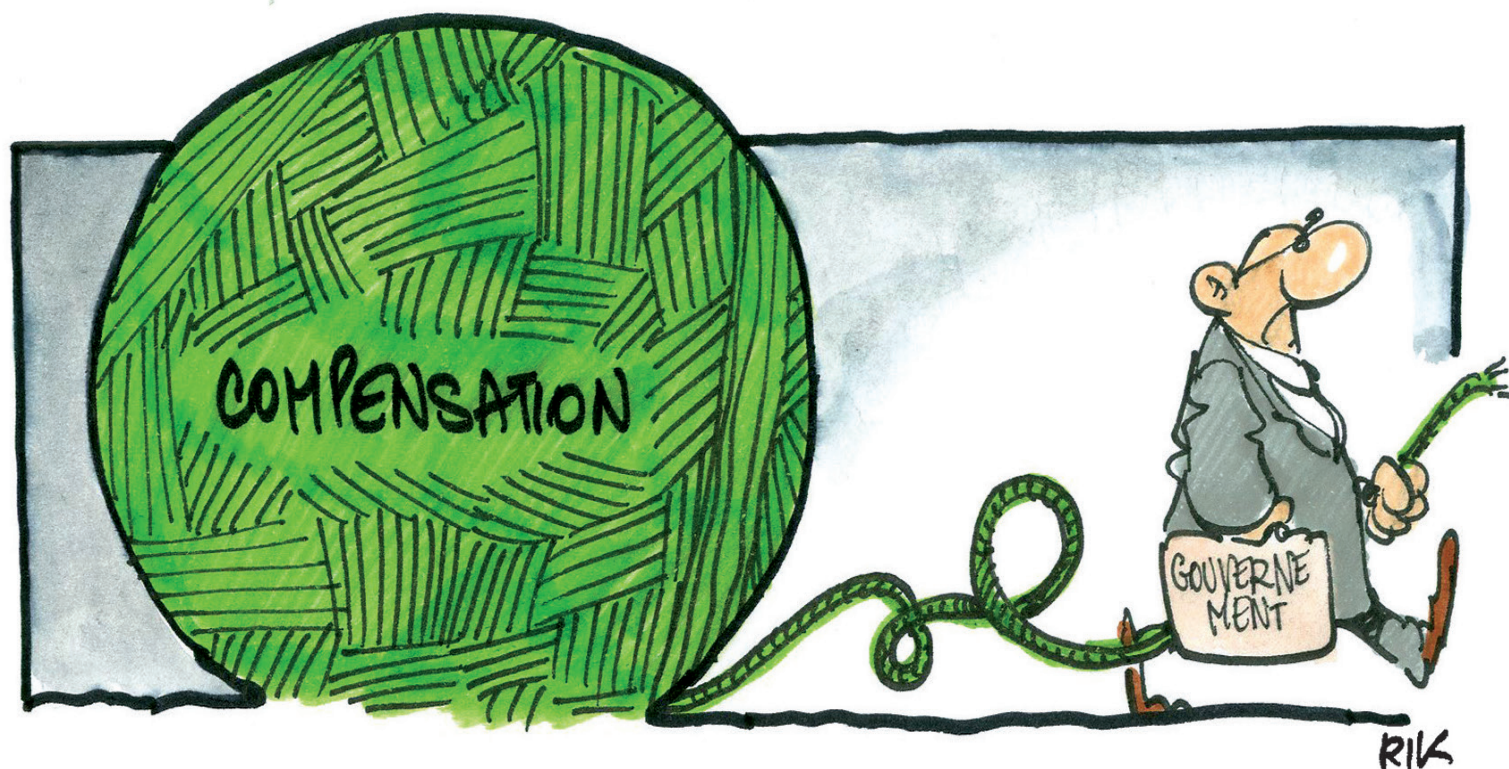


Weekly highlights by L'ECONOMISTE

Subsidizing butane gas A taboo finally broken



■ 50 DH per 12 kg cylinder, 12.5 DH that 3.5 kg

■ The reform progressive completed in 2026

■ Direct social assistance, wage increase, IR reform... the counterpart

Operation Crossing the Strait 2024: Morocco and Spain all set



A new life for La Casablancaise des Sports



Medical cannabis Potential revenues of 600 million USDs by 2028



Final preparations for the sacred music festival



EDITORIAL

Collateral victims

Mohamed Ali MRABI

SOME decisions are hard to take, but are essential if we are to rectify untenable situations. The removal of the butane gas price subsidies is one of them. Admittedly, it is a measure that may be interpreted as unpopular, but which is fully justified on an economic level, or even by some logic. For decades, public subsidies for the price of butane gas have represented a financial abyss swallowing up billions of Dirhams (hundred million USDs), which do not always benefit the poorest populations. The Government can no longer afford these losses.

The statistics are there to remind us. Between 2015 and 2023, more than 174 billion MAD (USD 17 billion) were absorbed by support for butane gas, sugar, and flour (two other subsidized products). Originally, the aim of price subsidies was to avoid volatility in commodity prices, in order to preserve purchasing

power and guarantee social peace. However, this public aid mechanism has been misused to serve the interests of people or entities who are not in need. The wealthiest social class absorbed 27% of this support. The most disadvantaged class, on the other hand, received just 14%. This fully justifies the paradigm shift initiated a few years ago, replacing price subsidies with direct aid. Nonetheless, in this process, one must keep in mind the goal of equity that should guide the new approach. Hence the importance of continuing to fine-tune the targeting system, by tackling the teething problems (in particular by ironing out the problems identified with scoring). Above all, it is important to avoid doubly penalizing certain categories, already in a vulnerable position, by depriving them of both price subsidies and direct assistance, thus making them collateral victims of the system. □

Weekly highlights

Operation Crossing the Strait 2024

Morocco and Spain all set

