

Bethlehem lights up Christmas tree as virus rules keep crowds away

Author:

AFP

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BETHLEHEM: Bethlehem lit up its Christmas tree on Saturday evening but without the usual crowds, as novel coronavirus restrictions put a damper on the start of Christmas festivities in the holy city.

Palestinian authorities last week announced measures, including a night-time curfew, across the Israeli-occupied West Bank for 14 days to fight a "worrying spread" of the virus.

Locals and pilgrims traditionally gather each year for the lighting of the tree in Manger Square, near the Church of the Nativity, built on the site where Christians believe Jesus was born.

But this year, only a small crowd of journalists was present due to coronavirus restrictions, an AFP photographer said.

Carmen Ghattas, director of public relations at the Bethlehem municipality, told AFP that Palestinian prime minister Mohammed Shtayyeh had lit up the tree remotely from his office in Ramallah.

The West Bank, with a Palestinian population of more than 2.8 million, has officially recorded 71,703 coronavirus infections, including 678 deaths. Israel has occupied the territory since 1967.





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Life in Gaza 'extraordinarily difficult' for disabled: HRWGaza gets vital medical aid as hospitals struggle with rising infections

[Istanbul turns to foreign funding as state banks close their doors to city](#)

Sat, 2020-12-05 22:11

ANKARA: The refusal of Turkey's state-run banks to extend loans to Istanbul is forcing the municipality to seek loans from abroad.

At a press conference in Istanbul on Wednesday, Ekrem Imamoglu, the mayor of Istanbul, announced that the municipality issued its first eurobond to international capital markets to fund its new infrastructure projects.

The municipality secured \$580 million of financing with this eurobond for four landmark subway projects in the city.

"Our relationship with foreign financing sources will continue. This could be either another bond issue, project financing or another instrument," Imamoglu said.

Imamoglu declared he will focus on metro projects in 2021 following the repeated calls of Istanbulites to ease the traffic jams in the second most congested city in the world.

Imamoglu emerged a powerful challenger to the authority of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) since he won two local elections last year in March, then in June to be elected the mayor of 16 million people.

The local projects he has implemented so far attracted various segments of the society as they touched on their daily needs. Imamoglu is also expected to challenge Erdogan in the next presidential elections in 2023.

Turkish state banks closed their doors to the municipality after they had supported AKP-affiliated municipalities for the past 25 years.

"It is no secret that Erdogan felt threatened by the loss of Istanbul to the opposition. He refused to accept the loss initially and demanded a rerun of the election, which – embarrassingly – Imamoglu won even more decisively. Now Imamoglu has emerged as a serious contender for 2023 and therefore has a target on his back," said Paul T. Levin, director of the Stockholm University Institute for Turkish Studies.

"It is unsurprising that the AKP uses its sway over state banks to make governing difficult for the opposition mayor, but it is the citizens of the city who will ultimately pay for it," he told Arab News.

Given Istanbul's importance to the country's economy, Levin warns that trying to punish Imamoglu may backfire and end up hurting Turkey's rulers, especially Erdogan.

FASTFACT

The Istanbul mayor emerged a powerful challenger to the authority of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) since he won two local elections last year in March, then in June to be elected the mayor of 16 million people.

Separately, the government has not abandoned the controversial Kanal Istanbul, The \$9 billion project, dubbed as Erdogan's "crazy project," aims to connect Black Sea and Marmara Sea through an artificial waterway. It has drawn harsh criticism from Imamoglu who has been a vocal opponent of the project on environmental and financial grounds along with the fear that it might trigger earthquakes.

The security around Istanbul mayor was recently increased following serious claims of Daesh-linked assassination plot.

According to Berk Esen, a political analyst from Sabanci University in Istanbul, the state banks' decision to not offer loans to opposition-controlled municipalities is another sign of the increasingly authoritarian regime in Turkey.

