



LETTING IN THE LIGHT

A Focus on the World's Best
Journalism in 2021



Fetisov Journalism Awards Annual 2021



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CONTENTS

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Foreword	6
Introduction	8
Outstanding Investigative Reporting	12
Prize Winners	
1st Prize – Audrey Travère, Phineas Rueckert, Paloma de Dinechin (France) Series: <i>“The Cartel Project”</i>	14
2nd Prize – Yudhijit Bhattacharjee, Smita Sharma (US/ India) <i>Stolen Lives: The Harrowing Story of Two Girls Sold into Sexual Slavery</i>	52
3rd Prize – Zecharias Zelalem, Will Brown (Ethiopia/ Kenya) Series <i>“African Migrants ‘Left to Die’ in Saudi Arabia’s Hellish Covid Detention Centres”</i>	76
Message from Gwen Lister	88
Shorlisted Stories	
Farzad Seifikaran, Nasim Roshanaei (Iran) Series of articles	90
Kemi Busari (Nigeria) Series <i>“Blood on Uniforms”</i>	100
María Sol Lauría Paz, Iván Ruíz, Luis Fernando Cantoral, David Bernal, José Bautista García, Alberto Alonso, Jessica Carrillo, Octavio Enríquez, Suhelis Tejero, María Fernanda Sojo, Santiago Sánchez, Mildred Rojas (Argentina, Bolivia, Spain, US, Nicaragua, Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Uruguay) Series <i>“Chavismo INC”</i>	110
Mauri König (Brazil) <i>The Forgotten Children of Itaipu</i>	124
Naipano Lepapa (Kenya) Series <i>“Hard Labour: The Surrogacy Industry in Kenya”</i>	134
Nanami Nakagawa (Japan) Series <i>“Abandoned at Futaba Hospital”</i>	148
Pari Saikia (India) <i>Rohingya Brides Thought They Were Fleeing Violence. Then They Met Their Grooms</i>	154
Robert Flummerfelt, Nellie Peyton, Ange Kasongo (DRC/ Senegal) <i>More Than 50 Women Accuse Aid Workers of Sex Abuse in Congo Ebola Crisis ...</i>	162

Rukaia Alabadi, Fatima Al Othman (Syria/ Lebanon)	
<i>The Mahdi Scouts: A Chronicle of Child Recruitment into Iranian Militias</i>	170
Tristen Taylor, Ingrid Gercama, Nathalie Bertrams (Romania, RSA, Germany, Netherlands)	
<i>Where Did the European Union's Billion Euros for the Danube Delta Actually Go?</i> ...	180
Outstanding Contribution to Peace	192
Prize Winners	
1st Prize - Olatunji Ololade (Nigeria)	
<i>The Boys Who Swapped Football for Bullets</i>	194
2nd Prize - Haris Rovčanin, Albina Sorguč (Bosnia and Herzegovina)	
<i>Series of articles</i>	206
3rd Prize - Ali Al Ibrahim, Khalifa Al Khuder (Sweden / Syria)	
<i>Syria's Sinister Yet Lucrative Trade in Dead Bodies</i>	228
Shorlisted Stories	
Kolapo Olapoju (Nigeria)	
<i>Series "Conflict in a Pandemic"</i>	238
Marga Zambrana (Spain)	
<i>Uyghur Refugees Speak Out Against Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity</i>	246
Contribution to Civil Rights	252
Prize Winners	
1st Prize - Sukanya Shantha (India)	
<i>Series "Barred-The Prisons Project"</i>	256
2nd Prize - Corinne Redfern, Ali Ahsan (Italy/ Bangladesh)	
<i>She Was Trafficked into a Giant Brothel. Now She Runs It</i>	274
3rd Prize - Monica Jha (India)	
<i>The Testimony</i>	286
Message from Milica Pesic	302
Shortlisted Stories	
Carmen Grau Vila (Japan)	
<i>Japan's Indigenous Ainu Community Don't Want a Theme Park – They Want Their Rights</i>	304
Daneel Knoetze (South Africa)	
<i>#AboveTheLaw: How SAPS Protects the Killers Within Its Ranks</i>	310
Hélène Seynaeve, Cole Stangler, Filippo Poltronieri, Maurizio Franco, François Greuez, Valentin Delaunoy (Belgium/ France/ Italy)	
<i>Series "Inequality Unmasked"</i>	320

John Washington, José Olivares (United States)	
<i>Series "A Silent Pandemic"</i>	336
Nils Adler, Pascal Vossen (United Kingdom)	
<i>Murder in the Name of Honour</i>	344
Shalini Singh (India)	
<i>Series "Women@Work"</i>	352
Shola Lawal (Nigeria)	
<i>As Ocean Empties, Senegal's Fishermen Risk Seas for New Life in Europe</i>	358
Xavier Aldekoa, Alfons Rodríguez (Spain)	
<i>Africa, a Future with Names and Surnames</i>	364
Message from Zaffar Abbas	371
Excellence in Environmental Journalism	372
Prize Winners	
2nd Prize - Bhrikuti Rai (Nepal)	
<i>Series of articles</i>	374
2nd Prize - Sarah Maslin, Stephan Kueffner, James Tozer (Brazil/ Ecuador)	
<i>Series "Dispatches from the Amazon Under Pressure"</i>	394
3rd Prize - Karla Mendes (Brazil)	
<i>Déjà Vu as Palm Oil Industry Brings Deforestation, Pollution to Amazon</i>	410
Message from Barbara Trionfi	434
Shorlisted Stories	
Anna Geroeva (Russia)	
<i>On the Crest of a Toxic Wave</i>	436
Jack Losh (United Kingdom)	
<i>When Nature Conservation Goes Wrong</i>	444
Mya Frazier (United States)	
<i>Gas Companies Are Abandoning Their Wells, Leaving Them to Leak Methane Forever</i>	454
Zakir Hossain Chowdhury, Irwin Loy (Bangladesh)	
<i>Bangladesh's Hidden Climate Costs</i>	462
Building Trust to Escape Journalism's Sustainability Crisis	466
Expert Council 2021	470
July 2021	476
Fetisov Charitable Foundation	478

FOREWORD



MIRIAM LEVY TURNER
President and Board Member
Fetisov Charitable Foundation

Every journalist faces challenges when they come to write a story. Whether following a lead, reporting on a dramatic event, or picking up a poignant idea, it all requires research, fact-finding, and placement in context before it can be made public.

Journalists engaged in this work must be committed, professional and dedicated to long-term and often onerous physical commitment, whether reporting from uncharted territory in South America's rainforests, or investigating and exposing other sensitive and hidden stories of injustice and suffering.

Then, when published, these stories must be laced with emotional power and reveal the reality of people's lives through the expression of their authentic opinions. This work requires perseverance and can often be dangerous.

In the four years since it launched, the Fetisov Charitable Foundation has confronted many challenges, including promoting the world's best journalism during the global health emergency, in a period of historic turbulence, social conflict, and humanitarian crisis.

In a time of great challenges, the Fetisov Journalism Awards establish a window of opportunity for unknown voices from around the world to be heard and to become authors of change.

As this report reveals, words and images from powerful and well-told stories linger in the memory and may lead to actions that have a dramatic impact. They can

change lives, help to make peace, build respect for civil rights, and raise awareness of threats to our environment.

Each year we are humbled by the number of submissions, which continue to increase dramatically.

We record our thanks to our Steering Committee and our Honorary Advisor, who work all year to bring this project to life. We are also indebted to the panel of experts and jury who do so much to provide guidance and promote our cause, and who are so generous in the allocation of their time.

Everyone involved is dedicated to the cause of journalism and the life-changing impact of words that tell the truth. It is this ideal that drives the Fetisov Journalism Awards – a powerful idea whose time has come.

INTRODUCTION



AIDAN WHITE

Honorary Advisor to the Fetisov Journalism Awards
President of the Ethical Journalism Network

The Fetisov Journalism Awards 2021 represent a high-water mark in the development of the world's richest journalism prize. This year there are more entries, more cross-border collaboration, more use of stylish multimedia presentation and more evidence that committed and fearless journalism remains a vital tool in the promotion of democracy and human rights.

This report is the third since the launch of the Fetisov Journalism Awards and is published in another year of turbulence, international instability and conflict.

Over the past three years journalism has had to meet the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, a global health emergency that has cost millions of lives, as well as the deepening impact of climate change, a global energy crisis, a descent into conflict, and the worst period of global instability for almost 80 years.

The struggle to maintain respect for democracy, human rights and peaceful co-existence is greater than ever. Journalists find themselves on the frontline of a battle to promote truth-telling in a world of increasing uncertainty, disinformation and propaganda.

This year's report tells a positive story — that courageous journalism is alive and well, and that the media is able to push back against political and corporate bullying to give people access to truthful and reliable information.

Since 2019 the Fetisov Journalism Awards have developed into a truly global phenomenon. Over the past three years, entries from 97 countries have been received, with a clear trend towards more collaborative, cross border journalism.

In the first year only ten percent of entries came from teams of journalists working across borders, but by 2021 that figure had almost doubled. Now around 40 percent of the shortlist of winners represent excellence from teams of journalists and reporters.

Most of the entries are detailed and long-form journalism, indicating another trend – towards detailed and extensive reporting, usually reflected in a series of articles, with increasingly prominent use of stylish and multimedia elements.

The number of entries that include video or other multimedia and interactive components has increased steadily, although the share of completely interactive work – available on a special separate website, with clickable databases and other interactive elements, has remained largely the same. Around 27 percent of the winning shortlist contained works with video and or multimedia components.

The winning shortlist for 2021 was selected from around 400 entries. Each year they have the opportunity to share a prize fund of 520,000 CHF (more than 509,000 Euro).

The winners were selected by an international jury in four categories:

- Outstanding Investigative Reporting
- Outstanding Contribution to Peace
- Contribution to Civil Rights
- Excellence in Environmental Journalism.

The FJA International Jury and Expert Council faced a monumental task to select individual winners from a terrific selection of world-beating stories submitted from 80 countries.

The original list was whittled down by the Expert Council who selected 36 of them for the first shortlist and from this the jury chose the finalists. The final outcome was independently verified by KPMG Limited.

In the end they chose winners who each provide a masterclass in stylish, fact-based, and courageous reporting. They come from different backgrounds and different cultures, but with a shared passion for truth-telling and attachment to universal ethical principles of independent journalism.

They provide a priceless body of evidence that journalism, despite all the pressures and the threats that are facing news media, continues to make a difference in a global struggle for transparency, humanity and democracy.

The winners include five individual stories (from India, Brazil, Nigeria and Nepal) and seven collaborative works including cross-border investigations from Latin America, US, Europe, Africa and Asia. They focus on a range of challenging social, economic and political issues including people trafficking, illegal arms dealing, oil industry misconduct, threats to the environment and the plight of migrants.

Reporting these issues puts pressure on journalists but the stories also impact

the public with many people saying they regularly avoid the news because it is too depressing.¹

This comes as bad news for journalists who already face daily harassment from repressive governments, gangsters and corporate centres of power and who struggle to survive in an industry under the chronic stress of continual financial crisis.

Often there is a relentlessly negative stream of news, whether it's related to the Covid-19 pandemic or climate change or any of the numerous regional wars and conflicts that are the focus of news reporting.

But the glittering examples of excellence and public purpose to be found in journalism around the globe revealed in this report also contain positive and constructive ways of addressing the problems that often threaten to overwhelm people and crush their hopes for the future.

This highlights an important and crucial part of the mission of the FJA, which is not just to provide glittering prizes and professional recognition for journalists who do good work, but to build public trust in ethical news and to illustrate how journalism is transformative; it can help people solve their problems and enrich their lives.

The 2021 winners of the FJA are:

Outstanding Investigative Reporting

First Prize

Audrey Travère, Phineas Rueckert, Paloma Dupont de Dinechin (France)
For the series *"The Cartel Project"*: *"Uncovered: The Buried Truth of Assassinated Journalist Regina Martínez"*; *"Mexican Cartels: 'The Asian Connection'"*; *"An Ocean of Guns: Mexico's Journalists in the Crossfire of the International Arms Trade"*

Second Prize

Yudhijit Bhattacharjee (US), Smita Sharma (India) for their report *"Stolen Lives: The Harrowing Story of Two Girls Sold into Sexual Slavery"*

Third Prize

Zecharias Zelalem (Ethiopia), Will Brown (Kenya) for their report *"African Migrants 'Left to Die' in Saudi Arabia's Hellish Covid Detention Centres"*

Outstanding Contribution to Peace

First Prize

Olatunji Ololade (Nigeria) for his report *"The Boys Who Swapped Football for Bullets"*

Second Prize

Haris Rovčanin and Albina Sorguč (Bosnia and Herzegovina) for their series of articles *"BIRN Fact-Check: Is the Bosnian Serb Report on the Sarajevo Siege Accurate?"*; *"Serb Chetniks' Links to War Criminals and Extremists Uncovered"*; *"Bosnian Serb Military Police Chiefs Never Charged with Srebrenica Killings"*; *"28 Years On, Families Still Searching for Missing Bosnian Soldiers"*

Third Prize

Ali Al Ibrahim (Sweden) and Khalifa Al Khuder (Syria) for their investigation and report *"Syria's Sinister Yet Lucrative Trade in Dead Bodies"*

Contribution to Civil Rights

First Prize

Sukanya Shantha (India) for the series of articles entitled *"Barred – The Prisons Project"*: *"From Segregation to Labour: Manu's Caste Law Governs the Indian Prison System"*; *"Rajasthan HC Takes Suo Motu Note of The Wire's Prison Report"*, *"Orders 'Overhaul' of Prison Manual"*; *"The Wire Impact: After 70 Years, Rajasthan Amends Prison Manual That Sanctioned Caste-Based Labour"*

Second Prize

Corinne Redfern (Italy) and Ali Ahsan (Bangladesh) for their investigation and report *"She Was Trafficked into a Giant Brothel. Now She Runs It"*

Third Prize

Monica Jha (India) for her report *"The Testimony"*

Excellence in Environmental Journalism

(No First Prize awarded this year¹)

Second Prize

Bhrikuti Rai (Nepal) for the following series of articles: *"Drawing a Line in the Sand"*; *"Permit to Plunder: How the Environment is Paying the Price for Nepal Local Governments' Greed"*; *"Environment Conservation Takes a Back Seat in the Budget"*

Second Prize

Sarah Maslin, Stephan Kueffner, James Tozer (Brazil/Ecuador) for their series of articles entitled *"Dispatches from the Amazon Under Pressure"*

Third Prize

Karla Mendes (Brazil) for her report entitled *"Déjà Vu as Palm Oil Industry Brings Deforestation, Pollution to the Amazon"*

¹ <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/journalism-media-and-technology-trends-and-predictions-2022>

¹ The first prize was not awarded to anyone this time as there was a withdrawal of the winning article after the results of the competition were finalized and verified. The second prize was shared by two teams in accordance with the results of the contest.

OUTSTANDING INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

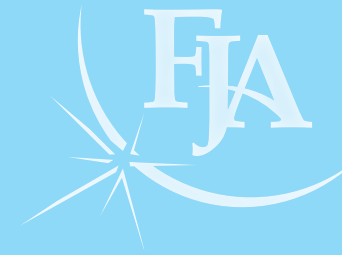
By Aidan White

The high number of entries in the category of Outstanding Investigative Journalism is a fresh indicator of the importance of news media in holding power to account.

Investigative reporting is the lifeblood of public interest journalism. It requires vital skills in research, a capacity to ask tough and awkward questions and, when done well, it delivers robust and convincing stories with the power to change lives and society. But it also requires patience, commitment, and courage.

It is unsurprising that investigative journalists who expose corruption and malpractice in public life are among the most targeted people in the news media. They face threats not just from criminals and others in the dark corrupt underworld of society, but often they come under fire from commercial and political centres of power, even in democratic societies.

The shortlist provides an abundance of great stories – extrajudicial killings in Africa during the global pandemic, an extensive international investigation in Latin America into money laundering in Venezuela, and a long overdue report on how patients were abandoned in one of the world's worst nuclear disasters, but the judges eventually agreed on three worthy winners.



OUTSTANDING INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING



FIRST PRIZE WINNER

THE CARTEL PROJECT

Uncovered: The Buried Truth of Assassinated Journalist Regina Martínez;

Mexican Cartels: "The Asian Connection";

An Ocean of Guns: Mexico's Journalists in the Crossfire of the International Arms Trade

Audrey Travère, Phineas Rueckert,
Paloma Dupont de Dinechin (France)



Audrey Travère joined Forbidden Stories as an investigative journalist in 2019. After obtaining her master degree in Journalism, she worked for the French public radio station France Inter and "Les Décodeurs," the data and investigative journalism desk at the French newspaper Le Monde. For Forbidden Stories, she participated in the Green Blood project and coordinated the Miroslava Project. For the Cartel Project in 2020, she reported on illegal drug trafficking around the world, from Mexico to Europe and Asia, and coordinated several stories.



Phineas Rueckert joined Forbidden Stories as an investigative journalist in September 2020. Before joining the team, he worked as a reporter at Global Citizen in New York City, where he reported on humanitarian issues. He holds a joint master's degree in journalism and human rights with a focus on Latin America from Sciences Po in Paris, and his previous work has been published in AFP, News Deeply and Atlas Obscura.



Paloma de Dinechin is a freelance French investigative journalist. She studied political science with a focus in Latin America before completing her master's degree in journalism at Sciences Po Paris. She worked as a freelance journalist for the Mexican media outlet Tercera Vía in the state of Guerrero in 2017. In 2018, she produced the documentary "Los niños lloran" about police violence against indigenous children in Araucanía. She joined Forbidden Stories for three years, a consortium of journalists that pursues the work of threatened reporters, in 2019. There, she coordinated and reported for the Green Blood Project, the Cartel Project, the Pegasus Project etc. focusing on Latin America. Her articles have been published in Die Zeit, the Washington Post, Le Monde, Espresso, El Faro and others.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The winners in this category are Audrey Travère, Phineas Rueckert, and Paloma Dupont de Dinechin (France) for their outstanding contribution to *The Cartel Project*, a remarkable series of reports that pays tribute to the reporting of journalists who have died in the pursuit of investigative journalism, particularly in Mexico where, over the past 22 years, 119 journalists have been killed for their work.

The Cartel Project is a unique collaboration involving 60 journalists from 25 media outlets, including The Washington Post, who came together to pursue the stories of their murdered colleagues. This assignment was coordinated by Forbidden Stories, a network of investigative journalists dedicated to continuing the work of reporters who are threatened, censored, or killed.

In this case, the group focused on the work of Regina Martínez, a journalist for the magazine Proceso who was murdered in 2012.

From all over the world, journalists worked together, piecing together the strands of her stories, tracking the international associates of Mexican criminal groups, and revealing their connections to organized crime.

The result is a relentless pursuit of truth telling, detailed research and dogged investigation. There is a detailed background to the assassination of Martínez, an expose of the international networks she was investigating and a compelling analysis of how Mexico's journalists have been caught in the crossfire of the international arms trade. This work is a major contribution, not just towards revealing corruption in public life but also as a bold statement against impunity and the targeting of journalists who hold power to account.

UNCOVERED: THE BURIED TRUTH OF ASSASSINATED JOURNALIST REGINA MARTÍNEZ

By Paloma Dupont de Dinechin. Translation: Phineas Rueckert

Forbidden Stories — December 6, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://forbiddenstories.org/the-buried-truth-of-assassinated-journalist-regina-martinez/>

On April 28, 2012, the murder of journalist Regina Martínez in the Mexican state of Veracruz marked a turning point in terms of impunity for crimes against the press in Mexico. Eight years later, Forbidden Stories and its media partners came together to pursue her investigations into the links between politicians and drug traffickers. They discovered that Martínez was preparing to publish an explosive report on thousands of people who had mysteriously disappeared in Veracruz in the months before she was killed.

His phone wouldn't stop ringing, but the instructions were clear: don't pick up. Hidden away in a Mexico City hotel, Andrés Timoteo awaited his fate. He was going to be exfiltrated to Europe under the protection mechanism for threatened journalists. The only idea in his head: get out alive.

For days, the journalist had been lying to his loved ones, telling them that he had gotten a visa to study in Paris. But in reality, he was leaving everything behind. He knew he would probably never go back to Mexico.

Five days earlier, on April 28, 2012 in Xalapa, a city in southeastern Mexico, the lifeless body of his friend Regina Martínez had been discovered. Martínez, also a journalist, had been beaten and then strangled to death in her own bathroom. Her murder was a warning sign to other reporters in the region of Veracruz, many of whom knew or knew of Martínez. For them the message was clear: you could be next. "If a journalist like Regina, who worked for a national media outlet, could be killed, it could happen to anyone," Timoteo said.

Key findings

- New revelations regarding the errors committed during the initial investigation into the death of Regina Martínez.
- The official narrative about her death was spread online through an organized disinformation campaign using bot accounts.

- Following up on Regina's investigations, the Forbidden Stories consortium revealed that former Veracruz governor Fidel Herrera embezzled public funds, a system of corruption that was passed on to his successor.
- Police in Catalonia identified Fidel Herrera's criminal links during the time he served as consul in Barcelona.
- The Forbidden Stories consortium was able to determine that just before she was killed Regina Martínez was preparing to publish an investigation into thousands of disappeared people in Veracruz.

A dogged journalist

"Everything that the local press didn't dare to publish was published via Regina Martínez," said Jorge Carrasco, the director of Proceso, the investigative weekly that Martínez worked for as a correspondent from 2000 until her untimely death in 2012.

A modest woman, born into a family of 11 children, Martínez knew Veracruz by heart — down to the smallest village. She studied journalism and began working as a reporter in 1980 for a local television station. She quickly learned that in the profession many reporters were paid by people in power to publish the news they wanted to hear.

Martínez — whose friends called her "La Chaparrita," or the "little woman," in reference to her miniscule size of 4'11" — made a name for herself as a professional reporter, always deeply ensconced in her work. Her professionalism isolated her bit by bit. A homebody, she preferred to stay in her house on the weekends chain-smoking cigarettes and tending to her plants.

Norma Trujillo, her longtime friend and a journalist in Xalapa, remembers her as a hyperactive and passionate woman.

"Her work was her life," Trujillo said. "She was really interested in social issues, human rights violations. She was close to the people. That was her superpower."

She was also a gifted, unparalleled reporter. In 2006, three years before the H1N1 crisis exploded, Martínez covered the horrible sanitary conditions of pig farms in La Gloria, the tiny village in Veracruz that was later determined to be the probable epicenter of the virus. A year later, she accused the Mexican Army of raping and killing a 72-year-old indigenous woman. Her doggedness and determination led her to investigate the excesses of power and corruption ravaging Veracruz. Fidel Herrera and Javier Duarte, who served as back-to-back governors, became central figures in her investigations.

Under the two leaders, Veracruz became the world's most dangerous place to be a journalist. Since 2000, 28 journalists have been killed in the region and another 8 disappeared — more than half of them during the 12 years Herrera and Duarte were in power.

The state's geography has long made Veracruz a sought-after region for cartels, leading to elevated levels of violence. With the longest coastline in Mexico and a major international port, the state is a strategic zone for drug trafficking. Isolated footpaths linking northern and southern Mexico make it an ideal location for the extortion of migrants from South and Central America while mountainous forests serve as the perfect hideout for drug traffickers. "El Chapo" Guzmán, the infamous head of the Sinaloa Cartel, even found refuge there when he was on the run.

Beginning in the early 2000s, Xalapa, the state capital, began to morph under the influence of drug cartels. At first this change was subtle: the low hum of 4x4 trucks in the distance. Before long, unknown men were buying up bars and casinos and ads for prostitutes covered the city's walls. The arrival of the Zetas cartel in 2008 unleashed a new wave of violence in the region.

"There were shootings in the streets at all hours of the day when Fidel Herrera was governor," Trujillo said. "The barrier between the cartels and the people in power was blurry. Police officers did nothing to stop the violence. On the contrary, they were part of organized crime."

'Band of undesirables'

Martínez regularly criticized Duarte and his predecessor Herrera for letting the state fall into the hands of the cartels. She reported from shoot-outs and revealed the true number of deaths, which the local authorities often tried to cover up. Her articles began to become a thorn in the government's side. In 2010, her name appeared on a list of critical journalists that was reportedly leaked from inside the governor's palace.

Two former high-level officials with experience in several administrations confirmed that authorities set up an underground spy unit to monitor journalists, among others. "The local government could connect to people's phones and know at any moment what they were up to," one of the officials told Forbidden Stories.

This network of political informants maintained a black book of critical journalists. Each journalist had a file containing a list of their family members, coworkers and places they frequented, in addition to their political affiliations and even their sexual preferences.

Martínez wasn't the only black-listed journalist, but she was considered to be the ringleader of a group of five incorruptible journalists who received extra attention from the authorities. One of these journalists, who preferred to remain anonymous because of security concerns, nicknamed this group "the band of undesirables" on account of the frequent government attacks against them. Martínez and the other journalists in this group would publish sensitive news simultaneously in order to throw the authorities off their trail and ensure that no one journalist was "stranded at sea."

Martínez was the most experienced and also the bravest among them. After publishing her stories, she frequently received phone calls from unknown callers

threatening to bring her to court. In the face of these threats, she began to take precautions.

Martínez, who normally took the threats against her lightly, felt the danger creeping closer to her. In an article published anonymously about half a year before she was killed, the journalist wrote that she "lived in a climate of terror."

"I lock every door in the house," she wrote. "I lock every door in the house. I don't sleep and when I go out I am always looking behind my back to make sure that there's no danger."

"La Chaparrita" lived alone and refused to let anyone into her house. Even the other journalists who made up the "band of undesirables" weren't allowed in.

Her house was her refuge — until that too was infiltrated.

In December 2011, after coming back from spending time with family during the holidays, Martínez returned home and immediately realized that someone had recently been inside her house. Everything was in order except for the bathroom. The room was filled with steam, as if someone had just gotten out of the shower. Her new soap bottles had also been opened, she told her closest friends.

Despite her friends' suggestions, Martínez decided not to go to the police.

"She was afraid, but she didn't want to make her situation public because she didn't trust in the justice system," Trujillo said.

Regina's lifeless body was found in her house four months after the break-in. A neighbor had called the police after seeing the door left open in the middle of the night. Martínez was found lying on her back in the bathroom, her head against the tub. Her body was covered with bruises and she appeared to have been strangled with her bath mat.

A bungled investigation

Twenty-four hours after she was found dead, Amadeo Flores Espinosa was announced as the local prosecutor in charge of the case.

"All leads that might clarify this unfortunate case will be explored," he said in a statement at the time.

A federal investigator from the Special Prosecutor's Office for Crimes against the Freedom of Expression, created in 2010 to fight against the impunity for journalist killings in Mexico, was also called in. The young woman in charge of the agency — FEADLE by its Spanish initials — was Laura Borbolla.

Borbolla arrived in Xalapa alongside her team of 14 officials four days after Martínez's murder.

With her young face and pink headband, Borbolla doesn't seem like the type of person who would have participated in the extradition of some of the biggest Mexican criminals, including the son of Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, the head

of the Sinaloa Cartel. Until now she had never spoken on record in detail about Martínez's case.

In front of the camera, Borbolla recounted what she saw as a colossally-flawed investigation that she believes ended with an innocent man behind bars.

"Looking back on this case puts me into a state of complete anger," she said, unprompted, at the start of the interview.

Borbolla remembers discovering a strange crime scene at Martínez's house. She said that local police in charge of the case destroyed fingerprints in the house by putting an excessive amount of revealing powder — a skill she noted is taught in the first year of criminology studies.

"NEVER IN MY CAREER HAD I SEEN SUCH AN ALTERED CRIME SCENE"

"It wasn't an accident," she said, adding: "That error didn't only happen once."

Borbolla was able to successfully reveal two sets of fingerprints that had not been found by other investigators but that were never identified.

Other objects that had reportedly been found at the scene of the crime — such as beer bottles — were not given to her to be analyzed until months later when they were handed over in a plastic bag. The bottles had been manipulated, making it impossible to perform any kind of analysis, she said.

Borbolla believes that the mishandled crime scene wasn't just the product of amateur detective work. She accuses the police chief Enoc Maldonado of willing negligence. "He would say, 'Of course, Madame the Procurer, anything you need,' and then he would turn around and tell the others to give me nothing," she said.

A perfect scapegoat

Borbolla found out — like many others in Mexico — through watching the television that a suspect had been arrested. Six months after the investigation was launched, Flores, the state prosecutor with whom she was supposed to have worked on the case, announced in a press conference that they had "successfully cleared up the murder of Regina Martínez."

The motive of the crime, he said, was a burglary. The killer, furthermore, had already confessed to Martínez's murder.

At the press conference, the suspect was brought out in handcuffs by hooded and heavily armed police officers. "Raise your head, imbecile," the officers said to him in front of the crowd of gathered reporters.

The guilty suspect was revealed to be Jorge Antonio Hernández Silva, better known by his pseudonym 'El Silva.'

According to the prosecutor, 'El Silva' went to Martínez's house along with a friend, José Adrián Hernández Domínguez — also known as 'El Jarocho' — who

local authorities said was Martínez's romantic partner. According to their version, a dispute arose and the presumed killers made her reveal where she kept her valuables. 'El Jarocho,' they said, then beat her repeatedly until she was lifeless before fleeing the scene and disappearing for good.

Borbolla never believed in this theory. The federal prosecutor said that numerous indications at the crime scene did not seem to suggest a robbery gone wrong.

"Everything was in order," she said. "If it had been a robbery, everything would have been in disarray."

A number of valuable objects, she added — such as a brand new CD player, a printer, her purse and her gold earrings — were not taken from on top of the dresser.

The day after the press conference, 'El Silva' walked back his confession, saying that it had been extracted under torture. "They had a sort of taser and they gave me electric shocks on my chest," he said in a statement to the magistrate. "I couldn't tell who did it because they had blind-folded me."

'El Silva' said that it was most likely the police who tortured him. Maldonado, the police chief at the time, refused to respond to these allegations. Contacted by Forbidden Stories, Maldonado denied all of the accusations against him. "The police staff who conducted this investigation performed their work in accordance with the law," he said.

Hernández's lawyer Diana Coq Toscanini used all of the legal recourses available to her to try to get her client out of prison, but has not been successful.

"He's 34-years-old, HIV-positive and he's going to die," she told Forbidden Stories. "He's the perfect scapegoat."

The official story

Forbidden Stories and its media partners were given access to Martínez's entire case file. According to the more than 1,000-page document, Hernández's fingerprints were never found at the crime scene. The only charge against him comes from a single eyewitness account from a neighbor who said they saw him and 'El Jarocho' going together toward Martínez's neighborhood.

Borbolla was never able to find this mysterious witness, nor was she allowed to interview 'El Silva' alone.

"We might never know who killed Regina, but I know who didn't kill her," she said.

'El Silva' was sentenced to 38 years in prison for aggravated robbery and homicide. He has since maintained his claim of innocence in conversations with his lawyer, the only person who visits him in prison. Borbolla, who stayed at FEADLE until 2015, refused to close the case.

Flores, the former prosecutor who is now a notary public in Xalapa, did not respond to multiple requests for an interview. "Everything is in the case file," he said.

The official version of Martínez's death given by the Veracruz authorities — that of a crime of passion — quickly spread across social media. An article from the site El Golfo Veracruz was widely circulated on Twitter. "The PGJ [local prosecutor] clears up the homicide of Proceso correspondent Regina Martínez," the title read.

Among the Twitter accounts that shared this story, Forbidden Stories discovered a number of fake accounts. Partnering with "The Disinformation Desk," a Barcelona-based organization that specializes in disinformation, Forbidden Stories was able to identify 190 so-called 'robot' or 'bot' accounts that automatically shared the El Golfo Veracruz article. These bot accounts also shared other favorable coverage of Governor Javier Duarte.

Forbidden Stories was able to identify the owner of El Golfo Veracruz as Othón González Ruiz, who was also a consultant for Governor Duarte at the same time. Interviewed by Forbidden Stories about the article in question, González, who calls himself a journalist, said that the case was not so black-and-white.

"For me, there was never a clear resolution of the affair," he said. González denied any implication in — or knowledge of — the bots.

Jorge Carrasco, Martínez's colleague and now the director of Proceso, also witnessed the effort to construct an official narrative about her death. After Martínez was killed, Carrasco was put in charge of covering her case for Proceso. After several round trips to Veracruz and months of reporting, Carrasco published an article on March 14, 2013 that shed light on the inconsistencies of the investigation in Veracruz.

"The way that the truth had been constructed felt like a bad screenplay," he said.

Immediately after publication, Carrasco began to receive anonymous threats by text message. "Stop investigating," the texts read. "If you continue, they will come after you."

Carrasco also received threatening text messages containing his home address. The threats had the intended effect. The director of Proceso was forced to stop the investigation and none of his colleagues ever picked it back up.

Local authorities, rather than treating Martínez's journalistic work as a lead, instead began to investigate Martínez's own network of friends. Many of them were fingerprinted and questioned, making them feel as if they were the murder suspects rather than witnesses. Authorities asked them who the journalist liked to hang out with and about her sexual orientation. Not a single question, they said, was about her journalistic work.

Carrasco, speaking to Forbidden Stories eight years later, said that he never had any doubts that Martínez was killed for her journalism.

"We wanted the authorities to investigate her journalistic work as a lead, and for the people who might have been bothered by her publications to be identified," he said.

The corrupt governors

Many of Martínez's articles shook the political class in Veracruz. Three weeks before her death, Martínez and a colleague at Proceso published a damning article about supposed links between two former Veracruz officials — Reynaldo Escobar and Alejandro Montano — and the Los Zetas cartel. The article listed all of the assets Montano had acquired through ill-gotten means. The next day, around 3,000 copies of Proceso mysteriously disappeared from the shelves of kiosks across Veracruz.

Forbidden Stories and the 60 journalists who make up The Cartel Project investigated the leads of Martínez's reporting and traced the international networks of individuals she wrote about, starting with Fidel Herrera and Javier Duarte, the two former governors who ran Veracruz for more than a dozen years.

The 2010 election of Javier Duarte marked the beginning of a reign of terror for journalists. Including Martínez, 16 journalists were killed during the six years of his mandate alone. Contacted by Forbidden Stories, Duarte, for his part, responded with a Tweet from prison, where he is currently serving a nine-year sentence: "I have never censored anyone's freedom of expression or freedom of the press," he wrote.

Despite the clear danger, Martínez investigated Duarte's lack of financial transparency and spiralling debt in the state of Veracruz during his mandate.

Duarte resigned from his position in 2016, after being accused of illicit enrichment and embezzlement. An international arrest warrant was released against him and he fled the country by helicopter, landing in Guatemala. Six months later, he was arrested and extradited to Mexico. The investigative news outlet Animal Politico discovered 400 shell corporations that he reportedly used to embezzle public money. In 2018, he was sentenced to nine years in prison for money laundering and criminal association. The sentence was accompanied by a \$3,000 fine — a laughable amount considering the millions of dollars he is accused of having embezzled.

"I've seen governors over my time involved in embezzlement and violence but he stands head and shoulders over all of them," said one senior DEA official with extensive tours in Mexico.

In her articles, Martínez regularly pointed her fingers at the heritage left over for Duarte by his predecessor Fidel Herrera, a bigwig in the PRI, the political party that has almost exclusively governed Mexico for 70 years.

Herrera had amassed considerable wealth, even for a state governor, according to Proceso: a private jet, 22 cars, including an armored vehicle, ranches, a hotel, a yacht. Herrera says that he was able to gain all of this wealth through nothing more than dumb luck, which he said he had had "since his childhood." He won the lottery in consecutive years: winning \$6.8 million in 2008 and \$3.6 million the following year.

A perhaps more likely source of his incredible wealth was a system of corruption known in Mexico as the "diezmo," or the "tenth." This kickback system may have

helped the governor to embezzle large amounts of money from public contracts.

According to a former official who served under multiple administrations in Veracruz, contractors who obtained public contracts — for example to build a road or highway — would pay 10 percent of the value of that work indirectly to Herrera through his associates. That same source confirmed having personally delivered multiple suitcases full of money destined for Herrera to his associates.

“It could be at the airport, at someone’s house, at a cafe, a hotel, in a different city,” the former official said, “wherever he ordered me to go.”

The DEA confirmed this vast system of corruption. “Herrera would take money from everyone. He was always into a kickback,” said one senior DEA official with extensive tours in Mexico. “In oil, horse-racing, mining, heavy equipment.

Despite multiple requests for comment, Herrera refused to respond to questions from Forbidden Stories.

‘Zeta 1’

Martínez didn’t only look into Herrera’s embezzlement schemes. The journalist also investigated his connections to organized crime.

In 2011, Martínez wrote that at least half of the Herrera administration had been infiltrated by the Zetas cartel. Several months after her death, a photo published in the local press showing Herrera riding horses alongside Francisco ‘Pancho’ Colorado Cessa — a businessman later tried in the US for laundering money for the criminal group — rekindled suspicions of Herrera’s ties to the Zetas. The Mexican news outlets that published the photo later received physical and legal threats from a journalist close to Herrera.

The 2013 court case against Colorado in the state of Texas revealed more details about the arrangement between the two men. During the trial, former Zetas’ accountant José Carlos Hinojosa said that he transferred \$12 million to Colorado in order to finance Herrera’s 2004 gubernatorial campaign. Mexican media later revealed that the Herrera administration gave out 22 public works contracts to a company that Colorado used to launder the Zetas’ money. Scott Lawson, the FBI agent in charge of the investigation, said at the trial that in exchange for helping get Herrera elected, the Zetas would be allowed to freely operate their drug trafficking operations in Veracruz.

In Mexico, no investigations were ever launched against Herrera. Herrera, for his part, publicly denied any involvement with organized crime in a television interview. “My hands are clean,” he said. “I never received a single illegitimate cent for my campaign.”

Security experts, however, contend that the relationship between Pancho Colorado and Fidel Herrera wasn’t purely anecdotal.

“Fidel was the boss of the bosses,” said Jorge Rebolledo, a security expert for a number of foreign governments and companies who spent more than 10 years in Veracruz. “The Zetas couldn’t have operated in Veracruz without his permission and he used them to maintain order in some parts of the state.”

Arturo Fontes, a retired FBI agent who spent 28 years investigating drug trafficking networks and money laundering in Mexico and Colombia confirmed this.

“The Zetas called Fidel Herrera ‘Zeta 1’ because he was the one who ran the state,” he said.

The consul and the criminals

Despite suspicions of corruption and possible links to organized crime, Herrera’s political career was largely unaffected. In 2015, he was named Mexican consul to Barcelona by President Enrique Peña Nieto.

In the Catalan capital, the designation of a former governor suspected of collusion with drug cartels was met with disapproval. The chief criminal investigator of the Catalan police, “Mossos d’Esquadra,” Toni Rodríguez, revealed to Forbidden Stories and its media partners that his team had begun collecting information about the links between the consul and money launderers in Barcelona.

At the center of this criminal network was Bernardo Domínguez Cereceres, a businessman who owned a publishing house that was investigated in 2018 for money laundering. Contacted by Forbidden Stories, the businessman admits to having known Herrera and having visited him on multiple occasions — even inviting him to his wedding — but denied any commercial relationship with Herrera.

“He never made any sort of commercial proposition,” Cereceres said. “He only asked me to edit his books, that’s it.”

The Catalan police also looked into Herrera’s relationship with Simón Montero Jodorovich, a member of Barcelona’s underworld who stands accused of running one of the most active drug trafficking rings in the area and laundering money for consuls. Although Jodorovich and a number of his associates were arrested in 2019 for money laundering, Herrera was able to slip through the cracks. The former governor left his position in January 2017, effectively ending the Catalan police’s research.

Since returning to Mexico, Herrera still has never been sentenced. The former governor did not respond to any of the emails sent to him by Forbidden Stories. His son, Javier Herrera Borunda, told Forbidden Stories that his father’s health condition made it impossible for him to respond to the questions we sent.

At 71-years-old, he has become untouchable. Despite a number of investigations brought against him since 2010 none have ever bore fruit. Nor has the former governor, or his successor, ever had to answer for the thousands of people who disappeared in Veracruz during his mandate.

Mexico's mass grave

Through several matching testimonies, Forbidden Stories was able to determine that before her untimely death, Martínez was getting ready to publish an explosive investigation into Veracruz's disappeared and had even located the location where some of them may have been buried. The journalist had published a few lines about this topic in a separate piece for Proceso, but the in-depth article she was preparing in the months before her death never saw the light of day.

Preferring to stay anonymous out of fear for his own life, a former high-level official explained that the disappeared people Martínez had been investigating were individuals the government and cartels wanted to get rid of. Among them were business owners who refused to submit to cartel extortion and young women that drug traffickers found to their liking and who were never able to return to their homes.

"Finding these bodies was like searching the sand for turtle eggs," the source said. "You would scratch the surface and find bodies upon bodies."

The official estimated that between 24,000 and 25,000 people disappeared in Veracruz during the mandates of Herrera and Duarte. Official statistics from 2015 put that number at about 5,000. According to the official, "the instructions were that this information never become public."

In 2015, after the discovery of a number of mass graves and the continued silence of the authorities, journalist Marcela Turati began to map the clandestine graveyards containing bones, skulls and other human remains.

"It seemed crazy that the state was not keeping track of the clandestine graves in Mexico," she said.

For a year and a half, Turati and her team discovered on average two new hidden graves per day. In total, she counted 2,000 across the country. Mexico, she found, was becoming an open air cemetery. For the journalist, this count was just the beginning.

"In some regions, the prosecutors were still in cahoots with the cartels," she said. "They preferred to hide the bodies and not be transparent about the statistics."

According to individuals close to Martínez, the reporter had begun to investigate Mexico's disappearances in 2009. At the time, nobody imagined the sheer scale or horror of the situation in Mexico. The family members of disappeared people held out hope that their loved ones had been simply kidnapped, and were not buried ten feet under. Oftentimes fear of speaking out prevented them from going to the authorities for help.

Despite the danger, Martínez started to look for the bodies of the disappeared. She told Andrés Timoteo, the journalist who fled Mexico after Martínez's death, that she had been looking for the bodies in public morgues, but to no avail. She asked him to come with her to speak with police sources.

"It was like going into a lion's den," he thought. "I told her that neither myself nor anyone else wanted to go there with her."

Martínez didn't stop there. In July 2011, she interviewed Father Solalinde, who ran an inn for migrants attempting to reach the United States through Mexico. The priest recounted a number of testimonies from migrants who had made it past the Zetas cartel, who kidnapped them and asked for ransom money before allowing them to continue heading north. If they refused or couldn't pay, they were executed and their bodies piled up in clandestine graves in the desert.

At the end of 2011, several months before her murder, Martínez's investigation had begun to pick up steam. 'La Chaparrita' had confided to a friend that she had embarked upon the most dangerous investigation of her career. She believed that she had determined where some of the disappeared had been buried. This time, however, it wasn't the cartels that made them disappear, she believed, but the authorities themselves.

Martínez contacted photographer Julio Argumedo. Argumedo, who had never spoken publicly until now, said that he remembers going along with Martínez to a number of mass graves, including one at Palo Verde, near Xalapa.

"The graves were so full that the bodies were overflowing," he said.

As Argumedo took pictures, Martínez spoke to the gravediggers to try to find out where the bodies were coming from. According to her calculations, the number of bodies buried in these mass graves had increased by 1,000 percent between 2000 and 2012.

According to the photographer, Martínez's investigation was very near publication. "I didn't know the exact date, but I knew that she was getting ready to publish very soon," he said.

In the years that followed Martínez's assassination, the biggest scandal in Mexico was uncovered bit by bit. Loved ones whose family members had disappeared organized brigades that scanned the ground for human remains. Starting in 2014, the Mexican authorities had no option but to follow suit. Thousands of mass graves were subsequently discovered across the country.

Today in Palo Verde, where Martínez investigated nearly 10 years ago, a man continues to look for traces of a mass grave. He is looking for his daughter Gemma, who disappeared in 2011 at the age of 29. After much insistence, the authorities admitted to him that her remains had been found in a plastic bag that had been deposited at Palo Verde. But they refused to dig around the entirety of the three-and-a-half acre plot of land where his daughter is almost certainly buried, along with many others.

"I have nowhere to put flowers for my daughter, to speak to her," he said. "It's like I'm rowing against the current. The authorities have no reason to dig. They just want to cover each other's backs."

In 2016, mass graves were found in the backyard of the Veracruz state police academy. Arturo Bermúdez, who served as public security secretary under Duarte, has since been put on trial. He's accused of having headed a death squad implicated

in the death of at least 15 people. He was conditionally freed in 2018 and is currently awaiting trial.

Even today, reporting on mass graves in Mexico remains dangerous. Turati and her team had to stop their on-the-ground investigation abruptly after receiving death threats. “They told me that if we continued, we wouldn’t get out alive,” she said.

On November 9, 2020, Israel Vázquez, a reporter for El Salmantino, was killed as he investigated the discovery of human remains in the central Mexican state of Guanajuato.

A high-level government official who was privy to sensitive internal conversations said that the mass graves could have been the subject that led to Martínez’s death. “She was a journalist who stirred things up,” he said. “I think that the mass graves could have been the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

“Disappearances are a very sensitive subject,” he added. “It’s not a crime like a homicide where the person is killed and it’s over. With a disappeared person, you don’t know whether they’re dead or alive. So the families keep putting pressure on the government and the government doesn’t like that bad press.”

A presidential promise

It’s impossible to know how far Martínez had gone in her investigation because her materials were stolen on the morning of her death. Borbolla, the federal prosecutor, noted that “they didn’t steal all of her work affairs, but rather her computer and two cassette tapes with her latest interviews.”

According to one of her friends, killing Martínez was a way to bury the truth. “By killing her, they burned down the library of Babel,” he said.

In 2015, the investigation into her death was officially closed by local Veracruz authorities. Asked about her case by Forbidden Stories at his November 17 press conference, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador committed to reopening the case if he could find a legal basis for doing so — a promise that may not do enough to heal Veracruz’s wounds.

Eight years after Martínez’s death, the cloak of silence is still palpable. Her friends preferred to meet with us at our hotel — looking right and left, fearful of being spied on. All of them were threatened after the journalist’s death and remain afraid to this day.

Andrés Timoteo has still not stepped foot back in Veracruz, where now the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG by its Spanish initials) has replaced Los Zetas. Journalists in the region — and across Mexico — avoid naming specific cartels, instead opting to refer to them as “organized crime.” Many journalists in Veracruz won’t say the names of Fidel Herrera and Javier Duarte out loud. Duarte, currently in prison, could be freed as early as 2022 thanks to a lightened sentence.

Each year, this silence is broken on one day. On April 28, the anniversary of Martínez’s death, her friend Norma Trujillo organizes a march in front of the governor’s palace — a building Martínez was never allowed to enter. And every time organizers put up a plaque in the central square, renaming it “Regina Martínez Square.”

Each year, the authorities take down the plaque. Even in her death, Martínez continues to disturb.

Jules Giraudat (Forbidden Stories), Arthur Bouvart (Forbidden Stories), Nina Lakhani (The Guardian), Dana Priest (Washington Post), Antonio Baquero (OCCRP), Veronica Espinosa (Proceso) and Lilia Saúl (OCCRP) contributed to this article, among others.

This investigation is part one of “The Cartel Project,” an unprecedented collaboration between 60 journalists and 25 media outlets around the world aimed at continuing the work of their murdered colleagues in Mexico.

MEXICAN CARTELS: “THE ASIAN CONNECTION”

By Audrey Traverso

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From Sinaloa to Shanghai, the disastrous fentanyl business still slips through the cracks.

Mexican cartels are now full-fledged multinational businesses. Their main expertise? Synthetic drugs. In recent years, the very potent opioid fentanyl has appeared as the new drug of choice. In order to prosper and stay one step ahead of the authorities, Mexican cartels need partners in every corner of the world. From a small laboratory in India to the metropolis of Shanghai, Forbidden Stories and its partners investigated this supply chain, where everyone shares a responsibility in the cartels' success, and the ensuing violence in Mexico.

Key findings

- Forbidden Stories got access to the “BlueLeaks”, a massive internal data leak from American law enforcement agencies published last June and cross-checked information from two unreleased DEA report.
- The Sinaloa cartel dominates the fentanyl market in the United States and uses complex networks to smuggle the very powerful fentanyl opioid to the U.S.
- With the help of C4ADS, Forbidden Stories uncovered a potential network of companies supplying drug precursors to the Sinaloa cartel.
- A testing operation coordinated by Forbidden Stories shows that Chinese manufacturers purposefully circumvent to laws to send chemical precursors used to produce fentanyl to Mexico.
- Online investigation and groundwork revealed the operation of a Chinese company that may be supplying drug precursors to Mexican cartels.

Jorge A. posed proudly in front of the five-star hotel Radisson Blu Hotel Shanghai New World in January 2016. The photo's caption set the tone for his business trip. “Busy working,” he gloomily wrote on Facebook. Jorge A. works for Corporativo Escomexa, a Mexican import-export company that specializes

in the trade of tequila, and agricultural and chemical products. He was thousands of kilometers from his home in Culiacan, Mexico and dressed for a bitter cold winter day. The photo got hundreds of likes. His mother, apparently touched, commented, “Blessings my son...Take care of yourself and succeed in your efforts...I love you! Kisses!!” The whole trip was carefully documented on Facebook—from a badly cropped selfie to an intimate portrait of his crab dinner.

Two associates accompanied Jorge A. on this frenetic Asia business trip and appeared in many of his photos. Over several weeks, this team from Mexico strung together stopovers: after Shanghai followed Hong-Kong, Japan, and finally, India. There, they joined Manu Gupta, an Indian businessman who they had previously met in Hong Kong. Gupta is the director of Mondiale Mercantile Pvt Ltd, a company whose missions are as diverse as they are vague. Aside from its export-import business, Mondiale Mercantile also offers legal advice for customs procedures. The company operates in a variety of sectors: chemical and pharmaceutical industries, agri-food products, sand, and even machinery.

Two years later, the true nature of Gupta's business came to light. On September 25, 2018, Indian authorities arrested Gupta, along with a Mexican associate and an Indian chemist. The three partners were caught in a lab in Indore wearing masks and gloves and in possession of fentanyl—a powerful synthetic pain reliever. Fentanyl is a heavily abused drug that causes thousands of overdoses across the world. Gupta and his associates intended to ship the fentanyl to Mexico on a commercial flight, hidden in a suitcase. In a December 2018 internal report from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) obtained by Forbidden Stories, Manu Gupta—currently imprisoned and awaiting trial along with the two other suspects—is described as “an alleged associate of a known Sinaloa Cartel member, who obtained precursor chemicals used to manufacture illicit drugs in Mexico that are subsequently distributed in the United States.” Forbidden Stories tried to reach out to Manu Gupta but didn't receive any reaction.

By cross-checking information from “BlueLeaks”, a massive internal data leak from American law enforcement agencies published last June, Forbidden Stories and its 25 international partners were able to investigate this case in India, which sheds light on the strategies employed by Mexican cartels to dominate the lucrative market for fentanyl. As murderous as they are, Mexican cartels use the same strategies as any other business—namely, a quest for profitability, outsourcing, and continuous adaptations to reflect changing international regulations. All of this for a multinational criminal organization.

Fentanyl: the new golden goose

A classified DEA report from October 2019 published in “BlueLeaks” soberly summarizes the situation: “Law enforcement data analyzed from 2018 through the end of February 2019 indicates that the Sinaloa Cartel has established itself as a prominent producer and trafficker of Mexico-based fentanyl into the United

States.” Despite the arrest in 2016 of Joaquin Guzman, the infamous cartel leader known as “El Chapo,” the DEA acknowledged that the drug business is still running at full capacity.

Across the border in the US, the drug has claimed thousands of lives. In 2018, fentanyl and similar synthetic drugs accounted for nearly half of the 67,367 drug overdose deaths in the United States. This marks a 10% increase from 2017 — an epidemic equivalent to the heroin crisis from 2000-2010. Back then, heroin (made by extracting morphine from the poppy plant) was wreaking havoc in North America. And Mexican cartels were reaping the benefits. In 2016, 90% of heroin sold in the United States originated in Mexico.

Now, the cartels are looking forward. And the future is synthetic. Northern Mexico, known as the “golden triangle” because of its marijuana and opioid cultivation, is transforming under the influence of the Sinaloa cartel. In the mountainous terrain around Culiacan, poppy fields are being replaced by laboratories. “Due to government restrictions, [the Mexican army destroyed poppy crops] we began the transition to synthetic opiates, which were cheaper,” a chemist hired by the Sinaloa cartel told Forbidden Stories.

In his clandestine laboratory nestled among the trees near Culiacan, the chemist decrypted the business. “It’s one of the most attractive drugs for cartels. It brings in more profits. You only need one pill per person. So if we transport 10,000 pills, then it’s 10,000 people who are going to take them.” In a kitchen dish, he stirred white powder with a plastic spatula. This powder is used to make fentanyl pills. Stamped with the letter “M,” these pills are supposed to imitate oxycodone — a highly addictive opioid. “I know my pill is very powerful and that it will create a dependence,” the chemist said. “And that’s what I want. When a consumer takes one and then needs another dose.”

Fentanyl’s profitability is extraordinary. Manufacturing this highly powerful drug requires only a minimal workforce and infrastructure. In a 2019 report, the DEA estimated that a fentanyl pill costs only \$1 to produce. Each pill is then resold in the US for \$10 or more. It’s a jackpot for Mexican cartels, with the Sinaloa cartel leading the charge.

A well-oiled machine

Until very recently, China exported a vast part of the fentanyl sold in the US. “You had individuals importing fentanyl from China, pressing the tablets in their basement and then putting those online for retail, on the darknet, or connecting up with a local distributor to sell those on the street,” explained Bryce Pardo, a Policy Researcher at RAND and expert in drug policy.

But stricter regulations imposed internationally and in China, in 2017 and 2019, changed the game. Shipping fentanyl directly became riskier. Cartels saw their opportunity to enter into the market as intermediaries. “The profit margins they get out of it is by synthesizing plus refining the product, as it were, into its consumable form,” explained

Falko Ernst, senior Mexico analyst at International Crisis Group in Mexico.

With its well-established network, the Sinaloa cartel already had a solid infrastructure to expand into synthetic drugs. One of the DEA memos released through “BlueLeaks” described a highly organized circuit that included warehouses at the border and distributors across the United States. Further down, the memo detailed one of the cartel’s techniques for sourcing precursors, mentioning the involvement of “an individual based in Culiacan, Sinaloa, Mexico,” who served as an independent seller. His mission was to buy “purchase additional large quantities of fentanyl precursor chemicals directly from China” on behalf of the cartel.

But who is the man that the DEA is referring to? When Forbidden Stories asked the American agency, they declined to answer. “Generally speaking, we do not confirm or deny [whether] persons or entities were or are targets of our investigations.” Forbidden Stories has found many troubling coincidences about Jorge A., the Mexican businessman based in Culiacan, Sinaloa, who posed alongside Manu Gupta and his Mexican associates in 2016. An intelligence source in India told one of Forbidden Stories’ partners that Jorge A. is believed to be under investigation by U.S. authorities. And some of the import-export company’s activities that he works for raise questions. With the help of C4ADS, an NGO specializing in data analysis, Forbidden Stories drew on open-source information that revealed a network of entities connected to this company. The complexity of these networks is difficult to unravel.

Companies with suspicious activities

Online, Corporativo Escomexa, the company of which Jorge A. is the official auditor — and its “innovation manager” on LinkedIn — has highlighted products that can be used in the manufacture of methamphetamine. You can find a trace of it on its website but also on different B2B platforms.

An analysis of Corporativo Escomexa’s trades revealed multiple suspect transactions from September to October 2016. Over the course of one month, the company received a collection of pharmaceutical equipment from India—notably a pill press machine. They also obtained 676kg of lactose monohydrate powder, microcrystalline cellulose, and copovidone, all of which are used to make narcotic substances, including fentanyl.

Although Corporativo Escomexa’s most recent activities on the trade platform Panjiva were recorded in October 2016, C4ADS was able to identify a large network of businesses still active today that are connected to the Mexican company in various capacities. “This network appears to be quite extensive and may include dozens of companies operating in both Mexico and the United States. Some of these companies also only have trade data for short periods of time before a new or different company within the network picks up primary shipping responsibility,” explained Michael Lohmuller, senior analyst at C4ADS. One such company, Corporativo y Enlace Ram, appears to share an address, an agent, and import similar pharmaceutical products. The two companies share suppliers as well. According

to available online data, Corporativo y Enlace Ram received a shipment in June 2016 from Mondiale Mercantile—the company owned by Manu Gupta, the Indian businessman arrested for trafficking fentanyl to Mexico and the same man seen with Jorge A. during his business trip. In addition, there are pictures of one of the managers in charge of Enlace Ram next to Jorge A and one of his associates, also present during the Asian trip.

“While no overt indications of criminal activity were uncovered, the existence of import-export ties and domestic commercial relationships maintained by Corporativo Escomexa SA de CV and its linked entities may warrant further inquiry or offer indications of the *modus operandi* of trans-Pacific fentanyl or methamphetamine trafficking networks,” told Lohmuller. When asked about this information by Forbidden Stories, Jose R., one of the two managers of Corporativo y Enlace Ram, answered that he did not know Jorge A., Escomexa or “this Indian supplier”. As for Jorge A., whom we wished to ask questions, the businessman never responded to our requests for an interview.

“That’s one of the main myths...the popular image of a cartel as this perfectly integrated organization,” Falko Ernst noted. But outsourcing to independent networks that specialize in logistics or money laundering is a common practice for cartels, including Sinaloa. “They’re the actual sort of backbone of this whole business,” Ernst explained. “Cartels’ brand names fade away eventually. All of those networks stay in place because they’re much less visible. They’re much more clandestine in their operations. They don’t go public and they’re much more shielded from this sort of thing in short term/medium term overhauls and volatility of the market.”

In a business plagued by corruption, Mexican cartels readily exploit the gray zones. “If you look at impunity rates in Mexico, there are about 90 percent. So chances are you get away with things...and you can invest through impunity. So a lot of legal firms, a lot of actors use legal facades...[they] use the impunity or the incentives... and just make a lot of money by getting involved in criminal markets,” Falko Ernst explained. In October 2019, 15 customs agents were dismissed from their jobs. Of those, six were said to have colluded with organized crime groups. This is just one example of the widespread corruption.

On the other side of the globe, Chinese producers of precursors adopted similar strategies to avoid getting caught—balancing on the edge of the law, always one step ahead of authorities.

Always one step ahead

Because of the potential for abuse, sales of precursors are highly regulated. The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) has a “Red List” of substances under international control. For fentanyl, the two substances are “NPP” and “ANPP.”

Unfortunately, there are almost endless possibilities to circumvent these controls by creating other nonregulated precursors. The final substance is slightly altered, but its effect is the same. “I’ve heard a chemist once say the precursor game with fentanyl

is very tricky. Eventually, if you really want it to solve this, we’re going to have to ban carbon. And clearly, we can’t ban carbon!” said Bryce Pardo. This is known as the “rebound effect.” Less-controlled precursor chemicals similar to NPP and ANPP are synthesized in China, ready to be shipped and exploited. “China has the human capacity. You’re talking about chemists that have PhDs, synthetic chemistry and organic chemistry that know how to manufacture these things very easily.”

To combat this phenomenon, the INCB placed a number of substances on a list, named ISSL, of products “to monitor.” This list identifies products that are not necessarily controlled substances but are frequently used illegally. In theory, the INCB — a nonbinding entity—can rely on companies’ goodwill and inspections by authorities. In reality, the extent of the problem is revealed with a simple Google search.

By entering keywords for the precursors used in fentanyl, the social network Pinterest comes up in just a few clicks. Nestled between users’ wedding mood boards and decoration inspiration are posts from Chinese companies offering fentanyl precursors for export—many directed towards Mexico. At the top of the page is “4-AP,” a substance on the ISSL list that recently became controlled in the US. According to the DEA, 4-AP only has one purpose: to produce fentanyl. Under the cover of a false Mexican identity, Forbidden Stories contacted three companies, all of which offered us substances known to be used in the opioid synthesis. These offers all came without having to disclose our identity or provide a company name.

One of the sellers was particularly quick to help us, offering multiple substances similar to 4-AP that were still available for sale. The seller proposed using a “special line” to Mexico. After sending us a series of photos and videos with closeups of the precursor, a crushed white powder, the seller told us more about this famous “special line.” She wrote, “We bought off some people at the Mexican customs, we trusted them very much, and they helped with all our shipments to Mexico. So you don’t have to worry about customs.” In another conversation, the seller explained that one of their “big” clients in Mexico had his own line and used cargo planes to deliver precursors. “When the goods arrived in Mexico, he would use his own connections to pick up the goods.” In her own words: “What are some things in this world that money cannot do?”

Bryce Pardo sums it up: “Our drug control laws are based on a very old system where everything is based on the UN single convention from 1961. These were really focused on three plants: cannabis, coca and poppy. Things have just changed so dramatically in the last ten, fifteen years, ever since China really got online with its pharmaceutical sector to the point where we just cannot keep up with the scheduling.”

To evade tightening regulations in China, some Chinese nationals are capitalizing on the opportunity to relocate parts of their business to countries with less strict monitoring, notably India. In another internal report from the DEA, which goes into detail about Manu Gupta’s arrest, the agency wrote that Gupta’s company was working with an individual based in China. In 2019, the DEA reported, “It is believed

this Chinese national continues to send precursor chemicals to Mexican cartels for the manufacture of methamphetamine, fentanyl analogues, and its derivatives, as well as finished fentanyl.” When asked about this information, a DEA spokesperson told Forbidden Stories that he did not know nor had he seen the report in question.

Richest Group, “almost” respectable

“There is a force that can promote the development of history. There is a power that can change the world. Richest Group changes the world with its products and services.” In a clip that feels more like a Hollywood movie trailer than a corporate video, Richest Group—a Chinese import-export company for chemical products and food additives—unveils itself with an epic music backdrop. At first glance, the company run by Kevin Dai appears impeccable. Its main subsidiary, Shanghai Ruizheng, is verified on the Chinese site Alibaba and rated four out of six diamonds. The company prides itself in exporting all over the world, highlighting prestigious partners, including Samsung, LG, and Canon.

A deeper Internet search reveals part of the company’s real business. Listed on Shanghai Ruizheng’s Alibaba boutique in October 2019 were several known uncontrolled precursors for fentanyl. One of its sites offered until recently 4-AP, the fentanyl precursor now a controlled substance in the United States. Forbidden Stories even found the Facebook profile of one seller, Alia Yang. She openly listed her affiliation to the group and offered the same precursors for fentanyl. To boost visibility to Facebook users in Mexico, the seller geotagged several promotional posts with Mexico locations. “New batch, enough stock, don’t miss it,” she wrote in one of her posts from May 2019.

On Richest Group’s website was a graphic of the company’s organizational structure, until a few weeks ago. At the center, nestled between two Chinese subsidiaries, was Mondiale Mercantile Pvt Ltd, Manu Gupta’s company. Again, the Indian businessman accused of working with the Sinaloa cartel and who the DEA suspects collaborates with a Chinese associate. The US DEA never answered our questions about Richest Group.

When contacted by a partner of Forbidden Stories, the head of Richest Group, Kevin Dai, denied any activity related to fentanyl production. “Our company has not and will not produce fentanyl or any substances related to it because we follow regulations.” He said we should ignore Alia Yang’s Facebook posts. According to Dai, Yang left the company several months before this November 10 phone call. Dai added that he has never done business with Manu Gupta’s company, Mondiale Mercantile Pvt Ltd, despite placing the Indian company at the center of his group’s organizational chart. According to Dai, the collaboration was never successful. “They said they could help us expand into the Indian market and asked whether we’d like to work with them... so we put the photos on our website to make it look like we are a big company,” Mere hours after this exchange, Manu Gupta’s company disappeared from Richest Group’s organization chart. On her side, Alia Yang completely wiped her Facebook profile, even changing her name. The promotional publications are no longer visible.

On November 17, Richest Group officially deregistered the branch of the group that operated in the offices that Forbidden Stories had visited a few weeks earlier.

In the face of organized crime: perpetual defeat

Faced with the trafficking of precursors, China seems to be accumulating problems and struggling to effectively control the country’s massive pharmaceutical industry. “Up until a couple of years ago, they had something like eight different authorities that were involved in the design of regulations over the pharmaceutical and chemical industries. It was sometimes unclear who had regulatory oversight,” explained Pardo. Efforts have been made these last few years to better control the market, with new regulations. In the particular case of Richest Group, the China National Narcotics Commission (CNNC) told Forbidden Stories that they reminded the company to be careful about the chemicals they sell, that some of them could be used by foreign drug gangs to produce narcotics. But despite these recent changes, some of the rules seem to be inadequate for the magnitude of the problem. For example, according to Pardo’s information, when performing a “surprise inspection,” inspectors must give 72 hours of warning. “If you’re manufacturing fentanyl, you’re going to clean up your act and switch everything so that it looks like you’re manufacturing baby formula or ibuprofen,” Pardo added.

It’s just one step from manufacturing fentanyl to new psychoactive substances. According to Bryce Pardo, all it takes is a simple Google search. “Now, with everything being online, it’s very easy for a chemist in China to go on to the United States Patent Office website or Google search and to just find new new drugs that were explored for medical purposes.” This trend was confirmed in the latest UNODC report on the subject: “More recently, there seems to be a shift in the synthetic opioid market towards newer and more varied chemical classes of substances.” According to the report, this is organized crime groups’ response to tightening regulations.

Several months before this investigation was published, Forbidden Stories contacted a phone number listed online as belonging to Alia Yang. At the time, Yang was no longer working for Kevin Dai, but for a similar company: Shanghai Talent Chemical — founded by a former Richest Group employee. A certain “Lucky” responded to us, but the WhatsApp avatar was a photo of Yang, and her name was listed. In an earlier conversation with Forbidden Stories, Yang had confirmed that the number belonged to her. But this time, “Lucky” wasn’t selling a precursor for fentanyl. Instead, she had a new product, Xylazine, a horse tranquilizer. This powerful drug is not a controlled substance. It is sometimes mixed with fentanyl and traces of this tranquilizer has been found in an increasing number of overdoses in the US.

Nothing bothered the saleswoman. When we told her that we were worried about arousing suspicion, she offered alternative names for the veterinary tranquilizers. “Some clients like to ask to use Creatine. Or potassium cinnamate. Or white pigment. It is up to clients.”

François Ruchti (RTS), Sandhya Ravishankar (The Lede), Michael Standaert (South China Morning Post) and Michael Lohmuller (CAADS) contributed to this article.

AN OCEAN OF GUNS: MEXICO'S JOURNALISTS IN THE CROSSFIRE OF THE INTERNATIONAL ARMS TRADE

By Phineas Rueckert

Forbidden Stories — December 9, 2020

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<https://forbiddenstories.org/an-ocean-of-guns-mexicos-journalists-in-the-crossfire-of-the-international-arms-trade/>

At least 86 of 119 journalists and media workers killed in Mexico since 2000 have been killed by firearms. Yet very few cases lead to an arrest and even fewer to a conviction. Over a months-long investigation, Forbidden Stories examined the flow of weapons into Mexico, analyzing thousands of declassified documents obtained by the NGO Stop US Arms to Mexico. These documents, along with the new report “Deadly Trade,” published today, suggest that in addition to weapons trafficked illegally across the US border, weapons produced overseas and sold legally to the Mexican Army may also be used to commit human rights violations.

Key findings

- At least 86 out of 119 journalists and media workers killed in Mexico since 2000 were killed by firearms.
- Between 2008 and 2018, the Mexican Army sold 205,395 European and Israeli firearms to local police, including to police with a documented history of human rights violations and collusion with cartels.
- European companies that sell weapons to Mexico may have also bypassed EU export laws, which require end-user certificates to be signed for all weapons exports to Mexico, according to a new report.
- NGOs estimate as many as 60 percent of weapons trafficked across the US border into Mexico were first imported into the US.

Around 6:00 a.m. on November 9, 2020, Luis Vallejo received a call from a municipal police officer. “Human remains,” the officer told him, had been found in Villa Salamanca 400, a neighborhood in the city of Salamanca, Mexico.

A crime reporter for PuntoCero Noticias, Vallejo has become accustomed to reports like this in recent years, as the levels of insecurity and violence in Guanajuato,

a state in central Mexico, have risen to previously unseen levels.

Usually reporters in this part of Mexico arrive at crime scenes in groups of at least two to minimize risk. He dialed his friend and colleague Israel Vázquez, a reporter for the local paper El Salmantino, to verify whether the information was true or false. But Vázquez didn’t pick up.

Vallejo waited for 10 or 15 minutes before hopping into his truck and driving to Villa Salamanca 400. Along the way, he noticed an ambulance driving in the other direction.

When he arrived at Villa Salamanca 400, neighbors had gathered around the scene of the crime. “Are you Luis — Luisito — the friend of Israel?” they asked him. “They just shot him.”

Vallejo was shocked. “Everything came crashing down on me,” he told Forbidden Stories over the phone from Salamanca.

The two reporters were life-long friends. Vázquez — known for his careful, diligent reporting — had inspired Vallejo to become a journalist. His energy was contagious, Vallejo said. The 31-year-old was a doting son, active in the community, the father of two young girls.

Vázquez had arrived at the scene of the crime before the police. As he was preparing to broadcast live on Facebook, at least two vehicles drove by and armed men shot him eight times. As he was lying on the ground he was shot another three times. Police found bullet casings from two guns — 9 millimeter and .45 caliber — at the crime scene. An unfired armor-piercing 5.56 caliber NATO bullet that Vallejo found at the scene of the crime was produced by a company headquartered in the US state of Minnesota. Vallejo believes that this bullet is most likely related to an incident several days earlier in the same area.

Vázquez was taken to the hospital. Hours later, he died from his injuries, becoming at least the seventh reporter killed in Mexico in 2020 — the most dangerous non-conflict zone to be a journalist.

On November 15, the state prosecutor announced that two men had been arrested for his murder. According to news reports, they were detained alongside seven other presumed members of a local criminal group. At the scene of the arrest, authorities recovered an arsenal of high-caliber weapons from around the world, according to unofficial sources cited in local news reports, including a US-made DPMS Sportical AR-15, an Israeli IWI Tavor 21 assault rifle, a German Heckler & Koch HK-416 assault rifle, and a modified Huglu XR 7, a semi-automatic shotgun from Turkey. The prosecutor has not yet confirmed whether the two men were arrested at the same time as the weapons were confiscated.

A criminal investigation for “premeditated murder” and “crimes committed against a working journalist” is currently underway.

A wave of journalist deaths

Vázquez was the third journalist killed in Mexico in little over a week. On November 2, Jesús Alfonso Piñuelas was gunned down while riding his motorcycle in the state of Sonora. Several days earlier, in Ciudad Juárez, television presenter Arturo Alba was shot dead as he left his shift at the TV show Telediario.

All of them had reported on corruption or crime in some of Mexico's most violent states. And all of them were killed by firearms.

Nearly 80 percent of the journalists killed in Mexico in the past four years have been killed by firearms, including six of the seven killed in 2020. Overall, at least 86 of 119 journalists and media workers killed in Mexico since 2000 — about 72 percent — have been killed by firearms, a number that has risen over the years, according to Forbidden Stories' analysis of more than two decades of reports by the watchdog organization Committee to Protect Journalists.

Starting from the murder of journalists, many of them with firearms, Forbidden Stories traced how lethal weapons end up in Mexico. In partnership with Global Exchange, Stop US Arms to Mexico and other NGOs in Europe and Israel, Forbidden Stories and its media partners were given access to an exclusive report, published today, and declassified Mexican Army data that suggests an alarming lack of oversight on legal weapons sales to Mexico from abroad, as well as potential violations of European export laws. Multinational companies headquartered in Germany, Belgium, Italy and elsewhere have shipped hundreds of millions of Euros worth of guns, parts and ammunition, with some ending up in Mexican states with a history of human rights violations and documented collusion with criminal groups. Yet these multinational companies have rarely faced consequences for their arms sales to Mexico, thanks to weak international regulations on firearms exports and impunity in Mexico that makes tracing firearms used to commit crimes back to their origins nearly impossible.

A step ahead of the government

Águila picks up one of the guns littered around the small wooden shack. It's a Heckler & Koch P30L pistol made in Germany — his favorite.

