houthi fighters backed by Iran have besieged the city. The Houthis have tested the resolve of the city's residents by seizing control of areas that include the principal wells supplying the city and restricting access to the essential resource. "Eighty percent of the buses at the university were destroyed," said Rebasi from behind the wheel of one of his tankers, which he creat-



TAEZ: A man stands atop a university bus transformed into a water tank in Yemen's third city of Taz. — AFP

ed by working "tirelessly" for a fortnight. In an open air workshop, university technicians dismantle other buses, leaving only the driver's seat and the chassis onto which tanks are attached in place of passenger benches.

Four passenger buses have been reincarnated as water tankers in total, to help 200 dormitory-dwelling students out of the university's 40,000-strong student body. "We've had several assembly issues and have struggled to find spare parts on the market," explained technician Mohamed Amin. "We can't order them from Sanaa" or provisional capital Aden, he said. The tankers are filled from what little rainwater falls in the area and from the boreholes still under government control. The scheme costs the university 700,000 Yemeni riyals a month (\$2,700 at the official rate, \$1,300 on the black market).

The United Nations accuses both the rebels and pro-government forces of war crimes against civilians, and provoking the world's worst humanitarian crisis including a cholera epidemic. The UN's special envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths wrote this week that "this is a conflict the international community can resolve. And because we can, we must". "Let us be clear: Yemen cannot wait. And moreover, Yemen need not wait. And neither should we." Two million suspected cases of the waterborne infection have been recorded by the World Health Organization, while cholera has killed at least 3,500 people, roughly two-thirds of whom were under five years old. — AFP

EU ministers in Malta to thrash out new migrant system

VALLETTA: Interior ministers from four EU countries met yesterday in Malta to try to work out an automatic system to determine which countries will welcome migrants rescued in the central Mediterranean. The ministers from France, Germany, Italy and Malta hope to end the long, drawn-out negotiations that have seen vulnerable asylum seekers including babies stranded at sea, sometimes for weeks.

The mooted automatic distribution scheme would only be a temporary solution until the current system, the "Dublin regulation", can be revised. Critics have long argued that the regulation places an unfair burden on the Mediterranean frontier countries Italy, Malta, Greece and Spain. Italy's new, pro-EU government has moved quickly to turn the page on the hardline anti-migrant policies pursued by former far-right interior minister Matteo Salvini, who closed the ports to those rescued.

A successful European migrant agreement would be a blow to Salvini, showing that cooperation gets better results than confrontation. After a meeting last week, Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and French President Emmanuel Macron both called for a reform of Europe's "ineffective" policy.

Countries that did not volunteer to take migrants should face financial penalties, they argued. "Europe has to be better prepared and stand with frontline countries like Italy, Greece, Malta, Spain and Cyprus." European migration commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos said as he arrived for the Malta talks. "Our priority is to save lives... the others who want to cross European borders illegally, they must know they will be sent back home," Avramopoulos said. Finland's Interior Minister Maria Ohisalo is also attending the talks as her country currently holds the EU presidency.

Rotation?

In a sign of how things have changed over the last few weeks, Italy late Sunday authorized charity rescue vessel the Ocean Viking to disembark its 182 people rescued at sea in Messina, Sicily. The decision "puts an end to five days of unnecessary suffering," said charities SOS Mediterranean and Doctors without Borders (MSF) which operate the ship.

"It is urgent that a European agreement is found to put an end to these repeated stand-offs," the ship's search and rescue coordinator Nicola Stalla said. At an informal meeting of foreign and interior ministers in Paris in June, 15 countries agreed to set up a "European Solidarity Mechanism". Croatia, Finland, France, Ireland, Germany, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Portugal said they would "actively" take part.

But Hungary's nationalist prime minister, Viktor Orban, rejected redistribution quotas in comments made during a visit to Rome on Saturday. Yesterday's meeting in Malta will try to decide where those rescued can be relocated - and whether that covers just those fleeing war and persecution, or economic migrants too. France and Germany are reportedly willing to receive 25 percent of people plucked from the Mediterranean.

But they are not keen on Italy's idea for migrants to be sent to countries across southern Europe on a rotation basis. Italy could take 10 percent of new arrivals - a lower proportion because it has already hosted tens of thousands. The number of migrants reaching Europe via the Mediterranean has dropped sharply in recent years. The UN's refugee body recorded nearly 115,000 arrivals in 2018, down from 170,000 in 2017 and over one million in 2015.

In Brussels, the European Commission said it welcomed the Malta talks and that it was looking forward to "the next step", a meeting of all EU interior ministers in Luxembourg on October 7-8. "We stand ready to support such temporary arrangements both financially and operationally," Commission spokeswoman Mina Andreeva said of the possible migrant distribution mechanism. — AFP