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The burnt Central Library in the Faysaliyah quarter in Iraq's northern city of Mosul is pictured. — AFP photos



A man stands amidst dusty books.

In Iraq, academics restock Mosul's barren bookshelves

Watheq Mahmud is pursuing an advanced engineering degree but the textbooks he needs are often missing in his native Mosul, the Iraqi city where jihadists burned volumes and destroyed libraries. To track down the books, he has had to travel 400 kilometers south to Baghdad, and even a further 600 kilometers to Basra.

"Everything is reversed today. Mosul used to be the hub for students and researchers from all across Iraq and the Arab world," said Mahmud, 33. "But today, Mosul's people are forced to leave their city in search of education, books, and resources," he added. For centuries, Mosul was known for its artists and writers, for libraries brimming with books in multiple languages, and for housing Iraq's first printing press.

But when the Islamic State group seized the city in 2014, it banned any texts deemed un-Islamic and burned treasured archives. And although Mosul has been back in government hands since 2017, its young academics see the barren bookshelves as part of IS's dark legacy.

"It's extremely hard for a researcher to complete his dissertation because there are so few resources available," Abdulhamid Mohammad, a 34-year-old pursuing a doctorate in history, told AFP. Roa al-Hassan, who is studying food science, fears much of her city's written riches will never be recovered. "Some books were never digitally available, and now they'll be lost forever," she lamented.

Looted, burned

One of Mosul's most prominent literary hubs was the Central Library, erected in 1921 in the eastern Faysaliyah quarter. It housed books ranging from donated novels to rare volumes, fragile manuscripts, and old blueprints. The library even held books in the Syriac language, produced in the 19th century by Iraq's first printing press, across the Tigris river in Mosul's west.

Mosul also boasted several large government collections, a library of religious texts, the Mosul University library, dozens of archives linked to churches and



Iraqi women sort out books at the new library of Mosul University in Iraq's northern city of Mosul.

mosques, and even more private bookstores along Nujaiifi Street, nicknamed "Culture Boulevard." Those gems were all destroyed in February 2015, when IS fighters looted the Central Library and systematically destroyed other collections, despite howls of protest locally.

Some experts say IS set aside precious manuscripts to sell on the black market, along with ancient artifacts retrieved from heritage sites it had destroyed. The Iraqi government's recapture of Mosul in 2017 facilitated support to restock the libraries, with donated volumes arriving from all over the world. "We had 16,338 books before the library was looted and ruined," said Jamal Ahmad Hesso, the associate director of the Central Library.

The library has received 11,758 volumes but is still missing more than a quarter of its previous content, said Hesso. Mosul's main religious archive once housed around 58,000 books. It now holds 48,000, according to its

keeper, Shamel Lazem Tah. "Among them were 4,361 rare and important manuscripts that were all stolen by Daesh (IS)," said Tah, 41. They included "al-Muht al-Burhani," a key text in Islamic jurisprudence that dated back 900 years.

'What it once was'

Mosul University, too, was ravaged by IS's three-year rule over the city, said agriculture professor Mohammad Abdallah. "The university library lost more than a million scientific and academic books, including more than 3,500 valuable prints," said. "Manuscripts, periodicals more than 300 years old, copies of the Quran dating back to the 9th century—all of them were looted or burned," Abdallah said.

Around 90 to 95 percent of the library's contents were lost. Slowly but surely, the university is restocking: nearly 100,000 books were donated from other colleges and

non-governmental agencies, both inside and outside Iraq. "The university is determined to rebuild its library so it can be what it once was—a rich resource of knowledge and academia," Abdallah said. While most of the current stocks are donations, some volumes remain from Mosul's original archives—survivors of IS.

"More than 3,000 books were saved. We have also stored away the remnants of another 4,000 destroyed books," said Mosul University librarian Omar Tufiq. Abu Mohammad, 33, was one of the Mosul residents who contributed to the rescue effort. "I rescued more than 750 books: one of my friends and I," he said. He hid the literary treasures in the cellar of an abandoned home. "When the library was being burned, we carried them away in small bags, despite it being dangerous," Mohammad.—AFP

Sherpa completes record 23rd Everest climb

For the hardy few, climbing Everest is a bucket-list feat of endurance, danger and wonder. But Kami Rita Sherpa's 23rd record summit of the world's highest peak yesterday was just another day at work. Sherpa, 49, reached the summit yesterday morning, breaking his own record that he set last year, his expedition company confirmed. A guide for more than two decades, he first summited the 8,848-metre peak in 1994 when working for a commercial expedition.