Nearly a dozen others sit nearby amidst spare parts, work tools and an unopened beer. Águila — who describes himself a farmer and a father of four, but who carries a walkie-talkie used by members of the Sinaloa Cartel to communicate securely — indicates them one by one: two AR-15 semiautomatic weapons produced in the US; an Italian Pietro Beretta pistol; an Izhmash rifle from Russia; a Czech .40 caliber; a 12 gauge shotgun, also Russian; a .22 Winchester rifle; a gold-plated Llama pistol made in Spain; and a rifle from a company based in the state of Massachusetts.

The weapons belong to a criminal group within the Sinaloa Cartel.

Journalists from Forbidden Stories and Die Zeit met with Águila at a gun repair shop

in the outskirts of Culiacán, the capital of Sinaloa state. The gun repairman who says he works for the Sinaloa Cartel on a "freelance" basis explained how cartels are able to easily procure an impressive array of high-caliber international weapons, enough to match the firepower of the Mexican authorities.

Criminal groups and local rancheros alike come to Águila and his business partner Búho — a camo-clad man who rarely speaks — to have their guns repaired or modified. Here, semi-automatic weapons are converted into automatic weapons — which they call "ráfaga" ("burst"). Parts are added or taken away. Old pieces are replaced.

In Culiacán, the Sinaloa Cartel and other criminal groups, which he calls "la mafia," are able to obtain almost any weaponry they want, he explained, either through weapons trafficked across the US border or through corrupt local police who resell seized weapons on the black market. This is the case throughout Mexico — in Sinaloa, Guerrero and Guanajuato, among other states, he said.

"The cartels are always packing more than the government," he said. "They always have to be one step ahead."

European weapons in Mexican cartels

It's not just weapons produced by US companies making their way into the hands of organized crime groups in Mexico.

Between January 2010 and September 2019, 1,925 Beretta (based in Italy), 1,365 Romarm (Romania), 700 Glock (Austria), 130 FN Herstal (Belgium), and 57 Heckler & Koch (Germany) weapons with serial numbers were recovered at crime scenes in Mexico, according to official Mexican Army documents accessed by Stop US Arms to Mexico through a freedom of information request and shared with Forbidden Stories and its media partners.

Military-grade European weapons have been documented in the hands of cartels and criminal organizations across the country.

Security guards working for El Mini Lic, the son of a senior lieutenant in the Sinaloa Cartel, who Mexico's Special Prosecutor for Attention for Crimes Against Freedom of Expression (FEADLE) presumes to be the intellectual author of the murder of journalist Javier Valdez in 2017, carried a German-produced Heckler & Koch MP5 machine gun, according to Forbidden Stories's open-source photo investigation. This same model has been sold to Mexican police in more than half of Mexico's 32 states including Sinaloa, according to the declassified documents shared with Forbidden Stories.

Forbidden Stories also documented high-caliber weapons produced by Europe-based companies in the firefight between the Sinaloa Cartel and state and federal police following the attempted arrest of Ovidio Guzmán — the son of famed kingpin Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán — in October 2019. These included the US-version

of an FN Minimi machine gun originally manufactured by FN Herstal in Belgium; an M72-LAW rocket launcher produced by Nammo, a company headquartered in Norway with a US subsidiary in Arizona; and a Russian AK-47. The weapons research organization Armament Research Services identified pistols from Beretta and Glock, companies based in Italy and Austria respectively, among the weapons held by cartel hitmen.

Águila, in Sinaloa, said that the Minimi has become a cartel favorite, along with high caliber weapons produced in the US such as Barrett sniper rifles and M16 machine guns.

Other cartels have obtained military grade weaponry from abroad. Images from the attempted assassination of police chief Omar García in Mexico City in June 2020 by the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generacion show a Belgian FN SCAR 17 assault rifle sitting in the bed of a pickup truck.

“This is absolutely not normal to see,” said Bart Libaut, a Belgian researcher who monitored and analyzed the social networks of Mexican criminal organizations for the Cartel Project. “We’re looking at military equipment.”

Some of the European weapons flooding the market in Mexico have also been documented in the killings of journalists in Mexico.

José Armando Rodríguez Carreón who worked for El Diario de Ciudad Juárez, was killed with 10 nine millimeter bullets in 2008. Laura Angelina Borbolla, a former official at FEADLE, maintains that the journalist was killed with a Beretta pistol. Jaime Guadalupe González Domínguez was killed on March 3, 2013 in Ojinaga, in the northern state of Chihuahua. According to news reports, the killers fired 18 shots at the journalist with a Five-SeveN, a gun produced by Belgian company FN Herstal that’s colloquially known as the “mata-policías,” or “cop-killer.”

“Almost all of the journalists in Mexico are killed with foreign weapons,” Borbolla told Forbidden Stories.

Lethal legal sales

The wave of journalist deaths comes as part of a steady rise in violence across Mexico that many attribute, at least in part, to the government’s own security policy. Since the mid-2000s the Mexican government has armed itself to the teeth with high-caliber weaponry in an arms race against criminal groups, a militarized policy that has only seemed to add fuel to the fire, critics say.

Weapons sold legally to these same authorities may have been used against human rights defenders, journalists and civilians, according to a new report by Global Exchange, Stop US Arms to Mexico and other NGOs, published today.

Stop US Arms to Mexico gave Forbidden Stories access to thousands of pages of declassified documents showing weapons purchased by the Mexican Army (SEDENA) — the country’s only licensed firearms importer — and resold to states across Mexico.

According to these documents, between 2006 and 2018, at least 108,000 Beretta (Italy), 68,000 Glock (Austria), 23,000 IWI (Israel), 19,000 Heckler & Koch (Germany) and 1,000 FN Herstal (Belgium) weapons were sold to state and local police in Mexico.

European weapons have been regularly sold to states with a documented history of human rights violations, enforced disappearances and suspected collusion with drug cartels, these documents show.

EU export laws for weapons sales may have also been bypassed, according to the report. The Mexican army is required to submit end-user certificates to exporting companies showing the final users of all weapons exports. Between 2008 and 2018, 44,293 weapons were reported in end-user certificates released to Stop US Arms in response to a freedom of information request and shared with Forbidden Stories. During that same time, however, receipts from weapons sales from the Mexican Army to state and local police show 205,395 European and Israeli firearms — more than four times as many.

One-thousand-sixty-four FN Herstal firearms were sold to Mexican police between 2009 and 2013, yet just 847 weapons were reported in end-user certificates during that same time period. Not a single end-user certificate was submitted to Beretta between 2013 and 2019. Meanwhile, receipts sent from the Mexican Army to local and state police show sales of at least 28,156 Beretta weapons between 2014 and 2018.

Veracruz — the Mexican state with the highest number of journalists killed since 2000 and where at least 15 human rights violations by “death squads” trained at the state’s police academy were committed during the six-year governorship of Javier Duarte — has regularly received weapons and ammunition from a number of European companies.

Senior US law enforcement officials said that the many killings and disappearances in Veracruz during Duarte’s time as governor, including of local journalists, could not have taken place without his complicity with the drug cartels and corrupt police forces believed to have carried them out.

“I’ve seen governors over my time involved in embezzlement and violence but he stands head and shoulders over all of them,” said one senior DEA official with extensive tours in Mexico.

End-user certificates filed by the Mexican Army show Benelli, a weapons manufacturer based in Urbino, Italy, that’s part of the Beretta Group; FN Herstal in Belgium; and Glock in Austria, among the companies who knowingly sold weapons and ammunition to Veracruz during this time. Police in Veracruz were also sold at least 8,219 Beretta pistols, rifles and machine guns between 2006 and 2018, though no end-user certificates appear to have been signed.

Between 2010 and 2016, local and state police in Veracruz are suspected to have carried out at least 202 enforced disappearances, including the disappearance and

presumed murder of Christian Téllez Padilla — for which the UN, in a first, declared Mexico guilty nearly 10 years later — and the disappearance of five students who were pulled over by armed state police and presumably handed over to members of Los Zetas in a well-known case called “Tierra Blanca.”

“In most cases where we have documented enforced disappearance, there is always this collusion between the state authorities and organized crime and there is always the exchange of weapons between these two entities,” Erika Guevara-Rosas, the Americas director for Amnesty International, said.

Yet international weapons manufacturers are equally undiscerning when it comes to selling to states with a long track record of human rights violations, according to John Lindsay-Poland, the director of Stop US Arms to Mexico.

“They clearly know that weapons are going to states like Guerrero and Veracruz and Tamaulipas and Chihuahua that have long, well-documented histories of corruption and human rights abuses and impunity,” he said. “In our view, they’re culpable.”

In the state of Guerrero, municipal police involved in the enforced disappearance of 43 students near the city of Iguala on September 26, 2014 carried a number of weapons produced abroad, including firearms produced by Heckler & Koch and Beretta. A chemical analysis of guns carried by Iguala police conducted on September 29, 2014 and shared with Forbidden Stories, confirms that at least seven Heckler & Koch and 19 Beretta firearms had been recently fired.

The flow of international weapons to this state did not stop there. Israeli Weapons Industries has repeatedly sent weapons to Guerrero, including at least one shipment of firearms in March 2015, less than half a year after the students were forcibly disappeared by Iguala police.

Neither IWI nor the Israeli Department of Defense wished to be interviewed for this story, citing Israeli export control laws and regulations that prohibit sharing information about specific export licenses.

“All of IWI’s defense export activities are in full compliance with the Israeli export regime and are backed with the proper export and marketing licenses as required by the law,” a spokesperson for IWI wrote in an email.

An institutional problem

State involvement in human rights abuses in Mexico appears to be systemic and involve every level of the military and police, according to human rights experts.

Between the end of 2006 and 2013, the NGO Human Rights Watch documented 249 disappearances committed in Mexico. In 149 of those cases — more than half — they found “compelling evidence that state actors participated in the crime, either acting on their own or collaborating with criminal groups.”

This included, they note, every level of security forces: the Army, the Navy, as well as federal, state and municipal police.

The Mexico Violence Resource Project estimates that nearly half of threats against journalists came from authorities, versus 5 percent by criminal groups.

Yet these authorities have nearly unlimited access to guns and ammunition with relatively little oversight.

The Mexican Army, which is responsible for all weapons imports and reselling of weapons to local and state police, has also been implicated in human rights violations.

Of the 204 “serious human rights abuses” brought to Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission between January 2007 and June 2017, roughly three-quarters of those were committed by the Army and Navy, according to a freedom of information request cited in the Stop US Arms report released today.

In the state of Jalisco alone, more than 350 human rights violations complaints were brought against the Army between 2006 and 2017, including the 2010 disappearance of six people in Jilotlán de los Dolores, which has been documented by Human Rights Watch.

In October, General Salvador Cienfuegos, who served as Defense Minister under President Enrique Peña Nieto, was arrested in the US on drug trafficking charges. The charges were later dropped and Cienfuegos was allowed to return to Mexico to be investigated. During the six years he was at the Army’s helm, more than 100,000 weapons were sold to police in Mexico.

“The evidence that Cienfuegos was involved in organized crime lends a whole new aspect to this issue,” said Lindsay-Poland. “SEDENA, after all, concentrates enormous authorities over firearms in Mexico — acquisition through imports, production, use in operations, sales to police, sales to citizens, confiscation of illegal weapons, keeping weapons registry, issuing licenses.”

“When someone at the top is involved in organized crime, the problem is institutional,” he added.

SEDENA did not respond to questions sent by Forbidden Stories and its partners.

‘Lost’ and ‘stolen’

Weapons sold legally to state and local police also risk being diverted into criminal networks, Forbidden Stories has found.

Between 2000 and 2015, more than 20,000 weapons were lost by or stolen from federal, state and local police, according to Mexican Army data released in response to a freedom of information request. In Guerrero and Tamaulipas, two of the most violent states in Mexico, 20 and 10 percent of weapons, respectively, were lost between 2006 and 2017. Other states with a documented history of collusion with cartels, journalist killings, and enforced disappearances — such as Veracruz, Jalisco and Sinaloa — also lost hundreds of weapons during that time, or about 5 percent of weapons sold to each state.

Presumably, at least some of the weapons that are lost or stolen end up in the hands of cartels and criminal networks.

“In Mexico, it’s super easy to get a weapon,” Vania Pigeonutt, the cofounder of Matar a Nadie and a journalist who works in the state of Guerrero, said. “Even the police, the army can sell you a weapon.”

Priscila Pacheco, a lawyer whose father, journalist Francisco Pacheco Beltran, was shot to death in Guerrero in 2016 echoed this.

“In reality a lot of those weapons are supposed to be exclusively used by the military and public security forces,” she said. “So then who is putting them in the hands of organized crime?”

Nonetheless, local and state police that regularly lose weapons nonetheless face no consequences, according to Lucía Chávez, a researcher at the human rights NGO Mexican Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights.

“The rule is that SEDENA can’t sell more weapons [to a state] than there are police officers [in that state],” she said. “But what we’ve been told — although we don’t have data on this — is that in reality there are no consequences for police who lose or have a weapon stolen.”

A profitable business and a blind eye

Multinational weapons companies based in Europe have meanwhile raked in millions of Euros in arms sales, capitalizing on the Mexican Army’s desire for military-grade weapons and ammunition.

Arms Trade Treaty reports from between 2015 and 2020 show direct weapons exports from a dozen European countries to Mexico, including Italy, Belgium, Austria, Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia, France, Portugal, Turkey, Switzerland, Finland and the UK.

Between April 2015 until April 2020 the Belgian arms manufacturer FN Herstal, which is owned by the Walloon government, sent 54 separate shipments to Mexico for a total value of almost 50 million USD, according to trade data accessed by Forbidden Stories.

“If you compare the graphic of homicide rates in Mexico with graphics of licenses approved in Belgium this coincides quite obviously,” said Mattijs van den Bussche, an activist at Vredesactie (Peace Action) in Antwerpen. “This is not to imply that Belgian weapons cause the homicide rates, but it does mean that the Belgian government — or the Walloon government in this case — doesn’t consider the security context in Mexico.”

Elio Di Rupo, the Minister-President of Wallonia, did not wish to respond to an interview with Forbidden Stories, but a spokesperson affirmed in an email that “since 2014, in light of the involvement of Mexican police in the murder

of 43 students, export licenses are only given to the Mexican Army and not to the police.”

He added that Minister-President’s office is “particularly attentive” to licenses for weapons shipped to Mexico.

Contacted by Forbidden Stories, an FN Herstal representative wrote in an email that it is “not in our company policy to issue comments to the press.”

“We confirm to you that FN Herstal monitors in the strictest respects its control regulations as applicable in this field,” the representative added.

The company declined to comment on specific exports or end-user certificates.

Beretta, in Italy, also sent more than 50 million Euros worth of weapons to Mexico between 2007 and 2018, including SCP 70/90 automatic assault rifles, ARX 160 assault rifles and GLX 160 grenade launchers.

Italy counts among the European countries with the strictest export requirements for firearms and other conventional military weapons. The country signed on to the international Arms Trade Treaty in 2013 and has ratified the EU Common Position 2008/944 CFSP, which puts into place a number of requirements for international weapons exports, including denying licenses if weapons risk being used for internal repression or violations of international humanitarian law.

But because Mexico is not considered to be engaged in an internationally-recognized armed conflict, exports are nearly always approved, according to Giorgio Beretta (no relation to the company), an expert at the Permanent Observatory for Small Arms (OPAL). He said that UAMA, the Italian export authority, has never released or disclosed any denied exports — to Mexico or elsewhere.

“Since UAMA has a legalistic approach [...] UAMA tends to consider the risks but in the end it will allow the export,” he said.

UAMA did not respond to multiple interview requests.

Beretta and other subsidiaries based in northern Italy, like Benelli, play an important economic and cultural role, making it harder to mount campaigns against them, activists say.

“It’s not only a matter of economic impact,” said Francesco Vignarca, an activist at the Italian Network for Peace and Disarmament. “The cultural part is huge. You know, the kindergarten is named after Beretta, the school is named after Beretta. Everything — the parks to the flowers in the park — exist because Beretta sponsors them.”

Even the local Catholic priest in Val Trompia, the suburb of Brescia where Beretta is based, must be approved by the Beretta family, he added.

“We regret to inform you that we are not interested to release interviews and/or comments regarding the below issue,” a representative for Beretta wrote in

an email responding to a request for an interview from Forbidden Stories and its media partners.

Even countries that sell relatively few weapons to Latin America — such as the United Kingdom — have seen exports to Mexico increase in the past decade and a half.

According to statistics from Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT), UK export licenses to Mexico increased from 58 in 2008 to 350 in 2017. Mexico is listed as a “priority market” for arms exports for the UK. In early 2015, just months after the 43 students were forcibly disappeared in Guerrero, the UK ambassador to Mexico told a journalist for The Guardian: “In the long term we would aspire to become a player in Mexico’s military procurement.”

While most of the UK’s weapons exports were for large-scale military equipment, the UK also shipped 4 million pounds of small arms to Mexico during that time. This also included three open export licenses, which typically last for about five years and don’t limit the number of exports that can be made, meaning the number of weapons exports could be higher.

“That’s 4 million pounds too many in our opinion,” Andrew Smith, an expert at CAAT, said.

Other European companies have responded to European export laws by moving production to the US. In 2020, Sig Sauer, a fully German-owned brand headquartered in Eckernförde, exported more than 50,000 pistols to Mexico’s newly formed National Guard from its factory in New Hampshire. The company had already shipped more than 10,000 pistols from the US to Mexican police between 2011 and 2019, according to end-user certificates submitted to the US State Department.

Sig Sauer, Glock, and IWI have all exported weapons directly to the Mexican Army from their US subsidiaries, according to State Department documents accessed by Stop US Arms to Mexico and shared in the new report.

A porous border

All of the international companies that sell weapons to Mexico — including Beretta, Glock, FN Herstal and IWI — also sell weapons to the United States, the primary source of illegal weapons trafficking to Mexico. Many of them have established subsidiaries that produce weapons in the US for American consumers, such as FN America and IWI US.

Mexican authorities insist that most of the European weapons trafficked across the border and ending up in the hands of cartels are first sold in the US, according to a high-level official in Mexico’s Foreign Secretary office.

“In Mexico, there are illegal weapons that come from the United States with

a European patent,” the official said.

Estimates for the number of firearms trafficked across the US border to Mexico vary, with some suggesting that as many as 213,000 weapons illegally make their way into Mexico every year.

The proportion of high-caliber, military-style weapons flowing across the border has increased since 2004, when the US congress under President George W. Bush allowed a bill banning the sale of assault rifles — signed in 1994 by his predecessor Bill Clinton — to lapse, Cecilia Farfan Mendez, the cofounder of the Mexico Violence Resource Project, told Forbidden Stories.

Weapons are typically bought by so-called straw purchasers — legal buyers who purchase automatic or semi-automatic weapons at gun shops — and then either walked, driven or flown across the border, where they enter illicit markets.

Officials in the US and Mexico call this “ant trafficking,” according to Thomas Chittum, assistant director for field operations at the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF).

Trace data from ATF suggests that about 70 percent of weapons recovered at crime scenes Mexico between 2014 and 2019 came from the US. But many of these weapons were first imported to the US by international manufacturers before being trafficked across the border.

As part of an ongoing project, the Violence Policy Center, a think-tank based in Washington D.C., has analyzed more than a decade of federal court documents accessed through the online court filing system PACER showing firearms trafficking destined to Latin America. Of the roughly 6,400 weapons in this database — shared exclusively with Forbidden Stories and its media partners — just under 60 percent of weapons where the origin was identifiable were first imported into the US before traffickers attempted to bring them to Mexico and South and Central America, suggesting the actual number of European weapons circulating in criminal networks in Mexico could be higher than previously thought.

Nearly 10 percent of the weapons in the Violence Policy Center dataset came from one company alone: FN Herstal. Hundreds more were produced in Europe, including by Romarm in Romania, Glock in Austria, and Izhmash in Russia.

Weapons from Europe are imported legally into the United States by companies like Century Arms, explained Kristen Rand, a researcher at the Violence Policy Center. They are then sold to gun shops across the country where they are bought by straw purchasers and trafficked across the border.

Cheap AK-style brands like the Romanian-produced WASR-10 are particularly popular with drug cartels in Mexico, she said. Yet, these weapons continue to be imported into the US with relatively few restrictions, thanks to a loophole in the 1968 Gun Control Act that allows for these weapons to be imported as hunting and sports equipment and not as military weapons.

“We have this completely unregulated, out of control industry that is wreaking havoc on our neighboring country,” Rand said. “The drug trafficking organizations can threaten the authority of the Mexican government because they are able to get all of the weapons they need.”

Despite advances, impunity kills

Chittum, at ATF, said that energy for fighting weapons trafficking to Mexico was at a decade-long high, noting that the past year was “the most significant firearms tracking activity I’ve seen in probably 10 years.”

In Europe, lawmakers called for stronger coordination on end-user controls in a September report approved by the European Parliament.

But on the ground, Mexican journalists and human rights activists note that while weapons exports and trafficking are both concerning, a bigger problem is the lack of proper investigation into violence.

The question of firearms is “secondary” to that of impunity, Vania Pigeonutt, at Matar a Nadie, said.

“The origin of the violence is in the production of weapons, but the real key is the impunity,” she said. “It can be with a .22 caliber, it can be with a ‘cuerno de chivo’ [AK-47], it can be with an AR-15, many types of pistols, but the result for us is that there is no investigation, we don’t even know who gave the order [to kill].”

Only 6 percent of all homicides in Mexico between 2010 and 2016 were resolved. For journalist killings, that number was only slightly higher — about 10 percent.

Investigations into arms trafficking in Mexico are also rare. Between 2010 and 2018 just 122 weapons trafficking cases were concluded, according to the Mexican Attorney General’s Office’s response to a freedom of information request by Forbidden Stories. Another 539 were launched between January of 2016 and May of this year, with a peak in 2018.

Despite the arrest of the two presumed hitmen in Guanajuato, local journalists have continued to call for greater clarity on the circumstances behind the killing of Israel Vasquez, as well as potential intellectual author or authors of the crime and the weapons used in his murder.

Protesters marched across Salamanca in the days after the journalist was shot to death. The initial government response — blaming Vázquez for reporting early in the morning in a dangerous neighborhood — only seemed to aggravate the situation.

“The people of Salamanca are demanding justice for Israel — for the loss that he left as a brother, son, father and friend,” Vallejo said. “We don’t want him to be just another cold case.”

Additional reporting by Veronica Espinosa (Proceso) in Guanajuato, Jules Giraudat (Forbidden Stories) and Amrai Coen (Die Zeit) in Sinaloa. Interviews contributed by Dana Priest (The Washington Post), Nina Lakhani (The Guardian) and Mathieu Tourlière (Proceso).

SECOND PRIZE WINNER

STOLEN LIVES: THE HARROWING STORY OF TWO GIRLS SOLD INTO SEXUAL SLAVERY

Yudhijit Bhattacharjee (US), Smita Sharma (India)



Yudhijit Bhattacharjee is a contributing writer at National Geographic and a contributor to The New Yorker, The New York Times Magazine and other publications. He is also the author of the New York Times bestselling thriller, *The Spy Who Couldn't Spell*, and *The Dinner Set Gang*.



Smita Sharma is photojournalist based in Delhi who has documented gender issues, sexual crimes and human trafficking in the Global South through long-form visual narratives. Smita is a TED fellow and an IWFM reporting fellow. She is the recipient of Amnesty International Media Award for photojournalism in 2021. Smita received the Indian Of The Year award, Exceptional Women of Excellence award by Women Economic Forum, Las Fotos Advocacy award and One World Media award for her short film *Rebels with a Cause*. Smita is committed to representing people with dignity and uses visceral and beautiful images to bring her subjects out of the world of faceless statistics and emphasize their humanity. Her work has been published in various places like National Geographic Magazine, The New York Times, BBC World, WSJ, TIME, Channel 4 amongst many others and exhibited and shown globally including at the UN Headquarters in New York.

EDITOR'S NOTE

In second place, the judges nominated Yudhijit Bhattacharjee (United States), and Smita Sharma (India) for their work *Stolen Lives: The Harrowing Story of Two Girls Sold into Sexual Slavery* which provides an exceptional insight into the problem of child sexual exploitation.

This is not a sensationalist review of a problem that blights the lives of thousands of young girls in India, but rather a story told with care and sensitivity through the authentic voice of two girls from a brothel in Mahishadal in West Bengal. The girls display courage and resilience, and powerful imagery reminds us that harrowing though their story is, they are survivors with hope for the future.

STOLEN LIVES: THE HARROWING STORY OF TWO GIRLS SOLD INTO SEXUAL SLAVERY

By Yudhijit Bhattacharjee, photographs by Smita Sharma

National Geographic — September 28, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/article/stolen-lives-harrowing-story-of-two-girls-sold-into-sexual-slavery-feature>

Trafficking minors for sex is a multibillion-dollar industry that spans the globe. One region in India and Bangladesh has emerged as a hub of this illicit trade.

Photo: After a fight with her mother, R. left her home near Kolkata, one of India's largest cities. At a train station, she met some men who tricked her and took her to a red-light district in the city. "They were laying a trap for me," she said. Many girls who are trafficked in their teens spend the rest of their lives in brothels. R. was rescued before she was sold to one. "I just got lucky," she said. She was sent to a shelter called Sneha run by Sanlaap, a nonprofit that prepares victims to rebuild their lives. R., who is now an adult, and some of the other girls in this story were photographed at Sneha.

Before they were sold to the same brothel, Sayeda and Anjali were typical teenagers, growing up in similar circumstances a few hundred miles apart: Sayeda in the city of Khulna in Bangladesh, and Anjali in Siliguri in West Bengal, India.

They nurtured the aspirations of teenagers everywhere—to get out from under their parents, to find love, to start living out their dreams. Both were naive about the world and couldn't have imagined the cruelties it had in store.

Raised in a tiny two-room house in a squalid neighborhood, Sayeda spent much of her childhood on her own. Her mother would rise early and leave for the day to clean shops in New Market, one of Khulna's commercial districts. Sayeda's father was a cycle-rickshaw driver, ferrying passengers for a pittance. A struggling student, Sayeda dropped out of school before her teens, despite her mother's admonishments that trouble would befall her.

Outgoing and free-spirited, Sayeda was quick to smile and made friends easily. What she loved most was to dance. When her parents were out, she would watch dance sequences from Hindi and Bengali movies on television, copying the moves. Sometimes, when her mother caught her, she would scold Sayeda. "Our neighbors didn't like that she was always singing and dancing," her mother told me.

Sayeda was beautiful, with a delicately chiseled face and almond-shaped eyes, and liked wearing makeup. She began to help out at beauty salons, learning about hairstyles, skin treatments, and cosmetics. Worried about the attention she was attracting from boys, her parents married her off when she was 13. Child marriage is common though illegal in much of South Asia. The husband Sayeda's parents chose was abusive, and she went back to her family.

When Sayeda returned home, she implored her mother to let her enroll in a dance academy. "I'll be able to perform in shows and make some money," she said. Her mother relented, and Sayeda began dancing at weddings and other events. That's when Sayeda became romantically involved with a boy who used to visit the academy. He told her he would take her to India, where she could earn a lot more as a dancer. Sayeda, imagining a future filled with promise, decided to run away with him.

Photo: a girl who's face is in shadow

Anjali was 16 when she became involved with a man who enticed her to run away from her home in Siliguri, a city in India's West Bengal state, with the promise of marriage. Instead, he and an accomplice sold her to a brothel in Mahishadal, near Haldia, an industrial town. She was forced to have sex up to 20 times a day until she was rescued. For a year and a half, she lived at Sneha among girls she said understood her anguish. Now an adult, she's living at home with her mother, who would like her to marry, but Anjali vows not to fall in love again. "I feel extremely lonely," she said. "I miss my friends at the shelter."

Photo: a girl wearing a light-purple top, her hair silhouetted against a patterned wall

When she was 12, S. left her home in Narayanganj, Bangladesh, with a family acquaintance who promised to find her a job in Dhaka. She was handed over to a man who trafficked her to West Bengal, then sold her to a brothel in Mumbai. S. was enslaved for two years before police freed her and sent her to a shelter. Six months later she met a woman who said she'd take S. back to Bangladesh but instead sold her to a brothel in Namkhana, in West Bengal. After she was rescued again, S. stayed for a while at Sneha. She's now an adult.

Anjali, a graceful girl with bright eyes and high cheekbones, had similar reasons for wanting to leave home. Her family lived in a slum, in a makeshift dwelling. Raised primarily by her mother, who worked as a maid, she and her sister were so poor they fought over the few school supplies they could afford. By 13, Anjali had dropped out of school—the norm for many children from poor families across India. She started working at a factory, packaging snacks. Reserved by nature, Anjali didn't have many friends. At home, her confidant was a baby goat she'd adopted, which followed her around, nibbling at her food during mealtimes and climbing into bed with her at night.

At the factory, Anjali met a young man who charmed her. Anjali knew her mother was on the lookout for a prospective groom for her, but she decided she wanted to be with the man she'd come to like. So, one evening in October 2016, during Durga Puja,

a Hindu festival, Anjali put on a bright new salwar kameez, slipped out of the house, and took a bus to a train station to meet up with her boyfriend. To Anjali's surprise, he was with another young man, but she boarded a train to Kolkata with them.

Searching frantically for Anjali that evening, her mother gathered that she'd been planning to elope for some time. In the days before Anjali disappeared, the neighbors had heard her speaking to her goat, saying: "Who is going to take care of you when I'm gone?"

Trafficking is a 'growth industry'

Of all the depravities that afflict humankind, among the most shocking is the enslavement of children for sexual gratification. Sayeda and Anjali, who told their stories to me, are just two of countless victims. As with most criminal enterprises, determining the scale of this atrocity is impossible, but it's clear that sex trafficking of minors is a multibillion-dollar industry that spans the globe. *(Here's why we're telling this story.)*

According to a frequently cited study by the International Labour Organization, more than a million children were victims of sexual exploitation in 2016. Because detecting child prostitution is difficult, the report conceded that the actual number was likely far higher. The most recent Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, issued by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, found that the number of victims of trafficking reported by countries rose from fewer than 15,000 in 2010 to nearly 25,000 in 2016. The statistics represent only a fraction of the actual victims; most are never detected. The increase may reflect improved enforcement, but researchers believe it more likely reflects a grimmer reality—that human trafficking, including the trafficking of children for prostitution, is on the rise.

Photo: one young woman and one girl standing hand in hand and looking at a passing train

M., who is now 18, waits for a train with her cousin in South 24 Parganas, a largely poor district in West Bengal with a high incidence of trafficking. A man M. met in a class sold her to a brothel in Delhi. She managed to call her father and was rescued by police with help from a nonprofit called Shakti Vahini. "This incident is a dark episode in my life," M. said. "When I came home, I was scared and ashamed. But I am not afraid anymore."

"We have 70 million refugees in the world at the moment. We have displaced people and increasing economic disparity," says Louise Shelley, a professor of public policy at George Mason University and author of *Human Trafficking: A Global Perspective*. "This is a growth industry."

The scourge of child sex trafficking has left virtually no country untouched, but some parts of the world have emerged as hubs of this illicit trade. One that has been especially ravaged is the region where Sayeda and Anjali grew up—the Indian state of West Bengal and its neighbor Bangladesh, which once were a single province known as Bengal. Divided by a 1,400-mile international border but bound by

a common cultural and linguistic heritage, the two areas share the misfortune of seeing thousands of girls sold into sexual slavery every year.

The actual toll is unknown, but numbers reported or estimated, however imperfect, point to a high volume of trafficking. According to India's National Crime Records Bureau, West Bengal accounted for almost a quarter of the 34,908 cases of human trafficking reported in the country from 2010 to 2016, a staggeringly large share for a state that makes up about 7 percent of the country's population. In 2017 alone, 8,178 children were reported missing from West Bengal, nearly an eighth of India's total that year. A significant number of girls among them were almost certainly sold to brothels. The picture might be worse for Bangladesh: One government estimate suggested 50,000 girls are trafficked out of the country to India, or through India, every year—a figure that doesn't include girls sold into prostitution within Bangladesh.

West Bengal is as much a destination as a source for girls who are trafficked into prostitution. The long border with Bangladesh and the 60 miles adjacent to Nepal include many unguarded stretches, allowing traffickers to smuggle girls into the state. Some end up in the red-light districts of Kolkata, a metropolis of more than 14 million people. Others are sold to brothels elsewhere in India—Delhi, Mumbai, Pune. (In India, commercial sex work is legal, but many activities associated with the trade, such as pimping or running a brothel, are illegal, as is engaging children in prostitution.) Girls trafficked into the country are sometimes then trafficked to the Middle East and elsewhere. For most of the girls ensnared by this sinister enterprise, there is no escape. Many resign themselves to a life of prostitution.

Photo: a police woman at her station at a train station

Police women keep vigil at Siliguri's New Jalpaiguri station. Train stations can be unsafe for unaccompanied girls and women, exposing them to the risk of sexual assault and other crimes, including trafficking. Deploying female police personnel at such locations aims to make girls and women feel safer when asking the police for help.

Not surprisingly, the biggest cause of this tragedy is the poverty that's widespread in the region. Most of the girls who are trafficked fall for promises of employment or marriage because they're desperate to flee the grinding maw of their everyday life. In a society that values women less than men and in which families often view girls as a burden, there are also some who are sold into slavery by their own parents or relatives. "It's a socioeconomic problem resulting from poverty and illiteracy," says Tathagata Basu, a police superintendent who has led anti-trafficking investigations in South 24 Parganas, one of the most affected districts in West Bengal.

In this fertile ground for trafficking, criminal networks behind the trade often operate with impunity. Some police officials are apathetic or corrupt, and officers assigned to anti-trafficking units are burdened with investigating all types of crimes in addition to trafficking. In recent years, though, these teams in West Bengal and throughout the country have intensified efforts to find and rescue girls sold to brothels, often under pressure from anti-trafficking activists.

“Whenever children go missing, we have to make sure that the police immediately start an investigation,” says Rishi Kant, a co-founder of Shakti Vahini, a Delhi-based nonprofit that has helped free hundreds of victims.

A Hidden Crime

The full scope of human trafficking in India—and around the world—is unclear. But in 2016, 4,911 girls were listed as trafficked by India’s National Crime Records Bureau. More than half of those girls were from West Bengal, which has about 7 percent of India’s population. Many cases are never reported.

Traffickers take advantage of the tangled network of rivers that makes the southern India-Bangladesh border difficult to patrol. (see infographics ‘Reported share of girls trafficked in 2016, by state’)

Nonprofits like the one Kant helped start also have stepped up searches for minors in red-light districts, leading to rescue operations with the police. Undercover investigators for these nonprofits visit brothels and dance bars posing as customers. They pass on the information to police and work with raid teams to plan and conduct rescues. It’s dangerous work.

Dipesh Tank, a social activist and founder of a Mumbai nonprofit, said one of his investigators was beaten up in a brothel after his spy camera was discovered. But the work also pays off, he said, describing a raid on a dance bar in a Mumbai suburb. “These guys had no clue that a raid was going to happen, because they were paying the cops,” Tank said. “When we entered, they were shocked. It was a huge loss for them. They tried to threaten us, to stop us.” The raid freed more than a dozen enslaved girls.

Still, India’s efforts to deal with sex trafficking are the equivalent of using a hammer to raze a fortress: The scale on which trafficking occurs is so huge that the solution requires a far more substantive and sustained law enforcement response, perhaps through a national agency dedicated solely to investigating trafficking cases.

After girls are rescued, many must fend for themselves, receiving little help from their impoverished or embarrassed families. Several nonprofit organizations run programs to rehabilitate victims of sex trafficking in the hope that they might be able to reunite with their families, overcome social stigma, and build decent lives for themselves. But to make a significant difference, state governments need to do much more to support rescued victims. “They should be able to live like you and me,” Kant says. “They should be empowered.”

Photo: police officer standing on boat.

A West Bengal police boat patrols the Hooghly River in the Sundarbans, a watery area with dense mangrove forests that straddles the southern India-Bangladesh border. Traffickers often use rivers to avoid detection when smuggling girls into India.

‘I’ll kill you and dump you in the river’

The day Sayeda left home, the boy she eloped with took her by bus from Khulna to a town near the Indian border. Arriving at night, they walked through a forest until they got to a riverbank. Sayeda noticed others on the same path, including young girls, but didn’t think much of it. At the river’s edge, the boyfriend bribed a policeman, and the two climbed into a boat that dropped them on the other side. They were in India.

The boy took her to a house close to the river, where they stayed for a few nights. There, Sayeda met another girl who also had been brought over from Bangladesh, and she became suspicious. Sayeda confronted her boyfriend, and he told her she was going to work in a brothel. When she refused, he said, “I’ll kill you and dump you in the river.”

Even if she could have escaped, Sayeda didn’t know whom she could have turned to for help. She had entered India illegally, and she didn’t see how she could go to the police. “I got so scared that I said OK,” she said. “I said I’ll work as a dancer, fine. But I won’t do anything else.”

The boy sold Sayeda to a brothel in Mahishadal, a suburb of Haldia, a major river port and industrial city in West Bengal about 40 miles southwest of Kolkata. A dozen girls held captive at this brothel, including Sayeda and Anjali, talked to me about what their lives were like there.

This account is based on those interviews. All the girls told similar stories of their captivity.

Photo: a girl holding a red tulip, with her face silhouetted against a blue background

A., who is now 19, eloped with a man several years ago. After she overheard him making plans to sell her, she managed to escape. She was found at the railway station in Canning, in South 24 Parganas, by representatives of Childline, an organization that helps children in distress. She later was taken to Sneha.

Photo: a girl who’s orange sari is silhouetted against a textured background

N., who is from a village in the Sundarbans in West Bengal, was married at 16. After her husband left her for another woman, she was trafficked to a brothel by an acquaintance who feigned empathy for her situation. She was rescued and taken to Sneha. She’s now an adult.

One in a row of such establishments along a highway, the brothel was a two-story hotel named Sankalpa with about 24 small rooms and a dance bar located behind a restaurant. According to the girls, it was run by a man named Prasanta Bhakta. He could not be reached, and his lawyer declined to comment.

Sayeda, then 14, still believed she would be able to get away with only dancing for customers. She told me Bhakta disabused her of that notion right away by raping

her. Sayeda learned from the other girls that this was his way of assessing what he could charge his customers for having sex with them. He had a color-coded system to advertise the different prices for the 20 or so sex workers he controlled, most of whom were minors. He had them sit on plastic chairs in the dance bar, where clients surveyed the girls and picked out the one they wanted.

New arrivals like Sayeda—deemed closest to virginhood—were the most expensive: 500 rupees, or about seven dollars. They were seated in white chairs. Others were assigned to blue chairs (400 rupees) and green chairs (300 rupees). Girls whom Bhakta judged as overweight or less attractive were made to sit in red chairs, with a price tag of 250 rupees. The clients paid Bhakta, who told the girls he would pay them once he made back what they'd cost him. They said they never saw any money.

The girls said Bhakta forced them to drink alcohol, to make them more pliable. Although Sayeda was resistant, she discovered that being intoxicated helped blunt the trauma of being a sex slave. She began drinking heavily, asking every client who picked her to buy liquor for her. "That's how I would pass the time—by drinking a lot through the day," she said.

Sayeda had been there for two years when Anjali, 16 at the time, was sold to the brothel. The man Anjali had expected to marry and the other young man had taken her to Kolkata and then to Mahishadal. They gave Anjali a bottle of beer. She drank it and dozed off. When she awoke, she saw that the boyfriend's companion had bought her soap, shampoo, a comb, and some makeup. He told her to freshen up, saying he was taking her to meet someone that evening.

Anjali didn't question the young men and went willingly when they took her to the brothel. When they entered a dimly lit room, she started to feel anxious. "What is this place?" she asked. They told her it was a hotel, and she would be working there. "What kind of work?" Anjali asked, starting to panic. When they explained it to her, tears welled in her eyes. The boyfriend's friend began pleading with her to accept the situation—as if she had any choice—saying he needed money to pay for the treatment of his sick wife. The men promised to return for her in two months. She never saw them again.

Photo: a girl holding light pink tulips with her face silhouetted against a patterned wall

S. said her family hardly managed to buy food because they were so poor. She eloped with a man from Dhaka who promised to take care of her. "How would I know that he had the intention of selling me?" said S., now an adult. "My life has so much pain." She was smuggled into India by river and forced to work in a brothel. She escaped with a woman she trusted who sold her to another brothel. S. was rescued and taken to Sneha.

Photo: a woman in a hot pink sari

M., who is now 19, was lured from her home in South 24 Parganas when she was 16 by a man who professed his love for her over the phone. After she met him, he proposed

marriage. On a date, he drugged her and took her to Delhi, where he sold her to a brothel. In the brothel, she was beaten, starved, and forced to have sex with up to 30 customers a day. During two police raids, the brothel owner hid her. She was rescued on a third raid.

It was clear to Anjali from the first day that resistance was futile. The girls told me they were terrified of Bhakta. If they complained or didn't obey, they said, he would beat them savagely or stub his lit cigarette on their skin, leaving severe burns.

For the girls, the brothel was a prison. The gate in the fence around the building and the front door were always locked or guarded. The girls were allowed to leave only at midnight to eat at the restaurant in front, escorted by an elderly guard. He would make up nicknames for the girls and joke with them, bringing a touch of kindness to the grim reality of their lives.

Customers came in day and night, and the girls were raped up to 20 times a day. Even at 4 a.m., when the girls were desperate to get some rest, drunk men would stumble into the rooms where they were sleeping to choose one. The girls took painkillers to endure the physical torment, but the emotional suffering was inescapable. After weeks and months of such abuse, they would become numb to it, almost. "We would feel such shame," Anjali said, "when we had customers who were older men, older than our fathers."

Bound by the trauma of having been trafficked and the daily horror of their brutal existence, the girls turned to each other for support. Anjali, quiet and shy, couldn't have been more different from Sayeda, who was so feisty when drunk that she sometimes kicked clients. Despite the contrast in personalities, or perhaps because of it, the two became friends. The pain of having been betrayed by boyfriends they'd eloped with wasn't all they had in common. Besides being raised by mothers who worked as maids, Anjali shared Sayeda's passion for music, even though she wasn't drawn to performing. And like Sayeda, Anjali loved wearing makeup.

Some of the girls who'd been at the brothel for a few years had cell phones, which had been given to them by clients. They sometimes spoke to their families, lying to them that they were employed as factory workers or maids and would come home soon. Once, Sayeda called her mother in Khulna and told her she was in India, working as a dancer, but couldn't come home. She was too ashamed to reveal the truth, which she felt would devastate her parents. She was too afraid to call the police, but she also didn't believe it would do any good. The girls knew several police officers visited the brothel as customers and were friends with Bhakta.

Once in a while there would be a police raid, but the girls said Bhakta and his staff always seemed to have advance warning. They would round up the girls and hustle them out an exit in the back, leading them through a field into a safe house. Even that didn't mean a respite from sex work. Bhakta would bring clients to the temporary hiding place. Sometimes the girls were forced to have sex with them on a bedsheet spread on the ground.

One afternoon in April 2017, though, a police team raided the brothel and another next door, without Bhakta's being tipped off. Several of the girls, including Anjali and Sayeda, said they ran out the back to flee from the police. They'd heard from Bhakta that the police would lock them up and their families would find out that they'd been working as prostitutes. The police arrested Bhakta and 12 others under laws that prohibit trafficking and sexual exploitation of children. Anjali and Sayeda, along with 18 other girls and women, were rescued.

They were free but not yet free to go home.

Photo: school girls walking down lane.

Girls walk home from school in South 24 Parganas. For many girls in rural India, education ends before high school, which often costs money. Poor families are more likely to put money toward education for boys and wedding expenses for girls. Although child marriage is illegal, it's still widely practiced. In this region, with high rates of child sex trafficking, families also worry that girls are at risk on long commutes to school.

Trapping unprotected, vulnerable children

On a fall morning in Diamond Harbour, a small town on the Hooghly River in South 24 Parganas, vegetable vendors and fishmongers sat on the side of a narrow, two-lane highway, selling produce and fish as trucks honked past, releasing trails of exhaust. Most of the vendors were subsistence farmers and small-time fishermen with meager harvests to sell. One elderly woman sat on her haunches, with her produce laid out on a tarp: a basket of okra, a few eggplants, a mound of potatoes. Within an elbow's distance, a man sat cross-legged with a couple of pails of shrimp, one of several shrimp sellers hawking their catch.

These vendors might be among the more fortunate of the area's inhabitants, many of whom live in abject poverty. Much of South 24 Parganas, one of India's largest districts, is underdeveloped, with rough roads and little industry. The southern half is part of a vast delta straddling the India-Bangladesh border where the Hooghly, the Ganges, and other rivers drain into the Bay of Bengal.

Agriculture is not lucrative here because the farmlands are prone to flooding during the monsoon season. The poverty is most extreme in the Sundarbans—nearly 4,000 square miles of islands, swamps, and mangrove forests. Cyclones churned up by climate change make farming and fishing there increasingly unviable.

As a result of this economic hardship, most men and women from villages across South 24 Parganas are forced to travel long distances from home to make a living. Every morning they pack into commuter trains leaving towns such as Diamond Harbour and Canning, pressed against one another with crushing force, and ride to Kolkata and its suburbs to work in factories or at construction sites, or to cook and clean in middle-class homes.

"They don't return until late evening, so their children are left unprotected and vulnerable," says Nihar Ranjan Raptan, founder and executive director of Goranbose Gram Bikash Kendra, a nonprofit based in Canning that has helped rescue and rehabilitate victims of trafficking. Raptan first worked with the police to recover a trafficked girl in 1995. In the years since, he says, it has become routine for young girls from the area to go missing. "Earlier, armed robberies happened all the time around here. Not anymore," he says. The trafficking of girls is far more profitable.

Photo: a group of people walk past a person blowing up a balloon at an outdoor festival

A crowd in Kolkata celebrates Durga Puja, West Bengal's most popular religious festival. Observed over nine days, the festival draws revelers into the streets. The holiday provides a chance for girls to mingle freely with boys. Traffickers are known to use the cover of these crowds and the relaxed atmosphere to identify and trap potential victims.

Gangs prey on targets they've identified, exploiting their destitution and other vulnerabilities. "If I am a trafficker ... I'll have to find out if the girl is starving and desperate for a job or if she's interested in romance," says Tapoti Bhowmick of Sanlaap, a Kolkata-based nonprofit that helps victims of trafficking. A woman with strikingly large brown eyes, Bhowmick possesses a fierce humanity that seems necessary in her line of work, exuding a steely kindness when she speaks.

She says teenage boys and young men working for trafficking groups scout villages and towns looking for targets. They often lure adolescent girls by pretending to fall in love with them. "Some might go so far as to arrange a fake marriage with the girl they have trapped," Bhowmick says. "They might even rent a house and live with the girl for a month or two like a newly married couple."

These investments are paltry compared with the rewards from the eventual sale. "The madam is waiting to receive the girl in Sonagachi, in Kamathipura, at G.B. Road," Bhowmick says, citing red-light districts in Kolkata, Mumbai, and Delhi. "If the boy has spent even 20,000 rupees to trap the girl, he'll be able to sell her for 70,000 rupees," she says. That's a substantial profit—about \$650, as much as many factory workers make in five months.

For girls raised in poverty, the promise of simple luxuries such as cell phones and beauty products can have a hypnotizing effect. "They want the kind of life for themselves that they have seen in soap operas on television," Bhowmick explains.

Photo: a woman sitting on a step outside of a building on the phone

Shiuli, a 27-year-old sex worker, arranges to meet a client in the Kalighat red-light district of Kolkata. "A girl born to a poor family," she said, "has to go through hell throughout her entire life." Married at 13, Shiuli eventually left her husband, taking their son with her, but her parents wouldn't let her return home. She narrowly averted being trafficked. Unable to make enough as a maid, she became a sex worker. She has two other sons, fathered by clients.

By the time most trafficked girls are sold into a brothel, their spirit is already so broken that resistance is far from their minds. Usually, they've suffered violence and rape at the hands of their traffickers. For a newly sold girl, the trauma of having been taken from her home by manipulation or force can be so intense that the brothel environment, with the other young girls, can even seem comforting at first.

"At least she is out of the clutches of her abductors," says Urmi Basu, the founder of New Light, a nonprofit that helps care for children of sex workers in Kalighat, one of Kolkata's red-light districts.

In the days after their arrival, Basu says, "their companions at the brothel are telling them, 'Don't try to flee because if you do, you will be killed. Don't think we haven't tried.' So there's fear, and there's complete loss of hope, and there's repeated violation." The brothel owner is keen to quickly recover the money he or she has paid to acquire the girl and knows that the girl's earning potential will go down with time.

"That's why young girls are forced to be with clients 20 or 30 times a day," Basu says, her voice breaking. "There is a huge disconnect between what the person was before and what the person becomes after being left in the brothel for six months. So after being in the brothel for two years, they decide: 'OK, fine. What choice do I have?'"

Photo: a woman standing in a doorway

Married at 15, Kajol Dalopati left her husband after she had a miscarriage. She returned home, but her father and stepmother refused to support her, she said. A distant relative in Kolkata promised her a job but instead sold her into prostitution. Now 26, she has been a sex worker for six years in the city's Kalighat red-light district.

Photo: a woman posing for a portrait looking through a window

Chhobi Das became a sex worker to help support her family. Although at 50 she's too old for the trade, she has no choice but to continue living in the Kalighat district. Former sex workers often transition into other roles at brothels, such as cleaning and cooking. Some become brothel managers and even brothel owners.

'Please rescue me'

Only in rare cases is a trafficked girl able to find a way out before losing the will to return to society, but when the police respond swiftly to a promising tip, it can free a girl from that dismal fate. That's what happened in the case of Mala not long after the 18-year-old was sold in April 2017 to a brothel in Agra, a city southeast of Delhi. This account is based on interviews with Mala, her mother, and officers investigating the case.

A few days after she was sold to a brothel, Mala managed to persuade a client to let her use his cell phone to call her mother at home in a village in South 24 Parganas. "I'm being held in a bad place," she said. "Please rescue me."

Her mother, who had already filed a missing person report with the police, rushed to the Mathurapur Police Station to pass on the number that Mala had called from. Investigators traced that phone to a man in Agra, and he identified the brothel.

About six weeks later, more than a hundred police officials, many in plain clothes, descended on the red-light district where the brothel was located. The man whose phone Mala had used led a team of four policemen, including Prabir Ball, the investigating officer for the case, to the brothel and knocked on the door. Recognizing the man as a client, the brothel staff let them in. Ball and his two colleagues pretended to be customers. After they'd confirmed that Mala was in the brothel, the officers alerted the rescue team with a phone call.

Photo: a woman wearing a pink dress, silhouetted by the light of the room, peers around a wall

Mala lives in South 24 Parganas and was sold in April 2017 to a brothel in Agra, India. She was 18. She managed to call her mother from a client's cell phone, which allowed the police to trace her whereabouts and rescue her. Mala's description of the people who trafficked her helped investigators find and arrest several suspects. She has since married a man whose family has been supportive. "They have accepted me the way I am, in spite of my dreadful past," she said. "They are good people."

While Ball and the others were waiting to coordinate with the officials outside the building, the brothel staff got wind that a raid was imminent. "They attempted to hide the girls in bunkers under the beds," Ball said. "They even asked us to hide." The police found five girls and six young women, including Mala, at the brothel.

Mala provided the police with a description of the young man who'd trafficked her from South 24 Parganas. She said he had a chipped front tooth, wore a bracelet with a blue stone, and had a heart tattooed on his left arm. According to Ball, Mala said the young man had raped her several times at his sister's house in Delhi, where Mala had stayed before she was sold to the Agra brothel by the man's sister and her husband. In July 2017, police in South 24 Parganas arrested her alleged trafficker—Farrak Ali Gayen, a gangly 23-year-old who matched her description.

Mala also described the man's sister and her husband, which enabled the police to create sketches of them. Several months later, Muslima Gayen, who goes by the name Pinky, and her husband, Radhya Gupta, were arrested in Delhi. A lawyer for Gayen, his sister, and her husband declined to comment.

In an interview at the Mathurapur Police Station, Gayen told Rishi Kant of Shakti Vahini, which helped with Mala's rescue, and photographer Smita Sharma how he'd entrapped her. He said he got Mala's number from a mobile phone recharging shop and then struck up a friendship by calling her. When he proposed to her, Gayen said, she traveled to his sister's house in Delhi.

Gayen said he was paid 20,000 rupees, or about \$260, for trafficking Mala. He said he received that much for each girl he brought to his sister. Gayen and a few associates trafficked 11 girls in a year and a half, he said.

Photo: three people sitting in a police office having a conversation

Farrak Ali Gayen was arrested in July 2017 based on a description that Mala gave of a young man she said trafficked her. He stands between Jagdeep Singh Rawat, an anti-trafficking activist with Shakti Vahini, and police officer Shibendu Ghosh in the Mathurapur Police Station in South 24 Parganas. Gayen promised to marry Mala, so she ran away from home. He said he was paid about \$260 for every girl he brought to his sister in Delhi and that she sold the girls to brothels. He said he and others on his team trafficked 11 girls from South 24 Parganas over a year and a half. Gayen and others arrested are still in custody, and the case is ongoing.

When Mala recounted her story to me, I realized how much courage it had taken for her to beat the odds. She told me that she'd tried to escape from the brothel when the madams and other staff were sleeping, but one of them found out just as she was about to open the door.

"The other girls were afraid of being severely beaten if they were caught," Mala told me. "I told them I didn't care if I got a beating. I wanted to get out at any cost."

After she went home, she married a young man who believed she shouldn't be shamed or blamed for the ordeal she'd been through. The two have a baby and live with Mala's family.

'How much more could I cry?'

Sayedra and Anjali were 17 when I met them at Sneha, a shelter run by Sanlaap in Narendrapur, a suburb of Kolkata—the metropolis where I once was a crime reporter for an English-language daily. Situated in tranquil surroundings, the shelter consists of a small cluster of buildings on a green campus protected by a high boundary wall. At any given time, about 80 to 90 girls live there. The center accepts girls who were rescued from brothels but also those who are vulnerable to being forced into prostitution, such as the children of professional sex workers. Along with counseling, they receive training in trades such as block printing and tailoring in hope of preparing for an easier return to society.

Photo: two girls sitting, one brushing the hair of another, while another girl hangs laundry on a line

Sanlaap's Sneha shelter in South 24 Parganas cares for some 80 to 90 girls and women who were victims of abuse or who are considered to be at risk. Besides girls who were trafficked to brothels, there are others who were forced into marriages as minors or who were victims of domestic violence. Sneha—which means "affection" in Bengali—provides medical care, counseling, and training in skills such as tailoring that might help them rebuild their lives.

Sayedra and Anjali had arrived just days before, along with 10 other girls rescued from the brothel in Mahishadal. Sanlaap's staff asked the girls if they would be willing to meet with me, and they all consented. A supervisor in charge of chaperoning

the girls ushered them into a large unfurnished room where I was waiting with a representative from Sanlaap. Slipping their footwear off at the door, they filed in, pausing their chatter as they took me in with guarded glances. The awkwardness eased after I joined them in unrolling a rug. We sat down in a circle. As we began conversing in Bengali—the language I grew up speaking at home—the girls became more comfortable.

I explained that I was writing about sex trafficking and wanted to understand what victims go through. I made clear that they were under no obligation to answer my questions. Sayedra, seated to my right, was the keenest to talk. She had mischievous eyes, a bright smile, and an easy confidence that set her apart from the others. When I asked how she'd ended up at the brothel, she told me matter-of-factly that she'd been tricked by the boy she loved. She described how the brothel staff kept a strict watch on the girls and how the owner, Bhakta, routinely beat her and the others.

"He wouldn't stop until he drew blood," Anjali, sitting next to Sayedra, interjected.

"He used to tell us—if you don't sleep with at least 10 customers a day, I'll beat you," Sayedra said.

I turned to Anjali, who told me how she'd been trafficked by her boyfriend. "He told me he would marry me," she said, smiling abashedly, as if apologizing for being so naive. The other girls laughed. It felt like they were being unkind, but over the course of our conversations, I realized they hadn't been laughing at Anjali as much as laughing with her. Their stories were similar.

Some of them had made feeble attempts to escape. Anjali told me she once asked for help from a client, but the man told another girl at the brothel and word got back to Bhakta. "Then I got a beating," she said.

Photo: a group of hands on concrete all with red nail polish

Girls at Sneha paint their nails. Having shared similar traumatic experiences being trafficked and sold into sexual slavery, many of them forge strong relationships with one another as they prepare to return to their families and communities.

Photo: a folded dress, comb, toothbrush, underwear and other items lying on a lace cloth

When girls arrive at Sneha, they receive a welcome kit that includes a towel, a dress, underclothes, and other personal items. It's a way to make them feel cared for, a small step toward restoring the respect and dignity that have been robbed from them.

The girls from Bangladesh, such as Sayedra, felt more helplessness. Since they were in India illegally, Bhakta had impressed on them that the safest place for them was inside the brothel. "He used to say, 'You want to run away? Sure, you could try. Then the police will lock you up. You'll grow old by the time they let you go,'" Sayedra told me.

The longer I talked with the girls, the more I realized the impossibility of comprehending the desperation they'd felt. One of them told me she'd asked her

father back home in Bangladesh to care for her three-month-old daughter before coming to India with an acquaintance who'd promised to get her a job. Several months after she was sold to the brothel, she got her phone back and was able to speak with her father every few days. She lied to him, saying she was employed at a factory but couldn't return home until she'd repaid her debts to the owner. As time went on, her father grew frustrated. She told me he would call to say, "It's been two years. You said you'd come back in six months. I want you to come back because who will take care of your daughter after I die?"

He would ask to speak to her employer, and she would hand the phone to Bhakta. Her father would plead with Bhakta to let her come home. But Bhakta never relented, always replying that she needed to work a few more months. Then, one day, her father called to say that her child had died. "I wept for two days," she told me. Only when she spoke to her sister did she learn that her daughter wasn't dead. Her father had lied in desperation, hoping it would sway Bhakta to let her return home.

When I went back to the shelter the next morning, I asked whether Sayeda and Anjali would talk with me again, since they had been the most forthcoming. Sayeda showed up grinning ear to ear, her forehead and cheeks covered in colored powders: red, blue, green. It was just days after Holi, a Hindu holiday that people celebrate by splashing color on one another. I gathered that Sayeda had joyfully accepted a full smearing of her face from other girls at the shelter that morning. Anjali had gotten away with a minor dabbing.

The two told me of the horrors they'd experienced with a detachment that I found unnerving.

Photo: two girls facing away from the camera holding hands

Sisters Z. and B., now both adults, were trafficked by a relative when they were in their early teens from Dhaka to a brothel in Mahishadal. B. got pregnant at 15 and was forced to have an abortion. She often refused to have sex with customers; when she wouldn't, the owner would make her sister whip her with a belt. "This was the most painful," Z. said, worse than having to have sex with 20 clients a day.

They didn't want to say much about the sexual abuse. Instead, they described the physical violence. Anjali showed me a mark on her lip where she said Bhakta had given her a cigarette burn. Sayeda told me that Bhakta sometimes ordered one of the girls to flog another, with a belt or a stick, while he watched.

Not sure how I could get her to describe her feelings about this abuse, I asked Sayeda how much she'd wept in the three years she'd been enslaved, realizing as soon as I said it how shallow it sounded. "Oh, I've cried and cried. How much more could I cry?" she replied in a tone of resignation I'd never heard from someone so young. The sum of her tears would never be enough to convey the measure of her sadness.

She told me how she drank constantly to cope with the pain. Anjali chimed in to say

that Sayeda would get into fights when drunk. At other times, Anjali said, she would weep and tell her and other girls how she missed her family.

I asked them what they would do when they returned home. Anjali was unsure.

"Will you fall in love again?" Sayeda asked, laughing.

"No, I will not," Anjali replied.

"When I get home, I'll say Allah's name and learn the Quran," Sayeda said, adding that she would try to get a job at the beauty parlor where she'd worked. "I won't go back to dancing. I'll try to get an education."

"I might take dance lessons," Anjali said.

"No, don't get into dancing," Sayeda warned. "That could lead to trouble."

As we came out of the building into the sun, Sayeda asked me if I could use my cell phone to find a satellite view of her city. She wanted to show me the neighborhood where her parents lived, next to a well-known mosque. I couldn't do that on my phone, but I promised I would visit her in Khulna when she returned to her family.

Smiling, she ran over to a play area in front of the building. I watched her climb to the top of a slide and glide down. Walking toward my car, I could hear her laughing.

HOW TO HELP

Here are three groups working in India on behalf of sex trafficking victims.

Shakti Vahini works to free minors from brothels.

Sanlaap aids girls who have been rescued or are at risk of being exploited.

New Light helps the children of sex workers.

'We refuse to give up'

One afternoon two years ago Giriraj Panda, a lawyer in Haldia who has helped prosecute sex trafficking cases, was eating lunch at a food shack near the courthouse when a sudden commotion disrupted the usual thrum of activity. Panda looked up and saw a man racing away, chased by a couple of policemen. The cops were too slow. The man outran them and climbed on a motorbike driven by an accomplice. The two sped away.

Panda, hired by Sanlaap to represent the girls in the case against Bhakta and the others, recognized the fleeing man. It was Bhakta. He was due in court when he managed to break free from the officers leading him into the building with his hands clasped in theirs. Bhakta had appeared in court before on similar charges, Panda said, but his lawyers had been able to arrange his release on bail. Apparently, Bhakta was risking a daring escape because he hadn't managed to get out on these new charges. He'd been in jail for more than a year and a half.

Photo: many woman sitting on the floor looking up toward the front of the room

Sex workers and staff members attend the annual anniversary event of New Light, a nonprofit in Kalighat. The organization offers care and schooling for the children of sex workers. It also collaborates with the union that represents them to prevent brothels in the area from forcing children into prostitution.

Brothel owners and traffickers who exploit minors are often able to get away with their crimes not just because the police fail to enforce the law but also because India's judicial system leaves open many avenues of escape. Indian courts are inundated with cases, and the backlog is so huge that it's not unusual for prosecutions to stretch over years. In many instances, courts have no choice but to grant bail to defendants because prosecutors fail to file charges on time, owing to incompetence or corruption.

Panda told me defendants in trafficking cases use money and muscle to try to evade convictions. "They are able to spend millions of rupees on legal fees," he said. Intimidating or bribing the witnesses is a common tactic. One of the first steps toward a prosecution, after a raid at a brothel, is for the rescued victims to give statements under oath. Panda said it's not unusual for the defendant's goons to show up outside the courthouse when the victims are brought in. They threaten the victims, or if they can't get close enough to be heard, menace them with glares and gestures. "If these girls were trafficked from Bangladesh or Nepal, the men warn them that they might never be able to go back to their country," Panda said.

Defendants freed on bail can continue the intimidation, trying to coerce the girls' families. Under pressure from their families, trafficked victims sometimes recant their initial statements at trial or claim to be older than they actually are. Prosecutions also are hampered by weak investigations leading to a lack of incriminating evidence, says Ankita Chakraborty, a doctoral student at the Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur in West Bengal who has been analyzing the prosecution of sex trafficking cases in India for her Ph.D. thesis.

"Say I raid a brothel, but I don't procure the electricity bill or something else to prove the ownership of the brothel," she says. In her study, Chakraborty says, she has found instances in which police filed charges against defendants under sections of the Indian Penal Code that allow bail to be granted easily, rather than under more stringent anti-trafficking or child-protection laws. The majority of cases end in acquittal, she says.

Despite this grim state of affairs, efforts to bring traffickers to justice haven't been abandoned. Those accused in the trafficking of Mala are on trial in South 24 Parganas. The prosecutor in that case, Debranjana Banerjee, told me that individuals working on behalf of the traffickers had offered him a bribe to bungle the prosecution so that the defendants would be released on bail. At the first few hearings, the traffickers' henchmen showed up outside the courthouse, some with pistols tucked in their jeans. "The goal was to intimidate me," Banerjee said. At his request, police increased security. The defendants were not granted bail.

Photo: a woman lies in with her head on her mothers lap on a bed

C., now a young adult, is comforted by her mother just days after being rescued and reunited with her family in South 24 Parganas. From passages in her diary, the family realized she'd eloped with a man she'd met. Months later, police found her in a brothel in Pune.

Photo: a diary with window shadow markings

C.'s diary offers a glimpse into the teenager's infatuation, which the man who trafficked her exploited. Her words in Bengali say: "If I don't get you in my life, I will die. If I am not yours, I can't be anyone else's."

In the past six years, Panda said, he and his team have secured convictions in more than a dozen trafficking cases in the Haldia area. He said he would fight to prove the charges against Bhakta, who Panda said was tracked down and arrested a few weeks after his escape.

The case is ongoing and could last for years. Bhakta did get bail earlier this year — a decision Panda said prosecutors would appeal. "Because traffickers and brothel owners can afford to spend a lot on legal fees, it's easy for them to get away," Panda said. "But we refuse to give up."

'A simple, innocent heart'

A few months after my visit to Sneha, Sayeda began suffering severe abdominal pains. Just days earlier, she'd performed enthusiastically in a dance show at the shelter. But now she was unable to eat. Her stomach became swollen. Her breathing became labored. Sneha's staff rushed her to the hospital, where she died hours later. Doctors attributed Sayeda's death to liver failure, most likely caused by her heavy drinking.

The news was devastating to the girls at the shelter, especially Anjali. "We cried so much," she told me, recalling how Sayeda used to make everyone laugh. "We wanted to see her one last time." But they couldn't. Sayeda's body was driven in a van to the India-Bangladesh border crossing at Benapole, where her father was waiting. He stood silent and motionless, I was told, as the coffin was transferred to another van to take Sayeda home.

In November 2018, I traveled to Khulna with photographer Smita Sharma to see Sayeda's family—a trip that Sayeda and I had imagined would be a happy one. Driving past the mosque that Sayeda had wanted to show me, we wended through the streets and parked next to a tea shop. Sayeda's mother—a short, stocky woman dressed in a salwar kameez—led us along a dirt path to the house where Sayeda had grown up. Her father, a slight, haggard man, greeted us feebly. Since the outer room had no furniture, they invited us into their bedroom. Smita and I sat cross-legged on the bed, the afternoon light pouring in through the window.

This is where Sayeda had spent much of her childhood. When her father brought her

coffin home, her mother told me, a crowd gathered outside the house to mourn. “If you go to the market, everybody will tell you how much they loved her,” she said. When she described how much her daughter enjoyed singing and dancing, I showed her a photograph of Sayeda with Anjali and the other girls taken after their dance performance. Wearing a bright magenta sari and a yellow crown, Sayeda is smiling radiantly.

Photo: hands holding up a pink sari with light gold detailing

Sayedra’s mother holds her daughter’s favorite sari at home in Khulna, Bangladesh. Sayedra’s father gave it to her on Eid al-Fitr, the Muslim holiday that marks the end of Ramadan. It was the last one her family celebrated together. At 14, Sayedra eloped with a boy who sold her to a brothel in Mahishadal.

Photo: a pair of sandals with blue straps

Along with Sayedra’s clothes and cosmetics, her mother has held on to a pair of sandals she loved to wear. They are heartbreaking reminders of her daughter’s spirited personality. For three years, Sayedra was held captive at the brothel. She was beaten and forced to have sex. In a police raid, Sayedra was rescued and sent to Sneha but never made it home.

Her mother looked at the photo for a moment and began to weep. “My daughter had such a simple, innocent heart,” she said, wiping her tears. “That is why I lost her.”

She brought out a couple of photo albums to show us pictures of Sayedra when she was younger. “She loved to dress up and look pretty,” her mother said. “She didn’t look like she could be my daughter.” She was proud of how skilled Sayedra was at applying cosmetics. When she had to attend a wedding, it was Sayedra who did her makeup. Sayedra’s cosmetics, saris, and sandals were still stored in a box. Her mother couldn’t bear the thought of parting with them. Sayedra was often trailed by a posse of younger children, her mother said. They’d follow her home, where she would direct them in Bollywood-style performances. When they were finished, she’d send them off with bowls of rice and clothes that no longer fit her. When I heard her mother describe how Sayedra used to give away her old clothes, I imagined that’s what she would have wanted her mother to do with the possessions she’d left behind.

Sayedra’s parents knew their daughter had been trafficked and enslaved in a brothel, but they wanted to know more about what she’d gone through, so I turned on a recording of my interview with Sayedra. Her mother leaned in to listen. Her father listened from the other room, where he sat on the floor, staring blankly at the wall. A few minutes into the recording, as Sayedra started talking about what she’d endured at the brothel, her mother shifted uncomfortably and her father turned his head away.

“Hearing this might hurt,” I said.

Sayedra’s mother looked at me, her eyes brimming. “We are hurting anyway,” she said. “There’s no end to the pain.”

Her father didn’t say a word that afternoon. When I returned the next day to say

goodbye to the family, he finally spoke. “My daughter was my world,” he told me. “She used to be happy all the time and make others happy, and now she’s gone.” Since Sayedra’s death, he said, he’d become erratic, skipping meals and baths often, sitting by the roadside for long periods of time, transfixed by grief, instead of ferrying passengers in his rickshaw.

“My daughter’s image floats up before my eyes all the time,” he said.

Sayedra’s mother told me that in her husband’s mind, her decision to let Sayedra enroll at the dance academy was at the root of this tragedy. She’d hoped that Sayedra’s account of how she’d been trafficked would convince him that his daughter’s passion for dancing didn’t cause her death. Sayedra’s father acknowledged that he’d heard her describe how she’d been lured away. But that hadn’t erased the explanation his grief-stricken heart had latched onto.

“If she hadn’t learned dancing,” he said, “my daughter would never have died like this.” Even death, it seemed, had failed to absolve Sayedra from the blame so often laid on trafficking victims—that they are in some way also responsible for ending up in sexual slavery.

‘I don’t love anybody anymore’

After a year and a half at the shelter, Anjali finally returned home to her mother in Siliguri and began working at a factory. When I visited in December 2019, Anjali, then 19, was helping her mother with household chores.

Anjali told me she struggles with loneliness. She misses her friends from the shelter, who understood her anguish as no one else ever will. She hadn’t shared much of her experience with her mother. The neighbors were aware that she’d been gone for more than two years, and some had heard that she’d spent some of that time at a shelter. Anjali said she’d overheard some of the neighbors talking about her being in a dirty profession.

“I don’t respond to them,” she said.

It was evident that the neighbors’ shaming had deepened Anjali’s sense of isolation. But while she could pretend the neighbors didn’t exist, it was harder for her to tune out the words of her mother, who had become intensely protective, causing Anjali to feel stifled.

Her mother, a kind-looking woman, explained that she worried constantly about her daughter’s safety. She had consented to Anjali’s factory job only after being assured there were no young men on the same shift. She was comforted by knowing the factory had security cameras.

“Whenever she’s out of the house, I call her frequently to find out where she is,” she said.

“She doesn’t let me go out anywhere!” Anjali complained.

“I tell her, Sit quietly at home. Be on your phone. Watch TikTok videos if you like,” her mother said. “Don’t ever set foot on the wrong path again.”

I asked what she meant. Wasn’t Anjali the victim? Was it wrong to fall in love?

Photo: a woman silhouetted while holding her phone and an older woman stands in the background

After she was rescued from a brothel, Anjali returned home to her mother in Siliguri. Her mother, afraid for her safety, closely monitors her whereabouts, which grates on Anjali. She would like to have more freedom. She spends much of her time alone. To battle her isolation, she watches a lot of videos on her mobile phone.

Photo: a woman walking down the street waving back at a mother holding a baby

On an early winter morning, Anjali says goodbye to her mother and nephew while leaving for work at a factory. Her mother approved of the job after being reassured that there were security cameras and no men working on her shift. The job doesn’t pay much, but it helps Anjali stay busy and keeps alive her dream of becoming financially independent.

“Yes, I know she fell in love. But who could have known that the boy had such evil intentions?” her mother said. “I mean that she’s vulnerable. She’s young. She could easily be lured by another boy who might promise to marry her and then go and sell her to another place, like it happened before.”

“A person is only fooled once. Not again and again, you know,” Anjali interjected. “I’m mature now.”

Her mother tried to mollify her. “I’ve been telling her, Don’t elope,” she said. “If you find somebody you like, tell me, and I’ll check out the boy’s background and get you married.”

Anjali cut her off. “I don’t love anybody anymore,” she said in a tone of finality.

What she really wanted, she told me, was to be able to go wherever she wanted whenever she wanted. A few months after her return, she wanted to visit a girlfriend nearby after she got back from work. Her mother told her it wasn’t safe. Anjali got so furious that she hurled an object at their television, shattering the screen.

