

Business

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2021

Afghan saffron boss vows Taleban will not silence her

Hardline rulers increasingly exclude women from public life

KABUL: An Afghan business leader who employs hundreds of women on her saffron fields has vowed to speak up for the rights of her workers, and “not remain silent” under Taleban rule. The hardliners have increasingly excluded women from public life since sweeping to power in mid-August, pushing many female entrepreneurs to flee the country or go into hiding.

Many fear a return to their brutally oppressive rule from 1996 to 2001 when women were effectively banned from going to school or work, and only allowed to leave the house with a male relative. “We will raise our voice so that it reaches their ears,” said Shafiqeh Attai, who started her saffron company in the western city of Herat in 2007.

“No matter what happens, we won’t just sit at home, because we have worked very hard.” Attai’s business, the Pashton Zarghon Saffron Women’s Company, produces, processes, packages and exports the world’s most expensive spice with an almost exclusively female workforce. More than 1,000 women pick the brightly colored crocuses across the company’s 25 hectares (60 acres) of land in the Pashton Zarghon district of Herat Province, which borders Iran.

Another 55 hectares are independently owned and operate under the collective that Attai set up for women saffron pickers, who are represented by union leaders. Employing women allows them to be breadwinners for their families, Attai said, enabling them to send their children to school, and to buy them clothing and other essentials. “I worked hard to establish my business,” the 40-year-old said. “We don’t want to sit quietly and be ignored. Even if they ignore us, we will not remain silent.”

Alternative to opium

The ousted, Western-backed government encouraged farmers to grow the spice-used in dishes from biryani to paella—in a bid to wean them away from Afghanistan’s huge and problematic poppy industry. Still, the country remains by far the world’s biggest producer of opium and heroin, supplying between 80 and 90 percent of global output.

During their previous stint in power, the Taleban—who used the sale of opium to fund their insurgency—destroyed much of the crop ostensibly to eradicate it, though critics said it was to drive up the value of their huge stockpiles.

The cultivation of poppies has again surged in recent years, as poverty and instability increased. Afghanistan’s production area is now roughly four times larger now than in 2002, according to the United Nations.

‘Red gold’

Herat Province produces the vast majority of Afghanistan’s saffron. At more than \$5,000 per kilogram (2.2 pounds), saffron is the world’s most expensive spice, and Attai’s company produces between 200 and 500 kilos each year.

The pistil of the flower has for centuries been used around the world in cooking, perfumes, medicines, tea and even as an aphrodisiac—and because of its high price has been dubbed “red gold” by those who rely on its cultivation. Best grown in the baking hot sun, the bright purple saffron flowers are harvested in October and November

by armies of workers, many of them women in their fifties and sixties, who start picking at dawn before the plants will later in the day.

Labourers then prise apart the delicate lilac leaves, vivid red stigmas and pale yellow stamens—painstaking work that demands concentration and skill.

‘Hard work’

Attai is concerned not just about the future of her business, but also for women across Afghanistan who are living in limbo, uncertain about jobs, education and representation in government. “Now that the government of the Islamic Emirate is here we are very worried that they will block our work,” she said. “They haven’t given girls the permission to go back to school and university, and they haven’t given any women posts in the government—I am worried about what will happen,” she added.

“I’m not just thinking about myself, I’m thinking about

bearded 28-year-old told AFP. “They’re extending it again, but what’s going to happen when that runs out?”

Deadline day

France has asked the UK to issue 169 fishing licenses to its vessels but they must prove they fished in Channel Island waters before Brexit—and many are struggling to do so. An initial deadline for applications ended on June 30, triggering stormy protests by French fishermen that threatened to turn into a full-blown naval incident. As French trawlers steamed towards the capital Saint Helier, London sent two naval patrol boats to monitor the situation, prompting Paris to respond in kind.

In a bid to calm tempers, a three-month extension was agreed and is set to expire on Thursday.

Jersey’s government said last Friday that some French vessels had provided enough evidence they had previously fished off the island. Others still needed to submit more information and will only be granted a temporary permit until January 31 next year.

