

International

Virtual visas: Barbados says to open first 'metaverse' embassy

Clients to get consular services virtually

BRIDGETOWN: Tiny Caribbean nation Barbados has laid claim to establishing what it says will be the first diplomatic embassy in the metaverse - a virtual reality version of the internet. The announcement was sparse on details, but Barbados said this week that clients would be able to get consular services virtually once the project is up and running. Authorities on the island of just under 300,000 people did not offer a start date, but noted they have signed a deal with metaverse platform Decentraland and are finalizing agreements with two others.

Metaverse has become a buzzword for the future of the internet, especially since social media giant Facebook has made a multi-billion-dollar push to build the digital world where people feel as if they are face-to-face using virtual reality technology. "Barbados looks forward to welcoming the world in its metaverse embassy," said Senator Jerome Walcott, the nation's foreign minister. Barbados, which has moved to become a republic and withdraw Britain's Queen Elizabeth II as head of state, said it would maintain physical embassies as well.

"In some ways, it's super cutting edge and innovative. In other ways, they just happen to be the first movers, and good for them, but everyone's going in this direction," said Rabindra Ratan, a Michigan State University associate professor of media and information. "It's kind of like having a new type of website, except this website exists in a three-dimensional space that feels a bit embodied and you can access it through a virtual reality headset," he added. Barbados' announcement and its enthusiasm for the trendy technology is also a tool for the small nation to have a voice in the diplomatic arena, its political leaders noted.

In a similar tech-embracing vein, the Central American country of El Salvador adopted bitcoin as its official currency alongside the dollar in October. As for the metaverse, it already exists in some forms, like the virtual worlds linked to video game platforms, such as Roblox. But the world's largest social network, which renamed its parent company "Meta," is betting big on the idea and has announced plans to hire 10,000 people in Europe to work on building it. —AFP



BRIDGETOWN: The Barbados flag flies above the Barbados Parliament Buildings yesterday in Bridgetown, Barbados. —AFP

France bans wild animals in circuses

PARIS: French lawmakers voted yesterday to end wild animals being used in live circus shows, spelling an end to performing tigers, lions or bears. Performances of wild animals will be prohibited in two years and owning them outlawed in seven years, under the wide-ranging animal rights legislation that has been under debate since 2020.

The law, once signed by President Emmanuel Macron, will also ban live dolphin shows in the next five years and immediately end mink farming, meaning the country's last operator will close. Macron's centrist Republic on the Move (LREM) party called the legislation "a historic step in the animal rights combat".

Circus owners denounced it, while some environmentalists said it did not go far enough. The foundation of France's most famous animal advocate, veteran actress Brigitte Bardot, welcomed "a major advance for the animal rights cause in France".

As well as the measures targeting circuses, the new law will raise the maximum penalty for mistreating animals to up to five years in prison and a fine of 75,000 euros (\$85,000), and will tighten restrictions on

the sale of pets. Loic Dombreval, the LREM co-sponsor of the law, conceded that other controversial issues had not been included within the scope of the legislation, which won cross-party support in both houses of parliament.

"There will inevitably come a day when... we will debate sensitive issues such as hunting, such as bull-fighting, or some animal-rearing practices," said the lawmaker, who is also a veterinarian.

'Arbitrary law'

Environmentalists had called for measures to improve the conditions inside industrialised animal farms, which will require "a change in our agricultural model", Senator Daniel Salmon said yesterday. Issues such as hunting and bull-fighting are especially sensitive because they are staunchly defended by supporters in rural areas as long-standing cultural practices.

Farms that make foie gras pate in France—which force-feed birds such as geese and ducks to artificially bloat their livers—have also long been targeted by campaigners. The 120 circus owners in France are likely to protest against the restrictions placed on their livelihoods and have warned that some animals might end up abandoned.

"It's an arbitrary law because there are not mistreated animals in our circuses," William Kerwich, head of the circus animal trainers' union, told AFP. He said there would be a reaction from his members on Monday, and a legal appeal. —AFP

Migrants fear ruse behind Mexican residency offer

JESUS CARRANZA: Immigration agents lined a highway in southern Mexico offering hundreds of migrants temporary residency if they abandoned their march. Exhausted, some accepted, while others kept going, afraid of being deported. The offer of residency cards has split opinion and sowed suspicion within the caravan that set out three weeks ago from near the border with Guatemala to demand refugee status.

Promises of food, water and an airconditioned bus to take them to a shelter while awaiting a one-year permit on humanitarian grounds were enough to persuade several migrants. But many others were unconvinced, despite suggestions that the card could smooth their passage to the United States. "Lies—they're going to deport us!" men and women shouted angrily at the dusty checkpoint in the southeastern state of Veracruz, where immigration agents worked hard to try to persuade them to stop marching.

Elena Raudales, a migrant from Honduras, showed AFP a document called a "visitor's card for humanitarian reasons" with her name and photograph that she was given earlier this year. "Even so they detained me two months ago and sent me back" to near the border with Guatemala, she said. "We're not going to believe anything anymore," she added. According to officials, around 1,500 people have accepted the temporary residency offer, re-

ducing the caravan's size considerably since it left the southern city of Tapachula on October 23. Around 800 people remain in the group, mostly Central Americans fleeing violence and poverty.

'Lied to us'

Many migrants are reluctant to accept the residency offer because they fear being tricked and deported, said Christian Joel, a 22-year-old Honduran. "They lied to us already," he said, complaining of a lack of assistance from the immigration authorities since he arrived in Mexico a year ago. He is making a second attempt to return to the United States, where he lived for 18 years from the age of two with his family until he was deported for driving without a license, he said. But some other migrants went willingly with the authorities in the hope of getting legal documents.

"We're going to try.... We've already come a long way and we're very tired," said 30-year-old Salvadoran Walter Ceron as he prepared to board a waiting bus. The offer was also tempting for Vilma Escobar, 26, who was getting ready for another day pushing her two-year-old son's stroller along the highway under the beating sun. Sometimes she thinks "I would like that card, but it means taking a risk," said the 26-year-old Guatemalan, unsure if going with immigration would take her closer or further from her goal of reaching the United States.

US President Joe Biden's arrival in the White House has led to increased flows of undocumented foreigners arriving in Mexico hoping to be allowed into the United States. More than 190,000 irregular migrants were detected by Mexican authorities between January and September this year, three times more than in 2020. Some 74,300 have been deported. —AFP