

Israel bans Palestinian agricultural exports via Jordan: PA minister

RAMALLAH: West Bank Israel has escalated a trade war with the Palestinians by stopping their agricultural exports through Jordan, Palestinian Agriculture Minister Riyad al-Attari said. Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) opened a new front in their decades-long conflict with a trade dispute that began in October and has escalated over the past week.

"Yesterday, the director of Israeli crossings informed all exporters and all relevant parties that all Palestinian agriculture products would be banned from export to world markets through the Jordanian crossing starting Sunday," al-Attari said. Israeli and Jordanian officials did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

"This is an economic war against the entire

Palestinian people," said Ahmed Rihan, director of sales at Attelawi, which exports products to Britain and to Arab countries. "It will affect us as merchants and exporters, it will affect farmers and transport companies and it will affect the entire Palestinian people," he added.

In October, the PA announced a boycott of Israeli calves. Last weekend Israeli Defence Minister Naftali Bennett said he would halt all PA agricultural imports, which in turn prompted the PA to say it would end imports of Israeli agricultural products, fruit juice and bottled water.

Those moves have frayed trade links that have generally held strong since the two sides signed interim peace accords in the 1990s, even weathering the collapse in 2014 of

peace talks. Bilateral tensions have been further fuelled by the announcement of U.S. President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan which has prompted a string of violent incidents in Jerusalem, the occupied West Bank and Gaza. The actions of the PA, whose power base is in the West Bank, in part reflect greater efforts to end what its leaders see as an over-dependence on Israeli markets. "We are at a critical political moment and we completely understand the negative impact that will result from these measures, but I say with all confidence that the negative impact will also affect the Israeli economy," said al-Attari. Al-Attari said around 60 Palestinian agriculture products are exported to 100 markets around the world. The new ban includes olive oil, dates and medicinal herbs, Palestinian exporters said. —Reuters



Major stock markets under pressure from coronavirus fears

NEW YORK: Global stocks mostly fell Friday as investors pocketed profits from this week's rallies, despite data showing a surge in US job creation.

Equities largely bounced back this week after heavy losses triggered by worries about the economic fallout from China's deadly coronavirus outbreak. But major US indices, which ended at all-time highs on Thursday, spent all of Friday's session in the red. And major bourses in Asia and Europe also dipped.

"Having already rallied hard this week, it was going to be hard to push equities higher into the weekend, especially given the uncertainty surrounding the coronavirus in China," said Chris Beauchamp, chief market analyst at online trading firm IG.

The focus of the day was the US employment report, showing employers added 225,000 new non-farm jobs last month, far surpassing expectations, thanks to big gains in construction, and leisure and hospitality.

And while the unemployment rate ticked higher, this



was due to more people entering the labor force. Wages rose modestly. But stocks retreated as "investors take a breather to reassess after a string of four-straight days of solid gains," analysts at Charles Schwab brokerage said in a statement.

Meanwhile there is a sense the global economic impact of the virus outbreak could be limited. Observers say the virus, which has killed more than 600 people

and infected 31,000, will batter Chinese growth in the first quarter but the economy could rebound later in the year, as it did after SARS.

"If the pattern of the SARS impacts are a guide, there is the potential for the Chinese economy to rebound with an above-potential growth rate once the outbreak subsides," said T. Rowe Price analyst Chris Kushlis.

Among individual compa-

nies, Uber Technologies surged 9.5 percent as it moved up the target date for becoming profitable to the fourth quarter of 2020, rather than in 2021. Ford dropped 1.7 percent as it promoted Jim Farley to chief operating officer and announced the carmaker's automotive President Joe Hinrichs will retire. Shares have been under pressure following a disappointing 2020 outlook released earlier this week. —AFP

South Africa seeks to unlock stalled arms sales to Saudi, UAE

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa aims to free up over a billion dollars in stalled weapons sales, including to Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, by amending a document at the heart of an export row, a senior arms control official told Reuters.

Local defense firms have lobbied the government for months to change a clause in the export document requiring foreign customers to allow South African officials to inspect their facilities to verify that weapons aren't being transferred to third parties.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE buy at least a third of South Africa's arms exports and have been engaged in a war in Yemen. They refused to agree to the inspections because they considered them a violation of their sovereignty, industry officials told Reuters in November. "I can confirm that the amendment of the end-user certificate was approved by the NCACC recently," Ezra Jele, the head of the secretariat of South Africa's National Conventional Arms Control Committee (NCACC), told Reuters.

