

International

COVID frustrates Saudi women's push for financial independence

Pandemic hits nascent non-religious tourism industry hard

AL ULA: Abeer al-Howayan despaired of ever working after spending eight years trying to find a job that would put her chemistry degree to use in the Saudi Arabian town of Al Ula. She eventually abandoned her scientific ambitions and turned to selling homemade cakes, before she was chosen last year for a government training programme to support a \$20 billion flagship tourism project in the kingdom's northwestern region. The 31-year-old learned how to make artisanal soap from French experts flown in by Saudi authorities, and in late December started selling her creations at a booth near the rock-hewn tombs of Madain Saleh, site of an ancient civilisation.

She also started offering her wares online. Then the coronavirus struck. Even after all her compromises, Howayan's future is uncertain once again. The pandemic has hammered Saudi Arabia's nascent non-religious tourism industry - among the few new sectors to have emerged under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's drive to diversify the economy from oil and create millions of jobs. "It is very tough, but I keep telling myself things will get better after corona. One has to remain optimistic," Howayan, whose online business has also slowed, told Reuters.

Women in the United States and Europe have taken an outsized hit from the wave of unemployment caused by the coronavirus, but for

women in Saudi Arabia the downturn is particularly damaging because it struck just as their efforts to enter the workforce and gain greater financial independence were gaining traction. Howayan is among nearly one million unemployed Saudis - 12% of the working-age population - pinning their hopes on the prince's vision to modernize the conservative and patriarchal country with ambitious projects. Women make up about 83% of the jobless, according to the Saudi statistics office. And it's an educated group; 70% of those women have high school diplomas or university degrees. And many were counting on the new sectors such as tourism to provide their entry to the workforce.

Private sector squeezed

Tackling unemployment is a main pillar of Prince Mohammed's plan. He promised in 2017 "better unemployment numbers by 2020" and to cut the jobless rate to 7% over the next decade. But the rate has fallen by less than 1 percentage point. A tough task has become even tougher as coronavirus disruptions and austerity measures have squeezed the finances of the private sector. "To reduce unemployment, the private sector will need to create at least 500,000 to 1 million jobs for Saudis, said John Sfakianakis, a Gulf expert at the University of

Cambridge, "But this year alone, the private sector will unavoidably contract by 7% ... and that's just this year." Finance Minister Mohammed al-Jadaan told Reuters that the government remained committed to job creation targets and was still funding training and capacity building. "Coronavirus is with us this year and possibly for a part of next year, but then it will go away and when it goes away we need to make sure that we have seized this time to build more capacity and train more people to be ready when we start offering services again," said Jadaan. He did not specifically address the issue of women.

According to regional experts, a faltering of the reform drive could lead to the public questioning the social contract between the ruling Al Saud family and the people in a country where 80% of the population is under 30. Oil wealth is shared across the kingdom in exchange for popular submission to absolute monarchical rule. However there could be some social discontent if jobs do not materialize and Saudis find themselves paying more taxes with less state benefits, according to Yasmine Farouk at the Carnegie Middle East Center. "It will eventually guide the country into a political discussion that the leadership doesn't want," she said.

Saudi Arabia has largely struggled to lure

foreign capital outside the energy sector as many investors hesitate over Riyadh's human rights record and the commercial viability of some domestic mega projects. But the entertainment and tourism industries started taking off last year, accompanied by social reforms to open up the kingdom, including ending gender segregation in most public places and introducing public entertainment. Thousands of jobs were created and Saudis flocked to concerts, festivals and sporting events. Last year, the kingdom attracted international acts from Cirque du Soleil to Mariah Carey, Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli and Greek musician Yanni. Saudis also cheered female WWE wrestlers in Riyadh, and heavyweight boxers Anthony Joshua and Andy Ruiz Jr in a custom-built 15,000 person stadium.

However the Saudi tourism minister told Reuters in April that the industry, including Muslim pilgrimages, could decline by 35-45% this year due to coronavirus measures. Abeer Mohammed Jumuah is another example of a woman who benefited from the prince's reform drive. She spent years looking for a job as a teacher after graduating from university in home economics, and eventually joined a government training program last year to learn cooking skills in Paris—Reuters

Virus-hit Mumbai largely unscathed by Cyclone

MUMBAI: At least three people were reported dead as coronavirus-hit Mumbai appeared to escape the worst of Cyclone Nisarga Wednesday, the first severe storm to threaten India's financial capital in more than 70 years. The city and its surrounds are usually sheltered from cyclones - the last deadly storm to hit the city was in 1948. Authorities had evacuated at least 100,000 people, including coronavirus patients, from flood-prone areas in the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat ahead of Nisarga's arrival. The cyclone ripped roofs off buildings in nearby coastal towns, but appeared to have left the sprawling, crowded port megacity of Mumbai largely unscathed. Local media reported at least three fatalities in Maharashtra. One man died after an electric pole fell on him, and a woman and man were killed in their houses after tin sheets over their roofs blew away, the Press Trust of India (PTI) said.

The storm made landfall near the coastal town of Alibag, around 100 kilometers (60 miles) south of Mumbai, on Wednesday afternoon, meteorologists said. It crossed Maharashtra's coast, with its path veering to the east of Mumbai, and gradually weakened to a deep depression by Wednesday evening, they added. The cyclone brought heavy rainfall with winds of 100-110 kilometers per hour and gusts of up to 120 kph. Mumbai experi-



MUMBAI: People walk under the rain along Marine Drive as rain falls in Mumbai yesterday - the day after cyclone Nisarga's landfall in India's western coast. — AFP

enced downpours throughout the afternoon, with strong winds toppling trees in some cases. City authorities said there were no reports of injuries or deaths, though the rains caused compound walls to collapse in some neighborhoods.

The beach town of Alibag fared worse, with the cyclone tearing roofs off homes and overturning mobile food stalls. A 45-year-old professor who evacuated from his house near the sea told AFP he could see corrugated roofing flying through the air as Nisarga's powerful winds struck. "The intensity is very strong and nothing like weather events we've seen before," said Milind Dhore, who lives in Alibag with his wife and son. The coastal town is a favored haunt of Bollywood stars and industrialists, who own holiday homes there. —AFP

Snapchat curbs Trump for inciting 'racial violence'

SAN FRANCISCO: Snapchat on Wednesday became the latest social network moving to curb the reach of US President Donald Trump, claiming the president has been inciting "racial violence." The youth-focused social network said it would no longer promote Trump on its Discover platform for recommended content. "We will not amplify voices who incite racial violence and injustice by giving them free promotion on Discover," a statement from Snapchat said. The move came days after Twitter took an unprecedented stand by hiding a Trump post it said promoted violence, heating up the White House war with Silicon Valley and social media.

Snapchat parent Snap chief executive Evan Spiegel over the weekend sent a lengthy memo to employees condemning what he saw as a legacy of racial injustice and violence in the US. Snapchat will not promote accounts in the US that are linked to people who incite racial violence on or off the messaging platform, according to Spiegel. "Every minute we are silent in the face of evil and wrongdoing we are acting in support of evildoers," Spiegel wrote as companies responded to the outrage over the police killing of a black man in Minnesota. "I am heartbroken and enraged by the treatment of black people and people of color in America." The Discover feature at Snapchat is a curated platform on which the California-based company gets to decide what it recommends to users.—AFP