GONE Preparations for Operation Crossing the Strait 2024 (OPE-24) are well underway. The campaign, which promises to be on a massive scale, attracted the interest of the joint Moroccan-Spanish Crossing the Strait Commission, which met on May 20 in Tangiers, under the co-chairmanship of Khalid Zerouali, Wali, Director of Migration and Border Surveillance, and Susana Crisóstomo, Spanish Under-Secretary of State for the Interior. An operation described as “an eloquent example of the close coordination and cooperation between Morocco and Spain”, according to Susana Crisóstomo, stressing that “communication and cooperation between the two countries will ensure the success of Operation Crossing the Strait and manage any unforeseen situations”. In her opinion, the experience accumulated over the years in organizing such an operation bears witness to the effectiveness of this collaboration.

For the Crossing the Strait 2024 operation, a substantial fleet plan has



been drawn up, with the participation of seven maritime operators, 29 ships and 11 shipping lines, offering an overall capacity of over 7 million passengers, 2 million vehicles, and 8,000 round trips. Major measures have been implemented in terms of maritime and road transport, including technical verification campaigns for ships and the mobilization of land transport inspectors.

Upon arrival or departure, Moroccans living abroad will be welcomed by the experienced teams of the Mohammed V Foundation for Solidarity which provides them with an extensive social assistance scheme. The port infrastructures of Tanger-Med, Tanger Ville, Nador, and Al Hoceima have also been updated, offering improvements in terms of passenger comfort and facilitation, including relaxation

areas, shaded areas, walkways, a display and signage system, as well as the dredging of car-ferry berths.

The plan also emphasizes the mobilization of local authorities, with the setting up of ad hoc units in the provinces and prefectures, the reinforcement of security services and the mobilization of Moroccan consular representations in Spain, with daily standby duty, including on weekends and public holidays.

To support this operation, a multimedia communication strategy aimed at Moroccans living abroad has been developed, notably for the dissemination of practical information via the Marhaba website of the Mohammed V Foundation for Solidarity.