A draft letter from Jele to a defense industry association obtained by Reuters and authenticated by two industry sources said the NCACC planned to replace a clause allowing for "on-site verification ... performed by an inspector designated by the (defense) minister." The new clause would state "on-site verification of the controlled items may be performed, through



diplomatic process". Defense sources said the changes were aimed at assuaging the concerns of importing nations that objected to the original wording, in the hope that exports could resume. Before it takes effect, the amendment must be published in the government gazette. But the letter stated that permission was being sought from the defense minister for companies to use the new language in the interim. Jele declined to comment on the letter, as did the head of the industry association to whom it was addressed.

South Africa has sought to reform its defense industry — once a pillar of the racist apartheid regime — by making ex-

port approvals subject to human rights considerations. It has long included a clause in its end-user certificates requiring on-site inspections, though it was rarely acted upon. But in 2017, arms control officials moved the clause to the front page of the certificates, and countries including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman and Algeria refused to sign them.

Exports to the Gulf and North Africa are a key source of revenue for local defense companies including state-owned Denel, Paramount Group and Rheinmetall Denel Munition, a joint venture between Denel and German industrial giant Rheinmetall. —Reuters

Route cuts intended to make South African Airways sustainable: rescue team

JOHANNESBURG: Plans to cut some of South African Airways' (SAA) domestic and international routes are aimed at making the airline sustainable and free from government funding after restructuring, experts appointed to try to rescue the company said on Sunday.

State-owned SAA entered a form of bankruptcy protection in December and is fighting for its survival. The rescue specialists said on Thursday that SAA would cease flights to Durban, East London and Port Elizabeth from Feb. 29, as well as cutting some international routes, as part of efforts to conserve cash and make the airline more attractive to potential equity partners. South African President Cyril Ramaphosa said on Friday his government did not agree with plans to cut some of SAA's domestic routes, plunging rescue efforts for the cash-strapped carrier into uncertainty. "We recognize the concerns raised, especially around the domestic routes. We will continue to engage with stakeholders, with a commitment to include inputs into the final business rescue plan, which is due to be published by the end of this month," SAA business rescue practitioners Les Matuson and Siviwe Dongwana said in a statement. Under South African company law, the business rescue team is entitled to take decisions that are deemed necessary to turn a distressed company around, independently of government. In theory it could ignore the government's objections. SAA is among several South African state entities including power company Eskom that are mired in financial crisis after nearly a decade of mismanagement. —Reuters



US energy secretary hopes Mexico, Canada will help export American coal

WASHINGTON: US Energy Secretary Dan Brouillette said that Canada and Mexico could help export U.S. coal to Asia to get around the blocking of shipments by West Coast states concerned about the impact of the fuel on climate change. Brouillette said he expects the two U.S. neighbors will offer opportunities to export coal in talks that could be facilitated by the new North American trade agreement, the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, or USMCA, that President Donald Trump signed last month.

"That's why the USMCA was so important," Brouillette said at an Atlantic Council event in Washington. "We hope to work more collaboratively with both Mexico and Canada to find export facilities to get the coal from Wyoming," and other states in the U.S. West to Asia and other global markets. Wyoming is a top U.S. coal producing state, but its exports have been hampered. The states of California, Washington and Oregon have blocked permits for coal ports on concerns about coal's impact on climate change. Some U.S. lawmakers have complained about a lack of environmental standards in the USMCA. "Nonetheless it's not going to prevent the administration from working with our colleagues in Canada and Mexico

to look for those types of opportunities," Brouillette said. He said he met with Jason Kenney, the conservative premier of the Western Canadian province of Alberta, on Thursday. "We had a very wide ranging and extensive conversation about that very topic. I think there is a lot of interest in doing this on the part of the Canadians," he said. Kenney's spokeswoman Christine Myatt said Canada's "ports and rail are Constitutionally under federal authority, as is bilateral cross-border trade." The West Coast Canadian province of British Columbia already exports some U.S. coal. If there was an agreement between Washington and Ottawa to boost shipments, the coal would likely be sent through Alberta to a port in British Columbia.