Anjali wanted a scooter so that she could commute to the factory more easily. She wasn’t happy that her mother was saving up to buy Anjali’s older brother a motorcycle.

“I’ll buy you things when you get married,” her mother said gently.

Anjali gave her an exasperated smile. Despite her annoyance, she knew she was a lot more fortunate than many trafficking victims whose families don’t want them back because of the fear of being shamed by relatives and neighbors. Anjali’s struggle to rebuild her life was clearly far from over, yet seeing the support of her family and her quiet resolve, I left with the hope that she would someday find the freedom she has been seeking.

About this story: To protect the privacy of the girls who were trafficked and to comply with Indian laws on identifying victims of sexual crimes, we are not disclosing their identities or those of their family members. We photographed them in ways intended to obscure their faces and altered some images to hide distinguishing features. We use pseudonyms for the girls featured in the story.

A shorter version of this article appears in the October 2020 issue of National Geographic magazine.

Read the story in [Bengali](#) or [Hindi](#)

THIRD PRIZE WINNER

AFRICAN MIGRANTS 'LEFT TO DIE' IN SAUDI ARABIA'S HELLISH COVID DETENTION CENTRES

Will Brown (Kenya), Zecharias Zelalem (Ethiopia)



Will Brown is a correspondent for The Telegraph reporting across Africa and a Senior Associate at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC. Will was born and brought up in South London. Before joining The Telegraph in 2019, Will was the West Africa Correspondent for The Economist based in Dakar and a freelance journalist in New Delhi. He has reported in 26 countries across Africa, the Middle East and Europe and has been published in, appeared on, or cited by more than 40 major news outlets.



Zecharias Zelalem is an Ethiopian freelance journalist with a focus on the Horn of Africa and Ethiopia in particular. He has reported extensively on the region's current affairs, migration, as well as the ongoing Ethiopian civil war. Zecharias wrote for the Addis Ababa based Addis Standard magazine before freelancing for international media outlets, including the likes of The Telegraph, Al Jazeera and The Globe and Mail among others.

EDITOR'S NOTE

In third place are Zecharias Zelalem (Ethiopia) and Will Brown (Kenya) whose powerful investigation into the plight of migrants in one of the richest countries in the world — *African Migrants 'Left to Die' in Saudi Arabia's Hellish Covid Detention Centres* — led to international condemnation of the conditions faced by thousands of migrants.

This is a story that was also under investigation by other media outlets and was followed up by dozens of leading news media outlets, but the extraordinary detail of the investigation and the outstanding quality of the reporting was notable, and it led to the repatriation of thousands of migrant victims to their homes in Africa.

AFRICAN MIGRANTS 'LEFT TO DIE' IN SAUDI ARABIA'S HELLISH COVID DETENTION CENTRES

By Will Brown, Africa correspondent, Nairobi and Zecharias Zelalem
The Telegraph — August 30, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:
[https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/
investigation-african-migrants-left-die-saudi-arabias-hellish/](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/investigation-african-migrants-left-die-saudi-arabias-hellish/)

'The guards just throw the bodies out back as if it was trash,' said one.

Saudi Arabia, one of the wealthiest countries on earth, is keeping hundreds if not thousands of African migrants locked in heinous conditions reminiscent of Libya's slave camps as part of a drive to stop the spread of Covid-19, an investigation by *The Sunday Telegraph* has found.

Graphic mobile phone images sent to the newspaper by migrants held inside the detention centres show dozens of emaciated men crippled by the Arabian heat lying shirtless in tightly packed rows in small rooms with barred windows.

One photo shows what appears to be a corpse swathed in a purple and white blanket in their midst. They say it is the body of a migrant who had died of heatstroke and that others are barely getting enough food and water to survive.

Another image, too graphic to publish, shows a young African man hanged from a window grate in an internal tiled wall. The adolescent killed himself after losing hope, say his friends, many of whom have been held in detention since April.

The migrants, several displaying scars on their backs, claim they are beaten by guards who hurl racial abuse at them. "It's hell in here. We are treated like animals and beaten every day," said Abebe, an Ethiopian who has been held at one of the centres for more than four months.

"If I see that there is no escape, I will take my own life. Others have already," he added via an intermediary who was able to communicate on a smuggled phone.

"My only crime is leaving my country in search of a better life. But they beat us with whips and electric cords as if we were murderers."

The images and testimony have sparked outrage among human rights activists, and have particular resonance in light of the global Black Lives Matter protests.

"Photos emerging from detention centres in southern Saudi Arabia show that authorities there are subjecting Horn of Africa migrants to squalid, crowded, and dehumanising conditions with no regard for their safety or dignity," said Adam

Coogle, deputy director of Human Rights Watch in the Middle East, after being shown the images by *The Sunday Telegraph*.

"The squalid detention centres in southern Saudi Arabia fall well short of international standards. For a wealthy country like Saudi Arabia, there's no excuse for holding migrants in such deplorable conditions," Mr Coogle added.

Oil-rich Saudi Arabia has long exploited migrant labour from Africa and Asia. In June 2019, an estimated 6.6m foreign workers made up about 20 per cent of the Gulf nation's population, most occupying low paid and often physically arduous jobs.

The migrants work mainly in construction and manual domestic roles that Saudi nationals prefer not to do themselves. Many are from South Asia, but a large contingent come from the Horn of Africa, which lies across the Red Sea.

The detention centres identified by *The Sunday Telegraph* house mainly Ethiopian men and there are said to be others packed with women.

Over the last decade, tens of thousands of young Ethiopians have made their way to the Gulf state, often aided by Saudi recruitment agents and people traffickers, in a bid to escape poverty back home.

They have been trapped partly as a result of the pandemic but also by the 'Saudization' of the kingdom's workforce, a policy introduced by Muhamad Bin Salman, the Crown Prince who took power three years ago.

The testimonies gathered by *The Sunday Telegraph* directly from migrants on encrypted channels about the conditions they now find themselves in are harrowing.

"Plenty of inmates are suicidal or suffering from mental illnesses as a result of living this for five months," said one. "The guards mock us, they say 'your government doesn't care, what are we supposed to do with you?'"

"A young boy, about sixteen, managed to hang himself last month. The guards just throw the bodies out back as if it was trash," said another.

When the pandemic struck in March, the Saudi government in the capital Riyadh feared the migrants, who are often housed in overcrowded conditions, would act as vectors for the virus.

Almost 3,000 Ethiopians were deported by the Saudi security services back to Ethiopia in the first ten days of April and a leaked UN memo said a further 200,000 were to follow. A moratorium was then placed on the deportations after international pressure was brought to bear on Riyadh.

The Sunday Telegraph has found many of the migrants who were slated for deportation five months ago have been left to rot in disease-ridden detention centres. "We have been left to die here," said one, who said he has been locked in a room the size of a school classroom and not been outside since March.

"Covid19? Who knows?, he added, "There are a lot of diseases here. Everyone is sick here; everyone has something."

The images smuggled out show many of those held are plagued by disfiguring skin infections. They claim they have received no medical treatment.

“We eat a tiny piece of bread in the day and rice in the evening. There’s almost no water, and the toilets are overflowing. It spills over to where we eat. The smell, we grow accustomed to. But there’s over a hundred of us in a room, and the heat is killing us,” said another young Ethiopian man.

A short video clip smuggled out shows several rooms covered with filth from an overflowing squat toilet. One Ethiopian man can be heard shouting out: “The toilets are clogged. We tried unblocking them, but we’re unable to. So we live in this filth, we sleep in it too.”

“To [the Saudis] or even to Abiy, it’s like we’re ants. When we die, it’s as if an ant died, no one cares or pays attention,” the man added, referring to Ethiopia’s Nobel Peace Prize-winning Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed.

Saudi Arabia is deeply stratified by race and cast. African migrants enjoy few legal rights and many complain of exploitation, sexual and racial abuse from employers.

New laws further limiting the rights and employment prospects of foreign labourers were introduced in 2013 and crackdowns have continued under the rule of the young Crown Prince Muhamad Bin Salman, who took power in 2017.

The Sunday Telegraph was able to geolocate two of the centres. One is in Al Shumaisi, near the holy city of Mecca and one is in Jazan, a port town near Yemen. There are believed to be others housing thousands of Ethiopians.

Migrants in each of the centres said there were hundreds of them in each room. Satellite imagery shows there are several buildings at both centres, meaning there may be far more migrants in each centre who are uncontactable.

Several of the migrants said they had been rounded up from their homes in various Saudi Arabian cities before being placed in the camps. Others are African refugees from war-torn Yemen.

Earlier this month, Human Rights Watch reported that Houthi forces used Covid-19 as a pretext to expel thousands of Ethiopian migrants into neighbouring Saudi Arabia.

Testimonies gathered by the NGO say that the Houthis killed dozens of Ethiopians and forced others at gunpoint over the Saudi border. Saudi border guards then fired on the fleeing migrants, killing dozens more.

“Saudi Arabia, a wealthy country, has long held undocumented migrants including many from the Horn of Africa in conditions that are so crowded, unsanitary, and appalling that migrants often emerge traumatised or sick,” said Mr Coogle.

“It’s fair to question whether Saudi authorities are purposefully allowing these detention conditions to exist in order to punish migrants,” he added.

The Sunday Telegraph approached the Saudi Arabian embassy in London for comment but had not received any at the time of going to press.

A representative of the Ethiopian government in the Middle East was also unsuccessfully approached for comment.

**Migrants’ names have been changed to protect their identity*

INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNATION RAINS DOWN ON SAUDI ARABIA AFTER TELEGRAPH INVESTIGATION INTO HELLISH DETENTION CENTRES

By Will Brown, Africa correspondent, Nairobi and Zecharias Zelalem

The Telegraph — September 1, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/international-condemnation-rains-saudi-arabia-telegraph-investigation/>

The Gulf state says it will investigate conditions as video evidence emerges showing migrants fighting back raw sewage.

Saudi Arabia has agreed to investigate following a *Sunday Telegraph* investigation which revealed the Gulf State is keeping hundreds if not thousands of African migrants locked in cramped and unhygienic detention centres as part of a drive to stop the spread of coronavirus.

Conditions in the centres are so bad that people are dying and the images smuggled out have been compared to those of slave camps. Today *The Telegraph* publishes video images from inside one of the detention centres. It shows raw sewage spilling across the floor in an area in which those detained have to sleep and eat.

“Please help us”, one of those in the video is heard pleading. “Watch this and do something for us,” says another.

The investigation, first published on Sunday, has sparked a whirlwind of condemnation and criticism around the world from human rights groups, politicians, and Black Lives Matters activists.

The British government said it was “very concerned” and the official opposition called for immediate action from the Saudi authorities.

“Emerging evidence of the shocking conditions in which African migrants are being held in Saudi detention centres is deeply disturbing and demands immediate action,” said Shadow Foreign Affairs Minister, Stephen Doughty.

“The Saudi Government must bring an immediate end to this appalling practice and permit access for independent health and human rights experts. It is vital that those

being detained are held in line with international migration law and treated with the dignity and compassion they deserve.”

“UK Government Ministers must immediately raise this worrying situation with their counterparts in Saudi Arabia, particularly in light of the country’s historically poor record on protecting and upholding human rights,” Mr Doughty added.

The story has sparked outrage across Africa and the Middle East, and has featured prominently on Al Jazeera and other Arabic media channels.

A spokesman for the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres told The Telegraph, said the UN was also investigating.

A spokesperson for the UN’s International Office of Migration (IOM) in Geneva said that they were “deeply concerned about the troubling images of Ethiopian migrants detained in Saudi Arabia, in apparently inhumane conditions.”

IOM added that the overcrowded, unsanitary centres raise human rights concerns, and warned they could be a “breeding ground” for fatal diseases. The Telegraph has located two of the detention centers and today published satellite images showing their exact location.

Graphic mobile phone images sent to the newspaper by migrants held inside the detention centres show dozens of emaciated men crippled by the heat lying half-naked in packed rows in small rooms with barred windows.

Many have not been outside for five months since they were rounded up by Saudi security forces in April as part of a drive to stop the spread of coronavirus.

One image, too graphic to publish, shows a young man hanged from a window grate. The adolescent killed himself after losing hope, say his friends.

Other migrants, some of whom display scars on their bodies and disfiguring skin infections on their faces, claim they are regularly beaten and racially abused by the prison guards.

Saudi Arabia, a member of the UN’s Human Rights Council, told The Telegraph in a statement that “the images are of course shocking and unacceptable to us as a country”.

The Saudi government said it was “looking into the state of all official government facilities in light of the allegations,” it added.

The statement, which was sent to the newspaper by the Saudi Arabian embassy in London, said: “If facilities are found to be lacking their needs will be addressed appropriately.”

Saudia Arabia sought to shift part of the blame for the scandal to Ethiopia, home to

many of those being held. “We believe there are about 20,000 Ethiopian immigrants who recently crossed the border into Saudi via Yemen and their repatriation is being negotiated with the Ethiopian government.

“Sadly, the Ethiopian authorities have refused their re-entry under the claim of not being able to provide adequate quarantine facilities upon their arrival,” Saudia Arabia added.

A high ranking Ethiopian minister denied the government had any knowledge of the dreadful conditions the migrants were being held in.

Mrs Tsion Teklu, Ethiopia’s Minister for Economic Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs, said that they had not received any reports from their embassies of abuse in the centres and were only made aware of the situation when The Telegraph’s article was published.

Mrs Teklu declined the opportunity to issue any formal reaction to the conditions for Ethiopian migrants in the centres but said Ethiopia would raise the issue with the Saudi government.

The African Union, which has long been criticised for standing up for the continent’s strongmen more than Africans themselves, was also approached for comment but none has been received.

EU PARLIAMENT CONDEMNS HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES IN SAUDI MIGRANT CAMPS AFTER TELEGRAPH INVESTIGATION

By Zecharias Zelalem and Will Brown, Africa correspondent, Nairobi

The Telegraph — October 8, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/eu-parliament-condemns-human-rights-abuses-saudi-migrant-camps/>

Vote kept top secret until last minute amid concerns of coercion.

The European Parliament has strongly condemned Saudi Arabia for holding tens of thousands of African migrants in slave-like Covid detention camps after The Telegraph exposed horrific conditions.

The vote to censure the kingdom comes a month after an investigation by this newspaper found thousands of men, women and children locked up to stop the spread of coronavirus were being forced to sleep and eat in their own faeces.

Harrowing footage captured on smuggled phones by the migrants in August shows hundreds of emaciated Ethiopian men at various stages of dehydration, heatstroke, and starvation.

Other photos show migrants with scars and wounds from beatings and torture and disfiguring skin infections. Some images, too graphic to publish, show the bodies of migrants who appear to have died from dehydration, disease or suicide.

The condemnation is a major blow to the Gulf kingdom's international standing.

The resolution was passed by members of the European Parliament (MEPs) in Brussels on Thursday afternoon, after a fiery debate where criticism rained down on the Gulf kingdom from across the European political spectrum.

"Imagine the cruelty of being put in detention camps with thousands and thousands, chained... and using cell floors as your bed. For migrant workers from Ethiopia in search for a better future, this is the day to day reality," said Samira Rafaela, a Dutch MEP.

"Saudi Arabia has spent billions on PR to try and convince the world it respects human rights," said Marie Arena, a Belgian MEP.

"We will not be fooled... this country does not know what human rights means," she said in an impassioned speech.

Urtasun Ernest, a Spanish MEP, said that the European Parliament wanted to send a clear message and reduce cooperation with Saudi Arabia, downgrading the EU delegation at the G20 summit in Saudi Arabia next month.

"It was clear that MPs shared the belief that the continuous abuse of Ethiopians in detention centres is unacceptable."

The Telegraph understands that the condemnation vote was kept top secret until the last minute because some EU officials feared they might be targeted by hackers.

One senior EU official said just 24 hours was enough time for powerful Saudi lobbyists to coerce some MEPs into stopping the condemnation in its tracks.

The draft version of the resolution contains a damning catalogue of egregious human rights abuse allegations by the regime of the Crown Prince, Muhammad Bin Salman.

The document calls on Saudi Arabia to "immediately end torture and other ill treatment" of tens of thousands of Ethiopian men, women and children who have been stuck in detention facilities there for months on end.

It calls for the immediate release of the migrants, demands an "independent and impartial investigation" into allegations of torture and deaths in the centres, and asks for EU representatives to be given access.

It also asks EU states to downgrade representation at the upcoming G20 summit, to avoid legitimising ongoing rights violations.

Saudi authorities pledged to investigate conditions at migrant detention centres in early September. But since then, migrants say they have been handcuffed to each other at the ankles, stripped naked and kept without food or water for 24 hours as punishment for trying to communicate with the outside world.

Last week, a report by the rights group Amnesty International said that inmates were subjected to electric shock torture and that pregnant women were also being detained in woeful conditions. The rights group said they had heard about the deaths of at least five children and newborns.

"It was evident for anyone who read the reports and watched the videos that the situation these poor migrants are in currently is unspeakably horrible," Urmas Paet, an Estonian MEP, who is understood to be the main architect of the resolution, told *the Telegraph*.

FIRST MIGRANTS RELEASED FROM SAUDI DETENTION CENTRES ARRIVE HOME AFTER TELEGRAPH INVESTIGATION

By Zecharias Zelalem and Will Brown, Africa correspondent, Nairobi
The Telegraph — January 27, 2021

The original publication is available via the following link:
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/first-migrants-released-saudi-detention-centres-arrive-home/>

Reports revealed how thousands of Ethiopian migrants were kept in shocking conditions in Saudi detention centres.

Almost a year after they were arrested and locked up in slave-camp like conditions in Saudi Arabia, tens of thousands of migrants will be repatriated to Ethiopia after a series of Telegraph investigations exposed the appalling conditions.

On Tuesday evening, the first group of 296 detainees was flown home to Addis Ababa. Photos published by Ethiopian state media show their joyous, exhausted faces as they marched off the plane.

“It’s as though our prayers are answered,” said 23-year-old Aynalem¹, who has been locked up at the Al Shumaisi detention centre near the holy city of Mecca since April. “I haven’t been outside in eight months. I feared I would only leave this place in a body bag.”

According to Ethiopian officials and state media, the country will now begin repatriating a thousand migrants each week from the centres. It is unclear what has prompted the move but international pressure has been mounting on both the Ethiopian and Saudi governments.

Last August, The Telegraph found that 10s of thousands of Ethiopian migrants had been rounded up and kept for months on end in sunless rooms and forced to sleep and eat in their own faeces as part of a Saudi policy to limit the spread of coronavirus.

Migrants in several centres spread out across the oil-rich kingdom told the paper

that they had been regularly beaten, tortured, starved of food and water and that some young men had died of disease and dehydration in the Arabian heat.

Using phones smuggled into the prisons migrants sent shocking photos and videos of their appalling living conditions to the newspaper on encrypted channels. The images of hundreds of emaciated young men, some of them with injuries from Saudi prison guards’ beatings, provoked global condemnation.

Shockingly, The Telegraph found that Ethiopian diplomats in Saudi Arabia tried to cover up their fellow citizens’ plight, most probably to avoid a damaging diplomatic fall out with a major investor.

The harrowing accounts of suicide, disease and torture led to an investigation by the United Nations chief. The accounts were confirmed by rights groups Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

The overwhelming weight of evidence eventually led to a vote of condemnation against Saudi Arabia in the EU Parliament. But despite the global outrage, accounts of starvation and brutal killings by prison guards have continued to emerge over the last few months as authorities conducted mass sweeps of the prisons to find inmates to find smuggled mobile phones.

The 296 migrants who arrived home on Tuesday are from Al Shumaisi, which holds at least 16,000 Ethiopian migrants. There are multiple other centres in Saudi Arabia holding Ethiopian migrants from many other African countries such as Nigeria, Somalia and Kenya.

“Overall, there are roughly 40,000 Ethiopian migrants ready to go back home,” Nebiyu Tedla, Ethiopia’s Deputy Consul General in Jeddah told The Telegraph.

“For now it will be 1,000 returnees per week,” Mr Nebiyu said. “But hopefully, we will be given the green light to increase the numbers.”

According to Ethiopia’s Deputy Consul Nebiyu Tedla, inmates held at the Jazan detention centre near the Yemen border would also be flown home. Jazan is notorious among inmates for its extremely violent guards and a higher chance of death.

The Telegraph managed to reach Aynalem on Tuesday with a phone that the prison guards had not spotted because the young man had hidden it in the toilet.

“On Saturday, someone from the [Ethiopian] Embassy came to see us,” he said. “He told us to prepare to go home and that our suffering would end soon.”

¹ Name has been changed to protect his identity

EXPERT'S MESSAGE



GWEN LISTER

Founder of The Namibian, Chair of the Namibia Media Trust
FJA Expert Council Member

“I’m honoured to have been part of the Fetisov Journalism Awards which have served to remind me once again of the fact that great investigative journalism continues to make a positive difference in all corners of the globe, despite the daunting threats it faces on various levels.

The job of a journalist never gets easier, and so it is imperative that we celebrate journalistic excellence and encourage those who are keeping true to the values of the craft, especially when we consider the critical importance of vigorous, ethical, independent investigative journalism to enable democracy, promote accountability in our deeply fractured world, and win back public trust.”

OUTSTANDING INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

SHORTLISTED STORIES



SHORTLISTED STORY

SERIES OF ARTICLES:

"How Does Iran Circumvent the Sanctions on Dual-Use and Military Goods in Europe?";

"Arms Embargo on Iran - from the Beginning of the Conflicts to Now";

"Shipping Fighter Jet Parts to Iran from a House in the UK";

"Covert Deals and Iran's Efforts to Buy Military Equipment from Germany".

Farzad Seifikaran, Nasim Roshanaei (Iran)



Farzad Seifikaran is an Iranian-Dutch journalist with more than 10 years of professional experience as a writer, journalist, editor, and book publisher. Most of his journalism work has focused on human rights, politics, and social activism in Iran. In 2015, Seifikaran was forced to leave his native Iran due to his political activism and his work publishing books on banned topics. He moved to the Netherlands, where he has been living as a political refugee for six years. Once in the Netherlands, Seifikaran continued his education with a degree in journalism. Since 2018 he has been working as a senior journalist at Zamaneh Media. Seifikaran has researched, written, and translated multiple print and digital publications, both from within and outside of Iran.



Nasim Roshanaei is an Iranian-Dutch journalist, sociologist, and former activist. While living in Iran, she studied Persian literature and worked several years as an editor. Roshanaei was forced to leave Iran in 2008 after being imprisoned for her political activism as a part of the leftist student movement. She has been living in the Netherlands as a political refugee since 2009. In 2013 Roshanaei began her current role as a journalist at Zamaneh Media, where she focuses on investigative journalism, politics, society, and women's issues. Throughout her career, Roshanaei has researched, written, and translated multiple print and digital publications, both from within and outside of Iran.

HOW DOES IRAN CIRCUMVENT THE SANCTIONS ON DUAL-USE AND MILITARY GOODS IN EUROPE?

By Farzad Seifikaran and Nasim Roshanaei

Radio Zamaneh — November 1, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://www.radiozamaneh.com/549109>

The international military equipment and dual-use goods procurement network of the Islamic Republic of Iran is an extensive network operating in countries from East Asia to Europe, North America, South America and North Africa. This includes companies and individuals who provide military and dual-use equipment to Iran through secretive and dangerous means.

Instead of prioritizing the livelihoods and well-being of its citizens while helping to bring peace to the Middle East, the Iranian regime has made extensive international efforts since 2006 to buy dual-use goods from Western countries, despite UN arms sanctions and EU restrictions on exports of certain goods. These efforts have been aimed at completing and advancing the nuclear program and acquiring advanced military technology and equipment. In addition to dual-use goods and equipment, Iran seeks to obtain a variety of military weapons, which are mainly procured in black markets. While some European countries can track and identify the complex networks secretly involved in this business, Iran's more hidden and covert business in these black markets are not easily traceable.

Dual-Use Equipment: Dual-use refers to equipment, goods, machinery, and items, including both products and technologies, that can be used for both peaceful (non-military) and military purposes.

Even though the EU supports the commitment to the JCPOA agreement and disagrees with the return of UN sanctions against Iran and the activation of the trigger mechanism by the United States, they have continued to impose restrictive rules on the purchase and export of dual-use goods and military equipment against Iran until 2023. However, due to differences in laws, types of sanctions, and law enforcement by agencies in export fields in different European countries, it is left up to governments and companies to trade equipment with Iran. In recent years, a pattern can be seen which has been repeated by the Iranian regime and Western countries.

The EU's restrictions on exports of dual-use equipment to Iran are ambiguous, and there are different interpretations of these laws. International media often use

the word “sanctions” when they refer to export restrictions on Iran. Quentin Michel, a professor of political science at the University of Liège in Belgium, disagrees with the use of the word “sanctions” for dual-use goods. He explains for Zamaneh why he believes there are no real sanction on dual-use goods:

“By this definition, if there are restrictive laws, of course, it will be more difficult to export, because you have to respect and commit to a specific process. It will be easier if you do not have rules. Also, any agreement between countries in this regard or any sanctions will slow down the export process. If there are approved restrictions by the EU, EU countries must implement them. But you will be surprised if you know about the differences between the countries’ restrictions and what dual-purpose goods each country has.”

According to Quentin Michel, the implementation of export control laws for dual-use goods and military equipment in EU countries is overly complex and has major differences. Additionally, Michel explains that no sanctions are applied to the economic activity of European companies and that these companies only must ask the government for a legal permission to sell certain goods:

“If the relevant dual-use goods are among these goods, the company will have to ask for a license from the national authorities to sell them. But some of these companies do not care about obtaining a license.”

Due to the wide range of dual-use goods and the complexity of export rules, as well as the profits of European countries as a large part of this lucrative business with Iran, Zamaneh asked Mark Akkerman, researcher and investigative journalist at the NGO Stop Arms Trade (Stop Wapenhandel) in the Netherlands, about the mechanism and process of illegal exports of European countries.

Akkerman tells Zamaneh that the export of dual-use goods is not a problem itself, but in principle, the export of certain dual-use equipment is banned under UN and EU sanctions:

“Export of particular types of commodities with dual-use to Iran are essentially banned under the UN and EU sanctions. The fact that such exports have been gone through is to some extent because EU countries with the permission to export weapons have a wrong or soft position toward Iran (and it seems those commodities have not been sanctions or their use in Iran has not been scrutinized enough) or there was a case of illegal mediation by companies.”

In the continuation of this research, there will be a summary about a few operations of smuggling dual-use equipment and weapons to Iran from Italy and Germany. In a series of joint studies by Zamaneh and Danwatch about the export of dual-use goods and equipment to Iran, such trades through Italy, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, Britain, and the United States will be covered in detail in separate articles. Another study also examined the export of large military weapons.

Differences in export laws of European countries

In 2007, the European Union imposed restrictions on exports and trade of dual-use

military equipment with Iran. The EU revised these regulations two years later, in 2009. These standards are legally imperative, but it is on the member states to choose their enforcement tools. Specifically, in Article 24 on dual-use equipment in the EU Regulation of 2009, member states are required to “take appropriate measures to ensure proper implementation” and to set “effective, proportionate and inhibitor” penalties for violations. Since the implementation of these laws and how they are enforced is the responsibility of countries, differences in the legal structure and culture of the member states of the EU affect how the laws are enacted. EU countries differ in six areas in this context:

- The first difference is in the rules and types of laws that EU member states have to control exports. Some countries, such as the Netherlands, prosecute such crimes under the General Economic (penal) crimes. Some others, like the UK, prosecute it under customs (penal) law, while other countries, such as Croatia, hold an option of using special export control laws.
- The second difference is in how much of this information is provided by countries in this case. Some countries, such as Germany and the United Kingdom, have enacted export control laws that provide a strict responsibility which means that it is more difficult to prevent prosecution by claiming to be unaware of the law.
- The third difference is the level and type of punishment that different EU countries have for such crimes. Whether the offense is classified as criminal or administrative influences the level of the punishment. In Cyprus, for example, the maximum penalty for intentionally violating export control laws is three years in prison, which is the minimum in the EU; while in Slovakia there are no prison penalties for export control offenses. In France, by contrast, the maximum prison sentence is 30 years. France has the highest penalty for such crimes in the EU.
- The fourth difference is about who is responsible for violating the export control laws of dual-use goods, whether it be individuals, institutions, or organizations. For instance, in the Netherlands, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom, both companies and individuals can be prosecuted. On the other hand, in Germany, it is not possible to prosecute a company.
- The fifth difference is regarding the different procedures and methods EU member states use to enforce their national laws. This can include the rules of criminal procedure that determine how a case is studied in a court. The authorities responsible for prosecuting such crimes also vary between countries. In addition, there are differences in the definitions of basic legal concepts in export control criminal cases, such as assistance and participation, effort, intent, negligence, and protection. There are also organizational differences in how authorities oversee detecting, investigating, and pursuing operations in different countries. In most EU countries, customs make the initial assessment. However in some countries, the customs office (often one part of the customs office) may conduct the entire investigation. In other countries, the responsibility for the investigation may be with another institution such as

the police, expert agencies, or intelligence and security services. In some cases, the prosecution may be even conducted by zones and districts, or by an expert unit.

- The sixth, and most important difference between EU countries, is that according to national priorities, different budgets are allocated to pursue export control of dual-use equipment.

Reference: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)

Italian “Lady in black” and weapons and dual-use equipment export to Iran

Anna Maria Fontana, nicknamed the “black lady” by Italian media for her Islamic clothing, was one of the main actors in the smuggling of weapons and dual-use equipment to Iran.

Fontana and her spouse, Mario Di Leva, had friendly relationships with senior Iranian authorities like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. According to the Italian newspaper *Il Mattino*, the couple traveled regularly to the Middle East, specifically to Iran and Libya. They lived intermittently in Tehran for 17 years. After converting to Islam, Mario di Leva changed his name to “Jafar” in respect of the sixth Shiite Imam.

Fontana also has had relations with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in recent years. She was involved in an international espionage case in 2006 to rescue two Israeli soldiers captured by Lebanese Hezbollah.

According to a 2019 report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), three Italian nationals were arrested on January 13, 2017 by the Italian Financial Police in Venice on a sentence issued by the Antimafia Investigative Direction (Direzione Investigativa Antimafia or DDA).

Annamaria Fontana and her husband Mario Di Leva, along with Andrea Pardi, CEO of the Italian Society of Helicopters (Società Italiana Elicotteri) – a company with expertise in the production of helicopters and new and used spare parts – have been charged with arms smuggling by a court. They were accused of sending dual-use equipment to Iran and ISIS supporters in Libya through an Iranian-based company between 2011 and 2015, as well as knowingly violating arms sanctions against Iran and Libya.

The three accused Italians’ illegal trade in Iran and Libya included the sale of Russian-made weapons, including anti-tank and surface-to-air missiles, helicopter spare parts, and different kinds of ammunition. According to the Italian news agency *Il Centro*, they were arrested by police before they could make their next deal. A Libyan national is the fourth accused person in this case.

Also, according to documents obtained by Italian attorney generals, Mario Di Leva intended to sell an ammunition factory to Iran. During interrogations, Di Leva admitted he was negotiating with the Ministry of Defense of the Islamic Republic to sell the machinery and technology needed to set up an ammunition factory.

According to the Italian news website, *Corriere del Mezzogiorno*, Pardi was sentenced to two years in prison, Di Leva to three years and eight months in prison and a fine of 8,000 euros, and Fontana to three years and six months in prison and a fine of 7,000 euros.

In addition to these three, six other people were arrested in Italy in March 2016, concerning the same judicial case in which four people were Iranian.

Italy has always had close political and economic relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran since the very beginning years of the revolution. Italy is Iran’s largest business partner in the European Union. During a meeting with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, in New York on October 25, 2016, current president of Iran Hassan Rouhani emphasized the friendly relations between Iran and Italy, and the development of economic and business relations between the two countries. Business relations between Iran and Italy in 2017 grew by 68% and the amount of trade between the two countries this year reached 2.4 billion and 400 million euros.

The business of Fontana and the other accused people in this case exposes the other side of the close and stable political-economic relations between Iran and Italy – a series of secret and hidden business relations to bypass the international arms sanctions against Iran.

Pieter D. Wezeman, a senior fellow at the Military Expenditure Program at SIPRI, believes that European countries were often aware about illegal trading cases and that law enforcement and their affiliates have worked to track and prevent them:

“Law enforcement agencies sometimes have succeeded locally [to prevent these trades]. In the cases that ended up in the courts, we can see that they really succeeded in arresting a few people who were involved in this illegal business. But for sure, Iran will also learn from its past activities. The Iranian authorities will change their network, and change the people they come to, and eventually the countries where they tried to buy the equipment they needed. Of course, they will try to find the weakest countries; countries where law enforcement agencies are less developed and have a higher potential for corruption.”

Pieter D. Wezeman emphasizes that there are different ways for Iran to purchase the equipment it needs. According to this expert, measuring the level of effort of European countries to prevent such activities is exceedingly difficult and complex.

Iran’s covert deals and uninterrupted efforts to procure military equipment from Germany

Iran has tried to acquire German dual-use technologies since concluding the nuclear deal (JCPOA) with the Western powers in July 2015. According to the German Domestic Intelligence Agency, German intelligence agents recorded 141 attempts by Iran to acquire technologies for “nuclear weapons development” in 2015, almost twice as many as the year earlier. Two-thirds of these cases, or about 100 cases, involved Iranian institutions.

According to the Financial Times, “Iran often targets so-called ‘dual-use’ technology that can be used simultaneously for non-military and military purposes.”

Also, according to Reuters News Agency, 32 attempts by Iran to buy equipment from Germany were detected and are either likely or definitively related to developing their nuclear and mass destruction weapons in 2016. In addition to attempts by the Iranian government to purchase such equipment, in 2012 the German Federal Attorney General arrested four German citizens suspected of exporting “industrial valves” to Iran in violation of EU sanctions. According to Reuters, the delivery of these goods was done in shipments during 2010 and 2011, and were part of an order of several million euros. In order to prevent the tracking of illegal exports of these goods to Iran, the shipments were declared to be exported to Azerbaijan and Turkey.

According to a report by SIPRI in 2019, the final user of these products was MITEC, the Modern Industries of Technology Company in Iran. This company was responsible for building the IR-40 heavy-water reactor at the Arak nuclear power plant, which is why this plant is on the list of EU’s nuclear sanctions against Iran.

In 2011, Hossein Tanideh, a key person in Iran’s nuclear program abroad, with the help of Bekasar Industrietechnik GmbH, a German company that belongs to two other Iranian-German people named Gholam Ali and Kianzad Kazemi (a father and his son), bought industrial valves and sent them to Iran through a company registered in Turkey.

Hossein Tanideh had introduced himself to the Germans as a “refinery manager”. According to a witness in a court, the German intelligence service had been aware of Hossein Tanideh’s actions since 2009 and of his involvement in buying German-made nuclear valves for export to Iran. However, no serious action was taken to prevent these activities until 2012.

In February 2015, Iran Watch, a Washington based website that monitors Iran’s missile, nuclear, and chemical weapons programs, wrote that initial discussions of the shipments began in 2007, when an Iranian named Hossein Tanideh contacted Rudolf Mayer, owner of a German company called MIT-Weimar, to purchase industrial valves. The first shipments were prepared in October 2010 and sent to Iran. The initiator of the deal, Tanideh, fled Germany to Turkey. He was listed by the United States in a Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List (SDN) in July 2012, and his assets were frozen by the US Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). He is known as part of the procurement network of Iran’s nuclear program and is sanctioned by the United States for his connections.

According to “Valves for Arak”, a report by two researchers named Daniel Salisbury and Ian J. Stewart, Hossein Tanideh was arrested by Turkish authorities in January 2013 and his request for extradition to Germany was not granted. The Iranian State News Agency (ISNA) also wrote about Hossein Tanideh and his arrest in Turkey on August 6, 2013:

“It is alleged that Hossein Tanideh is wanted by Interpol for purchasing the equipment

needed for Iran’s nuclear ballistic missile program.”

According to ISNA, Tanideh was finally tried in court by the intercession of Hakan Fidan, the head of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization. While the case was being considered, Tanideh would be conditionally and temporarily released and a lawsuit would be filed against him in Turkey.

Finally, Rudolf Mayer was sentenced to three years suspended imprisonment and a fine of 106 thousand euros, Gholam Ali Kazemi to four years in prison and a fine of 250 thousand euros, Kianzad Kazemi to two years and nine months suspended imprisonment, and Hamid Khoran (an Iranian-German businessman who was an interface between the Kazemis and Meyer) to 18 months of conditioned prison by a German court.

Perspective for the export of dual-use goods to Iran after the lifting of arms sanctions

Despite sanctions and restrictions imposed on Iran by the UN and the EU for exporting weapons and dual-use goods, in recent years some European companies have risked exporting such goods to Iran through various channels. The benefits of these illegal trades seem to outweigh the potential risks.

Companies that try to bypass the EU laws and keep trade with Iran secret often do so through fictitious or nominal companies in third countries to make it harder for regulators and law enforcement agencies in their home countries to track them down.

In response to how such transactions have taken place in various European countries despite restrictions, Pieter D. Wezeman told Zamaneh:

“Many law enforcement agencies in the European Union believe that export control organizations are trying to figure out how Iranian institutions, often through fictitious companies from countries other than Iran, can order their specific equipment, materials or parts that can be used by the Iranian arms industry to produce weapons. Tracing these cases is difficult. Europe’s borders are open. Iran’s arms industry and Iranian purchasing agencies have developed the skills and networks to achieve such goods during the years.”

The UN arms sanctions against Iran was lifted on October 18, 2020, but questions remained unanswered: Will the lifting of sanctions make European companies more willing to sell dual-use weapons and equipment to Iran? Will conditions be facilitated for Iran to be able to legally procure the equipment that they need?

Frank Slijper, who leads the arms trade project at the PAX Peace and Disarmament Organization in the Netherlands, told Zamaneh that the situation would not change much once the arms sanctions are lifted. Regarding how European countries work, he says:

“It makes no difference now for European companies and their exports to Iran. The European arms sanctions will remain in place, at least until 2023. After that, the results of the nuclear deal between Iran and the other parties show what the EU will decide and do.”

Pieter D. Wezeman responded to the question in somewhat similar way:

“No, the situation will not change a lot. The European Union will continue to control its exports to Iran. There may no longer be a formal UN sanction, but a collective agreement on allowing arms or dual-use equipment to be exported to Iran is not acceptable in the current situation. And this has to do with how Iran uses its military weapons, because it increases Iran’s influence in the Middle East to achieve Iran’s specific goals in the region. These goals are not in line with what the European Union and the United States intend to support.”

While there is no clear perspective on dealing with military weapons in Iran, and experts believe that the situation will not change quickly, officials in the Islamic Republic see the end of arms sanctions as an important achievement of the JCPOA: an achievement that paves the way for unrestricted weapons trade from “every source.”

Hassan Rouhani had previously said that Iran had nothing to achieve from the JCPOA nuclear deal. However on October 14, 2020, as the end of the arms sanctions approached, he described lifting the sanctions as one of the benefits of the JCPOA and addressed the deal’s opponents:

“Those who ask what the JCPOA has done for us, this is one of its benefits.” We have lifted the arms sanctions, and from Sunday we can buy and sell weapons from anyone we would like.”

The day after the end of the arms sanctions, Amir Hatami, the Minister of Defense of the Islamic Republic, stated that the country has advanced militarily and has increased demands of weapon purchases:

“Many countries came to us a year ago and we talked together. The Islamic Republic is ready for any sale and purchase of weapons, and of course we will sale them more widely.”

This is political rhetoric. On the other hand, the United States, in addition to its rhetoric by unilaterally withdrawing from the JCPOA and reinstating UN Security Council’s sanctions against Iran, has used all its efforts to prevent arms deals with Tehran. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued a statement on Sunday, October 18, 2020 – coinciding with the end of the arms sanctions on Iran – announcing that UN sanctions against Iran, including the arms sanction, would be returned on Monday, October 19, 2020.

On the same topic, Pompeo said:

“The United States is completely ready to use its internal authority to punish any person or entity that assists in the supply, sale or transfer of standard weapons to or from Iran, as well as those who provide technical training, financial and service support and other assistance related to such weapons.”

Following the implementation of the JCPOA agreement and the subsequent adoption of Resolution 2231, all UN sanctions against Iran, apart from the arms sanctions, were lifted. The arms sanctions were also lifted through the conditional solution that if five years after the JCPOA the International Atomic Energy Agency

(IAEA) verifies that Iran has no undeclared nuclear activity, the arms embargo would be lifted. Also, during this period of five years, other countries were able to legally trade arms with Iran with the permission of the Security Council, but no country has done so.

The end of the UN arms sanctions does not necessarily mean facilitating the use of dual-use and military equipment for Iran, as EU exports restrictions continue to remain until 2023 and can also be extended. Given US pressure and unilateral sanctions against Iran, other countries will be cautious and Iran’s options will be limited to Russia and China.

Now that the arms sanctions against Iran have been lifted, if the government continues to face obstacles, will it use the same methods to purchase its dual-use goods and the weapons? Although it is difficult to predict what the Iranian government will do, continuing the legal transactions or smuggling of weapons and dual-use technologies means spending huge sums to develop a nuclear and missile program. This is notable given that the breadline for a family of four has been reached to 10 million tomans in October 2014.

The contentious political discourse of the Iranian regime and their nuclear ambitions have led to widespread economic sanctions, which will mainly press the citizens, the majority of whom have no role in the ambitions of Iran’s power-seeking regime. The bellicosity and domination of the Iranian regime in the region must be considered, as well as the costly payments in vicarious wars, rent capitalism, and systematic corruption within the country. The international sanctions, which are the result of the Iranian regime’s nuclear expansion, have given the dictatorship of Iran an excuse to justify mismanagement, inefficiency, structural corruption, and the suppression of any freedom-seeking voice. Ultimately, the main responsibility of a government towards its citizens should be to establish peace, welfare, social justice, and freedom for all.

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SHORTLISTED STORY

BLOOD ON UNIFORMS SERIES

Kemi Busari (Nigeria)



Kemi Busari is the Editor of Dubawa, West African independent fact-checking and verification platform under the Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism. Aside this role, Kemi is an established investigative journalist in Nigeria with traceable impacts and years of experience in covering corruption, human rights issues, public procurement among others. As an expert journalism consultant, he has trained and mentored thousands of journalists to produce consequential reports on issues facing his continent. Kemi has received several recognitions for his works including the Free Press Awards (Newcomer of the Year) and two-time runner-up for the West Africa Media Excellence Award.

BLOOD ON UNIFORMS (1): INSIDE EXTRA-JUDICIAL KILLINGS BY POLICE OFFICERS ENFORCING COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

By Kemi Busari

Premium Times — March 1, 2021

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/445952-blood-on-uniforms-1-inside-extra-judicial-killings-by-police-officers-enforcing-covid-19-lockdown.html>

At least five people were shot dead while many others sustained gunshot injuries from police shootings in a Kaduna community.

By Thursday, April 9, 2020, ten days after Nigeria entered a partial lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Nigerian security officials had extra-judicially killed 13 people while enforcing the curfew – the virus had only claimed six lives by then. By May 4, when the government eased the lockdown, about 20 persons had been killed in similar circumstances. For three months, investigative journalist Kemi Busari followed the trails of these arbitrary killings which have left many families devastated, with no hope of justice.

The journey between Layin Tanki, where Sani Umar lives, and his father's residence at Sabon Garin Nasarawa, both at Trikania, Kaduna, takes only six minutes. Being the breadwinner of his extended family, Mr Umar frequently visited his father and other relatives. His intention, on April 4, 2020, was to do the routine.

He was about three minutes into the journey, by a google map estimation, when he was caught in a binge of gunfire unleashed by police officers at Bakin Dogo junction, the intersection of Gwagwada Road and Hakimi Road, just close to the railway line. Multiple slugs penetrated his cranial bones, smashing and exposing the internal organs and dismembering the skull.

Mr Umar did not complete the journey on the familiar road. Instead, remains of his shattered skull, packed in a black plastic bag, were sent to his father – then tears followed.

Amid the bedlam that engulfed Trikania that day, another body fell at Wakili Road. That was Aliyu Abubakar, a teenager. The bullet entered through his chest, tearing first his pectoralis muscle before rupturing the upper right pairs of his vertebrosteral ribs and ultimately his lungs. The 18-year-old was pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital.

Then, 31-year-old Musa Aliyu was shot at close range, about 10 metres to the front door of his family house at Dokaje Street. The bullet entered through his vertebrochondral ribs; leaving him with no chance at surviving. He died in pains some two hours after.

One street away, a fourth body fell to the hail of bullets. Yusuf Mukhtar was shot multiple times right at the door of his house at Hakimi Road. He did not survive the bullet that entered first through his chest, rupturing some life-holding organs, and then at his hand, tearing the hand from other parts of the body.

A fifth person, which PREMIUM TIMES could not trace despite efforts, was shot dead in the gunfire that lasted about one hour, bringing the fatalities to five. Residents say the fifth victim, a male, does not reside in the area.

Apart from the five dead, six others – Ibrahim Abdullahi, Isah Saleh, Mujahid Saminu, Isah Ibrahim (Al-Amin), Abdul Abass and Mohammed Mohammed – suffered various degrees of gun-shot injuries during the unexpected onslaught carried out by police officers on April 4, 2020, at Sabon Garin Nasarawa Trikania area of Kaduna State.

Connecting the dots

Five dead, six injured and a permanent scar left in the hearts of loved ones. But, what led to this offensive?

The popular Monday Market holds on the fringes of Kakuri in Kaduna South Local Government Area of the state. Due to proximity, residents of Trikania in Chikun local government also join in the trading, every Monday. The two communities, existing in different local governments, are only separated by a railway track.

March 31, 2020, was another market day but owing to a dusk-to-dawn curfew imposed by the state government to curb the spread of COVID-19 which by then the state governor, Nasir El-Rufai, had tested positive for, residents could not trade as usual at the market.

Although the government only announced a temporary relaxation from 3 p.m. Wednesday, April 1 to Thursday, April 2, residents of Sabon Trikania still felt the need to stock up groceries two days after, April 4. A make-shift market was established at Bakin Dogo junction.

Buying and selling started early and on a peaceful note. Residents said members of Sabon Garin Nasarawa local community security, officially named the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), were on hand, as early as 8 a.m., to ensure compliance with COVID-19 protocols.

Some hours into trading, members of Makera CJTF, from Kaduna South jurisdiction, came to the market to disperse the buyers and sellers. They were resisted by the youth in the community.

Usman Muhammed, the General Commander, Sabon Garin Nasarawa CJTF, said he considers the move by the Makera CJTF as surprising as the unwritten rule is that

‘when we (CJTF of one area) want to go (to) another area, we’ll let the JTF in that area know.’ But the Makera CJTF did not inform of their operation that day, he added.

The General Commander of Makera CJTF, Muhammed Halliru, would not comment but directed PREMIUM TIMES enquiries to the chairman of the outfit.

The chairman, Alhassan Dahiru, said he was not aware of the killings when, in January 2021, he was asked questions about the role his men played.

About one hour after the initial resistance at the market, the Makera CJTF came again, this time in the company of the Divisional Police Officer (DPO), Kakuri Police Station, Zubairu Abubakar. Witnesses said he addressed the traders and was assured of compliance with COVID-19 rules before he left unsatisfied.

Assault

Not long after his exit, police officers attached to Kakuri Police Station returned. The assault started, shortly after midday, with the police shooting tear gas into the make-shift market but resistance from traders and residents did not work this time. The defiance was met with maximum force by the police officers who not only shot to disperse but hunted some residents down to their houses. All hell was let loose.

By the time the dust settled, about 11 people were writhing in blood. Of the 11, one died instantly, three survived for a few hours but died eventually. Six were critically injured with gunshot wounds, among them a 9-year-old boy.

PREMIUM TIMES could not get details of one fatal victim, who was said to be residing at a faraway location.

Although the police, in a statement shortly after the incident shifted the blame to the CJTF, evidence and accounts of witnesses counter this narrative.

Nine months after this incident, family members of the deceased and residents could only hold on to the memories of their lost loved ones – sad memories.

Distraught by what had become their pandemic, survivors of the April 4 shooting in Sabon Garin Nasarawa feel only pains. These memories become more excruciating as there appears to be no hope of justice.

‘Police officer killed my boy, threatened to shoot me’

Officially, Sabon Garin Nasarawa CJTF has 177 members. Musa Aliyu was one of them until his death. The 30-year-old worked full time at the Kakuri Makera branch of Eurofoam in Kaduna. He was in the bathroom when he heard the sounds of gunshots. A moment later, he was further jolted by the sight of two strangers who ran into his family house at Dokaje Street to take refuge.

After a slight interrogation, emboldened by his membership of the CJTF, Mr Aliyu stepped out to find out what was going on. He never returned. He was just about 10 metres away from the entrance of his family house when he was shot.

The shot, fired by a yet unknown officer, who was said to be chasing some people, pierced his vertebrochondral ribs. Blood gushed out in an instant. Fleeing residents who knew him were the first to come to his aid. His weakened body was hastily dragged on to a motorbike; one resident blocked the injured section with a cloth to prevent more bleeding. He was rushed to Ashmed Specialist Hospital, about 500 metres away.

Upon sighting his injured son, Ali Banki said he rushed in to dress up with the hope of going to the hospital. He could not do that without confrontation, he recalled. He shook his head in sadness as he narrated the events of the day.

“I see (saw) one police here, he laid down, everybody was running but he laid there...I couldn’t see his name. He told me ‘go inside’. I said to him? In front of my house? You kill my boy you still want to kill me? Go ahead, shoot me too,” Mr Banki said of his encounter with a police officer he met before rushing to the hospital.

On getting to the hospital, there was no doctor to attend to the injured, then another journey to another hospital – Smart Hospital. There, he was promptly attended to but he had lost a lot of blood.

By this time, Mr Aliyu’s bloodshot eyes had started to close, his breathing difficult – then he gave up. All efforts to revive him were not successful. He was buried the following day.

‘Bodies falling’, teenagers killed in cold blood

While scampering for his life, Ibrahim Abdulamid, a nurse, resident in Trikania, recalls seeing bodies fall. He said prefers the community was hit by COVID-19 than experiencing the onslaught by the police officers.

“That very day, what the police did in this community, they were more dangerous than coronavirus at that specific time,” he said.

Aliyu Abubakar and Yusuf Muhktar were both 18. They were both Senior Secondary School (SSS) 3 students of Government Day Secondary School, Kakuri and they were both slated to write the secondary school leaving exams in 2020. They both aspired to become soldiers to defend their country; aspirations that would no longer materialise.

Slugs from yet-to-be-identified officers halted their dreams, just a few minutes apart on April 4, 2020.

It took some efforts to get Abubakar Aliyu (Aliyu Abubakar’s father) to narrate the incident of his son’s death, and when he did, his tone was filled with vile. For him, it is justice or nothing. His malcontent is understandable, given the circumstance with which the ‘child he loves most’ was snatched from him by the people employed and paid to protect him.

The aged man had gone to the market like many other residents on April 4. Around noon on that Saturday, the sad news came in.

“I came back from the market where we were chased when a boy came running and told me that “your son Abba has been shot”, he narrated, struggling to hold back tears. “At that time, Abba’s (Aliyu’s) corpse was brought to me. It felt like a tale when I was told that it was the police that shot Abba.”

What was brought to Mr Abubakar was a lifeless body with a bullet-ridden chest. The bullets had already damaged his lungs making passage of oxygen into cells an impossibility.

A bewildered Mr Abubakar could not come to terms with his son’s death without a fight. His first instinct was to take him to a hospital and off they zoomed to Ashmed Hospital. On getting to the hospital, his death was confirmed as having occurred barely an hour ago.

Mr Abubakar said he will never remain the same. “My mother passed away, but I did not feel so much pain like his passing, because he does anything I tell him to,” he said.

Before their untimely deaths, Aliyu Abubakar and Yusuf Muhktar were friends, they both loved football which they played at the popular Bakin Dogo field, just by the railway. What more do they share? They died the same day, almost the same time.

Muhktar was shot several times. He was in his family residence in Hakimi Road when the police officers went on a rampage. Right by the door of the house, he was shot first on his chest and then his hand. The bullets that hit Muhktar ripped off his hands.

His brother, Aliyu Muhammad, heard the gunshots but had to take refuge inside the house. When the assault finally subsided and Muhktar was brought into the house, he had already lost several pints of blood. His hands ripped off, chest ridden of cavities, he was in excruciating pain and it was only a matter of time before he was expected to die. Nevertheless, he was rushed to the hospital.

There was little the medics at the Al-Ramadan Nursing and Maternity Home could do. Muhktar was dead before arrival. The medical report stated that he suffered a ‘significant gunshot to the chest.’

Relatives described Muhktar as a ‘hustler’. While not in school or playing ball, the teenager engaged in carpentry, which he already learnt to a professional level. At other times, he was a rider and even a washer.

“Sincerely, he is a jovial boy, who believes(d) in hard work and relates(d) to (with) people well. He once rode a tricycle and sometimes stayed late at night to wash the tricycle. This is aside from his carpentry. Sincerely, he is (was) a hustler!” said Aliyu.

Umar never made it to the hospital

Unlike others, Sani Umar did not have the privilege of being taken for treatment nor a befitting burial. He was a regular at his father’s residence being the sole

breadwinner. He left his home on April 4, 2020, to visit his father before he was killed. Pictures taken afresh after his death shows a smashed skull crammed in a black plastic bag and a lifeless body.

While the other three dead were taken for burial the following day, on April 5, Mr Umar's burial could not be delayed due to the body's untidiness and the potential stink it could ooze overnight. He was immediately taken for burial. Mr Umar suffered more. His disintegrated skull still had to be taken for a shave to enable proper documentation.

"I was in the market seated, then my (other) son called me and said Sani has been killed," said Babangida Umar, Mr Umar's ageing father. "He was shot on the head and it broke open. We had to fetch his brain in a polythene sack. When we were going to wash the corpse, we had to tie the head with a wrapper before clothing, taking him to the graveyard."

Given his tenacious lifestyle, one would have wished he was still alive to fulfil his dreams. Although a welder, Mr Umar still sought formal education even in his 30s. Braving the shame of sitting in the same classroom alongside teenagers, he finished his secondary school education in 2019 at the age of 32.

What now remains of Messrs Musa, Sani, Muhktar and Aliyu, once beacons of hope for their families, is 6-feet of earth where each of them was interred. The four suffered gruesome deaths by any sense of imagination. PREMIUM TIMES could not publish gory pictures of these victims alongside this copy as they require a prior warning before viewing.

Horrid images gathered in the course of this investigation can be viewed in a separate folder via a separate link on the PREMIUM TIMES website.

Apart from these four, residents claim a fifth victim, a man, who resides far away was also caught up in the carnage. A photograph of the victim shared with PREMIUM TIMES shows an elderly man, clad in white babariga (traditional clothing) but we could not independently verify.

"He doesn't live here," some residents said in chorus. "His people have taken him (his corpse) away so we don't know where he is," Ibrahim Aliyu added.

This newspaper is still making efforts to contact the family members. We call on anyone who has a lead to reach out to us.

Bullets, deaths, survivals

Shooting on April 4 started at Bakin Dogo, around the crossroad that joins Gwagwada Road and Hakimi Road, the location of the makeshift market, but soon spread to other streets as gun-wielding police officers chased people.

On Hakimi Road, about 150 metres to the west by-pass, then 9-year-old Ibrahim Al-Amin was running an errand when two bullets hit him at opposite sides of his chest.

The bullets penetrated through his pectoralis, rupturing his ribs in the process. His two hands became temporarily paralysed. His dying body was found inside the culvert close to his house.

The first landing place for the boy, who had become unconscious, was Agwa Hospital. Here, the doctors revived him, stabilised his breathing and placed him on a drip. He was referred to Barau Dikko Teaching Hospital for further treatment as the private hospital lacked the facility to remove the bullets.

From there, he was referred to two other government hospitals, which both rejected him before the family settled for a private hospital. At Smart Hospital, Al-Amin was given emergency treatment but something else would later deter his further treatment.

"The next day, when the doctor arrived, he said he will not touch the boy till we deposit N30,000," said Binta Ibrahim, his mum, now recounting the horrible experience with more ease nine months after. "After much struggle, we managed to pay the money before the bullets were removed."

Mrs Ibrahim said the family paid N105,000 plus other unrecorded expenses to see Al-Amin alive today. His story was similar to that of Ibrahim Abdullahi, another survivor.

By the evening of April 4, news had already spread around Sabon Garin Nasarawa that casualty figures had risen to six. The sixth was 22-year-old Abdullahi, a student of the Kaduna State Polytechnic.

A bullet that penetrated his chest and forcefully exit his back threw him lifeless on Gwagwada Road axis of Trikania. Mr Abdullahi was lucky the bullet spared his spinal cord. He said he saw a policeman shoot him. "He wanted to shoot me again when my mum come (came) and drag me down."

Mr Abdullahi would later spend hours at the hospital to regain consciousness and days to have his body mended.

Police complicit

Of the six victims (fatal and survivors) captured in this investigation, four were shot at close range, one shot at the head and the last shot at the ribs. Four were shot multiple times.

Shooting at close range, multiple times and at delicate areas suggest only one thing; the police acted out of annoyance in the confrontation and planned to kill, said a retired inspector of the Nigeria Police Force who analysed the situation.

The inspector, who does not want to be named for fear of victimisation, said even if they were provoked, the officers ought to deploy tactical withdrawal and then reinforce to calm irking nerves.

"It is when you're being shot or attacked by dangerous weapons and you don't have

any other alternative that you're allowed to shoot as a policeman," he said. "Even at that, you can't shoot in the head or chest, you're to shoot at the leg. But you know in most cases, police will lie that they aimed at the leg."

Although the 2020 Police Act is silent on the rules guiding the use of firearms, the Use of Force Order 237, which subsists as reference legislation, corroborates the former cop's analysis.

The order authorises police officers to "only use (as last resort) objectively reasonable force, proportional to the threat or urgency of the situation, when necessary" and in this context, "only when 12 or more people remain violently assembled beyond a reasonable time after the reading of the proclamation, and that the persons conduct may lead to imminent death or serious injury to the police or other persons."

The order notes further that "indiscriminate firing into a crowd is always unlawful" and officers must account for any use individually as stipulated Sections 25, 298 Criminal Code Act 1990. In cases when officers' use of force leads to death or injury, such case is open to investigation by the court and such officer is liable under the Criminal Code.

Some bullets retrieved from the scene of the shooting were sighted by PREMIUM TIMES but the retired inspector said it is difficult to trace to individual cops as Nigeria lacks a register of ammunition and usage.

Blood, bullets yet no justice

The attack has mostly been kept away from the media with only a few reports based on a press statements existing as reference. In the statement, the Kaduna Police Public Relations Officer, Mohammed Jalige, said the investigation was ongoing "while seven had been arrested".

But 10 months after, Mr Jalige could not provide details of the investigation.

None of the officers deployed to the scene of the attack was subjected to internal probe nor was there any prosecution as stipulated by the law. Mr Jalige asked for more time to provide answers to our enquiry but never got back and did not reply subsequent calls and messages.

PREMIUM TIMES also reached out to the state Commissioner of Police, Umar Muri, who directed enquiries to Mr Jalige.

The DPO of Kakuri Police Station, where the assailant officers were attached, at first said he was not aware of the killings. He later said he would require a 'clearance' from the state command to comment on the issue.

None of the loved ones of Messrs Umar, Aliyu, Muhktar and Sani would ever be pacified by this injustice. Apart from grieving the loss of their loved ones, they are further dejected by the fact that no move for justice was initiated 10 months after.

They said there was no contact from anyone except for the effort by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) in May 2020 to document the events.

The Kaduna State Coordinator of the commission, Gwar Terngu, said details of the documentation were sent to the headquarters in Abuja for further action. But it is 10 months now and there has been no response.

Denials still pervade the horrible killings, accusing fingers are still being pointed, relevant agencies still tardy in their responsibilities but these will not deter the families of the deceased from clamouring for justice. They want the trigger-happy officers brought to book and some compensation paid for their losses.

Umar Babangida was downcast by the picture of his son's disintegrated body towards the end of the interview but showed fury when asked his demands.

"I want the government to arrest these people and charge them. If that's not done, then justice is not served," he said.

But a time-taking legal process Nigeria is known for will not do for Abubakar Aliyu. "Those who killed them should also be killed," he said adding that although this will never bring back his Abba, "it has to be done quickly."

BLOOD ON UNIFORMS (2):

<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/446676-blood-on-uniforms-2-no-justice-for-inmates-killed-by-nigerian-prison-officials.html>

BLOOD ON UNIFORMS (3):

<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/447496-blood-on-uniforms-3-in-nigerias-south-east-no-justice-for-people-killed-during-covid-19-lockdown.html>

BLOOD ON UNIFORMS (4):

<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/448113-blood-on-uniforms-4-policewoman-killed-by-policeman-soldier-shoots-man-dead.html>

BLOOD ON UNIFORMS (5):

<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/448933-blood-on-uniforms-5-10-year-old-dead-after-police-raid-on-jigawa-market.html>

SHORTLISTED STORY

CHAVISMO INC. THE GEARS OF BOLIVARIAN CAPITALISM

María Sol Lauría Paz, Iván Ruíz, Luis Fernando Cantoral,
David Bernal, José Bautista García, Alberto Alonso,
Jessica Carrillo, Octavio Enríquez, Suhelis Tejero,
María Fernanda Sojo, Santiago Sánchez, Mildred Rojas

Chavismo Inc. The gears of Bolivarian capitalism is a transnational journalistic production of Transparencia Venezuela, local chapter of Transparencia Internacional, the Latin American Platform of Journalism CONNECTAS and the Rebel Alliance investigates (ARI). Chavismo INC is a transnational investigation that tracked the million-dollar flows of oil income money that was transferred out of Venezuela under the Chávez and Maduro administrations in the last 20 years, mostly for money laundering and corruption-related operations. Published in a multimedia special, it contains a large database and ten reports from ten Central and Latin American countries, which reveals the international projection of the Venezuelan case.

Journalists: Iván Ruíz (Argentina), Luis Fernando Cantoral (Bolivia), David Bernal (El Salvador), José Bautista García and Alberto Alonso (Spain), Jessica Carrillo (United States), Octavio Enríquez (Nicaragua), Suhelis Tejero (Dominican Republic), María Fernanda Sojo (Venezuela), Sol Lauría (Panama), Santiago Sánchez (Uruguay).

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Sol Lauría is an investigative journalist covering power, human rights and corruption from Panama. Founding member and general editor of Concolón, she has been working and collaborating with media in Latin America, the United States, Europe and in global initiatives such as Panama Papers, Paradise Papers and Chavismo INC. for more than 15 years. She directed the specials ConexiónPTY, Panama Files and Duelo, among others. Her reports have earned her several national and international recognitions. Among others, she is part of the team that won the Pulitzer Prize. She's an academic professor at the CIDE (Mexico) and member of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ).



Suhelis Tejero Puntos has more than 20 years of experience in economic journalism, with an emphasis in public finance issues. Tejero Puntos has a degree in Social Communication from the Central University of Venezuela and a master's degree in Research in Journalism: speech and communication from the Complutense University of Madrid. She has been the Economics editor of Dominican newspaper Diario Libre and a member of the editorial board of the journalistic platform for the Americas Connectas. She has also been a contributor to the news agencies France Presse (France), Europa Press (Spain) and for the newspapers El Universal (Venezuela) and El Comercio (Ecuador). She has received recognition for his participation in various journalistic investigations about corruption, human rights, environment and international cooperation.



David Bernal. Journalist since 2006. Started as a Sports journalist focused on applying research and data journalism. Applied the access to public information, data collection and research in multimedia environments on the traditional media. Currently judicial editor at La Prensa Gráfica, also university professor at the journalism faculty, and participates in collaborative journalism networks.



Octavio Enríquez is a nicaraguan journalist who writes about public corruption, state of law and humans rights. He built his profesional career since 2000. Now he is an experienced reporter and editor in topics about his country and with a vision about America Latina. He won Ortega y Gasset award in 2011, Spain king journalism prize in 2014 and also he's three-time winner of the Inter American Press Association award . He is writing for Confidencial, a digital newspaper of Nicaragua, and CONNECTAS, an important initiative to produce and share information in the region.



José Bautista García is an investigative journalist based in Madrid specialized in economics, corruption and migrations. Currently, he works for The New York Times and coordinates the Journalism team at Fundación por Causa. Previously, he has worked for other media outlets and organizations, including La Marea (Spain), Agencia EFE, OCCRP, Folha de São Paulo and CEPAL. He holds a double master's degree at Sorbonne Paris and the ESCP Business School.



María Fernanda Sojo P. is a Venezuelan journalist with experience in the coverage of economy, finance and transnational corruption. She is currently a member of the Research Unit of the Venezuelan chapter of Transparency International. She worked in the Economics section of the daily El Nacional and coordinated special supplements in the media. She collaborated in transnational journalism projects with the Latin American platform CONNECTAS and media such as El Espectador (Colombia); Diario Libre (Dominican Republic); Confidencial (Nicaragua); La Prensa Gráfica (El Salvador) and El Pitazo (Venezuela). She participated in special awards by the Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa, SIP and the Instituto de Prensa y Sociedad, Ipys Venezuela.



Jessica Carillo is a Venezuelan journalist with experience in digital and printed media in Venezuela and the United States. While living in Venezuela she worked for: El Universal, El Nacional and Tal Cual - in the latter she was a political reporter and the World News Editor. In New York, she worked for Scientific American Magazine, Diario Las Américas and was part of an investigative project (PorqueSoyFlores) that was presented in Colpin 2018.



Iván Ruiz is an award-winning investigative journalist specialized in corruption, money laundering and health businesses. After a decade working as political correspondent at La Nación, one of the largest newspapers of Argentina, he is part of the Infobae's Investigation & Data Unit. Many officials were fired for his investigations and a lot of court cases beginning after his publications. Iván also works as editor of Connectas for transnational investigations in Latin America and is a current member of the International Consortium of Journalists (ICIJ). He took part in many collaborative projects such as FinCEN Files, The Implant Files and Panama Papers, which earned him a shared Pulitzer Prize (2016). Ivan won the Data Journalism Award (2013), Fopea Argentinian National Prize (2017 and 2020) and received an honorable mention in Colpin (2019). He has published with La Nación Data many stories regarding with Covid-19 pandemic.



Santiago Sánchez is an Uruguayan journalist based in Montevideo. Specialized in political issues, Sánchez worked in the daily newspaper La Diaria first as a reporter and between 2017 and after as an editor. In the last months he started to work in the weekly newspaper Búsqueda, covering Parliament issues. Sanchez also is part of IJNet team since 2013 as Spanish editor. He graduated with honors from ORT University in 2012, after a final work about public information access law in Uruguay.



Luis Fernando Cantoral. Journalist for 15 years, specialized in coverage in economics, judicial and human rights. He started working as a radio journalist and after he migrated to digital and investigative journalism. He worked in the largest radio network in Bolivia, Erbol, nowadays he works in the Fides News Agency, the oldest and most important in the country. Mr. Luis Fernando made reports on prison and health issues that earned him several awards, as well as he took part on the exploitation of natural resources and corruption reports. In addition, he has done reports for the Reuters Foundation, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung FES Bolivia, Foundation for Journalism, UNIR Foundation and Solidar Switzerland. He is co-author of the book "The face of insecurity in Bolivia, seven chronicles on criminal circuits". He is a prominent member of the CONNECTAS Journalistic Community. National Journalism Award Honorable Mention in Bolivia 2017. Shared winner of the IAPA Journalistic Excellence Award in In-Depth Journalism 2021 and Special Mention in the XI National Journalism Contest 2021 of the IPYS.



Mildred Rojas Guevara. Lawyer graduated from the Andrés Bello Catholic University, UCAB, with postgraduate and master's studies at the UCAB and the Instituto de Estudios Superiores de Administración, IESA. She is currently legal consultant for the Venezuelan chapter of Transparency International and is a member of the organization's Research Unit. She has been a member of Venezuela's human rights movement since 2016 and has represented Venezuelan civil society organizations in hearings before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, IACHR.

CHAVISMO INC, THE GEARS OF BOLIVARIAN CAPITALISM AROUND THE WORLD

ARI (Runrunes, El Pitazo and Tal Cual), CONNECTAS and Transparencia Venezuela
September 22, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://chavismoinc.com/en/the-gears-of-bolivarian-capitalism-around-the-world/>

From an apartment in a luxury skyscraper in Manhattan (USA), on the “millionaire avenue”, to fantasy houses in paradisiac Marbella, Spain. From investments in exclusive touristic projects in the Caribbean, such as Punta Cana and Dominican Republic to entrepreneurship with dreamy budgets at El Salvador. From complex business tissues, knitted in Panama and connected to large bank accounts around the world to companies in Argentina or Uruguay, which jumped from doing more than discrete businesses and having almost no money in their arks to be simply multimillionaires. From the failed construction of a gigantic oil refinery in Nicaragua to the calculated acquisition of an agro-industrial giant in Bolivia.

All of this has been associated to a common origin: the millionaire flow of petrodollars that came from the public treasury of the Venezuela ruled by Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro during the last 20 years. That is what Chavismo INC., is all about, a collaborative investigation that evidences a complex network of businesses, which filled few pockets of people who is now established in different corners of the world, in a diaspora that renders account of the international projection of the Venezuelan case, through a series of documentaries covering a dozen countries.

This project was performed by Transparencia Venezuela, the Rebel Alliance Investigates (ARI) and the Latin American Platform of Journalism CONNECTAS). It is supported by the official inquiries made by authorities such as Prosecutors, Tribunals, Parliaments (among other documents) in 21 countries to relate the shuffle and final destination of money that in some cases was obtained thanks to the proximity to power, through advantageous, deceptive, fraudulent agreements, or just simply as the result of sophisticated networks that enabled a patrimony to be squeezed out, which led to poverty, hunger and major humanitarian deficiencies in the previously prosper oil nation, the one that still has the largest crude oil reserves in the world.

Outside Venezuela, there are at least 86 ongoing investigations. 52 of these files track more than USD \$30 billion allegedly related to money laundering operations, according to the information obtained by Chavismo INC. This number exceeds almost 6 times the international reserves according to Banco Central de Venezuela database, disclosed in January 2020. However, this is fraction compared to the income received thanks to the oil boom reported by the Government, who controls the monopoly of the oil industry. Fiscal incomes are calculated approximately in 1 trillion dollars

in a decade. This income seemed to evaporate while the institutions controlled by the chavismo in the last 20 years have barely done any efforts to recover this money and investigate the denounces related to every cent.

This portrait is the result of a data base complied by Chavismo INC., opened to public with the submission of this work, which sets an exercise to track more than 5.000 persons and entities that have been linked directly or indirectly to Venezuelan funds. This research turned up in a consolidated inventory of 751 people of interest due to their connections to businesses with chavismo government. Contractors with access to power, former high government officials and intermediaries with privileged contracts have been related to more than 3919 interactions with their environments.

In countries like Panama, one of the financial crossroads of the world due to its easiness, it is estimated that Venezuelan customers have injected more than \$2.800 million dollars into its banking system till 2019. Mexican ex-president Vicente Fox coined a phrase that, at that moment, gave a key to understand the phenomenon: “the best minister of Economy that Panama has had is Hugo Chávez”.

It was precisely in that country where a German banker knitted the complex skein of one of the biggest money laundering networks from Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), around \$1.200 million dollars. This case involved, according to the investigations, from relatives of Cilia Flores (Maduro’s wife and “first combatant” of Venezuela) to former public officials and young contractors. As it is stated in Chavismo INC., important names from power positions, public contracting and defalcation formulas had their companies at the Isthmus.

They also had offices in other places, where massive migrations of funds had place. In many cases, those funds were captured by real estate market. Ironically, United States is the country where most of the criminal investigations were made and where the money follow up has been more strict, but also where millionaire flows of money from Venezuelan fortunes were linked to businesses through companies that were created only to make real estate transactions. An example of it, investigated for this documentary, is a USD \$17 million apartment, located in One57 skyscraper, in an exclusive area for magnates. The property is owned by a former oil contractor, condemned by USA justice due to his connection to money laundering.

A similar situation took place in Spain, a country that has been receptive of funds from characters mentioned in cases investigated internationally. They acquired properties in La Moraleja and Salamanca, those areas are among the ten that concentrate residents with the highest per capita incomes in the European country, according to the Spanish tribute agency. One of these characters was an ex – government official linked to the strategic area of energy and who is investigated in four countries. In one case only, he is pointed by suspicious movements of more than USD \$54 million. He bought apartments for himself and other relatives in Madrid. Likewise, a young businessman who is under the magnifying glass of justice, acquired a €23 million farm, promotes investments in global reputation startups and he has come to have proximity with the highest Spanish elite.