"The AKP government has turned the state bureaucracy into its partisan machine, using public resources to favor the party base and punishing opposition voters," he said.

"This is a deliberate move by the government to leave mayors from opposition parties without sufficient funds to service the municipality debt and undertake large-scale public projects simultaneously," he said.

Similarly, a senior official at the Ankara municipality confirmed that public banks are refraining from extending loans to the capital as well.

In March 2019 elections, the opposition candidate, Mansur Yavas, ended 25 years of rule by the mayors affiliated to the AKP who benefited continually from the loans of state banks for strange and unpopular urban projects such as dinosaur parks.

According to Esen, the AKP elites calculate that these projects could help opposition mayors draw votes from their base, thereby undermining the AKP's political hegemony.

“State banks are a convenient tool to use for this strategy. Under the AKP rule, the state banks instead turned into cash machines for pro-government businesses who openly side with Erdogan,” he said.



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Turkey's main opposition faces a continuous physical threat Turkey in weekend lockdown with coronavirus cases at record highs

[Lebanon's 'hunger heroes' bring food to people in need](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-12-05 01:58

DUBAI: Preparing over a million meals is no mean feat, but it is an even more extraordinary endeavor when achieved solely through the power of volunteers, donations and the salvaging of over 200 tons of food waste.

Since it was established eight years ago after Maya Terro and her team won a competition, the Beirut-based social enterprise FoodBlessed has grown steadily and organically.

“I was able to turn my passion for food and my pursuit of empowering others into a humanitarian mission that nourishes individuals, communities, and public institutions to promote positive change in their country – one meal at a time,” said Terro, executive director of FoodBlessed.

After raising \$2,600 through a fundraising initiative during the holy month of Ramadan, the company began to divert food from landfills, feed hungry people throughout Lebanon, and use food to “build communities and tackle loneliness.”

“We believe that food is an act of love, for the planet and its people,” Terro said. “In the long term, we strive to create a cultural shift fueled by mindful consumption. It is only when people see and appreciate the value of food that they will they stop wasting it and start sharing it.”

As a community-based and volunteer-driven initiative, FoodBlessed relies heavily on the help and generosity of volunteers and monetary and in-kind donations.

The coronavirus pandemic has naturally had a negative effect on the country’s economy and, subsequently, access to food. Over 3,000 community volunteers (otherwise known as “hunger heroes”) have signed up to be part of the solution.

“The current broken Lebanese economy will probably need a minimum of five years to recover,” said Terro. “In this period, we will be diligently working on providing food assistance to Lebanese families across the whole of Lebanon on a weekly basis, be it through a meal or a food parcel.

“One food parcel costs us \$19 and is enough to provide food sustenance to a family of four for between three to four weeks. To date, we have successfully distributed 5,000 food parcels across the whole of Lebanon.”

Human compassion is at the forefront of FoodBlessed’s values. Alongside its work with food, the organization aims to help vulnerable communities, including refugees, domestic migrant workers and single mothers – all made possible thanks to its extended network of NGOs, partners, and community members.

IN NUMBERS

- 5,000 Food parcels distributed in Lebanon by FoodBlessed.
- \$19 Cost to FoodBlessed of one food parcel.

FoodBlessed also works on rebuilding the dignity of those in need in the way they deliver the food. Terro said: “Instead of lining up for food, like in most humanitarian relief settings, our guests are invited to sit down at our table and made to feel at home.”

However, FoodBlessed’s success has not come without its challenges. Within the first year of starting up, both of Terro’s teammates left, leaving her to

manage the company on her own.

“The key to success is self-belief and being true to oneself. Turning rejections into motivations, and embracing one’s difference and uniqueness is the only way to make it in the world,” she said.

“Sadly, the majority of people, including sometimes the people closest to you, will judge you and often mistaken your diligent determination for ego or for aggressiveness. Nevertheless, I urge you to never lose hope.”