The office of Mexico's Energy Secretary Rocio Nahle did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Trump's administration has been trying to help coal mining companies which are suffering amid a glut of cheap natural gas. U.S. coal-fired electricity output last year fell to the lowest level since 1975. Brouillette said the Energy Department will direct up to US\$64 million in funding for research and development into more efficient coal plants. —Reuters

Indian housewives surprisingly contribute to economy boost with culinary skills

MUMBAI: Rashmi Sahijwala never expected to start working at the age of 59, let alone join India's gig economy -- now she is part of an army of housewives turning their homes into "cloud kitchens" to feed time-starved millennials.

Asia's third-largest economy is battling a slowdown so sharp it is creating a drag on global growth, the International Monetary Fund said Monday, but there are some bright spots.

The gig economy, aided by cheap mobile data and abundant labour, has flourished in India, opening up new markets across the vast nation.

Although Indian women have long battled for access to education and employment opportunities, the biggest hurdle for many is convincing conservative families to let them leave home.

But new apps like Curryful, Homefoodi, and Nanighar are tapping the skills of housewives to slice, dice and prepare meals for hungry urbanites from the comfort of their homes.

The so-called cloud kitchens -- restaurants that have no physical presence and a delivery-only model -- are rising in popularity as there is a boom in food delivery apps such as Swiggy and Zomato. "We want to be the Uber of home-cooked food," said Ben Mathew, who launched Curryful in 2018, convinced that housewives were a huge untapped resource.

His company -- which employs five people for the app's daily operations -- works with 52 women and three men, and the 31-year-old web entrepreneur hopes to get one million female chefs on-board by 2022. "We usually train them in processes of sanitisation, cooking, prep time

and packaging... and then launch them on the platform," Mathew told AFP. One of the first housewives to join Curryful in November 2018 shortly after its launch, Sahijwala was initially apprehensive, despite having four decades of experience in the kitchen.

But backed by her children, including her son who gave her regular feedback about her proposed dishes, she took the plunge.

Since then, she's undergone a crash course in how to run a business, from creating weekly menus to buying supplies from wholesale markets to cut costs.

The learning curve was steep and Sahijwala switched from cooking everything from scratch to preparing curries and batters for breads in advance to save time and limit leftovers.

She even bought a massive freezer to store fruits and vegetables despite her husband's reservations about the cost.

"I told him that I am a professional now," she told AFP.

- Internet restaurants - Kallol Banerjee, co-founder of Rebel Foods which runs 301 cloud kitchens backing up 2,200 "internet restaurants", was among the first entrepreneurs to embrace the concept in 2012.

"We could do more brands from one kitchen and cater to different customer requirements at multiple price points," Banerjee told AFP.

The chefs buy the ingredients, supply the cookware and pay the utility bills. The apps -- which make their money through charging commission, such as more than 18 percent per order for Curryful -- offer training and supply the chefs

with containers and bags to pack the food in. Curryful chef Chand Vyas, 55, spent years trying to set up a lunch delivery business but finally gave up after failing to compete with dab-bawalas, Mumbai's famously efficient food porters.

Today Vyas works seven hours a day, five days a week in her kitchen, serving up a bevy of Indian vegetarian staples, from street food favourites to lentils and rice according to the app's weekly set menus.

"I don't understand marketing or how to run a business but I know how to cook. So, the current partnership helps me focus on just that while Curryful takes care of the rest," Vyas told AFP. She pockets up to \$150 a month after accounting for the commissions and costs, but hopes to earn more as the orders increase.

In contrast, a chef at a bricks-and-mortar restaurant takes home a monthly wage of between \$300 and \$1,000 for working six days a week. With India's cloud kitchen sector expected to reach \$1.05 billion by 2023, according to data platform Inc42, other companies are also keen to get a slice of the action.

Swiggy, for example, has invested 2.5 billion rupees (\$35.3 million) in opening 1,000 cloud kitchens across the nation.

Back in her Mumbai kitchen, Sahijwala is elated to have embarked on a career at an age when her contemporaries are eyeing retirement.

Over the past year, she has seen her profit grow to \$200 a month, but more importantly, she said, "my passion has finally found an outlet. I am just glad life has given me this chance."