The assimilation with traditional families also happened in paradisiac places like Dominican Republic, where a former Pdvsa contractors clan, some of them requested

by the Venezuelan justice, managed to slip through groups related to tourism business, which is not easy to make. According to Chavismo INC., the businessmen take part of the promotion group for project Downtown Punta Cana, a development of more than 150 thousand square feet, that offers to lead an already dreamy and consolidated destination in the Caribbean to a higher level. ¿The estimated cost of this development? Approximately USD \$100 million.

The fuel for foreign businesses was associated to the opportunities that came up with oil agreements sculpted from Venezuela, with strategic partners. In Evo Morale's Bolivia, a man that was deputy for the president's party became owner of an agro-industrial complex that has exported more than a billion dollars in the last decade, thanks to an operation with Venezuelan funds. He is currently being investigated for money laundering, also helped to dissimulate the discrete control exercised by Chávez and Maduro over an active barely known in Venezuela.

In El Salvador of Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN), a complex network of companies benefitted by loans from Venezuelan cooperation was created, almost USD \$100 million of these financings were given to an airline that went bankrupted only after two years of operation. This company had among its directives a Venezuelan Pdvsa contractor. In Daniel Ortega's Nicaragua, more than USD \$3.700 million were given in oil credits, those were discretely handled by the presidential family. A mega – refinery failed project also gave business opportunities to companies accused of bribery to PDVSA employees in other cases.

In Kirchner's Argentina there have been identified sales with overprice for more than USD \$234 million. Among these, there is a businessman that multiplied greatly his patrimony thanks to businesses in Venezuela. Local judges opened a dozen of cases, but it languishes, according to affirmations, due to lack of cooperation from the Venezuelan authorities. This already happened in José Mujica and Tabaré Vázquez's Uruguay, where two judicial investigations were dismissed. These pretended to reveal how the contact networks worked to do businesses with Venezuelan government, plagued with denounces for alleged corruption.

The exception in the world has been precisely firm condemnations. The common, to have millionaire bribe collection schemes and legalization of capitals mainly related to Pdvsa, the squeezed goose of the golden eggs. That is stated in this investigation, which combined the efforts of twenty journalists.

Chavismo INC. will continue working on the development of an interface, baptized as Corruptometer, which soon will propose to readers an analysis of the inquiries to Venezuelan entities such as Public Ministry, Comptroller General of the Republic and the National Assembly. This will quantify the amounts compromised by Venezuelan corruption and will go over emblematic cases.

The bonanza brought by the time when an oil barrel fluctuated over the USD \$100 had the aim to expand Bolivarian socialism. Thousands of millions disappeared in alleged networks of cooperation, which was translated in several countries as corruption and caste systems that became entrenched with power. For many people's pockets, just as presented by Chavismo INC., socialism transformed, in practice, in the best example of Bolivarian capitalism in the world.

A DEFALCATION WITH GLOBAL BRANCHES

By María Fernanda Sojo

ARI (Runrunes, El Pitazo and Tal Cual), CONNECTAS and Transparencia Venezuela
September 22, 2020

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Prosecutors and parliaments of 21 countries have initiated or concluded 86 investigations about corruption cases linked to Hugo Chávez and Nicola's Maduro governments. Chavismo INC. examined each one of those cases and found a plot of bribery, privileged contracts and money laundering that allowed millionaire flows of money from Venezuela to spread around the world.

“At the first sign we have to do something” sentenced Hugo Chávez, president of Venezuela, when referring to suspicion that a Venezuelan United Socialist Party (PSUV) delegate or from his government was acting corruptly. It was Sunday, December 06th, 2009, and during the first Extraordinary Congress of PSUV, celebrated in Maracay (central region of the country) the leader was frowning and raising his voice to give emphasis to his orders: “This party has to tighten the moral belts. Party and Government have to give an example of transparency, honesty above all and beyond”.

Minutes before, Chávez was dedicated to explain that if a PSUV delegate with a small Volkswagen and an apartment in a low middle class neighborhood came up overnight with several trucks, airplanes, moved to a mansion in an upper class neighborhood, wear expensive clothes and go to private clubs, the party and government should turn the alarms on and act consequently. “Anyone who wants to make money cannot even be at the rear end (government's rear end), he added”. His words remained recorded by the State channel, Venezolana de Televisión, which transmitted the show Aló Presidente 345.

From the front row, the main government officials then were listening to him. Elías Jaua, Minister of Agriculture and Lands; Diosdado Cabello, Minister of Public Works and Housing; Aristóbulo Istúriz, Deputy to the National Assembly and Cilia Flores, who led Parliament. She was already Nicolás Maduro's partner at that time, and he is the head of power in Venezuela now. Chávez was getting close to half of his third presidential period and although there were still no visible signs of cancer, the one that consumed him and put an end to his life three years later, there were clear signs of scandalous cases of corruption, which gnawed the Venezuelan institutions, and pushed the country to an abyss never seen before.

Eleven years after that speech among the most important leaders of PSUV, former officials from revolutionary government, friend contractors, front men and foreign dignitaries who negotiated with Venezuelan funds, there is a large amount of people who accumulate luxury real estate valued in hundreds of million dollars, gigantic farms, private jets, fleet of exclusive vehicles, high range watches and bulging accounts in fiscal paradises. Chavismo INC. investigation kept track of persons of interest, natural and legal, given the direct and indirect relations that they had with Chávez and Maduro's governments. In the findings there are 751 people of interest, with around 3.919 relations with hundreds of companies, institutions and agents in 61 countries.

The information was obtained and processed by Chavismo INC. in order to track judicial, parliamentary and executive investigations, besides public company and property registers related to Chavismo in 69 countries. With this information it was possible to build a data base showing a patrimonial approximation and the relationship with these characters. The transnational investigation initiative from Transparencia Venezuela, local sectional of Transparencia Internacional, the Latin American Platform of journalism CONNECTAS and Rebel Alliance investigates (ARI) gathered information that tells about the magnitude of Chavismo operations inside and outside of its country: the gears of Bolivarian capitalism in the world.

The systematization of data revealed that 182 Venezuelans have been sanctioned by 57 countries. Prosecutors and parliaments of 21 nations in America and Europe have opened 86 investigations related to corruption on Chávez and Maduro managements. Only on 52 of those causes, the compromised Venezuelan public patrimony ascends to USD \$30.087 million, an absurdly high amount for any country, except for Venezuela, which received over a billion dollars in oil sales in only a decade. Despite that, the country accumulates six years of an economic catastrophe at levels never seen before in a Latin American nation, where the hyperinflation overpassed the 1.000.000% in 2018. An economic and political crisis that led to an humanitarian one: lack of food, medicine, currently gas and other essential goods also led to an unprecedented migration of 5 million Venezuelans, it is the country with more deaths for malnutrition: 3,7 million of citizen had malnutrition in 2018, according to the Organization for Food and agriculture (FAO).

The investigation Chavismo INC. evidenced the corruption patterns, the way how Venezuelan's money was captured, moved and hidden: payment of bribery to key government officials in State Organisms in exchange of multimillionaire contracts, such as the one of a national treasurer that received USD \$1.000 million to benefit companies with currency exchange operations; the assignment of great projects to friend companies from allied governments, as registered in Haiti and Argentina; and creation of complex financial networks to launder money resulting from the illegal operations like the case of a former vice-minister requested by USA justice.

Most of cases have been made public before the USA justice, a country that has had terrible diplomatic relations with Chavismo, but that ironically ended up being the favorite destination of government officials to keep the money obtained illegally.

In view of the inventory made by Chavismo INC., North American prosecutors have opened 38 investigations in which there would have incurred in a patrimonial damage to Venezuela of approximately USD \$16.049 million, mainly coming from Oils of Venezuela (PDVSA), the most important state company in the country. 44 people have plead guilty for those cases.

Drawing the scheme

Payment of bribery to obtain public contracts was common in almost every dependance of the Venezuelan State during Chávez and Maduro's management, but it was specially prominent in services for oil area, financial operations, home construction and importation of foods and medicines, while a severe scarcity overflowed the malnutrition cases in the country and deaths due to lack of medicine.

In the USA, Spain, Ecuador, Brazil, Mexico and Colombia, 25 cases were officially tracked, in which it was proven or investigated the payment of bonuses to Venezuelan government officials in exchange of granting contracts with Oils of Venezuela (PDVSA) and its branches, the National Treasury Office, Caracas Electricity Company and the Unique Corporation of Productive and Alimentary Services. There are 137 persons (natural and legal) of interest pointed and identified in these accusations.

One of the most representative cases in this corruption scheme is a fraud committed at the National Treasury Office in Venezuela and investigated by District Prosecutors of South Florida, USA. As part of this case, Alejandro José Andrade Cedeño, former treasurer of Venezuela between 2007 and 2011 admitted to have received USD \$1.000 million in bribery from Raúl Gorrín, owner of Globovisión news channel, in order to benefit his companies in money exchange operations, which turned out to be extremely juicy in the midst of an strict currency control ruling in the country.

How did this mechanism work? The National Treasury Office had to get the necessary bolivars so the government could cover their expenses, to do that, they went to Gorrín exchange houses and sold him bonuses in dollars at a preferential exchange rate, much lower than the currency quotation in the real market. Therefore, the businessman's exchange houses delivered few bolivars and earned huge amounts of dollars. In this case, Andrade Cedeño was condemned to 10 years of jail and the USD \$1.000 million were confiscated, besides mansions, vehicles, horses, watches, airplanes and bank accounts. A written questionnaire was sent to Gorrín for this series of works but there was no answer to the closure of this edition.

The analysis of the cases done by Chavismo INC. evidences that the collection of bribes non only worked for the assignment of contracts: it also prepared the ground for façade companies to present invoices of goods acquired with prices way over their value in real market, with nobody to complain about it and to make believe that there were goods that entered the country, but that never actually arrived, according to the gathered investigations.

Payment of bribery to security officers, custom employees, supervisors and managers in charge of importation of all goods in Venezuela allowed, for example, that Colombian businessmen like Alex Saab and Álvaro Pulido could be able to charge the Venezuelan government several times for the arrival of one cargo of materials for construction, according to the Federal District Prosecutor of South Florida. The accusation sustains that between 2011 and 2015 the Colombians paid to Integrated National Service of Customs and Tax Administration, of the National Commission for Foreign Exchange Administration workers and national guards so they take photos from different angles to a single shipment and simulate that there were various shipments.

Thanks to fraudulent importation of construction materials, Saab and Pulido allegedly earned around USD \$350 million, according to the United States accusation. But this is only a small part of the businesses that have been done with the Venezuelan government. An Investigation of communication media Armando.info reveals that the Colombian duet also had contracts for thousands million dollars in oil, mining, health and food areas, specifically on importation of food boxes with the lowest quality for the Local Committees of Supply and Production (CLAP), a flag program for Maduro.

Due to the United States accusation and the Interpol red alert emitted by that country, Saab was detained on June 12th, 2020, just landing in Cape Verde, an island located in the Atlantic Ocean. His extradition to USA was approved. Nicolás Maduro's administration, who avoided to refer to Saab for years, now defends him and states that he is a Venezuelan citizen and that he is also a government agent, they qualified his detention as illegal and arbitrary.

From the High Spheres

From tracking of legal cases made by Chavismo INC. it is shown another corruption pattern with Venezuelan funds executed by allied governments. When reviewing the performance of different funds created in occasion of the energetic cooperation agreements established by Chávez and Central America, South America and Caribbean governments, it is visible that there are assignment of big projects to companies property of the same government officials, their relatives, or people related to them, even when not necessarily they appear as part of the directive boards.

In Haiti, Argentina, Uruguay and El Salvador 14 investigations have been opened, all of them related to the handling of those money flows, as result of Venezuelan hydrocarbon sales that ended up being shadily invested and landed in the pockets of local leaders or the businessmen related to them. After tracking the main characters of these cases, it was possible to identify 117 persons involved, natural and legal.

In august of the present year, for example, the Superior Tribunal of Administrative Accounts and Disputes of Haiti, delivered the third and last auditing report made for alleged acts of corruption in the handle of Petrocaribe agreement funds, through which Venezuela supplied oil with preferential credits. On the documents, the conclusion is

that there was favoritism and misuse of funds in projects such as the one assigned to Agritrans, a company that was under the control of Jovenel Moise before he won Haiti's presidency. Among the irregularities described, it also refers to the creation of a network of officials inside the government, which allowed to obtain contracts for friends of Ex-president Michel Martelly and first minister Laurent Lamothe.

#Petrofraud, a journalistic investigation published in January 2019, also showed that with Venezuelan funds, businesses of Dominican senator Félix Bautista were privileged, also business groups and families connected to power in the island of Hispaniola. The money route pointed to the social work of Leonel Fernández, former president of Dominican Republic and campaign financing for presidential candidates like Alejandro Toledo, former president of Peru, who tried unsuccessfully to return to power in 2011 elections.

Other investigations that evidence this pattern are the ones opened by Argentinian justice. In 2019, a General Trustees of that Nation report was published, which confirmed the irregularities committed on a trust fund created in 2004 by presidents Hugo Chávez and Néstor Kirchner. It was agreed that Venezuela sold fuel oil to Argentina and the payment for those supplies was going to go to the fund from where some companies, providers of supplies and goods for Caracas were paid. But the companies selected for exports made triangulations, triple the price of goods, falsified shipments, charged freights and transportation several times, among others, according to the cases that are still in open. The company owners have been linked to Kirchner and Julio de Vido, former minister of Planning in Argentina and who acted as a kind of supra – ambassador in businesses with Venezuela.

The money fountain that flowed on those cooperation agreements during the oil price boom turned out to be a challenge for the control system on those countries and a temptation for those connected to whom took the decisions. Despite of the evidence shown till now, Venezuelan justice has not informed of any investigation related to handling of resources on those cooperation agreement funds or the alleged favoritism on the assignment of contracts.

Erasing the trace

People involved on corruption cases with Venezuelan funds, identified in this investigation, tried to erase their money traces, as referred in the analysis of ongoing processes in prosecutor offices and parliaments. Creation of complex financial networks has been evidenced, with the aim to launder money from payment of bribery or juicy earnings left after taking advantage of the exchange differential, overprice charges on imports or falsification of shipments.

In most of cases documented by Chavismo INC. there is proof of connection between the underlined characters and façade companies in Panama, Belize, Bahamas, Virgin Islands and Malta; With the opening of bank accounts in Switzerland, Andorra, Spain, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Bulgaria and United States; With the purchase of financial institutions with the aim to launder money in Dominican Republic, Guatemala and

Liechtenstein; and with the acquisition of luxury properties distributed in cities like Madrid and Miami.

A pragmatic case is the one of Nervis Villalobos, Vice – minister of Energy and Mining of Venezuela between 2003 and 2006. He has connections with 61 other people from the data base made for Chavismo INC. This former government official is wanted by USA justice since 2017, accused of participating in a network to launder money from bribery payments, in order to grant contracts to oil and electricity companies. This process came up to light again on march 26th, 2020, when General Prosecutor of USA, William Barr presented charges for drug traffic and corruption against 14 members of the revolutionary government and offered USD \$15 million for Nicolás Maduro's capture.

Villalobos is being investigated by justice in United States, Portugal, Andorra and Spain, pointed in cases of laundering money from bonuses to grant contracts with PDVSA and Electricity of Caracas, among others. Just the inquiries carried out by the Spanish prosecutor show that the former government official laundered more than €50 million through a network of companies in Edinburgh, Cyprus and Northern Ireland. He also acquired a whole luxury neighborhood in Marbella, with more than 40 villages. Villalobos declared himself innocent of all "barbarities" he was accused of, in an interview offered to the diary El Mundo of Spain.

On the open causes against Villalobos, as well as on other judicial processes tracked by Chavismo INC., the presence of bankers and financial operators considered as professionals of money laundering repeats. Those were hired to help erase the real origin of the Venezuelan funds subtracted in an irregular way.

Another example is Matthias Krull, a German residing in Panama. He was ex-Manager Director and Vice-president of Swiss bank Julius Baer, and in October 2018 was sentenced to 10 years of jail after pleading guilty of participating in a conspiracy to launder USD \$1.200 million from misappropriated PDVSA funds. The case denominated Money Flight is one of the biggest investigated by USA Justice in which there are also 21 other people involved, officials of the state company, briefcase businessmen and professional money launderers. Among the pointed in this investigation, 9 have been officially identified and accumulate 99 interactions on the data base built by Chavismo INC.

To launder money in this case, and according to the official information, sophisticated schemes of fake investment were used, such as promissory notes and bonuses designed for non-compliance or default, especially in south Florida and Cayman Islands. Briefcase companies were created to transfer funds and luxury properties were acquired. In the middle of this plot, we can find, for example, apartment 2205 in Porsche Design Tower, of approximately 3229.17 sq. feet and priced in USD \$5,3 million. This confiscated property was under the name of Paladium Real Estate Group LLC, a company whose director is Carolina Croquer de González, a relative of José Vicente Amparán Croquer, identified as one of the money launderers in this network.

Bruce Bagley is another professional who they recurred to, to launder money from

Venezuelan corruption. He is an American citizen, university teacher, author of books about money laundering and frequently interviewed in communications media. On June 01st, 2020 he plead guilty of two money laundering charges before a district judge in USA, accepted having used his own bank accounts and from a company he created in Florida to launder more than USD \$2 million in earnings from a bribery network. It is barely a fraction of a defalcation enabled by the great corruption in Venezuela.

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SHORTLISTED STORY

THE FORGOTTEN CHILDREN OF ITAIPU

Mauri König (Brazil)



Mauri König, 54, is one of Brazil's most awarded investigative journalists, specializing in the investigation of drug trafficking, human rights and state crimes. In his 31-year career, he has won 38 journalism awards, including the Maria Moors Cabot Prize (Columbia University), the Lorenzo Natali Prize (European Union), the Global Shining Light Award (Global Investigative Journalism Network) and the International Press Freedom Award (Committee to Protect Journalists). As a journalist, he worked in some of the most important press vehicles in Brazil; as a writer, he has published five books. He also works as a journalism professor and researcher, focusing on ethics.

THE FORGOTTEN CHILDREN OF ITAIPU

By Mauri König

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Controlled prostitution by the dictatorship to build the greatest hydroelectric of the world left a multitude of children fatherless

The agriculturists João Batista e Maria Florinda dos Santos arrived in Foz do Iguaçu City in 1969, carrying a child in their arms and another by the hand, coming from a further South region of Brazil. They bought a piece of land in a bucolic district of Três Lagoas, to plant vegetables and raise chicken. Six years after that, the family saw themselves surrounded by brothels in a place that would be the greatest core of prostitution of the triple frontier formed by Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina.

The new prostitution zone was established by the local and national government 400 meters from a bus stop of the South shoulder of the road BR-277, the only ground access to Foz do Iguaçu. It was a side effect of the mega construction of Itaipu hydroelectric power plant, the largest of the world by that time, which was used by the Military Dictatorship as a symbol of the Brazilian “economic miracle”.

By the resolution of the military who governed the country, the former zone of prostitution houses was removed from the original place to open room for a set of houses built to the power plant workforce. So, the brothels were relocated to a rural neighborhood occupied by corn producers and smallholder livestock raisers.

Itaipu was built through a cooperation settlement between Paraguay and Brazil's dictatorships. The power plant was raised on the border of the two countries, over Paraná River, split by two on a binational entity. During the entire period of the construction, the power plant was under control of the two dictatorships.

In Brazil, the hydroelectric was controlled by the generals who started a coup in 1964 and remained in power of the country until 1985, implementing a policy of press censorship, violence, and murders. When they left, the military left a residue of 434 deaths, people who were opposite to the dictatorial regime.

Itaipu was the show room of the dictators. There were 32.000 workers at the highest point of the construction – 12.000 of them were single, reason why a zone of

prostitution was needed to attend the military interests. The construction of Itaipu made the population of Foz do Iguacu increase from 35.000 inhabitants in 1935, to 140.000 in 1984, period of the beginning and end of the power plant construction. Nowadays the city has a population of 260.000.

That was the context in which the new prostitution zone was relocated, having the goal of providing service to the plant workers. The brothels were placed right next to the house of João and Maria. João had 8 children from a previous marriage and other 9 more with Maria.

According to Julia, their daughter, her father had 4 more children with working girls of the red-light district. Joao did not recognized any of them. "That's what we know, it could have been more children", admits Julia, who was 5 years old when the brothels took place where the family lived.

The family then started to face a strange paradox. João had children with the working girls, while Maria looked after the children of those women, who had no means to take care of them while working in the brothels. João was not the only one to deny the children born from relations with the prostitutes of the place.

An unprecedented survey made by *Intercept* reveals that in the 10 years of construction of Itaipu plant, there was a significant increase of registered children without the name of the father. Only in that decade, the registry office of the city documented the birth of 4.280 newborns and 134 stillborn children without a defined paternity, 5 times more than the previous decade to the beginning of the construction of Itaipu.

The impacts of the local demography remained even after the conclusion of the power plant, because many children without a father kept being born. That was due to a great number of workers, also known as dam men, who remained in the city, including the thousands of immigrants who did not have the chance to work at the construction.

As a result of the population explosion, between 1985 and 1994, the city registry office showed over 7.605 newborns and 96 stillborn children without the paternity recognized at the official document. Altogether, 12.115 children were born without a father in the period of 20 years after the beginning of the construction of Itaipu, according to the survey of the report.

Intercept went searching for the "children of Itaipu", a multitude of children born from the sneaky encounters from the dam men and the prostitutes of Foz do Iguacu. Thousands of women worked in the nightclubs over the control do the military dictatorship. And, without knowledge, they helped to finance weapons and ammunitions to the armed force of the State. Those children are one of a few memories left of the time the dictatorship profit from prostitution.

Three days of fun at the "prostitution paradise"

Três Lagoas district gathered the largest number of brothels of the border at

the highest point of the construction of Itaipu. "There were around 25 big houses, besides the bars. Altogether, there were 30 or 35 houses", said Dalva Alves Pereira, 65, whose nickname was Regina the time she was a brothel manager. The number of women varied according to the size of the house.

"We happened to have 700 women at the same time, because there were the ones who lived there and the ones who came from other places and stayed there for a while. They stayed for one week, one month, two months. There were over 700, 800 counting everyone", Dalva recalls. During the construction of the hydroelectric at least 10.000 women worked at the brothels of Três Lagoas.

Few houses were made of brick and had swimming pools, a luxury attraction to seduce the clients. Most of the houses were made of wood and the living room was used as a dance floor, connecting to a corridor that led to the rooms where the sexual intercourses took place. That was the most bustling place in the border, day and night, and that was the reason it was called, by the local press a "Prostitution Paradise". The clients were the hydroelectric workers.

Itaipu prioritized hiring single men because the collective dorms were centered inside the construction site. "There were 12.000 single workers under the responsibility of Unicon, company responsible for the management and distribution of the dam men in the lodges", the geographer Patricia Sutuyo points out. She carried out a master's research in University Federal of Santa Catarina (UFSC) in which she approached the urban segregation at the border during the construction of the hydroelectric.

During the days off, the workers used the brothels to relieve the tensions of a work controlled with a military strictness in the construction site. "There was an interest by the company for the employees to release their distresses and cravings at the zone of prostitution", says the historian Luiz Eduardo Catta. The conclusion is in his research about the daily life of the borderline during the construction of the hydroelectric, made at the same University, UFSC, one of the most prestigious institutions in Brazil.

The paydays at the construction sites brought on frantic preparation at the brothels, foreseeing the arrival of busses, cars, and trucks with the dam men. Itaipu paid their wages in cash in an envelope with banknotes. Part of that ended up in the brothels.

"The guys got out of those trucks with money in their hands. Then, they drank a little and sometimes a thief appeared taking the money. It was crazy", recalls Genésio Aparecido da Silva, a former police officer. He arrested many dam men in trouble at the prostitution zone. "It was really turbulent in the days of payments", he said.

The former dam man João Carlos Chaves says that he used to save part of his salary to spend in the brothels. "In the middle of the month, I used to go there and didn't care about anything. The party was great", remembers João. "I used to spend the night there, and sometimes didn't even return on Sunday", he says laughing. "Sometimes I only returned on Monday", he said.

Under the Military Control

Itaipu has always refused to take any responsibility over the prostitution zone of the border, although it attended the binational entity and the military's interests. And it has remained the same way for 45 years. "We do not have any records on Itaipu's actions for the remotion and relocation of prostitution houses in Foz do Iguaçu", the company informed *Intercept* by email. But history says it differently.

"Clearly, company and city officials understood the necessity for a zone of tolerance that was sufficiently removed from the city center, easily accessible from the highway, and ample enough to contain the number of houses required to service the thousands of male dam workers that would soon descend upon the borderlands", said John Howard White. He is the author of a PHD thesis of New Mexico University (USA) about work and gender in the borders of Brazil and Paraguay.

"Itaipu security guards controlled the brothels in order to avoid quarrels and to assure that the workers wouldn't get drunk enough to the point of causing self-injuries or work accidents", stresses the geographer, Patricia Sutuyo.

The prostitution zone was also monitored by the military dictatorship, through State Institutions. All the working girls were registered in Civil Police of Paraná, the state of Foz do Iguaçu city. From the beginning to the end of the construction of the hydroelectric, the number of registered women by the police force was up to 10.000.

The State maintained the control over those women by issuing a "ballerina card", with picture and personal data at the front and stamps of medical follow ups at the back. It was a responsibility of the Civil Police of Paraná, by an especial fund of police apparatus named Funrespol (Police Re-equipment Fund), with the function of checking medical records of those women and charge the fees from the brothels.

The prostitution per se is not illegal in Brazil, but the penal code of 1940 considers a crime "to take advantage of a third part prostitution, taking part directly in one's profit or supporting oneself, partially or at all, by the one who practices it". The penalty is 1 to 4 years of reclusion, and a fine. In other words, the military government itself acted against the law, taking advantage of the prostitution.

"To work, the women had to bring a document and we manufactured the ballerina's card, with the original name and the fantasy name", confirmed to Intercept the retired police officer Genésio Aparecido da Silva, who was the chief of Funrespol between 1978 and 1986. "Every month we did the inspection. If one of them had not made the medical follow up, she would be notified. The requirement had to be followed", he affirms.

Every brothel paid a monthly fee to Funrespol, money which after would be reverted to the purchase of equipment for the police force. Even considered marginal to the law, the work of the prostitutes was used to buy weapons, ammunition, and vehicles, which attended the state organs of the repression of military dictatorship. The police of the federal district and of the 26 states of

the country were subordinated to the military government.

The police of Paraná State set up a schedule to charge the fees from the brothel owners. "The owners had to pay a fee to keep their business opened, and we always told them the women had to go first to Funrespol to make their ballerina's card", Genésio recalls. At the beginning of each month, the police officers did the rounds over the city to charge the fees. "We did an inspection and the owners had to show the documents, or the establishment would be shut down", he said.

"The police officers used to inspect every brothel, woman by woman", describes Dalva Alves Pereira, a former brothel manager who currently lives with her husband in a single room house at the same district. "We went to the gynecologist to check for venereal diseases. At sometimes they came to take the blood sample here and we paid them", she said. "To pay the license, we had to take the test to the police station. Every month we had to take the women's test at the police station", tells Dalva.

"The military seized power by the force in 1964 not only aiming to eliminate the left-wing parties, but to implement a project of a "Great Brazil", supported by colossal works and in a society with conservative, Christians, and moral principles", points out the anthropologist José Miguel Nieto Olivar. In his book "Devir Puta", product of his doctorate degree, he observes that the State was complacent to the imprisonment, torture, and death of prostitutes.

But, in the hydroelectric of Itaipu, the military decided to use the prostitution on their benefit, showing the hypocrisy through the speech and the practice of the dictatorship. The police of Foz do Iguaçu sent monthly reports of fee collection to the Direction Command of the Civil Police in Curitiba, capital city of Paraná state, 700 km far from Foz do Iguaçu. There are no records of the amount of money the prostitution controlled by the State in Três Lagoas district profit on behalf of the military dictatorship.

Abortion, abandonment, and fatherless children

The family of Julia dos Santos was harshly impacted by the settlement of the prostitution houses in Três Lagoas district, where she was born. Julia was 5 years old and saw everything happening by her room window. "At that time there weren't many preservatives, so there was a lot of children", she says.

Although the State was very strict to register the working girls and collect the fees, it was neglected to assure contraceptive methods to them. There is no possible accurate way to know the exact number of the children born from the relationship of the dam men with the prostitutes. But, in fact, there are 12.115 children registered on unknown father, in just two decades of direct influence of Itaipu in Foz do Iguaçu demography.

But not all the children were born. The unwanted pregnancy demanded a difficult choice. "We never knew if it was a miscarriage or an intended abortion, but there

were a lot of abortions”, Julia said. The women who decided to carry on the pregnancy gave birth in Iguacu maternity or São Vicente de Paula Hospital. “Many women gave birth at the brothel”, she affirms with the certainty of someone who grew up watching it through her window.

The babies born at the brothels had different fate. “Some mothers paid someone to take care of their child, others gave the child to whoever wanted him and then left the brothel”, reveals the former brothel manager Dalva Pereira.

There were so many babies that the families of the neighborhood had a task force to take care of the newborns. “My mother took care of more than 30 children of the prostitutes”, Julia recalls. “They couldn’t take care of the babies because they needed to work at night, so I felt obliged to look after them”, Maria Florinda dos Santos confirms. Nowadays she is 84 years old.

Maria was the neighborhood’s healer and started to play the part of a big mother when she started to accept the children of the working girls. “It was not just my mom who did that, Alice*, the owner of one brothel has also raised a lot of children. My neighbor Tereza also raised those children”, Julia recalls.

Alice was the owner of the brothel named Carinho da Noite (Night’s Affection), one of the most visited tolerance houses of the borderline, which ended the activities in 2018. The owner of the brothels used to dismiss the women who got pregnant or requested them to abort. Alice acted differently. She maintained the pregnant women during all the pregnancy working as a cleaner or a cook and then took the responsibility of raising the newborn.

Alice bought a house nearby, in Parque Imperatriz district, to shelter those children and selected one of her workers to take care of them. Altogether, Alice supported 44 children in that house and registered 8 of them on her name in the city registry office.

In two occasions Alice refused to receive the Intercept team at the door of her house, where it was her brothel until 2018. Neusa¹, the “second mother”, Alice’s employee who changed diapers and took care of the children, explained the reasons for Alice’s refusal to talk: prejudice and persecution. Also afraid, Neusa was reluctant to talk about that and used half words to tell the sad story.

It was not easy to adapt to the neighborhood having at the same time so many children of the prostitutes in one house. The bias against their origins was so strong to the point of becoming a target of the press. In the middle of the 90’s, a judge showed up at the door of the house followed by a cameraman and a reporter of a sensationalist tv show.

Neighbors have reported complaints of mistreat. But, after checking and listen to Neusa, the judge was all compliments. The 44 children grew up with the stigma of

their parentage and of the way they were conceived. On many occasions, Neusa needed to go to school to help her children, victims of prejudice.

“Just because they are children of prostitutes, they have no right to live?”, she asks. Therefore, Alice has her reasons to choose to be silent. She avoids opening old scars, now that her children grew up and many of them have their own families. Alice prefers to preserve them, because among her children there are public servers, chefs, businessmen, waiters, teachers. “They all followed a good path, none of them became a criminal”, Neusa says proudly.

Many men knew the pregnancy of the girl they had intercourse with. “Some of them even helped those women, others didn’t want to help neither meet the child. How many children do not know the father and can be talking to him? How many mothers are next to their children and do not know that because she gave the child to someone else?”, Neusa points out.

“Many children were born, many died, many were aborted. That was the law of the time. Because, by the eyes of the brothel, the woman had to be pretty and the pregnancy did not make her pretty”, concludes Neusa.

A promise of future

The large flow of clients and money opened place to the sexual exploration of minors in Três Lagoas. “As the place started to be famous for easy money making, a lot of teenagers of 15, 16 years old started to show up. When the police came to inspect, the girls ran to nearby houses”, Julia Santos recalls.

The corruption fed the illegal business. “Most of them lied about their age. The brothels were really crowded, there was no time to check for minors. If the police took any of the teenager, it was her problem”, dodged the former brothel manager Dalva Pereira. “Sometimes there were problems, we had to pay the police not to be arrested”, she says.

According to the former police officer Genésio da Silva, the surveillance made in the houses was not just to collect the maintenance fees, but also to avoid the presence of minors in the brothels. “But many of the girls had a false document, attesting that they were 18 years old. That happened a lot”, he recognizes.

On the Paraguayan side of the border, there were also teenagers in María Magdalena District, which had 400 women in 37 brothels. “The owners of the brothels used to look for girls in the countryside and convinced their parents about the wonderful future they would have”, says the journalist Alcebiades Delvalle. In 1979 he investigated the death of a teenager and unveiled a corruption scheme involving local authorities, fact that sped up the end of the zone of prostitution.

The victim was Adriana da Silva, Brazilian, 16 years old. Her death was not notified to the police and the body was buried at the private cemetery of a farmer. The police investigation was filed, but Delvalle found out that the wife of the responsible judge

¹ The original names were modified to preserve the privacy and the safety of the characters.

of the case used to go to the brothels to sell cosmetics. “Nobody else could sell it, only her. And the prices were abusive”, says Delvalle.

As well as in Brazil, women had to pay a fee to the police in Paraguay, to be registered, and another monthly fee to work. The brothels paid monthly to have the right to work, and an additional fee to the chief of police in order to assure “special protection”, which included the rescue of runaway women. “Nobody could leave”, recalls Delvalle.

The local authorities made a lot of money with the sexual trading of Hernandarias city. The head of the City Health Center also charged the women every other week, with the allegation of the health attendance. “Everybody won, but not the girls”, said the journalist. It was never clarified in which hands the money ended up to.

Delvalle’s series of reports, published on the newspaper ABC Color, marked the beginning of the decline of the prostitution zone of Hernandarias city. The houses started to be vacant bit by bit and the women spread out to other brothels in the borderline. Some of them ended up in the prostitution zone in Três Lagoas, in Foz do Iguaçu.

The end of the brothels and the neglect towards the women

The decline of the prostitution zone in Três Lagoas started with the end of the construction of Itaipu Binacional, with the spreading of AIDS and the creation of a prison complex in the area. “Everything started to end”, says Neusa, who worked in the brothel Carinho da Noite. Some of those brothels are currently houses, repair shops, Evangelic Temples and even a Rectory of the Catholic Church.

In the construction site of Itaipu women were the exception. The symbolic representation of the segregation is expressed in a 25 mt length and 2 height panel exposed in the entrance of the power plant, a tribute to the dam men workers who raised the “century workpiece”. Ostracism was the single retribution to the working girls who served Itaipu workforce. The only memory of those women are the children born in the brothels, yet the State does not acknowledge them.

But, without those women, the great work of the military dictatorship perhaps would not have been finished. “Prostitution was a vital part in the construction of the hydroelectric”, Delvalle points out. “Without such outlets for male sexuality, the project could be delayed due to a lack of sex: in a circular logic, men could not function properly without regular sexual intercourse, and the hydroelectric dam project could not be constructed without the male dam workers. In short, there could be no hydroelectric dam without the sex workers”, concludes the Historian John Howard White.

Delvalle describes the hypocrisy and the neglect of the high command of Itaipu towards those women. Itaipu Binacional planned and built houses to their workers, with education, health, recreation, and trainings. On the other hand, the employees

used the service of those women. “Itaipu Binacional did not have a direct role, but rather the impetus emerged from its workers and as an indirect consequence of its activities”, complements White.

For Delvalle, Itaipu and its outsources companies should have recognized the prostitutes as a legitimate category of workers, with the same benefit given to the workers of the dam. He suggests that the medical follow up of those women should have been performed in clinics and hospitals managed by Itaipu, to avoid the exploration of the health authorities.

Forty years later, Delvalle sadly recalls the prediction he once made during the construction: “When the dam is finally opened, nobody would find any plate to celebrate or honor the young women of Hernandarias”. The prostitution was seen as a necessity, but only tolerated when kept hidden.

SHORTLISTED STORY

HARD LABOUR: THE SURROGACY INDUSTRY IN KENYA

Naipanoi Lepapa (Kenya)



Naipanoi Lepapa is a freelance investigative and feature journalist based in Nairobi, Kenya. Naipanoi is interested in under-reported stories and writes about gender, human rights, health and environmental stories. She also writes about culture and technology.

HARD LABOUR: THE SURROGACY INDUSTRY IN KENYA (I)

By Naipanoi Lepapa

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Commercial surrogacy agencies market Kenya as a safe, affordable and welcoming surrogacy destination to desperate and guileless foreign couples via dozens of websites. They mostly operate legally under Kenyan laws. Some operate quietly out of private houses in the Nairobi suburbs. In one case, the actual ownership trail disappears into the secretive and anonymous offshore world via the UK and the obscure Marshall Islands.

An investigation has raised serious concerns that vulnerable women and babies may have been exploited by commercial agencies which market Kenya to foreigners as a highly affordable destination for surrogacy.

Surrogate Monica was hired to deliver a baby for a commissioning parent who later changed their mind. Forced into a late term abortion, for which she says she was never fully compensated, she wakes up from a recurring nightmare that the dead baby is lying on her bed.

Monica is one of scores of poor Kenyan women who have turned to commercial surrogacy to lift their lives out of poverty.

Commercial surrogacy is when an individual or a couple who are unable to conceive their own children hire a woman and pay her to carry and deliver a child for them.

The demand for their services in Kenya is driven mainly by foreigners — many of them either gay or lesbian couples — who are attracted to the country due to its affordability.

Commissioning parents can commission a child from a Kenyan surrogate at quarter of the cost in some Western countries.

But unlike other countries where the surrogacy laws are clear and dutifully followed, the industry in Kenya operates in a legal and regulatory void.

Kenyan legislators have for years failed to pass a law that would protect surrogate babies as well as the mothers commissioned to carry them.

Ironically, some surrogacy agencies advertise Kenya as an open and tolerant country, whereas the reality is that homosexuality is illegal.

The law also expressly forbids gay or unmarried couples from adopting children.

In September 2019, the government also banned the adoption of children by foreign nationals.

The allegations by surrogates include:

- coercion, exploitation and intimidation of surrogates;
- apparent human trafficking of surrogate mothers and children;
- forced abortions; and identity forgery and fraud.

This is allegedly happening in the shadows while lawmakers dither over passing a number of bills currently tabled before both the National Assembly and the Senate.

More than a third of Kenya's population is classified as poor, according to a report by the National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) in 2020.

With a lack of clear regulations and laws in this area, Kenya provides a perfect environment for such businesses to flourish.

Commercial surrogacy agencies market Kenya as a safe, affordable and welcoming surrogacy destination to desperate and guileless foreign couples via dozens of websites.

They mostly operate legally under Kenyan laws. Some operate quietly out of private houses in the Nairobi suburbs.

In one case, the actual ownership trail disappears into the secretive and anonymous offshore world via the UK and the obscure Marshall Islands.

Before moving to Kenya, one of the other main players shifted his business from country to country in Asia. The agencies hire local fixers, some without medical backgrounds. These fixers can obtain identity documents, court orders and free passage through immigration with remarkable ease.

Some international agencies are now warning their clients against using Kenya as a surrogacy destination. They despair about what they claim are fly-by-night operators who give the wider industry a bad name.

To crack open this secretive and fear-filled world, reporter Naipano Lepapa spent months posing as a commissioning parent and later as a candidate surrogate.

She then broke her cover to interview five surrogate mothers, who shared their stories — and that of a wider circle of surrogates — on condition of anonymity. Their reluctance to be identified stems in part from the social stigma that exists around surrogacy; but mainly, these women are vulnerable and scared.

This reporter faced threats of legal proceedings and an attempted arrest after

confronting one of the agencies about the allegations against them.

This is also a story about how a national failure to confront the complexities of sexual reproduction has created these issues.

Only a comprehensive law can address the legal and ethical issues around commercial surrogacy. It would define the kind of surrogacy to be practiced in Kenya, set standards for all parties, and provide a regulatory framework.

Two bills — one before the National Assembly, one in the Senate — promise to accomplish all this, but they have stalled in the face of concerted opposition.

The bills would provide an overarching legal framework to govern safe access to a wide range of reproductive services for women such as family planning, pregnancy terminations, adolescent reproductive health and assisted reproduction — including surrogacy.

The Senate bill has stirred strong debate particularly on issues on abortion and teenage access to family planning methods. Its critics want it voted down, saying it promotes underage sex and abortion. Others claim surrogacy is an unnatural process and would allow same-sex couples to have children.

Its supporters say it would make surrogacy legal for the first time in Kenya thereby protecting surrogate children, mothers and parents from exploitation.

If passed, it would make Kenya only the second country in Africa to legally recognise surrogacy, after South Africa.

What is commercial surrogacy?

A reproductive practice where an individual or couple who are unable to conceive their own children contract a woman and pay her to carry and deliver a child for them.

There are two ways this can happen:

1. In gestational surrogacy, the couple's sperm and eggs or donor eggs are fertilised in the lab to make an embryo that is then implanted in the surrogate's womb — a process known as in vitro fertilization (IVF).
2. In partial or traditional surrogacy, the surrogate uses her own eggs and becomes pregnant through artificial insemination often using the commissioning father's sperm.

The alternative to commercial surrogacy is altruistic surrogacy, in which a surrogate agrees to carry a child for free.

Who are commissioning parents (sometimes known as intended parents)?

A couple that enters a commercial surrogacy arrangement with a surrogate who they pay to carry and deliver their child. A surrogacy agency typically acts as a go-between for the commissioning parent and the surrogate.

Is surrogacy legal in Kenya?

Kenya does not currently have any legal framework which either permits or bans surrogacy.

A patchwork of laws make it possible (but not straightforward) for married heterosexual couples to either adopt, or get custody of, a surrogate baby through the courts.

The law outright forbids adoption by sole applicants or unmarried couples, as well as by “homosexuals” and “sole foreign males” — although this appears to be a major target market for surrogacy agencies who offer Kenya as a surrogacy destination.

Custody is a quicker, simpler route through the courts, provided the surrogate gives her consent.

Some surrogacy agencies short-circuit the process entirely by arranging for the commissioning parents’ names to be entered straight into the surrogate baby’s birth records when they are born.

This method is thought to be illegal, as it not only risks children being trafficked but also denies the surrogates their legal rights as the birth mothers.

How big is the commercial surrogacy industry in Kenya?

A number of mostly foreign-owned agencies market surrogacy services in Kenya, but there are no official estimates of how many IVF and surrogacy agencies exist in the country.

The Ministry of Health was unable to provide any data on the numbers of foreigners coming to Kenya for surrogacy, women working as surrogates, or children born out of these arrangements. Officially, the ministry says they don’t have data because there is no law in this area.

Globally, commercial surrogacy is big business with revenues expected to exceed \$27.5 billion in the next five years, according to a market research report from 2019.

Kenya is a relatively new and niche surrogacy market, and is likely to be a tiny player. Its principal attraction as a commercial surrogacy destination appears to be because it is cheap and English-speaking.

A typical package costs commissioning parents Sh3-4 million (\$30,000-\$35,000) – which is around one-quarter of what it would cost in the USA, for example.

The cost of surrogacy in Kenya makes it competitive with countries in eastern Europe, like Georgia and the Ukraine.

Meet the surrogates

Monica (not her real name), a single mother of two, earned Sh6,000 (\$55) per month as a house help before being fired. Months after losing that job, and getting

desperate, Monica was scrolling through Facebook when she thought she had found a life-changing opportunity. A Kenyan surrogate in Russia posted a WhatsApp link seeking surrogates.

Monica jumped on the opportunity and joined the WhatsApp group, where she met Josephat Kioko Jahjah, a former taxi driver and tour guide turned surrogate recruiter for African Fertility Agency Limited.

Jahjah immediately sent her the transport fare to meet him at a hotel in downtown Nairobi the following day. Monica remembers it was the first day of the month and, coincidentally, the first day of her period. In the brief meeting, Jahjah, a tallish middle-aged man who at first acted charmingly told her said he would pay her Sh630,000 (\$5,700) for the entire process, comprising a monthly stipend of Sh20,000 (\$180) and Sh450,000 (\$4,100) after delivery.

After the brief meeting, Jahjah instructed her to meet him at Fertility Point, a IVF clinic located in the Upper Hill suburb of Nairobi, a leafy area favoured by multinational companies and major banks, for medical tests the next day.

On the third day of the month, Monica met him at the fertility clinic where she was subjected to many tests, including for sexually transmitted diseases, hepatitis, and hormonal balance.

The doctor in charge immediately put her under hormonal medication to help prepare her uterus for pregnancy.

Just two weeks later, with her verbal consent, but without her signing any contract, an embryo was implanted in her womb at the facility and afterwards she relocated to a private hostel in Buruburu, a middle-class residential area of Nairobi.

The hostel is one of several run by African Fertility Agency, where surrogates remained for the whole nine months.

“From this point on, Jahjah dictated every part of my life. What I ate, where I travelled, and when,” Monica said.

Six months later, Jahjah took Monica to Nyayo House, the government’s immigration centre in Nairobi, to get a passport. She would need to make a journey to a foreign country where the commissioning parent of the baby inside her lived.

Monica had never been out of Kenya before. Jahjah told her to pay Sh3,000 (\$27) and three days later, Monica’s first passport arrived. A few days later, she boarded the flight.

Upon arrival, Monica was put up at a hotel where she lived for a further two months. The commissioning parent lived a five-hour drive away. Sometimes he visited to check up on her but mostly they communicated via WhatsApp.

In the eighth month of her pregnancy, Monica got a call from the parent, instructing her to pack her bags. He said he’d pick her up in a few hours’ time, and gave her the impression that he was taking her to live with his parents where she would be better cared for.

When he arrived, he tearfully informed her that his parents were not in support of the arrangement and that he had changed his mind and didn't want the baby.

He was accompanied by a friend, and they drove to another hotel where Monica was checked in. Over the next few hours, a doctor injected her with a drug that gave her severe contractions.

As her pain grew, the parent and his friend moved her to a clinic. It turned out that the friend owned this single-bed facility, and that it was a backstreet abortion clinic.

They injected her with more drugs and she laboured painfully for 12 hours.

"When the baby didn't come out, this guy called his friend who was also a doctor and they transferred me to another hospital where they did a Caesarian-section surgery on me. They told me that the baby had already died."

"All this was done without my consent," Monica recalls, her face etched with anger and bitterness.

Five days after the abortion, during which Monica was not allowed to use her phone, she boarded a flight back to Kenya. "It's a miracle I made it back home," she said.

African Fertility Agency was unaware about these developments, Monica said, until she landed back in Nairobi.

Upon her return, Monica received another blow: the agency refused to pay her, she claimed.

Monica fell into depression and had nightmares of the aborted baby sleeping on her bed.

After she threatened to report the matter to the police, the agency's co-owner Gaurav Wankhede paid her Sh400,000 (\$3,600). She used a chunk of this, around Sh30,000 (\$270) to pay for therapy and medication for depression.

A sample surrogate contract obtained from the African Fertility Agency focuses mostly on the needs of the client, and if anything goes wrong the surrogate appears to be on their own.

For example, there is no next of kin in the contract or a contact in case of an emergency. A surrogate who miscarries before week 24 of pregnancy is not compensated and one who wants to abort must seek consent from the parent.

Monica is among the many poor women from Kenya who have turned to surrogacy to lift their lives out of poverty but who find themselves being exploited.

In some cases where women may have felt pressured to give birth abroad, experts believe that what happens to surrogates is tantamount to human trafficking.

Sophie Otiende, a highly respected anti-human trafficking campaigner, commented that Monica's experience was also of concern. She said: "She appears not to have been told what would happen to her, or that she would have to leave the country."

Trafficking in persons is a serious crime, carrying a minimum sentence of 30 years or Sh30 million (\$271,000) fine, or both. Repeat offenders face life imprisonment.

All the allegations in this article were put to African Fertility Agency in writing, as well as to both co-owners individually. Wankhede didn't respond. Jahjah denied the allegations saying they were "false and untrue".

Vulnerable women

More than a third of Kenya's population lives below the poverty line, according to the Comprehensive Poverty Report published by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) last year.

The KNBS's poverty line is set at Sh3,252 (\$30) monthly income per adult in rural areas and Sh5,995 (\$55) in urban areas.

Experts say that poor, illiterate and ignorant women are particularly at risk of exploitation because they are not aware of their rights and cannot negotiate for reasonable compensation.

While researching this article, this reporter met half a dozen women who have risked their bodies to gain some economic stability.

Ordinarily, they would earn meagre incomes as house helps, as assistants in shops and hair salons, or as menial workers.

Single women seem to be preferred by recruiters because, as one surrogate put it, "Single women have no support systems. A husband will question things, and they don't seem to want that."

All of them spoke on condition of anonymity, for multiple reasons including fear of reprisals, losing out on further surrogacy opportunities, and social stigma from their families and communities.

Many identifying details have been removed to protect the identities of those who have shared their stories.

Anne Ireri, executive director of the Kenya chapter of the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), said that there was a risk of the exploitation and abuse of surrogates because of a lack of regulation.

"Our organisation has heard reports of abuse, but the surrogacy industry is clouded in mystery and very few women are willing to come forward," she said. She added that FIDA is available to help surrogates who feel that they may have been exploited.

Dr Jane Wathuta, director of the Institute for Family Studies and Ethics at Strathmore University, said that agencies should at a minimum give surrogates detailed information about what the entire surrogacy process entails, before they consent to participate.

She also said that surrogates should receive ongoing counseling for lengthy periods before and after the procedure.

But all of the surrogates we interviewed claim none of this was offered. “You are not allowed to question. If you do, you’ll be reminded that you need them more than they need you,” said one surrogate.

Threatened and silenced

Magdalene (not her real name) acted as a surrogate twice, under New Life Kenya, an agency founded by a Georgian woman and ultimately owned in an offshore tax haven.

Both times she signed contracts, Magdalene says, but she claimed that her recruiter kept hold of them.

“They rush you into signing the contract before you read it, and they never give you a copy to keep or read later,” she says.

The single mother of one was in desperate need of money when she first signed up with Millicent Auko Ogott, the company recruiter and Kenya country manager, whom she met on Facebook.

As with surrogate Monica, Magdalene was immediately sent for tests and then put on hormone medication to prepare her womb for pregnancy.

The first time, her commissioning parents were a foreign couple living and working in Kenya. When they met, the couple revealed they would soon be moving back to their home country and wanted Magdalene to go with them to have the embryo implanted there.

“When I said I didn’t want to go, they threatened me with legal action saying I had signed a contract and they had already paid Sh80,000 (\$700) for my tests.

Bobby Mkangi, a constitutional and human rights expert, said that Magdalene was given a wrong impression that her contract is the law, whereas her own legal rights superseded any contract.

Otiende, the human trafficking expert, observed that there seemed to be no way for her to opt out of the arrangement.

Two weeks later, on her way to the airport believing that she was headed to one country, Magdalene learned she was going to another.

She says she protested, but at this late stage there was nothing she could have done.

Magdalene lived overseas for the duration of her pregnancy. After she delivered, she flew back to Kenya where she said she was paid Sh400,000 (\$3,668) — a welcome sum for a single mother, but still Sh200,000 (\$1,834) short of the agreed Sh600,000 (\$5,502) delivery fee.

“I was told the additional costs of sending me abroad were deducted from the final payment,” she said.

Magdalene added that New Life Kenya was meant to protect her but they didn’t,

choosing to side with the parents at every turn. “When I called Millicent, she would dismiss me saying, ‘You complain a lot.’”

“If a surrogate falls ill or even dies while pregnant, or during childbirth, nobody cares,” Magdalene said.

Although her second surrogacy was more straightforward — she delivered for Kenyan parents at a hospital in Nairobi, and was paid in full — she says she will never do it again: “Robbing a bank is easier than being a surrogate.”

All the allegations in this article were put to New Life Kenya in writing, as well as to Ogott in her personal capacity.

New Life responded: “We always respect our surrogate mothers’ interests and always treat them in line with protecting all kinds of human rights.”

Ogott said the specific allegations against her were “malicious” and threatened to sue this reporter in a personal capacity. Further detailed questions sent to her lawyer at her request went unanswered.

Surrogacy Costs

New Life Kenya shared the following cost breakdown with this reporter, who was posing as a potential client in mid-2019.

On signing:

- \$4,500 (Sh463,500 at the then- exchange rate) agency fee for sourcing surrogate mother;
- \$1,000 (Sh103,000) to prepare uterus for implantation;
- \$1,000 for surrogate hospital visits and tests before embryo transfer (IVF);
- and \$1500 (Sh154,500) for contract notarisation and surrogate background check.
- \$500 (Sh51,500) for surrogate pay after embryo transfer, and
- \$500 monthly pay for surrogate during the remainder of her pregnancy.

The IVF procedure was not included in the cost break-down, the agency said.

IVF can cost anything between \$3,000-\$5,000 (Sh310,000 and Sh515,000) in Kenya, according to experts.

In total, New Life Kenya said the surrogate’s compensation package would be \$8,000 (Sh824,000) plus an extra \$1,000 (Sh103,000) if she delivers twins.

“It is your responsibility [as an commissioning parent] to look after the pregnant surrogate mother during the pregnancy period and undertake all necessary expenses,” reads the email.

New Life no longer operates in Kenya.

Meet the agencies

The surrogacy agencies that managed Monica and Magdalene are both owned by foreign nationals with a long history in the surrogacy industry and both operating legally in Kenya.

Monica was recruited by African Fertility Agency Limited, an offshoot of an international surrogacy group called Become Parents which was founded in 2007 in Melbourne, Australia, by Gaurav Wankhede.

Wankhede, 46, is a jack-of-all-trades with a tendency towards grandiose self-promotion.

According to his LinkedIn profile, his remarkable career has zigzagged from being a restaurant manager in India to a procurement specialist for the Royal Australian Air Force “responsible for inventory optimisation for the entire \$4.7 billion Australian defence supply chain”.

He then moved on to KPMG where he was a senior advisor in organisational change management, before becoming CEO of a fine dining establishment in Kolkata called OMG Hospitality. In 2017, Wankhede co-founded an Indian professional wrestling franchise with a childhood friend.

Throughout these many career changes, the one constant on Wankhede’s CV has been his surrogacy agency Become Parents, which he calls “the world’s leading ethical surrogacy agency”.

After India banned surrogacy for foreign homosexual couples and single parents in 2013, Wankhede’s international business moved on — first to Thailand, where surrogacy was also soon banned, then to Nepal, Cambodia and, finally, Kenya.

Bill Houghton has known Wankhede for years, ever since Become Parents facilitated the birth of Houghton and his husband’s two children in 2012. For a while, they were business partners, first in India and then Thailand.

But then Houghton and Wankhede parted ways gradually. “Every time one country closed its borders to surrogacy, it seemed Become Parents opened its services in the next unregulated country. I think he would have done better to move instead to the next safer destination.”

Houghton said the unregulated Cambodian market in particular was dishonest and dangerous.

Commissioning parents operating in a legal vacuum were forced to navigate a maze of bureaucratic bribery in order to obtain the necessary documentation for their children. Some lawyers were found to be forging documents, and some agents were arrested, Houghton said.

There is no suggestion that Wankhede or his agency were involved in any illegal activities.

While Houghton says he remains grateful to Wankhede for helping him start

a family, he parted ways in order to focus on his own agency, called Sensible Surrogacy.

Houghton worries that his old friend Wankhede may one day come unstuck operating in unregulated surrogacy markets, and points out that Kenya is similar in many ways to Cambodia.

Houghton has now taken to actively warning prospective parents that Kenya is an unsafe surrogacy destination.

“The lure of being able to have a baby ‘on the cheap’ is attracting desperate couples into what could be a dangerous situation.” Houghton said in a 2018 press release. “Many of our clients are LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans-gender] couples, and Kenya is notoriously homophobic.”

Houghton said that surrogacy agencies in the US charge \$120,000 (Sh12 million). Or they can deal directly with a surrogate and spend less than \$70,000 (Sh7 million). Either way, they avoid the risky, unregulated and homophobic Kenya market, he said.

Wankhede shot back in a video posted to his website last year, saying Houghton was not speaking from experience because he had never been to Kenya.

Wankhede extolled Kenya’s virtues as a great tourism destination that is welcoming to same-sex couples. “The fear that people have about same sex couple in Kenya is wrong. It’s absolutely a myth,” he said.

He claimed his agency’s “best practices in the industry” help attract local and foreign clients, adding that foreigners like him are able to build their businesses around Kenya’s many IVF clinics and plentiful supply of skilled medical practitioners.

In the video Wankhede then introduces Jahjah, the former taxi driver, as the agency’s manager and caretaker.

Jahjah claimed none of the same sex couples he worked with had issues. As long as foreigners do not show affection in public, he advised, nobody cared about their sexual orientation.

Wankhede and Jahjah own 50 percent each of African Fertility Agency, which was registered in April 2019 according to ownership records from the business registry. Jahjah is also the firm’s director.

Wankhede has been operating in Kenya for longer, however, since at least 2017 when Become Parents launched a website for a business called Surrogacy Agency Kenya.

Wankhede did not respond to detailed questions, including about his run-ins with Houghton. Jahjah dismissed all the allegations against him as “false”, including a question about the agency’s apparently misleading marketing pitch about Kenya being open and welcoming to gay commissioning parents.

In another video posted to Become Parents YouTube channel in 2017, Wankhede introduced Millicent Aoko Ogott as his operations manager in Kenya.

Ogott, a former teacher, was also managing at least one other surrogacy firm in Kenya at the time.

This was New Life Kenya, the agency where Ogott recruited surrogate Magdalene — the surrogate who felt unable to opt out of her contract and who ended up being sent to an unexpected country to give birth.

New Life Kenya is a branch of the New Life Global Network, founded by Dr Mariam Kukunashvili in Georgia in 2008.

Kukunashvili lives a jet-set lifestyle, with each glamorous destination documented on social media with herself at the centre of a seemingly inexhaustible series of fashion and modelling shoots.

New Life Global Network is actually a limited liability partnership (LLP) company, incorporated in the UK in 2010.

It is impossible to determine who ultimately owns the company, as its registered partners are not people, but a pair of companies based in the Marshall Islands, a secrecy jurisdiction and tax haven in the Pacific.

It is puzzling, though, that whereas New Life Global Network's website and Facebook page says it has helped thousands of couples become parents through IVF and surrogacy, the UK-based parent company's public disclosures bear little relation to this line of work.

Its principal business activity is described as "consultant for medical equipment and received commission". Between 2017 and 2019, its corporate filings show an annual income of just a few thousand pounds in commission fees.

In 2015-2016, when the company's principal business activity was listed as "medical consulting services", its income comprised agent's fees in the region of £120,000-£160,00 per year (Sh15-20 million at the then-exchange rate).

This amount is roughly equal to the cost of just a couple of commercial surrogacy packages offered in a Western country, like the US.

Although New Life was happy to answer questions about its Kenyan operations, it ignored all questions about its global ownership structure, principal business activity and income.

New Life said it had only ever referred four client couples to surrogates in Kenya, who delivered a total of six babies between 2016 and July 2019, after which they stopped offering surrogacy services in the country.

They said they closed because, "despite the fact that surrogacy is not banned in Kenya, we saw that the legal part of the procedures was not regulated quite well".

Ogott distanced herself from New Life Kenya saying she does not run any entity by that name. She said all her business operations are lawful, and referred further questions to her lawyer who declined to receive them by email.

In a brief WhatsApp exchange, the lawyer said: "Pay due to consideration to

the laws of defamation, criminal libel and malicious falsehoods."

Asked to explain why the New Life Kenya website — which features Ogott as its country manager — was only taken down in late February after receiving our questions, the agency said it was an oversight by their technical team and should have been done earlier.

New Life said that, apart from the six surrogacy deliveries of which it was aware, it was "not responsible for any other actions taken by Ms. Ogott".

From interviews with surrogates, this reporter believes that there could have been up to nine deliveries in total involving Ogott as agent — some of which may have been undertaken for other agencies including Wankhede's Surrogacy Agency Kenya.

New Life confirmed that Ogott had been their agent in Kenya between 2016 and 2019 because "she had the [data] base of surrogate mothers" in the country.

Other Players in the Surrogacy Ecosystem

Most surrogacy agencies rely on a number of IVF fertility clinics dotted around Kenya.

One of the most popular being Mediheal Diagnostic and Fertility Center which is owned by Kenyan politician Swarup Ranjan Mishra. Mishra, the Jubilee Party's MP for Kesses constituency in Uasin Gishu county, is also a trained gynaecologist and obstetrician.

According to a 2019 brochure on the Mediheal website, they say they have a "surrogacy program" which "accept(s) embryos from overseas for transfer into surrogates".

The brochure also notes that "monetary compensation may or may not be involved in [surrogacy] arrangements" and that the Centre's "success rate is among the highest in the region for both IVF and surrogate procedures".

Other IVF clinics include Fertility Point and Wings in Nairobi, and the Mombasa Assistive Reproductive Centre, attached to the Mombasa Hospital.

Hospitals where surrogates have given birth include the Aga Khan University Hospital and the Nairobi Hospital, Nairobi West Hospital as well as smaller facilities such as Mater Misericordiae and Balozi hospitals.

There is no allegation of wrongdoing by any of these IVF clinics and hospitals. In the next installment, we reveal the potential impact of unregulated surrogacy on commissioning parents PLUS an encounter with a surrogacy agent.

Additional reporting and story editing by Lionel Faull & Margot Gibbs, of Finance Uncovered. This article was developed with the support of the Money Trail Project.

HARD LABOUR: THE SURROGACY INDUSTRY IN KENYA (PART II)

<https://www.theelephant.info/long-reads/2021/05/29/hard-labour-the-surrogacy-industry-in-kenya-part-ii/>

SHORTLISTED STORY

SERIES OF ARTICLES: “ABANDONED AT FUTABA HOSPITAL”

Nanami Nakagawa (Japan)



Nanami Nakagawa is an investigative journalist with Tokyo Investigative Newsroom Tansa, an independent nonprofit newsroom in Japan. Before becoming a reporter, she worked for Ashoka, the world's largest network of social entrepreneurs. Her investigative series “Abandoned at Futaba Hospital” chronicles how 45 patients died after being left behind during the Fukushima nuclear accident evacuation. She has also investigated misleading advertising by the tobacco industry and a chemical pollution cover-up.

“EVACUATION COMPLETE” WITH 227 PATIENTS LEFT BEHIND DURING FUKUSHIMA DISASTER

By Nanami Nakagawa

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The Fukushima nuclear disaster proved deadly for at least 45 patients at Futaba Hospital and residents of nearby retirement home Deauville Futaba, located just 4.5 kilometers southwest of the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant.

On March 12, 2011, the day after the plant had been crippled by the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, the prime minister ordered the evacuation of all residents within a 10-kilometer radius of Fukushima No. 1. In theory, the evacuation should have been completed that day. But the last of the hospital patients and retirement home residents only made it out on March 16, five days after the accident began.

Some passed away before help reached them; others, weakened by the wait, passed away at the evacuation point or on the bus ride there.

Charges alleging professional negligence resulting in death was filed against three former executives of the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), which owns Fukushima No. 1. If the nuclear accident had never taken place — if the company had been sufficiently prepared for a major natural disaster — no patients would have been left behind. Although the executives were acquitted in the Tokyo district court, the verdict is currently being appealed.

But even amid the race against the clock and the chaos of evacuation, was there no way these 45 lives might have been spared? Even 10 years after the disaster, this is a question few have examined, and no one has been held accountable for what happened. Relatives of the deceased are still searching for answers.

Tansa examined legal records used in a shareholders' lawsuit (separate from the above) against TEPCO in the Tokyo district court. The records contained transcripts of hearings with those involved in the evacuation of Futaba Hospital and Deauville Futaba, including members of the Self-Defence Forces, police, and hospital staff. We found therein a number of previously unknown details about the mismanaged evacuation, such as fatal errors by Self-Defense Forces leadership.

Using the above records, as well as interviews, documents obtained through freedom of information requests, and records from the government's Accident Investigation Committee, Tansa investigated why so many were abandoned at Futaba Hospital.

March 11, 2:46–3:15 p.m.: “He’s fine, we moved him to a safe location”

Both the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant and Futaba Hospital and Deauville Futaba lay within the jurisdiction of Okuma town. The hospital is situated 4.5 kilometers southwest of the plant and is a little less than a kilometer removed from the Okuma town center, where town hall was located.

Run by a medical corporation called Hakubunkai, the hospital had both psychiatric and internal medicine departments. It housed a significant number of elderly in-patients, such as those suffering from dementia or experiencing complications due to illness. About 20-30 required constant IV treatment. The psychiatric ward also had a number of long-term patients. All told, 338 individuals were in hospital at the time of the disaster.

Masumi Kowata (66), who ran a cram school in Okuma, had worked at Futaba Hospital as a nursing assistant when she was 33. She recalled a psychiatric ward patient confiding that he wasn't on speaking terms with his family, who lived in Tokyo.

“Nobody’s coming for me,” he said. Some of the patients had no home to go back to. Futaba Hospital could be a lonely place.”

Hakubunkai also ran Deauville Futaba, which was about 500 meters from the hospital. Its 98 elderly residents required various levels of assistance, and many were bedridden or had been diagnosed with dementia.

When the magnitude 9 earthquake struck at 2:46 p.m. on March 11, 2011, Masakatsu Kanno (76), who ran a butcher’s shop on Okuma’s main street, rushed to Futaba Hospital as soon as the shaking subsided. His father, Shinzo, then 99, had been hospitalized since coming down with pneumonia six months earlier. It only took Kanno five minutes to drive to the hospital. He asked the woman at reception if his father was ok.

“We moved him to a safe location, so he’s fine,” she replied.

The receptionist hadn’t actually checked on Kanno’s father. Perhaps, in the confusion right after the quake, she had wanted to quickly reassure the worried son. Kanno returned home, breathing a sigh of relief. It was then 3:15 p.m. — the last time for a month that he would know his father’s whereabouts.

March 11, 3:15 p.m. – March 12, 5:44 a.m.: Administering IVs by candlelight

Despite the receptionist’s assurances, Futaba Hospital and Deauville Futaba found themselves, increasingly, in trouble.

Some patients and staff had screamed as the earthquake, the largest in living memory, shook the facilities. Others, too scared to speak, held their nurses’ hands in a vice grip. Every lifeline was severed: electricity, running water, gas, phone lines. Backup generators provided no more than a few hours of power.

Burst pipes flooded swathes of the facilities, in some areas deep enough to require waterproof boots to cross. Nurses guided patients out of the flooded rooms.

But the biggest problem was the blackout. Without power, staff couldn’t use medical devices like aspirators or infusion pumps, both of which were essential for the bedridden patients.

It was all hands on deck: Hospital Director Ichiro Suzuki helped care for patients as well. By flashlight and candlelight, the hospital staff checked on patients and adjusted their IVs. In place of aspirators, syringes were used to draw out patients’ sputum.

As Suzuki and his staff cared for their charges, people in Okuma were growing increasingly uneasy about the nearby nuclear plant.

Kowata saw a number of men wearing Fukushima No. 1 plant worker uniforms pop in and out of a convenience store near town hall. The cash register didn’t work because of the power outage, but the men carried off their goods without waiting for a staff member to ring them up using a calculator. Kowata spotted a worker who had once attended her cram school. She called out to him, asking what was going on.

“You should get out!” he yelled back. “It’s over for Okuma.”

Kanno, whose father was at Futaba Hospital, was visited at home that night by his son-in-law, who worked at Fukushima No. 1.

“The plant’s in bad shape. We have to vent,” he said.

The cooling functions of Fukushima No. 1’s reactors had been knocked online by the earthquake and tsunami. Pressure was rising within the reactors, and venting the pent-up steam was necessary to prevent them from exploding.

Kanno didn’t understand what his son-in-law meant. “Vent?”

“Radiation will be released when we do,” he explained.

Both an explosion and venting would release radioactive materials, but venting was the lesser of two evils. At least the reactors would be intact.

The Okuma townspeople’s unease proved well-founded. Beginning the night of March 11, the Japanese government issued successive evacuation orders for an expanding radius around Fukushima No. 1. The next day, at 5:44 a.m., the evacuation zone was extended to 10 kilometers from the damaged plant — an area that included Futaba Hospital and Deauville Futaba. Okuma Mayor Toshitsuna Watanabe received the order via a phone call from Special Advisor to the Prime Minister Goshi Hosono.

March 12, 5:44 a.m. – 2 p.m.: Mayor left without confirming full evacuation

Hospital Director Suzuki learned of the 10-kilometer evacuation order via Okuma's wireless disaster warning system.

"It could be a difficult, even life-threatening journey for the bedridden patients," he thought. "But if we stay here and the situation at the plant worsens, the hospital might not be able to receive food and other supplies."

He decided to evacuate everyone.

Suzuki knew city officials were preparing buses to help residents evacuate. Ambulances would be better, but any port in a storm — the buses would have to do. Even the patients requiring IVs could go without them for at least 12 hours. Suzuki quickly dispatched staff to Okuma town hall to make sure the buses made it to the hospital.

But despite repeated trips by staff to negotiate, no buses came throughout the morning of March 12. The hospital was told to wait and that it would be provided with buses after the other residents had been evacuated.

At last, around noon, five buses pulled up at the hospital. Suzuki checked each ward for patients as nurses and other staff helped them onto the buses.

The buses were at capacity with 209 people onboard, including all the nurses and hospital staff, who went along to take care of patients on the journey. They departed the hospital at 2 p.m.

Still remaining were 129 patients in Futaba Hospital and 98 residents of Deauville Futaba; 227 in total. Suzuki, assuming town hall was sending more buses their way, stayed behind, as did the Deauville Futaba director and oice head.

But no more buses came.

Mayor Watanabe believed that everyone from Futaba Hospital and Deauville Futaba had been evacuated. With Suzuki and 227 patients still waiting for help, Watanabe set off for the evacuation point, Tamura city.

What had caused Watanabe's misunderstanding? On May 15, 2012, he testified as follows for the government's investigation into the disaster.

"I asked the Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to send trucks to Futaba Hospital, and I confirmed that they were on their way. I assumed that the SDF would communicate with the hospital staff and take necessary measures."

But the SDF were not involved in the hospital evacuation on March 12, nor were they under obligation to follow Watanabe's instructions. Watanabe considered the evacuation complete without confirming that the SDF had arrived and rescued the remaining patients. Tansa interviewed Watanabe, who has since retired and now lives in Okuma.

Why hadn't he confirmed that the Futaba Hospital evacuation was complete?

"It's true that I made a mistake in not properly confirming that everyone got out. But Okuma had a population of 10,000. Realistically speaking, we got the evacuation order

that morning and did the best we could, but it was impossible to check on absolutely everyone. If evacuation was that easy, no one would have had any difficulty."

We asked what specific instructions Watanabe had given the SDF when he asked them to evacuate Futaba Hospital.

"It's not like we could tell them 'Go here, do this.' The SDF had their own organizational structure and line of command that they operated under. And they didn't contact us, so we couldn't check how things went."

Had there been no word about Futaba Hospital while Watanabe was in Tamura city?

"No, none at all. I learned about the situation there later, from the news."

Watanabe hadn't given the SDF specific instructions because they had their own line of command. Although he had asked them to go to Futaba Hospital, there had been no follow-up from either side.

As hours turned into days and over 200 patients waited for rescue, this lack of communication between government officials and the SDF would continue to impede the evacuation.

