

PALESTINE

Run for your life

Run 10 kilometres from the Church of Nativity to the Canaanite village of Al-Khader and back; repeat. The route of the Palestine Marathon, which takes place in Bethlehem for the fourth time on 1 April, reflects the reality of the Occupation and invites one to imagine – and experience – a different one. ‘The idea is to get people to think: why do I have to do it this way?’ says George Zeidan, Palestine Marathon co-founder and himself an avid athlete. ‘Because running in Palestine requires careful planning: you go where there is no threat of Israeli settlers or the army.’

Organized by the Right to Movement, a volunteer-run global running community, the 42-kilometre race offers participants a whistle-stop tour of Palestinian life as the course takes in two refugee camps, the Apartheid Wall, a checkpoint, and villages whose lands have been confiscated for illegal Israeli settler colonies. It is meant to

reclaim the right to move freely and break with the stereotypical view that Palestinians are a violent people. ‘It’s also fun,’ Zeidan says.

Locally, the marathon is changing social perceptions and challenging gender norms in what is a highly patriarchal society. Training groups set up in Ramallah, Jerusalem and Bethlehem now boast more women than men. Just over a third of the 600 people who took part in the first Palestine Marathon were female, and that proportion still applies now that 3,000 are running in it. ‘We’ve been able to create a proper atmosphere for Palestinian women to enjoy running: they no longer feel weird about doing something very normal,’ Zeidan says. ‘We also work with the male mentality. I don’t have to tell every man to accept his wife, sister or daughter running; he sees it in



Signe Vest/Right to Movement

practice. This is women’s empowerment – not on paper but in reality.’

Zeidan has run in the event three times. ‘On the finish line I cry,’ he says. ‘But on the last round I feel emotionally strong, seeing happiness in people. It’s the biggest professional event in Palestine and Israel hates it because it sends an image of Palestine that they don’t want: a nice image.’ ■

Giedre Steikunaite
palestinemarathon.com

GEORGIA

Big hydro bad news

As spring approaches, villagers in Chuberi, a mountain hamlet in the former Soviet republic of Georgia, hope that the harsh winter does not end. For once the snow melts, construction on the nearby Nenskra

dam will resume, irreversibly altering the secluded community’s way of life.

They are the latest group to fall victim to something of a hydro-boom in Georgia. This small nation of 4.4 million has recently awarded more than 100 concessions for new hydro projects. With an output of 280 megawatts, the Nenskra

hydropower plant is the jewel in the crown. At a cost of \$1 billion, it is set to become the largest and most expensive hydroelectric endeavour since independence in 1991.

A joint venture between the state and a Korean utility, Nenskra has drawn interest from multilateral donors such as the European Investment Bank and London-based lender, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

Chuberi and the surrounding Caucasus mountains are rich in biodiversity and water resources, and 35 hydropower plants are already at various stages of development in this region, which is roughly one-and-a-half times the size of Luxembourg.

The Georgian government is doggedly pushing the projects forward with one clear goal in mind: to generate enough power to meet high domestic demand in winter months, and export the rest to Turkey and the EU.

Malina Gerliani, a 47-year-old Chuberi resident, has watched with anxiety as the bulldozers enter the village. After losing her home during the conflict with Russia over Abkhazia in 2008, Malina faces displacement once again – her house and the

Scratchy Lines
by Simon Kneebone



UNITED STATES

Keystone sting

President Obama's decision to block the KeystoneXL tar sands pipeline was a major victory for the environmental movement in the United States and beyond. Now, the company behind the pipeline – TransCanada – are planning to sue the US government for putting climate action above corporate profits, to the tune of \$15 billion.

The Keystone pipeline would have transported highly polluting tar sands from Alberta, Canada, to refineries on the Gulf Coast of the US and on to export markets such as Europe. Over the project's 50-year lifespan, it was predicted to generate up to 8.4 billion metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions.

