

Sports

Sailing Baghdad's river bends, young Iraqis rocking the boat

'I want to show everyone that we, Iraqi women, can succeed'

BAGHDAD: Mariam Khaled squinted her eyes, drew in her sail against the wind and set her white dinghy towards a point on the riverbank: Adhamiya, to be precise, in central Baghdad. With the orange sunset saturating the sky, a cluster of mostly teenage sailors, windsurfers and jet-skiers were making waves along the river Tigris. "It's a difficult sport that requires a lot of effort, and plenty of patience and perseverance," 16-year-old Khaled, a former junior swimming champion, told AFP. "But I want to show everyone that we, Iraqi women, can succeed," she added, after pulling her dinghy up the muddy bank.

The water sports are also revolutionizing how Iraqis interact with the historic Tigris and Euphrates, which gave the country its byname of the "land between the two rivers" millennia ago. Water levels in the twin rivers have dropped by half because of dams upstream in neighboring Turkey and Iran. One year in Baghdad, the levels drew so low that residents could squelch between the banks of the Tigris on foot.

Following the US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein in 2003, Adhamiya became the heart of a Sunni insurrection and one of the most dangerous places in Baghdad. The dark years of Iraq's sectarian fighting from 2006 until 2008 pitted it against the Shiite district of Kadhimiya, just across the Tigris. The remains of victims who were thrown into the river back then still some-

times wash ashore—but today, Baghdad's river bends see much more life than death.

'Place of leisure'

Along the waterfront, restaurants and small funfairs are teeming with families who gaze out at the young athletes. "It's now a place of leisure and relaxation," said Ghazi al-Shayaa, a sports journalist. "It's a joy to see Baghdadis gathering here nearly every day to watch the swimmers or the boats go by," he said. The latest major round of violence in Iraq ended in 2017, when the government declared victory in its years-long fight against the Islamic State jihadist group.

The next year, Ahmad Mazlum came up with a crazy idea: setting up Iraq's first water sports federation. Its riverside headquarters in Adhamiya is identifiable by the rows of white dinghies and bright windsurfing sails. Half of the 10 dinghies are Iraqi-made, at around \$600 each. "An (imported) sailboat can cost \$10,000. So we had to build our own in a workshop we set up with the club members," said Mazlum, the federation's deputy head.

The around 100 mostly teenage members—eight of them girls—wear matching fluorescent athletics clothes, as bathing suits would likely contravene Iraq's widely conservative norms. Boys and girls train together under Anmar Salman, a regional rowing champion who re-



BAGHDAD: Members of the Iraqi Water Sports Federation are pictured on the banks of the river Tigris, in the Adhamiya district of Iraq's capital Baghdad. — AFP

cruited from fellow rowers and Iraqi swimmers to launch the sailing club.

'For the joy of it'

Aboard a motorized boat one late afternoon, he advised the young sailors on how to tack and deal with wind conditions. "Turn now!" called out the instructor with the neatly-trimmed beard.

The stretch of river where they practise has surprisingly robust winds of up to 15 knots, likely because the buildings on either side create a tunnel. Salman is planning to take his young trainees to qualifiers next year in Abu Dhabi for the Tokyo Olympics. But since they can only train up and down the river, they may not have the same versatility as sea sailors. — AFP

India ready for 'hard, aggressive' cricket as Aussie series begins

SYDNEY: India are promising to play "hard, aggressive" cricket when they emerge from coronavirus quarantine to face Australia in a blockbuster limited-over series beginning in Sydney today. The first of three ODIs, followed by three Twenty20s next week, comes after the visitors had to endure wrangling over quarantine requirements and an outbreak of the virus in Melbourne, which delayed confirmation of the tour until just weeks ago.

Virat Kohli's squad have been in isolation since their arrival a fortnight ago, although they have been allowed to train within a bio-secure bubble. It has been an equally odd build-up for Aaron Finch's Australia, with the likes of David Warner, Steve Smith and Pat Cummins, who played in the Indian Premier League, also undergoing the mandatory 14 days of quarantine, which ended yesterday. The lack of international cricket this year makes it hard to determine form, although Australia head into the white-ball series on the back of beating 50-over world champions England in September. India haven't played together since a tour of New Zealand in February, when they clinched the Twenty20 series but were whitewashed 3-0 in the ODIs. — AFP

India football stronghold mourns 'Our God' Diego

KANNUR: Even in the land of cricket, Diego Maradona's death came as such a shock that one Indian state declared two days of official mourning and fans flocked to a hotel room where the football deity once slept. The Argentine footballer, who died on Tuesday at the age of 60, is so revered in Kerala state that even the shells from some prawns he ate during his visit in 2012 have been freeze-dried and framed.

A steady stream of fans and journalists went to the Hotel Blue Nile in Kannur to leave tributes as the state government ordered the mourning period and a local musician sang a mournful tribute to the footballer on television channels. Hotel owner Ravindran Veleimbra recalled the day when Maradona entered the lobby. "Our God had walked in. He was in front of us," he told AFP. Maradona's visit brought chaos to the southern state, which bucks the trend in India by preferring football to cricket.

Veleimbra remembered how hordes of fans wearing Argentina's blue and white shirts packed the road outside, some having travelled hundreds of kilometres in cars, buses and on bikes. Thousands more packed a local stadium. Everything Maradona touched in Room 309 has been preserved, the owner said. "We have saved the cutlery, toiletries and even the bouquet that we gave him. The flowers have dried but it's all framed." The prawn shells that were part of the salad he ate are also displayed, along with footballs and a menu that the World Cup hero signed.



KOLKATA: A worker prepares a sculpture of late Argentinean football legend Diego Armando Maradona before an event to pay their respects after Maradona's death in Kolkata yesterday. — AFP

'Time for tears'

"People ask us specifically for a stay at the Maradona room. Everything that he touched is still intact and his fans want to experience that." Veleimbra said he would now set up a Maradona statue. "It's a day of mourning for us. He hugged me while he was leaving and to this day I can feel him around." Fans also headed to a Maradona statue in the eastern city of Kolkata that is also known as a football holdout. The Argentine superstar went to the eastern city of 15 million people in 2017 to unveil the 12 feet (3.6 metre) high statue showing him wielding the World Cup, which he won in 1986. Fans left flowers and messages at the foot of the bronze statue, which stands on a road leading to Kolkata's airport. — AFP