Translation by Annelise Giseburt

SDF WAITED 27 HOURS FOR HAZMAT SUITS AS HOSPITAL
BEGGED FOR HELP (2)

<https://en.tansajp.org/investigativejournal/7613/>

"SOME PATIENTS ARE BEDRIDDEN" — MISINFORMATION
IMPEDED RESCUE MISSION (3)

<https://en.tansajp.org/investigativejournal/7630/>

THE COLLAPSE OF THE OFSITE CENTER (4)

<https://en.tansajp.org/investigativejournal/7638/>

THE DOCTOR SEPARATED FROM HIS PATIENTS (5)

<https://en.tansajp.org/investigativejournal/7660/>

35 PATIENTS LEFT BEHIND FOR FOURTH TIME AS
MISCOMMUNICATION PLAGUED SDF RESCUE OPERATION (6)

<https://en.tansajp.org/investigativejournal/7670/>

25 DEAD IN FIVE DAYS (7)

<https://en.tansajp.org/investigativejournal/7679/>

NO CLOSURE FOR RELATIVES OR CITIZENS SEEKING
ANSWERS (8)

<https://en.tansajp.org/investigativejournal/7685/>

SHORTLISTED STORY

ROHINGYA BRIDES THOUGHT THEY WERE FLEEING VIOLENCE. THEN THEY MET THEIR GROOMS

Pari Saikia (India)



Pari Saikia is an independent investigative journalist from New Delhi, India. She spends most of her time researching and investigating human trafficking cases in South and Southeast Asia. She is the recipient of the Grand Prize of the European Commission's Lorenzo Natali Media Prize 2021 for her story on trafficking of Rohingya women. In association with YouTube and Google News Initiative, she is creating India's first human trafficking news channel. Pari has been reporting for seven years on human trafficking, gender issues, LGBT, menstrual hygiene, and other human rights subjects from various media platforms.

ROHINGYA BRIDES THOUGHT THEY WERE FLEEING VIOLENCE. THEN THEY MET THEIR GROOMS

By Pari Saikia

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In a VICE World News investigation, Rohingya women share their harrowing stories of being sold to men in Kashmir.

KASHMIR, India—Her baby cradled in her arms, Muskan recalls the winter night when she was duped into traveling more than 2,000 miles to be married to a man 30 years older than her.

“My legs were swollen and hurting because of the beatings and intense cold,” Muskan told VICE World News at her house in Kashmir, a stunning but conflict-ridden mountainous valley administered by India. “I felt miserable. I couldn’t see a way out.”

Five years have passed since she made the harrowing journey from her home in Myanmar. But Muskan can’t forget the horror of being held captive in the middle of the freezing winter, locked in a room without a toilet. The traffickers wouldn’t even let her and the other young trafficked women leave to use the bathroom. Muskan said their male captors beat them when they refused to marry complete strangers, often older men suffering from mental disabilities. Many of the marriages were arranged by families who struggled to find a caretaker for these men, she said.

Muskan, who is now in her 30s, was eventually sold for 100,000 Indian rupees (\$1,370) to a 60-year-old farmer in Kashmir who was mentally ill.

During a nine-month investigation, VICE World News tracked the jarring journeys of four Rohingya women who were trafficked from Myanmar’s northern Rakhine state to Kashmir over the past decade. To protect their identities, pseudonyms are used.

In separate interviews, the women said they were tricked by human traffickers who promised them marriages to “young and handsome bachelors.”

The four women, speaking on the condition of anonymity for fear of backlash from the community they now live in, said they were sent from Myanmar via Bangladesh,

then handed over to Indian traffickers in Kashmir, who held them for days in appalling conditions. They were denied food and medical care as they begged to return to their families in Myanmar.

The Myanmar military's brutal crackdowns on Rohingya Muslims have affected their lives in many ways, including fueling a market for the trafficking of brides outside the country. In 2017, the Myanmar military's latest systematic attack against the community forced over 740,000 Rohingya Muslims to flee the Buddhist-majority country by crossing the Naf river into the southeastern part of Bangladesh.

The sudden mass arrival increased offers for Rohingya brides in trafficking networks, according to experts.

"There was a sudden surge in demand for Rohingya women after the 2017 mass exodus in Myanmar, while trafficking among Bangladeshi women went down, though it's still prevalent," said Salma Ali, president of the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association (BNWLA) and an anti-trafficking activist.

Hasina Kharbhih, founder of Impulse NGO Network, a human rights NGO in the northeastern Indian city of Shillong, added that many Rohingya women end up in Kashmir and Hyderabad because of significant Muslim populations there.

According to Imtiyaz Ali, a Kashmir-based social worker with Childline India, Kashmiri families pay the equivalent of about \$680 to \$1,370 for Rohingya brides, an amount much less than the minimum expenses for a Kashmiri wedding, around \$6,831.

"More people find it economical to buy a bride than organize a wedding," Ali said.

Tricked and betrayed

But the longstanding persecution of the Rohingya people in Myanmar has created incentives to get out of Rakhine state even before the 2017 crisis. The Buddhist-majority country has systematically harassed the stateless Rohingya for decades, leaving many to take risky journeys by boat to foreign countries in an attempt at a better life.

Muskan, who hails from Rakhine's Inn Din village, which would become the site of an infamous massacre two years after she left, said traffickers would often come looking for families desperate to marry off their daughters outside Myanmar.

In September 2015, a Rohingya trafficker from Myanmar showed her photographs of men who seemed wealthy and handsome, and told her they were Kashmiris. That was the first time Muskan said she heard the word "Kashmir." Within a week, the trafficker met her parents, who were farmers, and assured them she would marry the man she had picked from the photos. Her family paid him \$150 for her safety.

Zubaida, who lived in Maungdaw town in Rakhine state, was also tricked. She was 16 years old when her parents paid \$15 to a trafficker to get her out of Myanmar. That was the only way she said they could help her escape growing persecution

of the community in 2012 when anti-Rohingya riots killed hundreds. But once in Kashmir, the trafficker sold her for less than \$683 to a 37-year-old man who also suffered from psychological problems.

Zubaida, who now lives in Kashmir's Anantnag district and is a mother to a six-year-old child, is worried about her future with her husband. "He is old. What will happen when he dies? I would have run away if I did not have any children," she said.

Farida, 30, has been living in Jammu & Kashmir's Pulwama district for more than five years. She said her first husband was killed in Myanmar's Rakhine state along with other Rohingya men in an attack by Myanmar soldiers in 2011 that could not be independently verified. To escape the same fate as her husband, Farida fled Myanmar, swimming across the Naf river to Bangladesh with her toddler tied behind her back.

In 2015, having lived in a Cox's Bazar camp for four years, she paid a trafficker more than \$1,100 to escape to India. Farida said that she had no way of knowing that the trafficker would sell her to a man double her age for \$685. She said she is also aware of at least two Rohingya women from Cox's Bazar who were brought to her village in Kashmir in May 2019.

Unlike the other brides, who at least knew they were being brought to India, Begum, a 32-year-old Rohingya woman from Rakhine state's Maungdaw district, was told that she was being taken to Bangladesh for marriage in 2011.

"It takes only a day to reach Bangladesh from Rakhine but we kept traveling for 15 days and nights changing several vehicles on the way," she said.

By the time she realized she was being taken to another place, her group was caught by the police. She was told she was in India's south Kashmir. She said the police sent her to a nearby Rohingya refugee camp, where she was taken in by a sympathetic family. But this place was also infested with traffickers and a single woman like her soon attracted attention. She wanted to go to Bangladesh, but a trafficker she met at the camp told her that there was no way to go back to Bangladesh. The only option was to get married to a man from Kashmir. A trafficker later sold her for more than \$820 to a 32-year-old Kashmiri man who couldn't manage to get a bride locally.

Life in Kashmir

It is common for trafficked brides to be exploited in their marriages, according to interviews. They are frequently subjected to discrimination on the basis of their color, facial features, language and nationality. Many brides complain of being treated as laborers; they are made to work non-stop in the farms. The brides are not allowed to interact with anybody except their husbands and in-laws.

Zubaida complained that the work at her in-laws' apple orchards caused her perennial back-ache. She has been using a posture-corrector brace since 2018.

“I am treated like a servant here. My medicine costs over INR 1,000 (\$13.7) but all I am given by my in-laws is INR 200 (\$2.74),” she said.

Pointing towards her tattered salwar kameez, a traditional outfit worn by women in South Asia, she said her in-laws treat her differently from other daughters-in-law and physically abuse her because she’s Rohingya.

During an interview with VICE World News, Zubaida was still wearing the same oversized male chappals, or slippers, from her younger days years ago in Myanmar before being trafficked to India.

Muskan’s life in Kashmir, where she is married to a farmer and has two children, is similarly miserable and abusive.

“My husband once battered my head with a wooden log that resulted in many stitches. He threatens to throw me out of the house and keep the two children. There is suffering in my homeland too, and this place is no different.”

Muskan said this is her husband’s third marriage—his previous wives left him because of his abusive behavior. He often beats her in front of their children and his relatives. She pulled up her outfit to show a long, deep scar on her lower abdomen. She said her husband beat her for consulting a doctor for an infection she caught after a caesarean section for her second child. The beatings were so severe that she had to get stitches again.

“Sometimes, I just want to die to get rid of this suffering,” said Muskan, breaking into tears.

She has tried to seek help at many police stations to lodge a complaint against her husband and his relatives, but none of them have been addressed. Her only solace from the abuses lies in meeting a few other Rohingya brides who live in the same district.

She is among the fortunate few who, after much resistance from her husband, was able to speak to her family in Myanmar on a few occasions. But she is also expresses weary resignation about her fate.

“I miss my family, but this is my home now.”

No end in sight

Over one million Rohingya Muslims have now fled Rakhine state, where they had lived for centuries. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) told VICE World News an estimated 866,457 Rohingya live in the largest camps called Kutupalong and Balukhali camps in Bangladesh. In India, there are only about 18,000 Rohingya refugees as of Nov. 31, 2020.

A United Nations report published in 2019 noted that Rohingya women and girls suffered the most at the hands of the Myanmar army; they were gang-raped, tortured and held captive as “sexual slaves” at military bases.

The humanitarian crisis has made Rohingya women in Myanmar and Bangladesh a target for human traffickers who lure them with dreams of marrying rich and handsome men in India.

Human rights activists combating trafficking say that Rohingya women are being trafficked through India’s northeastern states as well as West Bengal in the east.

“India shares a 4,097 kilometres-long [2,545 miles] porous border with Bangladesh, but there are not enough people managing it. If you go to Malda city in West Bengal, you’ll realize that it is an open field with no fencing at all,” said Tapoti Bhowmick, secretary of Kolkata-based human rights NGO Sanlaap.

Impulse NGO Network’s Kharbhih said there is no clear data for Rohingya women trafficked into India due to lack of documentation by government and rights monitors. But it is happening regularly. “Trafficking of Rohingya women through the borders of India’s northeastern states including Mizoram, Manipur, Assam, Tripura and Nagaland has been going on non-stop.”

Code words: Mishti & Sandesh

Despite huge risks like being detained, imprisoned, and even re-trafficked during the course of an illegal crossing, many Rohingya women in India often risk their lives to reconnect with their families in Myanmar and Bangladesh.

VICE World News met at least 10 Rohingya women at Cox’s Bazar camp who managed to return to Bangladesh after being trafficked to India. These women, who escaped their abusive husbands in Kashmir, said they worked as laborers and did odd jobs to save up money so they could pay traffickers to take them back to Bangladesh. Some received financial support from their families to return.

All of them said that there is a close nexus between traffickers, travel agents, transporters, recruiting agencies, and even government officials operating in both the countries.

The Rohingya women VICE World News interviewed in the refugee camps in Bangladesh claimed that the border guards in Bangladesh and India colluded with traffickers to facilitate their entry into both the countries.

They recounted that traffickers and border guards would use code words like sandesh and misti (sweets in the Bengali language) when the women were made to cross the border using auto rickshaws for transportation.

“The border guards would then show up, take the money, and give the vehicle a free pass,” said 20-year-old Halima at the camp, who was part of a group of women trafficked in 2018. “This happens either at the crack of dawn, after the morning prayers, or late at night.”

Abida, a 31-year-old in the same trafficked group as Halima, said she saw two Bangladesh Border Guards ask her trafficker for cash to let them through the border.

Anti-trafficking activists say neither the Indian government nor Myanmar has addressed the cross-border trafficking of Rohingya women. In a conference in December 2020, the Border Security Force and the Border Guard Bangladesh decided to conduct joint night patrol at “vulnerable patches to thwart cross-border crimes including smuggling of narcotic substances, cattle, and human trafficking.”

In January 2020, the Bangladeshi government agreed to teach Rohingya boys and girls up to the age of 14 under the Myanmar school curriculum, and give them skills training, in the hope of combatting human trafficking in the camps.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has also initiated many steps like creating awareness programs for women and children on human trafficking and “cash for work” initiatives in the camps in Cox’s Bazar. But there are systemic problems like the burgeoning population of Rohingya in the congested camps, lack of human resources, and poor anti-trafficking laws, all of which slow down the process.

“We are reaching out to Rohingyas and explaining if any person comes in the camps and offers a passport or plane ticket for free, you have to understand that it’s not real,” said George McLeod, an IOM spokesperson in Bangladesh.

Women of no land

VICE World News tracked down Zubaida’s brother, Alam (also a pseudonym), in Nayapara, one of the two government-run refugee camps in Bangladesh. Alam seemed hesitant about the possibility of getting Zubaida to return to the family.

“How will I give her a better life when I have no financial support myself?” he said. “There’s no work for most Rohingyas staying at the camp. We are not even allowed to move outside the camp in Bangladesh. We were chased away from Myanmar and this country is also not our land.”

Besides, the threat of traffickers looms large at the camps in Bangladesh. Families of scarce means with daughters, widows, and even single mothers often catch the attention of traffickers. Alam fears that even if Zubaida returns, she’d soon be lured into another trafficking racket.

In Kashmir Zubaida still hopes that she can meet her parents one day without having to go through traffickers. But if she has to stay in India, she wants to be treated with equal respect as other Kashmiri daughter-in laws.

“We want acceptance in the Kashmiri society—as wives and not as laborers,” Zubaida said.

Muskan has a similar request: “Please help me get my status and fundamental rights as a wife. My kids have rights too. I was deceived and sold but now just allow me to live with dignity here. I don’t want to be deported, put into jail, or a detention camp. I have seen enough pain now...could you write this to the government?”

As far as Farida is concerned, she has already made a few attempts to escape from her abusive husband and run away to Bangladesh. “Please, don’t tell my husband. Help me run away to Bangladesh,” she pleaded, afraid of being caught speaking by her husband.

For Begum, who is desperate to reunite with her family in Myanmar, it’s different.

“You won’t find belonging anywhere except your own home,” she said, pulling her 4-year-old daughter close to her chest.

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SHORTLISTED STORY

MORE THAN 50 WOMEN ACCUSE AID WORKERS OF SEX ABUSE IN CONGO EBOLA CRISIS

Robert Flummerfelt (DRC), Nellie Peyton (Senegal),
Ange Kasongo (DRC)



Robert Flummerfelt is an award-winning investigative journalist based in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, where he has worked for four years. Robert has investigated human rights abuses, sexual exploitation and abuse, industrial pollution, and racketeering/corruption, and he generally focuses on militarized conservation, foreign intervention, and abuses by NGOs, UN agencies, and multinational corporations. Robert notably worked to break the Ebola sex abuse scandal in DR Congo, which spawned a major independent commission by the World Health Organization, and overall proved to be the numerically largest sex abuse scandal in any one place in UN history. Robert has testified before the Parliament of the UK and his work has been cited by the UN Security Council's Group of Experts on Congo.



Nellie Peyton is a freelance journalist covering West and Central Africa. She has been based in Dakar, Senegal since 2016.



Ange Kasongo is a freelance journalist and author in the Democratic Republic of Congo, based in Kinshasa. She focuses on documenting complex and uncomfortable subjects, including human rights issues.

MORE THAN 50 WOMEN ACCUSE AID WORKERS OF SEX ABUSE IN CONGO EBOLA CRISIS

By Robert Flummerfelt, Nellie Peyton, Ange Kasongo
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'They hired you with their eyeballs.'

BENI, Democratic Republic of Congo

More than 50 women have accused Ebola aid workers from the World Health Organization and leading NGOs of sexual exploitation and abuse in the Democratic Republic of Congo, an investigation by The New Humanitarian and the Thomson Reuters Foundation revealed.

In interviews, 51 women – many of whose accounts were backed up by aid agency drivers and local NGO workers – recounted multiple incidents of abuse during the 2018 to 2020 Ebola crisis, mainly by men who said they were international workers.

The majority of the women said numerous men had either propositioned them, forced them to have sex in exchange for a job, or terminated their contracts when they refused.

The number and similarity of many of the accounts from women in the eastern city of Beni suggest the practice was widespread, with three organisations vowing to investigate the accusations uncovered by reporters. After being made aware of the allegations, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for them to be “investigated fully”.

Women said they were plied with drinks, others ambushed in offices and hospitals, and some locked in rooms by men who promised jobs or threatened to fire them if they did not comply.

“So many women were affected by this,” said one 44-year-old woman, who told reporters that to get a job she had sex with a man who said he was a WHO worker. She and the other women spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals. Some identifying details have been removed to protect their identities.

“I can’t think of someone who worked in the response who didn’t have to offer something,” she added.

Some women were cooks, cleaners, and community outreach workers hired on short-term contracts, earning \$50 to \$100 a month – more than twice the normal wage. One woman was an Ebola survivor seeking psychological help. At least two women said they became pregnant as a result of their abuse.

The WHO said it was reviewing a “small number” of sexual abuse or exploitation reports in Congo but declined to say whether they took place during the Ebola outbreak in the east of the country, which ended in June after more than 2,200 deaths.

About this investigation:

The New Humanitarian first became aware of sexual abuse and exploitation allegations against workers in the Ebola response in March 2019.

On a reporting trip in October 2019, a handful of women shared their experiences. As the scale of the problem became clearer through additional reporting, TNH partnered with the Thomson Reuters Foundation. In July and August 2020, a team of reporters travelled to Beni. Interviews with 51 women, as well as reports from more than a dozen aid agency drivers and NGO workers, turned up numerous allegations of exploitation and abuse. Reporting only focused on Beni town – one of the outbreak’s epicentres. It did not extend to other hotspots.

A WHO spokeswoman said the allegations stemming from the investigation were under review internally and encouraged the women involved to contact the WHO. Many women said they had never reported the incidents for fear of reprisals or losing their jobs. Most also said they were ashamed.

Some women said abuse occurred as recently as March. Reporting only focused on Beni town – one of the outbreak’s epicentres. It did not extend to other hotspots.

“We would not tolerate such behaviour by any of our staff, contractors, or partners,” said WHO spokeswoman Fadéla Chaib, reiterating the agency’s “zero tolerance” policy.

‘Why would you even ask if I reported it?’

Despite “zero tolerance” policies and pledges by the UN and NGOs to crack down on such abuses, as exposed in Haiti and Central African Republic, reports of such behaviour continue to surface.

(Timeline: UN and NGO sex scandals from 1990 to 2020)

Most aid agencies and NGOs contacted by The New Humanitarian and the Thomson Reuters Foundation said they had received few or no claims of sexual abuse or exploitation against their workers in Congo.

The investigation, conducted over almost a year, found women who described at least 30 separate instances of exploitation by men who said they were from

the WHO, which deployed more than 1,500 people to the government-led operation to control the outbreak.

The next highest number of claims were against men who said they were with Congo’s ministry of health, noted by eight women.

Reporters also interviewed five women who said they were exploited by men who said they worked for World Vision, while three women pointed to men who said they were from UNICEF. Two women accused men who said they were workers with the medical charity ALIMA.

Single claims were made against men who said they worked with Oxfam, the UN’s IOM migration agency, and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF).

The investigation has prompted an internal inquiry at World Vision, which said the reports were “shocking” as all staff were trained on preventing sexual abuse and it was working hard to address “entrenched cultural and power inequalities”.

After being contacted with the outcome of the investigation, ALIMA also said it would undertake an inquiry.

UNICEF received three reports involving two partner organisations responding to Ebola, said spokesman Jean-Jacques Simon. He declined to name the charities but said the cases appeared to be different from those discovered by reporters.

“Despite our best efforts, cases of sexual exploitation and abuse in DRC remain grossly under-reported,” said Simon, adding that the agency had introduced 22 ways to file complaints in Congo, including a confidential hotline and complaint boxes.

Spokespeople for IOM, MSF, UNICEF, and Congo’s health ministry said in mid-September they had no knowledge of the accusations brought to their attention, and several said they would need more information to take action.

Oxfam said it did “everything in our power to prevent misconduct and (to) investigate and act on allegations when they arise, including supporting survivors”.

The WHO, and most of the aid groups involved in the response, said they had policies in place to prevent and report abuse or exploitation, from staff training to reporting hotlines. (A chart showing sexual abuse and exploitation claims recorded by Ebola aid groups.)

Table methodology

TNH/TRF surveyed 34 organisations involved in the Ebola response on whether they had received claims of sexual abuse and exploitation by their workers and, if so, how many of these claims had been substantiated or remained pending and what action had been taken. The survey was conducted via a combined email and telephone questionnaire between June and September 2020. Organisations included 29 UN agencies and international organisations, four local NGOs and the Ministry of Health. Nine organisations declined to provide data specific to SEA claims made during

the Ebola-response in the DRC, including CARE; Danish Refugee Council; International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC); International Organization for Migration (IOM); Mercy Corps; Oxfam; Save the Children; UN Population Fund (UNFPA); World Health Organization (WHO). Most cited confidentiality of victims. Samaritan's Purse did not provide any information.

Although the women did not know all of the men's nationalities, they said some came from Belgium, Burkina Faso, Canada, Côte d'Ivoire, France, and Guinea.

"Why would you even ask if I reported it?" asked one woman, who said she was offered money for sex by a man who said he worked for the WHO and another who said he worked for UNICEF.

"I was terrified. I felt disgusting. I haven't even told my mother about this."

'Passport to employment'

Many women said they were approached outside Beni's main supermarkets, in job recruitment centres, or outside hospitals where lists of successful candidates were posted.

Some said men approached them after they were visibly disappointed at being passed over for jobs.

One woman said the practice of men demanding sex had become so common that it was the only way of finding a job in the response. Another called it a "passport to employment".

"You'd look to see if your name was on the lists they posted outside," said a 32-year-old woman, who said she was made pregnant by a man who identified himself as a WHO doctor.

"And every day we'd be disappointed. There is no work here."

Women said men routinely refused to wear condoms – at a time when physical contact was being discouraged to halt the spread of the deadly virus. Many knew the men's names.

One 25-year-old cleaner said she was already working for the WHO when a doctor invited her to his house in 2018 to discuss a promotion. On arrival, he took her into his bedroom.

"He shut the door and told me, 'There's a condition. We need to have sex right now'," she said.

"He started to take my clothes off me. I stepped back, but he forced himself against me and kept pulling off my clothes. I started crying and told him to stop... he didn't stop so I opened the door and ran outside."

At the end of the month, she said, her contract was not renewed.

Though reports of jobs-for-sex schemes – and other forms of corruption – are not

uncommon in humanitarian aid in Congo, almost all the women said they had never encountered similar experiences when trying to find work.

In discussions with hundreds of community members in multiple towns, sexual exploitation was a "consistent finding", said Nidhi Kapur, a consultant commissioned by aid group CARE International to research gender issues during the Ebola crisis.

"Whether we talked to adolescent girls, or adult women, or women in the community or in the government, everybody said the same thing," Kapur said.

However, when The New Humanitarian and the Thomson Reuters Foundation surveyed 34 of the main international organisations and a handful of local NGOs involved in the Ebola operation, most of the 24 that provided data indicated they had received no complaints during the near two-year outbreak.

Congolese Health Minister Eteni Longondo said he had received no reports of exploitation by aid workers.

"I ask any woman who is asked for this kind of sexual abuse and exploitation services to denounce it, because it is not allowed in Congo," Longondo said. "If it is a health worker who is involved in this case, I personally will take care of it."

Some women said they were considering whether to file formal complaints with aid agencies, NGOs, or the health ministry; most, however, said they simply wanted to tell their stories so other women were not subjected to the same behaviour.

'They hired you with their eyeballs'

Congo's 10th and deadliest Ebola outbreak, in a nation decimated by decades of conflict, proved a major test for the UN, coming just two years after the end of West Africa's epidemic, which killed more than 11,000 people.

More than 15,000 people were based in Beni and surrounding towns like Butembo for the 2018 to 2020 response operation, which cost more than \$700 million and was marred by militia violence and hundreds of attacks by armed groups on treatment centres, medical staff, and patients.

Many of the women said Congolese workers involved in the crisis were more likely to demand financial kickbacks in exchange for work rather than sex.

The women reporting abuse said most sexual encounters took place at hotels that doubled as hubs for UN and NGO offices. Among the favourite spots were the Okapi Palace hotel and Hotel Beni, where aid groups had offices and often booked blocks of rooms.

Another woman – a 32-year-old Ebola survivor – said she was phoned by a man who invited her to come for a counselling session at a hotel. Ebola patients' telephone numbers were routinely taken for follow-up care after they were discharged.

In the lobby, she accepted a soft drink. Hours later, she said she woke up naked and alone in a hotel room. She believes she was raped.

“I lost my husband to Ebola,” she said, adding that she stayed silent about the incident because she already felt shunned by people afraid of catching Ebola from her. “Instead of help, all I got was more trauma.”

A handful of aid agency drivers corroborated organisational affiliations of the men.

The men – doctors, health workers, and administrators – used official drivers to shuttle women to the hotels and to their homes and offices, according to four drivers interviewed. All the drivers requested anonymity so as not to jeopardise job opportunities.

One woman said the man who abused her drove in a vehicle marked “World Health Organization”.

“It was so common,” said one driver. “It wasn’t just me; I’d say that the majority of us chauffeurs drove men or their victims to and from hotels for sexual arrangements like this. It was so regular, it was like buying food at the supermarket.”

Young men were also exploited, aid agency drivers said.

One driver said a doctor would routinely ask for young men to be brought to restaurants and hotels. Other boys and young men were paid to procure women, according to a recruiter at an international NGO who spoke on condition of anonymity.

One woman said, “In this response, they hired you with their eyeballs. They’d look you up and down before they’d make an offer.”

Some of the women showed reporters their name badges with organisation logos or pictures of them in uniforms after they were hired. One said a money transfer came from the WHO as payment for a job she said she was given in exchange for sex.

‘Women and children deprioritised’

Most women interviewed were unaware of hotlines and other ways to report abuse. A programme to protect against sexual abuse was put in place a year after the operation began, said David Gressly, the UN’s former Ebola response coordinator.

Critics said this highlighted the failure of programmes to protect against sexual exploitation and abuse in humanitarian operations, which were underfunded, an afterthought, and male-dominated with few women in decision-making roles.

“It was very clear that women and children were deprioritised,” said Kapur, the CARE consultant.

Even when allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation are reported, they are often found by investigators to be unsubstantiated.

In Central African Republic, for example, investigators were found to lack experience or tried to discredit victims who made accusations against UN peacekeepers.

One former humanitarian worker, who now advises international organisations and governments that fund humanitarian efforts, said the only way things will change is when donors – and taxpayers – demand change.

“Donor governments should take a much stronger stance and must ensure that taxpayer funds are not misused for the purposes of violating the rights of vulnerable aid recipients,” said Miranda Brown, formerly with the UN’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Though relief efforts in Ebola-affected areas have been scaled down amid budget constraints and more pressing concerns – from COVID-19 to a new Ebola outbreak in northwestern Congo – the experiences haunt many of the women.

“If they really wanted to help people, they would have done it unconditionally,” said a 24-year-old woman. “Instead of helping us, they destroyed our lives.”

An investigation by The New Humanitarian, Thomson Reuters Foundation

Additional reporting by Sam Mednick in Beni and Butembo; Guylain Balume in Goma; and Philip Kleinfeld, Paisley Dodds, and Izzy Ellis in London. Reporting support was provided by a Congolese journalist and a Congolese researcher whose names are being withheld for security reasons. Editing by Katy Migiro, Belinda Goldsmith, Andrew Gully, and Josephine Schmidt. Illustrations by Robert Flummerfelt.

SHORTLISTED STORY

THE MAHDI SCOUTS: A CHRONICLE OF CHILD RECRUITMENT INTO IRANIAN MILITIAS

Rukaia Al-Abadi (Syria), Fatima Al Othman (Lebanon)



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THE MAHDI SCOUTS: A CHRONICLE OF CHILD RECRUITMENT INTO IRANIAN MILITIAS

By Rukaia Al-Abadi and Fatima Al Othman. Supervision: Zeina Arhim
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This investigation reveals children were trained in weapon use in Iranian camps in Syria and Lebanon under the banner of the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts, which serves as a bridge to militias affiliated with Iran's Revolutionary Guard.

This report investigates the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts through exclusive interviews with young scouts, their families, teachers, and scout leaders. The youngsters not only gain strength by joining the Mahdi Scouts, but also evade Syria's two-year mandatory military service.

So, what are the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts? And what role do they play in supplying Iranian-backed militias in Syria with fighters?

The Boys of Imam Mahdi

Mustafa was 16 when, at the end of 2018, he joined the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts. He had been told about them by friends in Hatla, a small town north of Deir Ezzor.

People in Hatla are mostly Shia. Following intense fighting with opposition forces in June 2013, they fled to regime-held areas only to return with the arrival of Iranian-backed militias in the region in late 2018.

The town is headed by Muhammad Amin Raja, a member of the Syrian People Assembly, who first attracted young men to be included in the ranks of Syria's Hezbollah and the Fatemiyoun Brigade.

Mustafa was among the first boys to join the Imam Mahdi Scouts when it started its activities in Deir Ezzor about a year after the defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Syria (ISIS) and the Syrian regime's return to power in the governorate.

At the time, the scouts mainly attracted the children of people close to Iranian leaders and relatives of those affiliated with Iran's Revolutionary Guard.

Mustafa therefore needed some mediation from his friends in Hatla, before being able to join the scouts in the Ummal neighborhood of Deir Ezzor.

Here the sleeping and eating quarters are located. Training took place in the College of Electronic Engineering in Port Said Street, which is also considered the headquarters of the Pakistani militia, the Zainabiyoun Brigade, also backed by Iran.

Mustafa spent three months here. He did a lot of sports and attended religious classes from Iranian teachers they used to call “the turbanis.”

“They talked a lot about the battles of Hussein, the one in Taf when he was killed, and Imam Ali, which affected me a lot,” Mustafa said. “I was young and changed my religion from Sunni to Shia.”

Girls Scouts and Virgin Stars

The boys were not only attracted by the prospect of becoming a scout, but also by the hundreds of Syrian and Lebanese girls who joined the movement.

One of them was 20-year-old Lebanese Rayan. Encouraged by her mother, she joined the Mahdi Scouts when she was only four years old and stayed until she turned 18. She liked the “participatory and collective” atmosphere.

“The scouting environment is linked to the religious commitment of my family, which is what mostly motivated me to stay,” she said.

The activities for the girl scouts vary and are different from those for the boys.

“One of the most important tasks was collecting and distributing food,” Rayan explained. “We also attended religious and cultural courses, and participated in religious events as Ashura. However, we stayed away from political activities.”

The scouts also organized the so called “female veil stars,” which according to Rayan was aimed at strengthening the commitment, faith and proper behavior of girls. In addition, there were summer activities, handicrafts courses and leisure trips, including a visit to Sayeda Zeinab’s shrine in Damascus.

Hezbollah

Yousef, a leader of the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts in Lebanon, who preferred not to be fully named, said the camps also offered activities related to agriculture and cleaning streets and beaches.

“The scouts furthermore work on moral behavior from both a psychological and religious point of view,” he explained. “In addition, they work on enhancing the members’ capabilities in dealing with society through theater, music and speaking in public.”

Yousef started working for the scouts eight years ago and eventually became a youth leader. According to him, the Mahdi Scouts do not have a fixed center in every Lebanese region. However, the headquarters is located in the area of Bir Hassan near the Hezbollah stronghold in Beirut’s southern suburbs.

Yousef denied the existence of any link between Hezbollah recruitment and the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts. He also denied the scouts were offered any arms training.

Three years have passed since Mustafa first joined the Mahdi Scouts in Deir Ezzor, during which he underwent training in a group of some 25 youngsters between 14 and 18 years of age.

According to Mustafa, they received theoretical and practical training in the use of weapons, in addition to religious classes. However, there was no weapons training at first.

“They gradually raised the issue, asking whether we wanted to learn about weapons, if we wanted to learn how to dismantle and assemble weapons in a short period of time,” he said. “All scouts were asked such questions to arouse their curiosity and to one day carry weapons.”

According to Mustafa, there are also camps directly affiliated with Iran’s Revolutionary Guard, yet they have stipulated that participants must be between 16 and 20 years of age, and have a sponsor, generally a family member, to back them and sign a contract.

“Literacy”

26-year-old Samer confirmed what Mustafa told us about arms training in the camps. He joined the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts in Lebanon in 2003 and remained a member until he turned 18. According to him, “literacy” is the name used for the training program in the use of light weapons.

“They do this to honor what Imam Musa Sadr said ‘Weapons are the adornment of men,’ during the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon,” Samer said.

He added that the “literacy program” did not extend beyond “firing three or four bullets.” The aim was just to give children an idea of how to use weapons and encourage them, so that in a later stage they might join “the path of jihad.”

Samer emphasized the “literacy program” was not obliged, but optional. Practice would take place in and around Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley, as it “ensures no sounds could be heard.”

Upon leaving the scouts, Samer traveled to Africa. His parents insisted on him leaving out of fear he might join Hezbollah’s ranks, and with an eye on the dire economic situation in Lebanon.

Origin

The Imam al-Mahdi Scouts have a long history. They originated in Lebanon in 1985. The movement defined itself as a leisure and educational movement under the slogan “Help build a better world.”

The movement obtained a license from the Lebanese Ministry of Education in 1992 and was recognized by the World Organization of the Scout Movement in 1998. It is named after Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Mahdi, who the Twelver Shia believe is the 12th and final Imam.

In an interview with The New York Times in 2008, Talal Atrissi, a Lebanese political analyst and expert on Hezbollah, talked about the link between the Mahdi Scouts and Hezbollah.

“It is an integrated system from elementary school to university,” he said. “The goal is to create a generation that holds strong religious beliefs and is close to Hezbollah.”

In 2012, Hassan Khosh Nawais, a former commander of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard in Syria, founded the Syria Province Scouts, which later became the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts. On November 10, 2019, the Mahdi Scouts started a branch in Deir Ezzor and began attracting students from government schools.

Targeting Schools

In cooperation with the Iranian Cultural Center and the Revolutionary Youth Union, which is the Syrian Baath Party’s youth branch, the Mahdi Scouts began targeting public schools in Deir Ezzor. The scouts would send representatives to promote their activities.

“When the schools returned to normal at the beginning of 2019, the Iranian Cultural Center started its activities in cooperation with the Baath Vanguard Organization,” said Ali, a 34-year-old teacher in a public school in Al-Mayadin, a town some 45 kilometer east of Deir Ezzor. “They provided money, stationery and food, and organized school trips and festivals.”

In April 2019, the first Iranian personalities appeared as part of the Mahdi Scouts school visits, which paved the way for affiliations with Iran’s Revolutionary Guard.

This coincided with the activities organized by the Friends of Syria Scouts and Mahdi Scouts in the fifth recreational camp at the Zubaida primary school, which was attended by Hajj Sadiq al-Irani, who is in charge of the Iranian Cultural Center in Deir Ezzor.

Also present were Baath Party representative Saher al-Sakr, Lebanese national Hajj Jawad, an Iraqi military leader named Hajj Abd al-Fattah, as well as several leaders of local militias affiliated with the Revolutionary Guard, including Bassam Al-Satam and Adnan Al-Saud Abu Al-Abbas (“Zuzu”), commander of the Abu Al-Fadl Al-Abbas militia in Deir Ezzor.

This was not the delegation’s first or last visit to the region. More visits took place at the Al Hassan, Zubaida and Ibn Sina schools in Al-Mayadin, where the leaders would talk about the importance of educating children about the danger of “Wahhabi terrorism,” jihad, martyrdom and resistance.

“I was asked to give religious lessons, as well as science and mathematics at the Iranian Cultural Center for a very attractive salary, some 100,000 Syrian pounds per month,” said Ali. “So I worked there almost daily for four months. And the children at that time went to train to fight on Fridays and Saturdays in the Mazraa area near the Al-Rahba Castle, and in the Ain Ali area.”

In addition to the Iranian Cultural Center, the Mahdi Scouts also use the Bright Light Center in Al-Mayadin, which is in fact the most important of its centers in the city.

They furthermore use five schools in the governorate to organize closed camps: the First Girls School and College of Electronic Engineering in Deir Ezzor, the School of Industry in Al-Mayadin, and Al-Ashara and Al-Maari in Abu Kamal.

Training Camps

In June and July of 2019, the Imam Mahdi al-Scouts organized closed camps in the Al-Mayadin desert, in which a first group of some 50 boys were trained in the use of weapons.

After being accepted as a fighter in the ranks of the Revolutionary Guard as fighters, each former scout was given a special card and a monthly salary of 50,000 Syrian pounds.

The closed camps were repeated in Ain Ali, the Al-Mayadin farms and Husseinia in Al-Mayadin. According to teacher Ali, dozens of children between the ages of 12 and 14 were enrolled in physical training, while those over the age of 15 were trained in the use of weapons to join the ranks of Iranian-backed militias.

Path of Resistance

Lebanese scout leader Yousef noted that the organization used to visit and organize camps in Syria and Iraq even before the beginning of the Syrian war. He acknowledged there are links between the Mahdi Scouts in Syria and those in Lebanon “to exchange experiences.”

However, Maher Qamar of the scouts in Lebanon denied this, saying: “There is no link between the Imam Mahdi al-Scouts and scouts under the same name in Syria and Iraq.” He refused to answer our questions regarding arms training.

Yousef did not deny that the Imam Mahdi al-Scouts follow the “path of resistance,” yet insisted that does not provide any evidence for weapons training. Adding: “If we did that, the United States would have imposed sanctions, as it has done on so many other institutions.”

According to him the total number of people active in the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts in Lebanon, including officials, is close to 80,000. He stressed that the scouts’ work is of an “educational and social nature,” seeking to develop young people based on an Mahdist ideology. And: “All work is on a voluntary basis.”

Exploitation

Iran consolidated its presence through rehabilitating some infrastructure and a “social invasion” through its cultural centers, thus extending its influence west of the Euphrates River.

“The work of the Iranian cultural centers is not that different from the work of the scouts camps concerned with raising children according to the vision of the Iranian regime, and extending Iran’s influence over the Middle East,” said Mohamad (42), an elementary school teacher from Deir Ezzor. “Not only military, but also religious and sectarian.”

Asked about the reason to first join the Mahdi Scouts and then an Iranian-backed militia, Mustafa replied: “The first reason is the tragic life we live.”

He then hesitates, before adding: “There is also a tempting salary from the Revolutionary Guard, as well as a non-exposure card.”

All members of militias affiliated with the Revolutionary Guard, get such a non-exposure card which bears the name of the person, a signature and stamp of the brigade commander and the text: “This mujahid brother is allowed to enter and leave at any time, not to be stopped by any security agency, which if needed will facilitate and support him.”

Mustafa said his family was afraid of him being part of the National Defense Forces. Local militias cannot threaten it, as they are affiliated with the Revolutionary Guard, the most powerful authority in the region. “So, I have a certain authority,” said Mustafa.

There are special benefits for boys who are sent by the scouts to volunteer in a militia affiliated with the Revolutionary Guard. One of them, according to Mustafa, is a “a contract we know nothing about, which we sign with an official of the Revolutionary Guard, for a period of six months and a monthly salary of 160,000 Syrian Pounds.”

The scouts can also complete their studies in an Iranian and Lebanese university, but often the officials working for the scouts or the Iranian Cultural Center do not keep their promises. The main focus has shifted towards fighting.

On the other hand, an ordinary member of an Iranian militia is not entitled to go on any mission and is generally treated poorly. He may even be threatened with Syria’s military service if he does not renew his contract with the militia linked to the Revolutionary Guard.

Clan Militias

The Iranian-backed militias that attract graduates from the Mahdi Scouts vary in nature. Having invited tribal leaders and notables to meetings in Tehran, Iran managed to persuade some local clans to establish militias affiliated with

the Revolutionary Guard. The first such meeting took place on August 3, 2018.

One of them is the Al-Mashahda clan in Abu Kamal. Iran claims the Al-Mushahda lineage is rooted in the Iranian city of Mashhad. This is what convinced the clan to form the 47th Regiment under the name of the Hashemite Brigade, led by Yousef Mahmoud Al-Hamdan Abu Issa.

The 47th Regiment recruits its members from the region. It also receives family representatives to submit complaints. Some 200 children from the city of Abu Kamal and surroundings, aged between 15 and 18, were registered as 47th Regiment Scouts.

So far, six training camps were established for these teenagers, three of which we were able to confirm. They were established in January, April and July 2020.

The average stay in such a camp was 20 days, during which the youngsters were given religious lessons, in addition to theoretical and practical military training, including firing weapons in the desert surrounding Abu Kamal under the supervision of the Afghan Fatimiyoun Brigade.

After completing the camp, the graduates were able to join a brigade under a six-month renewable contract.

Nawaf Al-Bashir, a former opposition figure, headed the delegation of notables and sheikhs that visited Tehran in 2017, and returned to form Liwa al-Baqir (Baqir Brigade), which includes most of the members of the Baggara tribe, which trace their lineage back to the 5th Imam al-Baqir.

The Baqir Brigade too is affiliated with Iran’s Revolutionary Guard. It has an estimated 1,000 fighters. The brigade admits children into its ranks without conditions, whom shall be treated as ordinary combatants.

In the countryside west of Deir Ezzor, Sheikh Manhal al-Fayyad, Sheikh of the Al-Busaraya clan, has encouraged the youth of his clan onto the “path of resistance.” Residents claim he has helped hundreds of them to join the ranks of militias linked to the Revolutionary Guard.

Battle fuel

Dozens of former Mahdi Scouts have been killed after joining a militia in Syria over the past few years. Some were officially mourned. Others were handed over to their families or buried in secret.

In July 2017, Lebanon’s Hezbollah organized a memorial service for Mahdi Abu Hamdan, who was 17 when he was killed in Syria. From the will read at his memorial service and his friends’ social media pages it became clear he used to be affiliated with the Mahdi Scouts.

On the same occasion, Hezbollah announced the killing of Muhammad Husayn al-Haq, from the town of Al-Khawakh in the Bekaa Valley. He too was 17 at the time. Days after his death, his high school results were revealed.

Naim Qassem, Hezbollah's Deputy Secretary-General, justified the recruitment of children as Abu Hamdan by saying that they are considered mature at 15 "when the boy reaches puberty."

On January 19, 2020, Mahmoud Sufyan Al-Salfij (15), Muhammad Ahmad Al-Hilabi (13) and Uday Al-Hanan (16) died in a landmine explosion in the Al-Mayadin desert. The boys were students at the Al Hassan School in Al-Mayadin and had joined the Imam al-Mahdi Scouts in mid-2019.

Mahmoud had just finished his 9th grade exams in 2019. As it turned out, he was not very lucky at school, nor in life.

International law prohibits the use of children in combat, which includes their recruitment and arms training.

"It is considered a crime in international criminal law," said lawyer Tariq Shindab, who has Doctorate in International Law.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, which most of the world signed in 1989, prohibits the recruitment and training of children younger than 15.

Article 38 states that: "Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities." And: "Parties shall refrain from recruiting any person who has not attained the age of fifteen years."

The treaty was criticized at the time for setting the minimum age at 15, since most countries in the world consider anyone under the age of 18 a minor.

In January 2000, the Working Group of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights adopted an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

This requires signatory states not to recruit children under the age of 18. Iran signed the optional protocol on September 21, 2010, yet never ratified it.

Finally, the training and use of children in armed conflict violates The Paris Principles regarding children associated with armed groups and The Paris Commitments to protect children from unlawful recruitment or use. These sets of guidelines were adopted by 58 countries in February 2007.

"I can't leave them"

Lord Baden Powell had to wait 19 years before the World Organization of the Scout Movement was officially established in 1922. He could never have imagined that the name "scouts" would be used to recruit children in one of the fiercest wars in modern history.

Mustafa laughed when we asked him about leaving his life of arms.

"I cannot leave whenever I want, because when I leave, the Syrian army will take me

to complete my military service," he said. "And the reason I did not join the army was to not be forced to do service away from home in other provinces. As for the Revolutionary Guard, my role is within my village."

"I don't think about what will happen to us in the future," he concluded. "Me and the other volunteers are all in it together."

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SHORTLISTED STORY

WHERE DID THE EUROPEAN UNION'S BILLION EUROS FOR THE DANUBE DELTA ACTUALLY GO?

Tristen Taylor (South Africa)
Ingrid Gercama (Netherlands)
Nathalie Bertrams (Belgium)



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WHERE DID THE EUROPEAN UNION'S BILLION EUROS FOR THE DANUBE DELTA ACTUALLY GO?

Info-Sud-Est.ro — March 5, 2021

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://www.info-sud-est.ro/investigation-where-did-the-european-unions-billion-euros-for-the-danube-delta-actually-go/>

Our investigation reveals how the European Union's €1.114 billion investment to save the Danube Delta passed into the hands of a network of Romanian politicians, NGOs and businessmen.

On the 12th of June 2017, a high-level delegation from the European Commission arrived in Tulcea, a small Romanian port city at the edge of the Danube Delta. They were on an urgent mission to save the EU's €1.114 billion investment to preserve the Delta's biodiversity and lift its residents out of poverty.

While the investment began in 2014, only 3% of the funds had been spent. The Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) Danube Delta, the EU's biggest single point investment in Romania, was on the brink of collapse.

This investment was supposed to be a showpiece on how to save the environment and raise living standards in a UNESCO world heritage site. Moreover, it is an official part of the 2014 to 2020 partnership agreement between Romania and the European Commission. Johannes Hahn, the current Budget Commissioner, negotiated the agreement and the creation of ITI Danube Delta with the then Romanian Minister for European Funds, Eugen Teodorovici.

In order to address the crisis, the delegation sat down with people who were supposed to be implementing the EU's investment: the Association for Community Development – ITI Danube Delta (ADI-ITI) was joined by Horia Teodorescu, the president of the Tulcea County Council. According to EU documents, Teodorescu kicked off the meeting at 14:30.

Just before the meeting concluded later that afternoon, one of the Commission's representatives told ADI-ITI and Teodorescu exactly what the Commission wanted: over one billion worth of projects contracted by the end of 2020.

The representative said, "No obstacles will be placed, it is desired that ADI-ITI work. The contracting process needs to be accelerated...this acceleration being

the priority number one of all factors involved.”

We don’t know the name of the representative. The European Commission has redacted the names of the attendees from the minutes.

Over a period of three months, we examined documentation from over one thousand tenders and looked at the wealth declarations of an array of Romanian politicians. We used Romanian databases to establish company ownership structures and financial accounts. Additionally, we received information from confidential sources from within both Romania and the European Commission.

This is the story of how funds meant to protect a unique ecosystem and help isolated villages get sewage systems did not reach the isolated communities but mostly went to the mainland instead of the Delta itself. It is also about how the mechanism fell under the control of politicians and businessmen connected through a web of personal, financial and political relationships.

But the story starts with ITI Danube Delta’s weak lines of accountability, confused programming and serious monitoring issues.

An administrative grey zone

Integrated Territorial Investments are used across Europe to match various EU funds, such as the Cohesion Fund, with regions and their particular problems. The main idea is one or more EU Funds are allocated to a particular ITI. Then regional and local politicians, industry groups and NGOs identify the issues specific to the region. The money then spent on projects that, ideally, solve those problems.

ITI Danube Delta is located in Tulcea County, which is one of Romania’s forty-one counties. These counties are akin to states or provinces and are both the administrative divisions and electoral constituencies of the country. Only 200,000 people live in Tulcea County.

According to the World Bank and as of December 2019, ITI Danube Delta is the largest in Europe. The second largest, Azul in Spain, receives €902 million and covers a region of nine million people.

Eight different EU funds make up the investment. These funds are channelled through Romania’s Ministry of European Funds, the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. There’s no single ministry with overall control and the multiple lines of reporting are confused.

Subsequently, ITI Danube Delta falls into an administrative grey zone between authorities.

The current Minister of European Investments and Projects, Cristian Ghinea, is from the anti-corruption party, Save Romania Union. About ITI Danube Delta and its setup, he states: “The question is who owns it? Who is responsible? Who is in charge of the process? In practice, because the political gravity was of such a nature,

the role of county council of Tulcea was huge.”

Under the confusion of the existing system and according to Minister Ghinea, “Basically the chief of the county becomes the chief of the ITI de facto.”

Professor Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, a Romanian political scientist and anti-corruption expert at the Hertie School in Berlin, concurs, “The heads of the counties are the most influential, in Romania, over most projects, including EU funds.”

Given their power of patronage and influence in the parties, county council presidents have earned the moniker ‘barons’ in Romania. And Horia Teodorescu has been the Tulcea County Council president since 2012. His current term of office ends in 2024.

But he is more than just a local politician. During the implementation of ITI Danube Delta, he was an alternate member of the European Union’s Committee of Regions from 2015 to 2020. As an official EU body, the Committee provides advice to the Commission on regional matters, including territorial cohesion and economic policy.

One of Teodorescu’s fellow Social Democratic Party (PSD) colleagues in the Committee, Ionel Arsene, is currently facing corruption charges in Romania. Arsene is the president of Neamţ county council. Another county council president on the Committee, Csaba Borboly from Harghita county, was charged in 2013 with two offences of abuse of office including forgery. He is currently on trial.

Andrei Bodean, chief prosecutor at Romania’s National Anticorruption Directorate – Constanţa Station, says that one of the main patterns for corruption of EU funding is “the civil servant – the one who has access to information, understands the EU funding mechanisms and flow, and who, for himself, family, friends or, in some cases, even for superiors, chooses to defraud funds.”

Making a difference... or not

Covering 3120km² and according to UNESCO, the Danube Delta is one of the most sparsely populated regions in Europe. Only 15,000 people of various ethnic groups—such as Lipovans, Ukrainians and Moldovans—live in the Delta itself.

Sulina is typical of the Delta. Once a thriving cosmopolitan city of 10,000 people, Sulina is now almost empty. Since the revolution in 1989, post-communist Sulina has seen its fishing industries die and its shipyard close. Young people have moved out and unemployment has become endemic. Petruţa Teampau, an expert in the Delta from Babeş-Bolyai University, says of the past thirty years, “the city continued to slowly destroy itself.”

The EU’s investment was supposed to solve these problems. It was also supposed to promote sustainable fishing and protect 5,000 plant and animal species, including the iconic Beluga sturgeon. The ban on sturgeon fishing removed a key source of income from the area.

Yet after five years, things haven't gone so well with ITI Danube Delta. Formerly an economist at the University of Bucharest, Florian Marin is currently a specialist in rural development and EU Funds. He states that: "In those isolated communities they don't have internet, they don't have toilets, no warm water, they don't have tools to heat their homes. These problems, from the perspective of the strategy, have been neglected."

There is also a problem within the design of Integrated Territorial Investments in general: there isn't a legally prescribed way to monitor them. An anonymous source with insider knowledge of EU funding states: "There is no sort of formal requirement for monitoring of the ITI itself, and that is in my point of view a weak point. It has always been a strange one, the Commission submitted guidelines about this, how theoretically member states should set up overall indicators for ITIs but it was guidance, not regulations."

Dr. Piotr Żuber from the University of Warsaw simply states that monitoring an ITI like the one for the Danube Delta "is difficult."

The pace quickens

At the June 2017 meeting, the Commission asked Petre Ilie, the president of ADI-ITI, how long it took to approve a potential project. He replied that it took a maximum of one day and, out of the approximately 600 applications for funding received up until then, the rejection rate was about one percent.

The Commission didn't seem to be particularly fazed. The Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) representative said later on in the meeting: "There is openness on the part of DG REGIO in order to make this mechanism more flexible. The most appropriate measures must be found to meet the needs, there must be a balance between the need for speed and flexibility."

The meeting had an impact. As of the end of 2020, the ITI Danube Delta mechanism has allocated €1,101 billion to 1180 projects, most of which haven't been completed. Only seven projects were earmarked for the protection of the Delta's unique and fragile environment.

And according to ADI-ITI's website and as of October 2020, just under 16% for the projects went to the Delta itself. The rest went to the mainland.

The current investment will be followed by another funding period between 2021 to 2027. However, no decision has been made, either by the Commission or Romania's Ministry of European Investments and Projects, as to the euro amount.

Political maneuvering

From 2012 to 2019, during the design and most of the implementation of the ITI Danube, the PSD controlled the country, except for between November 2015 to January 2017. A technocratic and independent government, led by Dacian Cioloș,

came into power as a result of massive anti-corruption demonstrations against the PSD government of Victor Ponta.

Fraudulent activities centring around Ponta's right hand man and Deputy Prime Minister, Liviu Dragnea, blighted Ponta's cabinets. Dragnea is now in jail: a three and half year conviction for corruption. He is also being currently investigated for defrauding EU funds.

The PSD runs Tulcea County. From 1998 to 2010, Horia Teodorescu was the vice-president of the Tulcea social democrats and in 2010 became the president of Tulcea PSD. A position that he remains in today. He is also an elected member of the PSD's National Political Council, which controls the party.

Horia Teodorescu (photo by Inquam Photos/ Octav Ganea)

A political scientist from the University of Jena in Germany, Olaf Leiße, describes the PSD as a "left-nationalist power cartel" and in which "access to offices, resources and privileges depends on loyalty to the party."

Eugen Teodorovici was the Minister of European Funds from 2012 to 2015, after which he had a brief stint as the Minister of Finance. Along with Commissioner Hahn, Teodorovici created ITI Danube Delta. When interviewed in local media last year, Teodorovici stated, "Let's not forget that the approval of the most important financial package for the county, of 1.2 billion euros, was approved by me, as Minister of European Funds."

After securing that over a billion euros entered Tulcea County and with Horia Teodorescu's blessing as the local PSD boss, Eugen Teodorovici represented Tulcea in Romania's parliament from 2016 to 2020 as a senator.

According to Teodorovici, "My relationship with Mr. Horia Teodorescu is purely institutional and supportive, as it is with those who are part of the local administration of Tulcea County and who I want to increase the quality of life of the inhabitants of this county."

Profiting from an NGO

In the EU partnership agreement with Romania, an NGO was given a legally defined role within the ITI mechanism: Fisheries Local Action Group (FLAG) Danube Delta. FLAG is part of the EU's official European Network of Fishing Areas programme and one of the key parts of the mechanism.

FLAG Danube Delta is supposed to be the bridge between the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) and local fishermen. In order to achieve this, FLAG Danube Delta received €9.3 million of EU funds. The average amount of funding for other FLAGs in Romania is €2 million.

Daniel Buhai, the president of FLAG Danube Delta, is also the president of Black Sea Commercial Fishermen's Association RO-Pescador, which is a founding member of

FLAG. Two of Daniel Buhai's companies are founding members of RO-Pescador. Along with his wife Daniela Buhai, he has a substantial stake in SC Miadmar Fishing SRL. Together, Daniel and Daniela Buhai own S.C. Deltaica Seafood SRL.

Another company that helped to create RO-Pescador is SC Bbg Acces Consult SRL. George Buhai is the owner and Boris Buhai is the manager. They are respectively Daniel's brother and nephew.

By the of November 2020, FLAG Danube Delta funded RO-Pescador to the tune of €590,000, of which approximately €440,000 came from EMFF funds. This funding was not unknown to the Tulcea County Council as the manager of FLAG Danube Delta, Valentin Moldoveanu, is a county councillor: he works with and answers to Horia Teodorescu.

As the manager of FLAG Danube Delta, Moldoveanu signed off on the funding to RO-Pescador. Just as he did for Petruș Fotea in 2019. Fotea is FLAG's legal expert and owns the construction company SC Holiday Steel SRL. This company received from FLAG Danube Delta €18,400 for the "arrangement and endowment of accommodation spaces." Fotea denies that this was a conflict of interest: his statement is here.

Valentin Moldoveanu states that in Fotea's case the national and European legal framework was respected and the conflict of interests was avoided. Valentin Moldoveanu's full answer can be read here.

For his work at FLAG Danube Delta, Moldoveanu earns €17,600 per annum, considerably more than his work as a counsellor at Tulcea County Council; €2,470 a year. In addition, he is on the Political Bureau of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions, which advises the Commission on fishing policy and budgets. Horia Teodorescu is also a member of the Conference.

Daniel Buhai is not a poor man. Miadmar owns two fishing trawlers, modernised in 2004, and Deltaica's factory can process up to 700 tons of fish annually. He even has considerable shareholdings in two fancy restaurants. Yet ITI Danube Delta funds have flowed to his industrial fishing companies.

In 2018, Deltaica was awarded €323,000 to upgrade fish processing equipment. Miadmar received €55,000 to establish a "small fishing shelter". According to Deltaica's website, annual sales in 2017 were just over two million euros. Daniel Buhai's businesses directly benefited from the ITI Danube Delta mechanism and he claims that this led to the creation of forty jobs.

Along with the Romanian ministries responsible for ITI Danube Delta and the European Commission, Daniel Buhai in his capacity as president of RO-Pescador is on the EMFF Operational Programme Monitoring Committee. According to the European Commission, he is part of the oversight mechanism.

When asked about this, Daniel Buhai claims that he has not yet exercised his right to vote in the monitoring committee. Buhai also says that he does not participate

in the project evaluation procedures and did not participate in the selection of the project obtained by RO-Pescador or FLAG precisely in order to avoid the conflict of interests. Daniel Buhai's full answer can be read here.

Incidentally and according to his company's website, Buhai's commercial restaurants in Tulcea and Bucharest are "culinary projects" of RO-Pescador.

The big pocket of EU funds

ADI-ITI's role in the mechanism is to provide public information about, implement and monitor the ITI. Petre Ilie, the President of ADI-ITI says, "Organising a strategy to a very limited territory, which has unique specificities offered by this biosphere, we succeeded to get a specific allocation from the big pocket of the European funds."

Two contracts stand out within this organisation. The first involves Raluca-Andreea Bumbac. She is the interim coordinator of ADI-ITI, an expert in EU funds and a member of the selection committee for FLAG projects. Along with her husband, she owns Turism Crew Platform SRL.

This company received €110,000 from FLAG Danube Delta for "Innovative solutions for accommodation and leisure in the Danube Delta." She denies this is a conflict of interest. She states that she wasn't part of the selection committee that approved the project and her full statement is here.

The next unusual contract at ADI-ITI involves FLAG Danube Delta's legal expert. Petruș Fotea is also a public procurement expert at ADI-ITI. His other company, Lake House Mineri SRL, received two consultancy contracts for "Advice in the field of public procurement." These contracts netted him a total of €12,500 of ITI money. Fotea claims that it is not a conflict of interest for these contracts and the funding to his company because he did not take part in the decisions, verification or selection of the projects submitted to FLAG.

Both Raluca-Andreea Bumbac and Petruș Fotea came to the June 2017 meeting prepared. Fotea registered Lake House as a company four days before the meeting: Bumbac registered Turism Crew three days before.

Alexandru Dan Munteanu, a PSD member of the Tulcea County Council from 2016 to 2020, sits on ADI-ITI's board. And his boss, Horia Teodorescu, doesn't have to travel far to engage with ADI-ITI since its office and the offices of the Tulcea County Council are in the same building.

This is not the only influence Teodorescu has over ADI-ITI. An advisory committee directs the general flow of projects, provides a monitoring role and sets the agenda for meetings with the European Commission. Tulcea County Council is part of the advisory board, along with FLAG Danube Delta.

It was this advisory committee that organised the agenda for the June 2017 meeting.

Local Tulcea media reported that on the 23rd of October 2019 and at the opening

conference of a FLAG Danube Delta project, Horia Teodorescu said, “I congratulate Valentin Moldoveanu for what he did, proof of his value in the activity he submitted to FLAG...it is a guarantee, from my point of view, that when you rely only on professional people, you get results.”

But not everyone sees it Teodorescu’s way. When Daniel Buhai ran for a position on the Tulcea Municipal Council in 2020, he wasn’t elected.

Neither did Tulcea see Eugen Teodorovici’s worth. But despite losing his bid to be reelected as a senator, Teodorovici is okay. He is now the audit director at Romania’s Court of Accounts where, as he states, he is responsible “for auditing the Danube Delta ITI Instrument and the expenses incurred within it.”

Dragging in national government

The Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration (MDRPA) plays a significant role in the Commission’s investment. MDRPA is one of three ministries that channel the eight different EU funds to ITI Danube Delta. Both ADI-ITI and Tulcea County Council report to it.

MDRPA was at the June 2017 meeting.

The ministry is the key source of funding for Romania’s county councils and municipalities: she who controls MDRPA, controls the political base of the party. And during the implementation of ITI Danube Delta, the Tulcea local PSD power structure was deeply embedded in the MDRPA through the figure of Sirma Caraman.

Within Romanian ministries, the position of state secretary of a ministry is equivalent to that of a deputy minister. State secretaries are responsible for the implementation and monitoring of a particular ministry’s programmes and activities. Their role is often out of the spotlight but their power can be immense, sometimes far more than their ministers.

Sirma Caraman was a state secretary at MDRPA from 2014 to the end of 2019. Prior to joining the ministry in 2014, she was at the Tulcea County Council working in finance. She started at the Council in 1977 during Romania’s communist era. She then had a break for two years, between 1989 and 1992, when she worked at the Ministry of the Interior. She eventually reached the powerful position of the Economic Director of the Council in 2012.

Like many former communist apparatchiks in Eastern Europe, she went into business after the fall of the iron curtain. With her late husband, Atanase Caraman, they founded a bakery in 1994 whilst keeping their political links. Anatase used to be a PSD councilor at Tulcea County Council.

The informal political power of a county council president in the PSD plays a substantial role in determining who becomes a state secretary: Sirma Caraman could not have achieved her position in MDRPA without Horia Teodorescu’s support.

In 2016, she transferred her shares in Cristian-Impex SRL to her son, Cristian Caraman, who is now the sole owner of the bakery. And the official documentation shows that Cristian-Impex SRL received ITI Danube Delta funding two years later: €318,000 for the acquisition of construction equipment.

How bakeries and construction mix remains an open question.

According to her wealth declarations and ADI-ITI documentation, Mirela Caraman worked at ADI-ITI until 2020 as an expert at obtaining EU funding. Her job was to get funds to support small and medium sized enterprises. Mirela Caraman is Cristian Caraman’s wife.

Both Sirma and Mirela Caraman declined to comment.

The Dutch connection

The corruption within Tulcea seems to extend across borders. On the 25th of November 2020, the National Anticorruption Directorate put Alexandru Filip Stroie on trial for attempting to defraud EU funds.

His father, Alexandru Stroie, had an old friendship with Teodorescu: according to him, he loaned Teodorescu €200,000 a decade ago but says he has no idea what the loan was for.

In order to prove he had the necessary 50% co-financing to obtain EU funds to build a new pastry production line at his company, Alexandru Filip Stroie borrowed US\$3 million in 2018 from Brikston Cooperatif UA, a Dutch investment fund.

He then showed the Agency for the Financing of Rural Investments a bank statement indicating the funds were in his account. Three days after receiving the funds and to minimise the interest payment, Stroie transferred the money back to Brikston, paying USD\$2500 in interest. Stroie has confessed to the charge of fraud and in February 2021 received a suspended one year and eight months prison sentence.

According to Andrei Bodean, another one of the major patterns of corruption is “businessmen who feel protected either by the political factor or by the power with which they feel invested due to their financial status.” He goes on to explain that “the more money they have, the more powerful and inconsiderate they feel about the law.”

Bodean is the prosecutor who caught Stroie.

The head rots first

According to his 2020 wealth declaration published on the Tulcea County Council’s website, Horia Teodorescu loaned €205,000 to his construction company SC Condor S.R.L., which he has 100% ownership of and formed in 1990 when he was thirty-two. He also received about €76,000 in dividends from his company, which is double his annual salary as the President of Tulcea County Council.

Like Buhai and others, Teodorescu has also personally benefited from EU funds meant to save the Delta. Administered by Robert Berbecel, SC Condor S.R.L. received €487,000 under the ITI Danube Delta mechanism.

The contract was for “creating a new accommodation unit in Tulcea County, in order to develop tourism in an area with high tourist potential.”

This “accommodation unit” appears to be located in a mostly empty multistory building in the city of Tulcea. Teodorescu owns the building through Condor. The building has no signs of touristic activity: not one single advertisement about tourism.

Horia Teodorescu’s edifice towers over a crumbling building. Lichiardopol House was where the Kingdom of Romania, after the Romanian War of Independence (1877–78), signed the agreement that Dobruja became part of Romania, after almost 500 years of Ottoman administration. Dobruja consists of the counties of Tulcea and the neighbouring Constanța counties, which encompass the Danube Delta.

When we sought to confirm that the accommodation unit was in Teodorescu’s building, Tulcea City Hall informed us that the building’s construction permit is missing from the institution’s archives, stating that “the file was sealed by National Anticorruption Directorate prosecutors” in 2017. However, according to sources with the prosecutorial service, the National Anticorruption Directorate rarely takes original documents and, if it does, a copy is left in the archives.

Sirma Caraman was the state secretary for MDRPA when Teodorescu’s company received almost half a million euros for the “accommodation unit.” MDRPA was the managing agency for those EU funds.

Horia’s wife, Mariana Teodorescu, and Robert Berbecel also got their share of EU funds. Berbecel owns the company Infrabild SRL, which was allocated €422,000 from the ITI Danube Delta mechanism in 2018. The funds were for the company’s capital stock.

Mariana Teodorescu is a 49% beneficiary of Mimp SA. The company was awarded €421,000 from ITI Danube Delta in 2016 for the “acquisition of equipment”.

In March and June 2020, Condor received two ITI contracts for sewer works in Tulcea County: just over two and a half million euros. The total amount of taxpayer money Condor received from 2007 to 2020 is almost €15 million.

Horia Teodorescu, Mariana Teodorescu and Robert Berbecel all declined to comment.

Where is the European Commission?

There’s another key element to Teodorescu’s ITI contract for the “accommodation unit”. According to official documentation, the start date for the project was six months before the June 2017 meeting. The European Commission sat down

with a man who was already receiving European taxpayers’ money. If they were monitoring their investment, they would have known that.

Yet the European Court of Auditors and European Anti-Fraud Office aren’t investigating. We asked them.

Commissioner Johannes Hahn, the man responsible for funding the ITI Danube Delta, has not had a single meeting with ADI-ITI during the past eight years according to the official list of his meetings. He also refused to be interviewed about or even comment on ITI Danube Delta.

After the June 2017 meeting ended on the 12th, the Commission representatives went to dinner. The next day they took a long boat ride to Sulina, the still fading shadow of yesteryear, and ate a “traditional lunch.” Then back to Tulcea for another dinner. On the morning of the 14th, they departed.

In June 2018, the second and last meeting between the Commission and ADI-ITI took place. There are no official minutes of this meeting. One billion euros and two meetings. The Commission has the power to suspend programmes if serious irregularities are found.

What happens next?

The jumble of the mechanism created the conditions for potential fraud and corruption. You don’t find a clear organisational chart in which the decision makers are easily identifiable. And, most crucially, there are no ongoing monitoring regulations specific to the mechanism: in the case of ITI Danube Delta, that ticking time bomb exploded.

For these reasons, Minister Ghinea would like to see smaller ITIs implemented in Romania and with very clear and well-defined organisational structures, strong programming and accountability. He regrets that Romania chose to put all the funds into a single ITI in one location.

Eugen Teodorvici knows that something is wrong. He says, “For ITI Danube Delta to be a success, some urgent measures are needed to adjust and accelerate the implementation of this instrument.”

The question is then will he audit ADI-ITI, FLAG, Buhai and Teodorescu?

“The production of this investigation was supported by a grant from the Investigative Journalism for Europe (IJ4EU) fund.”

OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION TO PEACE

By Aidan White

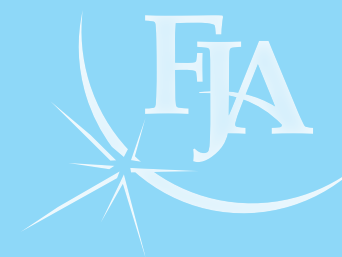
The search for lasting and sustainable world peace remains elusive and poses a singular challenge to journalists. Many regional conflicts remain frozen in time, but any one of them, as the horrifying events in Ukraine in the northern spring of 2022 remind us, can suddenly erupt, disrupting the lives of millions and creating global instability.

Journalists have a special role to play in reporting conflicts like this. It is not their purpose to make war, to incite others to violence or to promote hate speech. They must provide honest and fair reports, explaining in clear, temperate and non-partisan language the brutal realities of war, showing humanity to the victims, and pointing to the potential for peace and reconciliation.

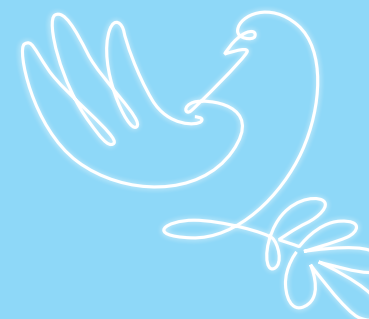
The entries in this section illustrate the value of fearless reporting, giving voice to the victims of war and exposing how conflict continues even when peace agreements have been struck.

There are poignant reflections from Nigeria on how the conflict there has continued during the health emergency, bringing devastation and a wave of killings in Southern Kaduna.

Another story highlights the courageous voices of Uyghur refugees speaking out against genocide and crimes against humanity in their Chinese homeland.



OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION TO PEACE



FIRST PRIZE WINNER

THE BOYS WHO SWAPPED FOOTBALL FOR BULLETS

Olatunji Ololade (Nigeria)



Olatunji Ololade, Associate Editor, The Nation, Nigeria, is a multiple-award-winning journalist. He has reported conflict and emergencies across Nigeria, Cameroon, Liberia, and Cote d'Ivoire. He has received 33 journalism awards including the Nigerian Media Merit Award (NMMA), UN Migration Reporting Prize, CNN/Multichoice African Journalist Award, Wole Soyinka Prize for Investigative Journalism. He is a five-time finalist for the Kurt Schork Award in International Journalism and the only journalist to emerge NMMA's Newspaper Reporter of the Year for three consecutive years: 2010, 2011 and 2012 respectively. He was a 2020 finalist for the Fetisov Journalism Award in the Outstanding Investigative Category.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Selecting the pick of the entries was no easy task, but the judges agreed Olatunji Ololade (Nigeria) is a worthy winner for his terrific report on how children are robbed of their childhoods and futures because they live or grow up in war zones.

It is estimated that around 153 million children are the primary and most vulnerable victims of war and privation according to the charity Save the Children¹. Often children only survive by becoming players in the horrors that surround them. Many have no choice and are abducted and forced into active warfare.

Such was the fate of thousands of boys in Nigeria where over the past three years more than 10,000 boys were strong armed into boot camp training in abandoned villages and forest hideouts by Nigeria's militant Islamist group Boko Haram which is fighting to overthrow the government and create an Islamic state.

This was painstaking work and highlights the traumatic aftermath of life for Boko Haram's former child soldiers.

This report focuses on the traumatic experiences of young boys like Yakubu, who was kidnapped aged 10, then subjected to psychological torture and groomed into service as a cold-blooded killer. The details are horrifying – in his first year as a child combatant, he killed 22 people, including 20 adult hostages and two of his childhood friends.

Before his abduction Yakubu had, like millions of other youngsters, childhood ambitions of becoming a professional footballer, but this dream was shattered in the wake of Boko Haram's raid on his home in Gwoza.

Ololade tells the story without holding back on the detail. He shows compassion and respect for the victims and demonstrates why the ethic of humanity is a core value of journalism and why the adult world needs to take responsibility for building a future shaped by commitment to peace, security and the safeguarding of the lives of children everywhere.

¹ <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/half-of-children-poverty-conflict-discrimination/>

THE BOYS WHO SWAPPED FOOTBALL FOR BULLETS

By Olatunji Ololade

The Nation — May 2, 2021

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://thenationonlineng.net/the-boys-who-swapped-football-for-bullets/>

The thing about a gun: its easy for a child to get trapped in the sickle curve of its blind trigger. Yakubu, 10, is a testament. Since he learned to squeeze his first trigger, he's been enamoured with the gun. His weapon of choice, the Russian Kalashnikov, AK-47 rifle. It didn't matter that it was the deadliest gun in the world. He was only too ecstatic to wield it. Armed with the gun, he hushed boys to sleep with bullets in Sambisa. He shot hot lead into their parents in Baga. He watched blood drip through their perforated innards to soak the bleached sands of Kalaberge. He abducted peasant girls and housewives too. The 10-year-old dispersed corpses into Borno's scorched earth. But he "did it all to survive."

"If I didn't do those things, they would have killed me," he said, explaining his ordeal as a former captive and combatant of the Boko Haram (BH) terrorist group. Now 16, Yakubu regrets his membership of Boko Haram.