The joint Moroccan-Spanish Crossing the Strait Commission agreed to strengthen coordination between focal points to ensure a smooth flow of information and anticipate certain aspects linked to peak day management, ticket interchangeability, and the fight against speculation on sea crossing prices. □

Radia LAHLOU

A new life for La Casablancaise des Sports

AS with a number of other transformational projects in Casablanca, work is accelerating on the delivery of La Casablancaise des Sports. This sports field project, which has been underway for several years, is nearing completion.

After years of delay, the Ministry of National Education, Preschooling, and Sports resumed work on the outdoor facilities at the beginning of 2024.

Today, the municipality has officially entrusted the management and operation of the site to the National Stadium Construction and Management Company (Société nationale de réalisation et de gestion des stades - Sonarges). Under the terms of the agreement, adopted during the recent May session of the city council, the Sonarges company will manage the facility for a renewable 5-year period. Prior to this, however, the ministry in charge of the project will have to carry out site development



Following the rehabilitation of the Arab League Park and its adjoining squares (Mohammed V and Nevada), it is La Casablancaise's turn to open its doors to sports enthusiasts (Ph. F. Al Nasser)

and maintenance work, as well as strengthen the administrative and sports human resources. As far as the municipality is concerned, it must make the site available to Sonarges as soon as the agreement linking the Ministry of National Education, Preschooling, and Sports, the Ministry

of Youth and Culture, and the municipality comes into force. The municipality also undertakes to beef up the administrative and sports staff, and authorizes the Sonarges company to use La Casablancaise sports field to host sporting, cultural, and social events. As far as Sonarges is concer-

ned, it will have to set up and run an annual program of shows and activities.

La Casablancaise, formerly known as the Lyautey Stadium, is located in the heart of Casablanca, not far from Place Mohammed V. Built in 1936 by the French authorities, this complex has seen its heyday, with many national champions passing through its doors, particularly in athletics.

Home to several athletics federations, the building has also been the venue for a number of artistic events, particularly in the Abdessamad Kenfaoui Hall which has also hosted general assemblies held by clubs and federations.

The development of La Casablancaise is one of the transformational projects undertaken as part of the Casablanca Development Plan. After the rehabilitation of the Arab League Park and of the adjoining squares (Mohammed V and Nevada), it is now the turn of the La Casablancaise to open its doors to sports enthusiasts. □

Aziza ELAFFAS

Subsidizing butane gas

A taboo finally broken

GONE are the 40 Dirham- (USD 4) and 10 Dirham- (USD 1) bottles of butane gas. Since Monday May 20, 2024, the Government has increased the price of 12 kg bottles by 10 Dirhams, bringing the selling price to 50 Dirhams, and that of 3.5 kg bottles by 2.5 Dirhams, raising them from 10 MAD to 12.5 MAD. The announcement was made via a press release from the Ministry of Finance on Sunday May 19, taking everyone by surprise.

After fuel, the Government is now tackling the reform of the butane gas subsidy. The reform will be phased in over three years: 2024, 2025 and 2026. The level of increases for the next two years has not yet been specified. The next steps will be assessed in the light of overall economic conditions.

Eventually, will true prices be applied, or will prices be capped? The Ministry of Finance was due to answer this question during the question time session in Parliament on Monday May 20 ... During discussions relating to the Finance Act, Fouzi Lakjaa, Minister of the Budget, had mentioned a "price cap", without providing further details concerning the desired level. In preparation for this removal of butane



In addition to improving purchasing power and incomes, other major issues are on the negotiating table: the draft organic law on pensions and pension reform

gas subsidy, the Government took stock of all existing social programs and grouped them together to ensure the necessary efficiency in targeting vulnerable groups.

