

## Niger stampede kills 20 at handout for refugees



Hundreds of thousands of people in Diffa, southeastern Niger, depend on food handouts to survive

### Niamey

Fifteen women and five children were trampled to death on Monday in a stampede for food and money for refugees in southeast Niger, a regional governor said.

The accident occurred at a youth and culture centre in Diffa, the main town of a region of the same name that hosts more than a quarter of a million refugees and internally displaced people.

"Unfortunately, fifteen women and five children died... in this regrettable drama," Issa Lemine, the regional governor of Diffa, said on television after visiting the injured in hospital.

Aid workers confirmed the death toll and said about 10

people had been injured.

The region which abuts Nigeria and Chad has been repeatedly hit by attacks by Nigeria's Boko Haram jihadist group since 2015.

It hosts 119,000 Nigerian refugees, 109,000 internally-displaced people and 30,000 Nigeriens who have come home from Nigeria because of the instability in its northeast, according to UN figures released in October.

The aid being distributed had been given by Babagana Umara Zulum, the governor of Borno state in northeast Nigeria, a Nigerian official told AFP.

He had come to the region to visit camps for refugees and the displaced, and had already left the town when the stampede occurred.

# Smog veils Central Asia cities as smoky stoves choke locals

Bishkek | Kyrgyzstan

Snow-capped peaks used to be clearly visible from the streets of Almaty and Bishkek, two of the largest cities in Central Asia that both lie in plains surrounded by mountains.

But now a heavy cloud of dark smog often blots out the view as air pollution regularly soars to levels comparable to those in New Delhi and Lahore, even though Almaty and Bishkek have fewer people and industries than their Indian and Pakistani counterparts.

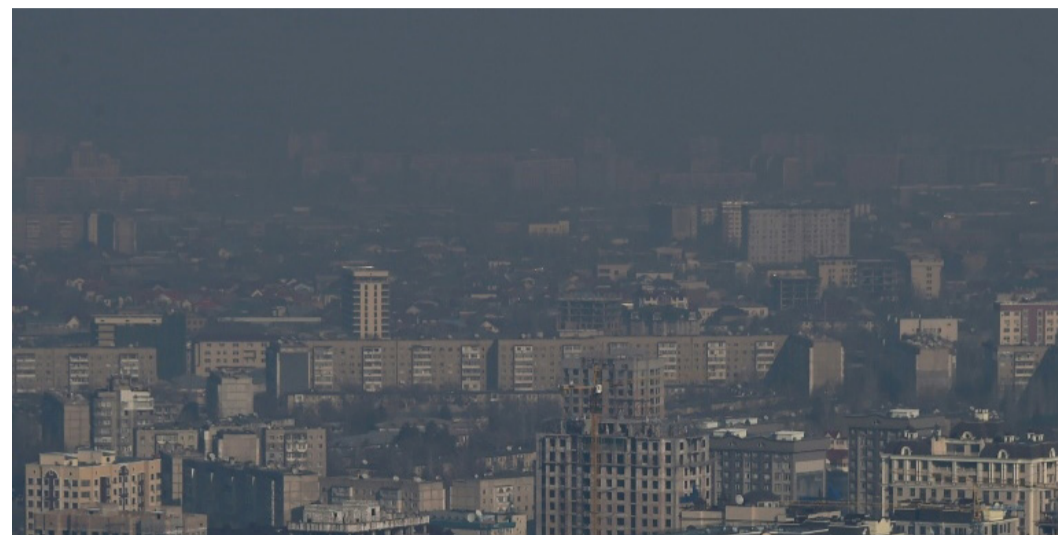
In the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek, a city of one million, and Kazakhstan's second city of Almaty, which is twice as large, the onset of winter prompts a surge in pollution as people burn coal and other dirty fuels in stoves to heat their homes.

One of those monitoring the situation is Kyrgyz environmental activist Kunduz Adylbekova, who experiences the problem firsthand.

In the area of small private houses where she lives on the outskirts of Bishkek, the air quality is particularly bad.

"The air here has a kind of heavy feel," said Adylbekova, a programme manager at Archa Initiative non-profit

Many locals use highly pollut-



A heavy cloud of dark smog often blots out the view of snow-capped mountains in the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek

ing stoves to heat their homes and boil water because they are not hooked up to mains gas. Large numbers of ageing cars and trucks exacerbate the situation.

In this district, readings of PM 2.5 -- a measure of fine particles in the air -- regularly reach levels that the United States Environmental Protection Agency defines as hazardous to human health.

