

Yemenis should not be punished for Houthi wrongdoings, say officials

Author:

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AL-MUKALLA: Needy Yemenis should not be punished for Houthi actions targeting humanitarian operations in the war-torn country and the UN should divert its activities to government-controlled areas, officials said.

Yemen's Minister of Human Rights Mohammed Asker said international aid organizations had a duty to make sure that help reached those who needed it. "The (international) organizations have a legal and moral responsibility when they request support for the needy in Yemen, to make sure that the donors' money does not go to buying bullets that kill Yemeni children," the minister told Arab News, adding that humanitarian operations inside Houthi-controlled areas had become a breeding ground for corruption due to a lack of transparency and accountability. "This is the net result of dealing with parties outside the framework of the state."

His warning came as the UN threatened to reduce its operations in northern Yemen due to Houthi obstruction. USAID said it would suspend aid to Houthi-controlled areas if the militants did not leave aid workers alone.

Yemeni officials said a suspension or reduction of aid in northern Yemen would aggravate the humanitarian crisis, and that civilians would pay the price.

Jamal Balfakeh, the general coordinator of Yemen's Higher Relief, an Aden-based government body responsible for handling humanitarian activities, said the international community should punish Houthis by relocating offices to Aden and dispatching aid through government-controlled areas.

HIGHLIGHT

Yemen's warning came as the UN threatened to reduce its operations in northern Yemen due to Houthi obstruction.

"The UN should punish the real perpetrators not civilians," he told Arab News, "and the greatest punishment is moving their operations to government-controlled areas. The UN can bring in aid through 22 sea and land corridors." He said that reports about the Houthi mishandling of aid and the militant group's obstruction vindicated the government's demand for the UN to investigate corruption.

"We have been warning the international community about the Houthi looting of aid since the first six months of the war," Balfakeh added. "We have provided them with detailed reports about the scale of the Houthi plundering of aid and told them that Houthis divert aid to their fighters." Yemen's ambassador to the US, Ahmed bin Mubarak, said that UN officials used to complain in private about Houthi pressure.

"UN officials used to complain that Houthis attacked and blackmailed their

workers,” he said. “But they could not confront the Houthis in public as they might disrupt aid.”

He said the government was pleased that UN and media reports reflected concerns about the flow of arms from Iran and the Houthi looting of humanitarian aid.



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US to stop aid in Yemen's Houthi areas if militants don't budge

[A homegrown UAE brand bets on date's heritage appeal](#)

Fri, 2020-02-28 23:17

DUBAI: When you can answer the classic business question about a unique selling proposition (USP) in six different ways, you likely have a successful product on your hands.

Thankfully, when you are dealing with dates, unusual product features are not a problem.

There are more than 3,000 date varieties around the world, but Emirati brand The Date Room is approaching the sticky business of breaking into an established market with just half a dozen local cultivars.

From the buttery, caramel notes of the golden Kholas date to the lower-carbohydrate Razaiz type, their flavors offer a change from the more commonly available Medjool and Deglet Noor varieties.

Being locally sourced from about 20 farms in the Al-Ain oasis area of Abu Dhabi, they are also introducing UAE residents to the nation's heritage.

"Emirati dates are unique because they're generally much richer in taste and texture than others on the market – although they can be smaller in size," said Tony N. Al-Saiegh, executive director of The Date Room.

The Date Room launched with two luxury boutiques in the UAE last November after founder Ahmed Mohamed bin Salem spotted a gap for local fruit in a market dominated by produce from Saudi farms.

While official market share by origin data is not available, Saudi dates may control close to 90 percent of the UAE's retail market.

Yet, with an annual production of 755,000 tons, Saudi Arabia trails Egypt, Iran and Algeria, all of which produce in excess of a million tons each year, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization.

By contrast, UAE farms grow about 475,000 tons, a significant percentage of which is exported.

Dates are among the world's oldest cultivated crops. The palm is native to the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia, with origins that go back more than 5,000 years to what is modern-day Iraq.

The appeal of dates has grown considerably in recent years. Their high fiber and mineral profile have led to their classification as a superfood, they have been used for their high natural sugar content in healthy natural alternatives to processed candy bars.

"The Date Room's main initial motive was the fact that our own farms produce a superior quality of date in every way," Al-Saiegh said.

"Our families have been enjoying these dates with every meal and occasion for generations, so why not introduce it to the market in a way that makes them available to everyone but also promotes the unique culture of the UAE?"

The company's annual production runs to about 160 tons.

For now, distribution is restricted to the UAE, but Al-Saiegh says his team is in talks with distributors in India and Indonesia.

