



China warns of 'grim' situation with Taiwan

Evacuations as Cyclone Gulab bears down on eastern India



KABUL: Fighters from around Afghanistan perform their judo and wrestling skills during a gathering in Chaman-e-Huzuri park, downtown Kabul. —AFP

Afghan fighters seek glory on dusty field

Grapple gangs: Militants pit their skills against each other in a sport

KABUL: Every weekend, fighters from around Afghanistan gather on a public field in the capital to pit their skills against each other in a sport that is a mix of judo and wrestling. The informal gatherings attract big partisan crowds, with fans cheering for their favorites - usually someone from their home district - and jeering those they want to see lose. "I have been fighting for 17 years," said Mohammad Atef, a well-built 31-year-old from Samangan province in northern Afghanistan, after disposing of his opponent with an expert throw.

"It is popular in Samangan, Kunduz, Baghlan - and there are many famous wrestlers in Sheberghan too." Judo and wrestling are particularly popular in the north, with villages and districts producing local champions they put forward for regional contests and even national glory. The discipline the Afghans follow on the dusty field is a mix of both, with referees to make sure an obscure set of rules is followed and to declare a winner.

Bouts are usually settled quickly - a fight rarely lasts longer than a minute or two - with opponents

giving each other a sporting hug no matter the result. "Today my competitor was from Kunduz," said Atef after disposing of his rival with an acrobatic throw. "I used a spiral technique and I finally defeated him." Matches are made by promoters who choose opponents based on a combination of weight and record. There is a small purse for the winner and although gambling is officially banned by the Taliban, it is clear side bets are made on the bouts - with money furtively changing hands between wily old spectators after each fight.

Hekmat, a 21-year-old also from Samangan, is just starting his career and was beaming after his first victory at the weekend. "It is around 10 years that I am wrestling... from childhood," he said. "I have just come to Kabul in recent months after I have wrestled in other provinces and districts." There was no sign of the Taliban in the crowd gathered in Kabul - those present say the group eschews physical contests. "We organize this ourselves," said one referee. "This is not for the Taliban." —AFP



KABUL: Fighters perform their judo and wrestling skills during a gathering in Chaman-e-Huzuri park, downtown Kabul. —AFP

Campaign highlights clothing to protest Taliban dress code

GLENWOOD: After seeing photos of black-clad Afghan women in full face veils at a pro-Taliban rally in Kabul, Bahar Jalali, an Afghan-American historian, launched a campaign highlighting the vibrant colors of traditional Afghan dresses. "I was very concerned that the world would think that those clothing worn by those women in Kabul was traditional Afghan clothing, and I don't want our heritage and culture to be misrepresented," said Jalali, who lives in Glenwood, Maryland, about an hour's drive from Washington.

Jalali, 56, created the social media hashtags #DoNotTouchMyClothes and #AfghanistanCulture, which quickly became popular, with women posting photos of themselves wearing colorful, embroidered Afghan clothing and smiling for the camera. "Afghan women don't wear hijab," Jalali said. "We wear a loose chiffon headscarf that reveals the hair. And anybody who's familiar with Afghanistan history, culture, knows that the clothing worn by those women have never been seen before in Afghanistan," she said, referring to demonstrators at the pro-Taliban protest at a university lecture in Kabul earlier this month.

About 300 women - covered head-to-toe in all black in accordance with strict new dress policies for women in education under the Taliban - waved Taliban flags, as speakers railed against the West and expressed support for the hardline Islamists. "Afghan women don't dress that way. Afghan women wear the colorful dresses that we showed the world." Women's rights in Afghanistan were sharply curtailed under the Taliban's 1996-2001 stint in control, but since returning to power



GLENWOOD: Bahar Jalali, an Afghan academic, looks at her Twitter account as she speaks with AFP during an interview in her home in Glenwood, Maryland. —AFP

last month, they have claimed they will implement a less extreme rule.

Women will be allowed to attend university, as long as classes are segregated by sex or at least divided by a curtain, and women must wear an abaya robe and niqab, which cover the whole body and face, save for a slit for the eyes. Jalali moved to the United States when she was seven. She remembers Afghanistan under secular rule, with some women wearing short skirts and sleeveless dresses on the streets of Kabul, while others choosing to wear headscarves.

In 2009, Jalali returned to Afghanistan to teach

history and gender studies at the American University in Kabul, in what was the country's first gender studies program. After 8.5 years there, she returned to the United States and now teaches Middle Eastern history at Loyola University Maryland. "My students were very passionate about gender equality, male and female students," she recalled. "So I really can't imagine how this new generation of Afghanistan that has never witnessed Taliban rule, that has grown up in a free and open society, is going to be able to adjust to this dark period that Afghanistan has now entered." —AFP

World 'better place' 25 years after nuke test-ban treaty

VIENNA: Twenty-five years after its adoption, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty has made the world a safer place, experts say, despite never being ratified and concerns over North Korea. The Americans conducted the world's first nuclear test in the desert of New Mexico on July 16, 1945. Between then and September 24, 1996, when the treaty opened for signature, more than 2,000 nuclear tests were carried out, says Robert Floyd, head of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO), a UN body.

Since September 24, 1996 there have been only about a dozen tests, carried out by India, North Korea and Pakistan. Nevertheless eight nuclear powers, including China, North Korea and the United States have refused to ratify the landmark treaty, preventing it from entering into force and despite increasing pressure, there is little sign that they will change their minds, analysts say. "We're in a much better place," insists Floyd, an 63-year-old Australian, during an interview with AFP in his bright office on the seventh floor of one of the UN towers in Vienna.

The accord has set a "global norm against testing," he adds. "The only country to test this century is North Korea." To ensure the absence of nuclear tests, the CTBTO, which operates with an annual budget of around 111 million euros (\$130 million), has set up more than 300 monitoring stations around the world, which are capable of detecting the slightest explosion in real time.

'Testing taboo'

The treaty effectively stops nuclear proliferation "by making testing taboo," says Jean-Marie Collin of the French branch of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN). A total of 170 countries have now ratified the accord, including nuclear powers Britain, France and Russia, on the grounds that they have sufficiently advanced simulation programs. Still missing are Egypt, India, Iran, Israel and Pakistan, as well as China, North Korea and the United States.

Floyd said he wanted to have "a conversation" with those states about "the pathway that we can have, to get from where we are now to a point where they would ratify and we could see, for all of humanity, a legally binding ban". But he gave no further details about how he wants to overcome the long-entrenched impasse. If the treaty comes into force, the CTBTO would have the power to carry out on-site inspections. In Washington, no one since former US president Bill Clinton "has dared" to present the text to Congress because the Republicans formally oppose signing it, says Emmanuelle Maitre of the Foundation for Strategic Research. —AFP