

Qatar tackles weighty problem with national sport day

February 10 2015

More than a million Qataris were given a day off work Tuesday to take part in a nationwide day of sport amid growing concern at obesity levels in the super-rich Gulf state.

Although the annual Qatar National Sport Day is meant to be a fun event with beach volleyball, jogging, fitness boot camps and even a screening of the boxing movie "Rocky", it contains a serious message.

Qatar, for all its recent association with sport, has a weight problem.

The first results from an ongoing two-year study by the Qatar Biobank, a medical research facility, published at the beginning of this year found that 73 percent of Qataris were classified as "overweight or obese".

The same research—covering 1,200 Qatari nationals and long-term expats—also discovered that 76 percent of men and 70 percent of women are at risk of developing cardiovascular disease.

And only two in 10 Qataris do any kind of exercise each week.

The same research also found that 45 percent of women had gained weight in the past year, though there was no comparable figure for men.

Hadi Abderrahim, managing director of Qatar Biobank, says the obesity problem is "a lifestyle issue" and is typical of "a country (which) is growing and developing quickly".

The problem is so grave that accounting giant PwC has advocated that Qatar introduce a tax on fatty foods to encourage healthier eating.

National Sport Day locations also include "diet shops" and there are cash prizes offered for those Qataris who have lost the most weight throughout the year.

To encourage a healthy lifestyle, shisha smoking pipes were banned at one of Doha's biggest markets, Souq Waqif.

It is the fourth consecutive year Qatar has held the event, which gives the working population of more than 1.2 million people a day off—traditionally on the second Tuesday in February.

Athletes such as British runner Kelly Holmes, a double Olympic champion, were invited to attend.

Difficult to exercise

Among the venues used was Doha's Aspire Academy, usually a hothouse for potential professional talent but, which on Tuesday, was taken over by enthusiastic amateurs trying out a variety of sports including yoga, cycling, football and climbing.

One of those scaling a "scary" 30-foot (nine-metre) wall was Colin, a 29-year-old electrician from Kenya who lives in Qatar.

He said the sports day was a "good idea" but he was unable to do more exercise because of the demands of work.

"I just took it as my rest day. So, it couldn't affect my daily routine because I work literally more than 10 hours every day," he said.

Similarly, American Danielle Garr, 32, who has lived in Qatar since last August, took advantage of the day off but was unconvinced it would mean a change in lifestyle for many, citing the country's inhospitable climate.

"I like to be active it is just that Qatar is not a very good place to be active outside, because of the weather and dust," she said.

She added that the National Sports Day seemed "a bit random".

Other events being held across Qatar included a children's run, beach tennis and a "5,000-step journey"—a roughly 40-minute walk designed for families to take part together.

Sheikh Saoud bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, secretary general of the Qatar Olympic Committee, said the Gulf state faced similar problems to other nations where driving to work, sitting in an office or in front of television or computer screens mean people are less active.

"It is a problem everywhere in the world," said the sheikh, a keen cyclist, who also admits to supporting the Real Madrid and Manchester United football teams.

"The most important thing is to make awareness for sport for the whole year.

"It is not meant for one day. One day is like... the wake-up call, to make you understand how sport is important in your life."

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