"I did not climb for world records, I was just working. I did not even know you could set records earlier," he said last month before setting off for Everest base camp. The accomplished Nepali climber has also conquered other challenging 8,000-metre peaks including the world's second-highest mountain, K2 in Pakistan. Last year he ascended Everest for the 22nd time, breaking the previous record

of 21 summits he shared with two other Sherpa climbers.

Ethnic Sherpas from the valleys around Everest have become synonymous with high-altitude climbing, crucial for Nepal's lucrative mountaineering industry, which nets the impoverished Himalayan country more than \$4 million a year. With their unique ability to work in a low-oxygen, high-altitude atmosphere, they are the backbone of the industry, helping clients and hauling equipment up Himalayan peaks. "It would be impossible for many foreign climbers to summit mountains without the help of a Sherpa," said Ang Tshering Sherpa, former president of the Nepal Mountaineering Association.

"They are critical for Nepal's mountaineering and take a huge risk to keep this industry running," he added, pointing out that the government does not give them the recognition and financial security they deserve. Nepal has issued a record 378 permits costing \$11,000 each for this year's spring climbing season, sparking fears of bottlenecks enroute to the summit if poor weather cuts down the number of climbing days.

Most Everest hopefuls are escorted by a Nepali guide, meaning about 750 climbers will tread the same path to the top in the coming weeks. And at least 140 others are preparing to scale Everest from the northern flank in Tibet, according to expedition operators. This could take the total past last year's record of 807 people reaching the summit. The mountain also claimed five lives last year.

Mountaineering has become a lucrative business since Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay made the first ascent of Everest in 1953. There are mounting concerns, however, that the numbers are unsustainable, with fears of dangerous overcrowding as well as trash and other environmental problems.—AFP



In this file photo Nepali mountaineer Kami Rita Sherpa tries on a climbing jacket in a shop in Kathmandu. — AFP

Masters of puppets: Indonesia's 'Ondel-Ondel' kids

Peeking through a slit in her giant puppet costume, Indonesian teen Juniarti is drenched in sweat as she moves stiffly under the blistering sun. The 15-year-old and a motley crew of other children—some as young as nine—make a living by strapping on two-meter brightly colored folk effigies known as Ondel-Ondel. The giant-headed puppets are a staple on the streets of Indonesia's bustling capital and often appear in celebrations to help ward off evil spirits.

Wobbling from side the side as they move, the puppets' face used to be made from paper mache although a fiberglass or plastic resin mold is more common these days. Usually Ondel-Ondel come in a male version with a thick moustache and red face while the female's white face is punctuated by bright-red lipstick—with coconut leaves for hair.

Juniarti and her puppet-wearing friends collect change from passers-by with some jerky dance steps and selfie poses for entertainment. Nearby, the teen girl's four-year-old cousin Hassan wiggles and bops to mobile phone music while holding a bucket for change. With the fasting month of Ramadan underway in Muslim-majority Indonesia, the kids are hoping that calls to give to the less fortunate will put more rupiah in their pockets. But while they can pocket as much as \$20 a day, it's not easy money.

Ondel-Ondel wearers balance a bamboo

frame on their shoulders to carry the oversized costume, which weighs up to 30 kilograms. "Of course it's tiring," Juniarti told AFP during a break behind a luxury shopping mall. "It is so hot inside that my clothes are all drenched." Bastian, who has been busking for three years, has permanent reminders of his difficult work. "The Ondel is really heavy—look at my scar," the 11-year-old said as he pulled his t-shirt to reveal red marks and scratches on his shoulder.

Many adults don the costumes too, but children are increasingly picking up the practice. That has alarmed youth protection advocates who fear that they're vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. But Juniarti and Bastian insist they've suffered little harassment—apart from being shooed away by security guards. Their path to this job tugs at the heart, however. Juniarti dropped out of school in the third grade and went to work to help her family after their father passed away.

Residents in her Jakarta neighborhood, where the hand-painted dolls are traditionally made from scratch, asked if she wanted to join the Ondel-Ondel ranks. It is a common way for people in the poor district to earn money. And having the chance to blend work with play means some of puppet kids think they've got a pretty good deal. "I can have fun with my friends and work at the same time," said 13-year-old Yogi Susanto. — AFP



This picture shows Indonesian teen Juniarti, inside his giant puppet costume.



People walk past Ondel-ondel effigies worn by children. — AFP photos