• *This report is being published by Arab News as a partner of the Middle East Exchange, which was launched by the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives to reflect the vision of the UAE prime minister and ruler of Dubai to explore the possibility of changing the status of the Arab region.*



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Hunger threatens Lebanon if leaders don't act, UK minister warns
Lebanon plunged into 'deliberate depression': World Bank

Pandemic teaches Kuwait's fitness industry a healthy business lesson

Author:

Sat, 2020-12-05 01:29

KUWAIT: The COVID-19 outbreak has had devastating effects on almost all aspects of business in the region, and the gym and fitness sectors are no exception. In response to this unprecedented challenge, some operators have come up with innovative ways to stay afloat and continue serving their customers.

Before the virus hit, the fitness market in Kuwait had achieved a steady annual growth rate of around 6 percent between 2012 and 2017. This expansion was fueled by an increasing expatriate population, widespread obesity, and a rise in health consciousness that has led to a shift in lifestyle. The growth rate was expected to hit around 10 percent in 2022, based on a report by Research And Markets.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has affected our business greatly over the past six months and will continue to do so until people feel safe to return to the normality of life," said Anthony Brown, operations manager at Elite Fitness, a facility in Kuwait that offers personal training, group fitness classes and aerial yoga, among other fitness activities.

Gyms and fitness clubs in Kuwait were forced to shut down in mid-March. As part of the government's reopening plan, the sector was not allowed to resume operations until the end of August with certain restrictions in place to limit the spread of the disease among gym-goers.

"You put people together in a closed environment, particularly where they engage in strenuous activity that may involve them producing droplets, heavy breathing, shouting, whatever else," Dr. Mike Ryan, an epidemiologist and the executive director of the World Health Organization's Health Emergencies Program, said in a Q&A session on COVID-19.

With six full months of complete business shutdown, Elite Fitness – as other fitness businesses in Kuwait – had to innovate to remain afloat and ensure their staff of almost 70 people can survive.

"We immediately went online, offering classes and personal training sessions to be conducted through apps such as Zoom and Instagram," Brown said.

According to him, that was not enough because a gym's main source of revenue is people walking through the door and buying a membership. Thus, Elite Fitness and some of its peers decided to move the gym to customers' homes.

"We are very fortunate in that we have a huge stockpile of equipment, so we were able to do this without compromising any equipment which we use in our facilities on a day-to-day basis," Brown said.

IN NUMBER

6% Annual growth rate of Kuwait's fitness sector in 2012-2017.

Over this period, the maintenance workers, receptionists and management team successfully rented out various gym equipment to over 100 customers. Most of the gear was delivered and unloaded in homes to ensure it arrived safely and in proper working order.

"People are now in the habit of (exercising) at home; they have seen the ease with which it can be done and the time and money they can potentially save," Brown said.

While this shift might not be in the best financial interest of the gym industry, adapting to the new reality has helped Elite Fitness deal partly with the devastation the pandemic has caused.

Furthermore, current restrictions on the number of people allowed into fitness facilities increase the burden on the industry as it tries to recover. "We have over 3,500 square meters (of space). For our business to be functioning and profitable, we need to keep it busy," Brown said.

Before COVID-19, Elite Fitness delivered over 200 sessions of personal training daily. Limits on how often members can come to the gym and the fact that classes can no longer be back to back to allow for cleaning have significantly impacted the number of training sessions the company can currently offer.

Brown, however, is not worried about the long-term prospects of his industry. "I think, with time, more people will start coming back. Gyms in Kuwait are very social and give people an outlet to interact, so inevitably they will again want to do this," he said.

"As the market begins to recover and the population starts to regain confidence in getting out and (being) social, the industry will again start to boom, as it has over the past 10-15 years."

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Kuwait says low COVID-19 mortality rate due to strong treatment protocols
Iran surpasses one million coronavirus cases

[**New report shows extent of Turkey's oppression of free press**](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-12-05 01:29

ANKARA: An exhaustive new report published by the joint international press freedom mission to Turkey that took place in October reveals the extent of the country's crackdown on media freedom in the country and calls for coordinated action from the international community to address the challenge.

