



This picture from the Giza side of the Nile River shows houseboats moored along the Giza bank in the Agouza district, days before their expected removal as part of a wider decree to clear all of the river banks in the area.



Egyptian-British national Omar Robert Hamilton, 37, stands at the balcony of his houseboat located in the Agouza district. — AFP photos

Cairo's floating heritage risks being towed away by grand projects

Dozens of vibrantly colored floating homes have for decades dotted the banks of the River Nile, rare havens of leafy seclusion in the Egyptian capital's hustle and bustle—but maybe not for much longer. Residents of the 30 or so houseboats that remain moored on the banks of the Nile last week received eviction orders, giving them less than two weeks before their homes are taken away to be demolished.

"Buying this houseboat was my dream," celebrated British-Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif told AFP. "I furnished it to accommodate my grandchildren and spend my last days here." The boats have long occupied a special place in the Egyptian collective consciousness, having been the centerpiece of conversations in Nobel Prize laureate Naguib Mahfouz's "Chitchat on the Nile", as well as various classics from the golden age of Egyptian cinema.

But while many have campaigned to protect the houseboats for their historic value, the authorities have argued they are an eyesore standing in the way of the state's grand development plans.

Residents have been offered no alternative accommodation or compensation, unlike others who previously faced evictions, and many have nowhere else to go. For Manar, a 35-year-old engineer who poured everything into buying her houseboat four years ago, it's a devastating blow.

"I sold my apartment, my father sold his car, and we used my two retired parents' severance pay," said Manar, who did not wish to give her full name. "People from the slums have been rehoused, the state even moved graves when it built a road through a cemetery, but for us, nothing."

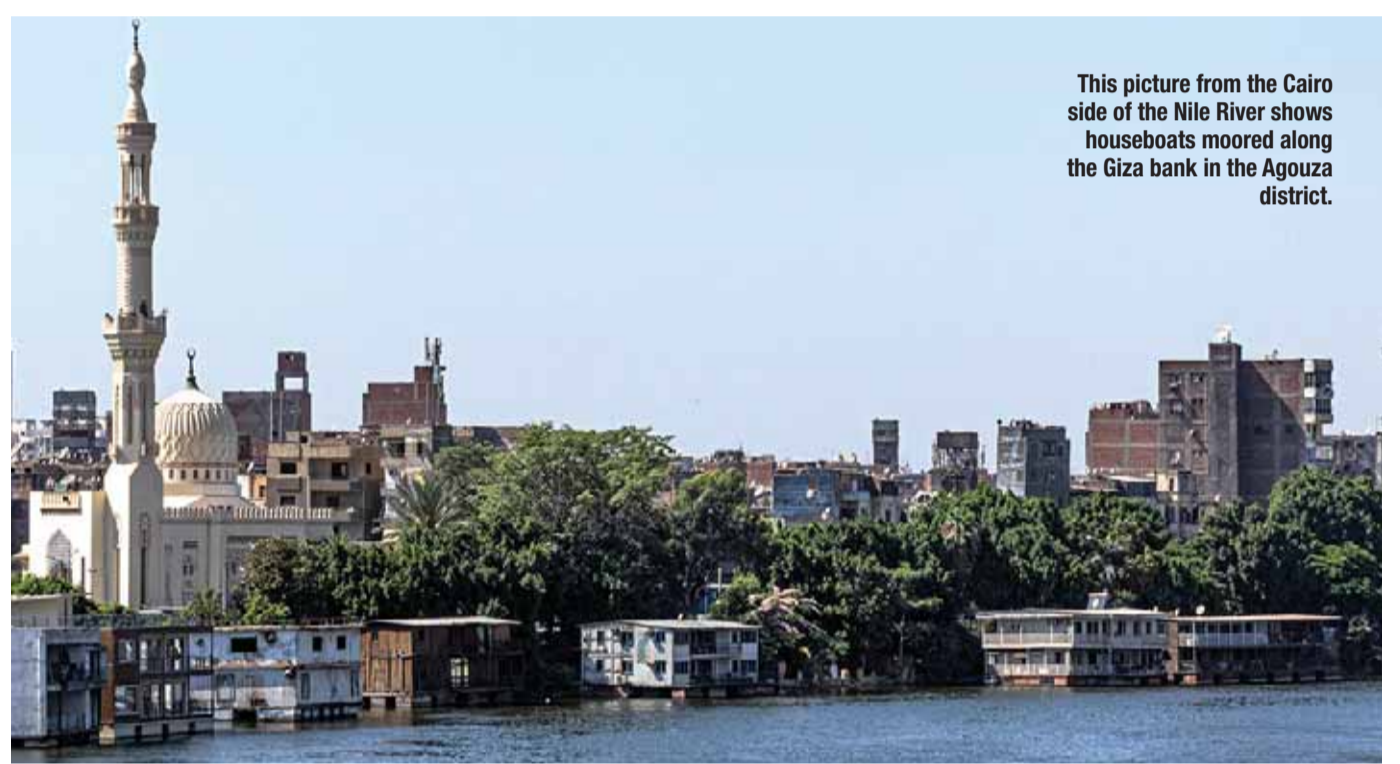
'Uncivilised sight'

Barely a week after the eviction order, some boats have already been towed off and impounded in a state marina, despite petitions and campaigning, even by pro-government television pundits. Soon, the sight of these houses, perched on metal caissons along the banks of the working-class neighborhood of Imbaba opposite the upscale island of Zamalek, will only remain a memory.

The first warning came in 2020, when the governor of Cairo "suspended new houseboat parking authorizations". Residents had since received no news, until the eviction order came on June 20, leaving them "with no time to file an appeal", according to one resident.

