

Millions take plunge in giant Indian festival



Indian Hindu devotees taking a holy dip at Sangam -- the confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna and mythical Saraswati rivers

AFP | Allahabad, India

More than 20 million Hindu pilgrims ritually bathed in India's holy rivers on the opening day of the Kumbh Mela, a gigantic festival billed as the world's largest human gathering.

The spectacular seven-week festival began Tuesday in Allahabad, an ancient city that rises alongside the Ganges, Yamuna and mythical Saraswati rivers in northern Uttar Pradesh state.

The meeting point of these rivers is considered among the holiest places in Hinduism and devotees believe bathing there during the Kumbh helps cleanse sins and brings salvation.

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, whose government is overseeing the enormous event, said 22.5 million Hindus plunged into the icy waters on the first day of the Kumbh.

"I thank all the visitors, religious leaders, common man and officials for the smooth conduct

of the mega event," he told the Press Trust of India news agency on Wednesday.

Adityanath, a firebrand Hindu priest who rose to lead India's most populous state in 2017, said the opening day figures were "a record" for the centuries-old festival.

The Kumbh attracts astonishing numbers of visitors, outstripping the Haj pilgrimage to Mecca or any other large-scale gathering.

Kumbh organisers say the last major gathering in Allahabad in 2013 drew 120 million people -- nearly the population of Japan.

Nearly 30,000 police have been deployed to oversee crowds for the huge undertaking, and prevent stampedes that have marred previous gatherings.

A gigantic tent city has emerged near the banks of the hallowed rivers with a 45-square kilometre encampment set aside specially for pilgrims.

Adityanath, who hails from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party,



Followers of the Kinnar Akhara monastic Hindu order made up of transgender members take a dip in the Sangam

has heavily promoted this year's festival which comes as India prepares for a general election due by May.

The historic city of Allahabad was even renamed Prayagraj in October by the state's conservative government, stripping its centuries-old name and replacing it with an ancient Hindu

title.

But it is still widely known as Allahabad, the name given by Islamic rulers that reigned over India hundreds of years ago.

The Kumbh, which runs until March 4, was recognised as an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO in 2017.

Only Japanese-born sumo champ retires

Tokyo, Japan

The only Japanese-born grand champion or "yokozuna" in sumo has decided to retire following a disastrous run of form and injury, leaving two Mongolians on top of the ancient sport.

Kisenosato, the first Japanese-born wrestler to reach the heights of yokozuna since 1998, decided to throw in the towel after three straight losses in the New Year "basho" or tournament.

Top government spokesman Yoshihide Suga described the retirement as "very regrettable."

"It's sad," he told reporters at a regular briefing.

"I think he captivated many fans as the first Japanese-born yokozuna in 19 years," he added.

Kisenosato won promotion to yokozuna in March 2017, much to the delight of fans eager to see a home-grown champion.

He had a promising start, winning his first basho as a yokozuna, but suffered a chest injury that forced him to miss eight consecutive tournaments.

He managed to win the autumn tournament last year but was again forced to retire in the basho after that following four consecutive losses.

This prompted officials to voice disappointment with his performance, sparking speculation that he needed good results in the New Year tournament to retain his top-ranked status.

Local wrestlers have been unable to repel a flood of foreigners who have dominated in recent years.

The overseas invasion began in earnest with Hawaiian behemoth Konishiki, who was nicknamed "Dump Truck" and tipped the scales at a whopping 285 kilos (628 pounds), and other hulking Pacific islanders in the 1990s.

The subsequent rise of the Mongolians has tormented sumo traditionalists in the absence of a Japanese challenge.

Sumo has also been rocked by a series of scandals in recent years, including the 2017 resignation of yokozuna Harumafuji after a brutal assault on a rival wrestler while out drinking.

In 2018, the sport drew accusations of sexism over a long-standing prohibition on



With the expected retirement of the 32-year-old, there will only be two fighters left in the top ranks -- Hakuho and Kakuryu, both Mongolians.

