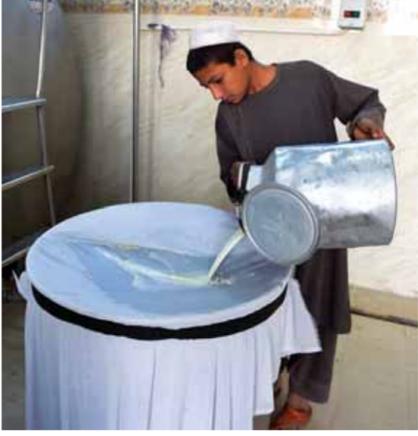


Lifestyle | Features



A worker filters milk into a tank at a collection point of Milko company in Arghandab district of Kandahar province. — AFP photos



Farmers gather with milk buckets at a collection point of Milko company in Arghandab district of Kandahar province.



A boy is seen as farmers gather with milk buckets at a collection point of Milko company in Arghandab district of Kandahar province.

Afghan dairy entrepreneur walks political tightrope to stay afloat

Brightly colored milk bottles whizz off the production line at the Milko factory in Afghanistan's Kandahar province, the result of entrepreneur Ghani Mia treading a careful line with both the Taliban and government officials. To keep Milko afloat, Mia has become adept at skillfully pleasing the warring rivals, which are preparing to restart peace talks next week in Qatar. People from both sides want a share of

his success. "The Taliban only take their taxes, but the government take taxes and also our products," he explains.

The company's dairy products including flavored milk drinks and ice creams have become well-loved throughout the region. The company supplies some of the most dangerous towns in southern Afghanistan, such as Zabol, Ghazni and Lashkar Gah, encircled by Taliban territory. With his clean-shaven face and affa-

ble smile, Mia says he just a pragmatic businessman who does what he needs to make the company thrive. "I want to continue living in Afghanistan, and working here. I don't want to go and invest abroad," he argues.

At war for 40 years, Afghanistan regularly ranks as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. Khan, a delivery driver for the dairy who goes by one name, says the local police are his

biggest hurdle. "They ask me for money... and if I don't have any, they want my goods," he explains. Despite also contending with a lack of electricity and skilled labor, the owner has managed to grow the business employing hundreds of people and offering more than 30 products, using 250 of its own cows as well as relying on farmers in rural areas.

In Arghandab district, farmers line up to drop off their fresh milk at a Milko col-

lection point, an opportunity that has substantially boosted the income of many. But security poses a constant challenge, with some areas temporarily or permanently inaccessible for sale because of fighting, which has dramatically increased in recent months. "If the situation persists, we will be forced to close," Mia says. "But I don't want to let the farmers down." — AFP



Photo shows the New Year's Eve fireworks erupting over Sydney's iconic Harbor Bridge and Opera House (left) during the fireworks show. — AFP

Opera to return to Sydney after COVID hiatus

The finishing touches were being put on a glitzy show at the Sydney Opera House Saturday, as the venue prepared to host an opera crowd for the first time since March. "The Merry Widow" will open on Tuesday to masked audiences up to 75 percent capacity, in a sign of hope for a performing arts industry crippled by the pandemic, artistic director Lyndon Terracini told AFP.

"Walking back into the theatre was a very emotional time for everyone involved," he said. "I think throughout this year, other opera houses will be opening very soon and people will be coming back to the theatre with a sense of hope." Thanks to Australia's success in suppressing the virus, crowds inside venues - including the Sydney Opera House - have been permitted in the

country's most populous city for months.

But even as the performers readied for their opening night, an outbreak in the city forced officials to tighten restrictions - including a new mandate on mask-wearing on public transport and in many indoor settings from midnight Saturday. The outbreak of over 180 cases first emerged in December in Sydney's northeast but has since sparked other clusters, including in Melbourne. Areas of Sydney remain under lockdown and officials have suggested further restrictions may be needed to curb the spread - which could include a change to audiences at indoor performances.

Julie Lea Goodwin, who leads the show along with Alexander Lewis, said she was thrilled to be back performing but after a nine-month hiatus the uncertainty of the pandemic still loomed. "I have no idea what's ahead," Goodwin said. "I think that Australia is doing an unbelievable job... but it's just going to be a process for the next year, I'd say, or longer." Australia has recorded over 28,400 cases of the virus and 909 deaths linked to Covid-19 in a population of about 25 million. — AFP

Mystery monolith makes appearance in Canada

A mysterious monolith-similar to ones that have appeared briefly in the Utah desert, on a heath in the Netherlands, in Warsaw and on a Romanian hilltop-has now popped up in Toronto. Canadian media said the four-meter (12-foot) tall shiny metal structure, which appeared to be hollow, was spotted on the city's shore on New Year's Eve. Similar ones were also recently reported in Vancouver and in the mid-western city of Winnipeg.

