

Ayesha Ayaz wins medals and hearts for Pakistan

EIGHT-YEAR-OLD IS THE COUNTRY’S YOUNGEST TAEKWONDO PRACTITIONER

AIMING HIGH
ISLAMABAD
BY SANA JAMAL
Correspondent

At the age of eight, when most kids spend their time on smartphones, Ayesha Ayaz made her international debut as Pakistan’s youngest taekwondo practitioner.

She became the youngest competitor to win a bronze medal for her country at the seventh edition of the Fujairah Taekwondo Open Championship in the UAE early this month.

“I really love taekwondo and my aim is to get Olympic gold for Pakistan,” the young athlete told *Gulf News*.

The eight-year-old dedicated her first international win to Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan and is eager to show him her medal.

Pakistan’s haul at the championship was two gold, one silver and two bronze medals.

Dedication

Talking to *Gulf News*, Lieutenant-Colonel (retired) Wasim Ahmad, president of the Pakistan Taekwondo Federation (PTF), said the young star is very dedicated. “She has demonstrated outstanding dedication and accuracy at an early age,” he said.

Noting that there are a few other young taekwondo competitors, Ahmad said “Ayesha is the youngest Pakistani to win a medal at the international competition and we couldn’t be more [proud] of her achievement.”

Ayesha hails from Swat Valley in Pakistan’s Khyber Pakhtunkwa province, home to the world’s youngest Nobel Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai.

Like Yousafzai, who became the global symbol of female education, Ayesha is passionate about becoming Swat Valley’s sports icon.

Introduced to martial arts at the age of three, Ayesha has won many district, provincial and international medals.

Her father, Mohammad Ayaz, also a taekwondo practitioner, said she took to the sport after watching him training. She grew up practising with



■ Ayesha Ayaz won bronze at the Fujairah Taekwondo Open Championship.



■ Ayesha, 8, with her brothers Zaryab Khan, 7, and Zeeyab Khan, 5. The three siblings and their father are Taekwondo practitioners.



“Appreciation and honour will not only motivate my daughter to improve her performance but inspire young Pakistani girls.”
Mohammad Ayaz | Ayesha’s father

her brothers Zaryab Khan, 7, and Zeeyab Khan, 5, who are also national champions.

Ayesha is a third-grade student at The Best Schooling Academy in Swat Valley and has a deep-seated passion for sports.

In the conservative part of north-western Pakistan, where education for girls still remains a challenge, Ayesha’s father is determined to help his daughter realise her Olympic dream.

“She is a great little athlete and I will take every step to support her despite social displeasure,” the proud father said. “It is hers and now my dream to see Ayesha participate in [the] Olympics and raise Pakistan’s flag high at the global event.”

Lack of recognition

Her dedication towards the sport is remarkable at this young age but without government recognition and support, competitors face a risk of disappointment.

“It’s really hard being an athlete without any recognition,” Ayesha’s father said, lamenting the fact that her win has so far been overlooked by the sports board and officials.

“Appreciation and honour will not only motivate my daughter to improve her performance but inspire



■ Ayesha is Pakistan’s youngest Taekwondo practitioner to win at an international event.

young Pakistani girls to take up sports,” he said.

Sport in Pakistan possesses huge potential when it comes to empowering youngsters. The impact on girls is especially significant as it helps break down gender stereotypes, thus improving girls’ confidence.

The PTF is encouraging young taekwondo players from all over the country, but its president Ahmad says that the support of the government, coupled with sports-based investment, can go a long way in enabling young people to live healthier and productive lives.

Pentagon official in Afghanistan

Pat Shanahan says he has no orders to reduce the US troop presence

KABUL

The Pentagon’s top official made an unannounced visit to Afghanistan yesterday to meet with US commanders and Afghan leaders amid a push for peace with the Taliban.

Pat Shanahan, the recently installed acting secretary of defence, said he has no orders to reduce the US troop presence, although officials say that is at the top of the Taliban’s list of demands in exploratory peace negotiations.

