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Children play in a tent set up by the UN children's agency UNICEF in the western Ukrainian city of Lviv. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has forced at least two thirds of the country's 7.5 million children to flee their homes, Save the Children says. — AFP photos

In western Ukraine, displaced children play to forget war

Inside a play tent for displaced children in western Ukraine, 12-year-old Natan said his cat Marquisa was not acting normally, sleeping all day and staying awake all night. Maybe it was because she was so stressed after all the Russian bombs on his home city of Mariupol, he said, as his fluffy white pet snoozed curled up in her carrier box. Leaving her to rest, he joined other children playing, some stacking cubes under dangling origami, others coloring cartoon characters with crayons. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has forced at least two thirds of the country's 7.5 million children to flee their homes, Save the Children says.

As the war grinds on into its 10th week, organizations working with children are increasingly concerned about the mental toll it is taking on younger Ukrainians and their parents. Outside a municipal building in the western city of Lviv, Natan waited in

the tent set up by the UN children's agency for his parents to finish government paperwork. Under the canvas, a mother steadied her wobbly toddler in an avocado-themed jumpsuit. Natan crawled around the play mat, giving a younger child a ride on his back.

"He's always been sociable," said his mother Olena, returning hours later to retrieve him from the caregivers. But that evening Natan and his parents were catching the train eastwards to start a new life in the capital Kyiv, and she believed that below his smiley demeanour her third-born was a little worried. "He's afraid to go there. He survived the bombardment (in Mariupol), he knows what it's like," the 51-year-old medical assistant said.

'Find my mother and son'

The family arrived in Lviv in early April

after escaping the besieged port city of Mariupol, braving Russian shelling to run back from a shelter into their burning flat to rescue Marquisa the cat. But sleeping on a schoolroom floor in Lviv has been far from ideal, and it was time to try their luck in Kyiv after the Russians withdrew from its devastated suburbs. Since escaping Mariupol, Olena accompanied her 16-year-old daughter all the way to a youth hostel in Germany, she said. But the mother-of-three said she had to remain in Ukraine. The Russians had taken her 28-year-old son prisoner, she said.

And she had lost all contact with her mother in Mariupol, a city now almost entirely under Russian control after weeks of brutal siege. "I can't just leave with my children. I need to find my mother and my son," she said. As Natan and his parents walked off with Marquisa in

her box, the young boy in a stripey jumper turned around and waved goodbye. Just hours later, a Russian missile hurtled down onto the capital even as UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres visited, killing one person.

Photos left behind

Child psychologist Natalia Tybura said she had seen many parents and children in the UNICEF tent since the conflict started. Several came asking for advice about a son being more aggressive than usual, and she advised them to allow their child to vent through sport. But many more parents, especially those who had escaped Mariupol, just wanted to confide in someone.

They often felt wracked with guilt at having been forced to leave a loved one behind, or desperately wished they had brought along more images of their family.

"What people regret the most, more than property, are the photos they could not take with them," Tybura said. "Many people talk about family albums, and some were even forced to delete the images on their phones" to be able to cross Russian checkpoints out of the city.

Tybura said that among the worst hit, she had seen children who had fled Mariupol on foot with their families after weeks of being trapped inside the city. "Their minds had switched to survival mode," she said. But she warned trauma could well manifest itself at a later stage, and the country should brace itself for a mental health landslide when the war ended. "There will need to be a lot of support," especially for families with members returning from the front, Tybura said. — AFP



Dutch singer and rapper \$10 left the Schiphol Airport for Turin to attend the first semifinal of the Eurovision Song Contest on behalf of the Netherlands. — AFP

Geopolitics and glitz as Ukraine tipped to win Eurovision

Kitsch, glitz and geopolitics - the Eurovision Song Contest is back in two weeks' time, with Russia excluded and conflict-ravaged Ukraine the hot favorite to take the crown. "Stefania", by Ukrainian folk-rap group Kalush Orchestra, has been tipped by bookmakers to win the cult competition, this year being held in the northern Italian city of Turin on May 14. Russia was barred by organizers the day after it invaded its neighbor in late February.

