

Women Molested at Saudi Music Festival Despite Anti-Harassment Campaigns

RIYADH (Middle East Eye) – It was Elise Schouten's first time in Saudi Arabia.

The 25-year-old Dutch woman was in Riyadh at the beginning of December to attend MDL Beast Soundstorm, the Persia Gulf kingdom's giant rave held in a remote desert outside the capital.

The event has been lauded as one of the world's biggest music festivals this year. But it has come under renewed criticism over incidents of harassment of women, despite pledges by organizers to combat the abuse.

Held from 1-3 December, the festival attracted over 730,000 fans and featured diverse music acts, spanning electronic to hip-hop.

Schouten, a lover of electronic music who works at the Dutch embassy in Cairo, had come with her roommate to Riyadh for the weekend to attend Soundstorm. From the time they arrived at the concert, Schouten said, a number of men were shouting and trying to touch them.

"I was holding on to my friend as the crowd became denser as we made our way to the stage, and then I felt it three times, someone grab my behind," Schouten told Middle



Saudi fans attend the first MDL Beast, an electronic music festival held in Banban, on the outskirts of Riyadh, on 19 December 2019.

East Eye. "I turned around and shouted and screamed at them, but they didn't stop. Instead, the hand reached for me again."

After being criticized in its first two years, in 2019 and 2021, for harassment, MDL Beast organizers took extra steps through their Respect & Reset campaign, and beefed up security and safe dancing zones to prevent sexual and other harassment, particularly targeting women, among its various stages and venues.

Despite such efforts, after the fes-

tival ended and through its next event - MDL Balad Beast, which took place in Jeddah on 9 and 10 December - floods of women who had been harassed in Riyadh took to social media to voice their stories and complaints.

"I noticed we were surrounded by only guys - there were no girls in sight, and that is when the panic kicked in," Schouten said.

Schouten said she found a security officer and told him what had happened. He asked her to locate the

man and he would kick him out. By that time, Schouten had no idea where the man had gone, except back into the sea of people.

"There was no 'Are you okay? Are you all right?'" said Schouten. "We stood there for a while before we made our way to the stages. On an unspoken level, we knew this was only going to get worse."

She later filed a complaint with the event management, which responded that a number of suspected harassers were evicted from the event.

Another incident, which took social media by storm, was recounted by Finnish nurse Erika Milia.

"Last night was one of the most traumatic experiences I've ever had," she wrote on Instagram. "I've always felt safe and valued as a woman in Saudi, but all of that went out the window last night and big time. Me and my friends were sexually harassed and molested by an outrageous number of men during one of the biggest music festivals in the Middle East."

Both Saudi and foreign women commented on her post, while dozens went to the account of MDL Beast to list their grievances.

U.S. Leaders Ask Egypt's Sisi for Help in Releasing Zionists From Gaza

CAIRO (Middle East Eye) – Two American leaders met with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi during his visit to Washington, where they raised the issue of several Zionist troops detained in Gaza.

The Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations' CEO William Daroff and its chair Dianne Lob met with Sisi, Daroff said in a statement on Twitter.

"I also raised the issue of the Israelis who are being held captive by Hamas in Gaza: Avera

Mengistu and Hisham al-Sayed, and the bodies of two soldiers, Hadar Goldin, z"l, and Oron Shaul, z"l, and reiterated the importance of their return to the American Jewish community," Daroff said.

Hamas is holding Mengistu, a Zionist, who entered Gaza in September 2014 for unclear reasons. Sayed wandered into the besieged enclave in 2015 and was captured by Hamas, the de-facto ruler of Gaza, and accused him of being "a soldier in the occupation army".

The two Zionist soldiers, Goldin and Shaul, were captured a month earlier. The occupying regime says both are presumed dead, while Hamas refused to comment on whether they are alive or dead.

Hamas and the Zionist regime have indirectly negotiated a prisoner swap deal at various times since 2014, without any breakthroughs.

According to Haaretz, the Zionist prime minister's office said they would continue working with Egypt to negotiate their release.

The most famous trade came in 2011, when Gilad Shalit – a Zionist soldier abducted by the Palestinian group in a raid in 2006 - was released in exchange for more than 1,000 Palestinians that were being held in the Zionist regime's jails.

Hundreds of Palestinians released as part of the Shalit deal were later re-arrested by the regime, however, and were forced to serve the rest of their sentences.

There are currently 4,760 Palestinian prisoners inside the Zionist regime's jails.

UN: 90% of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon Need Humanitarian Aid

BEIRUT (Anadolu/Xinhua) – A group of UN agencies say that 90% of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon are in need of humanitarian assistance.

Most of the Syrian refugees suffer from tough living conditions, especially with the exacerbation of the Lebanese economic crisis on one hand and the global economic crisis on the other.

"90% of Syrian refugee families need humanitarian assistance to survive," said a joint statement by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the World Food Program (WFP) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF).

"The levels of food security for refugees in Lebanon are extremely worrisome," said Abdallah AlWardat, WFP representative and country director in Lebanon.

"Thanks to the generous support of our donors, WFP is supporting 1 in every 3 people in the country. We are providing cash assistance, food parcels and school snacks, and supporting livelihoods activities across Lebanon," he added.

Ayaki Ito, the UNHCR representative in Lebanon, said despite the fact

that since 2020 the "price of essential items and services" have increased by 700%, yet, "families in Lebanon still earn less while having to pay much more for the most basic goods."