His life would probably pan out differently had he escaped the clutches of the insurgents, when they laid siege to his village, in Gwoza, in July 2016. That sad incident put paid to his childhood and his dreams of attaining soccer renown.

Growing up, Yakubu dreamed of playing professional soccer. He yearned to play for El Kanemi Warriors of Borno, and afterwards, English Premiership's Chelsea FC. He clung to his dreams even when quick with monsters.

At school and on the sandy pitches of Gwoza, he was fondly admired as a 'standing 10,' a skillful midfielder, who teased the passion and shrieks of many a soccer lover by his aplomb.

The future seemed rosy, guilt-edged, until the sad incidence of his abduction.

On that fateful day, the boy died in Yakubu, so did his spunk and promise as a soccer maestro.

Boko Haram stormed his village and burned his home. They shot his parents in the head,

and stabbed his brother in the neck killing them. Then they whisked him, his brother's wife and six of his childhood friends to their enclave in Sambisa forest, he said.

There, they forcibly conscripted him and his friends as child combatants. He said, "Few days later, they transfered us to Shababu Ummah, in the Chikungudu forest, in Kalaberge. There, we spent four months learning to use daggers, swords and machine guns."

And Yakubu knows his guns. He knows when and how to shoot to merely wound flesh and bone. He knows when to crack the cranium, and go for the kill, delivering the headshot.

Sometimes, the casualty hits too close to home, like when he aimed his rifle at his best friends, Idrissu, 11, and Ilyasu, 13.

"They stole dried fish and tried to escape. They were my childhood friends but I was their leader. I was told to punish them. So, I shot them in the head," he said.

Asides the two that he shot in the head, four of his remaining friends, Abdullahi, 10, Bashir, 12, Salihu, nine, and Hassan, 13, were killed during encounters with the Nigerian Army.

Shooting his childhood friends in the head; hardly anyone ever gets past that, let alone a child. But Yakubu shrugged off the incident, describing it as two out of his 22 kills. Keeping count was an ego thing. "The more people you kill, the more you are revered," he said.

At the Chikungudu bootcamp, Yakubu grew insentient. Perhaps because his captors taught him to use captives as target practice.

He said, "One day, when they (BH fighters) returned from a mission, they lined up their hostages before us and asked us to kill them. They said they were strengthening us to become men. That day, I killed six people.

"Two days later, my trainer told me, Yakubu, my god daughter is turning four today, you will kill four people. I thought he was joking but he thrust an AK-47 in my hands, and held another gun to my head, threatening to kill me if I refused to execute the hostages lined up before me. Instantly, I killed four of them."

One week later, Yakubu gunned down four men while on a mission in Monguno. At that point, there was no turning back. "I enjoyed firing the rifle like they did in the movies," he said, adding that their commanders made them binge on hard drugs including Tramol (A variant of Tramadol), LSD, cannabis, and codeine before and after they embarked on missions.

Ball in a pitch of thorns

In time, Yakubu settled into his new life, evolving from apprehension to a sort of

understanding: that his childhood dreams, like a punctured ball, had deflated in a pitch of thorns. Thus he embraced life as an insurgent.

There was no time for regret: the power he felt squeezing the trigger and watching life depart his victims, filled him with blood lust. It kept him fiending for the 'respect' and applause of fellow child combatants, he said.

Due to his dexterity with the gun, he rose through the ranks at the boot camp and was tasked with the 'honour' of training about 120 boys including minors as young as four years old.

"I taught them to dissemble and couple assault rifles. I also taught them to shoot guns," he said.

Yakubu got swept away by the thrill of life as a Boko Haram gun fighter until his squad got overrun by the Nigerian Army en route a mission in Gwoza.

"We suffered heavy casualties. I was the only one that survived the assault," he said, adding that he was eventually arrested at a military checkpoint while trying to trek from Gwoza to Maiduguri.

"One of our girls (former sex captives) who got rescued by the army pointed me out to the soldiers. I was lucky they didn't kill me," he said.

Life as a village 'serpent'

Upon his arrest, Yakubu was enrolled in the Nigerian Army's deradicalisation programme tagged, "Operation Safe Corridor," graduating as one of its early beneficiaries. He has supposedly "been rehabilitated and reintegrated" into society, according to military authorities.

But even though he has quit the battle field he faces a new battle with the demons within.

"Sometimes, I dream that I am in Chikungudu forest training boys. I dream that the army are chasing me...I pray for forgiveness. Everytime," said Yakubu.

Laraba, his grandma and only guardian, disclosed that, "Since he (Yakubu) returned from the forest, he has been a shadow of himself. He keeps to himself a lot, and lashes out explosively at the slightest irritation."

She said, "One day, he threatened to beat me up because I told him to stop smoking Indian Hemp because it made him ravenous, which is bad, because always have tiny rations of food to share. He threw his plate of food at me in a rage. Instantly, his eyes became glazed, bloodshot. He started trembling so hard. I couldn't recognise him anymore. Ever since, I have become very afraid of him."

Laraba does not know what her grandson had been through. She doesn't know what he had done or how deeply he dug into the trenches of mayhem, to earn the trust

and applause of Boko Haram's rank and file.

"I don't wish to know anything. Whatever he did belongs to the past. I am simply glad he is free. I lost my husband and three sons, including Yakubu's father, to Boko Haram. Thank God Yakubu is back," she said.

Even so, the 81-year-old lives wary of her grandson. "I am scared of losing him. Sometimes, he barks out orders in his sleep. He screams and threatens to kill people while sleeping," she said.

More worrisome is Yakubu's penchant for chanting Boko Haram anthems even when visitors are around. "It's scary and embarrassing when he does that...Some neighbours visit simply to get kernel for gossip. They call him 'serpent' behind my back. One of them boldly told me to either poison him or let him go before he kills me but he is my grandson, and I love him," said Laraba.

Yakubu, however, insisted that "it doesn't mean anything" that he occasionally sings Boko Haram's anthems. "I am home now," he said.

But for how long? Many former child soldiers, like him, return home physically but emotionally, they remain attached to Boko Haram, argued Mabel Sanusi, a clinical psychiatrist and specialist in war time trauma.

According to her, a lot of former child soldiers have been prematurely discharged by military authorities. "Many of them have not been appropriately weaned of the bigotries and violence fed to them by Boko Haram. They were abducted at ages as young as four, and violently thrust into a world of carnage, where they were forced to play the roles of killers and abusers. This went on for a period of at least five years in most cases.

"The fact that they were perpetrators doesn't mean they weren't traumatised. How do you release such boys into society without giving them adequate treatment? It's wrong and very dangerous for us all," she said, warning of the likelihood of a high rate of recidivism among supposedly rehabilitated ex-Boko Haram child combatants.

Deradicalisation not working – Gov. Zulum

Recall that Borno governor, Babagana Zulum, recently sounded the alarm that the deradicalisation of repentant Boko Haram members is not working. The military launched Operation Safe Corridor, in 2016, to deradicalise and rehabilitate ex-Boko Haram members. The aim was to reintegrate repentant Boko Haram members into society. More than 500 ex-insurgents have already completed the programme.

But while speaking at the North-East Governors' Forum few weeks ago, Zulum warned that the initiative must be reviewed because some of the ex-Boko Haram

members only come to spy on communities and then return to join the group.

He said, “It has been confirmed that the concept of deradicalisation or Safe Corridor is not working as expected. Quite often, those who have passed through the Safe Corridor initiative, or have been deradicalised, usually go back and rejoin the terror group after carefully studying the various security arrangements in their host communities, during the reintegration process.

“In addition, the host communities where the reintegration process is going on usually resent the presence of Boko Haram terrorists, even if they have been deradicalised, because of the despicable and atrocious activities they have committed in the past,” he said, stressing that the main goals of the deradicalisation initiative are not being achieved.

The governor advised that the best option is to immediately prosecute the insurgents in accordance with the terrorism Act, adding that ex-members, who were forcibly recruited but have been rescued or have escaped from the group, should be the ones to undergo the deradicalisation.

Boy, invisible in plain sight

While the world focused on Boko Haram’s mass abduction of women and girls, the terrorist group was stealing an even greater number of boys. Over 10,000 boys were abducted by the group and trained in boot camps in forest hide-outs and abandoned villages, according to government officials and the Human Rights Watch (HRW), a New York-based advocacy group.

Yakubu is just one of at least 10,000 children and teenagers abducted by the group since its campaign of terror across the northeast and the Lake Chad Basin began in 2009.

With no formal database for the missing, it’s impossible to know how many boys like him, have escaped Boko Haram captivity since the group laid siege to northeastern Nigeria.

They have killed more than 5,000 people including children, and they have left almost double that number with serious injuries and disabilities.

“A great deal of the injuries aren’t physical. Too many among them have been traumatised. They have PTSD,” said Balkis Mohammed, a social worker and child psychologist in Maiduguri, Borno State.

Corroborating her, Maryam Bello, a volunteer social worker in Yobe State stated that the northeast is littered with children and teenagers traumatised by an extreme cycle of violence. “Many of are living in denial. Many are not even aware that they need treatment. And the few, who are lucky to access mental health care live at very great risk of suffering a relapse, due to the persistent warfare wracking the region and its severe consequences,” she said.

According to Kyla Storry, a Mental Health Activity Manager with the Médecins

Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF), “The situation remains extremely worrying. This longterm crisis – which affects more than 60,000 people in Gwoza and as many as 1.8 million people across Borno state – prevents most people from imagining a future for themselves and causes great psychological distress. As long as the crisis lasts, the need for mental health support will continue to grow. It’s crucial that mental healthcare is available to children and adults living in this situation.”

Ten-year-old Abubakr is undoubtedly one of the lucky few to enjoy mental health intervention, following his ordeal as a Boko Haram captive. He was abducted by Boko Haram in Gwoza, at the tender age of five. Abubakr lived with the armed group for five years but he found his way back home, with injuries. On his return, he was admitted to the MSF clinic where he underwent surgical treatment.

Soon after his return, he began to exhibit signs of psychological distress suggesting that he was traumatised by his five-year captivity. But after he started attending sessions with Maryam, an MSF counsellor, he gradually came out of his shell. In time he learned to accommodate intervention and warmed up to others. These days, he has found a knack for drawing and playing football.

The same could hardly be said for Yau Damina, who was abducted from Potiskum at age 14 by Boko Haram. Damina spent five months in Boko Haram’s boot camps, training to become a combatant. In five months, he developed deadly skills. For instance, he killed five men in the blink of an eye, because they disrespected and killed his team leader.

“I killed them because they disrespected and killed my team leader,” he said, in an exclusive chat with The Nation. Damina was eventually arrested at a wedding ceremony in his grandfather’s village.

He regrets his past atrocities. He has no hobbies, no dreams, and he has no hopes for the future. He is simply content living in military detention.

Like Damina, Ali Mustapha was kidnapped at age 14, in Marte, by Boko Haram.

He was subsequently held in captivity at the Chikungudu forest, in Kalabaje and trained as a combatant for three years.

He said, “I have killed about 13 people in separate locations. The first time I killed, I killed five hostages in Chikungudu forest. They later came with three other people and forced me to kill them. I also killed five people in a village called Burssari.”

Mustapha said that “more than 500 children” his age, including younger ones, were conscripted as child soldiers in Chikungudu.

“They spat on us and refused to give us food whenever we dithered in doing what they asked of us. Sometimes, they kill dissenters,” he said, adding that at Chikungudu,

their leader was Umar from the Mamman Nur faction of Boko Haram.

Mustapha was, eventually, intercepted by security operatives, while on espionage in Maiduguri. He was arrested at the Bakassi IDP camp after refugees identified him as a member of Boko Haram. He said he was sent to spy on likely soft targets at Baga Road, the Monday and Custom Markets in Maiduguri.

A work in progress

While the army's deradicalisation programme has been described as a work in progress, it is still one of the most advanced efforts to de-radicalise terror suspects. One critical component of the programme is the rehabilitation of extremists in prison through religious reeducation, vocational training and psychological counseling.

Idris Mahmud-Abdoulahi, a Borno-based Islamic cleric and social psychologist, said, while the initiative is commendable, it is too early to determine the accuracy of any estimate of recidivism, particularly since there has not been enough time to study long-term effects of the de-radicalisation programme.

The programme initially focused only on inmates who were not directly involved in terrorist attacks but it later included radicalised detainees arrested in Sambisa Forest and repatriated from prisons of neighbouring countries.

The actual locations of the de-radicalisation centres are hidden from the public. "This is for security reasons," revealed a senior military officer in the programme, adding that there are plans to expand its scope to include detainees' families, in joint counseling sessions, to mitigate the likelihood of stigmatisation.

The healing

Fiona Lovatt, founder, Children of Borno (COB), a haven for orphaned children and other vulnerable IDPs argued that the government and must pay good mind to the kids' healing process.

She said, "We don't know what has been fed into their minds but it is clearly not the Quran because the Holy Quran is a healing balm for those who have suffered or are suffering. I have seen in Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in the camps, such high faith; that they can sit in the squalor and hunger and poverty that they are dealing with and say 'Alhamdulillah! Praise God, I am alive. My children are alive. I have lived another day.

"It's wrong to say, they have been radicalised; they have been brutalised. So, we know there's drugs involved. We know there's violence involved. We know there's emotional blackmail. Most of these kids have to kill or be killed. This is not some ideology. This is just some raw, gut torture. It is the sort of things Nazi did to train

their soldiers. These are mind control techniques that has nothing to do with any religion," she said.

In Lovatt's perspective, it's just an abject failure of society to care for those children. She said, "We must take care of children in need. I have seen children who have experienced the worst killings rise above their trauma to paint beautiful pictures. I have seen such children tend their own gardens, grow their own vegetables and learn two new languages. I have seen passion ignite in them and watch them yearn to become engineers, doctors, teachers when they grow up. I have seen such children heal in my home," she said.

'Shaytan has whispered into their hearts'

Yet for so many boys, disaffection is the most feasible rationalisation for Boko Haram's appeal. Many of the group's child combatants have little formal education. They live in straitened circumstances, surviving by menial jobs on the fringes of urban and rustic north.

You see them smiling and pleading for alms but deep down, they are very angry. And Boko Haram offers them a corrupted creed as platform to vent.

Eventually, they are goaded to believe that they are a crucial part of a great cause. A worthy movement geared to topple the government of the infidels.

"They misinterpret the Holy Quran and use it to justify the senseless murders they commit. Shaytan has whispered into their hearts," argued Sheikh Mahmud Abdullah, an Islamic scholar and cleric.

There is no gainsaying Boko Haram's creed of violence and wanton genocide is resonant among brainwashed minors. The compelling nature of the grievances articulated, and the pervasiveness of poverty justifies the group's rationale for employing violence to express their grievances.

What are the group's grievances? A history of corruption and neglect at the federal, state, and local levels of government, according to experts, is also a source of widespread dissatisfaction towards politicians, the legal system, and law enforcement.

These sentiments may be found in greater depths and concentration in the north than elsewhere in the country, argued James Forest, Associate Professor, University of Massachusetts, United States of America.

Boko Haram and its sponsors, of course, cash in on the situation; they manipulate the sentiments of the northern youth in recruiting them as soldiers. They lure them with food, money and a passport to paradise; they tell them that their religion is under threat.

Redemption walk

If you ask Yakubu, Damina, Abubakr, among others, they would tell you that life as an ex-child insurgent is markedly tragic, harsh. It's hard to settle into their new lives. They have to relearn the old ways of communal life and humaneness.

But while they pick their way through the jagged horror of their past, will their hearts and memories retract the terror they visited on their innocent victims? Will the latter forgive?

As the antiterrorism war intensifies in Nigeria's northeast, Boko Haram replenishes its ranks with a steady stream of boy combatants, moving child abductees cum combatants through neighbourhoods and forests, using military trucks and passenger vans to boot camps holding more than 1,000 boys on the watch of adolescent trainers.

Back in Chikungudu, said Mustapha, it was normal to see 10-year-old boys romanticise raiding villages, killing traditional chiefs and taking over their wives and daughters.

But when there is no activity. "We get restless and occasionally pick fights among ourselves. The fights get deadly at times," said Damina, who confessed to killing five fellow child combatants for disrespecting and killing his leader.

Such is the tenor of life in the Sambisa and Chikungudu forest bootcamps, where prepubescent boys are mauled into killers by impatient adult commanders and adolescent trainers.

At their arrest or rescue, they find it harder reintegrating into normal life. Home becomes a strange, hostile space. Yakubu's neighbours, for instance, call him 'serpent.'

And in July 2020, some Borno communities protested the reintegration of "repentant Boko Haram members" among them; they asked the federal government to relocate the boys to the presidential villa, in Aso Rock, Abuja.

At the backdrop of it all, several ex-child insurgents must battle the demons within for control of their lives. If they are not consumed by the ravages of PTSD or society's engine of enforced peace and punishing inertia, the rumours, judgmental stares of their relatives, and neighbourhood hostility, ultimately push them back unto the famished paths of mayhem.

There are many inescapably tormented by the intense dialogue of the conflicting personae trapped within their consciousness.

The present is marred by nightmares from their past. Yakubu, for instance, claimed he is okay and "back home now" but every night, he steals back to Chikungudu forest in his sleep. There, he orders recruits as young as four years to disassemble and couple AK-47s in the blink of an eye.

He is home physically but mentally, he is still living in the forest, raiding townships and dodging Nigerian Army bullets.

So engrossed is he with his innate demons that he neither sees the divinations of hope nor the possibility of rebirth.

SECOND PRIZE WINNER

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Bosnian Serb Military Police Chiefs Never Charged with Srebrenica Killings
28 Years On, Families Still Searching for Missing Bosnian Soldiers

Haris Rovčanin, Albina Sorguč (Bosnia and Herzegovina)



Haris has worked with BIRN Bosnia and Herzegovina since September 2016. He started working as a journalist in 2006. He worked for daily newspaper Oslobodjenje for three years before joining Dnevni List, where he worked for seven years, reporting on local crimes and the work of the judiciary in the field of organised crime, terrorism, corruption and, partially, war crimes.



Albina Sorguč has been a journalist for 16 years. She worked for Balkan Investigative Reporting Network Bosnia and Herzegovina for 11 years, and before BIRN she worked for “Nezavisne novine” for five years. At BIRN, she has been monitoring war crimes trials before the Cantonal Court in Sarajevo and the Court of BiH for several years. Besides reporting from the court, she wrote many victim-oriented analyzes and stories, giving the victims much-needed public space to share their stories. In “Nezavisne novine” she reported on social and community issues, focusing on organized crime and corruption.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The second prize went to Haris Rovčanin and Albina Sorguč (Bosnia and Herzegovina) for their forensic analysis of disputed claims about the history of the siege of Sarajevo during the Balkan war of the 1990s.

This high-quality series of reports shows how fact-based journalism is essential when analysing the truth of historical events. Even today prosecuting war crimes in Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to be controversial, some 26 years after the war ended.

By applying simple journalistic principles of fact-checking and challenging unsubstantiated narratives the reporters have revealed how a biased view of events can distort the truth to fit a single narrative. Using concrete examples, the reporters challenge the findings of the so-called Commission for Investigating the Suffering of Serbs in Sarajevo.

SERB CHETNIKS' LINKS TO WAR CRIMINALS AND EXTREMISTS UNCOVERED

By Albina Sorguč and Haris Rovčanin
Detector.ba — February 5, 2021

The original publication is available via the following links:

Bosnian: <https://detektor.ba/2021/02/05/dokumenti-otkrivaju-vezu-clanova-ravnogorskih-i-cetnickih-udruzenja-sa-ratnim-zlocinima-i-ekstremizmom/>

English: <https://detektor.ba/2021/02/05/dokumenti-otkrivaju-vezu-clanova-ravnogorskih-i-cetnickih-udruzenja-sa-ratnim-zlocinima-i-ekstremizmom/?lang=en>

Court records in Bosnia reveal that prominent members of Serb nationalist Chetnik organisations have been charged with war crimes, while the Bosnian Security Ministry has warned that such groups are extremists who could pose a security risk.

“There will be hellish scenes and blood on the River Drina,” sang a man called Rajko Lecic at a gathering of Serb nationalists in Bosnia in March 2019. “Here come the Chetniks from the Serbian mountains!”

As Lecic sang, some of the black-clad members of so-called Ravna Gora Chetnik associations who were attending the gathering in Visegrad, a city on the River Drina, filmed him on their cellphones, while others joined in with his belligerent song.

Visegrad was the scene of brutal ethnic cleansing by Bosnian Serb forces during the 1992-95 war. Bosniaks were killed, imprisoned or driven out.

The Bosnian Security Ministry has warned that rowdy gatherings of Serb nationalists who identify themselves as Chetniks cause fear among Bosniaks who have returned to live in areas like Visegrad after being expelled during the war.

But even though inter-ethnic relations remain highly sensitive, members of Chetnik associations from Bosnia and Serbia who participate in these events did not face any consequences for staging their rowdy celebrations and singing nationalist songs that seem to threaten bloodshed until last year.

By analysing hundreds of pages of documents from the official court registrations of all 16 associations in Bosnia and Herzegovina whose names include the terms ‘Ravna Gora’ or ‘Chetnik’, BIRN has established that some of them have strong connections with war criminals.

The documents revealed that a number of individuals from these associations have either been convicted or are currently on trial for war crimes in Bosnia and

Serbia. Most of them are former members of the Bosnian Serb Army. One prominent Chetnik was convicted of manslaughter in Serbia.

BIRN has also discovered that Bosnia’s State Investigation and Protection Agency is monitoring associations whose names contain the words Chetnik and Ravna Gora because of suspicions that they are propagating extremist ideas.

Other extremist connections that Chetnik associations have cultivated were revealed when a Bosnian citizen was prosecuted for going to fight for pro-Russian separatist forces in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. At the trial, the Bosnian state court heard how the Ravna Gora Movement from Serbia was funding Serb volunteers to travel to the Ukrainian conflict zone.

War crimes and Chetnik ‘dukes’

The original Chetniks were a loosely-structured movement that united Serb nationalist and royalist movements in occupied Yugoslavia during World War II, and collaborated with Nazi-led Axis occupation forces.

They were also known as the Ravna Gora Movement because the organisation was established in the Ravna Gora highland area of Serbia in 1941.

They were banned in post-war Communist Yugoslavia and their leader, Dragoljub ‘Draza’ Mihailovic, was executed for high treason and Nazi collaboration in 1946.

They re-emerged amid the rise of Serbian nationalism in Yugoslavia after Slobodan Milosevic came to power in 1989 and self-style Chetnik units participated in the 1990s wars in Bosnia and Croatia. The most prominent ‘Chetnik duke’ involved in organising paramilitary units was far-right Serbian Radical Party leader Vojislav Seselj, who was later convicted of crimes against humanity by the UN court in The Hague.

The contemporary Ravna Gora associations’ statutes say that they uphold the traditions of Serb forces in the 1990s wars as well as World War II – referring to both as ‘liberation wars’ – and that they promote the ‘truth’ about WWII leader Draza Mihailovic. They gather at Ravna Gora each year, dressed in black uniforms, to commemorate the WWII Chetnik leader, who was rehabilitated by a Belgrade court in 2015.

“As a member of the Bosnian Serb Army who fought in the [1990s] war for several years, I have the right to cherish veterans’ traditions,” explained Goran Ljepojevic, who described himself as the representative in Republika Srpska of one of several Serbian Chetnik organisations.

“I also cherish the tradition of the [World War II-era] Chetniks and the Yugoslav Army in the fatherland under the command of Dragoljub ‘Draza’ Mihailovic,” Ljepojevic said.

Another association, the Chetnik Ravna Gora Movement, which is registered in

Republika Srpska's main city, Banja Luka, has cultivated relations with Bosnian Serb Army veterans.

However, Ljepojevic insisted that war criminals should be prosecuted: "I am all for condemnation of each and every person who committed war crimes, Chetniks and anyone else," he said.

But documents analysed by BIRN suggest that some of the key roles in the governing council of the United Ravna Gora Movement of the Serbian Fatherland association, of which Ljepojevic used to be president, were held by war crime defendants.

According to a document from a Banja Luka court file on the United Ravna Gora Movement of the Serbian Fatherland, in 2013 and 2014, the organisation's regional governing council was headed by Jovan 'Joja' Tintor, the former president of the Serb-led wartime Crisis Committee in the Vogosca municipality who was also an adviser to Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic.

In 2019, Tintor was convicted of the unlawful detentions and abuse of Bosniak and Croat prisoners in the Vogosca area during wartime and jailed for ten years. He was also convicted of manslaughter in Serbia in 2015.

Mileta Pavicevic, president of the United Ravna Gora Movement of Montenegro and a member of the governing council, claimed that Tintor, who is now serving his sentence, was "unjustly arrested".

Rajko Kusic is another member of the council who is due to stand trial for alleged wartime crimes. The charges, accusing Kusic of crimes against civilians in Rogatica in Bosnia, were transferred from Sarajevo to the Serbian war crimes court because he now lives in Belgrade.

Kusic and other council members hold the title of 'duke' – the highest rank in the Chetnik and Ravna Gora hierarchy.

Meanwhile Veljko Papic, one of the founders and vice-presidents of the Ravna Gora-Romanija Movement in Sokolac, is currently on trial at the Sarajevo Cantonal Court for war crimes. The indictment accuses wartime Bosnian Serb Army soldier Papic of mistreating civilians in Sarajevo, intimidating them and forcing them to do hard labour. Papic declined to speak to BIRN.

Serbian historian Milivoj Beslin argued that the Ravna Gora associations are extremist by nature.

"Speaking of the nature of all these Chetnik organisations, not only are they representatives of the most extreme form of nationalism and neo-fascism, but they should actually be declared terrorist organisations in any country governed by the rule of law, because that is what they actually are," Beslin explained.

"You have paramilitary groups that wear some kind of uniform, they obviously have some arms as well, and they are threatening to provoke a war," he added.

But Ljepojevic argued that Chetnik associations are not military organisations, and have the right to exist because "we are legally recognised by the decisions of the court".

Ukrainian insurgents and death's head logos

At the trial of Gavrilko Stevic, who was ultimately acquitted by the Bosnian state court of going to fight in Ukraine, it was heard that Bratislav Zivkovic of the Ravna Gora Movement from Serbia was involved in organising Serb military volunteers' trips from Bosnia to the eastern Ukrainian front, where Moscow-backed rebels have been battling government forces in a long-running insurgency.

"The financing was done through the Chetnik Movement," Zivkovic, who describes himself as a Chetnik commander, explained to BIRN.

"We received help from [Russian nationalist] Cossack organisations. I have strong connections with them. They paid, we sent money, bought tickets and people came to Luhansk [in eastern Ukraine] under my command," he added.

Zivkovic is banned from entering Bosnia because, he said, he has been classified as a threat to national security. He spoke to BIRN via Facebook Messenger from Ukraine, where he still lives.

But prior to the ban, he regularly attended gatherings of Ravna Gora movement members in Visegrad. He also said he went to Bosnia during the war as a military volunteer, but his Serb comrades did not let him go to the frontlines to fight because he was only 16 at the time.

In 2017, the Bosnian Security Ministry's annual assessment of crime and security threats, a document based on intelligence and police sources, raised the alarm about Chetnik associations, warning that "according to the Intelligence Agency in Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethnic/national extremism clearly exists and has a negative impact on the security environment".

The Chetnik associations are committed to "aggressively denying the legitimacy of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina and obstructing Bosnia and Herzegovina's Euro-Atlantic integration", the Security Ministry said. Serb nationalists see Bosnia and Herzegovina as illegitimate and want Republika Srpska to secede and unite with Serbia.

The current president of the United Ravna Gora Movement, and a member of its so-called 'Ducal Council', is Slobodan Maric. Maric is a former police officer in Bosnia's Serb-dominated Republika Srpska entity, and declined to be interviewed.

Republika Srpska's Interior Ministry did not respond to a question about how the head of an association which was considered to be a security risk by the Bosnian Security Ministry was allowed to work as a police officer.

Despite the Security Ministry's concerns, some municipalities in Republika Srpska also continue to provide direct or indirect support to Ravna Gora associations.

The authorities in the town of Ugljevik, for example, allocated a total of 18,700 Bosnian marks (around 9,600 euros) from 2016 to 2019 to the local branches of the Ravna Gora Movement and the Ravna Gora Movement of Serb Countries.

Zoran Lukic, the president of Ravna Gora Movement of Serb Countries, said that its finances are properly accounted for and should be of no interest to journalists, and that the association only does what its court-approved statute states: “Nurturing the tradition that is connected with our association’s ways. Marking certain dates, visiting monuments.”

Members of the Ugljevik branch of the Ravna Gora Movement of Serb Countries have posted several photos on Facebook of their gatherings. The pictures show a black flag emblazoned with a death’s head and the slogan “With Faith in God, Freedom or Death” in the background.

The death’s head logo is used by several other Ravna Gora associations.

The same death’s head logo could be seen on an envelope sent to the Bosnian state parliament on November 6, 2019, photographs published in Dnevni Avaz newspaper showed. In the envelope was a bullet wrapped in a cotton-wool swab.

The photos also showed that the envelope was marked as having been sent from Serbia, but the Bosnian state prosecution has never announced the outcome of its investigation into the envelope’s origins.

While Zivkovic was talking to BIRN from Ukraine via Facebook, a black flag with the same logo was on display behind him. “When a bullet is sent to someone, it means they have been sentenced to death,” he said.

But he denied that his group was involved in sending the threatening letter to parliament. “They’re just using our symbols and our insignia for some petty propaganda of their own. They’re trying to drag me and my detachment into all sorts of stupid things,” he insisted.

‘Their goal is reviving Greater Serbia’

After years of inaction, the Bosnian state prosecution last year charged three members of the Ravna Gora Movement with inciting ethnic, racial and religious hatred, and provoking discord and intolerance at the uniform-clad rally in Visegrad in March 2019.

The indictment charging Dusan Sladojevic, Slavko Aleksic and Risto Lecic alleged that the suspects “caused distress and fear among the population in Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly [post-war] returnees and residents of Visegrad and surrounding places by playing and singing a song expressing threats of violence”.

According to the documents analysed by BIRN, Sladojevic is the president of the Ravna Gora Movement of the Serbian Fatherland. He could not be contacted for a comment on the indictment.

In a previous interview with BIRN, he insisted that hatred and intolerance was not enshrined in his movement’s statute.

“We have the honourable intention of correcting inaccurate history,” Sladojevic said at the time.

Nejra Veljan of the Sarajevo-based Atlantic Initiative think-tank, co-author of a research paper entitled ‘History, Ideology and Structure of the Modern Chetnik Movement’, argued that the Chetnik associations cannot be dissociated from the concept of creating a ‘Greater Serbia’ – the 1990s war goal of the Bosnian Serb authorities, which led to ethnic cleansing and mass killings.

“They will never say in their official statutes that their goal is to revive the [idea of a] Greater Serbia, but they will fill them up with nice words. We should focus more on their actual activities and not on what is written about them [in the statutes],” Veljan said.

One of the most comprehensive verdicts handed down by the UN war crimes tribunal in The Hague, the one that convicted Bosnian Serb political leader Radovan Karadzic, mentions several times that during the ethnic cleansing of Bosniaks and Croats, prisoners were sometimes forced to sing Chetnik songs, while some of the crimes were committed by people who called themselves Chetniks.

Veljan said that junior Chetnik recruits do not understand that they are part of a movement that committed serious crimes during World War II and in the 1990s war in Bosnia.

“They are taught the opposite – that the Chetniks are their [Serbs’] saviours. This can be problematic for the future of the country and inter-ethnic relations,” she said.

She explained that her research has shown that there has been an increase in the Ravna Gora movements’ activities from 2015 onwards, and that their gatherings not just harmless uniformed parades.

“It is no longer about insignia and beards and guys dressed in black, now we have young men and women wearing shirts depicting [Bosnian Serb military chief] Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic and glorifying this movement because, as well as celebrating World War II, they are now also celebrating the events that happened in the 1992-95 war,” she said.

BIRN FACT-CHECK: IS THE BOSNIAN SERB REPORT ON THE SARAJEVO SIEGE ACCURATE?

By Haris Rovčanin and Albina Sorguč
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The original publication is available via the following links

Bosnian: <https://detektor.ba/2021/04/21/birn-fact-check-izvjestaj-o-stradanju-srba-u-sarajevu-nasuprot-sudski-utvrdjenim-cinjenicama/>

English: <https://detektor.ba/2021/04/21/birn-fact-check-izvjestaj-o-stradanju-srba-u-sarajevu-nasuprot-sudski-utvrdjenim-cinjenicama/?lang=en>

A report funded by the government of Bosnia's Serb-dominated Republika Srpska entity claims Serbs were subjected to ethnic cleansing in wartime Sarajevo, but its allegations differ from facts established by courts about crimes during the siege.

The allegations in the report published this month by the Commission for Investigating the Sufferings of Serbs in Sarajevo, which was set up by Bosnia's Serb-dominated Republika Srpska entity government to highlight its perspective on wartime events, have already proved controversial.

The report, which runs to more than 1,200 pages, claims that Serbs were forced out of the Bosnian capital by Bosniak forces as a result of the 1992-95 war.

“Paired with a systematic anti-Serb propaganda and ethnic pressure, these crimes represented a systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing, which culminated in exodus of Serbs from Sarajevo after the Dayton Peace Accord [in 1995],” the report says.

As its source material, the Commission used testimonies and statements given to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, ICTY, documents from and statements given to the Republic Centre for War Crime Investigations of Republika Srpska, documents from the UN's wartime peacekeeping force in Bosnia and Herzegovina, UNPROFOR, as well as media reports, interviews and books.

The commission was founded as an attempt to “offer a more balanced depiction of the events in Sarajevo based on facts”, the report says. It was chaired by Israeli historian and writer Raphael Israeli, a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

One chapter focuses on the suffering of Serbs in Sarajevo during the war, but the rest of the report consists of chapters about the historical context in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the role played by the media and by radical Islam in the war, among other subjects.

When the commission was established in 2019, lawyers and experts in transitional justice expressed concerns that it could be misused to present a biased view of wartime events, downplaying crimes against Bosniaks and Croats.

BIRN analysed some of the key sections in the report to assess whether it corresponds to judicially-established facts, and found that it ignored many findings established in court cases and verdicts at the ICTY and at courts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and elsewhere in the region.

Was it really a siege?

From April 5, 1992 to February 29, 1996, Bosnian Serb forces encircled Sarajevo in what would become known as the longest siege of a capital city in the history of modern warfare. Some 10,000 civilians were killed during the 44-month-long siege, mostly by snipers and shells fired from mountains above the city.

But the Commission insisted that Sarajevo was not actually besieged, only blockaded, as humanitarian aid was “allowed into the city” by the Bosnian Serb Army and there was no starvation.

However, the ICTY's verdicts, including the one that convicted former Bosnian Serb president Radovan Karadzic, did not accept the arguments of soldiers and officers from the Bosnian Serb Army's Sarajevo-Romanija Corps soldiers who claimed that the city was not under siege because a tunnel under the Sarajevo Airport runway could be used as an exit and because some humanitarian aid was coming in.

“The fact that humanitarian aid had to be sent to the city and that the UN required permission of Bosnian Serbs for this clearly indicates that it was an encircled city, a city under siege and that the SRK [Bosnian Serb Army's Sarajevo-Romanija Corps] controlled the situation,” the Karadzic verdict said.

“Had the SRK not surrounded the city and stopped supplies from coming in, neither the tunnel nor the humanitarian aid would have been necessary,” it added.

Who shelled the Markale market?

Two of the most horrific incidents during the siege were the shelling of the Markale marketplace on February 5, 1994 and on August 28, 1995, both of which have been blamed on Bosnian Serb forces.

The Commission's report says the UN peacekeeping force UNPROFOR concluded that “each side could have fired the grenade”, citing intelligence experts from several countries who determined that the Bosnian Army staged the attack itself to cast the Serbs in a bad light.

However, the report did not offer any evidence that could cast doubt on the official version of what happened.

A second-instance verdict at the ICTY in the trial of against former Bosnian Serb

Army Sarajevo-Romanija Corps commander Stanislav Galic stated that “the 120 mm mortar shell fired at Markale market on February 5, 1994, which killed over 60 persons and wounded over 140 others, was, beyond a reasonable doubt, deliberately fired from SRK-controlled territory”.

The verdict said that it finds it “not only unreasonable that ABiH [Bosnian Army] forces would have fired in this case on their own civilians but also contrary to the material facts proved”. The judgment further states about the 1994 attack on Markale: “This incident is an example of a shelling deliberately targeting civilians.”

Citing foreign intelligence data, the Commission also claims that the second attack on the Markale market in 1995, which killed 43 people, was “probably not” carried out by Bosnian Serb forces, but by the Bosnian Army again.

But the ICTY verdict convicting Sarajevo-Romanija Corps commander Dragomir Milosevic said that the court is satisfied that “the mortar shell that struck the street in the vicinity of the Markale market was fired from the territory under the control of the SRK and that it was fired by members of the SRK”.

The conclusion that the Markale market was shelled from Bosnian Serb Army-controlled positions in both 1994 and 1995 was also confirmed at the trial of Radovan Karadzic.

Were Serbs punished by biased courts?

The Commission’s report concluded that Serbs were more severely punished than suspects of other ethnicities by biased courts both in Bosnia and The Hague, and claimed that nearly all perpetrators of crimes against Serbs have evaded justice with the active support of Bosnian state institutions.

“Perpetrators of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocidal acts against Serbs benefited from the extreme leniency of judges, so they frequently went unpunished, both in trials before the international court and courts in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” the report says, adding that many suspects have not been indicted, while some have been acquitted on appeal or had their sentences reduced.

However, while Serbs have been given longer sentences for committing more serious crimes, courts in Sarajevo and The Hague have convicted a significant number of Bosniaks too.

The Bosnian state court has sentenced six people to a total of 24-and-a-half years in prison for crimes against Serbs in Sarajevo. The longest sentences were given to Bosnian Army soldiers Zaim Lalicic, Samir Kesmer and Mirsad Menzilovic, who each got six years for rape. The trials of three wartime Bosnian Army corps commanders are also ongoing.

Meanwhile the state court has sentenced a total of nine people to 122 years in prison for crimes against non-Serbs in the Sarajevo area.

The ICTY has convicted four people of crimes against Serbs. Rasim Delic,

commander of the Main Headquarters of the Bosnian Army, was sentenced to three years in prison, while for crimes against Serb detainees at the Celebici prison camp, Hazim Delic was sentenced to 18 years, Esad Landzo to 15 years and Zdravko Mucic to nine years.

The ICTY meanwhile has sentenced former Bosnian Serb political leader Radovan Karadzic to life in prison for crimes including terrorising the population of Sarajevo during the siege. Former Bosnian Serb military chief Ratko Mladic was convicted of the same charge, but is appealing.

The Hague court also found commander of the Bosnian Serb Army’s Sarajevo-Romanija Corps, Stanislav Galic, guilty of a campaign of terror against the civilian population of Sarajevo. Galic was sentenced to life in prison.

His successor as commander of the Sarajevo-Romanija Corps, Dragomir Milosevic, was convicted of the same offence by the ICTY and sentenced to 29 years.

Did jails for Serbs proliferate in Sarajevo?

The Commission’s report also focuses on addresses the topic “the Bosnian Army’s prisons and prison camps in Sarajevo”, saying that “private prisons led by Croat and Muslim paramilitary formations mushroomed in Sarajevo right after the beginning of the war”.

The report says that many Serbs were detained in the Central Prison and Viktor Bujanj military barracks. It quotes part of a Bosnian state prosecution statement about an indictment which says that between May and November 1992, more than 200 civilians were imprisoned and tortured, causing the deaths of 18 of them.

It also says that numerous private prisons existed in Sarajevo. The most notorious ones included the Silos camp which, as the Commission wrote, operated throughout the war. The report says that “according to Serb sources”, up to 550 men and women were held there.

A retrial for offences committed at Silos, among other crimes, is currently ongoing at the Bosnian state court. The first-instance verdict in the trial, which was overturned, determined that around 500 Serbs, including minors, women and elderly people, were arbitrarily arrested and held at Silos.

The report cites the Commission for Gathering Information about Crimes against Humanity of the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia as saying that there were 52 detention camps and detention facilities in Sarajevo’s municipalities under the control of the Bosnian Army during the war.

It also says that Republika Srpska’s Republic Centre for War Crime Investigations has prepared a list of 211 locations, explaining that the majority of police and military units had their own detention facilities at their headquarters.

However, despite what the report claims, there is no precise registry of war-related

detention facilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Among other reasons, this is because a proposed state-level law on torture victims, which would determine the number of locations and detainees, has not been adopted.

The first draft of the law was prepared in 2006. A second draft followed in 2011 and a third in 2017. None of them was adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina because lawmakers from Republika Srpska voted against the legislation.

Did foreign Islamists train Bosniak militants?

The Commission's report highlights the role played by the El Mujahid detachment, a unit of foreign Muslim fighters which was under the command of the Bosnian Army's Third Corps.

The report describes the El Mujahid detachment's members as foreign terrorist fighters who spread Muslim propaganda, but it does not say how the Muslim unit played a role in wartime events in Sarajevo or in suffering of Serbs in the city.

Two Bosnian Army officers have been convicted of bearing responsibility for crimes committed by the El Mujahid detachment against Serbs, but the offences happened elsewhere in the country.

Rasim Delic, commander of the Main Headquarters of the Bosnian Army was sentenced to three years in prison for failing to take measures to prevent or punish crimes committed by El Mujahid fighters at the Livade and Kamenica detention camps, near Zavidovici.

The former commander of the Third Corps of the Bosnian Army, Sakib Mahmuljin, was sentenced to ten years under a first-instance verdict for failing to prevent murders and inhumane treatment by members of the El Mujahid detachment in the Vozuca and Zavidovici areas. He is now appealing.

The Commission's report claims that Islamist terrorist movements, such as al-Qaeda and so-called Islamic State, used the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina to send in fighters and train Bosniaks to lead radical groups in Sarajevo and elsewhere in the country.

However, although al-Qaeda was established in 1988, Islamic State was only founded in 1999, several years after the Bosnian war ended.

BOSNIAN SERB MILITARY POLICE CHIEFS NEVER CHARGED WITH SREBRENICA KILLINGS

By Haris Rovčanin

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Bosnian: <https://detektor.ba/2020/07/08/komandanti-vojne-policije-izbjegli-odgovornost-za-srebrenicki-genocid/>

English: <https://detektor.ba/2020/07/08/bosnian-serb-military-police-chiefs-never-charged-with-srebrenica-killings/?lang=en>

Despite survivors' testimonies, official documents and Hague Tribunal verdicts stating that three Bosnian Serb military police units were involved in capturing Bosniaks from Srebrenica and escorting them to mass execution sites, their commanders have never been charged.

Mevludin Oric was one of the fortunate ones.

Twenty-five years ago, in July 1995, he was captured by Bosnian Serb troops under Ratko Mladic's command while fleeing from Srebrenica alongside more than 10,000 other Bosniaks who were trying to escape.

He and some of the other captives were first escorted to the Vuk Karadzic school in Bratunac, then to another school building in Orahovac, and finally put on trucks and taken to a nearby location to be executed. (*Hague Tribunal witness testimony by Mevludin Oric. Source: ICTY*)

His cousin Hariz Habibovic, who was known as Aid, was with him, along with hundreds of other Bosniak captives.

"Aid was saying: 'They'll kill us'. I said: 'No, they won't.' As soon as I said 'they won't', the gunfire began," Oric recalled.

"I felt him grabbing my arm and I felt that he had been shot. I pulled loose from his hand. I threw myself on the ground face-down, he fell across my back, he shivered for a couple of seconds and died," he continued.

"I was naked from my waist up and so was Hariz. His blood was pouring over me, so they believed I was dead too."

After night fell, Oric managed to escape, leaving hundreds of corpses behind him.

According to judgments in trials at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former

Yugoslavia in The Hague, around 1,000 Bosniaks were killed in Orahovac on July 14, 1995.

Orahovac was one of several mass execution sites during the Srebrenica genocide, in which court verdicts have established that more than 7,000 Bosniak men and boys were killed, and some 40,000 women, children and elderly people expelled.

Oric, who is now 50, remembers seeing members of the Bosnian Serb Army's military police force throughout his ordeal. He said that military policemen were involved in capturing and escorting him and other prisoners, guarding them when they were held at the school building, and in taking them to the execution site.

He told BIRN that the Bosnian Serb military policemen had pistols and white belts "like in [Yugoslav leader Josip Broz] Tito's time". He added that because he served in the Yugoslav People's Army, "I know what the military police are".

So far, 15 former members of the Bosnian Serb Army and police force have been sentenced by the Hague Tribunal to four life sentences and a total of 189 years in prison for genocide and other crimes in Srebrenica.

BIRN's analysis of all the completed Hague Tribunal cases and evidence, including testimony from survivors and former military policemen, shows that members of the Bosnian Serb Army Zvornik Brigade's military police force participated in operations in Srebrenica.

The analysis suggests that three Bosnian Serb military police commanders, Miomir Jasikovic, Mirko Jankovic and Zoran Malinic – as well as 40 other individuals – were directly involved with the process of capturing Bosniaks from Srebrenica, guarding them and transporting them to execution sites, and then hiding the crimes. But no charges have ever been filed against any of them.

The analysis suggests that three Bosnian Serb military police commanders, Miomir Jasikovic, Mirko Jankovic and Zoran Malinic, took part in the operations, and that another 40 individuals were directly involved with the process of capturing Bosniaks from Srebrenica, guarding them and transporting them to execution sites, and then hiding the crimes. But no charges have ever been filed against any of them.

'Attempt to hide' military police's role

One of the most extensive Hague judgments, convicting the former commander of the Zvornik Brigade, Vinko Pandurevic, and six other high-ranking Bosnian Serb Army and police officers, established that "members of the military police of the Zvornik Brigade guarded the captives in the school building in Grbavci and school building in Rocevic and transported the captives to the execution site in Orahovac".

Orahovac was where Mevludin Oric escaped death but some 1,000 others were killed.

According to findings that American military expert Richard Butler presented to the Hague court, Miomir Jasikovic was the commander of the Zvornik Brigade's military

police in July 1995. This was confirmed by former military policemen who testified.

Butler found that before dawn on July 14, 1995 buses and trucks loaded with Bosniak captives began arriving in the area controlled by the Zvornik Brigade, and that the Zvornik Brigade's Military Police Squad was already the detention facility in the school building in Grbavci along with commander Jasikovic. (*Richard Butler's expert report. Source: ICTY*)

"According to the personnel roster for the Military Police Company of the Zvornik Brigade for 14 July 1995, there was a detachment of military police present in Orahovac. Also apparent is that some effort was made to conceal this after the fact," Butler said.

Entries indicating that the military police were in Orahovac had been erased but remained visible in the roster, Butler explained.

The presence in Orahovac of military police under Jasikovic's command was also confirmed by former members of his unit who testified at the Hague Tribunal.

(Zvornik Brigade Military Police Company unit attendance roster for July 1995. Source: ICTY.)

Jasikovic, a Bosnian Serb Army colonel, has never been indicted for his role in what happened at Orahovac. A source from the Bosnian state prosecution who is familiar with war crimes investigations unofficially told BIRN that an investigation is being conducted into Jasikovic, who is now in Serbia.

BIRN obtained contact details for a Miomir Jasikovic in the Indjija area of Serbia and called several times to ask for a comment. The person who answered the phone said that Jasikovic was a colonel but he was not there at the moment.

'They did nothing to protect us'

Military policemen from the Bosnian Serb Army's Bratunac Brigade were also involved in the Srebrenica operation, BIRN's analysis of the evidence shows.

Mevludin Oric was captured near Konjevic Polje on July 13, 1995, two days after leaving Srebrenica in his bid to escape through the woods. Right after he was seized and before he was escorted to Orahovac, where he survived the mass shooting, he saw military policemen who told him and the other captives to wait for buses to take them away.

"We got on the first bus. They put us on the back seats. Three policemen, military policemen from Republika Srpska, got on the bus," Oric testified at the Hague Tribunal in 2003.

The bus drove to Bratunac and stopped in front of the Vuk Karadzic school, where Oric said soldiers and officers called people out by name and took them away. Three buses had come from Konjevic Polje, and two more were also parked in front of the school building, he added.

“The military police was there. They approved everything, those whose names they called out or those they took out or those who someone recognised, because some Serbs knew some of those people [Bosniak captives],” Oric told the Hague court.

(Map of Nova Kasaba used at the Hague Tribunal.)

“They took a lot of people out of the first two buses. As the lights in the bus were on, you could see that. I heard cries for help in the Vuk Karadzic school building. The military policemen saw and listened to all that. They did nothing to protect us, nothing at all,” he said.

The Bosnian state court sentenced Mladen Blagojevic, a military policeman with the Bratunac Brigade, to seven years in prison for shooting at the captives at the Vuk Karadzic school building through a window.

According to US military expert Butler’s report, senior sergeant first-class Mirko Jankovic was commander of the Bosnian Serb Army Bratunac Brigade’s military police squad. Some members of the squad confirmed that to the Hague Tribunal, also saying that Mile Petrovic was Jankovic’s deputy.

Information gathered by BIRN from two independent sources, which could not be officially confirmed, suggests that Jankovic has since died and that no charges have ever been filed against Petrovic.

Petrovic testified for defence teams at the Hague court, and denied having command responsibility for the military police squad.

The Bratunac Brigade military police duty officer’s log, containing handwritten records of the unit’s daily activities from the beginning of July 1995, suggests that on July 12 and 13, the squad was engaged in “security for the UNHCR [UN refugee workers] and the surrender of Muslim people from Srebrenica; part of the unit provided security for the wounded and sick at the health Centre in Bratunac and for the passage of a truck transporting refugees from the Srebrenica enclave”. The log also indicated that the Bratunac Brigade military police were involved in guarding Ratko Mladic.

(Bratunac Brigade military police daily log from July 1995. Source: ICTY)

(Cover of the Bratunac Brigade military police’s daily log. Source: ICTY)

Momir Nikolic, the former assistant commander for security and intelligence affairs of the Bratunac Brigade, who the Hague Tribunal sentenced to 20 years for Srebrenica crimes, said during his testimony that military policemen from Bratunac were involved in separating Bosniak men from their families in Potocari near Srebrenica.

Some military policemen denied Nikolic’s allegations. The Bratunac Brigade military police duty officer’s log, which is included as evidence in almost all Srebrenica genocide verdicts, indicates that on the night of July 14-15, 1995 “the police were assigned to escorting Muslim refugees [Bosniak captives from Srebrenica]”.

Prisoner shot ‘in front of Ratko Mladic’

Besides the military police of the Zvornik and Bratunac Brigades, Butler also mentioned the 65th Protection Regiment of the Bosnian Serb Army’s Main Headquarters in his report. According to Butler’s findings, the 65th Protection Regiment’s military police battalion was commanded by major Zoran Malinic, who in July 1995 was deployed in Nova Kasaba, where more fleeing Bosniaks from Srebrenica were seized.

“This unit participated in gathering and detaining Muslim captives in the vicinity of Nova Kasaba,” Butler’s report indicates.

A protected witness at the Hague Tribunal, codenamed PW-016, said that he was captured in Nova Kasaba on July 13, 1995 and put in a shack for some time before being taken to a local football pitch.

“About 1,500 or 2,000 people were sitting in lines in the field surrounded by Serb soldiers. Soldiers surrounded the field, standing at a distance of less than one metre from each other,” PW-016 said, adding that Ratko Mladic arrived at the football pitch in Nova Kasaba later and told them they would be part of a prisoner exchange.

“At that moment a captive stood up,” PW-016 continued. “Serb soldiers approached him, kicked him and hit him with a rifle butt. After that a Serb soldier pulled his handgun out and killed him. He was then thrown among the others. Mladic was there and did not react.”

(Intercept of Bosnian Serb Army security chief Ljubisa Beara’s phone conversation dated July 13, 1995. Source: ICTY.)

(Intercept of Ljubisa Beara’s phone conversation dated July 13, 1995. Source: ICTY.)

Testifying at the Tribunal, 65th Protection Regiment military police battalion chief Malinic said that, according to his findings, the captives were not abused, but had to sit on the ground and were given water and bread. He added that he heard that there was a murder at the football ground in Nova Kasaba “when a captive attacked a soldier who was a member of the battalion’s military police”.

“That was the only person who lost his life, but it did not happen on someone’s whim. It was self-defence,” Malinic insisted.

The Bosnian state prosecution has unofficially confirmed that an investigation into Malinic is underway but that he is not in the country. BIRN has not been able to obtain his contact details.

Mevludin Oric said that finding and prosecuting commanders who were responsible for what happened to the detained Bosniaks from Srebrenica, as well as the direct perpetrators who shot the captives, would bring at least some satisfaction to him.

“It would mean a lot to find the people who were responsible and bring them to justice, and not only to me, but also to those who were killed and all the survivors,” Oric said.

“Twenty-five years have passed. Fifty more will pass, but the number of people who were killed will never be forgotten.”

Srebrenica suspects evade trial in Serbia

The Bosnian state prosecution has filed indictments charging more six people with involvement in the Srebrenica genocide, but they have not been brought to trial because they live in Serbia.

Radoslav Jankovic, former intelligence officer with the Intelligence and Security Affairs Section of the Bosnian Serb Army’s main headquarters, is accused of helping and supporting the partial extermination of the Bosniak population from the Srebrenica area through his actions and failure to act in the period from July 11 to 19, 1995.

Jankovic is charged, among other things, with having ordering military policemen from the Bosnian Serb Army’s Bratunac Brigade to bring civilians from the area around Potocari for transportation, organising the preparation of lists of women, children and men who were loaded onto trucks and buses, and escorting three buses driving captives to Orahovac, knowing they would be killed.

Svetozar Kosoric, former chief of the Intelligence Section of the Bosnian Serb Army’s Drina Corps, is charged with committing genocide and deliberately helping the participants in a joint criminal enterprise.

The indictment alleges that Kosoric found locations for the temporary detention and execution of men aged between 16 and 60, and participated in organising the transportation of women and children who were expelled from the Srebrenica area to territory controlled by the Bosnian Army.

Tomislav Kovac, the former deputy minister and interior minister of Republika Srpska, is accused of being in control of police units that participated in capturing Bosniak men and boys, forcibly detaining them and then transporting them to mass executions at several locations including Kravica, Cerska, the Cultural Centre in Pilica, Branjevo Farm, Sandici and Konjevic Polje.

Milislav Gavric, the former deputy commander of the police station in Srebrenica, is charged with assisting in the forcible transportation of several thousand Bosniak civilians, participating in the separation of men from the others and then taking them away, away after which they went missing without trace.

Borislav Stojisic and *Rajko Drakulic*, who were both military policemen with the Bosnian Serb Army’s Vlasenic Brigade, are accused of stopping vehicles transporting Bosniak civilians from Srebrenica to Kladanj in the village of Luke and seizing their money and gold, and also forcibly separating men and young women from the other passengers.

28 YEARS ON, FAMILIES STILL SEARCHING FOR MISSING BOSNIAN SOLDIERS

By Haris Rovčanin

Detector.ba — May 10, 2021

The original publication is available via the following links:

Bosnian: <https://detektor.ba/2021/05/10/porodice-vojnika-armije-bih-iz-vranice-28-godina-cekaju-pravdu-i-traze-nestale/>

English: <https://detektor.ba/2021/05/10/28-years-on-families-still-searching-for-missing-bosnian-soldiers/?lang=en>

Empty graves are waiting for three young Bosnian Army soldiers who disappeared during an attack by Bosnian Croat forces in Mostar in May 1993, but despite their families’ efforts, their bodies have not been found and their killers remain unprosecuted.

Fedja Huskovic was a second-year student at Sarajevo University’s Faculty of Electrical Engineering when he joined the Bosniak-led Bosnian Army during the war.

On May 10, 1993, five days after he turned 21, Huskovic went missing alongside 12 other Bosniak soldiers during an attack on the Bosnian Army Fourth Corps’ command headquarters in the city of Mostar by the Croatian Defence Council, HVO, the Bosnian Croat wartime force.

Most of the bodies of the Bosnian Army soldiers who disappeared that day have been found, but those of Huskovic, Sefik Pobric and Hasan Balic have not. Neither has anyone been convicted of involvement in their deaths.

“We had lunch together on May 8, 1993. In the evening, he went on duty, to replace a schoolmate of his, and he stayed there until May 9. That guy, Nedim, returned home and my Fedja stayed [at the Fourth Corps’ command HQ],” his mother Jadranka Huskovic recalled of her last meeting with her son.

She said that after the disappearance, she and her husband, who has since died, searched for information about Fedja for years. They appealed to the Human Rights Ombudsman, spoke to Bosnian Croat political leader Jadranko Prlic and to Mostar mayors Neven Tomic and Safet Orucevic, but without any result. Her husband even offered money for information, but nobody ever contacted them in response.

In 2007, a mass grave was found in Rimski Bunar near Mostar, containing the remains of ten Bosniak soldiers killed during the war.

“When they said they found bodies in Rimski Bunar, I said for the first time: ‘I hope to God that my Fedja is there, so I can find rest at last, and find and bury him.’ It was very hard to cope with that. Up until then I had hoped that he was alive somewhere, that somebody had hidden him, that somebody had helped him,” Jadranka Huskovic said.

The other soldiers were buried, at the Sehitluci cemetery in Mostar, where plots have been left empty for the bodies of Huskovic, Pobric and Balic.

Jadranko Prlic was the prime minister of the unrecognised Croat-led Herzeg-Bosnia statelet, which had its ‘capital’ in Mostar – a city which in wartime was ethnically divided and saw fierce fighting between the HVO and the Bosnian Army.

In 2017, the Hague Tribunal convicted Prlic of wartime crimes against Bosniaks, along with five other senior Bosnian Croat wartime officials – one of whom, Slobodan Praljak, took poison in court and died soon afterwards.

The verdict said that the Vranica residential complex, where the Bosnian Army Fourth Corps’ command headquarters was based, came under attack from the HVO on May 9, 1993, and the Bosniak troops surrendered the following day.

After having surrendered, some of the Bosniak soldiers were detained at the Mechanical Engineering Faculty building, “where they were victims of a brutal beating”, according to the verdict.

The Hague court found that on the night of May 10-11, HVO fighters killed ten Bosnian Army soldiers who were detained at the Mechanical Engineering Faculty. The verdict named Pobric and Balic among the victims, but not Huskovic.

Semir Pobric said his brother Sefik had a child who was only a month and a half old when he went missing in May 1993.

“I knew immediately that he was captured, we got the information. We even saw the [Bosnian Army command] building burning,” Semir Pobric said.

His parents spent years searching for their son Sefik’s grave, but then his mother fell sick and died.

The body of 22-year-old Dzevad Colic, a Bosnian Army soldier who surrendered at the Vranica building, was one of those found at Rimski Bunar in 2007. His sister Zejna Colic said that in 2004, the family was offered information about the grave by a Croat man.

The Croat initially asked for nothing in return, but later called on her to testify on his behalf in a court case after he was involved in a violent incident. She refused to do it because she didn’t know anything about the case.

“Some time in 2007 he called. I even met him. He drew a location in Goranci [near Rimski Bunar], saying the grave was there. However, weapons were found at that place, while the grave was nearby,” she recalled.

Before the grave was found, she used to go to the Red Cross every day seeking

information about her brother’s whereabouts. She said that a civilian who was at the Mechanical Engineering Faculty building told her: “Nobody was imprisoned. They were all executed.”

‘They should help us find our children’

In 2000, the trial of HVO fighters Mato Anicic, Erhard Poznic and Ivan Skutor, who were indicted in the Vranica building case for war crimes against captured Bosnian Army troops, began at the Cantonal Court in Mostar. Nearly 20 years later, the case ended in acquittal.

The Supreme Court in Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Federation entity had quashed acquittals by the Cantonal Court three times and ordered a retrial each time, but the fourth time, it upheld the acquittal, clearing the defendants of war crimes against prisoners of war.

In 2015, another murder case arising from the killings of the captured Bosnian Army soldiers from the Fourth Corps’ HQ at the Vranica building was transferred to the Bosnian state prosecution, and the Federal Police Directorate was engaged to investigate.

In 2019, the families of the killed soldiers held a meeting with the chief Bosnian state prosecutor and were told that “an investigation is underway”.

“In five years we didn’t receive any information except that the investigation is underway,” said Azra Penava, a representative of the Board of Parents of Vranica Bosnian Army Members in Mostar.

Nothing more has been heard since then, and the Bosnian state prosecution did not respond to BIRN’s query about the case.

Semir Pobric said he still hopes to find at least one of his brother Sefik’s bones and bury it in the empty plot at the Sehitluci cemetery in Mostar.

Meanwhile Jadranka Huskovic appealed for any information that might allow her, almost three decades on, to find out what happened to her son.

“I am asking all those who have got information to share it, to unburden themselves,” she urged.

“We are old – the parents and relatives are dying. Those [HVO troops], they were young at the time, and now they are older; they should unburden themselves and help us find our children and organise a decent burial for them.”

THIRD PRIZE WINNER

SYRIA'S SINISTER YET LUCRATIVE TRADE IN DEAD BODIES

Ali Al Ibrahim (Sweden), Khalifa Al Khuder (Syria)



Ali Al Ibrahim, Investigative Journalist/ university lecturer in Sweden, and co-founders of SIRAJ. Al Ibrahim is also a writer in MENA and has worked on several of its cross-border collaborations, such as BBC, VICE, National Geographic, The Guardian. He was awarded as Best Young Journalist by the BBC and has received the SK Award for Freedom of the Press. The GIJN chose him in 2019 as one of the best investigative journalists. He is a fellow at TED International. Al Ibrahim participated in cross-border investigations with the OCCRP and others.



Khalifa Al Khuder is a journalist and former detainee in the prison of the Islamic State in Syria (ISIS). He has been working in the media field since the start of the revolution in Syria in 2011. He was awarded the Samir Kassir Award for freedom of the press 2017. Al Khuder is the author of the book Al-Kanais (Prisoner Testimonies), and a journalist collaborating with several Arab and foreign websites, writing about the Syrian issue. He also filmed news reports for the media. He holds a BA in Psychology and is studying a MA in the field of media.

EDITOR'S NOTE

In third place the judges nominated a chilling report on the sinister and lucrative trade in dead bodies in Syria by Ali Al Ibrahim (Sweden) and Khalifa Al Khuder (Syria). For years the conflict in Syria has been a story of death, destruction and despair for the millions of people displaced or forced to leave the country.

This story reveals how, in the aftermath of the war, the bodies of victims, most of them killed by ISIS extremists, were dumped, then recovered and sold in a macabre and sinister trade. It is a tale of pure inhumanity that is hard to imagine, but it is a story told with care and sensitivity and is a tribute to the importance of the journalistic endeavour of pursuing uncomfortable truths.

SYRIA'S SINISTER YET LUCRATIVE TRADE IN DEAD BODIES

By Ali Al Ibrahim and Khalifa Al Khuder
DARAJ — March 25, 2021

The original publication is available via the following link:
<https://daraj.com/en/69350/>

“The corpses the officers had marked we would later dig up and hand back to them. They would ask the victims’ families for \$1,500 to \$3,000 per body.”

Anwar al-Muhammad was wandering around the garbage dump like he had done for years, looking for anything of value that could be traded or sold, when he suddenly smelt a strange smell. It was moldy mixed with the reek of flesh. At first he thought it was a dead dog.

What the 35-year-old garbage collector found instead in the landfill in the village of Hadath east of Aleppo would turn his life upside down, and turn him into a very rich man.

As it turned out, the smell emanated from the partly decomposed body of someone recently liquidated by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). “If it were not for the remains of God’s creation, I would not have been able to build my house on the land I inherited from my father,” said Anwar pointing at his home. “Look, it has a courtyard and stone fences. And I have planted olive seedlings.”

Having dug a hole next to the dump Anwar buried what was left of the corpse. He feared leaving it out in the open might attract stray dogs. This was in August 2014.

“After the first corpse had been dumped, many others followed,” Anwar explained. “Most bodies had ropes around their feet, hands or necks. Initially, the ISIS fighters warned me that if I were to recognize a body and contact the family, my place would be among the dead.”

Like most people in the region, Anwar did not know why ISIS killed these people and dumped their bodies the way they did. Yet, on the foreheads of most of the bodies ISIS fighters had written in blue or black “infidel” or “apostate.”

ISIS used to throw bodies in wells, dry streams or river beds and garbage dumps, according to reports issued by both local and international human rights organizations.

Anwar gradually became aware that the bodies had a value and price, as some point he started selling them to the victims’ relatives. “That’s how I made the money I would never have made just working in a landfill,” he said.

13th Century Fatwa

From 2013 to 2015, more than 20 mass graves were found across Syria, containing thousands of bodies. One of the most famous places where ISIS used to dump its victims is the 50-meter deep Al-Hota pit, located some 85 kilometers from the northern city of Raqqa.

“The Al Hota gorge was once a beautiful natural site,” said Syrian researcher Sarah Kayyali in *Into The Abyss*, a report issued by Human Rights Watch (HRW) in May last year. “It became a place for terror and punishment.”

During our 18-month investigation in Syria and neighboring countries, we did many interviews and obtained photographs confirming the trade in dead bodies. We tracked four cases in different geographical areas to ensure there is a pattern to the trade which has made some individuals involved in the conflict very rich indeed.

In the governorates of Deir Ezzor and Raqqa and the countryside of Aleppo, ISIS did not give the bodies to the families, based on a fatwa issued by the 13th century Islamic scholar Ibn Taymiyyah, which states it is forbidden to bury an “apostate” in a Muslim cemetery. And so ISIS threw them in wells, dumps and large pits instead.

In 2015, one family was searching the dumps in the countryside north of Aleppo for the body of their son, who had been killed by ISIS for “dealing with foreign parties.” The family met Anwar and offered him \$7,000 for finding their son, after they had been told his body was thrown onto a village dump. They even told Anwar not to worry “if the corpse were decayed, for they could still recognize it from the teeth.”

Anwar told the ISIS fighters who regularly came to the dump to throw bodies about the family looking for their son. They demanded \$10,000 for the body. Anwar would get a commission of 100,000 Syrian pounds.

8,143 People Still Missing

“The Islamic State’s (ISIS) expansion in Iraq and Syria featured horrendous public abuses,” HRW stated in its report *Kidnapped By ISIS*, which was issued in February 2019. “Largely unseen but equally egregious were the widespread detentions and kidnappings – thousands of people snatched from their homes and cars and at checkpoints, who subsequently went missing.”

While the full scale of the missing is not known, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has reported more than 8,143 cases of individuals detained by ISIS whose fates remain unknown. The majority of those taken were men. But HRW also documented the disappearances of several women.

“ISIS members would ask for money in exchange for informing families about the fate of their son,” Anwar said. “People did not bargain a lot.”

When we were researching other waste dumps in the Aleppo countryside to confirm

what Anwar told us, one worker there told us: “They were throwing bodies, once or twice a day. And I also saw them take bodies from the dump.”

Yasser Al-Najjar used to work as an official for the Syrian military authorities negotiating the exchange of prisoners and dead bodies. “ISIS at times had crippling conditions in their requests,” he said in his office in Kilis in southern Turkey. “But that did not stop them from selling bodies for money. In the shadows, far away from media and cameras, anything is possible in Syria.”

SNHR director Fadel Abdul-Ghani told us how one of his teams once witnessed an exchange between the Syrian regime and opposition factions, in which the bodies of Iranian militants were handed over in return for the release of detainees.

In Damascus

A Syrian man currently living in the Swedish capital Stockholm used to work for a public funeral service in Damascus which transported bodies to cemeteries on a daily basis. At first, he refused to speak with us, but after several calls he finally agreed to give us his testimony on the condition of anonymity.

“Our assignment was to transport bodies from the Tishreen Military Hospital and the Mezzeh 601 Military Hospital to two large cemeteries in Qatifah, north of Damascus, and one in Najha, south of the capital,” he said. “The car looked like a decorated box with pictures of Bashar al-Assad on all sides, so we could pass all checkpoints.”

“Some corpses had specific numbers or signs on them, which we would bury next to the mass grave,” he continued. “The others were thrown into the mass grave, one on top of the other, and covered with sand by a bulldozer.”

“The corpses which the officers had marked, we would later take out and hand back to them,” he added, after pausing to drink a cup of water. “For each body, they demanded some \$1,500 to \$3,000 from the victims’ families.”

He then made us listen to audio recordings and phone messages of conversations between him and the military and security officers. He estimated the total number of bodies he contributed to selling at 125.

According to HRW, the Syrian regime arrested and forcibly disappeared tens of thousands of people. The detention centers under its control are known for the widespread and systematic use of torture, and catastrophic living conditions. According to the SNHN, there are still some 130,000 detainees in the detention centers of the Syrian regime, including 7,913 women and 3,561 children, which represents 88.5% of all detainees in Syria.

The Corpse Market

In August 2020, 30-year-old May learnt that her husband Zaid Jibril had been killed three years after his arrest by the Syrian regime’s security forces for “organizing

anti-regime demonstrations.” He was buried in the Qatifah cemetery north of Damascus, May said she was forced to sell her house to be able to pay \$7,000 to an officer in the Syrian security services through a local broker, who then brought her husband’s body, so she could bury it.

“I thank God I was able to obtain my husband’s body so our children can visit,” said May by Skype from a refugee camp in the northwestern state of Idlib. “Many families paid money to regime officers and brokers. Many sold everything they owned to obtain news of their loved ones.”

“Trading in corpses, mortgaging them to exchange or sell them is considered a crime against humanity by the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court,” said legal expert Hussein Hamadeh.

According to him, any assault on or mutilation of corpses, leaving them in the open, not allowing them to be buried, using them as tools of political pressure or selling them violates international law. Authorities are furthermore not allowed to intentionally withhold information about those missing, given the level of anxiety and mental stress it produces for friends and families. When the person in question dies, the authorities must provide the family with information regarding the place of burial.

Five Bodies Ahmed Al-Sayed’s family learnt that one of their sons had been arrested by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) during their control of the city of Raqqa in October 2017.

The young man was arrested after an airstrike near the Abu Al-Hays intersection. The 34-year-old was transferred to a nearby medical center. His father told us that the family had asked all the center’s health workers about their son, but at first they could not find him.

A few days later a military source told the family their son had been killed. Obtaining the body would cost them \$10,000. “We paid the full amount to a SDF commander through a local broker and started digging near the archaeological park in Raqqa,” said Ahmed’s brother. “We found five bodies, one of which was my brother. We reburied the others in the same place, while we took my brother’s body to the family cemetery on the outskirts of Raqqa.”

We requested representatives of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, as well as the Syrian Ministry of Interior to comment on our findings, yet did not receive a response.

The March of Abu Ward

Abu Al-Ward is a local broker in the city of Idlib. After burying some bodies, he and three young men set out to search for a corpse that someone had asked for in exchange for \$3,000.

In the center of Idlib, you can see bodies entering the forensic medical center on

a daily basis. They were found, or belong to people killed in mysterious circumstances. Some 75 bodies a week arrive, according to the center's documentation office.

"There are bodies that the courts and hospitals refuse to hand over to their families, especially those known as Shabiha [gangs closely related to the Baath Party]," said Abu Al-Ward by WhatsApp. "What follows is the process of handing over the body and receiving the money."

"The body remains in the fridge for some 15 days to a month," said Ali Al-Taqash who works at a medical center. "Samples for DNA testing are stored to facilitate future identification."

As soon as the burial begins, the march of Abu Al-Ward begins too. And of all others who work just like him.

The Corpse in the Well

On January 6, 2014, the family of Mohamad al-Ali (a pseudonym) managed to obtain his body, which had been thrown in a well near the town of Deir Sunbul in the Idlib countryside.

Mohamad had been kidnapped at a checkpoint of the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) and was later liquidated by a gunshot to the head

"After negotiations that lasted for days, we paid a local mediator \$10,000 and the SRF allowed us to extract the body from the well," said the young man's family.

Local activists we met in the north of Syria and Turkey said they witnessed the sale of at least five bodies between January 2012 and March 2014. Their statements were backed by photographs and videos of the negotiations and sale, which are in our possession.

Military Gains

On the road between the Jenderes border crossing and the village of Qatma north of Aleppo, we met Abu Jaafar, who used to be responsible for forensic medicine in the opposition-held areas east of Syria until late 2016.

He had witnessed the exchange of bodies between the armed opposition and the regime and pointed at another dimension of the trade, which reflected military gains in the war.

"The body of one fighter in an Iranian-backed militia was exchanged for five or six detainees alive in the prisons of the Syrian regime," he said.