And with lyrics such as "I'll always find my way back home, even if all the roads have been destroyed", the bookies expect Ukraine to benefit from an outpouring of public support. A collation of leading bookmakers on fan site Eurovisionworld has put Kalush Orchestra as the runaway favorite, with hosts Italy in second place. Mahmood and Blanco's "Brividi" hopes to repeat the success of their country last year, when lederhosen-clad rockers Måneskin triumphed with "Zitti e Buoni" and went onto global fame.

But with Eurovision, whose riot of pop, outrageous outfits and international relations drew 180 million viewers across Europe last year, anything is possible. "The public show strong support for Ukraine but I would not assume Ukraine is going to win," said Dean Vuletic, a historian and expert on the geopolitics of Eurovision. "In 1993, Bosnia and Croatia did not finish highly," despite being under attack, he told AFP, adding: "While the Ukrainian entry is strong, there are other entries of high quality."

Roars of war

It is not the first time the roars of war have made themselves heard in the competition, begun by the European Broadcasting Union in 1956 with just seven countries. Greece boycotted Eurovision after Turkey invaded Cyprus in 1974, and tensions in the Balkans have often spilled on stage.

In 2019, Ukraine withdrew from Eurovision after its singer dropped out in

protest at rules against touring in Russia, while last year Moscow ally Belarus, targeted by EU sanctions, was excluded in a move it slammed as politically motivated. Benoit Blaszczyk, secretary of France-Eurofans, the French branch of the OGAE international fan association, said Ukraine will get the "sympathy vote" but not just that. "They have a good song," he told AFP, adding that Ukraine - which consistently makes it through to the grand final - "gets attention every year, they are often ahead of their time".

Voting blocs

Votes are cast by music industry professionals and the public from each country - and out of fairness, nobody can vote for their own nation. Blocs of nations have in the past often voted together, from the francophone countries France, Belgium, Switzerland and Luxembourg, to the Nordic and more recent central or eastern European blocs. But "when you look at studies, voting blocs do not determine the winners", said Vuletic. Almost 4,400 Eurovision fans affiliated to OGAE have already cast their ballots for their favourite songs in Turin - and Ukraine came in 11th, with repeat winner Sweden on top, followed by Italy and Spain.

The Ukrainian OGAE fans crowned Poland - a country that has taken in millions of Ukrainian refugees since Russia's invasion - followed by Spain, France, Norway and Sweden. Meanwhile, Russian fans gave the top score - 12 points - to pro-Moscow Serbia, followed by Lithuania, Spain and Latvia. In Serbia, Slobodan Todorovic, editor-in-chief of fan site Evrovizija.rs, insisted each act should be judged on its merits.

"A potential Ukraine victory (for political reasons) would cast a dark shadow on Eurovision and the values it upholds - neutrality, independence from politics and respecting and celebrating diversity," he told AFP. But even if they are not formally crowned Eurovision champions, there are many who believe Kalush Orchestra - who needed special permission to leave Ukraine - have won just by being there. "The fact they will be able to show on stage, that they were able to leave the country and receive these messages of support is already a success," said Vuletic. — AFP

Sole searching: Rare sneakers on show in Melbourne

The "Mona Lisa of sneakers" went on display in Melbourne on Friday, with Michael Jordan's old high-tops and around 100 other rare shoes offering a glimpse into a lucrative market driven by die-hard "sneakerheads" and eager investors. Online auction giant eBay opened the three-day Museum of Authenticity in an apparent bid for a bigger slice of the sneaker resales market, which has boomed during the pandemic. "We're essentially showcasing and displaying some of the rarest, most iconic sneakers in the world," eBay sneaker expert Alaister Low told AFP ahead of the opening in the city's trendy suburb Brunswick.



Photo shows eBay sneaker expert Alaister Low holding a pair of signed Shaquille O'Neil's Reebok Pump Shaq Attaq size 22 sneakers which will go on display during the three-day Museum of Authenticity by online auction giant eBay. — AFP photos

The signed Air Jordans, dubbed the "Mona Lisa of sneakers" by Low, were worn by Jordan on-court in 1985 and a similar pair sold at auction in 2020 for 560,000 US dollars (532,000 euros) - the most expensive shoes ever put under the hammer at the time. Alongside the Chicago Bull's footwear are College Dropout Bapesta-Kanye West's earliest sneaker collaboration. West's touch rivals Jordan's, with a pair of Nike Air Yeezys worn by the rapper fetching 1.8 million dollars last year.

