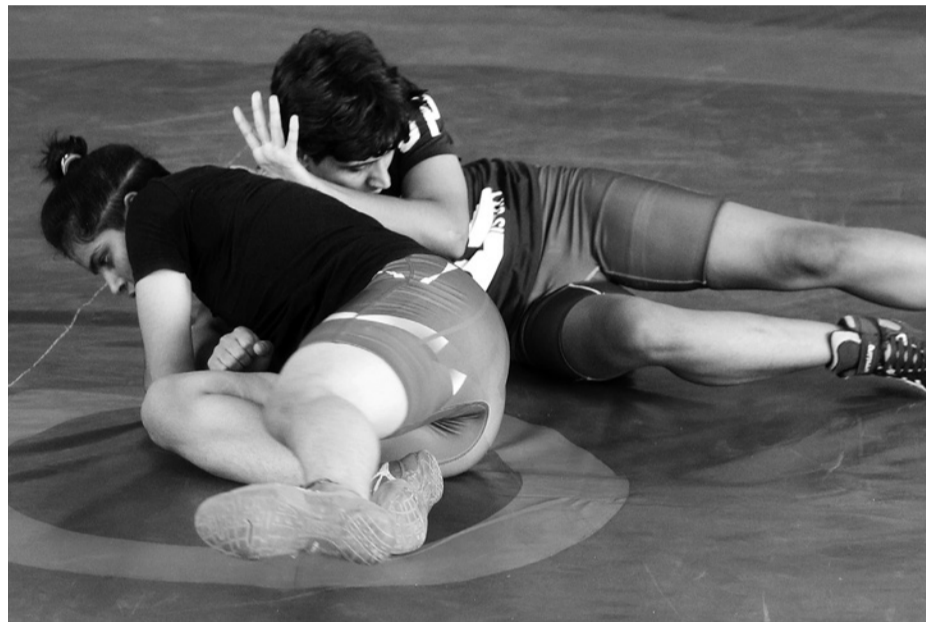




Alia Hussein attends a training practise

Wrestling rivals and tradition



Iraqi wrestlers practise at a gym in Diwaniyah, around 160 kilometres (100 miles) south of Baghdad

When Al-Rafidain first got started in 2016, the federation was only able to give it “a very small budget”, with about \$40 (35 euros) a month allocated to each member

AFP | Diwaniyah, Iraq

Sports teacher Nehaya Dhaher was living a quiet life looking after her elderly mother in Iraq's tribal south when she was asked to set up the country's first women's wrestling squad.

Taking on a sport largely reserved for men in a region with strict traditions was quite a challenge but one that both Dhaher and young female sports fans embraced.

“Recruiting wasn't a problem,” said Dhaher, a tight blue hijab framing her round face. “On the other hand, it's been difficult to convince society because our traditions aren't really headed in this direction,” the 52-year-old said.

Dhaher was working as a school sports teacher and trainer at a sports club but never imagined that one day she would be coaching a group of young female wrestlers in her conservative city of Diwaniyah.

But when the Iraqi Wrestling Federation approached her two years ago with the opportunity to lead the team due to her proven track record with women athletes, she leapt at the chance.

To start off, she found five volunteers at her local sports club to train the Al-Rafidain -- “the two rivers” -- whose name pays tribute to Iraq's mighty Tigris and Euphrates.

‘Tribes rule’

Today, the team has about 20 members

“We're sure of what we do, so people can say what they want -- we don't care, we haven't done anything wrong, so no one has the right to say anything”

ALIA HUSSEIN'S MOTHER

aged from around 15 to 30 who train three times a week in two-hour sessions after school. On a broad blue mat with a red circle at its centre, the wrestlers tumble with determination under the watchful eye of Dhaher, wearing a grey tracksuit.

The gym's windows are thrown wide open to ease the stifling heat.

Dressed in an assortment of shorts, tights and T-shirts, the young women alternate between stretches and sparring drills.

But when training ends, the wrestlers file out of the building in long robes, most of them wearing headscarves, seamlessly blending into the city where most women are cloaked in black.

“Here, the tribes rule the lives of all. I've received direct and indirect threats but we've managed to win respect,” said Dhaher. To do so, they had to put in more effort than the average coach, according to

Dhaher's assistant, Nadia Saeb.

“We've built bonds of trust with the wrestlers' families,” she said.

“We look after the girls, picking them up from their home before practise and returning them afterwards,” she said.

“We even follow up on their schooling,” added the 47-year-old proudly. The approach has paid off.

At first unsure what to make of the sport's new female competitors, today people in Diwaniyah come out to support the team during competitions, according to Dhaher.

‘Little by little’

As the sport gained popularity across the country, “little by little, people finally accepted us”, said Alia Hussein, the team's star who sports a stylish short haircut.

In September, she won a silver medal at the Women Classic International Tournament in Beirut in the under 75 kilo category.

Alongside her budding wrestling career, the 26-year-old hopes to finish her high school diploma after having put her studies on hold to help her family.

After graduating, she hopes to study physical education at university.

