

International

Despite the dangers, many Iraqi Kurds dream of reaching Europe

'We tried to cross but soldiers fired tear gas to force us back'

ARBIL: "Our life is awful," says Iraqi taxi driver Himen Gabriel, who no longer believes he has a future in his war-battered country and says he is about to try to reach Europe. He won't say whether he will try to enter the EU across the Belarus-Poland border like thousands of others, but is determined to leave his home in Arbil in Iraq's Kurdistan region. Sporting a long, black beard and a fashionable haircut, Himen, 28, says he has no professional prospects, blaming local systems of patronage and nepotism.

He pointed to his four brothers, saying "all have degrees and none has found a job in the public sector because they do not belong to any political party". He prefers not to say whether his itinerary will run via Belarus where up to 4,000 migrants, many of them Kurds, now huddle in an improvised camp in freezing weather. As troops mass on both sides of the border, Poland has accused Russia of orchestrating a wave of migrants trying to illegally enter via Belarus in a bid to destabilize the European Union.

One Iraqi man now in Belarus, who asked not to be named, told AFP by telephone that he and his family had made it all the way to the razor wire fence at the Polish border. When they arrived, he said their group was confronted by "Polish soldiers" on the other side. "We tried to cross," he said, "but the soldiers fired tear gas to force us back." Now back in the capital Minsk, he said he remained in contact with relatives living

inside the European Union, eager to find another way to enter and cross to Germany.



UN denounces arbitrary arrests

Belarus tourist visas

Gabriel, the taxi driver, remains convinced that even an arduous and dangerous journey is worth it, given the prospect of "leading a quiet life" in Europe. Kurdistan, an autonomous region in northern Iraq, presents itself as a haven of relative stability, but is regularly criticized for restricting freedom of expression.

The region has been ruled for decades by two parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Last May, the UN denounced "arbitrary arrests", unfair trials and "intimidation of journalists, activists and protesters" in Iraqi Kurdistan. About 3,000 Kurds have left the region in the past three months, of whom 1,600 have gone to

Belarus on tourist visas, according to the Kurdistan Refugee Association.

The Belarusian honorary consul in Arbil, Fouad Mamend, told AFP that they were using travel agencies to obtain tourist visas and plane tickets. He added that the Belarus missions in Arbil and in Baghdad had now been "closed for a week at the request of the Iraqi government". The head of the foreign relations committee in the Kurdistan parliament, Rebouar Babki, said that "initiatives are underway to bring these migrants back" to Iraqi Kurdistan. "But some of them are not in favor of returning," he said.

'A better future'

Belarus is also the immediate destination for Hiwa Fariq Mohammed, a printer in Sulaimaniyah in eastern Kurdistan. After four unsuccessful attempts to try to reach Europe, he said he will keep trying. "I want to leave because of the lack of security and the difficult economic situation," the 44-year-old told AFP. "I want to ensure a better future for my son and daughter." Diler Ismael Mahmoud, 55, was grieving his son's death. He said Kilan, 25, died less than two weeks ago in Belarus, while planning to enter Poland with a trafficker. "He had diabetes and a spinal cord disease," the father said.

The tough journey in harsh weather killed Kilan, who had set off with two brothers, his sister, her hus-



ARBIL: Iraqi Kurd Himen Gabriel, 28, a taxi driver who wants to immigrate to Europe, is pictured during an interview with AFP in Arbil, the capital of Iraq's northern Kurdish autonomous region. — AFP

band and their five-year-old child in the hope of reaching Germany. "We thought this route was easy," compared to risky Mediterranean crossings, said the bereaved father. "Many have done it and they say it is a safe route, with a four-hour walk." Today, he said, his daughter is being treated in Poland after breaking her leg during the journey, while the rest of the family is stuck in Belarus, awaiting an uncertain future.— AFP



SAN JUAN: People attend the first mass vaccination event to get inoculated with the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine at the Puerto Rico Convention Center in San Juan, Puerto Rico. — AFP

'Science and solidarity': Why Puerto Rico leads in COVID-19 vaccinations

SAN JUAN: Puerto Rico has an underfunded health care system, high levels of poverty and its infrastructure remains devastated by a major hurricane that swept through the island in 2017. So how is the US territory leading the rest of the country in COVID vaccinations? Experts credit the surprising success to two major factors: a sense of solidarity forged from past brushes with disasters, and a public health response untainted by political polarization seen on the mainland.

No fewer than 74 percent of the island's 3.2 million people are now fully vaccinated—well above the US total of 58 percent—but also ahead of wealthy and liberal northeastern states such as Massachusetts and Vermont. "Everyone should get vaccinated," Jose de Jesus, a retired government employee said. "You have to take care of yourself, you have to live life until you can," added the 74-year-old, who happily got a Moderna booster shot last week.