A third grouping will be refused licenses altogether and must stop fishing in UK waters. How many French boats are in which category will be unveiled in the coming days, prompting fresh fears on Jersey it could spark renewed protests. “We are running out of patience, the fishermen too, legitimately,” France’s Europe Minister Clement Beaune said last week.

In the small port of Gorey, dominated by green hills and a 13th-century castle, Corson said Brexit had made things “more difficult” as fishermen feared French reprisals over market access. “If we lose our market, it’s going to be a tough few years for us until we sort



HERAT, Afghanistan: In this file photo, an Afghan worker sorts harvested saffron flowers in a field on the outskirts of Herat. —AFP

all those that this business supports to run their homes,” she said, noting that some of her employees are the sole breadwinners in their families. “I am worried that 20 years of hard work by these women will go to waste.”

‘Cannot be ignored’

In the 20 years between the US-led ouster of the Taleban in 2001 and the Islamists’ return, many women became business leaders, particularly in cities like Herat. Long a key commercial hub near Iran and Turkmenistan’s borders, the city has in recent months suffered from the flight of many businesswomen.

Younes Qazizadeh, head of the city’s chamber of commerce, told AFP that he hoped the Taleban would make an official announcement to indicate that “women could come back and do business under this

government as well”.

For now, the fate of businesses like Attai’s hangs on a thread. “It is our hope to start women’s businesses again in our country,” Qazizadeh added.

Attai said that for now, she is staying in her homeland because she has “some hope” that her business can survive. Ahead of the US pullout, a mammoth airlift saw 124,000 people evacuated from Kabul airport.—AFP “I could have left as well. But I didn’t leave because all the hard work and effort that we put in should not be ignored,” Attai said. “I don’t think they will block our work,” she added, referring to the Taleban. “We are a company which is completely run by women and employs women—not a single man is brave enough to stop that. A woman who has shoveled her fields day and night cannot be ignored.” —AFP

Jersey fishermen caught in post-Brexit row

SAINT HELIER, Jersey: Fishermen on Jersey are voicing concerns at repeated delays to post-Brexit arrangements for fishing rights, as the latest deadline looms for EU access to waters around the British Crown dependency.

Jersey, home to more than 100,000 people, is the largest of the Channel Islands, and on a clear day, lies within sight of the French coast. Like Guernsey to its northwest, the self-governing territory is not part of the United Kingdom and its people did not vote in the 2016 Brexit referendum.

But both still depend on the UK for defense and international relations, drawing them into the country’s tortuous full departure from the European Union in January. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has vowed that London will “take back control” of fisheries policy, among other things, but nine months on, Jersey’s fishermen are still waiting to see the promised reduced EU access to their waters, as promised in the Brexit deal. Tim Corson, a small boat fisherman who sells his lobster catch in France, is unhappy at shifting deadlines for his European competitors to get licenses to fish off Jersey.

“It’s just getting delayed, delayed, delayed,” the red-

bearded 28-year-old told AFP. “They’re extending it again, but what’s going to happen when that runs out?”



SAINT HELIER, Jersey: In this file photo, French fishermen gather in a net on their vessel near the port of Saint Helier off the British island of Jersey. —AFP

something out,” he added, shifting big bags of bait bought in France after selling his catch there. The Jersey fleet, some 100 small boats that fish mostly during the day, exports lobsters, crabs and scallops to Europe via French ports.

But France has said it is ready to activate “restrictive measures” if it disagrees with the allocation of licenses, which Jersey’s fishermen say puts their future at risk. “The problem with the big fishing boats, they can fish in any weather and the small boats can’t, so they are continuously fishing when we have to stop because we are generally all day boats,” said Chris Casey in Saint Helier. —AFP

Sales of US manufactured goods take flight

WASHINGTON: A surge in civilian aircraft purchases sparked a surprise jump in sales of big-ticket manufactured US goods in August, according to government data released yesterday.

Durable goods orders rose 1.8 percent compared to July, to \$263.5 billion, taking flight on a nearly 78 percent increase in non-defense aircraft orders, the Commerce Department reported, a jump largely due to Boeing. But excluding transportation equipment, total orders edged up just 0.2 percent, slowing from recent months but still reflecting rising investment.