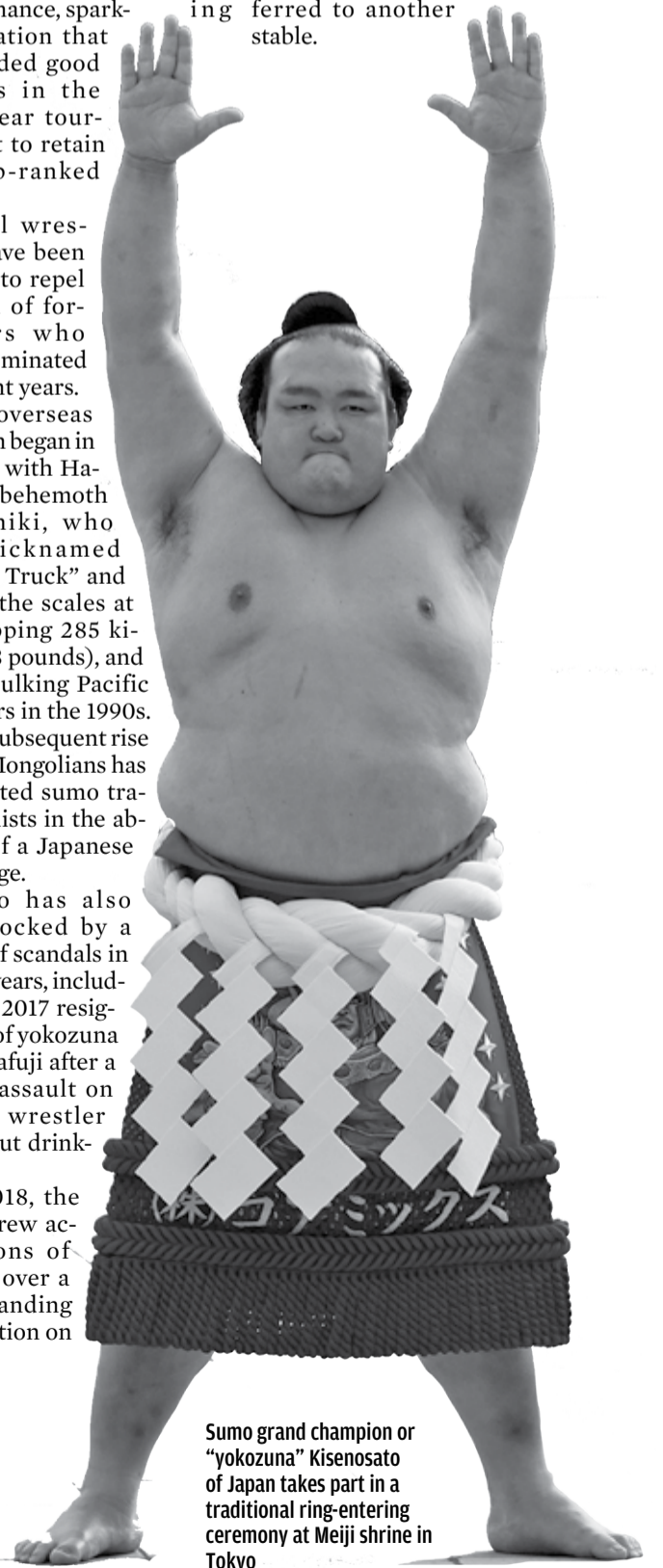
women entering the "dohyo" or dirt rings where sumo is practised.

The rings are viewed as sacred in the Shinto faith and women -- considered to be ritually unclean -- are not allowed to enter them.

The tradition came under the spotlight after women who rushed to help a mayor who collapsed in a ring were asked to leave as they offered medical assistance.

And in September, a top sumo stablemaster whose charges included the wrestler involved in the fight with Harumafuji announced he was resigning over the assault row.

The decision meant his wrestlers and staff were transferred to another stable.



Sumo grand champion or "yokozuna" Kisenosato of Japan takes part in a traditional ring-entering ceremony at Meiji shrine in Tokyo

'Zebra' bodypaint cuts fly bites 10-fold

Paris, France

Traditional white-striped bodypainting practiced by indigenous communities mimics zebra stripes to reduce the number of potentially harmful horsefly bites a person receives by up to 10-fold, according to new research published yesterday.

Tribes in Africa, Australia and southeast Asia have practiced bodypainting in cultural ceremonies for generations.

But scientists now believe that the striking striped patterns also slash the amount of biting insects attracted to the naked flesh of people living in Nature.

It is known that zebras get bitten far less than animals with a single fur colour, so a team of researchers decided to see if the light stripes painted on humans

would have a similar deterrent effect.

They used three shop mannequins -- one with dark skin, one with lighter skin, and a dark-skinned model painted with white stripes -- and coated each with a thin layer of adhesive to capture creepy crawlies. They then stuck them in the middle of a meadow for eight weeks in summer, and counted the number of horseflies and other biting insects each one attracted.

The results were startling: the dark-skinned mannequin was 10 times more attractive to horseflies than the striped model and twice as attractive than the light-skinned dummy.

The team behind the study believe that the stripes disrupt the polarisation of light reflect-



Representative picture (Courtesy of France 24)

ed off human bodies, making them less delicious-looking to horseflies and other bugs.

"Traditional bodypaintings with their typical white-striped patterns on a brown body sur-

face have the advantage of deterring blood-sucking horseflies as these patterns are unattractive to these parasitic insects," the authors wrote in the journal Royal Society Open Science.