As a result of the high uptake, Puerto Rico is crushing its coronavirus curve, with daily cases currently running at three per 100,000 people compared to 22 for the country as a whole, and deaths at 0.1 per 100,000. The situation is the complete opposite of what was expected at the start of the pandemic, when the odds seemed stacked against the Caribbean archipelago. Puerto Rico's poverty rate is 43 percent, more than double that of Mississippi, the poorest US state. Its government is facing an ongoing financial crisis that skyrocketed debt in 2017, and forced the imposition of a drastic austerity

policy. A hammer blow came in September 2017, when Hurricane Maria ravaged the island, leaving nearly 3,000 dead. Many of the victims perished from a lack of resources and poor post-disaster response. The storm struck the island less than a month after Hurricane Irma passed by, causing vast power outages. After that, protests in 2019 led to the resignation of a governor, Ricardo Rossello, and an earthquake destroyed nearly 8,000 homes in January 2020.

Lessons learned

"I couldn't sleep, I kept thinking the pandemic would be handled as badly as the responses to Hurricane Irma and Maria," Monica Felu Mojer, spokesperson for the nonprofit Ciencia Puerto Rico organization that advocates for science in Puerto Rico said. Instead, though, the memory of these disasters has made "people do their part," creating a critical wave of unity to respond to the challenge.

The Puerto Rican government began vaccinating in December 2020, like the rest of the United States. And in just a few weeks, professional groups, hospitals, universities, private corporations and non-profit organizations joined the effort, collaborations key to the later COVID vaccination campaign. Paradoxically, the trauma of Hurricane Maria prepared Puerto Ricans to face the coronavirus. The work of the NGO VOCES, which has administered more than 378,000 doses since January, is an example of this.—AFP

Still fighting: WWII Warsaw Uprising veteran defends EU

WARSAW: Wearing a military beret and a Polish wartime resistance armband, 94-year-old Wanda Traczyk-Stawska stunned the crowd at a pro-EU rally when she thundered "Be quiet, stupid boy!" at a member of a far-right group attempting to disrupt the gathering over a loudspeaker. Despite her advancing years and tiny stature, the Warsaw Uprising veteran has lost none of her fighting spirit when it comes to defending Poland's presence in the European Union and migrant rights.

Tens of thousands of people had turned out in October in support of Poland's EU membership after the Constitutional Court contested the primacy of EU law, in what experts saw as a step towards a "Polexit" given the nationalist ruling party's euroscepticism. "I'm a soldier, I tell it like it is," Traczyk-Stawska told AFP, smiling coyly as she took a sip of tea at her home in Warsaw filled with Polish and EU flags.

'Doughnut'

Traczyk-Stawska was a 12-year-old girl guide when the German army invaded Poland. She joined the resistance movement and went on to carry out acts of sabotage under the sweet pseudonym of "Doughnut". At the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising on August 1, 1944, she was one of 50,000 fighters to revolt against

Iran Guards release seized Vietnamese tanker

TEHRAN: Iran's Revolutionary Guards said yesterday they had released a Vietnamese-flagged oil tanker they seized last month in the Sea of Oman in a tense incident also involving the US Navy. Releasing the ship ends the latest maritime confrontation in waters near the strategic Strait of Hormuz, at a time when Tehran is preparing to resume talks with major powers aimed at ending a standoff over its nuclear deal. Iran and its arch enemy the United States gave sharply differing accounts of what happened to the MV Sothys, reportedly carrying 26 crew, in the incident on October 24.

Iran's Guards claimed they thwarted an attempt by a US naval vessel to seize the Sothys which was carrying Iranian oil. US defense officials rejected that account and said they took no action as Iran seized the tanker and took it into its territorial waters. Yesterday, Sepah News, the official website of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), said "the seized Sothys oil tanker was released by court order after it was emptied of oil belonging to the Islamic Republic of Iran in Bandar Abbas".

The Tanker Trackers website said earlier that "Iran's IRGC appears to have now released the Sothys. She is currently empty and underway in a southward direction. "Though her reported destination is Dubai, her current trajectory is the Gulf of Oman," the service said overnight, adding that Iran was holding the \$50 million worth of oil which the ship had received in June. The IRGC's Navy Commander Alireza Tangsiri mocked the US version of the incident as a "big lie", in a meeting yesterday attended by the Guards' commander-in-chief, Hossein Salami. Tangsiri also praised the "determination, intelligence and courage of the children of Iran who defeated the Americans". The incident came in the wake of a series of attacks on commercial vessels in the sea lanes serving the Gulf, where a large portion of the world's oil is produced and shipped. Iran was blamed for a July 29 drone strike on the tanker MT Mercer Street operated by a London-based firm ultimately owned by Israeli shipping magnate Eyal Ofer.—AFP

the Nazis - as well as a rare girl with a machine gun, an assignment usually reserved for men at the time. Over the course of 63 days of battle, nearly 200,000 civilians and fighters died and the city was reduced to a pile of rubble.