Sometimes readings are four times higher than the EPA minimum "hazardous" level, Adylbekova said, with locals suffering the ill-effects.

"Residents are often ill, some suffer from lung problems."

- 'We feel and see it' -

The bowl-shaped topography of both cities helps trap pollution.

Even worse, both have coal-fired power stations that date back to the Soviet era.

But other factors have led to a massive increase in the smog problem over the last two decades.

In Almaty, where gleaming skyscrapers reflect the country's oil wealth, many cite the huge growth in the number of cars since the breakup of the USSR.

Zhargas Jakiyanov, a marketing specialist who works in the business district, said the growing pollution is "already having an effect on our health."

"We don't just feel it -- we can see it," he added, pointing to the leaden smog cloud that hangs over the city.

"We need to switch to gas heating instead of using solid fuels. There needs to be more emphasis on spaces for pedestrians," Jakiyanov said.

Smog also afflicts the capitals of former Soviet republics to the south, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

## Morocco fortress village hopes to draw 'Game of Thrones' fans

Ait-Ben-Haddou | Morocco

Millions worldwide may have seen the desert fortress in the hit fantasy series "Game of Thrones", but fewer know they can visit the Moroccan village of Ait-Ben-Haddou.

The fortified old settlement at the foot of the majestic Atlas mountains enchanted audiences in the HBO series and also served as a dusty backdrop in Ridley Scott's epic swords-and-sandals film "Gladiator".

But unlike other famous locations from movie and television history, this UNESCO World Heritage Site has so far missed out on a mass influx of tourism -- something some of its inhabitants are eager to change.

"Several people have told me that they came here to see the filming location of 'Game of Thrones'," said Ahmed Baabouz, a local tour guide. "There is tourism linked to cinema here but frankly we have not developed it to the extent it could be."

Ait-Ben-Haddou is southern Morocco's most famous fortress. Time seems to have stopped at the site overlooking a valley some 30 kilometres (18.6 miles) from the town of Ouarzazate.

After passing through the imposing entrance way, visitors navigate a labyrinth of winding alleys that eventually lead onto a public square where the settlement's inhabitants once gathered.

There is a mosque and two cemeteries -- one for Muslims and one for Jews. Most inhabitants have long since departed though, with a few homes converted into stalls selling handicrafts.

The fortress is an ideal film



The town served as the fictional Yellow City of Yunkai in the "Game of Thrones" series

setting, located a short distance from the studios of Ouarzazate, the "Mecca" of Moroccan cinema. Productions ranging from "Lawrence of Arabia" to "The Mummy" have been filmed here.

More recently, scenes from the cult series "Game of Thrones" were shot at Ait-Ben-Haddou, with the site standing in for the fictional Yellow City of Yunkai which is conquered by Daenerys Targaryen, a key character in the "GOT" universe.

Hammadi, 61, is a privileged witness to the location's cinematic history.

"All of these productions have contributed to the reputation of the region," he said, grinning widely.

Hammadi himself has appeared as an extra in a number of films. And while like most people he lives in a more modern

home in a village on the other side of the valley, he continues to return to Ait-Ben-Haddou to welcome tourists.

### 'House of the Dragon'

On a wall at the entrance to Hammadi's former home, photos bear witness to the projects he has worked on.

One shows him dressed as an ancient Roman with director Ridley Scott on the set of "Gladiator".

"We have a very rich cinematic heritage that we hope to use to attract tourists," said tour guide Baabouz, who is 29.

But "nothing indicates that 'Game of Thrones' was shot here," he added.

On Morocco's Atlantic coast, the city of Essaouira also formed the backdrop to scenes from the series.

But there too, Moroccan tourism promoters are yet to capitalise on the connection.

In comparison, Northern Ireland, Malta and Dubrovnik in Croatia have attracted hordes of fans from around the world, drawn by their links to the franchise.

To remedy this, Baabouz and other young people in the village are pooling their limited resources towards an ambitious project: a museum in the fortress, gathering photography from the productions that have been filmed here.

US channel HBO has commissioned a prequel to "GOT", called "House of the Dragon". George R.R. Martin, the author of the books on which the series is based, wrote on his blog that shooting would also take place in Morocco.



Morocco's Ait-Ben-Haddou is a UNESCO World Heritage site that has served as the backdrop for numerous movies



A man overlooks the fortified old city of Ait-Ben-Haddou



Some locals hope that Ait-Ben-Haddou's association with "Game of Thrones" will attract more tourists