

The 'Pink Shuttle' is the first and only service in Afghanistan run uniquely by female drivers for female passengers

Afghan's pink shuttle to liberation



'Pink Shuttle' buses help Afghan women navigate society



According to Khan Mohammad Shinwaray, police chief at Kabul's traffic department, the number of women drivers in the capital has been steadily growing, with 275 licences approved for the first half of the year
AFP | Kabul



Parisa Haidary drives a mini-bus to pick up women passengers in Kabul



Pink Shuttle is being run by Nove Onlus, an Italian non-governmental group

Parisa Haidary gets behind the steering wheel of a mini-bus, kicks off her high heels and with a socked foot presses the accelerator, carefully easing the 10-seater into Kabul's ever-clogged traffic.

The Afghan mother, who works for a women-only bus service, smiles as other road-users -- all of them men -- gawp in astonishment.

"We get a lot of different reactions," she says. "Some drivers block our way, others honk at us, some even drive alongside at the same speed when the road is clear."

In a society where it remains rare to see a woman behind the wheel, Haidary is one of four drivers working for Pink Shuttle,

a pilot bus programme employing only women to ferry female passengers and their kids across the Afghan capital.

"I love driving and am interested in my job. The only concern we have is the security situation. We have to stay fearless," Haidary said.

The 36-year-old former beautician, who has also worked as a television journalist, and her colleagues were chosen from 100 candidates.

The first-of-its kind service is helping women navigate the many challenges they face getting around Kabul, where a woeful lack of transport options is compounded by the risk of harassment if they walk on the streets.

"We have transportation problems for women. In fact, public transportation does not exist, especially for women in Kabul," project coordinator Obaidullah

Amiri said. Pink Shuttle is being run by Nove Onlus, an Italian non-governmental group that in turn is being supported by the Only The Brave foundation, created by fashion designer Renzo Rosso.

Amiri said the pilot project, which started in May and also receives backing from the US Agency for International Development (USAID), is set to be extended.

While the service is currently being offered for free to a limited number of pre-approved passengers, Nove Onlus hopes it will become financially sustainable within two years.

Terrifying traffic

According to Khan Mohammad Shinwaray, police chief at Kabul's traffic department, the number of women drivers in the capital has been steadily growing, with 275 licences approved

for the first half of the year.

This is quite a jump: In the years between 2012 and 2016, just 1,189 women in total got licences in the city, according to Nove Onlus.

It is a "positive change to see Afghan women driving in Kabul," Shinwaray said. "There are no restrictions on women becoming drivers."

Navigating Kabul's traffic is no easy feat. Traffic can flow fast one moment, then suddenly grind to a complete standstill for hours on end.

Road signs are non-existent, few of the streets are named and drivers often zoom the wrong way into oncoming traffic. Usually it is the bigger of two vehicles that wins the right of way.

Congestion has only got worse in recent years as Kabul has been sliced into ever-smaller portions by new security measures and entire streets and landmarks suddenly disappear behind towering blast walls.

When extremist Taliban insurgents swept to power in 1996, women were forced to stay home, barred from most jobs, and deprived of their right to an education.

After the militants were top-

pled in late 2001 and a US-backed government took over, gender equality was enshrined in the Afghan constitution, though discrimination remains rife.

Fatima Mohammadi, a 31-year-old Kabul resident who has been driving for about four years, said she appreciated the freedom of having a car but still deals with daily harassment on the road.

"I usually don't leave the windows of the car open," she said.

"Sometimes when another driver or passerby smiles or says 'Well done,' it feels like harassment."

Women like

Haidary and Mohammadi worry the Taliban might one day return to power, and take away their relative freedoms.

Negotiations between the US and the Taliban that could have paved the way to an eventual peace settlement collapsed in September, and now no one is sure what will come next.

"If the Taliban come back, I hope they are not the same group they used to be," said Haidary. "If they impose the same limitations, we will lose our jobs."



A first-of-its kind service called Pink Shuttle is helping women navigate the many challenges they face getting around Kabul, where a woeful lack of transport options is compounded by the risk of harassment if they walk on the streets

China introduces mandatory face scans for phone users

China will require telecom operators to collect face scans when registering new phone users at offline outlets starting Sunday, according to the country's information technology authority, as Beijing continues to tighten cyberspace controls.

In September, China's industry and information technology ministry issued a notice on "safeguarding the legitimate rights and interests of citizens online", which laid out rules for enforcing real-name registration. The notice said telecom operators should use "artificial intelligence and other technical means" to verify people's identities when they take a new phone number.

Plane crash kills nine, injures three

Washington

A plane crash in the US state of South Dakota killed nine people, including two children, and injured three others on Saturday while a winter storm warning was in place, officials said.

The Pilatus PC-12, a single-engine turboprop plane, crashed shortly after take-off approximately a mile from the Chamberlain airport, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said.

Among the dead was the plane's pilot, Brule County state's attorney Theresa Maule Rossow said, adding that a total of 12 people had been on board. The three survivors had been taken to the hospital in Sioux Falls, she told US media.

The flight left the airport just before noon local time, with a destination of Idaho Falls Regional Airport in the western state of Idaho.

The FAA said investigators



A file picture shows a Pilatus PC-12 single-engine aircraft similar to the one involved in the crash, in which nine people were killed

were en route to the crash site and that the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) would be in charge of the investigation.

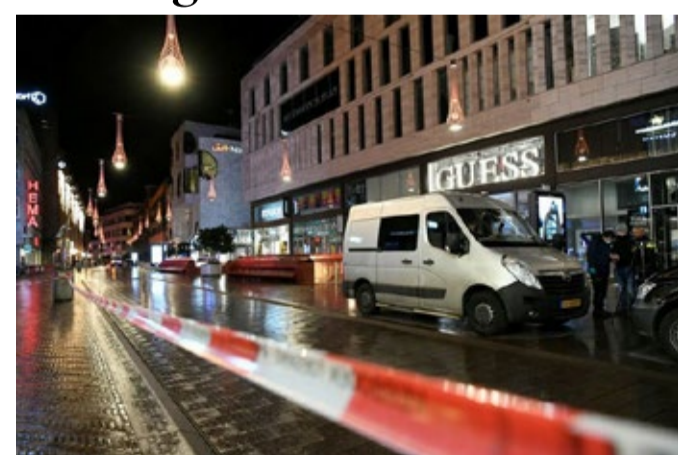
The NTSB tweeted that it was "investigating today's crash of Pilatus PC-12 near Chamberlain, SD." South Dakota is located in the Northern Plains, a region facing blizzard conditions as a storm blows eastward across the United States.

A winter storm warning re-

mains in effect in Brule County until midday Sunday, the National Weather Service said, potentially including blowing snow that "could significantly reduce visibility."

"The men and women of law enforcement, first responders and medical professionals should be commended in their heroic actions to rescue the victims in extreme weather conditions," the state's attorney office said.

No evidence suspect in Hague stabbing had terrorist motive



Stabbing in Netherlands

Reuters | Amsterdam

Dutch police said yesterday there was no evidence that a man arrested on suspicion of stabbing three people in the Hague had a terrorist motive.

Three teenagers were hurt in the incident on Friday evening on a busy shopping

street. Police said the suspect, a 35-year old man arrested at a homeless shelter on Saturday, had been interrogated.

"Preliminarily there have been no signs found that would point to there having been a terrorist motive," Hague police said in a statement. "What the motive was, then, is still being investigated."