

Analysis

Kuwait Times
Established 1961
The First Daily in The Arabian GulfTHE LEADING INDEPENDENT
DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF
ESTABLISHED 1961Founder and Publisher
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Email: info@kuwaittimes.com
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to cut climate risks

New York City gets its drinking water from a network of more than 20 reservoirs and lakes further north in New York state, some more than 160 km away. Because the land surrounding the reservoirs is carefully protected and managed, the water piped in is pure enough so that the city is one of the few in the United States that does not need to filter its drinking water, officials say. Creating more "nature-based solutions" like this - planting coastal mangroves or protecting coral reefs to slow storm surges - is a relatively cheap and effective way to curb rising climate change risks, resilience experts told a meeting in New York.

It could also help address other threats, including accelerating losses of plant and animal species not just from climate change but also expanding agriculture, forest-felling and mining, to meet the needs of a rising human population. "There is a wealth of evidence ... that if we restore, protect and enhance ecosystems, they will lower human vulnerability to climate change," said Nathalie Seddon, a University of Oxford zoologist. Especially in poorer countries, such measures can offer "the only affordable solution to climate change", she told the meeting on boosting resilience to climate pressures ahead of a U.N. summit Monday to accelerate action on global warming.

Africa forest deal

In Indonesia, international organizations and the government are working together to protect eroding coastlines by planting mangroves, said Henk Nieboer, director of Ecoshape, a Dutch foundation that promotes efforts to "build with nature". Once in place, the mangroves provide jobs by improving fishing and act as a barrier to destructive storm surges, he said. Ecoshape has carefully monitored the benefits of 14 pilot mangrove restoration projects in Indonesia, providing evidence that has now attracted interest from Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia and China, he said.

Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum, Fiji's attorney general and economic minister, said his Pacific island nation was also planting mangroves to blunt the effects of rising seas, store carbon, protect biodiversity and promote sustainable fisheries. Restoration projects are possible in many other natural environments, from peat-rich wetlands to grasslands and forests, climate experts said.

Andrew Norton, director of the London-based International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), said efforts to maintain ecosystems can provide "a stunning range" of benefits, from jobs to absorption of climate-changing gases. But finding the money to fund that work remains a challenge, not least because putting a financial value on the benefits is hard, and investors have yet to see an obvious pay-back. Nieboer said attracting capital would require the creation of value for ecosystems through measures like a carbon price to monetize avoided or removed carbon emissions. That is what is happening in Gabon, which will receive \$150 million over 10 years for protecting its carbon-absorbing tropical forests in an agreement announced Sunday - the first such deal for an African country. Under it, Norway will guarantee payment of at least \$10 for each ton of carbon certified as being stored.

Close to 90 percent of Gabon's land is covered in natural forests, much in reserves created over a decade ago, but like many Central African nations, it is under pressure to allow forest-felling to bring in cash. "We have to raise the value of the Gabonese rainforests in order to ensure that conservation and sustainable exploitation can be used as tools to improve the living standards of the Gabonese people," its environment minister said in a statement.

Social justice

Backers of such efforts to put a clearer value on forests and other natural systems warn that doing so brings some risks, including that indigenous people and others living on the land could be pushed off as its value rises. "Nature-based solutions have to work for social justice as well as climate solutions," said Norton of IIED. Nicky Batang-ay of Tebtebbba, the Philippines-based Indigenous Peoples' International Centre for Policy Research and Education, noted that "as indigenous people, we've been doing these nature-based solutions from time immemorial".

Oxford's Seddon, who runs the university's Nature-Based Solutions Initiative, said payments and other incentives should protect and expand natural forests rather than support single-species plantations with fewer natural benefits and far less resilience to climate change. Natural ways of dealing with climate change have seen a "wave of political momentum" in the build-up to the U.N. climate summit, speakers said on Sunday.

U Ohn Win, Myanmar's minister of environmental conservation, said his country - which is highly vulnerable to extreme weather - was looking to reforest 600,000 hectares over the next 10 years, in part to cut its climate risks. "Our country has committed to a sustainable development pathway ... with nature-based solutions at its core," he said. — Reuters

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In this file photo taken on Dec 22, 1989, people from East Germany greet citizens of West Germany at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. — AFP

Nov 9, 1989: The day that changed the world

Guenter Schabowski scratches his head, puts on his glasses, hesitates, then fumbles with his handwritten notes. He seems to be trying to understand what he is reading and haltingly responds to a question about when a measure giving East Germans more freedom to travel would take effect: "As far as I know... as of now." History's train has left the station. It is around 7 pm on Nov 9, 1989. A member of the Politburo of East Germany's communist party, and its spokesman, this member of the inner ruling circle of the "workers' and peasants' state" as the German Democratic Republic was known just announced to a few flabbergasted journalists the fall of the Berlin Wall. He seems to do it by accident, at the end of a press conference and in response to questions about the new rules for East German citizens leaving the country. There was no going back.