The Syrian war has witnessed countless negotiations and exchanges of bodies and prisoners between the regime and the opposition. In August 2012, the Al-Baraa Brigade in Eastern Ghouta concluded a deal with the regime to release over 2,000 detainees from Syrian prisons, in exchange for the release of 48 Iranians, most of them belonging to the military.

"Any assault on a corpse is considered a crime prohibited in international law," said SNHN director Abdul-Ghani. "Take the The Hague Convention on respecting the laws and customs of war, which clearly stipulates a commander is responsible for all actions of people under his command, and calls for respecting the dead and preventing the remains from being despoiled."

This investigation was carried out under supervision of the Syrian Investigative Journalism Unit Siraj and edited by Mohamed Bassiki.

EXPERT'S MESSAGE



SÉAMUS MARTIN

Author, Journalist

Retired International Editor of The Irish Times

FJA Expert Council Member

“The Fetisov Journalism Awards have provided an important impetus for independent journalism internationally and especially in developing countries. The standard of entries for the 2021 awards was, in general, extremely high.”

OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION TO PEACE

SHORTLISTED STORIES



SHORTLISTED STORY

SERIES: CONFLICT IN A PANDEMIC

Kolapo Olapoju (Nigeria)



Kolapo Olapoju is a development/investigative journalist and currently, editor of TheCable, Nigeria's knowledge-driven online newspaper. Olapoju has done extensive reporting on issues affecting underserved populations. His work has been used as a case study for a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation-funded research. Olapoju, a 2020 DAME Awards finalist for child-friendly reporting, has contributed to finding solutions to some of the problems bedeviling Nigeria. His reporting on menstrual hygiene management spurred a lawmaker, in 2019, to raise a motion on subsidising sanitary products. This contributed to the eventual decision of the federal government to exempt sanitary products from value-added tax.

CONFLICT IN A PANDEMIC (I): THE SOUTHERN KADUNA CHILDREN AND WOMEN DEVASTATED BY A WAVE OF KILLINGS

By Kolapo Olapoju

The Cable — October 5, 2020

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The echoes of conflict tend to reverberate long after the drums of war are beat and have faded. The victims of strife are often the weak, disenfranchised and powerless. In spite of their mute voices and non-roles, they tend to bear the heaviest brunt of conflicts while the main players march to the beat of their own drum. As the world grappled with COVID-19 in recent months, bloody violence raged through southern Kaduna — displacing, disabling and devastating women and children. This is their maddening tale of loss, pain, and despair.

Peace disabled

“**N**othing can make me be at peace again,” she muttered under her breath, slowly raised her head and added emphatically: “I will never forgive them.”

Her eyes are sunken with age. The white of her eye is far from white; bleak and blurry after months of crying while the world slept. The furiously pouring rain which is making its impact felt on the rusted metal roof firmly holds her gaze. Soon enough, tears flow forth from her eyes, dropping in unison with the rain.

Saraya John's world was turned upside down in the wee hours of May 18 when armed bandits suspected to be herdsmen raided Maikali, a village in Kajuru LGA of Kaduna. When the attackers made their presence felt, she was home alone with her visually impaired husband. His disability proved to be a fatal Achilles heel. He did not make it far before he was killed. Before 65-year-old Saraya returned to the village, he had been buried in a mass grave. She never got the chance to say goodbye.

Saraya is one of the hundreds of women who lost relatives in the reignited wave of killings that has engulfed southern Kaduna. Several local government areas have been in crisis mode and the resultant effects paint a sordid image.

“Anything we get, we eat. We have no means of livelihood.” Deborah Alfa, like most residents of Maikali, is a farmer — but nowadays, going to the farm is akin to a date with death.

At 35, Deborah is already widowed and with five children to cater for; her situation is dire. Survival and thoughts of the next meal are her daily preoccupation. When neighbouring Gonan Rogo was attacked, Deborah said they were informed that Maikali was next on the list. Courtesy of the advance warning, most villagers fled but her husband had difficulty walking as a result of persistent back pain while her father-in-law was blind. Neither could run, hence they stayed back and were killed.

Again, disability left them at the mercy of their attackers.

Friday Musa was determined to survive that attack by all means. As soon as it started, his father told him to run for safety. In the process of running, he was shot in his left hand, forcing him to hit the red earth. As he crashed to the ground, his attacker proceeded to machete him on his back and head.

Hellbent on surviving, he gathered the strength to stand up and continue running until the coast was clear. Friday, a JSS1 student, is now disabled, with only one arm fully functional. With his father dead, his elder brother has assumed breadwinner-ship of the family. All the money that accrued from farm produce after the last harvest was spent on hospital bills. As schools prepare to reopen nationwide, returning to the classroom is the last thing on Friday’s mind — survival is chief and feeding is king.

Scarred women of Zagon-Kataf

Hanatu Kefas is one of the widows resident at Mercy IDP camp, Zonkwa. On August 18, she was on her way home from the farm with her baby strapped to her back when she was greeted with a resounding slap. Hanatu, 22, was six months pregnant at the time. Her attacker repeatedly threatened to shoot her and her child while pressuring her to reveal the whereabouts of her husband.

When she was not forthcoming, he asked the six months pregnant Hanatu to remove her blouse and “show him” her breast — after which he ordered her to roll around on the floor.

Having satisfied his perverted desire, he told her to hide in a pig farm so she does not get killed by his comrades in arms. Much later, Hanatu would learn that her husband was shot in the head during a tussle with the suspected herdsman. Following her torture, Hanatu spent four days in the hospital receiving treatment. After getting discharged, she discovered that a liquid substance was oozing out of her nipple. “Water is still coming out from my breast and I don’t know why,” she noted in despair.

While Hanatu deals with a health issue she cannot afford to treat, Rebecca Joseph and her children are still haunted by the memories of the attack on their village.

Kibori was attacked around 10pm on a quiet July night. Rebecca said when she got wind of the chaos, she gathered her children and fled with them into the bush and remained there till daybreak. Upon their return to the village, they were rattled by the horror that lay in wait — burnt buildings, dismembered corpses, and missing body parts. The scenes were enough to make them decide to leave Kibori on foot and walk for several kilometres to Samaru where they eventually got a free ride to Zonkwa.

No longer at ease

In 2019, the victim toll of the southern Kaduna conflict soared, the acts of daredevilry worsened and the attacks became more bloody. Hence, the world started paying attention.

Victims of those 2019 attacks are still reeling in the agony of loss, throes of pain, and trauma of violence. One of them is Rehila Godwin from Dogon Noma, Kajuru LGA. In March 2019, her village was attacked while her children were sleeping. She tried to run but did not get far. Surrounded by the attackers, she watched helplessly as her first child was killed before they descended on her — macheting her neck, mouth and chopping off her hand.

Owing to the severity of her injury, Rahila was left for dead. No one expected her to survive, hence she was tied up with a wrapper. But somehow, she managed to keep breathing until corpses were being gathered. She was discovered and promptly rushed to the hospital. While on admission, Rahila went into labour and her child was born — but the baby would only live for two days.

Veronica John, also from Dogon Noma, has been living in a world of pain ever since the attack. She has not been back to her village nor has she seen her three surviving children and husband. She once had four children but one was killed. While her three eldest children ran for their lives when the bloodletting began, Veronica picked up the last born who could not move as a result of the shock of the attack, strapped her to her back and began running for safety.

“I was sick so I could not run very fast. While we were running, we came across the attackers and they shot me. The bullet hit me in the shoulder and my child helped me clean the blood and said, ‘mummy, sorry’.

“I raised my hand and started pleading with them to spare us. They refused to listen. I told my daughter to plead with them. She did so and they forcefully removed her from my back and cut her head into two. After they killed my daughter, they started cutting me with a machete.”

Veronica’s hand was severely macheted and her forefinger was cut off. The affected hand would eventually be amputated after spending months in multiple hospitals in Jos and Kaduna where they tried in vain to fix it. The damage done was too severe.

Viviana Lucky, 25, was fortunate to escape alive when Ungwan Barde, in Kajuru LGA, twice came under attack. Although she survived, two of her fingers were sliced off,

leaving her with just eight functional fingers. During that attack, Jummai Victor was not so lucky. She was having post-church lunch with her children when she heard a commotion. Her husband went to check for the cause only to discover that the village had been surrounded. He urged Viviana to take the children and run — but before they could get far, they landed in an ambush.

Three of Jummai's children were butchered

Jummai said she pleaded with the bandits to spare their lives but her cries fell on deaf ears as three of her children were butchered in her presence and her hand was severely macheted. She was pregnant at the time but later lost the pregnancy. When she got to the hospital, her hand was also amputated. Subsequently, her husband was involved in an accident and lost his leg. Nowadays, to survive, Jummai relies on handouts.

Tracking the Fulandi IDPs

In every story, there are always two sides — sometimes more. While the largely Christian Atyap communities have been widely reported to be on the receiving end of the attacks, the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN) has continuously said its members and their families are also victims of reprisal attacks.

However, the challenge has always been locating displaced Fulani families, particularly the children and women since they cannot be found in IDP camps or in the communities where they were once resident.

"They are in different locations," Bayero Ibrahim Zango, MACBAN spokesman, Kaduna chapter, disclosed when queried on their whereabouts.

He added: "Our people don't form camps. They just go to their relatives and stay. They are terribly displaced and they are in dire need of assistance."

As it would turn out, more than 100 Fulani women and children migrated from Zangon-Kataf to Tilden Fulani, a settlement in Kachia. The settlement, which is about 35 minutes away from the Kachia expressway, can only be accessed via motorcycle.

Hajara Musa is one of the women who reside in the settlement. She used to live with her 10 children in Machan, Zangon-Kataf, but says they were forced to flee when Atyap youth invaded their home. Although they tried to run into the river, they were apprehended.

Hajara says they were taken back home where their attackers threatened to burn them alive. When there was no consensus on that course of action among their attackers, they were asked to run. The only home they know was set ablaze as they fled. They now reside in two mud-brick structures that were once used as an Islamiyya school.

The Adamu family, on the other hand, migrated to the settlement in June after the attack on their home in Ungwan Gaya, also in Zangon-Kataf. Hafsat and Zainab Adamu lost their husbands in the attack. Between them, they have

11 children. Hafsat's son, a 16-year-old, was killed while rearing cows in the bush.

According to Salamatu Hussein, the female leader of the Adamu household, an Atyap woman hid them from the attackers while they were trying to run away. Life, for them, is now a daily struggle as they rely on relatives and neighbours for basic needs.

Tale of two Aishas

"I had six children, they killed one and left me with five." Aisha Alhassan and her family were sleeping when they jolted awake by the high-pitched sounds of whistles and screams of their attackers.

Their home was set ablaze while Alhassan's 13-year-old son who was tending to the cows was waylaid and killed in the bush. That night, she says they sought refuge in the backyard of a Kataf family. The morning after, she came across the lifeless body of her son. This, she says, motivated them to flee to the river where they spent two days before her relatives found soldiers who came to their aid and took them to Mariri.

Since escaping from Kan Kurmi, Alhassan now lives in Mariri and has no means of making an income to take care of her family. Before the attack, her occupation was the selling of cow milk but she lost everything and is unable to resume her business as her stock in trade was burnt to ashes.

Aisha Alhassan and Aisha Hassan may have a name in common but the scale of their respective losses is by no means alike. While the former lost one son, the latter saw her three sons killed during an attack on Sagwoza.

Hassan doesn't like to talk about her bereavement. She has suppressed the events of that deadly night in June. Seeing as she wishes not to remember the killing of Abdul, Yusuf and Habu, it takes a great deal of prodding before she manages to divulge little.

After her sons were killed, Hassan went into a state of shock. She was stunned and numb. The 51-year-old said she doesn't know how she was able to muster the strength to run into the bush with her remaining three children.

"It was by the grace of God that we were able to escape," she adds, averting her gaze in a bid not to remember, not to relapse into mourning.

Born amidst conflict

Hauwa Abubakar, 28, was pregnant and near her due date when terror was unleashed on Rafin Sewa. The timing couldn't have been worse. Her first instinct was to try to secure some of her belongings as she ran, but when the load began to slow her down, she was forced to choose between survival and salvaging properties. Her decision was a no-brainer.

While on the run, her water broke and she gave birth to a baby girl. Alone in the bush with no help, no medical assistance, she delivered herself of the baby and used her head tie to wrap the newborn.

After giving birth, the new mother continued running, sensing that the coast was not yet clear. She remained on the run until she arrived at her relatives' settlement where she got help. There, she was welcomed and the baby was bathed and clothed.

Like Hauwa, a few other Fulani women also gave birth while on the run. But none is as peculiar and striking as Hafsat Hamza, 38, and Shamsiya Abdullahi, 22.

Shamsiya is Hamza's daughter and both were pregnant and expected to deliver around the same time. When Kurmin Gandu was attacked, expectant mother and daughter fled to the bush where they would spend several days.

While Hamza gave birth in the rain on the evening of the attack, Shamsiya was in labour for three days before her child was born. Both women gave birth to girls and one of them was named after their grandmother who was left behind when they were forced to depart from their homes – and is now believed to be dead.

Children of war

When war or conflict breaks out, children and women are often the most vulnerable. History has repeatedly shown this and the southern Kaduna crisis is another indication. Many children bear physical and mental scars of the killings. In every village, there is bound to be a story of one caught in the middle of the chaos and left with a haunting memory.

Experiences such as this harden the hearts of children and rob them of a normal childhood. Reverend Waziri, who runs the Mercy IDP camp in Zonkwa, disclosed that a boy of “six or seven” who was shot in the face during the attack on his village has vowed to take revenge when he grows up.

Just like the revenge-seeking boy, Rita Friday was spared no mercy when Tudun Doka of Doka-Avong, Kajuru LGA, was besieged by suspected herders.

At just seven years old, she has come close to death – not at the hand of an ailment or a natural disaster, but human beings. Approximately 30 minutes after the attack on her village in June, first responders discovered her where she was left to die. Rita had been hacked on the head and blood was seeping out. Quick intervention and intensive treatment at the hospital got her stabilized.

Months later, she has almost fully recovered from the physical damage but the trauma is evident on her face, in her unwillingness to communicate, her unexplained tears and stoic expression. Rita lost her mother, elder brother and younger sister in the attack. Her father is all she has and someday, she may seek answers and accountability.

Isaiah and Zippora Jonathan as well as their toddler sibling from Gonan Rogo, Kajuru LGA, were not so lucky. They lost everything and everyone. Father, mother and three siblings were killed. Although Isaiah and Zippora were macheted in different parts of their body, they managed to make it out alive during the attack of May 2020. The toddler, on the other hand, miraculously survived the gunshot wounds that killed his mother.

Children who survive tragedies such as these may experience physical and mental health issues, says Daniel Folukoya, a medical doctor and founder of 1Dokita Healthcare.

Possible side effects of their jarring and abnormal experience, he said, are psychotic depression, paranoid schizophrenia, and the inability of the children to go back to their normal state before the attack.

“Those who have suffered a bereavement or witnessed their relatives being killed might suffer a reactive disorder,” Folukoya said. “They may go into depression or dysthymia. Some can end up in a psychotic depression where they are hearing voices and seeing things. They can end up living through the attack, hearing those voices or seeing those images over and over again. This can either manifest as auditory or visual hallucination.”

Folukoya said some of these children may also have psychosocial issues such as being unable to have normal interactions with people and struggling to communicate.

Jonathan Badamasi exhibited such signs when asked to share his ordeal during the attack on Dogon Noma. The 10-year-old boy is called the ‘Hero of Adara’ for saving his sister against all odds when his village was attacked.

As soon as he heard sporadic shooting and screams of panic, Jonathan backed his sister and took to his heels. While running, he was shot in his right elbow but rather than get deterred and resign to fate, he got back up, backed his sister again and continued running. Not even when he was shot again – this time in the stomach – did he stop running. He continued running, dodging bullets and taking cover until he was far away from Dogon Noma and found help.

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CONFLICT IN A PANDEMIC (II): THE DESERTED VILLAGES OF SOUTHERN KADUNA WHERE ONLY THE BRAVE DARE RESIDE

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://www.thecable.ng/conflict-in-a-pandemic-ii-the-deserted-villages-of-southern-kaduna-where-only-the-brave-dare-reside>

SHORTLISTED STORY

UYGHUR REFUGEES SPEAK OUT AGAINST GENOCIDE AND CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

Marga Zambrana (Spain)



Marga Zambrana is a Spanish independent writer and video journalist based in Istanbul. Since 2013 she has covered the Middle East and Turkey, with special emphasis on human rights and the Syrian conflict, for outlets such as the Associated Press, The Guardian, USA Today, Equal Times and El País. Previously, she was a correspondent for the EFE agency in Beijing, covering for a decade China's rise as a world superpower. She has widely researched and published on the crackdown on minorities like the Uighurs in China, the Yazidi genocide in Iraq, and crimes against humanity in Syria.

UYGHUR REFUGEES SPEAK OUT AGAINST GENOCIDE AND CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

By Marga Zambrana

Equal Times — November 18, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://www.equaltimes.org/uyghur-refugees-speak-out-against#.YhvMOMHmJPb>

If the Uyghurs had a Richard Gere to give voice to their suffering their cause would be as well-known as that of the Tibetans. But while the Uyghurs face genocide on an equal scale at the hands of the Communist Party of China (CPC), no international celebrity has followed in Gere's footsteps to become a spokesperson for the Turkic minority group.

Tens of thousands of Uyghurs have fled China in recent years since President Xi Jinping initiated a two-pronged policy of subjugation and assimilation in which Uyghurs are detained in mass re-education camps or uprooted and sent to work outside of what is known as China's autonomous Xinjiang region, in the country's north-west, where the majority of Uyghurs live. Research by international media such as The New York Times and academic documents indicate that up to one million Uyghurs are currently imprisoned in these indoctrination camps. The suppression of their culture, language and places of worship is evident in the autonomous region. According to Beijing, the aim of these policies is to combat separatism, radical Islamism and terrorism.

While a certain number of radicalised Uyghurs have crossed Turkey's borders to join the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) in Syria, Chinese authorities have used this fact to place the entire ethnic group under suspicion using a nebulous concept of terrorism that is far from the United Nation's definition.

The majority of the world's estimated 20 million Uyghurs practice Sufism, a mystical or esoteric strand of Islam, and their way of life is essentially secular. They speak a Turkic language still written using the Arabic alphabet. Thought to be one of the earliest inhabitants of the Tarim Basin, China's natural border with Central Asia, the declining Uyghur population there now comprises less than half of the 20 million residents of Xinjiang (East Turkestan to the Uyghurs). Other large communities of Uyghurs can be found in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, while the rest have recently migrated to Turkey, Europe and the Americas as refugees.

Unlike other Muslims in China, Uyghurs have a deeply rooted and unique cultural identity. After the fall of China's last imperial dynasty, the Qing dynasty, they created an independent state that lasted from 1933 to 1949 and ended in occupation by Maoist China, which marked the beginning of their present ordeal. During the Cultural Revolution, Uyghurs were subject to economic neglect and repression and prevented from practicing their cultural traditions. In order to placate their pro-independence sentiments, Beijing came up with an economic development plan and facilitated the arrival of settlers of the Han Chinese ethnic majority.

Owing to pressure from Beijing, a majority of Asian countries, including Thailand and Malaysia, and others such as Egypt, deport Uyghur refugees to China. According to human rights defenders, once in Chinese territory, they disappear and can face the death penalty.

Human rights groups such as the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) argue that practices such as arbitrary detentions, forced population transfers, forced labour and policies intended to reduce birth rates, including involuntary abortions and sterilisations, constitute acts of genocide and crimes against humanity in accordance with the Genocide Convention and the Rome Statute.

Ever since the CPC took control of the region in 1949, Beijing has imposed harsh restrictions on ethnic minorities such as Uyghurs and Kazakhs, among others, whose language, religion and traditions are very different from those of the majority Han Chinese. The mass arrival of Han Chinese combined with the regime's repression have provoked resentment among some groups and individuals within the community who have carried out attacks and protests such as the 2009 riots in the region's capital of Ürümqi, which resulted in several dozen deaths.

Turkey, a refuge for Uyghurs

Beijing's relentless policies have resulted in a mass exodus of Uyghurs in recent years, some 60,000 of which have found relative protection in Turkey, a country whose culture and language are similar to their own. A large conservative Muslim Uyghur community has formed in the Anatolian city of Kayseri and there are communities of Uyghurs in several neighbourhoods of Istanbul, such as Aksaray, Küçükçekmece or Zeytinburnu, where they run their own shops and restaurants. Chinese tourists visiting Istanbul often go to Uyghur restaurants, whose cuisine is a mix of Chinese and Central Asian.

In one such restaurant, the cooks stretch the traditional Uyghur noodles laghmen and the cold lembu with acrobatic skill. The pulled noodles are accompanied by pieces of lamb, vegetables and a spicy sauce made from nuts and herbs that delight an enthusiastic clientele. At the door, a sign written in Chinese, English and Turkish reads: "No entry for Chinese."

This is no joke, though it is an isolated case. Tahir, the restaurant's owner, says that he hung up the sign himself. He lists his motives: "The Chinese mistreat us and discriminate against us. Uyghur prisoners are given water with acid, many have died

from it. What's more, Covid-19 comes from China and many Chinese tourists have come through Zeytinburnu. Some Uyghur restaurants let them in but I don't want them in mine, I don't trust them," says the 34-year-old, who asked that his name be changed for fear of reprisals.

After being arrested and interrogated in China, Tahir left his hometown of Karamay in 2016. He fled to Turkey with his wife and three of his children. He had to leave two other children behind because they didn't have passports. His family in Xinjiang has been under immense pressure since he fled. Tahir tried to talk to his parents after settling in Istanbul but they begged him to stop to avoid endangering their lives after receiving threatening visits from Chinese police. "I haven't heard from my other two children since then."

Thousands of kilometres away, in Norway, another Uyghur intellectual recalls his traumatic experience in a re-education camp. Writer, linguist, activist and poet Abduweli Ayup, born in Kashgar in 1973 and educated in the United States, was detained in 2014 and imprisoned for 15 months for founding a network of Uyghur language schools.

While the language is theoretically protected under China's constitution, in practice authorities force schoolchildren to choose between Chinese and Uyghur. Ignorance of the former will keep them from finding a good job. Choosing the latter may land them in prison.

"Torture was part of interrogation," says Ayup. "I certainly didn't expect respectful treatment, but much less the diabolical things they did to me. The first night, three guards gathered about 20 prisoners, surrounded me and raped me. But that's something I don't want to talk about anymore," he says looking down and visibly shaken.

Following his release in August 2015, Ayup and his family fled to Turkey. In his new home he continued to write, teach Uyghur to children of his ethnicity, and to advocate as an activist. He has written three books about the torture he endured and his works can still be found in the Uyghur bookstore in Küçükçekmece.

Arrests of Uyghurs in Turkey

After the terrorist attack at the Reina nightclub in Istanbul on New Year's Day 2017, carried out by an Uzbek radical Islamist, life in Turkey changed for Abduweli Ayup and for many other Uyghurs. The Turkish security forces carried out mass arrests of Central Asian Muslims, among them Uyghurs. "Extremist groups in Turkey used the Uyghurs as protection," Ayup explains. According to his own research, which he now carries out from Oslo, 400 Uyghurs were arrested in Turkey. He claims to have been interrogated and harassed by the Turkish authorities.

The political situation has changed significantly since Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited Xinjiang in 2012 and moved his 'Uyghur brothers' by offering them protection. By 2016, Erdogan had changed his tune and began to point out the existence of radical Uyghur groups in Turkey.

Tahir, the restaurant owner, no longer feels safe in Turkey. In January 2017, he and ten of his employees were arrested for suspected terrorist links. During the 15 days of their imprisonment, they suffered insults and physical abuse at the hands of the Turkish police, Tahir says. On two occasions, they were forced to board a plane bound for Hong Kong. A Uyghur community leader from Kayseri ultimately intervened and managed to free them. The reason for their arrests and imprisonment: some Uzbeks connected to the Reina terrorist attack had eaten at Tahir's restaurant in the days prior to the attack.

According to an investigation by the Sunday Telegraph, in response to pressure from Beijing, Turkey is sending dozens of Uyghurs back to China via third countries such as Tajikistan.

The Office of the President, however, assured Equal Times in a statement that "Turkey is home to a considerable Uyghur community, some of whom have become Turkish citizens. The fact that so many Uyghurs choose to live, study and work in Turkey clearly demonstrates their sense of security here."

The majority of Uyghur detainees in Turkey have been released. But according to Ayup, as many as 1,000 Uyghurs have left Turkey to seek refuge in Europe, as he did in 2019.

Since 2013, thousands of Uyghurs have joined radical Islamic groups such as Al-Qaeda and IS in Syria. Over the last five years, Uyghur extremists have carried out attacks in China, Thailand and Kyrgyzstan that have resulted in deaths.

"It's unfortunate that some Uyghurs appear to have travelled to Syria, but the same is true of nationals of many European countries. So there is no direct connection between Uyghurs and terrorism," explains Peter Irwin, expert and senior project officer of the Uyghur Project.

"The Chinese government tends to frame this fact as proof that Uyghurs are a threat to its security. This doesn't make sense, because there has never been organised violence among the Uyghurs in China. Low levels of violence, while regrettable, are also a reaction against the Chinese government's relentless policy designed to prohibit even the slightest expression of Uyghur identity," Irwin adds.

International criticism of Beijing, an uncertain future for Uyghurs

In early 2020, Ayup was responsible for leaking the 'Xinjiang Files', supposedly official documents detailing the detentions of Uyghurs in internment camps for reasons including "having too many children," "growing a beard" and "applying for a passport." There is credible evidence to suggest that Uyghurs are forced to work in cotton production, including the manufacture of coronavirus masks. Groups such as Amnesty International have denounced the harassment that Uyghurs face, including in the diaspora, and have highlighted Beijing's policies in Xinjiang. Western countries and institutions, including Jewish anti-genocide activist groups, have responded with condemnation.

At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic this year, the United States banned

the import of technology and textiles from 11 companies whose products were allegedly manufactured by Uyghur prisoners held in forced labour and internment camps. The European Union and other Western countries have also condemned repression of the Uyghurs. In September, the Swedish fashion brand H&M cancelled its purchases from a Chinese cotton supplier suspected of using forced Uyghur labour.

Faced with this criticism and evidence, Beijing has insisted on several occasions that the Uyghur detainees were receiving vocational training and that the re-education camps will be gradually scaled back. But reports by independent experts from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) indicate that the reality is very different and the detention centres in fact continue to increase.

In September, President Xi reiterated that the repressive policies being pursued in Xinjiang are "absolutely correct" and in a statement that suggests the continuation of such policies, said: "Xinjiang enjoys social stability and its people live in peace and satisfaction. The facts make abundantly clear that our work with minorities has been a success."

"I am very hopeful about the actions being taken by certain countries. Jewish people are sympathising with us. Human rights activist are becoming increasingly involved in our cause. Uyghurs in the diaspora are learning their language and customs," says Ayup.

Tahir is more cautious. "I don't know if international support will be beneficial or harmful to the Uyghurs. The Uyghurs in China live in an open-air prison. The world is paying attention now but I don't believe that decisive action is being taken against China's atrocities. I call on the international community to defend the Uyghurs of East Turkestan."

"It's only a matter of time before the cost of China's treatment of Uyghurs becomes too great to continue," Irwin concludes. "Today it's the Uyghurs, but tomorrow it may be you who suffers from Beijing's policies, and you will regret not having stood up for them."

This article has been translated from Spanish by Brandon Johnson.

CONTRIBUTION TO CIVIL RIGHTS

By Aidan White

At the heart of any society that is genuinely free lies the protection of the rights of all citizens. However, in many parts of the world those rights are enjoyed in fragile conditions. Even where there are constitutional commitments and well-meaning signatures on human rights treaties, civil rights can be diluted or rendered meaningless without the constant vigilance of the news media.

Telling the stories of people and their communities is not made easier by rising populism and autocracy in politics, social and economic inequality in living conditions, and intolerance and disinformation in our communications. In this environment, ethical and inclusive journalism has never been more important, as illustrated by the entries in this year's awards.

The Covid pandemic, as two of the shortlisted entries elegantly highlight, provided an additional challenge to rights protection, as fresh cases of discrimination and neglect emerged in Europe and the United States during the emergency.

Whether it is coverage of the rights of indigenous minorities in Japan, or discrimination against the rights of working women in India, or the positive focus on the lives of ten African children in ten countries, these shortlisted entries all demonstrate how confident, positive journalism can combat injustice and contribute to improving the lives of forgotten people and communities.

The judges did not find it easy, but they found three entries that made a special difference.



CONTRIBUTION TO CIVIL RIGHTS



FIRST PRIZE WINNER

SERIES “BARRED–THE PRISONS PROJECT”:

From Segregation to Labour, Manu's Caste Law Governs the Indian Prison System;
Rajasthan HC Takes Suo Motu Note of The Wire's Prison Report,
Orders 'Overhaul' of Prison Manual;
The Wire Impact: After 70 Years, Rajasthan Amends Prison Manual
That Sanctioned Caste-Based Labour
Sukanya Shantha (India)



Sukanya Shantha is a Mumbai-based journalist who writes on law and social justice. She is a senior assistant editor at The Wire website. For over 12 years, she has written for several publications like The Wire, Indian Express, Scroll.in, The Caravan, among others. Sukanya has a Masters in Law from Tata Institute of Social Sciences. She has worked with Amnesty International as a human rights researcher studying the carceral system in India. Sukanya has won the Asian College of Journalism's K P Narayana Kumar Memorial Award for Social Impact Journalism, 2020; the Society of Publishers in Asia award, 2021 for human rights reporting; Golpitha Award, 2018, for reporting on caste and human rights in India. She was also awarded the Chevening South Asia Journalism Fellowship, 2021 and Pulitzer Centre grant for crisis reporting, 2020.

EDITOR'S NOTE

In first place is Sukanya Shantha (India) whose series *Barred – The Prisons Project* is a powerful and robust analysis of how the notorious inequalities of the Indian caste system are applied to the Indian prison system, leading to routine discrimination and exploitation in jails. The stories are emotionally charged, but they focus professionally and skilfully on the inhumanity of a system that leads to further injustice for people who should be protected under the law and constitution of India.

This is journalism of a high order, not only because of the expressive and creative presentation of the stories, but because it led to meaningful change for the victims of discrimination.

The High Court in the state of Rajasthan ordered a complete overhaul of the state prison rules in record time, but more importantly the 70-year-old prison law that underpinned the discrimination was finally changed and as a result several other Indian states have been forced to think again about how to deal with this sort of discrimination in their territories, providing more evidence of the importance of rights-based journalism.

FROM SEGREGATION TO LABOUR, MANU'S CASTE LAW GOVERNS THE INDIAN PRISON SYSTEM

By Sukanya Shantha

The Wire — December 10, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://thewire.in/caste/india-prisons-caste-labour-segregation>

In several states, prison manuals still dictate that labour within the prison should be assigned on the basis of caste.

This article, part of the series 'Barred—The Prisons Project', is produced in partnership with the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

New Delhi/Mumbai/Bangalore: On his first day at the Alwar district prison, Ajay Kumar* was gearing up for the worst. Torture, stale food, biting cold and harsh labour – Bollywood had already acquainted him with the grisly realities of jails. “*Gunah batao* (Tell me your crime),” a police constable, placed at the undertrial (UT) section, asked him as soon as he was escorted inside a tall iron gateway.

Ajay had barely mumbled something, when the constable snapped, “*Kaun jaati* (Which caste)?” Unsure, Ajay paused and then hesitantly said, “Rajak”. The constable was not pleased with the response. He further inquired, “*Biradari batao* (Tell me the caste category).” An inconsequential part of his life so far, Ajay’s caste identity, as part of a “Scheduled Caste”, was now to shape his 97-day stay in the prison.

Ajay, barely 18 years old in 2016, had to clean toilets, sweep the verandah of the ward and help in other menial work like storing water and gardening. His work would begin before dawn and continue till 5 pm each day. “I had assumed it was something that every new prisoner had to do. But in a week or so, it was evident. Only a select few were made to clean toilets,” he says.

The arrangement was clear – those at the bottom of the caste pyramid did the cleaning work; those high above handled the kitchen or the legal documentation department. And the rich and influential did nothing; they only threw their weight around. These arrangements had nothing to do with the crime that one was arrested for or his conduct in prison. “Sab kuch jaati ke aadhar par tha (It was all based on caste),” he says.

It has been close to four years since he was sent to jail. He was charged with theft by his employer. “Boxes of newly acquired switchboards had gone missing from the workshop. I was the newest employee, also the youngest. The owner decided to pick on me. He called the police and turned me in,” he recalls.

After spending 97 days in jail and subsequently facing a trial at the Alwar magistrate’s court, Ajay was finally acquitted. Alwar city, however, was no more an option; he soon moved to Delhi. Now 22, Ajay works as an electrician at a mall in central Delhi.

That short period in the prison, Ajay says, changed his life in more than one way. “Overnight, I was branded a criminal. Additionally, I was also reduced to a choti jaat (a lower caste person).” Ajay’s family, originally from Sambhuganj block of Bihar’s Banka district, had migrated to the national capital in the early 1980s. His father works at a courier firm in Delhi and his brother as a security guard at a nationalised bank. “We belong to a dhobi or a washerman caste. But no one in my family ever was engaged in the caste occupation. My father intentionally chose a life in a city, almost as if he was running away from the harsh caste realities of a village.”

But inside the jail, Ajay says, his father’s efforts were undone. “I was trained as an electrician. But inside jail that meant nothing. I was now only a safaiwala (a cleaner) in this confined space,” Ajay shares, sitting at his rented barsati in North Delhi.

The most painful of all, he recalls, was when the prison guard summoned him one day to clear up a choked septic tank. The toilets in the prison ward had been overflowing since the night before. But the jail authorities did not call in anyone from outside to fix the problem. “I was stunned that they (jail officials) wanted me to do this job. I meekly protested, and told the guard that I did not know this kind of work. But he said there was no one as thin and young as me. He raised his voice and I caved in.” Ajay had to strip down to his underwear, pry open the tank lid and lower his body into the cesspit of human faeces. “I thought I would die of the putrid stench. I began howling. The guard did not know what to do and asked other prisoners to drag me out.”

While manual scavenging was outlawed in India three decades ago, the law underwent an amendment in 2013 to recognise the use of men for cleaning of sewers and septic tanks as “manual scavenging” in the amended The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act. What the guards made Ajay do is a criminal offence.

“Every time I think of the incident, I lose my appetite,” he says. Each time he sees a cleaner or a sweeper on the street, he flinches. “The sight reminds me of my own helplessness,” he says.

Shocking as it may sound, Ajay’s is not an uncommon case. He says everything in prison is decided by a person’s caste. He was able to tell a person’s caste merely by looking at the life they lived in prison. Ajay was a pre-trial detainee, and unlike those convicted, pre-trial detainees are exempted from working in jail. But at the undertrial prison, where convict prisoners were only a handful, detainees like Ajay were called in for free labour.

When the rules themselves are casteist

Caste-based labour, in fact, is sanctioned in the prison manuals of many states. The colonial texts of the late 19th century have barely seen any amendments, and

caste-based labour remains an untouched part of these manuals. While every state has its own unique prison manual, they are mostly based on The Prisons Act, 1894. These jail manuals mention every activity in detail – from the measurement of food and space per prisoner to punishments for the “disorderly ones”.

Ajay’s experience matches what the Rajasthan Jail Manual lays out. While cooking and handling medical care in the prison is considered high-caste work, sweeping and cleaning is straightaway assigned to the lower castes.

For the cooking department, the prison manual states:

“Any Brahmin or sufficiently high caste Hindu prisoner from his class if eligible for appointment as cook.”

Similarly, Part 10 of the manual titled, “Employment, Instructions and Control of Convicts”, as also mentioned in the rules under section 59 (12) of the Prisons Act, states:

“Sweepers shall be chosen from among those who, by the custom of the district in which they reside or on account of their having adopted the profession, perform sweepers work, when free. Anyone else may also volunteer to do this work, in no case, however shall a person, who is not a professional sweeper, be compelled to do the work.”

The rule, however, remains silent over the issue of consent for those from the “sweeper community”.

These rules are drafted essentially keeping the larger male population in mind and get replicated in women’s prisons too, in states where women-specific rules have not been formulated. In the absence of a woman prisoner from the “appropriate” caste groups, the Rajasthan prison manual says, “...two or three specially selected male convict Mehtars may be taken into the enclosure by a paid worker under the condition...” Mehtar is a caste name, denoting those engaged in manual scavenging as a caste occupation.

On medical workers, the manual says, “Two or more long- term prisoners of good caste should be trained and employed as hospital attendants.”

Across states, prison manuals and rules stipulate the labour that needs to be carried out on a daily basis. The division of labour is roughly determined on the dichotomous ‘purity-impurity’ scale, with the higher castes handling only work that is considered “pure” and those lower in the caste grid being left to carry out the “impure” jobs.

Consider the case of Bihar. The section titled ‘Preparation of food’ opens with this line: “Of equal importance is the quality, proper preparation, and cooking of the food and its issue in full quantity.” Further, detailing the measurements and cooking techniques in jail, the manual states: “Any ‘A class’ Brahmin or sufficiently high caste Hindu prisoner is eligible for appointment as a cook.” The manual further specifies, “Any prisoner in a jail who is so high caste that he cannot eat food cooked

by the existing cooks shall be appointed a cook and made to cook for the whole complement of men. Individual convicted prisoners shall in no circumstances be allowed to cook for themselves, unless they are specific division prisoners permitted to do so under rule.”

Not just on paper

These are not mere words printed in an official book and forgotten. The caste practice ubiquitous in the Indian subcontinent manifests in more ways than one. Several prisoners who were approached shared their experiences of being segregated and pushed into doing menial jobs purely on the basis of the caste they were born into. While Brahmins and other high caste prisoners considered their exemption to be a matter of pride and privilege, the rest had only the caste system to blame for their condition.

“The jail tells you your right aukaad (status),” says Pintu, a former prisoner, who spent close to a decade at Jubba Sahni Bhagalpur Central Jail and a few months at the Motihari Central Jail. Pintu belongs to a ‘nai’ or barber community, and throughout his stint in prison, he served as one.

The Bihar prison manual too formalises caste hierarchies in labour. For instance, it says for those assigned sweeping work: “Sweepers shall be chosen from the Mehtar or Hari caste, also from the Chandal or other low castes, if by the custom of the district they perform similar work when free, or from the caste if the prisoner volunteers to do the work.” All three castes fall under the Scheduled Castes category.

From time to time, prison manuals have gone through a few tweaks. Sometimes this was triggered by public outcry or the Supreme Court or a high court’s intervention; sometimes the states themselves felt the need for it. In most states, though, the issue of caste-based labour practices has been overlooked.

In some states, for instance Uttar Pradesh, “religious scruples and caste prejudices” are considered important for “reformatory influences”. A separate chapter focusing on reformatory influences in prison says, “Reasonable respect shall be paid to religious scruples and caste prejudices of the prisoners in all matters as far as it is compatible with discipline.” The prison administration holds sole discretionary power over the extent of the “reasonability and compatibility” of these prejudices. The “reasonability”, though, has only meant furthering blatant caste prejudices while assigning work and exempting some from harsh labour – both in male and female prisons.

The Madhya Pradesh Jail Manual, which was amended only a few years ago, continues with the caste-based assignment in conservancy work – the official term used for manual scavenging. The chapter titled “Mal Vahan” or conservancy states that a “Mehtar prisoner” would be responsible for handling human excreta in the toilets.

Identical practices find mention in the Haryana and Punjab state prison manuals and rules too. Selection of sweepers, barbers, cooks, hospital staff among others are all pre-decided as per one’s caste identity. If any prison faces scarcity of prisoners of a certain caste to carry out the requisite labour, prisoners are to be brought in from nearby

prisons. However, no exceptions or changes in rules are mentioned in the manual.

When Sabika Abbas, a programme officer working with the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), a non-governmental organisation working on prisoners' rights, recently visited prisons of Punjab and Haryana, she said the blatancy of the practice shocked her. "Male and female prisoners alike shared their experiences of caste and caste-based labour work assigned to them. Some were compelled to carry out the work due to poverty and lack of financial support from their families. But these prisoners too were primarily from the backward caste groups," says Abbas.

Her research, commissioned by the Legal Services Authorities of Haryana and Punjab, covers a plethora of issues plaguing the prison system. Abbas observes that even though pre-trial detainees are exempted from carrying out labour in prison, the prevailing system compels them to work. "In most prisons in both states, we observed that the posts for sweepers and cleaners were lying empty for years. It was understood that those menial jobs will be carried out by prisoners belonging to lower caste groups," she observes. Unlike other state prisons which are still following the colonial prison rules, Abbas points to the amendments in the Punjab manual. "Punjab is relatively newer. It was last updated in 1996 but still did not do away with the caste-based provisions," she adds.

West Bengal, perhaps the only state that makes special provisions for prisoners arrested in connection with "political or democratic movements", continues to be just as regressive and unconstitutional as others when it comes to assigning labour according to caste. Similar to Uttar Pradesh, the West Bengal prison manual follows "non- interference with religious practices or caste prejudices". Certain specific preferences are accommodated in the manual – a Brahmin wearing "sacred thread" or a Muslim desiring a certain length of trousers. But with that, the manual also states: "Food shall be cooked and carried to the cells by prisoner-cooks of suitable caste, under the superintendence of a jail officer." Likewise, "Sweepers should be chosen from the Mether or Hari caste, also from the Chandal or other castes, if by the custom of the district they perform similar work when free, or from any caste if the prisoner volunteers to do the work."

These practices have remained in the prison rule book but have gone unchallenged. Dr Riazuddin Ahmed, a former Inspector General of Prisons in Andhra Pradesh and former director of the government-run Academy of Prisons and Correctional Administration in Vellore, says the issue of caste has never been deliberated upon while making policy decisions. "In my career spanning over 34 years, the issue has never come up for discussion," he says. Ahmed feels that clauses mentioned in the manual are mostly a reflection of the state's attitude towards those incarcerated. "Prison officials, after all, are a product of the same caste-ridden society that exists outside. Regardless of what the manual states, it is entirely up to the prison staff to ensure dignity and equality of prisoners," Ahmed feels.

Disha Wadekar, a Delhi-based lawyer and a vocal critic of the Indian caste system, compares prison laws with the regressive "laws of Manu". A mythical figure, Manu is

believed to be the author of the Manusmriti, which had sanctioned the degradation of humanity on the basis of caste and gender in ancient times.

"The prison system simply replicates Manu's dandniti (laws). The prison system has failed to work on the normative penal system that is built on the tenets of 'equality before the law' and 'protection of law'. On the contrary, it follows Manu's law that is founded on the principles of injustice – a system that believed that certain lives are to be punished more than others and that some lives have more value than others. The states have stuck to the ascribed caste-based understanding of "justice" and decide on punishment and labour as per an individual's standing in the caste grid," explains Wadekar.

Indian states, barring West Bengal, have borrowed from the Prison Act, 1894. "Not just borrowed but also remained stuck there," Ahmed adds. In 2016, the Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPRD) came up with an elaborate model prison manual. The model prison manual is aligned with international standards such as the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners (UN Bangkok Rules) and the UN Minimum Standards for Treatment of Prisoners (the Mandela Rules). Both call for the repeal of practices that discriminate on the grounds of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or any other status. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, propounded by the United Nations in 1977, to which India is a party, has clearly stated that: "No one shall be required to perform forced or compulsory labour."

No desire for change?

Since prison is a "state subject", it is entirely on the states to implement these changes suggested in the model prison manual. Acknowledging the problems in the existing prison manual of different states, the model prison manual states, "Management of kitchen or cooking of food on caste or religious basis will be totally banned in prisons." Similarly, the model manual also bars any kind of "special treatment" to a prisoner on the basis of her caste or religion. In fact, the model prison manual lists "agitating or acting on the basis of caste or religious" as a punishable offence. But implementation of the model prison manual leaves much to be desired.

It is not as if state prison departments have not struck down inhumane and unconstitutional practices from the books. Goa did, so did Delhi, Maharashtra and Odisha. They specifically stated that caste won't have any relevance in running prisons. Over the years, several inhuman practices like using fetters and whipping as a mode of punishment were done away with, so were caste-based occupations in some state prisons.

But did that weed out the caste practice entirely? "No," says Lalita*, a former prisoner. Between 2010 and 2017, Lalita faced multiple cases in Mumbai and other parts of Maharashtra. While most of her incarceration period was spent in Byculla women's prison, she was also taken to other prisons from time to time. The travel and interactions with other prisoners and prison officials gave her the opportunity

to understand the carceral system in all its complexities.

Unlike the male prisoners, women are fewer in number and so are the provisions made available to them. Lalita was a fierce fighter in jail, demanding basic rights and dignity for herself and her co-prisoners. So, when women prisoners revolted against the prison authorities, demanding better food quality and more frequent supply of poultry and meat, Lalita was at the forefront.

Prison rules are plenty and prisons authorities quote them each time to prevent any intervention by prisoners and their legal representatives. But these official documents are seldom accessible to common people, let alone an incarcerated individual. “Nothing is more dangerous than an informed prisoner asserting her rights,” says Lalita.

Ahmed agrees with Lalita. And to explain the unavailability of the updated manual, Beluah Emmanuel, professor and a senior faculty at the Academy of Prisons and Correctional Administration in Vellore, says that on average, it takes at least 15 years for changes in the manual to reflect. “Each time states introduce any change to the manual, it is merely noted at the official level. The revision to the prison manual reflects only when it is reprinted once in 15 years. Finding all amendments at one place is practically impossible,” adds Emmanuel. The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), which has been working on prisoners’ rights for several decades, has been unsuccessfully trying to access updated prison manuals for a long time. “Only about 10 states have prison rules/manual on the state prison websites. It is extremely difficult to access updated rules of other states. In our experience, access to prison manuals is a challenge for prisoners as well. Ideally, all prison libraries must have a copy of the prison rules,” says Sugandha Shankar, a senior programme officer at CHRI.

A sadhvi in the mix

In Maharashtra, Lalita says, unwritten caste practice is rampant. Her stay in Byculla prison coincided with that of Pragya Singh Thakur, a prime accused in a bomb blast case of 2008 in Malegaon, a town in northern Maharashtra. Thakur, on her release in 2017, was inducted into the ruling Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and later in 2019, became an elected member of parliament from her hometown, Bhopal.

At the time of her arrest, she was merely a self-appointed seer. That, however, did not stop her from growing her clout in prison, nor did it prevent her from influencing prison officials. Thakur was lodged in one of the three “separate cells”, which doubles up as both a “VIP cell” for the rich and influential seeking privacy, or in the case of erring prisoners, a torture or a solitary cell.

Outside the separate cell, three other undertrial prisoners, appointed as her ‘sevikas’ or attenders, would be placed to exclusively attend to Thakur’s command. One undertrial woman, from the same Thakur or “warrior caste”, was deputed to take care of her food. The trial court had granted Pragya permission for home-cooked

food, after she accused the prison authorities of feeding her “worms” and “egg particles”. Her brother-in-law, Bhagwan Jha, would travel over 280 km every day, from Surat in Gujarat to Byculla prison, with a multi-decker food box. The freshly cooked home food would reach the jail before the crack of dawn, and the Thakur sevika would rush to collect it from the prison office. Her sole job was to serve Pragya food three times a day. Similarly, another woman, an alleged drug lord belonging to the dominant Jaat community, was appointed her “bodyguard”. A local Dalit woman had to clean her toilet.

Pragya’s religion, her caste location and her political clout determined her position in jail, as well as that of her attenders. Pragya sought their services as if they were her legitimate right – and the state appeared to agree. “It did not matter whether or not such provisions were permitted in the jail text. What matters is that this happened and with the complete knowledge of the jail staff,” Lalita says. Several other former prisoners who had spent time in jail around the same period too corroborated this practice.

Among 60 district and central prisons in Maharashtra, Byculla is the only exclusive prison for women undertrials, with a capacity to accommodate 262 prisoners. But at any given point in time, the numbers exceed the official capacity dramatically. Barring a few convicted prisoners, who are exclusively lodged here to take care of the day-to-day chores, most labour work is carried out by the undertrial detainees. Among them, the most vulnerable are Bengali-speaking Muslim women, who, invariably, end up in jail on charges of being undocumented immigrants who crossed over from neighbouring Bangladesh.

When a person is arrested, the outside world often snaps ties with them, fearing police action. Noorjahan Mandal*, a 33-year-old domestic worker from Mumbai’s Reay Road area, did not have a single visitor during the four months she spent in Byculla jail. “My family was too scared to contact me or even send me a money order. I had no money to even buy myself a small snack when hungry. I was entirely dependent on the menial work in jail to take care of myself,” says Mandal, a Dalit Muslim from a town in West Bengal bordering Bangladesh. She would sweep, mop and help aging women prisoners bathe. In exchange, she would earn a few canteen coupons.

Like her, in the five prisons located in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR), several Bengali-speaking Muslim prisoners end up doing menial work in lieu of some money or food items. “Both caste and poverty are an underlying factor here,” feels Lalita. “You won’t see any poor Brahmin woman ever being pushed to such a desperate situation in jail. Both the Indian state and the society is built in a way to support her. This ecosystem is missing for others.”

A prison mapped by caste

In the summer of 1994, a family fight broke out in a temple of a nondescript village in Tirunelveli district, Tamil Nadu. What had begun as a benign argument soon turned violent and led to the death of a young man. Selvam*, a man in his mid 20s, was one of the nine involved in the murderous attack. They soon surrendered

before the local police. It was the first time Selvam had been involved in a criminal act. After spending a few days in a local sub-jail, he was moved to the larger Palayamkottai central prison in Tirunelveli. "I was there for close to 75 days," he recalls. The prison, like any other carceral structure, had several wards and cells. "I was placed in 'Quarantine Ward 2'," Selvam says. 'Quarantine' is local lingo for undertrial cells in Tamil Nadu.

Four years later, Selvam was convicted and awarded a life term. He was sent to jail once again in mid 1998. "The prison now was a different place. Wards were newly named as per castes. Thevars, Nadars, Pallars, everyone had their separate structure dedicated for themselves in the undertrial section," he recalls. Selvam belonged to the Kollar or blacksmith caste, a numerically small community in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu. "The prison authorities had identified a few castes as 'warring castes' and decided to place them separately. The rest were placed as per their caste locations," he explains.

These barracks are organised as per caste dominance. The Thevars, an Other Backward Class, yet dominant in the southern Tamil Nadu region, are placed closer to the jail canteen, library and hospital; next is the Nadar (also, an OBC caste) block and the farthest is the Pallar block, where prisoners from the Dalit community are lodged.

This practice, however, has remained primarily restricted to only the undertrial section, and segregation is not as restrictive in the convicted prisoners' section. One plausible explanation is the relative access to the justice system of the undertrial prisoners when compared to those convicted. "Prisoners are dealt with severely by prison officials in jails. But prison officials are most often wary of using excessive force on the undertrial prisoners, since the chance of them petitioning the court is much higher. Convicts, on the other hand, don't have access to courts or the outer world as easily, and the prison officials feel they can be brought under control more effectively. Hence, the difference in segregation rules," says K.R. Raja, a lawyer and founder of the Global Network for Equality, an NGO working with the children of prisoners. Raja, a trained counsellor, has worked at Palayamkottai prison for over six years, meeting prisoners from across barracks and helping them cope with their anxieties in jail.

Raja has studied the Palayamkottai prison structure very closely. He connects the transition in the jail with the socio-political changes that took place outside around that time. "After all, prisons are just a reflection of the society outside," he explains. In the mid 1990s, Tamil Nadu, more particularly the state's southern districts, witnessed some of the most gruesome caste violence against Dalit communities. In June 1997, in Melavalavu village of Madurai district, six leaders from the Dalit community were hacked to death by caste Hindu Thevars, an OBC community with significant presence, following the village council presidency election. "A series of violent attacks had broken out in the Thoothukudi, Tirunelveli, Madurai and Dharmapuri region. The state government was finding it hard to control the dominant caste groups and as a knee-jerk reaction, they decided to segregate those incarcerated as per their caste," explains Raja.

The practice continued for over a decade without any public outcry. And in 2011, R. Alagumani, a lawyer practicing at the Madurai bench of the Madras high court,

moved a petition. "Since I preferred interacting with my clients directly, I would frequently visit jails. I still remember the first time I visited Palayamkottai to meet a prisoner named Murugan. I had very little information and was hoping that the jail guard finds the right person. When I mentioned Murugan, the guard asked me the person's caste. I was bemused. I did not know Murugan's caste and so, the guard could not help me find him either. That is when I realised that at the Palayamkottai, to meet a prisoner, his name and case history is not enough. You have to know his caste too," Alagumani says.

The practice was unconstitutional, but had been institutionalised over the years. Alagumani decided to challenge it in the high court. He was hopeful the court would take note of it and an immediate intervention will be made. "Instead, the prison authorities claimed that they were helpless and segregation was the only way to ensure law and order in jail. The court accepted the affidavit and the case was disposed of," Alagumani says. With that, a discriminatory act was passed off as the only "plausible way" to ensure peace in the society.

It is more about a matter of convenience, Alagumani argues. "Can the Indian state justify segregation and discrimination outside prison? How, then, is it justifiable in jails?" he questions.

While the practice in the Palayamkottai prison is more widely known, similar caste-based segregation is seen in other district and central prisons too, mainly in the southern region of Tamil Nadu. Madurai central prison, for instance, not just practices segregation, but is also accused of continuing caste-based labour practices in jail. The prison authorities notoriously assign cleaning work to only prisoners from the Dalit community. A petition challenging this practice, again filed by Alagumani, is pending before the Madurai bench.

The National Crime Records Bureau data has consistently pointed to the over-representation of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and OBCs in Indian jails. However, barring a few anti-caste organisations, and individual lawyers like Alagumani and Raja, most rights groups have overlooked the caste realities of the carceral system in India. Research and advocacy campaigns largely focus on tangible violations. Violative practices like caste discrimination don't make it to the discourse.

This, advocate Wadekar says, is also symptomatic of a graver problem of lack of representation of marginalised communities in positions of influence. "Almost all prisoners' rights organisations and academics in India have shied from engaging with the issue of caste. When they do, it is treated like an addendum and not an integral part of the issue. Forced erasure of caste from the discourse on prisoners' rights is unethical," Wadekar says. How else can anyone explain the conspicuous absence of caste from the popular discourse around prisons and the carceral system in India, she asks.

**Some names have been changed for anonymity*

We would like to thank CHRI for giving us free access to their library and their collection of prison manuals. We are also thankful to advocate K.R. Raja for organising ex-prisoners' interviews in Tamil Nadu and translating them from Tamil to English.

RAJASTHAN HC TAKES SUO MOTU NOTE OF THE WIRE'S PRISON REPORT, ORDERS 'OVERHAUL' OF PRISON MANUAL

By Sukanya Shantha

The Wire — December 18, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://thewire.in/law/caste-prison-rajasthan-high-court-prison-manual-suo-motu>

The order has reproduced several findings published by The Wire in a report on institutionalised casteism in prisons, and has termed them as "striking".

Mumbai: "Disturbed" by a report published in The Wire, the Jodhpur bench of the Rajasthan high court has directed the state government to undertake steps to ensure the complete overhaul of the state prison manual.

The Wire, on December 10, published a detailed investigative piece on the caste practices prevalent inside prisons across different states in India. These practices, as per archaic prison manuals, were followed in most states that sanction caste-based occupation in jail. While prisoners of the Brahmin caste group in most states are assigned only cooking, or supervision work, those from the 'lower' castes are forced to carry out menial work like manual scavenging and cleaning.

Both caste-based discrimination and manual scavenging are criminal and unconstitutional.

The Rajasthan high court was hearing two separate writ petitions filed by a Jodhpur-based prisoners' rights lawyer, Kaluram Bhati, seeking adequate open-air prisons in Rajasthan. The petitions have also raised concern over the number of prisoners who drop out due to the dated Rajasthan Prisoners Open Air Camp Rules of 1972.

Alongside these, the court also took serious note of The Wire's article on caste-based labour division mentioned in the Rajasthan prison manual. The court observed, referring to the published article: "We are of the firm view that no under trial prisoner can be assigned such (caste-based) duties in a prison."

The division bench of Justice Sandeep Mehta and Justice Devendra Kachhawaha further directed the additional advocate general Farzand Ali to "apprise the court regarding the proposed steps for complete overhauling of the Prison Manual and

to ensure that the prisoners are not forced to indulge in menial jobs like cleaning toilets etc. merely on the basis of their caste and also that no under trial prisoner is forced to perform such jobs in the prison".

"Rather, considering the progressive democratic set up of our country and in order to ensure maintenance of proper hygiene in the prisons, it would be expedient in the interest of justice that the state government considers installation of mechanized/automated cleaning facilities in all the prisons in the State of Rajasthan," the order further states.

The order has reproduced several findings by The Wire and has termed them as "striking".

"The report also refers to the fact that the prison manuals of various states are still plagued by the archaic and derogatory caste system, which the Constitution of India pledged to eradicate," the order states.

The case is listed for further hearing on February 4.

The Rajasthan high court has, however, wrongly mentioned The Wire's report as a part of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI).

The article, an original work of The Wire, is one of the first in a series launched in collaboration with the Pulitzer Center, which will be looking at several issues plaguing the Indian prisons system. The published article meticulously examines prison manuals and the caste discrimination experienced by incarcerated prisoners on the ground.

Prisons manuals are a state subject and becomes a guiding force behind the functioning of prisons in every state. These manuals, borrowed from the Prison Act, 1894, have barely changed over the past decade. Rajasthan is one such state.

In the original report looks at the story of a young former prisoner who was pushed to carry out manual scavenging work inside Alwar central prison in 2016. The prisoner, barely 18 at that time, says the experience has scarred him and he has been struggling to come to terms with the indignities forced upon him. "Sab kuch jaati ke aadhar par tha (It was all based on caste)," the prisoner had told The Wire.

Similar practices, many of which are unconstitutional and caste-based, are followed in prisons of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, and Haryana among other states.

Disha Wadekar, a Delhi-based lawyer, had compared the prison laws with the regressive "laws of Manu". A mythical figure, Manu is believed to be the author of the Manusmriti, which had sanctioned the degradation of humanity on the basis of caste and gender in ancient times.

Even in some states where changes have been made and the caste practice have been dropped, the practice on ground has barely changed. In Maharashtra prisons, for instance, changes have been made on paper, but that has not stopped the prison

authorities from giving preferential treatment to several prisoners on the basis of their 'higher' caste standing.

Discrimination is done not just while assigning labour but also while placing prisoners in jail. In Palayamkottai central prison in southern Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu, prisoners are segregated as per their caste. This unlawful practice was raised before the Madurai bench of the Madras high court a decade ago but the state prison authorities "justified" the practice claiming that they were "helpless" and that "segregation was the only way to ensure law and order in jail". These claims were accepted by the court and the practice has continued for over two decades.

In 2016, the Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPRD) came up with an elaborate model prison manual. The model prison manual is aligned with international standards such as the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners (UN Bangkok Rules) and the UN Minimum Standards for Treatment of Prisoners (the Mandela Rules). Both call for the repeal of practices that discriminate on the grounds of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or any other status.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, propounded by the United Nations in 1977, to which India is a party, has clearly stated that: "No one shall be required to perform forced or compulsory labour."

Acknowledging the problems in the existing prison manual of different states, the model prison manual states, "Management of kitchen or cooking of food on caste or religious basis will be totally banned in prisons." Similarly, the model manual also bars any kind of "special treatment" to a prisoner on the basis of her caste or religion. In fact, the model prison manual lists "agitating or acting on the basis of caste or religious" as a punishable offence. But implementation of the model prison manual remains a far cry in India.

THE WIRE IMPACT: AFTER 70 YEARS, RAJASTHAN AMENDS PRISON MANUAL THAT SANCTIONED CASTE-BASED LABOUR

By Sukanya Shantha

The Wire — February 13, 2021

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://thewire.in/caste/rajasthan-prison-manual-amended-caste-labour>

The move comes nearly two months after The Wire's report had exposed conditions of institutionalised casteism in prisons of Rajasthan and several other states in India.

Mumbai: For over 70- years, the Rajasthan state had followed an unconstitutional and violative prison manual that allowed assignment of labour on the basis of a prisoner's caste. This institutionalised caste practice had continued unchallenged until The Wire's report exposed the conditions in prisons of Rajasthan and several other states in India.

The report had prompted the Jodhpur bench of the Rajasthan high court to suo motu demand an overhaul of the prison manual. And on February 2, the state's home department was compelled to repeal all those prison rules which allowed caste-based labour assignments in prison.

This is a significant decision since so far, the Rajasthan state had continued to dishonour the Indian constitution by discriminating against incarcerated persons on the basis of their caste. The Wire's investigative report, published on December 10, had exposed the prevalence of rampant caste practices like manual scavenging being forced upon prisoners belonging to Scheduled Castes. This practice, although unconstitutional and also a criminal offence, had continued because it was stated as a rule in the prison manual.

Part 10 of the manual titled, "Employment, Instructions and Control of Convicts", as also mentioned in the rules under section 59 (12) of the Prisons Act had earlier stated that:

"Sweepers shall be chosen from among those who, by the custom of the district in which they reside or on account of their having adopted the profession, perform sweepers work, when free. Anyone else may also volunteer to do this work, in no case, however shall a person, who is not a professional sweeper, be compelled to do the work." The rule did not seek the prisoner's consent and that had allowed the prison officials to rampantly exploit incarcerated persons belonging to lower castes.

For the cooking department, the prison manual had earlier stated:

“Any Brahmin or sufficiently high caste Hindu prisoner from his class if eligible for appointment as cook.”

These rules were not just mentioned on paper but also was practised rampantly. The Wire’s story had reported the experience of a young undertrial prisoner from Bihar, who, during his 97- days in the Alwar district prison in Rajasthan, was forced to enter a septic tank only because of his “Rajak” caste identity. Rajak’s are classified as Scheduled Castes in Bihar.

The changed rule now, notified by the home department on February 2 removes the mention of caste and specifically states: “No tradesman shall be chosen on the basis of his caste or religion”. Tradesman, a term commonly used in defence service, has been added to the Rajasthan prison manual to describe services that are commonly required in the prison space, like cooking, water- carrying, sweeping etc. For the selection of cooks too, the newly amended prison manual states, “No inmate (prisoner) shall be selected on the basis of his caste or religion”.

Rajeev Dasot, additional general of prisons, Rajasthan told The Wire that soon after the article was published and the high court rapped the home department, the prisons department had taken upon itself to rework the prison manual. “Prison manual has been awaiting amendments for a long, long time. By January 11, we had already drawn a new draft and sent it to the home department for approval. This was perhaps the fastest any work was carried out in the prisons department,” Dasot told The Wire. Dasot, who had in the past work with the Border Security Force, says that the term tradesman was introduced in the manual to keep away from any caste connotation and ensure the practice doesn’t go back to caste- based assignments.

Dasot also mentioned that in the upcoming budget, the Prisons Act, 1894, that was being followed in Rajasthan would finally be scrapped. “A new prison law which has been kept pending for over four years is expected to be adopted in the upcoming session. I had recently made a presentation before the chief minister (Ashok Gehlot) and the home department officials and we are hoping the new prison law will finally be adopted,” Dasot said. While every state has its own unique prison manual, they are mostly based on The Prisons Act, 1894.

Barring just a few states like Odisha, Goa and Delhi, most states are yet to shift to the model prison manual proposed by the Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPRD). Since prisons are a state subject, it is entirely for the states to ensure rules and laws in prisons are in sync with the laws and constitutional requirements of the land. But prisons continue to be one of the most neglected areas and are seldom considered for reformative measures. Dasot said that while changing the rules, his department had referred to the model prison manual to ensure that the violative rules are done away with.

While the removal of violative terms might be a step forward, experts feel it cannot be considered enough to work on its own. Disha Wadekar, a Supreme Court lawyer,

who compared the caste-practice in prisons with the regressive “Manu’s *dandniti* (laws)”, says this can just be the beginning towards adopting a progressive prison rule. A mythical figure, Manu is believed to be the author of the Manusmriti, which had sanctioned the degradation of humanity on the basis of caste and gender in ancient times.

“The work has actually just begun. Removing the problematic caste mentions from the prison manual will not automatically translate to annihilation of caste in prison. Prisons authorities will now have to ensure they stop the practice entirely and that would happen only with adequate checks and accountability,” Wadekar said.

The opacity of the structure of prisons makes it difficult to know the dreadful conditions in which carceral punishments are delivered inside the enclosed spaces. “Practices inside prisons are only a reflection of the society outside. But people residing outside at least have redressal mechanisms, this is commonly denied to those in jail. These change in rules won’t ensure change in attitude unless the state takes up the responsibility,” Wadekar warned.

Her apprehensions are not unfounded. In many states where discriminative rules did not exist on paper, prisoners were still assigned labour as per their caste. Other discriminative practices, like segregation too continue in prisons. Like, for example, in Tamil Nadu, in several prisons, incarceration is carried out as per individual’s caste identities. Caste-barracks are a common feature in Palayamkottai central prison in Tirunelveli and in Madurai prison.

Rajasthan is just one state to have continued with caste-based practice in prison and has now finally repealed it because of intervention by the high court. But other states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab and West Bengal still have not made any efforts to make necessary amendments.

Note: An earlier version of this article erroneously said the manual was edited on February 3. It was in fact edited on February 2.

SECOND PRIZE WINNER

SHE WAS TRAFFICKED INTO A GIANT BROTHEL. NOW SHE RUNS IT

Corinne Redfern (Italy), Ali Ahsan (Bangladesh)



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EDITOR'S NOTE

The award for second place went to Corinne Redfern (Italy) and Ali Ahsan (Bangladesh) for their challenging and devastating portrayal of sexual exploitation *She Was Trafficked into a Giant Brothel. Now She Runs It*.

This detailed investigation traces the link between child marriage and sex trafficking in Bangladesh. It was a marathon journey for the journalists, who interviewed more than 400 women and girls living in four of the country's largest legal brothels.

They focus on the story of Monowara Begum – a woman now in her 40s, who was trafficked into Bangladesh's oldest brothel as a child, only to grow up and choose to stay and help run the place.

The report reveals a crushing reality - that life for many adult women in Bangladesh is so unequal and brutal that they are safer, and suffer less discrimination, if they remain within the walls of the brothel. It is a sobering analysis of the structural inequalities and abuses of power that leave so many girls at risk in South Asia.

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By Corinne Redfern and Ali Ahsan

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The light was still dim when Monowara Begum (*pictured*) shuffled into her sandals and began her morning patrol. With a slight wheeze, the 44-year-old paced the alleyways, scowling behind gold-rimmed glasses as she listened for sounds of trouble coming from within the corrugated-metal and cinder-block buildings. A foul-smelling stream of sewage and used condoms ran between the makeshift homes. Several times, she flicked a bangled wrist to disperse a cloud of flies. Her other hand was tense, ready to grab a wooden stick if a situation called for it.

Her turf was the walled-off community of Kandapara, Bangladesh's oldest brothel. Sitting on the edge of a textile town north-west of Dhaka, the capital, it is one of 11 such "brothel-villages" in Bangladesh, which are among the less well-known legacies of British imperialism.

With row upon row of windowless bedrooms, Kandapara is home to more than 600 women and girls. On a normal day up to 3,000 customers frequent its streets. Young children, most born in the brothel, play tag along its narrow passages, tearing past bright pink walls painted with enormous yellow hearts.

Monowara (as she is known in the brothel) was trafficked into Kandapara as a child over 30 years ago. Since then, armed with little more than her wits, she has learned to navigate the institution's intricate hierarchies, cruelty and violence. Today she is one of the most powerful women in the brothel.

Her resilience has been desperately needed over the past year. When coronavirus began to encroach last March, policemen padlocked the brothel gates to keep customers out. Weeks ticked by, and many women had no secure access to income or food. At times the pandemic has pushed Kandapara's sex workers close to starvation.

A short-term loss of customers was not the only threat the women faced. Some people in the local town of Tangail had for years been trying to shut down the brothel.

Monowara feared that an outbreak of coronavirus within the brothel would provide them with invaluable ammunition. She and hundreds of others had been enslaved in Kandapara, yet it was also their bulwark against destitution. Monowara used to lie in bed planning her escape. Now she was kept awake by the possibility that Kandapara would soon close for good.

When the virus first arrived in South Asia, Monowara would watch the evening news and memorise the symptoms. In the morning she would bark instructions at the younger girls to look out for coughing or signs of flu, and to wash their hands for a long time. She didn't tell them that she was afraid she might die, that she worried nobody would hug her or give her a proper goodbye. Life had taught her one thing: a woman must never show weakness.

As a child Monowara thought she could outpace danger. Growing up in a farming family in the slow, muggy market town of Sakhipur she quickly learned the Koran by rote. She was faster than her friends in the schoolyard and more nimble at climbing trees. Her mother had a playful streak too. Sometimes she would wake Monowara and her sister in the middle of the night and feed them desserts hot from the fire: banana pakora, shemai pitha, chittoi pitha, baked, fried or boiled in milk, jaggery and spices.

When Monowara was 11, her mother died in childbirth. Monowara swore she'd never eat sweet things again. The baby didn't survive and six months later Monowara's father died too. Monowara and her sister became the shared property of their seven uncles. These new guardians told Monowara she was lazy and difficult – she hadn't dried the straw properly, hadn't swept their floors right.

Monowara had never been an "easy cup of tea", as her mother used to say while she combed coconut oil through her daughter's black hair. When one uncle picked up his cattle stick and threatened her with it, Monowara tore through the green jute fields until he was only a speck. When another sent her to bed without food for three days, she sneaked into a neighbour's house and feasted on their jackfruit. Working her nails under the firm, prickly skin, she pulled out handfuls of flesh before wrapping the seeds in a banana leaf and burying them deep in the soil.

In 1988, not long after Monowara turned 12, one of her uncles married her off to a man in his 30s. Her new husband raped her frequently. When he invited his friends to do the same, she ran away to her maternal uncle's house. That turned out to be no sanctuary: he also tried to rape her.

Monowara thought back to rumours she'd heard about a village near Tangail, an hour away, where women and girls lived alone. Men visited only to pay them, she'd heard, though she wasn't sure why. Whatever was going on there had to be better than her current situation, she thought. At 3am, as her uncle and aunt slept, Monowara moved silently through their mud-walled hut, her mother's wedding sari in her arms. Outside, in the wash of moonlight, she wrapped the embroidered red

silk around her waist, pleating and folding the fabric, trying to make sure it didn't drag on the floor.

The last thing her mother had told her before she died was to try to be kind. She hoped she could remember how to behave in this village, not to be rude or let her mother down. She lifted her skirt and ran to the local market. Monowara had no money when she left her uncle's house, but she found a bus driver who had known her father and he agreed not to charge her for her ticket. She didn't know where to go once she got off the bus in the town of Tangail. A tea vendor saw her standing by his stall and offered to help her find work as a maid – but after a few months, her new employer tried to marry her too. For the third time in a year, 12-year-old Monowara ran away.

Back on the streets of Tangail, Monowara described the women's village to a rickshaw driver and begged him to take her there. He drove her through the town until they reached a cluster of shacks rising up out of sticky, ankle-deep mud. The driver called out to a small woman sitting underneath a cotton tree just outside the settlement, who ran barefoot across the road, beckoning for Monowara to climb down.

Monowara felt heat rise to her cheeks: her period had started and she could feel blood soaking into the leather seat. The woman smiled and brought water out to wipe the chair clean. Her name was Sufia, she said. Monowara was welcome to stay and sleep in her bed. She led the child past a barbed-wire fence and into the settlement.

The first three days that Monowara spent with Sufia passed in a haze of exhausted naps, snacks and tea. Sometimes, on her way to the water pump at the end of an alleyway, she'd see girls who looked her age leading men into their rooms. When she asked why, the girls laughed and told her she'd be doing the same thing soon. Monowara knew something was going on, but couldn't work out what.

On the fourth day Sufia poked her awake. "One of my brothers has come to meet you," she said. "Take him and talk." Monowara shook her head. The man standing in the doorway looked even older than the husband she had fled from. Sufia didn't budge. "The man might be old, but money doesn't age," she said. Later, tearful and in pain, Monowara asked Sufia for her fee. The older woman told her that the money had already gone towards paying her rent.

