

Business



DOMBOSHAW, Zimbabwe: Danai Bvochora, a poultry farmer, arranges eggs at her market stall after transporting them on her renewable energy electrical tricycle which is designed for a rural off road environment such as her home in Domboshawa. — AFP photos



Danai Bvochora (left), a poultry farmer and her friend Frasia Gotosa clean and pack eggs into crates as she prepares to go to market on her renewable energy electrical tricycle which is designed for a rural off road environment such as her home in Domboshawa.

Solar electric tricycles give Zimbabwean women a lift

European Union-funded project assists small-scale farmers in Zimbabwe

HARARE: For years, selling eggs was a joyless business for Danai Bvochora, as most of the money she made went to cover minibus fares to the market in a rural area of Zimbabwe. That was until an earth-brown solar-powered electric tricycle changed her life. "We used to carry loads on our heads before. The tricycle has lessened the burden," said the 47-year-old from Domboshava, about 40 kilometer (25 miles) north of Zimbabwe's capital, Harare.

She carefully loads eggs onto the tricycle's trailer before embarking on a bumpy eight-kilometer journey to the market. "We even use it to go to church and worship," Bvochora said, explaining a single trip to buy chicken feed from a local business centre used to cost her \$12.

But charging her new solar-powered vehicle sets her back only \$2.50 every two weeks, and the mother of two is now making a profit. Bvochora is among groups of women in Domboshava, a district renowned

for its picturesque hills and giant boulders, who received a tricycle last year as part of a European Union-funded project to assist small-scale farmers.

Assembled by Harare-based social enterprise Mobility for Africa, the three-wheelers were first introduced in Zimbabwe in 2019 to help women develop their businesses, said the company's director Shantha Bloemen. Transport has historically been inadequate in sparsely populated rural areas of Zimbabwe, where women often have to walk long distances carrying heavy loads on their heads to trade products—which sometimes spoil on the way in the heat.

Electric push

Yet the idea of addressing that with electric three-wheelers raised a few eyebrows at first, said American-born Bloemen, who is a permanent resident in Zimbabwe and lived in the country in the 1990s when she worked for UNICEF. "It was very lonely

when we started," Bloemen said, explaining her team had to work hard to prove to funders that the idea was viable. "No one was talking about electric mobility in Africa let alone for rural women."

Three years later, the social enterprise is planning to more than triple its current fleet of 88 motorized vehicles by the end of 2022. It operates three solar-powered stations, where drivers can come to swap their lithium battery for a fully charged one when running low on energy—and foots the bill when something breaks. Zimbabwe has for more than two decades faced tough economic conditions, with rural areas particularly hard hit. The country's economy is mainly driven by the informal sector, to which Domboshava women farmers such as these belong.

While some of the three-wheelers—nicknamed "Hamba" or "go" in the local Ndebele language—were bought by the EU and then gifted to locals, others are rented out for \$5 a day. Phyllis Chifamba, a 37-year-

old mother of four, uses her rented vehicle as a taxi. Her clients include sick people going to a clinic, pregnant women going for medical checks, and villagers and farm dwellers going to do their shopping and other errands.

"I am able to provide food for my family and pay school fees for my children with the money I make from using the Hamba," she said. Mobility for Africa said it was planning to expand operations to other areas. "African women are the most entrepreneurial, most productive but no one takes them seriously," said Bloemen. "If we solve the transport problems, rural economies will work. Small farmers will get more produce to the market." Beneficiary Frasia Gotosa said her small business has improved since she has been driving to the market as her vegetables no longer rot while waiting for the bus or pushing a wheelbarrow. "Now I get to the market while my produce is still fresh," she said. — AFP



Non-oil business activity in Saudi, UAE improves

RIYADH/ABU DHABI: Business activity in the non-oil private sector economies of Saudi Arabia and the UAE continued to improve in July, with a strong increase in output, new orders and employment despite a rise in inflationary pressures. The headline seasonally adjusted S&P Global Saudi Arabia Purchasing Managers' Index posted 56.3 in July, slightly lower than 57 in June, but signaled a robust improvement in business conditions for the 23rd month in a row. A reading above the neutral level of 50 indicates growth while one below it points to a contraction. "The Saudi Arabia PMI remained firmly in growth territory in July. New business continued to rise substantially, helped by recovering demand and strengthening export sales," David Owen, an economist at S&P Global Market Intelligence, said. "Output expanded sharply and employment numbers rose at the fastest pace since September 2019, following a period of weakness in labor markets since the COVID-19 pandemic began."

Although the expansion in the kingdom's non-oil businesses activity was slightly softer than at the end of the second quarter, five times as many companies saw an increase in activity month-on-month compared with those that recorded a decline. Businesses surveyed attributed the expansion mainly to higher sales, new projects and stronger marketing. New work intake in the kingdom also rose markedly in July, with the latest uptick being the second-quickest in eight months. Improving market conditions at home and strengthening new export orders that rose at the sharpest pace since November helped the growth momentum at the beginning of the third quarter.

With new orders increasing rapidly, businesses were encouraged to raise employment levels further in July, extending the current period of growth to four months. The pace of job creation in the kingdom was the quickest since September 2019. Backlogs of work also decreased at the start of the third quarter, with the sharpest rate of decline in just over two years. Efforts to complete unfinished orders were helped by a rise in buying activity, as businesses expanded inventories to cope with stronger demand.

Demand continued to pick up across the non-oil

sector amid optimism for future economic growth. Business confidence in July remained one of the strongest seen since the pandemic began.