Between 2015 and 2023, 174 billion dirhams (USD 17 billion) were allocated to support butane gas, sugar, and flour, representing an annual average of 19.4 billion dirhams (USD 1.9 billion). However, the most vulnerable groups, representing 20% of the poorest population, received over the same period only 14% of these

subsidies, namely 24.36 billion MAD (USD 2.43 billion), with an annual average of 2.7 billion MAD (USD 270 million). By contrast, the wealthy social class, representing 20% of the richest population, absorbed 27% of the support, i.e. 47 billion MAD (USD 4.7 billion) over the same period, with an annual average of 5.22 billion MAD (USD 522 million), double the support for the poorest 20%.

These statistics, presented to the Finance Committee during discussions on the 2024 Finance Act, also reveal

that 60% of the population in vulnerable situations received only 40% of the butane gas subsidy, namely 70 billion dirhams (USD 7 billion) over the 2015-2023 period, with an annual average of 8 billion dirhams (USD 800 million). In contrast, the wealthiest 40% received 60% of the price subsidy expenditures, namely 104 billion dirhams (USD 10 billion) over the same period, with an annual average of 12 billion dirhams (USD 1.2 billion). □

Khadija MASMOUDI

Medical cannabis

Potential revenues of 600 million USDs by 2028

HOW The cannabis ecosystem could generate revenues in the range of 4 to 6.3 billion Dirhams (USD 400 to 630 million) by 2028, with a European market share of 10 to 15%. "We are fully capable of achieving this, especially with the efforts of all stakeholders", said Mohammed El Boumahdi, President of the Moroccan Federation of Pharmaceutical Industry and Innovation (FMIP). El Boumahdi was speaking at a workshop organized by professionals to take stock of the sector since the enactment in 2021 of Law 13-21 on the legal uses of cannabis. "The full body of laws is now in place, and the implementing regulations have been published", announced Mohamed El Guerrouj, CEO of the National Agency for the Regulation of Cannabis-Related Activities (ANRAC) which oversees the legal cannabis industry. The agency defines the national strategy, supports research, and ensures



Three years after the entry into force of Law 13-21 relating to the legal uses of cannabis, Mohamed El Guerrouj, CEO of the National Agency for the Regulation of Activities Related to Cannabis (ANRAC) recalls the imperatives which govern the activity (Ph. Privée)

rigorous regulation of legal cannabis activities. "To date, three provinces - Chefchaouen, Taounat, and Al Hoceima - and 9 activities have been authorized", added El Guerrouj, who insisted that only farmers are eligible to produce. "We're not in the business of expanding the area planted, but rather

targeting small farmers who were producing illegally, to move them into a regulated framework", explained the Agency's CEO. Targeted farmers must organize themselves through cooperatives. The nine authorized activities include: nurseries in the 3 provinces concerned, marketing, transport, im-

porting, exporting, and processing. All this must be organized within a framework that obeys four imperatives: the obligation to target pharmaceutical purposes, the contractual obligation, the compliance with specifications drawn up by ANRAC, and a monitoring system.

The stakeholders who attended the workshop recalled the fact that medical cannabis offers a wide range of therapeutic virtues, bringing a new dimension to patient care and offering alternative and complementary solutions to conventional treatments. From the management of chronic pain to the improvement of neurological symptoms and the alleviation of mental disorders, medical cannabis reveals its multiple health benefits, thanks to its active components, notably CBD (cannabidiol), widely used in cosmetics and dietary supplements for its various virtues. □

Aziza ELAFFAS

Weekly highlights

Final preparations for the sacred music festival



THE flagship event of the spiritual capital is already celebrating its 27th edition. From May 24 to June 1, 2024, the Fez Festival of World Sacred Music (FFMSM) will welcome over 200 artists from 18 countries, including France. It will be an opportunity to celebrate the peaceful coexistence of the three mono-theistic religions through a rich and varied program. Initiated under the patronage of His Majesty the King, the new edition will feature Spain as a country. In the meantime, preparations are continuing at the Bab El Makina square and the Jnan Sbil garden, which will host the various concerts. Of particular interest is the show-creation on Friday, May 24, 2024. As a reminder, this festival is