With farmers everywhere agonizing over the impact of climate change, what are the challenges facing date farmers, accustomed as their crops are to heat and aridity?

Scientists expect 2019 to be the second-hottest year on record after 2016, and they forecast that by 2070, today's major producers will suffer from a markedly unsuitable climate.

Despite palm trees being able to tolerate the heat for hundreds of years, Al-Saiegh says his farms are already feeling the impact.

"As the weather gets hotter and the summers get longer, it's drying out farms and (arable) land. This means more water is required because a lack of water affects the size and texture of the fruit," he explains.

While the full impact of those changes is some years away, the Abu Dhabi government has focused on conserving the UNESCO World Heritage oasis where the UAE's dates are grown.

On the other hand, given the way technology has transformed the local agricultural sector with solutions such as vertical, indoor and soilless farms, Al-Saiegh may soon be able to add another distinguishing feature to The Date Room's USP.

• 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 and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation 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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A Sinai desert community in Egypt leads the way in agritourismJeddah travel and tourism exhibition witnesses increase in diversity and activity

[A Sinai desert community in Egypt leads the way in agritourism](#)

Fri, 2020-02-28 23:17

CAIRO: "Community is everything, surround yourself with beautiful souls and watch what happens. So much love, I feel it bubbling out of my chest," writes Madison Cooper.

The experienced yoga instructor and assistant manager at The Kings Arms pub and music venue in Salford, UK, said this when describing her experience in the Habiba village, a remote beach community in the middle of Egypt's South Sinai desert.

It was this feeling of peace and tranquility that brought Cairo-born Maged El-Said and his Italian wife Lorena to the Egyptian port city of Nuweiba to settle and eventually start the Habiba community in 1994.

The community is a village that hosts an eco-friendly beach lodge, an organic farm, the Sinai Palm Date foundation and a learning center partnered with universities and organizations around the globe to promote a new form of educational tourism by hosting professional certification courses in permaculture and agriculture ecosystems.

More than 90 percent of Egypt's land is covered by deserts, Sinai being part of the Eastern desert that occupies more than 20 percent of the country's surface area, with very few populated villages and cities along the Red Sea coastal strip.

"I am sure there is enormous potential to invest in our huge deserts. The hidden value is in the people if we learn from each other the best way of integrating management of resources," El-Said said.

This, however, is easier said than done: El-Said, who is now in his sixties, spent almost 20 years taking "agritourism" from a concept to a meaningful business.

He succeeded in 2009, when tourists started coming to volunteer at the organic farm merely to enjoy the experience of isolated serene living.

Before that, El-Said spent several years doing a series of seminars and workshops and inviting local and international experts in organic farming to discuss the agritourism model.

His first introduction to the field was in Italy, where he earned his bachelor's degree in Italian language and literature in the 1970s.

Italian agritourism gained traction around the time when the agricultural business became less profitable.

Farmers in Italy were giving up, transforming their farms and farmhouses into vacation homes where tourists could stay and experience farming.

"People come to enjoy the beautiful nature and the serene surroundings, eat clean food and leave with fresh ideas and a new perspective on life," said El-Said when explaining the concept of agritourism.

While the idea is widespread in the US and many European countries, it remains nascent in MENA. Sporadic trials around the region are currently under way, including a licensing program launched by the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities for farms willing to explore the concept and offer agritourism services.

Expanding the scope of its target community, the Habiba learning center has been working toward hosting a series of certificate program.

Among them are an internationally recognized Permaculture Design Certificate course that provides an introduction to sustainable living systems for a wide variety of landscapes and climates.

The move is intended to attract a more professional international audience and establish a new breed of educational tourism. El-Said has an ambitious plan for the future, hoping he can establish a desert research hub within his community and start replicating the model in other Egyptian resort cities by the year 2025.

"It is challenging but beautifully rewarding; people are resistant to change, but when they see a working model, it becomes easy for them to follow," he said.

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A homegrown UAE brand bets on date's heritage appeal Jeddah travel and tourism exhibition witnesses increase in diversity and activity

[Protests hinder Yemen's efforts to combat coronavirus](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-02-28 03:00

AL-MUKALLA: As workers in Yemen's major port Aden began preparing a coronavirus quarantine facility at Al-Sadaqa Hospital, rumors swirled around the city claiming that if patients were locked inside the hospital, the disease would quickly spread through neighboring areas.

Amid complaints about the city's poor health facilities, hospital staff and fearful residents began protesting. People living nearby besieged the hospital, while health workers inside staged a sit-in, refusing to work unless the Health Ministry canceled plans to build the isolation room.