Total orders have increased in 15 of the past 16 months, and the originally reported dip in July was revised up to show a 0.5 percent increase, according to the report. In other sectors, orders of motor vehicles and parts fell 3.1 percent while computers and electronics rose 1.4 percent.

The consensus among economists centered around a 0.8 percent rise in total durable goods orders, but Ian Shepherdson of Macroeconomics had predicted an “upside risk” due to the aircraft



ARLINGTON, US: In this file photo, the nose of a Boeing 737-A is seen during a Boeing ecoDemonstrator program at Washington Reagan National Airport (DCA) in Arlington

component given the seasonal adjustment factors applied to the raw data by government statisticians.

“Data from Boeing suggest that unadjusted orders rose modestly, but a favorable swing in the seasonally adjusted increase,” he said in a preview of the report. While he said the post-pandemic surge in investment looks unsustainable, “the case for expecting continued increases, at a less frenetic pace, is strong” as firms have the resources and are restrained from expanding by adding personnel due to the shortage of workers. —AFP

Instagram hits pause on kids’ version after criticism

NEW YORK: Facebook said yesterday that it is suspending development of a version of its Instagram photo-sharing app for children aged under 13, after widespread criticism of the plan. The decision to pause the kids’ app comes as Facebook grapples with the fallout of a series of withering Wall Street Journal reports revealing that the company’s own research showed it was aware of the damage Instagram can do to teenage girls’ mental health.

Facebook’s announcement comes just days ahead of a hearing before US senators that was set up in response to outrage that followed the Journal series. Instagram chief Adam Mosseri complained that the project aimed at children, which would have created a parentally-supervised version of the app for youngsters, had been widely misunderstood. “We started this project to address an important problem seen across our industry: kids are getting phones younger and younger, misrepresenting their age, and downloading apps that are meant for those 13 or older,” he said in a statement. “We firmly believe that it’s better for parents to have the option to give their children access to a version of Instagram that is designed for them — where parents can supervise and control their experience — than relying on an app’s ability to verify the age of kids who are too young to have an ID,” he added. —AFP

Google hits back at EU over record Android fine

LUXEMBOURG: Google hit back in court against the EU yesterday as it appealed against a record fine levied by the bloc for monopolistic practices with its Android operating system on mobile devices. The 4.3 billion euro (\$5 billion) penalty, imposed by the European Commission in 2018, was the biggest-ever slapped on the American search engine juggernaut.

The case being heard in the EU’s general court is a major test for EU competition supremo Margerthe Vestager, who already lost an appeal by Apple and Ireland over taxes. Google argues that the EU’s accusations over its highly popular operating system are unfounded and falsely blame it for blocking rivals on its search and maps apps on Android phones.

“Android is in truth an exceptional success story of the power of competition in action,” Google lawyer Meredith Pickford told a five-judge panel. Moreover, the company contends that the EU case is unfairly blind to the presence of Apple, which imposes or gives clear preference to its own services such as Safari on iPhones.

‘Critical time’

“We will explain that... the commission shut its eyes to the real competitive dynamic in this industry, that between Apple and Android,” Pickford argued. He also said that downloading rival apps was only a click away and that customers were in no way tied to Google products on Android.

The EU and its backers contend that Google used contracts with phone makers in the early days of Android to snuff out rivals. This was done “at a critical time in the development of mobile computing, when the market was still contestable,” said Thomas Vinje, a lawyer representing FairSearch, whose original complaint launched the case in 2015. The Android case was the third of three major cases brought against Google by Vestager, whose legal challenges were the first worldwide to directly take on the Silicon Valley giants. Since then, global regulators have followed suit with Google facing a barrage of cases in the US and Asia based on similar accusations.

A victory in court for Google could prove a Pyrrhic one, however. Brussels is in the process of shaping new legislation to regulate Big Tech more closely, with the EU frustrated at the length of time it takes to pursue competition cases. Known as the Digital Markets Act, the new law would set up a rulebook of Do’s and Don’ts for Big Tech companies such as Google and Facebook. This could include specific bans or limits on such companies promoting their own services on platforms. —AFP