Artists from Uzbekistan, Iran, Syria, India, Spain, Egypt, Italy, France, and Morocco will set the Bab El Makina stage alight for the 27th edition of the Festival of Sacred Music. Festival-goers will discover an exceptional program for the occasion (Ph. YSA)



inaugurated every year in the presence of HRH Princess Lalla Hasnaa. As such, it is the only national festival to welcome such a high-profile figure for its official inauguration. The national and international elite also respond to the organizers' invitation, as do the sponsors and other institutional supporters. For its 2024 edition, the festival's theme is "The Quest for the Spirit of Al Andalus", the period of peaceful cohabitation of the religions of the Book in Andalusia from the 8th to the 15th century, a "Golden Age" whose spirit lives on in Fez. "The FFMSM is intended to be a special occasion to celebrate this capacity for 'living together', dialogue, and tolerance, promoted at the highest level by the Kingdom", said Abderrafia Zouitene, President of the Esprit de Fès Foundation, who adds that "Spain is in the limelight for this 27th edition, whose program will illustrate the historic and perennial links that bind the Peninsula and Morocco through performances and fusions of artists from both countries".

On the program side, the spiritual capital's flagship event will open with a creation entitled "Zyriab ou

la cinquième corde" (Zyriab or the fifth string). The show, which usually lasts an hour and a half, will highlight the Place Moulay El Hassan using mapping techniques and offer a journey to the sources of inspiration of Andalusian music, between sky and earth, mountains, and palaces. The fresco will revisit Arab music when it became Andalusian, and will inherit the teachings of ancient philosophers such as Al Firdūsī and Al Kindī, themselves inspired by the thought of Pythagoras and Plato. "Their vision of the cosmos and of the planets in relation to music is akin to that of the desert poet, who contemplated the immensity of the starry sky", explained Alain Weber, Artistic Director of the festival. A poet, singer, and musician of Kurdish origin, Abu Al-Hasan Ali Ibn Nāfi, known as "Zyriab" ("the bird or the blackbird"), the flamboyant prince of this great Andalusian epic, takes us through skies and mountains, to the Umayyad court of Amir 'Abd al-Rahman II of Cordoba in a show featuring artists from Uzbekistan, Iran, Syria, India, Spain, Egypt, Italy, Armenia, France, and Morocco.

This year's festival also features major artists including Sami Yusuf and Vicente Amigo. Presented by Time Magazine as "the greatest musical star of the Muslim world", the former is expected to perform a memorable concert on Saturday, May 25, 2024. Sami Yusuf is considered one of the most influential musicians of our time in the World Music category. Prolific guitarist Vicente Amigo will be making his second appearance at the Fez Festival. The artist will give a memorable concert where flamenco, as well as Andalusian and Spanish culture and art will be majestically highlighted. □

Youness SAAD ALAMI

Gospel music too

THIS year's closing show will be grandiose. Gospel will be on display from June 1, 2024, with Kim Burrell for "a world premiere in Fez", say the organizers. For this unique project in the world of gospel, more than fifty artists will perform an exceptional and spellbinding creation based around gospel music, with diva Kim Burrell, famous in the USA for having sung with Mariah Carey, Whitney Houston, Jay-Z, and Pharrell Williams, among others. Designed and directed by conductor Pascal Horecka, this unique project offers a universal gospel, fusing the world of Western classical music with the voices of sacred, black, and inspired America. □

A fun race

AFTER 4 years of suspension, due to Covid, the Fès-Saïss Association reiterates the successful experience of a race to the rhythm of sacred music and thus hosts the 8th edition of the foot race on the occasion of the 27th anniversary of the Sacred Music Festival. The event is scheduled for Sunday, May 26, 2024 at 9 a.m., and will be attended by world track-and-field champions Nawal El Moutawakel and Soufiane El Bekkali. For Hassan Slighoua, president of the association, the aim is to gather around 3,000 participants for this 10-kilometer family race, which is primarily aimed at promoting tourism in the city of Fez and its magnificent Medina. □