

International

Yemen weddings air on live TV to avoid virus shutdown

COVID cases on the rise in war-ravaged Yemen

SANAA: The Yemeni grooms sit expectantly inside a TV studio, waiting for their wedding parties to be broadcast live so that families and friends can join in the celebrations despite a coronavirus lockdown. The pandemic has forced weddings to be scaled down or cancelled across the world but in the Yemeni capital Sanaa the traditional folk music and dancing have been beamed into people's homes instead. Well-wishers call into the satellite channel Alhawyah to offer their congratulations to the grooms, dressed in their finest clothes and with rifles propped up next to them and traditional daggers tucked into their belts.

As the number of coronavirus cases began to rise in war-ravaged Yemen, Alhawyah - Arabic for "identity" - began hosting wedding parties with the aim of reducing guest numbers and preventing the spread of the virus. Participants are sprayed with disinfectant before entering the studio for the all-male gatherings, where a popular band performs. Before the pandemic, weddings in Yemen were lively affairs that drew hundreds of guests - both men and women but separately in line with tribal tradition. The men spent the evening chewing qat, a mild narcotic that is a mainstay of Yemeni culture.

Presenter Abdulwahab Yahya said the idea of the show is "to keep the bridegrooms in good

health and to help them enjoy their weddings despite coronavirus". "Instead of guests coming to wedding halls to greet the bridegrooms, they can phone and greet them during the two-hour show," he said. Osama al-Qaood spent months trying to organize his big day before opting for a televised event. "Normal wedding gatherings will help spread the disease to neighborhoods and communities. My real joy is to ensure a healthy society," he told AFP. Yemen is engulfed in a long war between Iranian-backed Houthi rebels, who control much of the north including Sanaa, and the government which is supported by a Saudi-led military coalition.

Five years of conflict have killed tens of thousands of people, most of them civilians, and created what the United Nations has described as the world's worst humanitarian crisis. UN agencies and humanitarian groups have warned that Yemen's dilapidated health system will not be able to cope with a major outbreak of coronavirus. Authorities have so far reported 967 cases including 257 deaths, but the real toll is feared to be much higher. "I hoped that I would be able to organize a normal wedding where relatives and friends get together to celebrate," said another of the grooms, Mohammed I-Rahoumi. "But amid the spread of coronavirus, we came to the TV channel to receive greetings," he said. — AFP



HAAJAH: Salwa Ibrahim, a five-year-old girl suffering from acute malnutrition and weighing three kilograms, is bathed by her mother outside their impoverished house in Yemen's northern Hajjah province. — AFP

US puts sanctions on 5 Iran's ship captains

WASHINGTON: The United States on Wednesday imposed sanctions on five Iranian ship captains who delivered oil to Venezuela, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reaffirmed Washington's backing for Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaido. Speaking at a news conference, Pompeo said the ships delivered about 1.5 million barrels of Iranian gasoline and related components, and warned mariners against doing business with the government of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, whose ouster Washington seeks. "As a result of today's sanctions, these captains' assets will be blocked. Their careers and prospects will suffer from this designation," Pompeo said in a statement later.

"We will continue to support the National Assembly, interim President Guaido, and the Venezuelan people in their quest to restore democracy," Pompeo added to reporters. President Donald Trump's administration is seeking to block Iran's energy trade and also bring down Maduro. It has threatened reprisals and warned ports, shipping companies and insurers against assisting the tankers. Venezuela's exports are hovering near their lowest levels in more than 70 years and the OPEC member's economy has collapsed. Yet Maduro has held on, frustrating the Trump administration.

In a statement on Twitter, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza called the sanctions "an excess of arrogance" and "more proof of the Trump hawks' hatred of all Venezuelans." Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi wrote in a tweet that Washington's action signaled the failure of its pressure campaign and said Iran and Venezuela "remain steadfast in countering unlawful American sanctions." Iran has sent five tankers since April to the socialist government of fuel-starved Venezuela. The shipments have done little to alleviate hours-long lines at gas stations. — Reuters

Political stagnation, COVID-19 galvanise Maghreb migrants

ALGIERS: "Here, I don't exist - I die little by little," said Hamid, a young Algerian, his gaze fixed on Mediterranean waters he sees as his route to a better future. "My only hope is to leave for Europe." Like thousands of citizens from the Maghreb, the 28-year-old has chosen to risk his life by crossing the Mediterranean on a makeshift boat. With the coronavirus pandemic further squeezing already scant economic opportunities, Algerians and Tunisians are more determined than ever to reach Europe.

The deadly nature of their gamble was underlined again this month when 60 people, mostly women and children, drowned off the Tunisian coast. But this has not put Hamid off. An engineer by profession, he has work, but is forced to live with his parents because his salary is not enough to rent a separate apartment. His friends Djamel and Mohamed are also set on making a seaborne bid from Annaba, a northeastern city that is a popular launchpad for illicit crossings to Europe. The migrants are known locally as "harraga", "those who burn" - a reference to successful travellers setting their identity papers alight upon reaching their chosen destination, to avoid repatriation.

A protest movement that started early last year and quickly toppled longtime president Abdelaziz Bouteflika had sparked young people's hopes for a better future at home. But as the unprecedented peaceful movement has been ever more harshly repressed and the oil-dependent economy has tanked on low crude prices, illegal departures have ticked up again. Djamel

said that with people being arrested for simply "posting opinions on Facebook", making for the seas "has become a question of survival".

'Society regressed'

Algerian defence ministry figures show authorities arrested 1,433 people trying to depart illegally from Algeria's shores in the first five months of this year - more than three times the figure for the same period of 2019. The monthly numbers of detentions dropped dramatically from 828 in January to just 16 in March, as the country's coronavirus outbreak kicked in. But Kouceila Zerguine, a lawyer based in Annaba, is convinced that actual migrant departures from Algeria are anyway far higher than the official figures.

"You have to multiply that number by 20," because you have to account for those who actually complete their trip without being intercepted, Zerguine said. Sociologist Mohamed Mohamedi said the Hirak protest movement had offered citizens brief "hope of shaping a life" in Algeria. But, he said, "the return of the 'harraga' is due to the return of hopelessness". Mahrez Bouich, a professor of philosophy and politics in Bejaia in northeastern Algeria, agreed that the lack of hoped-for changes, along with economic stagnation, were to blame.

The pandemic has "exacerbated social inequalities and injustices", Bouich said. Despite a 2009 law that punishes migrants intercepted at sea with six months in prison (five years for smugglers), growing numbers of Algerians are attempting the crossing - often more than once. Aboard the boats are doctors, nurses, policemen, the unemployed and entire families, lawyer Zerguine said, arguing that the phenomenon cannot be explained by unemployment alone. Those who decide to leave "want to live with the times, they want more freedom and dignity". Mohamed, the prospective migrant, said Algeria's social conservatism had overlooked young people. "My grandparents are more open in spirit than my parents - it's mad," he said. "Society has regressed and I refuse to regress with it." — AFP