Since Obama's veto, TransCanada has turned to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to sue the US administration. NAFTA grants investor privileges to corporations through the Investor-State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) mechanism, which allows firms to side-step national courts and sue governments at private ISDS tribunals for any losses

they might incur from government efforts to protect the environment or human rights. They can even claim for billions in notional 'future profits'.

The tribunals also exert a 'chilling factor', discouraging politicians from putting in place important protections.

The US and EU member states have already paid out billions of euros of taxpayers' money to corporations under existing investment treaties.

But a new wave of trade agreements could make things a whole lot worse. They include the gargantuan US-European Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) currently under negotiation, and the Canadian-European Trade Agreement (CETA), which is awaiting a vote of approval from European Members of Parliament.

Campaign groups have put up a powerful resistance to the deal – drumming up 3.2 million signatures in opposition from EU citizens last year – in the hope of stopping tens of thousands more foreign corporations from aping TransCanada in years to come. ■

Colin Roche
foeurope.org

surrounding fields are slated to give way to hydro-plant facilities. She says she has been kept in the dark about the planned resettlement. 'They come, take pictures, never ask us what we think,' she says. 'They have no documents to show us. Sometimes they come without translators so we do not understand them.'

The villagers of Chuberi belong to the Svan indigenous group, who maintain their own language and traditional customs. Chuberi's 300 households subsist on grazing animals and practise forestry on communally owned lands – both of which will be limited by the dam's reservoir, and no compensation is in sight.

From an economic perspective, there is little in the Nenskra dam project for the local Svan community. For many like Malina, the short-term construction jobs promised by the company are not enough to counter the risks of landslides, flooding and the loss of the Svan way of life.

Without a sustainable hydropower strategy in place, the situation for Malina and others will only become more precarious. ■

Klara Sikorova
bankwatch.org

IRAN

Morality app

You've probably come across smartphone apps that help you steer clear of speed cameras. Now, a group of techies in Iran have developed a bit of software to help their fellow citizens avoid a more pernicious form of law enforcement: the morality police.

Known as *Ershad* and operating in mobile units in streets, shopping malls and metro stations, the morality police regularly harass and even prosecute Iranians, particularly women, for their purportedly unIslamic behaviour and clothing.

Users of the app are invited to geolocate *Ershad* patrols, whose presence is then indicated on Google maps with an icon of a bearded man.

'I believe this will lead to many other creative apps which will address the gap between society and government in Iran,' says Hadi Ghaemi, executive director of the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.

On their own website, the app's anonymous developers ask, 'Why should we give up the most basic right of choosing what clothes to wear?' ■

Reasons to be cheerful

Bamboo bikes

Bernice Dapaah is a Ghanaian entrepreneur who turns organic bamboo into light, sturdy and sustainable bike frames in her hometown of Kumasi. Dapaah and her team of manufacturers and mechanics – mostly local women – work with farmers to plant 10 bamboo trees for every one bike sold and donate many bikes to local children for school transport. This successful business is expanding, with two new factories now opening in the Brong Ahafo region.



ghanabamboobikes.org

Helping girls code

The US nonprofit Girls Who Code works to reverse the gender gap – it's more of a gulf, actually – in the tech industry. And it's getting there: when it started providing summer courses to disadvantaged high-school girls in 2012, it trained 20 children; since then, some 10,000 girls have taken the courses and the aim is to reach a million by the end of the decade. This year, Girls Who Code will spend \$1million on scholarships across 11 US states.

Goodbye guinea worm

In the mid-1980s, guinea worm disease affected 3.5 million people across 20 African countries.

Now, thanks to a campaign led for 30 years by US former president Jimmy Carter and the eponymous NGO he set up in 1982, it looks set

to become only the second human pathogen after smallpox to be entirely eradicated. Success has stemmed from meticulously tracking known cases of infection; training local volunteers to administer aid and advice; and providing simple cloth filters and larvicide to prevent people from ingesting the *Dracunculus medinensis* larvae from contaminated water.



cartercentre.org

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