Adding to the pressures, authorities have been demanding parking and registration fees amounting to between 400,000 and one million pounds per residence (\$21,000 to \$53,000) — about 20 times more than previous annual fees. Ayman Anwar, head of the state-affiliated Central Administration for the Protection of the Nile River in Cairo, said residents were given ample warning.

"In 2020, the state banned the use of barges as dwellings, because they are an uncivilised sight and pollute the Nile," he said on a talk show this week. The process echoes previous forced evictions and demolitions in Cairo's central neighborhoods, such as Bulaq and Maspero. But while it may have started in poor informal settlements, the steamroller of development has now made its way into more affluent neighborhoods and homes. The only alternative appears to be to transform every houseboat into a commercial enterprise. "At my age, to become a cafe manager?" exclaimed Soueif, who is in her 70s. "It's forced evic-



This picture from the Cairo side of the Nile River shows houseboats moored along the Giza bank in the Agouza district.

tion, no matter what you call it."

'A lost cause'

The banks of the Nile were once among the few public spaces where residents of Cairo—a sprawling megalopolis of more than 20 million people—could escape the din. Dotted with cafes, visitors from across social strata would sip tea and juice by the water, for a modest price.

On the opposite bank of the Nile, the development Mamsha Ahl Masr ("the Egyptian people's promenade" in Arabic) has drawn a lukewarm response. The promenade is heralded by the state as one of many "megaprojects" launched by

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and executed by the army, the crowning jewel of which is a sparkling new capital, rising out of the sands 50 kilometers (30 miles) east of Cairo.

"It's a disaster," Soueif said. "Every square inch must be profitable. There is no more public space, people can no longer be outside without paying." But the promenade, with its restaurants, a planned marina and open-air theatre, will "guarantee public access to the Nile", the government insists. Awad, who has lived with his family on their houseboat for 25 years, says "a square meter of commercial space is worth 1,000 pounds, so of

course they'd rather rent the space out to cafes than keep us".

"It's tragic," said Awad, who also did not wish to give his last name. Now in his sixties, he laments the loss of "pieces of Cairo's heritage" dating back to the times of the late King Farouk as well as Umm Kalthoum and Mounira al-Mahdiyya, iconic divas of the 20th century. "It's a lost cause. We can't do anything, we are told that it's a decision from above," he said, cigarette in hand, gesturing towards the sky. — AFP



One of the houseboats usually moored across the bank of Nile River between the Zamalek district of Egypt's capital Cairo (right) and the Agouza district of its twin city of Giza (left) is towed away by authorities.



This picture shows one of the houseboats moored along the Giza bank in the Agouza district.



A family of fishermen sits in a boat as one of the houseboats (background) usually moored across one of the banks of the Nile River between the Zamalek district of Egypt's capital Cairo (right) and the Agouza district of its twin city of Giza (left) is towed away by authorities.

Francis Bacon painting of Lucian Freud sells for £43.3m

A painting by Irish-born British artist Francis Bacon of fellow UK painter Lucian Freud sold on Wednesday for £43.3 million (\$52.5 million, 50.2 million euros), according to Sotheby's auction house. The price is an auction record for a painting by Bacon sold in London and also for any single panel painting by the artist.

"Study for Portrait of Lucian Freud", painted in 1964, "exemplifies an iconic pairing of two of the most significant painters within the canon of twentieth-century art", said the auction house. The figurative work depicts a restless, bare-chested Freud, with a distorted face, sitting on a bench.

"The present work is testament to

Francis Bacon's capacity to provoke emotion and capture in paint the complexities of the human psyche," added Sotheby's. The artists were close friends but also artistic rivals fascinated by the human figure and sat for each other on multiple occasions.

Bacon's 1969 triptych "Three Studies of Lucian Freud" sold in 2013 for \$142.4 million, and held the record for the most

expensive work of art at auction until being unseated by Picasso's "The Women of Algiers (Version O)" in 2015. Snapped up by a New York gallery, it is composed of three panels or pieces which show the artist Freud sitting on the same chair but painted from different angles. Bacon died in 1992 and Freud in 2011. — AFP



Security guards walk past "Study for Portrait of Lucian Freud" by Irish-born British artist Francis Bacon displayed as part of the "British Art Jubilee Sale" auction at Sotheby's in London. — AFP

Kenya arrests 'fake policewoman' after TV appearance

Kenyan investigators said Wednesday they had arrested a would-be MP for impersonating a police officer after she appeared in full regalia on a television program where she talked about law and order. The woman, identified as Monica Wamaitha Gitau, was taken into custody after police were notified of her appearance on a local language TV station, the Directorate of Criminal Investigations (DCI) said on Twitter.

Gitau, who is running for parliament in Kenya's national elections in August, was asked about security and politics and provided responses dressed in the distinctive blue uniform of Kenya's police force. Police were less than convinced about her credibility, the DCI said.

"She is currently assisting with investigations for the offence of impersonating a police officer." According to a police report of the incident seen by AFP, when

confronted Gitau claimed to have been a serving officer who retired in 2011.

"She couldn't give a satisfactory account on why she wore the persian blue color police uniform with full police badges," the report said. In 2013, Kenya pledged to root out impostors in its police force after the high-profile arrest of a man accused of masquerading as a top provincial security official for a decade.

Under-equipped, badly paid and trained, the police force has a poor reputation in the East African country, where it is considered among the most corrupt organizations in the country, according to Transparency International. Under Kenyan law, someone found guilty of impersonating a police officer can receive a prison sentence of up to 10 years, a fine of up to a million Kenyan shillings (\$8,500), or both. — AFP