Saudi Arabia's economy grew by 11.8 per cent in the second quarter of 2022, with oil-related economic activity in the kingdom rising 23.1 per cent annually. Non-oil economic activity climbed 5.4 per cent during the period, supporting the growth of the Arab world's largest economy, according to flash estimates released by the kingdom's General Authority for Statistics last week. The International Monetary Fund estimates that the Saudi economy will expand by 7.4 per cent this year, driven by higher oil revenue, a projected improvement in the country's non-oil gross domestic product and its efforts to diversify the economy.—AFP

France warns winter gas cuts possible

PARIS: The French government warned Wednesday that companies might have to reduce energy use this winter even with the country's natural gas reserves at full capacity, as Russia continues to reduce its gas exports to Europe. "The main players, government agencies and businesses, must reduce their consumption" of gas as well as electricity, because "the two systems are linked," Energy Minister Agnes Pannier-Runacher told CNews television.

Moscow has slashed its exports to Europe in response to punishing Western sanctions over the invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces, forcing countries to scramble for alternatives.

Even though France is less reliant on Russian supplies than other EU countries, generating around three-quarters of its electricity from nuclear power plants, its industrial sector still relies on gas and millions of people use it to heat their homes. Winter shortfalls will be a risk even though France is racing to top up its gas reserves. "Right now our strategic gas reserves are at 80 percent capacity... which means we will reach our goal of 100 percent before November 1," Pannier-Runacher said.

Dutch farmer protests reap populist support

BARNEVELD, Netherlands: Dutch farmers' rowdy protests against government climate plans have caused a stir at home and abroad, with populists worldwide jumping on the bandwagon and even former US president Donald Trump backing them.

"We take all the support that we can get," says Jaap Kok, a 62-year-old cattle farmer standing in a meadow full of cows near Barneveld in the central Netherlands' farming belt. The farmers have wreaked havoc for weeks, dumping manure and garbage on highways, blockading supermarket warehouses with tractors and rallying noisily outside politicians' houses.

They oppose plans to cut emissions of nitrogen in the Netherlands—the world's second-biggest agricultural exporter after the United States—by reducing livestock and closing some farms.

While a small group has been blamed for much of the unrest, there have also been large protests involving thousands of tractors. With the protests garnering global headlines, right-wing figures have been quick to voice support. As well as Trump, they include French far-right leader Marine Le Pen, and Dutch far-right politicians Geert Wilders and Thierry Baudet. "I would have preferred that the support came from the left but from the right is fine too," said Kok, whose own farm risks closure. "Farmers are always the scapegoat."

'Very angry'

The tiny Netherlands produces huge amounts of food thanks to industrialized farming—but at the cost of being one of Europe's largest greenhouse gas emitters. That is especially true of nitrogen, with much of this blamed on ammonia-based fertilizer and cattle-produced manure. Agriculture is responsible for 16 percent of all Dutch emissions.

Nitrogenous gases play an important role in global climate change. Nitrous oxide is a particularly potent greenhouse gas as it is over 300 times more effective at trapping heat in the atmosphere than carbon dioxide. The Netherlands' flat landscape sitting just above sea level makes it vulnerable to extreme weather. In July the

Netherlands recorded its third-highest temperature since records began — 39.4C in the southern city of Maastricht. Nitrogen-containing substances are also blamed for damage to plant and animal habitats.

Following a 2019 court ruling that the Netherlands was not doing enough to protect its natural areas from nitrogen pollution, the Dutch government said in June that the only way to meet climate goals by 2030 was "radical" cuts to farming.

This would involve a reduction in particular of around 30 percent to the Netherlands' herd of some four million cows. The government has offered some 25 billion euros to help farmers adapt—but has also warned that some closures are possible. "The farmers are very angry," said Jos Ubels, vice president of the Farmers Defence Force (FDV), one of the groups coordinating the demonstrations. "In history, every time there is a problem with a minority they have to shout really hard to be heard, so this is what we are doing." Ubels said his group was not responsible for the roadblocks, saying that it was "just organized by local farmers—they are very angry because they are played with." Prime Minister Mark Rutte recently called the protests "life-threatening", yet there is a groundswell of support.

'Climate tyranny'

Upside-down Dutch flags—a symbol of the farmers' movement—can be seen hanging from many houses, lampposts and road bridges. The Farmer-Citizen Movement (BBB), a centre-right party founded in 2019, would increase its current one seat in parliament to 19 according to latest opinion polls.

But their campaign is also going global. The FDV's Ubels was in Warsaw last week for talks with Agriculture Minister Henryk Kowalczyk, of Poland's right-wing Law and Justice Party-led populist government. "I will support the position of Dutch farmers in maintaining production... and I hope that their government will change its mind," Kowalczyk said in a statement. Trump's backing has also been a boost.

"Farmers in the Netherlands of all places are courageously opposing the climate tyranny of the Dutch government," Trump told a rally in Florida in July.

In the Netherlands, a recent farmers' demo in Amsterdam brought also drew many conspiracy theorists and COVID-skeptics. British comedian-turned-YouTuber Russell Brand recently told his 5.8 million followers that the Dutch farm plan was part of the "Great Reset"—a conspiracy theory alleging that world leaders orchestrated the pandemic.—AFP



BORNERBROEK, Netherlands: In this file photo, farmers drive their tractors on the A35 motorway as they protest against the government's nitrogen emissions cutting plans, causing delays due to the slow-moving of their vehicles near Bornebroek. — AFP