"They threatened to kill me," Dr. Wafaa Dahbali, Al-Sadaqa Hospital manager, told Arab News.

The hospital's administration was forced to ask the Health Ministry to move the facility to another location, she said.

"Now we cannot even bring in basic protective items such as masks or gloves since workers will think we still plan to build the quarantine room," she added.

Yemen, which is gripped by a civil war that has killed thousands of people since late 2014, has intensified efforts to counter coronavirus. But due to crumbling health services, lack of awareness among people and the influx of hundreds of African migrants via the southern coastline, health officials fear the virus could spread undetected across the country.

Yemen's Ministry of Health in Aden on Wednesday said that Yemen is free of the disease and all Yemenis returning from China had tested negative. Health Minister Nasir Baoum opened a quarantine center at Seiyun Airport in the southeastern province of Hadramout on Sunday, and said that he had ordered all sea, land and air entry points to ramp up detection measures.

Financial constraints

Health officials across Yemen told Arab News this week that health facilities are working at full capacity to cope with the influx of war casualties, and cases of seasonal diseases such as cholera, dengue fever and H1N1.

The appearance of coronavirus in Yemen would increase the burden on the country's crumbling and cash-strapped health facilities, they said.

Ibn Sina Hospital in Al-Mukalla provides health services to patients from the three southern provinces of Hadramout, Shabwa and Mahra in addition to treating victims of the conflict in Abyan and Jawf.

Recently the Health Ministry decided to build a quarantine center at the hospital. Lacking sufficient space, a three-room kitchen was turned into an isolation facility.

However, Dr. Alabed Bamousa, the hospital's director, told Arab News that the facility could not afford to furnish the unit with medical equipment and staff lacked proper know-how.

"We have nothing at the moment. We asked the ministry for the names of health workers who would be trained by the World Health Organization on dealing with coronavirus patients," Bamousa said.

He said that workers are not being encouraged to wear masks and gloves in order to avoid triggering panic.

"My viewpoint is that we shut up till we are ready," Bamousa said.

Health officials at Al-Mukalla, one of Yemen's busiest ports, have asked sailors to complete declarations showing their movements before docking.

Riyadh Al-Jariri, head of the Health Ministry's Hadramout office, said that teams of six health workers in each district in the province are visiting Yemenis who have returned from China.

In the streets, people say that they get information about the virus from social media rather than official channels or local media outlets.

Hassan, a shopkeeper, said that he learned about symptoms of coronavirus and protection measures from WhatsApp.

"I know that the virus targets the lung and causes fever. We are advised to wash hands and wear marks," he said.



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US to stop aid in Yemen's Houthi areas if militants don't budge Yemen envoy to US says Houthi escalation spoils peace hopes

[Egyptian deaf-mute coffee shop shows all signs of success](#)

Author:

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CAIRO: An Egyptian cafe for deaf and mute people is quietly showing all the signs of success.

Staff and customers at Wadi El-Nile coffee shop, in the Upper Egyptian city of Qena, use sign language to communicate and place orders.

Printed guides are on every table showing how to sign simple words and phrases to help visitors, whether or not they are deaf-mute.

And activities in the cafe are no different than in any other coffee house, with customers playing backgammon and dominos, enjoying hot and cold drinks,

and smoking shisha.

Wadi El-Nile's owner, Mustafa Khairat, said that the success of his establishment had proved that deaf people could be integrated into society.

"I had hope and faith in achieving the dream of owning a coffee shop specialized in hosting the deaf and mute and where the staff would be deaf and mute as well. They would communicate with customers using sign language, and that is what happened," he added.

"Deaf people represent a huge segment in Egypt. They used to meet in several coffee shops in Qena governorate but when this one opened with deaf as well as other people attending, it turned into a destination for the deaf from other cities and villages. They meet here and they feel it is their home," said Khairat.

"We printed papers with sign language as a guide and put them on every table. They have simple sign language signs written in letters to help customers if they are finding it difficult communicating with a waiter or other deaf and mute customers."

Statistics issued by the UN in 2019, showed the number of deaf and mute people in Egypt to be around 7.5 million out of a population of 100 million, and coffee shops to cater for them have sprung up throughout the country.

In the city of Alexandria, Rady's cafe in the neighborhood of Mansheya, is better known to Alexandrians as the mute's coffee shop. The Brotherly Association for the Deaf, which is located in the same area, holds regular meetings there.

And last year, Mohamed Arafat opened his Candy restaurant in Cairo, which employs a number of deaf-mute staff.



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