Shanahan said he is encouraged that President Donald Trump’s administration is exploring all possibilities for ending a 17-year war, the longest in American history.

On their terms

But he stressed that peace terms are for the Afghans to decide. Thus far the Taliban have refused to negotiate with the government of President Ashraf Gani, calling it illegitimate. Washington is trying to break that impasse.

“The Afghans have to decide what Afghanistan looks like. It’s not about the US, it’s about Afghanistan,” Shanahan told reporters travelling with him from Washington.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the administration’s special envoy for Afghan peace talks, said on Friday that although talks are in an early stage, he hopes a deal can be made by July. That is when Afghanistan is scheduled to hold a presidential election.

Shanahan, a former Boeing executive who had never been in Afghanistan until

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Pat Shanahan
| Acting secretary of defence

yesterday, was scheduled to meet with Gani and other top government officials.

Shanahan took over as acting secretary of defence on January 1 after Jim Mattis submitted his resignation in December. Shanahan had been Mattis’ No 2.

Shanahan’s views on the Afghan war are not widely known. He said he would use this week’s visit to inform his thinking and to report back to Trump.

In testimony before Congress last week, Gen. Joseph Votel, the commander of US Central Command, offered a largely optimistic view of Afghanistan, saying the current manoeuvring between US and Taliban negotiators is “our first real opportunity for peace and reconciliation since the war began.”

Votel noted that the Taliban are still capable of inflicting significant casualties on Afghan government forces. Just last week the insurgents killed some two dozen Afghan troops in an attack on an army base in northern Kunduz province.

In addition to battling the Taliban, US and coalition forces in Afghanistan are focused on a Daesh affiliate known as Isis-Khorasan, comprised of foreign fighters largely from Pakistan.

— AP



■ Pat Shanahan greets an Afghan commando at Camp Commando, Afghanistan yesterday. The unannounced visit is the first for the acting secretary of defence.



■ Visitors row boats past cherry blossoms in full bloom in Tokyo in this March 2018 file picture. Cherry blossom season is feverishly anticipated by locals and visitors alike.

The art of Japan’s cherry blossom forecast

Most basic element of predicting when flowers will unfurl is a large data set of temperatures

TOKYO

As spring approaches in Japan, the country’s weather forecasters face one of their biggest missions of the year: predicting exactly when the famed cherry blossoms will bloom.

Japan’s sakura or cherry blossom season is feverishly anticipated by locals and visitors alike. Many tourists plan

their entire trips around the blooms.

“People pay more attention to the cherry blossom season than any other flower in Japan,” Ryo Dojo, an official of the statistics unit at the Japan Meteorological Agency, said.

The most basic element of predicting when the delicate pink and white petals will begin to unfurl is a large data set of temperatures. That’s because the flowers will come earlier if temperatures rise quickly in spring, Dojo said.

Conversely, if temperatures in the autumn and winter period are higher than usual, the blooms can end up being delayed. Extreme weather can af-

fect the trees too, with unusual patterns in 2018 prompting some blossoms to appear in October, well before the usual season.

In general, blooms begin as early as March in southern Kyushu and appear as late as May in northernmost Hokkaido.

Sakura project

In a bid to improve its forecasts, some outfits have started crowdsourcing data, including Weathernews, a firm in Chiba near Tokyo. It relies on photos of buds sent in regularly by 10,000 citizens across the country who are registered on the company’s website and app.

“Cherry blossom forecasting is impossible for us without

this system,” spokeswoman Miku Toma said. The company launched what they call the “sakura project” in 2004, signing up members who choose their own cherry tree and send pictures of its buds to the firm at regular intervals.

Thanks to the project, Weathernews has accumulated data from two million reports on cherry flower buds in the past 15 years, which it uses to increase the accuracy of its forecasting.

It also incorporates weather data collected from its own observation devices across Japan — 13,000 locations in total, 10 times more than the official weather agency has.

— AFP