The report, entitled "Turkey's Journalists on the Ropes," was funded by the

EU and supported by 11 international organizations that focus on freedom of speech and human rights.

The mission took place against the backdrop of ongoing targeting of dissident media by the Turkish authorities, increased assaults on journalists critical of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's regime, and a newly introduced restrictive social-media law that is likely to further hamper the last remaining bastion in of independent reporting in the country.

The mission's previous visit to Turkey, in September 2019, focused on the changes in trial proceedings, pre-trial detentions, the abuse of anti-terror laws to imprison dissident journalists, and potential changes that could be brought about by the Judicial Reform Strategy.

At the start of October 2020, 77 journalists were still in prison, one of the highest numbers in any country in the world. This year's report drew attention to the controversial amnesty law announced earlier this year to ease overcrowding in Turkish prisons, which excluded journalists from its scope.

"Turkey's press freedom crisis is worsening amid growing state capture of media, the lack of independence of regulatory institutions, and a new social media law designed to clamp down on the remaining spaces for free comment," the report stated, adding that the lack of judicial independence in Turkey encourages the government's crackdown on the press.

The report also criticized the new social media law, predicting that it would increase online censorship and cripple critical journalism in a space that had previously been open to the kind of independent reporting stymied by the government's takeover of mainstream media.

HIGHLIGHT

The report, titled "Turkey's Journalists on the Ropes," was funded by the EU and supported by 11 international organizations that focus on freedom of speech and human rights.

One concern about the new law is that it could push companies to comply with the government's censorship trend by removing content upon request and handing over user data to the highly politicized authorities and courts of the country – opening the way for further arrests of journalists who express dissident views online.

Last year, a total of 61,049 website domains were blocked in Turkey.

The politically motivated targeting of critical broadcasters in Turkey remains a significant problem, with regulatory bodies stepping up fines and broadcast bans on dissident TV channels and threatening to revoke their licenses if they receive a second ban, while pushing for advertising bans on critical newspapers.

“Growing authoritarianism, with the Turkish authorities trying to establish full control over the flow of information, is our main concern. They do this by different means – from jailing journalists to changing legislation to make it more difficult for journalists and media outlets to operate freely in Turkey,” Gulnoza Said, press freedom advocate and head of the Europe and Central Asia Program at the Committee to Protect Journalists, told Arab News.

Between March and August alone, there were 13 incidents of arrest or investigation of dissident journalists reporting on COVID-19 cases. Since the beginning of this year, at least 22 journalists have been arrested.

Their trials are not being held publicly, nor are lawyers permitted to attend the hearings. The authorities claim this is because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but observers have called for the government to uphold the principle of fair trials.

In November, at least 30 press-related trials were held in eight Turkish provinces, with some 40 journalists being prosecuted. Nine of those journalists were accused of insulting state officials.

“The international community must step up its bilateral and multilateral efforts to bring Turkey back into the club of countries that respects the rule of law. Human rights issues, including press freedom, must not be held hostage to geopolitical developments,” the report said.

According to Said, international leverage should still be used, but there are fewer levers now than there were years ago when Turkey aspired to become a member of the EU.

“Today, there is disenchantment with the West – both the EU and the US – in Turkey. That was coupled with the US distancing itself from playing (a central) role in defending democracy and human rights, including press freedom around the world, over the last four years. I hope the new US administration will be more vocal defending free press and independent journalists in Turkey and elsewhere,” she said.

The mission’s report welcomed some positive rulings by the Turkish Constitutional Court concerning the protection of freedom of expression online and offline. “However, lower courts increasingly ignore these rulings; for example, they have refused to lift website blockings in some cases,” the report noted.



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US lawmakers target Turkey in \$740bn defense bill EU weighs options as Turkey stand-off grinds on