"More help for vulnerable refugees and Lebanese families is urgently needed, including support to Lebanese institutions to provide sustained basic services," he said.

"Syrian refugee children and adolescents are affected the most. The assessment showed that 60 percent of Syrian refugee children between the ages of 6 and 14 were attending school regularly in 2022, with the rate dropping to 8 percent attendance for the older adolescents at upper secondary school level," the joint statement said.

It added that children and adolescents are the most affected among the Syrian refugees in Lebanon with estimates indicating that "six out of 10 Syrian refugee boys and girls experienced violent disciplinary methods."

Lebanon hosts around 1.5 million Syrian refugees, about 900,000 of whom are registered with UNHCR.

IMF Approves \$3bn Support Package for Egypt

CAIRO (Al Jazeera) – The International Monetary Fund has approved a deal that will provide a \$3bn support package to cash-strapped Egypt over almost four years, with the agreement expected to draw in an additional \$14bn in financing for the country.

The support package announced late on Friday – known as an Extended Fund Facility Arrangement – will not require the Egyptian government to cut spending on subsidies but will strengthen the social protection network for citizens, an Egyptian cabinet report released on Saturday said.

Egypt's economy has been hit hard by higher oil and food prices following the coronavirus pandemic and the war in

Ukraine, with the Egyptian pound losing 36 percent of its value against the dollar since March.

About a third of Egypt's 104 million people live in poverty, according to government figures, and many Egyptians depend on the government to keep basic goods affordable through state subsidies and other similar schemes.

The package covers a period of 46 months and will give the Egyptian government immediate access to about \$347mn, which will help the debt-ridden nation bolster its balance of payments and budget, the IMF said in a statement.

It also aims "to catalyze additional financing of about \$14 billion from Egypt's

international and regional partners" and introduce sweeping economic reforms, including a "durable shift to a flexible exchange rate regime" and a "monetary policy aimed at gradually reducing inflation".

The announcement comes after a preliminary agreement was reached in October between Egypt and the fund, following reforms by Egypt's central bank that included a hike in key interest rates by roughly 2 percentage points.

In a background document on Egypt, the IMF said the new program would fund some of the country's foreign currency financing gap, and that Cairo had secured \$5bn in new financing for the fiscal year ending in June 2023.

Europe...

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Exact dates have not yet been announced but the National Union of Civil Aviation Personnel agreed to schedule a minimum of five days of action before January 31.

The main Spanish trade union, CCOO, announced this week that 10,000 workers at airport operator Aena are planning to walk out around Christmas and New Year.

The airports affected include Madrid, Bilbao, Ibiza, Seville, the Canary Islands, with the proposed dates of disruption set for December 22, 23, 30 and 31, and January 6 and 8. The union has also warned that if the conflict goes unresolved they will continue with industrial actions through the first quarter of 2023 — including Easter.

Prolonged walkouts have been taking place at airports in Spain since November.

An ongoing strike by Ryanair employees is planned to last until January 7 and may affect travelers booked to fly during the Christmas an end-of-year holidays at various airports including Alicante, Barcelona, Madrid and Malaga.

Ryanair has stated that it expects disruption during December to be minimal.

Cabin crew from Vueling airline are also taking part in long standing walkouts that started in November and will go on until December 31.

The airline has also declared that the industrial action will cause minimal disruption for passengers.

A rail strike last week in Belgium, saw three-quarters of the trains across the country canceled.

On Friday, over 15,000 demonstrators braved the bitter cold in Brussels to call for more measures to shield them from high energy prices and better pay to counter runaway inflation.

The protests, backed by the three main unions, disrupted public services throughout Belgium, especially rail and subway systems in and around the capital as well as Brussels international airport.

With people increasingly under pressure from high prices, the unions demanded pay increases at a time when companies such as energy giants are making massive profits. They're asking for a freeze in energy prices and increased taxation on capital.

"We won't stop unless workers get what they deserve," the unions said in a statement.

Meanwhile, demonstrators in several cities across Italy took to the streets after two of the country's largest unions, CGIL and UIL, staged a one-day walkout.

They protested the government's 2023 General Budget, which, they say, does not account for the loss of purchasing power due to inflation.

Tehran...

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Broadcasting (IRIB) – have been sanctioned over alleged human rights abuses, while four more people and as many entities have been blacklisted over the issue of drones.

Ayatollah Khatami was included on the list over claims of inciting violence against protesters.

The senior cleric also pointed to a "historic" UN vote to remove Iran from its Commission on the Status of Women in response to what it claims to be Iran's "systemic repression" of women and girls. He said the resolution was passed following U.S. efforts.

"Real freedom exists in the Islamic system," he said, "It is only in the Islamic system that the life of women is an honorable Islamic life."

He also said the U.S. wants women as slaves who have lost their identity and culture.

"They chant the slogan of 'woman, life, freedom,' which is deceptive and it is clear that they are after libertinism," he said, referring to the famous slogan chanted at months-long riots across the country.

The 54-member UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) adopted the U.S.-drafted resolution to "remove with immediate effect the Islamic Republic of Iran from the Commission on the Status of Women for the remainder of its 2022-2026 term."

Twenty-nine members of the ECOSOC voted in favor of Iran's expulsion from the United Nations women's body, eight countries voted against and 16 abstained.