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Pearl-diving fest starts

Voyage preserves marine heritage; strengthens youths' ties to the past

By Ben Garcia

KUWAIT: A send-off ceremony, known as a Dasha, was held yesterday at the Kuwait Sea Sports Club (KSSC) headquarters in Salmiya in honor of the 200 young sailors aged from 8-17 who are currently participating in the 22nd Annual Pearl-Diving Expedition.

Parents, brothers, sisters and friends thronged the venue in the early morning to bid them farewell and wish their loved ones success on their nine-day voyage off Khairan Resort. While some of the more emotional divers shed a few tears, all the participants' faces expressed both happiness and excitement.

The annual expedition has become the most exciting event of the year for many Kuwaitis as it revives what was once the most important occupation of their forefathers in the pre-oil era. The annual event, which is held under the patronage of His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah in order to preserve this national heritage, this year takes place between July 15 and 24.

Yousef Al-Najjar, the head of this year's diving expedition, was delighted to see the happy faces of participants, parents and officials. "It's another beautiful dasha for this year's pearl-diving festival. We are delighted to see these young children participating in the revival of Kuwait's most important national heritage," he told the Friday Times. "The 200 youngsters have all been excited about this event and we are looking forward for a safe return and also for the success of our expedition."

Last year, at least three of the expedition vessels have joined with counterparts in Bahrain, but there are no boats from outside Kuwait this year. "We have little time left as we'll be welcoming the holy month of Ramadan early next month," Al-Najjar explained. "So that's one reason why we didn't consider any extensions [of the trip]."

At the event, Dr Ali Al-Nasifi represented HH the Amir, expressing the monarch's gratitude to the organizers, the captains of the boats and all the participants for all their hard work and for continuing to maintain Kuwait's national heritage.

The Dasha began with the singing of Kuwait's national anthem and a recitation of some verses from the holy Quran. The participants were then presented to Dr Al-Nasifi, who wished them every success. After the short ceremony, the 15 vessels set sail. They were expected to arrive after a two-hour journey at the Khairan resort where they will remain until July 24.

A supply boat, coast guards, paramedics and doctors accompanied this year's expedition, with all the participants excited about the event which is expected to be busier than those in previous years with representatives of the Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fish Resources (PAAAFR) accompanying the young sailors to teach them about marine life.

"We are very excited and at the same time proud to be part of this pearl-diving



KUWAIT: A young boy (inset) who is taking part in the 22nd pearl-diving festival is bidding farewell to a relative as the vessels (above) with some 190 youngsters leave for their nine-day voyage. — Photos by Joseph Shagra (See Page 8)

event," said one participant, a 16-year-old Qusoor High School pupil called Ali. "For us Kuwaitis, if you're really a man, you must try and be a part of this annual event. I am participating for the first time."

Another of the young sailors, Muhammad, a 15-year-old pupil at Yousef Al-Nasif High School, said that the training had been invaluable to him. "This is the moment we've been waiting for. The training is

over and we are finally going out for the real challenge," he told the Friday Times.

A colorful celebration of the expected bountiful pearl harvest from the voyage is set to take place on Monday at the Khairan Resort where families and friends of the young sailors will be able to watch several performances related to the pearl-diving expedition.