For the owner of the Air Jordans on display, building a collection is about more than money. "Actually, it's all about, like the passion. Yeah, I just love sneakers because I never resell them," Michael Fan, who lent out a small selection of his collection of 700 shoes to the exhibition, said. Fan, who said his array of shoes fills a carefully organized basement in his Melbourne home, said approaching the sneakers as a purely financial investment was a gamble.

"If you put the investment, like as a first priority, there will be like high risk." The market for rare shoes was "going up crazily", he added, with values of some in his collection jumping more than 100 times their original cost in the past decade. Low agrees, adding that COVID-19 lockdowns kicked the trend into overdrive. "Sneakers have just exploded in terms of growth, like on eBay, we've seen triple-digit growth within sneakers over the last three years," he said.

Similar to several other online resellers, including Detroit-based StockX that was valued at more than 3.5 billion dollars last year, eBay is touting its ability to make sure shoes that are traded on its platform are the real deal. The online-shopping stalwart says its "Authenticity Guarantee" service has experts pour over every detail, including "logo placement, stitching, leather quality and even smell", before granting an authentication certificate. — AFP



Photo shows sneakers which will go on display during the three-day Museum of Authenticity by online auction giant eBay.

Kenya's e-waste recyclers battle to contain scourge

In an industrial Nairobi neighborhood, impoverished slum-dwellers scour piles of garbage to collect damaged and discarded gadgets, part of an initiative to recycle old electronics and transform trash into treasure. Wearing T-shirts and flip flops and earning as little as 500 Kenyan shillings (\$4) a day, the unlikely warriors are at the frontlines of a battle against a rapidly-growing environmental menace.

Obsolete, broken and unwanted, these discarded items reflect a global scourge, with the electronics industry now generating trash at a faster pace than any other sector, including textiles and plastics, according to the United Nations. Although Africa has traditionally been a dumping ground for e-waste shipped from Europe and Asia, the continent is also increasingly dealing with huge volumes generated locally, driven by an insatiable appetite for smartphones, computers and household appliances.

But a handful of firms such as Sintmud

Group, WEEE Centre and Electronic Waste Initiative Kenya (E-WIK) are fighting back against the swelling tide, looking for ways to repurpose electronic trash. "We call it urban mining and do it for our environment," said E-WIK chairman George Kimani.

'End up in a river'

It is painstaking work. At E-WIK's facility in the Kenyan capital, dozens of employees carefully take apart motherboards, batteries, screens and cables, creating the building blocks for refurbished laptops that can then be sold to new customers. "When you get a working computer motherboard, you look for a power supply, and from there you start attaching other components including a nice casing," Kimani, a former car mechanic, told AFP.

In addition to buying trash from scavengers, E-WIK also collects discarded electronics from homes and businesses eager to dispose of them. At a wildlife conservation area outside Nairobi, a decades-old Macintosh computer jostles for space with vintage typewriters and landline telephones, waiting for E-WIK employees to show up. "I am so happy that they are taking it," said Liesl Smit, a ranch office manager at the conservancy, as workers in green overalls loaded the "junk" into a truck.

"We are a conservancy. It is important for me and all of us here to know that the waste is disposed of responsibly... that it is not

going to end up in some river or pollute wild spaces," she told AFP. The refurbished appliances-sold at bargain prices-have a huge market in Kenya-a country where 36 percent of the population lived in poverty in 2020 according to a government report - , with customers lining up to buy power inverters, televisions, refrigerators and much more.

"It is cheaper and often in your budget. There is nothing else," said Nicole Awuor, a 28-year-old baker, who owns a recycled microwave and mobile phone. E-WIK's most expensive laptop costs just 15,000 Kenyan shillings (\$131, 118 euros), a fraction of the price charged for a new model with similar specs. "There is a ready market. We give them a guarantee that if it doesn't work properly, they can always come back to us," said Kimani.

But environmentalists caution that such efforts are no match for the scale of the spiralling crisis. With only four recycling firms licensed in the country of nearly 50 million people, most of Kenya's waste still ends up in junkyards where it releases lead, mercury and other deadly compounds that pollute the environment. The total e-waste collected or recycled "is not documented and most of it" ends up in Nairobi's Dandora dumping ground-a garbage heap the size of nearly 20 football fields-the ministry of environment conceded in 2020. — AFP