Traczyk-Stawska later passed through four German prisoner-of-war camps, before Polish forces operating in the Netherlands and Germany freed her from a camp in Oberlangen, northwest Germany, in 1945. Once back home, she worked as a teacher at a centre for handicapped children. The last order she received, her life's mission, has been to watch over the cemetery bearing the remains of nearly half of the wartime dead found in the ruins of the Polish capital.

'A fly against an elephant'

Remaining in the EU "is a question of national security... Were we to quit the union, where would that leave us?" Traczyk-Stawska asked. "We already know what 1939 was like," when Poland found itself alone in the face of a two-front invasion by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. "It's our greatest danger... We'd end up like a fly up against an elephant," she added, her robust voice contrasting with her fragile frame.

She said she was "furious" at the rally when she chose to call out the far right, who have received funding from the state and plan to go ahead with a march through Warsaw on Thursday, Poland's Independence Day. The controversial march, which has drawn upwards of 10,000 people in past years and has often turned violent, has been the subject of intense legal wrangling. "I got up on stage to speak of the Poland of our dreams, us veterans of the uprising... a Poland that is kind and tolerant," Traczyk-Stawska added. She soon received death threats.—AFP

Climate change and fires: Bolivia forests in peril

SANTO CORAZON: The road through San Matias, Bolivia, is a no man's land. Hundreds of thousands of hectares of once lush forest are now a wasteland of twisted, carbonized tree stumps. It is a protected area, but San Matias - which also hosts subsistence farmers, cattle ranches and quartz mines - burns every year as land is cleared for the next planting season. The practice is legal during May and June, after the rainy season, with each farmer allowed to burn 20 hectares - also in the reserve located in Bolivia's eastern Santa Cruz department, near the border with Brazil.

The limit is often deliberately exceeded, and the fires negligible. And increasingly, the fires just take on a life of their own, fueled by ever drier, hotter conditions. "It came from that bush... over there!" said Antonio Tacuchava, 76, pointing to the spot where the most recent blaze came within a kilometer of his straw house in September. A former farmer who now keeps a few chickens and other small animals for domestic consumption, Tacuchava is one of 130 families in Comunidad Candelaria, a hamlet at the gates of the San Matias park. Locals raise cattle and grow corn, cassava, bananas and sugar cane on small plots.

'Like a match'

Like the handful of large, commercial ranches in the park, the subsistence farmers take part in the annual burning at the start of the dry season - before it gets too hot, dry and risky. "A spark here, near these houses, is like a match," said Tacuchava, with his neat white moustache and sun-tanned face. Yet despite their precautions, multiple out-of-control fires raged around the settlement from July to September this year.

Authorities said wildfires, mostly originating from land-clearing activities, had scorched 2.6 million hectares of land in Santa Cruz in the first ten months of the year. The Friends of Nature Foundation, a Bolivian NGO, estimates that forest fires destroyed more than 2.3 million hectares of forests and grassland in the country in 2020, and 6.4 million hectares in 2019. According to the NGO Global Forest Watch, Bolivia in 2020 became the country with the third-largest loss of virgin forest after Brazil and the Democratic Republic of Congo - passing Indonesia for the first time. It is a vicious cycle of climate change fueling forest fires, and vice versa.

Forest fires release vast amounts of planet-warming carbon dioxide into the air. According to green group WWF: "To have any chance of restricting the rise in global temperatures to 1.5 degrees Celsius in line with the Paris Agreement (on curbing climate change), more needs to be done to cut carbon emissions from forest fires." As temperatures rise in step with greenhouse gas emissions, dwindling green vegetation and water resources make fires more likely. Already, the WWF said, fires in many parts of the world are bigger, more intense and longer-lasting than they used to be. In 2009, Bolivia's environment ministry estimated that at loss rates then, all the country's forests would be gone by 2100.—AFP



SANTO CORAZON: Photo shows an indigenous family of the Ayoreo ethnic group in Santo Corazon, one of the communities most affected by the drought caused by forest fires, in the municipality of San Matias, Santa Cruz province, east of Bolivia. — AFP



WARSAW: Wanda Traczyk-Stawska attends commemorations on the 77th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising at the Warsaw Insurgents Cemetery in Warsaw, Poland. — AFP