Images posted on social media describing it as "Mono-terrific" showed Toronto's downtown including the iconic CN Tower in the distance. Local residents were giddy, eager to get a glimpse of the installation that some suggested online was either "rogue art," left by aliens, or a promotion for an upcoming film. Others worried that

crowds would flock to the Humber Bay Shores neighborhood in breach of public health officials' pleas to stay home during a government-ordered lockdown to slow the spread of the Covid-19 illness.

Nobody has claimed credit for the monoliths that have popped up around the world, and then disappeared. By Friday morning, the Toronto monolith had been vandalized with red paint. News of the first monolith in the Utah desert in November gained worldwide headlines, with many noting the object's similarity with alien monoliths that trigger huge leaps in human progress in Stanley Kubrick's classic sci-fi "2001: A Space Odyssey." — AFP

ICELANDERS TAKE NEW YEAR'S FIREWORKS TO DIZZYING HEIGHTS

While New Year's Eve fireworks are hardly rare, Icelanders take the tradition to breathtaking heights, firing the dazzling incendiary devices from back gardens, streets, hilltops or city parks across their Nordic island. Iceland's law provides a brief window, from December 28 to January 6, when buying and shooting off fireworks is allowed, and citizens buy more pyrotechnics in a week than most Europeans do all year - all in the name of charity. Each year the nation's 365,000 inhabitants buy around 600 tons of fireworks, more than a kilo and a half (three and a half pounds) per person, according to Statistics Iceland.

That's more than six times the EU average in a full year, according to Eurostat, and only the Dutch come close to competing with Icelanders' love for noisy bursts of color in the wintry night sky. The bulk of the devices go up on New Year's Eve, turning the sky above the subarctic island into a glittering canopy from the capital Reykjavik to the smallest village. "We sort of burn away the past year and make way for the new one, which I think we'll be very happy to do this year," said Dagrun Osk Jonsdottir, a doctoral student and expert on Icelandic folklore.

Bonfires cancelled

The tradition, dating to the early 20th century, is rooted in the Nordic bonfire, a much older custom that is banned this year anyway because of the pandemic. Once too expensive for most Icelanders, fireworks became more accessible to the general public thanks to a fund-raising campaign launched in 1968 by the volunteer Icelandic Association for Search and Rescue (ICE-SAR). The group, which controls most of the fireworks trade, has relied on the annual sales to finance its activities for the rest of the year ever since.

"It's a bit strange to think that we are so dependent on this sale," ICE-SAR president Thor Thorsteinsson said. "But we want to continue because we haven't been able to find other ways of raising funds." The organization's 93 volunteer rescue teams spread throughout the country respond to emergencies that public services cannot because of long distances and difficulty of access in many parts of the sparsely populated country. While many of the fireworks are fired from private gardens, the New Year's Eve displays follow a common timetable.

A first round, lasting around an hour and a half, begins around 8 pm after the prime minister's year-end speech. The sky goes dark and quiet for the next hour

as three quarters of the population turns on the TV for "Aramotaskaup" - It hit a record in 2019 when 99.7 percent of Icelanders in front of their TV watched it. The must-watch annual comedy show, whose title loosely translates as "Jollies of the Year", is a recap of the year's events with a hefty dose of satire. Warned and amused by the show, Icelanders venture back out into the cold to set off their fireworks extravaganza in earnest.

Pollution

As with many traditions elsewhere, Icelanders' fireworks excesses have recently come under scrutiny. In 2018, unfavourable weather combined with the fireworks to pollute Reykjavik's usually pure air with microparticles, reaching levels associated with megacities like Beijing or New Delhi. The highest hourly value, 3,000 micrograms per cubic meter, was detected in Kopavogur on the outskirts of the capital, setting a European record according to a study by the University of Iceland. The government is considering cutting the fireworks purchasing window to three days from the current 10. — AFP



In these photos Icelandic people celebrate New Year's Eve and hope for a brighter 2021 as fireworks light up the sky in Reykjavik, Iceland. — AFP photos