Her mother, who has adorned their modest family home with Alia's trophies alongside paintings showing revered Shiite imams and figures, has always been supportive.

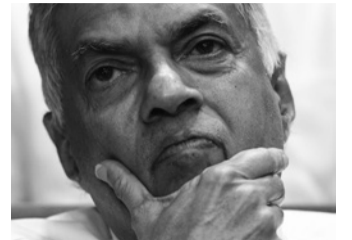
Followers of sacked Sri Lankan PM stage rally

Colombo, Sri Lanka

Tens of thousands of activists blocked the centre of Colombo yesterday to protest the sacking of Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister.

Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) staged the protest outside his official residence where he has remained since President Maithripala Sirisena dismissed him Friday. Sirisena named reformer authoritarian president Mahinda Rajapakse as head of government, triggering a constitutional crisis.

The party said about 100,000 people took part in the protests while police sources gave a figure of 25,000, though many



Ranil Wickremesinghe

busloads were still arriving.

Crowds chanted “down with the rogue PM”, referring to Rajapakse, and “respect the mandate, recall parliament.”

Effigies of Sirisena were

torn up in a symbolic protest against the president's move which has been described by many local newspapers as a “constitutional coup.”

US planning ‘tent cities’ for migrants

Washington, United States

President Donald Trump said yesterday his administration was planning to build tent cities for thousands of Central American migrants making their way through Mexico to the United States.

The announcement during a Fox News interview came as the Pentagon announced it was deploying 5,200 active-duty troops to beef up security, and follows weeks of heated anti-migrant rhetoric from the president ahead of crucial midterm congressional elections next week.

“If they apply for asylum, we're going to hold them until such time as their trial takes place. We're going to hold them, we're going to build tent cities, we're gonna build tents all over the place.

“We're not gonna build

structures and spend all of these hundreds of millions of dollars. We're gonna have tents, they're gonna be very nice, and they're going to wait, and if they don't get asylum they get out.”

He added that asylum seekers would remain in detention while their claims were being processed, a move which he said would deter would-be applicants from coming to the US.

“If you wanna wait, they don't usually get asylum. You know that. The problem is they release them in and then they have the trial, three years later, and nobody shows up.

“But we are gonna, unlike Obama and unlike others, we're going to take the people, we're going to put them in, and they're gonna wait.

“When people find out that happens, you're gonna have far fewer people come up.”



Migrants kneel after crossing the Suchiate River from Tecun Uman in Guatemala to Ciudad Hidalgo in Mexico

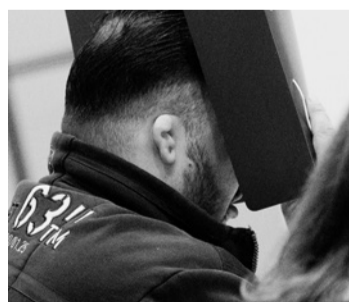
German nurse admits to killing 100 patients as trial opens

Oldenburg, Germany

Former nurse Niels Hoegel, admitted yesterday to killing 100 patients in his care, on the first day of his trial in the biggest serial killing case in Germany's post-war history.

Hoegel, 41, has already spent nearly a decade in prison on a life term for other patient deaths, and is accused of intentionally administering medical overdoses to victims so he could bring them back to life at the last moment.

As the proceedings opened in the northern city of Oldenburg, presiding judge Sebastian



Niels Hoegel hides behind a folder as he arrives in the courtroom

Buehrmann asked whether the charges against him were accurate. Hoegel replied “yes”.

“What I have admitted took place,” he told the courtroom

The choice of victim appears to have been entirely random, with their ages ranging from 34 to 96.

crowded with dozens of grieving relatives.

As the proceedings began Buehrmann said the main aim of the trial was to establish the full scope of the murder spree that was allowed to go unchecked for

years at two German hospitals.

‘Looking for justice’

Prosecutors say at least 36 patients were killed at a hospital in Oldenburg where he worked, and about 64 more at a clinic in nearby Delmenhorst, between 2000 and 2005.

More than 130 bodies of patients who died on Hoegel's watch have been exhumed, in a case investigators have called “unprecedented in Germany to our knowledge”.

200 victims?

Caught in 2005 while inject-

ing an unapproved medication into a patient in Delmenhorst, Hoegel was sentenced in 2008 to seven years in prison for attempted murder.

A second trial followed in 2014-15 under pressure from alleged victims' families, who accused prosecutors of dragging their feet. He was found guilty of murder and attempted murder of five other victims and given the maximum sentence of 15 years.

It was then that Hoegel confessed to his psychiatrist at least 30 more murders committed in Delmenhorst. That prompt-

ed investigators to take a closer look at suspicious deaths in Oldenburg.

Investigators say the final toll could top 200 but fear they might never know for sure because the bodies of many potential victims were cremated.

Hoegel appears to have followed a similar procedure each time, first injecting a medication that triggered cardiac arrest, followed by an often futile attempt at resuscitation.

Prosecutors say he was motivated by vanity, to show off his skills at saving human lives, and by simple “boredom”.