But 30 years after the fact, the debate is still raging: Was the sudden demise of the Berlin Wall, a prelude to that of the entire communist bloc, an accident of history, a slip of the tongue? Was it the result of a misunderstanding in the communist hierarchy, caught flat-footed by events, or a calculated gesture by the East German dictatorship which had reached the end of the line?

'We want to leave!'

In the corridors of power in East Berlin, inside the opulent villas in the leafy northern suburb of Wandlitz which the apparatchiks called home, the mood has been on a knife-edge for weeks. How to salvage the situation? The East German population, trapped behind the Iron Curtain since 1961, is "voting with its feet". Since Aug 1989, Hungary and Czechoslovakia have been turning a blind eye to a flood of refugees escaping the east for West Germany.

Meanwhile since early September, hundreds of thousands of East Germans have taken to city streets to protest each week, chanting against the regime "We are the people!" and "We want to leave!" The crisis has reached the tipping point. And the GDR can no longer count on the Soviet big brother to intervene.

Gorbachev's warning

In Moscow the tone has changed and Mikhail Gorbachev is speaking of "perestroika" (change or reform) and "glasnost" (openness, transparency). The Soviet leader had only just warned East German strongman Erich Honecker in early October that "Life punishes those who are too late." A few days later, on Oct 18, Honecker, who had applauded China for "crushing the counter-revolu-

tionary uprising" in Tiananmen Square, was gone, making way for Egon Krenz. Presented as a relative moderate, Krenz intends to shore up the GDR with a few reforms, notably a liberalization of travel with the granting of an exit visa without any preconditions.

A mistake?

Against this backdrop, Guenter Schabowski is entrusted the evening of Nov 9, 1989 with the mission of announcing live on television the measures decided the same day by a small committee. From there, the versions of events vary. Krenz still resents Schabowski, whom he accuses of having plunged the GDR "into a difficult situation" by proclaiming the immediate entry into force of the chance to leave the country. He should have, according to Krenz, stuck to a press release drawn up announcing the liberalization of travel starting the next morning.

The idea was to allow controlled departures with a mandatory visa and to maintain border infrastructure, not to rip down the Wall overnight, and with it the GDR. So was it an error of judgement in the line of fire? Or an audacious, intentional move? Until his death in 2015 at 86, Schabowski never clearly answered the question.

'Save the GDR'

"No one could have stopped the movement that was touched off by my announcement," he would say later, casting himself as an ardent reformer. According to his version of events, the opening of the borders was pushed through by a vanguard of proponents of change against the wishes of the party's central committee, dominated by Stalinist diehards. "We came to the conclusion that if we wanted to save the GDR, we had to let the people who wanted to flee leave," Schabowski told the daily TAZ in 2009. The former East German dissident and later speaker of the Bundestag lower house of parliament, Wolfgang Thierse, however is convinced that Schabowski never grasped the full impact of his announcement. "I don't think he knew what was going to happen," he told public radio. "We suspected that something was being prepared for freedom of travel because the communist party wanted to lift the lid to decrease the pressure. But Schabowski did not have an inkling that he was going to set everything off."

Merkel 'speechless and happy'

The ensuing events turned the tide in East Germany after more than 40 years of Cold War. After having heard the message on the radio, on television or by word of

mouth, East Germans streamed in their thousands throughout the night to the border crossings. Cautious at first, then incredulous, they grew emboldened by the West Berliners who were already cheering them on from the other side of the Wall. In the face of the swelling crowd, the barriers were soon wide open, starting in Berlin at Bornholmer Strasse.

Among the slackjawed East Berliners who made their way toward the west from that border crossing that night was a certain Angela Merkel. She lived in a small flat nearby and had kept her weekly date for the sauna before emerging to savor her first taste of freedom. "We were just speechless and happy," she would tell public broadcaster ARD. The chemistry researcher at the GDR Academy of Sciences modestly celebrated the evening by drinking "a can of beer" with friends in the west, before returning home at a reasonable hour.

"The welcome in West Berlin was so warm," the future chancellor recalled to the daily Frankfurter Rundschau. Further border crossings opened and the armed guards, overtaken by events and without orders from the party, stopped performing their official duties and the police withdrew. "We are as lost as you are," a border guard tells a Berlin woman.

'Completely crazy'

At the Bundestag in the "provisional" West German capital in Bonn, deputies by around 8 pm have begun to grasp the scope of the epochal earthquake. They interrupt their session and spontaneously break into a chorus of the national anthem. Former chancellor Willy Brandt, father of the Ostpolitik of rapprochement with the east, has tears in his eyes. At 10:40 pm, the main newsreader on West German television, Hanns-Joachim Friedrichs, presented the headline "East Berlin opens the Wall".

"The Berlin Wall no longer divides anything," AFP wrote that night, its reporters moved by their chance to witness history in the making. On that night of dreams, Berliners from East and West climbed atop the hated Wall in front of the Brandenburg Gate and danced to freedom and the "end of history". The jubilant images of Germans reuniting in tears circled the globe. Everyone seemed to have a variant of the same phrase on their lips: "It's completely crazy!" And Schabowski? The story's ending for its messenger is less happy: He was sentenced to prison in 1997 for his complicity in the shoot-to-kill policy enforced by border guards against those trying to flee to the West. He was pardoned in 2000. — AFP



(Left) Diman Fatah, the owner of Arbil's first female-run plant nursery, tends to her plants at her nursery in Arbil on Aug 8, 2019. (Center) Zilan Serwud, the owner of the Zee Burger food truck, poses for a picture with a burger in Arbil on Aug 17, 2019. (Right) Shawnem Hussein, owner of Sky Fitness health center, poses for a picture at the first fitness center for women in Raniya district, 70 km east of Arbil, on Aug 7, 2019. — AFP photos

For Kurdish Iraq's
women entrepreneurs,
persistence pays off

Smiling proudly, Zilan Serwud welcomed hungry customers swarming her newly-opened food truck in Kurdish Iraq. But launching the venture required more than just permits and loans: Serwud needed family approval. Lingering societal prejudice, family pressures and an under-developed private sector have constrained women from breaking into the Iraqi workforce, including in Kurdistan. That didn't stop 22-year-old Serwud. She launched Zee Burger in the regional capital Arbil last month, offering no-fuss fare of burgers, fries and onion rings served at small wooden tables.

The journey to get there was nowhere near as simple. The first step to any female-run business, said Serwud, was convincing relatives the venture would not be looked

down on by the Muslim-majority, conservative society. "I heard some people say: 'she has a father and brother, why should she run the restaurant?'" Serwud told AFP. "But if you have an idea or want to develop yourself, you should not listen to hearsay."

Her family gave its approval, and she received funding from the German development agency (GIZ) to purchase mobile kitchen equipment. Serwud's father helped pick out the kitchenware and her brother Bayad even flips burgers part-time in the yellow-and-purple food truck. "I am super happy now that I have my own business. I feel I've obtained my freedom and am showing everyone this is what I am capable of," said Serwud.

Budding businesses

In Iraq, only 15 percent of working-age women are in the labor force, one of the lowest rates in the world, according to a 2018 demographic survey by the regional government. Among employed women in Kurdistan, up to 75 percent work in the public sector, making female entrepreneurs an especially rare breed. The biggest obstacle is defamation by conservative elements of Iraqi society who see economically-autonomous women as

too liberal or even promiscuous. "What actually destroys women in our society is the word 'shameful'," said Diman Fatah, 59, who opened Arbil's first female-run plant nursery and chairs a botanical club with 450 members, including 25 women. "Women are afraid to innovate or develop themselves because of what other people might say about them," said Fatah. Some recent comments on the Facebook pages of female-led businesses described the owners as "silly" and insisted that "women are responsible for all that home".

But through solidarity and persistence, a gradual shift has become noticeable. Besides caring for literal buds, Fatah's club helps women-led ventures flourish by encouraging owners to "be confident". "Don't give up and don't be silent about your rights," she urges peers. "When a woman starts her own business in our society, she does not only earn money. She raises awareness about equality and paves the way for other women to enter the market and obtain their freedom," she said. A 2013 United Nations survey found that 66 percent of Iraqi youth support the right of women to work, compared to just 42 percent among the elderly - a marked generational improvement. — AFP