Shaken by the assault and Sufia's betrayal, Monowara asked for help from one of the navy-uniformed policemen patrolling the brothel. A man had raped her, she told him. Sufia wouldn't let her go back home. He agreed to question Sufia, who immediately offered the officer a deal: he could rape Monowara – free. "Once you're here, you're here," the policeman told her when she begged him to stop. "You need to do like the others do."

Monowara didn't want to do anything that the others were doing. One morning several weeks later, she washed her mother's wedding sari and hung it out to dry in the sun. When she went back to get it that afternoon, it was gone.

After that she had to get away. Just before dawn she slipped through the barbed wire surrounding Kandapara and ran along the darkened streets until she reached Tangail's main market. There she crouched behind a sack of rice and looked for somebody to ask for help.

A shopkeeper recognised her from the brothel and sent a boy running to wake Sufia, who approached with fury folded into her face. She dragged Monowara all the way back to the brothel, trailed by a crowd of spectators drawn by the 12-year-old's screams. Monowara yelled until her throat was sore. "You're acting crazy," Sufia told her. Another woman threatened to beat Monowara until she was quiet. They shut her in a room and set up a guard: customers came and went but Monowara wasn't allowed to leave.

The industrial-scale complex of child abuse Monowara had walked into was some 200 years in the making. Though the exact date of its establishment is unknown, Kandapara is a product of the British Empire. The brothel sits on the banks of the Louhajang river, a tributary of the much larger Brahmaputra, one of the great arteries of imperial trade. Kandapara was one of several brothel-villages that grew up along the course of the great river, which flowed from the Himalayas down to the Bay of Bengal. Others, such as Daulatdia to the west, were set beside railway lines, also built during the era of empire.

The British transformed prostitution in South Asia by moving sex workers into enclaves such as Kandapara, as well as establishing red-light districts in cities. In the 19th century venereal disease was rife among overseas regiments and the government in London was desperate to keep it under control. Despite evidence that these soldiers were infecting local women, not the other way round, across the empire administrators segregated sex workers, confining them to houses and settlements where they could be monitored for signs of infection.

The brothels continued to operate after the British left the subcontinent in 1947, providing services for local customers and lucrative rents for landlords. Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971 theoretically opened a new chapter for institutions like Kandapara. The young country had a relatively liberal approach to prostitution, and the profession was formally declared legal in 2000. A clause in Bangladesh's constitution also said that the state would "endeavour to prevent" the trade, an ambiguity that haunts Bangladesh's sex workers to this day. Sex workers are tolerated but their rights are not properly enforced and they have limited legal protection. Local officials are legally obliged to certify that everyone working in a brothel is over 18, but several charities have reported that many girls in such establishments are under 15.

By 1988, when Monowara arrived, Kandapara had become a quasi-urban sprawl with around 50 shops. The bedroom-homes were built on plots of land owned by private landlords from the town or wealthier madams, known in Bengali as *sardernis*. These *sardernis* made most of their money not from selling sex but by buying young women or under-age girls to work on their behalf. Each girl would be indebted to the *sarderni* until she had earned back the sum paid for her. Some *sardernis* kept ten or 12 girls at a time, using their income to build more houses in the brothel and increase their influence. Even when they had worked off their “debt”, the trafficking victims often had to pay rent to the *sardernis*.

Each dawn, hundreds of men arrived at Kandapara: bus drivers, police officers, teachers and engineers, boys on their way to school. They waited in lines outside the girls’ bedrooms, unbuttoning their shirts to save time, hurrying out with their sandals in their hands when they were done.

Twelve-year-old Monowara entered on the lowest tier of the brothel’s complicated economic system. On an average day she would see five men, one after the other until nightfall, when she’d soak a cloth in hot water and hold it to her body to try and ease the pain. Sometimes, usually as he got dressed, a customer would ask her how old she was; often he would cry when she told him.

After eight months as Sufia’s girl, Monowara tried to free herself again. She found another police officer and made a more realistic plea: she wanted to stay at the brothel but work independently. The officer decided to help, and ordered one of the private landlords to lease the child a room on the other side of the brothel. Though Monowara would still have to pay rent, in theory it was now up to her how she earned her money – who she had sex with and how much they paid her.

Monowara didn’t know what persuaded the police officer to step in. It might have been that she’d turned up at Kandapara of her own accord, she thought. Sufia hadn’t actually bought her, so Monowara had accrued no debt. The brothel was a lawless place in many ways, yet it nevertheless ran according to a series of unwritten rules. For Sufia to keep her would be to breach the code.

Over the next few years Monowara learned to tune out her experience with men, treating them as though they were background noise. Occasionally she enjoyed the physical contact; mostly she felt either boredom or disgust. She also started to make friends. After a customer bought her a cassette player and a collection of tapes, other girls from the brothel would cram into her tiny bedroom to sing along. They teased each other and joked that Monowara looked like a boy – at 15 she was still beanpole-thin and wore her hair short. On weekends she and her new friends would traipse through Tangail and watch films at the cinema. The plot was invariably the same: a girl was in danger from evil villains until, in the end, a handsome, generous man would step in to save her.

Monowara started to think about her future. She saw two possible routes out of

prostitution. The first was to save her earnings and buy a trafficked teenager of her own; some *sardernis* were in their early 20s, not much older than Monowara, and kept two or three girls locked in small rooms. Her friends tried to interest her in trafficking deals, but she felt that she couldn’t do to another girl what Sufia had done to her. The *sardernis* shrugged: “Buy or be bought,” they told her.

The other possible path was for a customer to become her boyfriend or husband. Men often whispered such promises as they buckled their belts, and many of Monowara’s friends fell for their murmurings, scrawling their names and phone numbers on their bedroom walls in lipstick, and tearing out photos of wedding saris from magazines. When the local jewellery-maker made his rounds, his glass display case tucked under one arm, girls would crowd round and point to the bangles they would wear on their wedding day. They’d insist that their exit was imminent, that it was only a few months until they’d leave the brothel.

Monowara wasn’t much of a day-dreamer. Movies were all very well, but marriage was always going to end in violence or rape, she thought. In the afternoons, when the men had gone back to their offices and Kandapara’s streets were still, Monowara would sit and listen to the brothel elders – former sex workers in their 50s and 60s who now scraped by on the generosity of younger women. They taught her how to cook, how to look after her health. She didn’t relish the idea of becoming one of them. But it seemed the least bad option.

When a teenage boy in Tangail gets his first job, his older male colleagues may offer to usher him through a rite of passage: an evening spent drinking in Kandapara, followed by the loss of his virginity. After the boy stumbles out of the bedroom, his friends greet him with a raucous round of applause. Now he is part of Kandapara’s massive, multi-generational customer base, one of thousands of men who saunter through the brothel’s gates each day.

Though the fates of Kandapara and Tangail are entwined, the relationship is a tense one. Money filters through Kandapara and back into Tangail’s economy. Women from the town’s poorest families work as cooks and cleaners in the brothel. A sex worker’s average monthly pay is about 30,000 taka, roughly \$350 – about five times as much as a cleaner would earn. Local government officials are frequent visitors. Yet the townspeople view Kandapara with distaste and sex workers are banned from being buried in public cemeteries.

Bangladesh is mostly Muslim, with a significant Hindu minority, and was founded on secularist principles. Over the past 50 years conservative religious voices have become louder. Municipal authorities and religious groups in other parts of the country succeeded in shutting down several brothels during the 1990s, and Kandapara too faced calls for its closure.

For a long time Kandapara’s residents were forced to identify themselves publicly as sex workers when they went in to Tangail. They were forbidden from

wearing a *salwar kameez* and had to fold their saris so that their petticoats showed, in effect branding themselves as women of the brothel. Most humiliating, they weren't allowed to wear shoes. The brothel's most senior *sarderni* worked with the police to fine any woman caught violating the dress code beyond the brothel gates.

As Monowara approached her 20s, she found herself increasingly resentful of the scorn directed her way. She hated the dress code and the way people looked at her. Wives would grab their husbands as she walked to the market; shopkeepers made rude remarks. The shame was insidious: many women became depressed and self-harm was widespread. Monowara would often see groups of women and girls praying at the brothel's main Hindu shrine, pleading for forgiveness. Some refused to leave the brothel at all.

Monowara wasn't the only one to chafe at the regulations. Hashi and Alo (a pseudonym) had both been trafficked into the brothel as children; Hashi was 15 years older than Monowara and was now a *sarderni* herself, controlling several children, including her younger sister. The three women weren't friends exactly, but they were thrown together in 1996 when a charity called CARE Bangladesh, which promoted better sexual health for the workers of Kandapara, organised a workshop outside the brothel. The women wanted to look smart: all three wore shoes.

When they got back the brothel's chief *sarderni* was waiting for them: she saw the shoes and immediately issued a fine. All were furious and Alo refused to pay. The three women started encouraging others to push back against the rules. Scores of sex workers rallied to their call and began leaving the brothel in shoes and *salwar kameez*.

The police responded quickly, ripped the shoes from the women's feet and pushed them to the ground. They briefly arrested Alo. There were rumours that the brothel's most senior *sarderni* had placed a bounty on each of the protesters' heads. For a few days Monowara hid in a neighbour's house.

For advice, the women approached a doctor from the charity. The doctor organised a meeting with the local police superintendent, and, to Monowara's surprise, he seemed more interested in listening to them than lecturing them. The following evening he called a meeting at the brothel's central shrine and announced that the occupants of Kandapara could dress as they pleased in Tangail.

Monowara found the sense of victory intoxicating. A year later the charity offered to pay for 25 women from Kandapara to fly to India for a conference for sex workers' rights. In Kolkata, Monowara was astonished to see that everyone was dressed the same: she couldn't tell the difference between sex workers and government officials. She met the members of Durbar, then a co-operative of more than 30,000 Indian sex workers who persuaded her she deserved more than shoes. Monowara's world shifted further: she realised she wasn't *occhut* – untouchable.

On the plane home, Monowara, Hashi and Alo shouted ideas at one another

across the aisle. They decided to form an organisation to look after the interests of Kandapara sex workers' interests. They called it Nari Mukti Sangha: "women's liberation". As soon as they announced their plans, 40 women signed up.

The founders of Nari Mukti Sangha set up an office just beyond the brothel walls. They paid for their makeshift administration with donations, before starting up a microcredit programme and using the interest to cover the office rent. The stairs up to their headquarters were narrow and dusty but they painted the bannisters in yellow and pink and bought a low rattan sofa and a large wooden desk. Once everything was set up, Monowara sat behind the desk, tapped a joint against the ashtray and considered what she wanted to do. She hoped to persuade the government to build a shelter for retired sex workers and a school for children born in the brothel. Most of all, she wanted to end the practice of buying under-age girls.

Before any of this could happen the three women had to consolidate their authority inside the brothel. Kandapara had always had a leader – the richest, most influential *sarderni*, who had the clout and the resources to bribe the local police department. The chief *sarderni* at the time was a friend of Monowara's, a beautiful, charismatic woman called Aleya who charmed police chiefs and government officials so that they turned a blind eye to the empire of child trafficking in return for a cut of the profits. Aleya rarely bought and sold girls herself. She didn't need to. She wielded her connections and took a percentage of the other women's income.

Displacing Aleya took years. Rather than confront her directly, the three women created a parallel power structure to slowly undermine her authority instead. They hobnobbed with officials in Tangail and Dhaka, and approached other organisations for additional support such as free condoms and medical supplies. In 2002 they invited residents of the brothel to vote for the leadership committee of Nari Mukti Sangha. Alo became president and Monowara a committee secretary.

Aleya's patronage network was growing weaker, but the chief *sarderni* did not accept defeat quietly. Monowara says that she feared that Aleya would have her, Hashi and Alo killed. In the end, the Nari Mukti Sangha organisers contacted the police superintendent who'd backed their dress-code protests. They told him that Aleya was bribing notaries and policemen to forge documents certifying that girls as young as 11 or 12 were old enough to work legally in the brothel.

Monowara had personally witnessed a policeman beating one of Aleya's girls to death with a towel stuffed in her mouth to muffle her screams. In response, the commissioner brought in a new unit to police the brothel. Aleya didn't stay long after that. In 2004 she slunk out of Kandapara. The women's liberation organisation had won.

By the time she was in her 30s, Monowara was one of the brothel's most high-profile figures. She no longer saw customers herself: she took a cut of the rent she collected on behalf of land-owning *sardernis*. Yet leadership, Monowara discovered, had limits. Every few weeks she'd hear the familiar drag of plastic suitcase wheels across

the brothel's paving slabs and feel her stomach tighten. Some women arrived by choice, often escaping abuse or desperate poverty. Many were sold into prostitution against their will.

Stopping trafficking – the practice that had trapped her in Kandapara – was harder than Monowara expected. Bangladesh was making progress in reducing poverty and improving girls' access to education, so fewer girls were vulnerable to trafficking than when Monowara had arrived at the brothel. Even so, there was plenty of business for brokers, known as *dalals*, who profited from the system and weren't going to give up without a fight.

Monowara would often see the *dalals* (who were nearly always men) sidle up to sex workers to find out which *sardernis* might be in the market to buy a new girl. Once directed to a potential buyer, the *dalal* would initiate a meandering chat over tea during which the *sarderni* would assess the *dalal's* reliability, and the *dalal* would weigh up how much he could charge. When they reached an agreement the *sarderni* would give the *dalal* an advance payment. Within a couple of weeks he would invariably return with a sleepy, terrified teenager. If she was very young, the *sarderni* might drug the girl with Oradexon – a steroid typically used to fatten up cows – in the hope of hastening her development.

Each *dalal* had his own technique for finding girls in Bangladesh. Sometimes a man would groom a child into thinking he was in love with her, only to sell her to the brothel as soon as her guard was down. Others teamed up with women to approach girls at bus stops and railway stations, offering them jobs in garment factories and then bringing them to Kandapara instead.

If a child came to Monowara wanting to leave the brothel, she would help them – with her support some 30 girls had escaped Kandapara over the years, she reckoned. The *sardernis* grumbled behind her back. “They don't like me, it's true like daylight,” Monowara would say. Some *sardernis* tried to ingratiate themselves with Monowara by offering to buy her a trafficked child of her own. Monowara would turn them down with a smile, joking that she didn't understand the business and would never be rich.

To fulfil her ambition to be president of the women's organisation, Monowara knew she'd need the support of the *sardernis*, who continued to carry weight in the brothel. Even the loudest or rudest woman would fall silent as a *sarderni* strode past, wrists and ankles jangling with silver and gold. Monowara never reported them to the police superintendent or city commissioner, both of whom she spoke to several times a week. If anyone asked, Monowara would say that she hadn't seen any under-age girls for a long time.

She salved her conscience by telling herself that women and girls in Bangladesh would end up abused and exploited no matter what. At least in Kandapara there was a support network of sorts. If she was in charge, things would be different, Monowara

thought. She'd not only bring an end to trafficking, but to the brothel's incessant drama. There were always rivalries and vendettas in Kandapara: women setting their boyfriends' friends on other women who'd angered them or got in their way.

Monowara would feel like she was slowly imposing a kind of order, and then the fighting would kick off again – a woman who was addicted to methamphetamine would start beating her child, or a girl would give birth and somebody would try to steal her baby. Sometimes Monowara felt she had no option but to grab a stick from one of the guards. It was in their best interests, she thought, as she cracked the bamboo against the back of a teenager's thighs. Why couldn't they just learn to behave?

Monowara liked the brothel best after dark. The streets cooled off, the men had mostly gone and the women could unwind and exhale. Twisting up the volume dial on 20 competing sound systems, they reeled each other arm-in-arm along the narrow streets, a blur of loose hair, laughter and noise.

She was never one for dancing. By the time Monowara was in her 40s she tended to watch the parties from the corner of one of the younger women's bedrooms, wreathed in cannabis smoke and pouring herself shots of room-temperature moonshine. These were the moments when Kandapara felt most like home. Like she had something to lose.

One Saturday morning in the summer of 2014, dozens of young men, led by the brother of the town's mayor, arrived with sticks and kerosene and threatened to burn Kandapara to the ground if its residents didn't leave within an hour. Government officials said that the brothel would be shut down. Local newspapers reported that the attack was an attempt to steal the brothel's land.

Threatened with the loss of their homes, their community and their livelihood, Monowara and her friends travelled to Dhaka to protest. A few months later Bangladesh's High Court allowed the women to return to Tangail and rebuild the brothel.

Kandapara's brief closure highlighted the lack of options for its inhabitants. Some of Monowara's friends tried to find work in the garment industry in Dhaka, but the stigma of prostitution made it hard to get or keep jobs in other sectors. Most ended up soliciting sex on the streets, where they were far more vulnerable to violence.

It was safer for sex workers to stick together, Monowara was sure of it. Old-timers taught new arrivals to read; women in their 20s cooked for those too arthritic to work. Women sometimes took on extra customers to cover a friend's rent if she couldn't work (when recovering from an abortion, for example). If a man beat a woman, the *sardernis* would rush there with sticks and rocks, drag him out and make sure he didn't come back.

Sometimes Monowara acted maternally towards the younger women. “Happiness is helping others,” she intoned as she combed her fingers through their hair, repeating her mother’s words. When a woman went into labour – as happened every few months – Monowara tore rags and boiled water to help with the delivery. She loved little more than seeing a newborn’s face.

Nevertheless, it was a lonely life. By the time the pandemic hit in early 2020 and the government locked Kandapara’s gates, there were only ten women remaining of those who had been there when Monowara first arrived. A handful of her friends had met men who’d made good on their promises of rescue. Others had taken their own lives, like sweet-faced Sahana, her “sister by day, daughter at night”. Then there was Anu, who wore her greying hair pulled back in a careful knot as Monowara did, and who had died from aids in 2019. And Shirin, who was murdered two weeks before lockdown last March. Nobody knew who killed her.

Even Alo and Hashi, with whom she had founded Nari Mukti Sangha, had taken to disappearing for weeks at a time. They were buying land in order to start new lives outside the brothel. Monowara felt she was losing them. Sometimes she struggled to greet them cheerfully when they came back after a trip away.

There might be an upside to Alo leaving Kandapara, of course. After 18 years Monowara was still just a secretary for Nari Mukti Sangha, and Alo remained the organisation’s president. Elections were supposed to be held every two years but Alo hadn’t bothered arranging them since 2013.

The children of the brothel already called Monowara Netri (leader), and she wanted her authority to be confirmed. She was the person to whom women came to for help. She was the one who took a rickshaw across Tangail at the height of the pandemic to ask the city commissioner for support for Kandapara. She was the one who negotiated a handout of 10kg of rice per person at the start of the outbreak, and a small reduction in rent.

By June last year, women were knocking on Monowara’s door all day long. The rice had run out and the quarantined brothel was starting to simmer with impatience. The first to snap was Hashi, the other member of Nari Mukti Sangha’s founding trio, and her younger sister, who stole a set of keys from a security guard and forced one of the brothel’s gates open. Monowara screamed at her to stop and the women scrapped before a crowd of spectators. Eventually they were dragged apart. But Hashi and her sister won: against government advice the gates stayed unlocked and customers started to drop by. Monowara didn’t know what to do.

The seasons were shifting, the air was heavy with damp. Sliding her feet out of her leather sandals at the end of the day, Monowara coughed and coughed and worried whether she would survive the coming months. Some nights she prayed for forgiveness. At other times she would brood over the past: the cakes she’d eaten hot from the fire as a child; blood seeping across a rickshaw seat; a wedding sari, stolen

from the washing line. So much had gone wrong in her life, she felt it must be her own fault. “Courage comes from your toes and rises to your head,” Hashi would say on bad days. “Just keep walking forwards.”

Sometimes Monowara imagined an alternative life. Would a 44-year-old woman be allowed to move back to Sakhipur and farm rice and wheat without a man? She wondered what her family would look like today if she’d stayed with her husband and had children of her own. Perhaps it would be better than being alone. Then she pictured the man she had been forced to marry, his violent fists, and she laughed. How lucky she was to be free.

This article was produced in partnership with The Fuller Project

THIRD PRIZE WINNER

THE TESTIMONY

Monica Jha (India)



Monica Jha is an independent journalist based in Bangalore, India. She is the winner of the 2020 Stop Slavery Media Award and nominated (TBA) for the True Story Award 2020/21. She is a finalist for the Society of Publishers in Asia 2020 Awards, Red Ink Awards 2017, and Lorenzo Natali Media Prize 2015. She is also a grantee of Pulitzer Center (2021), Oxpecker's wildlife crime grant (2021) and Impact Journalism Grant (2019). Her works have appeared in Daily Beast, Rest of World, Coda Story, London Evening Standard, South China Morning Post, FiftyTwo, Fountain Ink, Factor Daily, and Scroll.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Third place is awarded to another story of hope for children at risk by Monica Jha (India) for her report *The Testimony* which relates how four boys struck a blow for the rights of children everywhere with their courageous decision to testify in a court case that saw a hardened child trafficker jailed for life.

It is an outstanding example of sensitive reporting that charts the progress and drama of the trial and its aftermath. In the end the boys, whose determination to tell the truth against all odds is truly heroic, emerge stronger with their hopes for the future intact. It is a remarkable story of human endeavour and a navigation through the complexities of the Indian legal system.

THE TESTIMONY

By Monica Jha

Fifty Two — May 28, 2021

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://fiftytwo.in/story/the-testimony/>

Hundreds of children from Bihar's Gaya district had been trafficked to Jaipur's bangle workshops. Then, a group of boys escaped against all odds.

Escape

The two boys don't quite agree on how it began. Ashish says that he and some other boys stole Rahul's bread while he was in the bathroom. Rahul says it was all part of a plan. They agree on the main thing: on the morning of 20 February 2016, Rahul stepped out of the makeshift bangle factory in Jaipur, with a ready excuse. If Sonu, their trafficker, asked, he was going to say he was hungry, and plead to be allowed to go out to buy bread: hard, sweet gol paape buns, to be precise.

He and some other boys had been trafficked there from their homes in Bihar by a man named Sonu. Sonu made the boys work until midnight every day. Breakfast was two pieces of paape with chai. Their only other meals were what they could scramble together with a meagre supply of potatoes and rice, and some takeaway food that Sonu brought at the end of the day. The boys typically had dinner only after midnight.

Rahul was somewhat familiar with Jaipur from a previous stint at a sari factory in the city. He was playful and self-assured, the only one of the boys who dared to talk back to Sonu. Sonu would often beat him for this, but Rahul did it anyway. It earned him the tag of sanki, eccentric, among the children.

Luck was on Rahul's side that morning. Sonu stepped out to fetch some pots of water, and left a back door open. He'd only be away for a few minutes.

Rahul sneaked out. This was the first time he had left the house, which also served as a factory, since he had arrived more than a year earlier. From his earlier time in the city, he remembered a police station about two kilometres away. He ran towards it. The glass and lac powder in his clothes and hair shimmered in the sun.

Back at the house, Ashish and the other kids began work for the day. Sonu returned to find Rahul missing. The other boys told him Rahul was washing clothes.

At around 11am, there was a knock on the door. "There were three locked doors between us and the knock," Ashish said. "Sonu peeped through the outer door,

tiptoed to us and whispered, 'Hide yourselves.'"

The children normally obeyed Sonu unquestioningly. But that morning, they found courage and decided not to hide, Ashish told me. "We didn't know how it'd work out, so we didn't do anything drastic. We just continued making bangles."

Sonu opened the door to find that there were two vehicles full of policemen outside the house. Others had gathered to see what was happening. Rahul stood in the midst of it all.

The police arrested Sonu, whose real name was Toufeeq. They conducted a search, took photographs, and recorded the children's statements, before charging Sonu with child trafficking, wrongful confinement, employing children in hazardous work, and physical assault. "I was so relieved we were saved," Ashish said. "I was sure Sonu would have killed us some day or the other."

Rahul could have just escaped when he got out. When I asked Rahul why he didn't, he said, "If I had left, the other kids would've been stuck. Sonu would've killed them."

What about the danger to him, I asked. Rahul shrugged. "Hum darbe nahi karte hain." *I'm not scared.*

Labour

Nearly 24 million children are employed as labour in India. One in ten of these children work in Rajasthan, many in its capital, Jaipur.¹ Tourists love the city's bangles, but the industry that makes them largely comprises home-based workshops built on the backs of underaged workers. As a result of the forced labour, children suffer a range of ailments, including severe neck and back pain, and deformed knees from extended hours of squatting.

A large proportion of these children come from one state. Of the 1061 trafficked children rescued in Jaipur between January 2019 and December 2020, almost three-fourths were from Bihar.² Four child labourers at Jaipur's bangle units died between July and November 2020, The Indian Express reported.³ All were from Bihar, between 12 and 16 years old.

Gaya district, in particular, is a major centre of this trafficking. While reporting this story there, I met three children with work-related musculoskeletal disorders of the neck, including one with an abnormal growth on his neck. All of them had previously worked in bangle factories in Jaipur or Hyderabad. None of the children had received medical attention.

"I couldn't bring back my brother's body. I did his last rites with an effigy made of paddy straw."

— Mithilesh Manjhi

¹ 2016 Data from the International Labour Organization

² My source is Deepika Reddy Allana, Program Advisor at The Freedom Fund, a London-based anti-trafficking organisation

³ "Deaths of 4 Bihar child workers in Jaipur since July spotlights trafficking during lockdown," The Indian Express, 12 November 2020.

Neither had Shashikant Manjhi. On 11 July 2020, Manjhi, a 13-year-old boy from Gaya, who worked at a different bangle factory in Jaipur, complained about his terrible neck pain on a phone call with his sister-in-law. Two days later, he called her again, and asked her to collect some money from a bank account in which his employer was supposed to have deposited his salary.

Later that day, Shashikant died. His brother, Mithilesh, alleges that he died because he was physically abused and not fed properly during the Covid-19 lockdown. “The factory was shut and the employer complained about feeding him,” Mithilesh told me.

At the time, the country was under partial lockdown, and travel was expensive. The employer had not deposited Shashikant’s salary dues either, Mithilesh alleged. A travel agent promised Mithilesh a one-way train ticket to Jaipur for INR5000. “I couldn’t afford it,” Mithilesh said. “I couldn’t bring back my brother’s body. I did his last rites with an effigy made of paddy straw.” Shashikant’s employer, who had also trafficked him from Gaya, is now in jail.

Typically, the chances of a child trafficker being convicted are slim. In 2019, out of the 1019 cases of human trafficking involving children that went to trial, only 30 cases saw convictions.¹ There are many reasons for this abysmal conviction rate, according to Deepika Reddy Allana, Program Advisor at The Freedom Fund, an anti-trafficking organisation. Evidence is often weak, courts are not child-friendly, prosecutors are overworked, and cases come up many years after children are rescued, which often makes testimony inaccurate or weak. Some survivors are not even notified when their cases come up for hearing.

Cases are also impeded because survivors largely belong to oppressed castes, and are uniquely vulnerable to pressures within and beyond their communities. All the victims of child trafficking in three separate cases that I spoke to for this story—four out of the five boys rescued in 2016, three boys rescued from a bus to Jaipur in 2020 and Shashikant Manjhi’s family—are Musahar.

Musahars are classified as Mahadalits, an umbrella term coined by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar for some of the poorest and most marginalised communities among Scheduled Castes. None of the trafficked children’s families owned land, and all faced severe economic pressure. An individual that an outsider views as a trafficker, or an abuser, may often be seen by these families as an employer, even a saviour.

Traffickers are likely to be a neighbour or a cousin or uncle from the same village. Rahul, for instance, lived just a kilometre away from Sonu. So, even though the Jaipur police caught Sonu red-handed, it was possible that he would get away scot-free. It was going to be easy for him to influence the testimony.

Trafficking

Ashish first met Sonu in his village — Samod Bigha — in the winter of 2014. He was in Class 7, though he hardly attended any classes. Sonu was from Solara,

¹ - Per National Crime Records Bureau data

a neighbouring village, but lived in Jaipur. He told Ashish tales of life in the big city, of its beautiful monuments, its good food – and a good school, where Ashish could study. All Ashish had to do was learn bangle-making. He would only have to work an hour or two a day and he could earn INR2200 in a month. He would not have to pay for food or a place to stay. He could send all the money to his family.

Ashish says he was tempted when Sonu mentioned the school. His family’s circumstances had made the offer attractive in any case. His father worked in a brick kiln and barely made INR2000 a month. He spent most of it on alcohol. His mother worked in the fields around the village. During the harvest season, she would get one bojha, or bundle, for every dozen she reaped. That meant that, for three days of work, she would earn two, maybe three kilograms of rice, far too little for their family of seven. “There were daily fights in the house over money,” Ashish said. “As the eldest child, I felt responsible.”

Any hesitation he felt turned to delight when Sonu gave him an advance of INR2000. Ashish immediately ran over to his friend and a cousin to tell them about the plan. Soon, Sonu was proselytising about studying and working in Jaipur to a group of six children. He paid INR2000 to each of them to seal the deal.

Ashish didn’t sleep the night before he left. He had packed his school bag with clothes. His mother would never let him go away to a far-off city, so he didn’t mention the plan to her.

The children met Sonu in Solara, which is 35 kilometres away from Samod Bigha. Another boy from Sonu’s village joined them here. This was Rahul. The next day, Sonu took the seven children to Gaya. From there, they boarded a train to Delhi. Travelling together would be fun, Ashish thought, but Sonu made all the boys sit separately. He himself sat on a seat far away. Once they reached Delhi, the group boarded a bus to Jaipur.

In Jaipur, Sonu took them to a bangle-making workshop run by his aunt. When he entered the house, Ashish noticed several children labouring away. One, who seemed no more than 10 years old, squatted on the floor, working with the ease of an expert. “I imagined how young he must have been when he started there,” Ashish said.

Sonu kept the seven new children there for 15 days to train them in bangle-making. “Here, I saw the kids being beaten brutally. I knew we’d be treated the same way soon,” Ashish said.

Back in Gaya, Ashish’s mother had returned from work to find that he was missing. “Hum pagal ho geli hal ro ro ke. Kuch pata na chalit hal laikawa ke. Hamra lagit hal ki hamar laikawa ke mar delai koi,” Ashish’s mother, Sheela Devi, told me in Magahi. *I lost my mind crying. I had no information about my child. I dreaded that somebody had killed him.*

The children were moved to a new place after the training. Another boy from Sonu’s aunt’s workshop joined them. The new factory was a dingy three-bedroom house with no open space or ventilation. The eight children lived, cooked, ate and worked

in the same space. Sonu occupied one big room. “There were three doors between us and the outside world; they were always shut,” Ashish said.

Sonu began working them for long hours. “I had never sat that long, even to study,” Ashish said. “I thought I would lose my legs.” They squatted on the floor, with their necks craned down, eyes glued to the bangles as they set tiny stones in them. They coughed as they inhaled the fine glass and lac dust they rolled the bangles in to make them shimmer. Soon enough, Ashish had trouble breathing.

The children weren’t allowed to step outside the factory. Even for haircuts, Sonu took them out at night one by one on a scooter. Ashish said one reason for this was that the children’s bodies, hair and clothes were covered in glitter. “During the day, anybody could see we worked at a bangle factory.” A child named Devanand had been assigned cooking duties besides bangle-making. “Sonu would give me a kilo of potatoes and ask me to make it last for two meals for the eight of us,” he told me.

The beatings were the worst of all. When a child couldn’t or wouldn’t work, Sonu would flog them with whatever he could get his hands on. Often, this would be one of the wooden rolls on which the children hung the bangles. Rahul, who wasn’t afraid of talking back to Sonu, bore the worst of it. He told me Sonu would lock him up in a room, tie him to a chair, and beat him with a stick.

Sonu often threatened to dismember and kill the children. Ashish recounted an instance when he reminded Sonu about his promise to enroll him in a school. “He said, ‘You’re here to work. And, if you run away, I’ll chop you into pieces, tie your body parts in a sack and dump them. Crows will feast on you and your family will keep looking for you forever.’”

Phone calls to family members were forbidden. Instead, Sonu would send word through others that he was taking good care of the children. These tactics are part of the standard playbook of employers in the bangle-making industry. The activist Suresh Kumar said that they employ children because they need small, nimble fingers to handle the tiny pincers that are used to set stones. “Also, children can be crammed into small houses,” he said. “They are free or very cheap labour. They are easy to intimidate and unlikely to retaliate or run away.”

This was the world the children escaped—one they described in startling detail when they testified in court. Like so many trafficking cases in the Indian judicial system, theirs might have faded away. But Kumar wasn’t about to let that happen.

Preparation

For two months after the rescue, the children stayed at a government-run children’s home in Jaipur. Ashish told me he had respiratory trouble, and suffered from a severe cough and cold throughout this period.

Meanwhile, Sonu brought the parents of all five rescued children to Jaipur at his expense. It was his attempt to persuade them to testify on his behalf in the hearings,

which would begin later in 2016 in a district court in Jaipur.¹ But the plan fizzled out, and the parents returned without seeing their children.

After Jaipur, the boys stayed at a children’s home in Gaya for over a month. In June 2016, Ashish and Rahul returned home. It had been more than 18 months since they left.

That year, Suresh Kumar expanded the work of Centre DIRECT, an anti-trafficking non-profit, in Gaya. From a partner NGO in Jaipur, Kumar, who is Centre DIRECT’s executive director, received a list of children rescued from Jaipur over the last two years. Ashish, Rahul and three other children from their group were on this list. Kumar met Ashish in March 2017, and began to work to secure justice for the children.

“You’ve come back alive once. Don’t push it. Who wants to get entangled with these people?”

— Sheela, Ashish’s mother

For that, it would be crucial to get the boys to testify. The boys were fearful. They did not know what it meant to appear in front of a judge to talk about what Sonu had done. “Our trained counsellors, with the support of pro bono lawyers, organised many mock testimonies. ‘Tell the truth,’ we kept harping,” Kumar said. After two months of counselling, all five children agreed to testify.

But even if they were less scared now, there were other concerns. “I had no money,” Ashish said. “Who would want to lose workdays and forgo wages to go to court? I didn’t.” Centre DIRECT offered to cover travel expenses to and from Jaipur. The organisation was also worried that the children might be re-trafficked, or pressured by the trafficker to testify in his favour, something that is fairly common in such cases. So the NGO supported the families with small amounts of money.

There was considerable resistance from within the families. Ashish’s mother, Sheela, said, “I told him, ‘You’ve come back alive once. Don’t push it. Who wants to get entangled with these people?’”

She had reason to worry. Sonu, who was out on bail, had been calling regularly. He spoke politely, and told Ashish how he should testify. He wanted Ashish to say that he reached Jaipur on his own, that Sonu took good care of him, and provided him with food and education.

Sometimes, he would threaten them. “Sonu used to say, ‘I’ll kill anyone who testifies against me. I won’t shoot, I’ll send his photo to someone who’ll do it for me. Nobody will know where he disappeared,’” Ashish said. Petrified, Ashish would say yes whenever Sonu told him to testify in his favour.

But the boy could not forget what had happened. “I have endured injustice,” he said. “I was very angry. I thought, when I have an opportunity, I’d teach him a lesson.”

In many cases of trafficking that stretch across state borders, summons simply

¹ The case started in 2016 in the Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Court No 12, Jaipur. Finally, it ended up in the court of the Additional District and Session Judge No 9, Jaipur City.

never arrive, but Centre DIRECT ensured the summons were served correctly in this case. As the hearings were in Jaipur, they coordinated with a fledgling network of organisations working on trafficking from Bihar to Jaipur.¹

For legal support, the network put Centre DIRECT in touch with the Jaipur-based Centre for Child Protection. Their lawyers assisted the public prosecutor in the case. The legal team decided to work with a recent amendment to the Indian Penal Code which provides for imprisonment of 14 years to life for trafficking more than one minor.² It was a powerful, if untested, legal strategy.

In November 2018, almost three years after the rescue, Ashish received a summons from a Jaipur court to testify in the case. He, Rahul and two other children were ready.

Testimony

On 28 November 2018, Ashish sat outside the court of the Additional District and Session Judge No. 9, Jaipur City. He was slated to appear at 12 noon, along with Rahul and another boy.

As he waited, he felt a gaze fixed on him. Looking up, he saw Sonu walking towards them. Ashish's fists tightened and his jaws clenched. His head reeled a bit. Rahul, sitting next to him, grew angry.

"Ashish! Is that really you?" Sonu said as he came closer.

A constable accompanying him asked, "Is this Sonu?" Ashish nodded. By then, Sonu was close enough to touch him. A shudder ran through Ashish.

"Aye! Don't you come close to the kids," roared the constable. Sonu stopped in his tracks. The fear on Ashish's face was palpable.

Deena Nath Maurya of Centre DIRECT, who'd accompanied the children to Jaipur, calmed Ashish down. A woman from the Jaipur children's home told him that Sonu couldn't harm him. "Just don't be afraid," she said.

When his name came up, Ashish got into the witness box. He told the judge that Sonu forced him and other children to work in his bangle factory. He spoke of how meagre the meals were and how they weren't allowed to step out of the house. He also spoke about physical abuse: "If we slacked in work, Toufeeque would hurl whatever he could grab at us."

Each child's testimony reinforced the others'. Devanand identified Sonu for the judge. Another of the boys, whose parents were daily wagers, testified that Sonu made them work from 6am until midnight.

The defence argued that the boys were adults. Under cross-examination, the daily

wagers' son denied that he was above 18 or that he was a drug addict.

The prosecution called Dr. Rajkumar Sen, the physician who had conducted a medical examination of the five boys after the rescue. Dr. Sen pegged their ages at between 11 and 17. According to him, Rahul and Devanand were around 14 or 15 years old, the daily wagers' son was between 14 and 16, Ashish between 15 and 17. Another boy was estimated to be around 11 or 12 years old. In his cross-examination, the doctor granted that the children didn't have visible injury marks and that they were not suffering from any disease or malnutrition.

But the children recounted graphic details of abuse for the court. "If we asked to call home, he'd lock us up in a room and thrash us; he'd lift us up and slam us down. He'd tie me up in that room and beat me up," Rahul told the court. "He told us he'd kill us if we didn't work."

"My head was whirling. I didn't think that what I said in court would have such an impact."

— Ashish

The prosecution wanted to put Sonu on the stand. But when it was time for his testimony, Sonu was missing. Rahul believed that Sonu fled because he and the other children gave strong testimonies against him. "He ran and hid himself in the bathroom," Rahul said.

Sonu's lawyer had asked to cross-examine the children, but didn't show up at the appointed time. Later, Sonu filed an application to reopen the cross, but the court rejected it. It admitted the children's testimonies as final.

Two weeks later, the court heard the testimony of the fifth boy. The boy denied knowing Sonu, and said that Sonu neither brought him from his village nor made him work in a bangle factory. He denied knowing any of the other children.

In his cross-examination by the prosecution, however, he admitted that he had been rescued by the police from the same house as the other children. In fact, he had been rescued during the same raid as the other children. The court declared him a hostile witness. Maurya said that the boy later told him that Sonu's associates had taken him to Jaipur, and kept him confined until his testimony. This boy, who didn't respond to my requests for an interview, is part of the group of rescued children that Centre DIRECT supports.

Sonu gave his statement eventually. He denied knowing any of the children or bringing them to Jaipur. He also denied any involvement in the bangle-making business. He claimed to be a student. He said that the police apprehended him and took his photograph while he was out enquiring about the fees of a private college. The landlady, Mobina, testified that she rented the house to Sonu for INR3000 per month. She claimed that he used the place to study and wasn't involved in the bangle-making business.

But by this point, Sonu knew he was in big trouble.

¹ - These organisations eventually formed Child Labour Free Jaipur, CLFJ.

² - Section 370(5) was added to the Indian Penal Code in 2013 as part of the wide-ranging amendments to the criminal law to address violence against women and children in the wake of the 2012 Delhi gangrape.

Kidnapping

From here on, Sonu's strategy centred on getting the children to retract their statements or to get their family members to testify in his favour. He called Ashish's mother Sheela frequently, and asked her to come to Jaipur and make a statement in court. "He'd say: 'Either come with me or give your thumb impression on a statement. I'll pay you,'" she said.

After Sheela repeatedly refused, Sonu came to meet her in person in May 2019. She tried making excuses to avoid going to Jaipur with him: there had been a fight between Ashish and his father, she said; there was a wedding in the family, she added.

At the mention of the wedding, Sonu offered Sheela INR12,000 for a gift and other expenses for the event. Money was always tight, so Sheela took it.

She also received a call from Rahul's mother, Sumitra Devi, who said she was going to Jaipur with Sonu. She asked Sheela to join her, along with the parents of two other children.

Sheela took the money, handed it over to a relative, and prepared to go to Jaipur. Her rationale: "Since I've accepted money from you, I'll come with you. But I won't say what you ask."

Sheela set out for Solara, Sonu's village, along with two other parents. What she didn't realise was that Sumitra had called under pressure from Sonu, who was sitting with her as she made the call. Sonu had been working on Rahul's family, subjecting them to persistent and aggressive pressure, even enlisting some of Rahul's extended family for the job. In January 2019, Sumitra had informed the police station in writing that Sonu and his family had been threatening them, but an officer let Sonu's father off with a warning.

On 2 May, Sonu's maternal uncle and a few others gathered at Rahul's house. They demanded that Rahul change his testimony, or that Sumitra go to Jaipur to testify in Sonu's favour. While Rahul got into an argument with them, Sumitra escaped. Sonu's uncle and a cousin of Rahul's forcibly squeezed Rahul between them on a scooter and sped away.

Sumitra hid in a mango orchard outside the village, wondering what to do. It was midnight when she returned home and found out that Sonu's associates had kidnapped Rahul. If she waited till morning to get help, Rahul might well be on his way to Jaipur. She decided to reach out to Centre DIRECT. Their office was in Gaya, 12 kilometres away. There were no buses or autos to take her there.

Sumitra walked for three hours to reach the office. She knocked on the door and woke Maurya, who also lived in the same building. After she told him what had happened, Maurya took her to the Paraiya police station, closest to her village, where the police registered an FIR for kidnapping, wrongful confinement, and extortion.

Back in Solara, earlier that day, Sheela noticed that Sumitra wasn't home. "Now I was afraid," she remembered. "Despite being from the same village as Sonu, she

wasn't going with him." Sonu, who had stopped being polite once they reached Solara, brushed aside her concerns and said that Rahul was coming with them.

Sonu took her to his house along with two other sets of parents from the same group of children. Here, Sonu's grandmother, parents and sister beat their chests and cried in front of them. They pleaded with them to save their boy. "I told them I wasn't there when my son testified," Sheela said. "They wouldn't benefit from my going to court."

Sheela and the others stayed in Sonu's house that night. The next day, Sonu, along with his uncle, took Sheela, Rahul and four others in an auto to the train station. Sonu had taken the others' phones. "He asked for mine as well," Sheela said. "But, I didn't give it, saying I wouldn't be able to go with him if I couldn't manage things at home: the father-son fight, and the wedding. I told him I had to call Ashish frequently to calm him down."

Sheela was keeping in touch with her son on the phone. She'd assumed they would board the train at Gaya railway station, and told Ashish as much. Sonu still hadn't suspected anything was amiss, but Ashish now patched Maurya on the call. Maurya decided to go with the police to Gaya. By then, Sumitra's FIR had already been registered. "Keep calm, come to Gaya, we'll rescue you at the station," he told Sheela.

But instead of going to Gaya, the auto sped to Guraru railway station, about 25 kilometres away from Gaya. Sheela was frightened. She got on the secret group call again to convey the information.

At Guraru, Sonu hurriedly shoved them into a local train. "I started to cry," Sheela recounted. "What if Sir (Maurya) didn't arrive in time? Where would Sonu take us? What would he do to us? I was very scared."

"When Sonu couldn't find me, he took my mother," Ashish said. "He thought I'd come to rescue my mother and he could blackmail me into changing my testimony. If not, he could always get my mother to contradict my statement."

The police arrived at Guraru too late. Then, they missed catching the group again at AN Road, another station down the line. By now, the train had sped past six stations. It was time for another group call.

The next station was Dehri-on-Sone. A bridge on the Sone river causes a traffic bottleneck. Before they can enter the station, trains have to halt on the bridge for a while. Maurya started coordinating with the police. At around 10.30am, the train reached Dehri bridge. Another call: Maurya added Dehri-on-Sone police to it. Sheela told them they were on the bridge.

The train remained stationary on the bridge for more than 30 minutes. Sheela grew anxious. Then, she noticed some people in her bogie. They repeatedly looked down at their phones, and then at her. "I immediately knew it was the police. They were trying to match me with a photo," Sheela said.

The photo was of Sheela in front of the Hawa Mahal at Jaipur, taken by Sonu's

associate when Sonu had taken her to Jaipur on the pretext of meeting Ashish. “That’s the only decent photo of mine, taken on a bada mobail,”—a smartphone, she said. Ashish had sent the photo to Maurya, who forwarded it to the police.

“Earrings, yes, sindur, yes, same bangles as in the photo,” Sheela said. “I pulled the pallu down from my head so that they could see me well. I was having trouble keeping calm.”

Suddenly, people gathered around Sheela. Her companions grew puzzled. Sonu, who realised what was happening, slipped away in the melee, but the police detained his uncle. A team from Paraiya police station, where Sumitra had filed the FIR, arrived that night and took custody of him. The two mothers had foiled Sonu’s plan.

Judgement

On 28 August 2019, four months after the kidnapping, the court convicted Sonu under various sections of the Indian Penal Code and the Juvenile Justice Act. The children’s testimonies established that they were wrongfully confined and physically abused by Sonu, the court observed. It noted that the medical examination confirmed that all five boys were minors.

The judge said there was no evidence to support Sonu’s claims that he had been studying in Jaipur. All his education documents were from Bihar. The fact that he had rented a three-bedroom house to prepare for competitive exams without even enrolling in a Jaipur college refuted his claim of being a student.

Most importantly, the court found that charges against Sonu under Section 370(5) of the IPC, which provides for life imprisonment for trafficking more than one minor, were proven beyond doubt. “A lenient approach towards the accused is not justifiable,” the court noted.

On the day of the judgement, Ashish was attending a course at a computer centre run by Centre DIRECT in Gaya. He hadn’t thought about the case much since his testimony, and not at all since the kidnapping. “Focusia hai sab,” he told me. It’s all for show. He didn’t think anything would come of it, and was more worried about finding work.

A trainer at the centre told him the news about the judgement. “Umar qaid,” he said. Life imprisonment. “I had never imagined it. My head was whirling. I didn’t think that what I said in court would have such an impact.” The court had also ordered Sonu to pay a fine of INR1.46 lakh, which would be distributed to the four boys who testified against him. It also issued a recommendation letter to the Rajasthan State Legal Services Authority, asking it to pay compensation to the four boys.

Ashish felt vindicated. “Since the judge saw it, now, I was feeling that my anger was genuine.”

Sonu’s conviction was unprecedented. Its impact was felt in both Gaya and Jaipur. Jaipur’s courts have convicted five more traffickers since Sonu’s conviction—three

of them have been sentenced to life imprisonment. “The conviction created a stir among traffickers, they were terrified,” Narendra Sikhwal, former head of Jaipur’s Child Welfare Committee, explained.¹

Meanwhile, in Gaya, more rescued children are willing to testify. In September 2020, 19 children from Gaya were rescued from a bus just before it entered Jaipur. I met three of them and their mothers. The mothers have all signed agreements with Rajasthan Police to turn witnesses for the prosecution. Deepika Reddy Allana of the Freedom Fund told me that the network has so far helped more than 140 children to travel from Bihar to testify in Jaipur’s courts.

Encouraged by Sonu’s conviction, Centre DIRECT is now building more than 50 cases involving 254 children to prosecute a dozen traffickers, Kumar said. All the cases involve child trafficking from Gaya to Jaipur bangle factories. According to Kumar, a single individual traffics more than 100 children every year, and there are between 12 and 15 local child traffickers in Gaya district. A single conviction has the potential to save a thousand other victims.

Traffickers have become more alert after Sonu’s conviction, too. “Earlier, they didn’t take a case seriously; now they are scared,” Kumar said. “But, this also puts the survivors and potential witnesses at a greater risk.”

Rahul’s story is a case in point.

Threat

In November last year, I met Rahul on a sunny afternoon in Solara.

When he saw me, he flashed a broad smile that bared his protruding teeth. He had blonde-burgundy highlights in his hair and wore a white shirt and dark track pants. In the courtyard of his one-room house, he showed me a brick wall under construction, just about a foot high. This was where he intended to build a room once his compensation money came through, though he had no idea when that would be.

Some men and children gathered around. One man watched me keenly. As Rahul began to tell me how Sonu had lured him into going to Jaipur, the man grew impatient and began grumbling. I requested him to wait for his turn to speak.

When Rahul said that Sonu betrayed him, the man butted in. “Sonu isn’t wrong; he’s a very good man,” he said. “If Rahul hadn’t lied, he wouldn’t be rotting in jail today. It’s all Rahul’s fault.”

The interview descended into commotion. Over a dozen young men began hurling abuses at Rahul. People gathered around.

¹- The Child Welfare Committee is an autonomous body declared as a “competent authority” to deal with children in need of care and protection under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015. The committee consists of a Chairperson and four other members, at least one of whom has to be a woman and another an expert on matters concerning children.

When I intervened, the man grew more aggressive. He began hurling abuses and making physically threatening gestures towards Rahul, a Centre DIRECT worker, and me. “Sonu gave Rahul a job,” he said. “He took care of him really well, like a brother. But, after all that, Rahul is making him suffer.”

Rahul’s temper flared up, and he shouted at the man to leave. The interview descended into commotion. Over a dozen young men began hurling abuses at Rahul. People gathered around. Some women piped in to say that the men were drunk, and shouldn’t be taken seriously. They tried to take the shouting man away. But, then, they began to abuse Sumitra, Rahul’s mother.

Sumitra slumped to the ground. “Because of Sonu, my extended family is going to murder my son someday,” she said. “My child is going to get killed.”

Rahul would tell me later that the abusive man was the brother of one of his kidnappers.

Leaders

Some survivors are determined to change the stigma that surrounds victims who take the fight to the traffickers.

In March 2019, around Holi, a man from Dehri-on-Sone came to Ashish’s village. He picked up four children from the village, intending to put them to work at a highway dhaba. He was leaving the village in a car, with the children in an auto behind him, when Ashish called the Sherghati police station, the one nearest to the village. The police rushed to the spot and rescued the children. The mother of a rescued child abused Ashish and his mother for preventing her child from “making money.” Ashish told her about what he had gone through in Jaipur. It took days for her to accept that Ashish wanted to help her child.

The rapid police response was a result of the sustained efforts of Vijeta (literally, winners), a group of 25 rescued children, who now run an anti-trafficking movement in Gaya. Ashish leads the group, which was formed in 2018 with members from a dozen nearby villages.¹

The group holds monthly meetings and organises awareness campaigns. Members speak to vulnerable children, tell them about their own experiences, and advise them to be careful. Ashish said he asks children to call him if they notice signs of trafficking in their village.

He said he found it difficult to explain to parents why they shouldn’t send their children to work when they’re so poor. “But it’s my responsibility to stop other kids.” With several trafficking rackets active in the region, amidst high poverty, rescued children are at high risk of being re-trafficked. “Especially the ones who haven’t testified yet or whose trafficker hasn’t been convicted or even arrested,” Ashish said.

¹- Vijeta is also part of the Indian Leaders Forum Against Trafficking (ILFAT), a national collective of survivors who are now anti-trafficking leaders.

The pandemic has exacerbated the financial stress of these families. It has also made Vijeta’s work harder. They haven’t had a physical meeting since March 2020. Video calling hasn’t worked, since most of the members don’t own smartphones. “We don’t even have money to recharge talk-time,” Ashish said.

Ashish is also worried about his own future. His anti-trafficking work isn’t going to pay, he said.

The children received a “Bonded Labour Release Certificate” after their rescue. It allows them to access monetary compensation from the central government. But they’ve only received INR20,000 of the INR2 lakh that the central government is supposed to pay on the employer’s conviction. They also haven’t received their share of compensation from the INR1.46 lakh fine that the court ordered Sonu to deposit.

Rahul was working as a construction labourer in 2014 when Sonu trafficked him. Six years and one court appearance later, he does the same job.

Ashish often thinks about the time he spent at the children’s home in Jaipur, after he was rescued and before he returned home. “I had no stress, got my stomach’s fill, and I got to study, finally! I liked it so much I didn’t want to return home,” he said.

Ashish’s Class 10 results came in this April. He secured a second division and became the first matriculate in his family. He has also picked up some basic computer skills at a Centre DIRECT outlet. He takes up agricultural labour jobs every now and then, but tries to focus on academics. “Getting a job didn’t work out for me,” he said. “Only an education can transform my life.”

And, when his life transforms, he hopes to build a pukka house where he can hang newspaper clippings of his story, which include photos of him. “Matti ke ghar me thode lagta hai,” he said. It doesn’t look like much in a mud house.

Note to readers: Ashish, Rahul, and Devanand are over the age of 18 now. They consented to be named in this article, wanting to share their stories under their own names.

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A big thanks to Ashish, Rahul, and Devanand for trusting me with their stories. I’m grateful that they made time for in-person interviews even when it meant missing out on a day’s work. They also accommodated several follow-up phone calls.

I’d like to thank Suresh Kumar, Deena Nath Maurya, and Vijay of Centre DIRECT for explaining the intricacies of how human trafficking works in Gaya. I’m thankful to Kumar for patiently answering all my weirdly specific questions about every tiny little detail.

I owe a big one to my friend Shamsheer Yousaf for being excited about the two-sentence story idea and encouraging me to write 6,500 words about it.

EXPERT'S MESSAGE



MILICA PESIC

Executive Director of the Media Diversity Institute (MDI)
FJA Expert Council Member

“Some stories are really great, serious investigative pieces, yet, showing how much risk their authors have taken in aim to bring to the public what the public needs to know. I admire those colleagues who dare to risk *everything* for a story.”

CONTRIBUTION TO CIVIL RIGHTS

SHORTLISTED STORIES



SHORTLISTED STORY

JAPAN'S INDIGENOUS AINU COMMUNITY DON'T WANT A THEME PARK — THEY WANT THEIR RIGHTS

Carmen Grau Vila (Spain/ Japan)



Carmen Grau Vila is a Spanish journalist and reporter at Agencia EFE, based in Japan. She conducts investigative journalism for collaborative Think Tank projects, the latest about disinformation and propaganda in Latin America. Carmen has also worked as a communications specialist at UNESCO, and has investigated the Grand Transoceanic Canal in Nicaragua. From Peru she kept an eye on China's soft power. Carmen's work is published in Spain, UK, USA and Latin America. She was the winner of the 2019 ILO Global Media Competition with a story on the future of labour migration, and holds a Master's degree in East Asia. Carmen is currently researching disasters and gender for her Phd.

JAPAN'S INDIGENOUS AINU COMMUNITY DON'T WANT A THEME PARK — THEY WANT THEIR RIGHTS

By Carmen Grau

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<https://www.equaltimes.org/ainu-quienes-son-y-por-que-luchan#.YML2ni3WclI>

The brightly lit signs on the Hokkaido motorway in northern Japan do not inform the driver about the traffic. They are, rather, advertising Upopoy, a new tourist complex, and the Ainu National Museum. "Let's sing together for ethnic harmony" is the motto the Japanese government has stamped on the 20-billion-yen project (€164 million, US\$192 million) to revive the culture of the Ainu people one of the archipelago's minorities. The project showcases the heritage of the Indigenous people originally inhabiting the islands of Hokkaido, Kuril and Sakhalin. Young Ainu women dance to the tune of tradition and a controversial memorial overlooking the Pacific Ocean has been erected to honour Ainu ancestors. Japanese school buses pull in one after the other and tickets to visit the complex sell out fast. A few years ago, a manga sparked a craze for all things Ainu and now they have become an attraction.

But a generation of Ainu leaders is not happy. They don't want a theme park, they want to recover their rights as a native people. "It has no soul," 87-year-old artist Shizue Ukaji says of the complex. "If the Japanese government wants to use the term 'ethnic harmony' it is requested that the government make a formal apology to us Ainu for the historical injustices imposed on us," she protests. For them, the Ainu Policy Promotion Act passed in 2019 is devoid of rights and the Japanese government continues to exploit them as a tourism resource.

Seventy-eight-year-old Satoshi Hatakeyama, president of the Ainu Association of Monbetsu, has been campaigning since 2009 to win back his ancestors' right to fish. He wants to 'welcome the salmon' every autumn, a ritual called Kamuy-chep-nomi, without having to face a police investigation for doing so, as was the case in 2019. Sixty seven-year-old Ryoko Tahara, president of the Ainu Women's Association, decries the double discrimination they have suffered for generations, as Indigenous people and as women, be it at school or when looking for a job or to get married. She was born in a village that no longer exists. People would insult them and throw stones at them. She grew up thinking that being Indigenous meant being inferior.

“We have been hiding our whole lives, out of fear, and our history has not been told,” she tells Equal Times. She is working towards changing that, by reviving Ainu culinary traditions.

“They have used us, throughout history, and they continue to do so,” says 71-year-old Fumio Kimura, vice president of the Ainu Association of Biratori. Kimura wants the Ainu remains that were excavated without permission to be returned to their land. “Our history is one of forced displacement, even of our dead. My grandparents were forced to leave their place of origin to work on Japanese imperial farms, and when they were no longer needed, they had to move again,” he explains.

The Ainu people have been living in the shadows for 150 years, since their territories were occupied, at the end of the 19th century, to satisfy the expansionist ambitions of the Meiji-era government, after centuries of coexistence and trading relations. Their collision with Japanese colonialism resulted in a painful process of assimilation that has wiped out communities, names and words. The Ainu were stripped of their livelihoods, with the prohibition of their traditional hunting and fishing activities. The women were married off to Japanese men. They were forced into agriculture, and were pushed into poverty. Scientists used them, and their dead, as research subjects.

These Ainu leaders are conscious that their ancestral knowledge is endangered. “They are wiping us out, within 30 years we’ll all be Japanese,” laments Kimura. But they have not forgotten the past and are well aware of their rights under the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). They are recovering their history and studying Ainu – a lost language, with no more than a handful of native speakers left – through recordings, songs and oral literature. They are also the voice of their people at the United Nations, where they denounce Japan’s lack of commitment to their rights.

“This is the last chance for their struggle. Young people, Japanese or Ainu, are moving away from politics. They’re not interested in human rights,” says Hiroshi Maruyama, head of the Centre for Environment and Minority Policy Studies (CEMiPoS), devoted to the rights of the Ainu people. For this Japanese expert on the environment and Indigenous policies, “there is no Ainu perspective to Upopoy. It is cultural commodification. It was announced after [Tokyo won the bid to host] the Olympic Games, to attract tourism and to feign respect for minorities. Japanese nationalism espousing one race, one language and one nation is still firmly in place”.

Government associations have been promoting Ainu culture for decades, as well as managing public aid for education and to tackle poverty. The Ainu Association of Hokkaido, for example, has taken part in key decisions such as legislative processes or the opening of the Upopoy complex. But 80 per cent of Ainu do not feel represented by the organisation and view it with suspicion, a sentiment confirmed by many of the Ainu people consulted by Equal Times. One explanation for this distrust is perhaps the fact that Japan did not recognise them as an Indigenous people until 2008.

The dead that are owed to them

How many Ainu are there today? No one knows exactly. The official figure in Hokkaido was 13,000 in 2017. Added to this are the thousands of Ainu living in and around Tokyo, those who have relinquished their roots after a century and a half of fervent assimilation policies and those who are hiding their origins to avoid further discrimination. And how many are living in the diaspora is not known. But what they do have a good estimate of is the number of dead that are owed to them, and they do not tire of repeating it: around 1,600, which they are calling on the government and the 12 Japanese universities involved in ransacking Ainu graves from the late 1880s to 1972 to return to them.

Kimura recites by heart the names of all the scientists who took part in what they call ‘the grave robbing’. He is the last community leader, *ekasi*, to have contributed to the repatriation of remains. He was born in Biratori, a small municipality of 5,300 inhabitants, predominantly Ainu, in eastern Hokkaido. His fight began not long ago. In 2015, he came across a monument commemorating a “former Aboriginal school” in Niikappucho Anesaru (near Biratori). He says he felt a lightning bolt in his head: “The god of lightning, Kanna Kamuy, woke up the activist in me and I decided to fight to restore the Ainu people’s dignity.”

In 2016, Kimura founded an association to deal with the study of human remains, together with 30 other people. In 2018, following official government guidance, they requested the return of the remains belonging to their community and they succeeded. In October, the remains of 34 Ainu (six identified) were returned from the universities of Hokkaido, Tokyo and Niigata for burial. “We are born of the soil and to the soil we must return.” We are the only community that has managed this without having to go to court,” he says, referring to the arduous bureaucratic and legal path other Ainu leaders started down in 1980 in a bid to have their ancestors repatriated. The legal battle led to the prosecution of Hokkaido University, but it was not until 2016 that they secured the repatriation of the first remains. The university, built on a former Ainu enclave, has kept the remains of more than 1,000 Ainu in a repository outside the campus for decades.

In 2019, these remains began their journey to the new Upopoy memorial. Kimura was outraged when he learned that there was no written testimony and the repository could not be visited: “Why are they celebrating a building to house the remains of our ancestors and families if they won’t let us in?”

They requested access from the government in Tokyo but were given technical excuses. After insisting for months, they will soon be given access. But this is not the final outcome they are seeking: “They only see us as research subjects. We ask them if studies are still underway but they won’t give us a clear response. They must be returned to their land, and the country has to support us, as it says in Article 12 of the declaration. We want an apology. We are the victims.”

For days, Kimura called the Japanese Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport

and Tourism (in charge of Upopoy) to insist on a plaque. They finally mounted it in October, but experts from CEMiPoS consider the text to be deceptive, given its ambiguity in terms of the historical liabilities: “In some instances, the wishes of the Ainu may not have been considered when these remains were excavated and collected,” the plaque states. Kimura insists: “Japan is responsible for returning the remains. I will not stop until the day I die.” Other Ainu prefer not to look back. It is a painful matter, a taboo. “Some have asked me to leave it be. I hope that one day I will be understood,” he admits.

The last Ainu stronghold

Nibutani is a sacred valley, proud of its roots. Ainu and Japanese people live together, in one of the few parts of Hokkaido where being Ainu means being a majority. According to their own count, as there are no official figures, 80 per cent of the 500 people living in the valley (located in the municipality of Biratori) are Ainu. It is here that a legend was born, Shigeru Kayano (1926-2006), the first Indigenous political leader, a self-taught man who researched his culture, revived traditions and wrote several books. He became a local council representative, then set himself the task of changing history and reached the Japanese parliament. The memory of him is alive and strong. There is no one in the community who does not refer to him. He helped one villager to build his house. He taught another to work with wood. He founded a local museum. He taught the Ainu language. His son continues to teach in the community library. Half the children study it, as do many adults.

His grandson, Kimihiro Kayano, runs a guest house where the Ainu’s identity and language are kept alive: “My grandfather has been a great influence. We are in a majority here and that makes us strong. For young people, being an Ainu is easier now, even though there is still hate speech on the internet”.

Sitting alongside him is Rie Kayano, who sings and writes songs in the Ainu language. Acclaimed local artist Toru Kaizawa also has his studio and shop in the valley.

This piece of paradise was transformed in 1993, when the government built a dam on the Saru River, flanked by sacred mountains and at the heart of the Ainu community. Sociologist Masumi Tanaka points to some isolated ruins and explains that the valley is a unique part of Hokkaido, “but it has not been sufficiently valued”. The Ainu have long been forced to abandon their rituals, in the same way as they had to leave behind their fishing and hunting traditions. To compensate them for the dam, they built a cultural complex with museums and kotan, a village with traditional Ainu dwellings for artisans to show visitors their materials and unique crafts.

The complex is run with public money and the new Ainu law injects additional funds. According to figures from the Japanese Cabinet Office, JPY2.17 billion (€17 million, US\$21 million) will be invested in cultural, reforestation and tourism programmes in the municipality of Biratori over five years. The measures include fishing activities, but these will once again be subject to strict regulation: only 20 people

will be allowed to fish for ritual purposes and they will only be allowed to fish 50 salmon from September to November. Hunting is not even mentioned. Ancestral knowledge is being turned into a business and tourist activity – a day-to-day reality, and a livelihood, for many Indigenous peoples in today’s world.

This article has been translated from Spanish.

SHORTLISTED STORY

#ABOVETHELAW: HOW SAPS PROTECTS THE KILLERS WITHIN ITS RANKS

Daneel Knoetze (South Africa)



Daneel Knoetze is the founder and editor of Viewfinder. His reporting currently focuses on police criminality and the failure of police oversight mechanisms in South Africa. He was a fellow with the US State Department's Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowship Program in 2017/18, during which time he did a professional affiliation at Reveal from the Centre of Investigative Reporting in San Francisco. Previously he worked as a news reporter and a communications officer in the NGO sector. He is a graduate of Rhodes University and is a rock climber on the weekends.

#ABOVETHELAW: HOW SAPS PROTECTS THE KILLERS WITHIN ITS RANKS

By Daneel Knoetze
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<https://viewfinder.org.za/how-saps-protects-the-killers-within-its-ranks/>

Every year, police in South Africa kill hundreds of people and are accused of brutalising thousands more. A new investigation by Viewfinder has revealed that the killings and brutality are enabled by police management's reluctance to discipline officers accused of wrongdoing in these cases. This is true even when watchdog investigations conclude that these officers should be disciplined. Given free rein to re-offend, problem officers may become emboldened. For their victims, the consequences can be dire.

On 2 June 2014, 52-year-old Phindile Ramncwana lay dying at a neighbour's house in Sada, a rural township in the former Ciskei region of the Eastern Cape. As Esther Kasam tended to him, she recoiled at the sight of blood and vomit in a five-liter container on the floor beside his bed. Ramncwana retched when he tried to eat. He complained of stabbing pains in his stomach, Kasam recalled during a recent interview.

"Phindile, what did you say when they were hitting you?" Kasam had asked.

"I was crying a lot. I asked what I had done to be beaten like this. I begged for forgiveness," came his response.

People who said that they witnessed the assault would later provide statements to an investigator from the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID). They described how, on the night before, a police officer tackled Ramncwana to the ground in Whittlesea police station's charge office when he apparently defied instructions "not to make a noise". Ramncwana had been arrested earlier for being "drunk and disorderly", according to police station records.

At least three other policemen, including a warrant officer who was on duty in a command role that night, joined in the assault, according to one witness' statement. They slammed Ramncwana's head first into the wall and then into the floor, they kicked him in the ribs as he lay shielding himself.

The full extent of the assault is not apparent from these witness statements. Yet, when Ramncwana was released from custody early the next morning he could barely walk, according to a taxi driver who saw him. It was the middle of winter.

Ramncwana had limped into the taxi rank, the driver said, barefoot, hunched over and holding his stomach, to ask for a lift home.

Later that day, as he lay in bed, Ramncwana's condition worsened. Kasam recalls how she ran out to borrow a wheelbarrow. She covered Ramncwana in her best, new blanket and followed on foot as neighbours wheeled him to Sada Clinic.

There, a nurse also witnessed Ramncwana "crying" in pain and "vomiting blood". When an ambulance failed to respond to his calls, the nurse drove Ramncwana to Hewu Hospital in his own car. Hospital records show that Ramncwana complained of stomach pains for the last time at 4:10 am the following morning. Then, these records show, he started "gasping" for air and hospital staff administered oxygen to him via a mask.

"He Rest in Peace at 7:00 am," the log book's scribbles recorded. A doctor was called to certify Ramncwana's death.

A week later, a postmortem report revealed the extent of his injuries: abrasions and bruises all over his body, two fractured ribs, bruises to his heart and a ruptured small intestine. From this rupture, intestinal content had slowly seeped into the cavity holding Ramncwana's abdominal organs. This caused the infection which killed him.

Whittlesea: a pattern of abuse

"This is a very, very serious case," said Dr Steve Naidoo, one of South Africa's leading forensic pathologists with decades of experience in conducting post mortems on people who have died in police custody, on studying the report's findings. He added that Ramncwana's injuries were typical of "extreme interpersonal violence" which probably comprised kicking and stomping.

In mid-2014, police management in Whittlesea knew that there was a problem of brutality within its ranks. Over the two previous years, the station had registered a slew of assault cases against its own officers. According to IPID's data on the outcomes of these cases, SAPS management took very little action. This is not uncommon for a police station in a poor community in South Africa.

Visit Sada today and stories from those years, of a task team from Whittlesea SAPS raiding taverns and prowling the unlit streets at night to arrest and beat up the fleeing patrons, still abound. The name of the warrant officer who reportedly led such operations, and who was accused in Ramncwana's killing, is still steeped in notoriety. Viewfinder understands, from IPID's records on the case, that he was acquitted in a disciplinary hearing and remained on duty at Whittlesea SAPS long after Ramncwana's death. As of June last year he enjoys early retirement, according to a check of government's PERSAL system by a source.

The IPID Act, which came into force around two years before Ramncwana's death, affirmed that station commanders should transfer such cases to the directorate's relevant provincial office. In the Eastern Cape, IPID is in East London some

200 kilometers away from Whittlesea. Today, still, police commanders throughout South Africa would argue, as police minister Bheki Cele has done, that this means they must outsource the cases and wait for the outcomes of IPID's investigation before suspending or disciplining officers.

So, officers accused in even the most serious violent crimes often remain on duty.

IPID is a fraught and overworked institution. Viewfinder has previously revealed that the directorate has a history of "completing" poorly investigated cases to inflate performance statistics, while obstructing justice for victims of police brutality. Even when investigations are thorough, the completion of these are often delayed for months, due to massive case backlogs, a dearth in manpower, delays in technical reports and long distances to crime scenes. Interviewed about the Whittlesea cases, IPID Eastern Cape head Bongwiwe Tukela lamented that she has only 12 "foot soldiers" to cover the rural vastness of the province.

In spite of these odds, some IPID cases do lead to criminal or disciplinary recommendations against accused officers. For instance, Tukela's office recommended that police management discipline certain officers accused of assault and other crimes at Whittlesea in the years before and after Ramncwana's alleged murder. But, the watchdog's data show that hardly any were disciplined.

According to IPID data, four Whittlesea officers — the warrant officer, a constable and two police reservists whose identities are known to Viewfinder — had pending assault cases and disciplinary recommendations against them on the night that they were implicated in Ramncwana's killing. People present at the station's charge office on the night also accused two officers implicated in the Ramncwana case of separate assaults: with "fists" and an "iron rod" in one instance and with "open hands" and "police boots" in the other.

Nomandilakhe Gamana was the complainant in another, older assault case against a constable implicated in Ramncwana's killing. She was left badly bruised and bleeding from her private parts, she recalled during a recent interview. When she reported her assault at the police station, she said, the officer taking her statement scoffed and assured her pointblank that the case "would go nowhere".

"I thought that (he) was going to be arrested for what he did to me. I guess it never happened because he is a policeman," Gamana shrugged.

Across South Africa, impunity reigns

As part of an investigation which has now spanned more than two years, Viewfinder has collated and analysed IPID's raw data on thousands of alleged killings by police and tens of thousands of other brutality complaints. Taken across more than a thousand police stations in South Africa, these data show that violence permeates police work in the country. These records also reveal that police management routinely fails to discipline officers accused of brutality.

This is often true when allegations are registered at police stations – because station

commanders outsource the dossiers to IPID. Yet, it is also usually true when IPID completes its investigations and expressly recommends that police management discipline officers via departmental hearings. SAPS converts fewer than one in four IPID recommendations into disciplinary convictions, according to the watchdog's case data.

Few police brutality cases result in disciplinary recommendations against accused officers, but when they do convictions and proper sanctions are rare. Interact with this visualisation by filtering the data according to province and the classes of crimes that IPID investigates. (Data visualisation: Viewfinder)

If they were meted out properly, SAPS departmental sanctions could be effective in taking problem officers off the street. For SAPS management, the burden of proof for securing a disciplinary conviction is much lower than for a prosecutor pursuing a criminal conviction in court. So too is the likelihood of delays. Criminal proceedings against police officers can drag on for years – the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) in the Eastern Cape is yet to decide whether to institute murder charges against the officers accused in Ramncwana's 2014 killing.

The ultimate power of police management over these internal disciplinary processes explodes the notion that IPID is able to provide external or "independent" police oversight in South Africa – the purpose for which it exists. And, the reluctance of police management to properly enforce disciplinary recommendations leaves IPID's officials in the provinces cynical and demoralised. Police officers, like those accused of terrorising Sada's residents and murdering Ramncwana, are often left unpunished.

Killings by police in KwaZulu-Natal

Police management's failure to discipline officers for killing people is most frequent where it is probably needed most, IPID data shows. Between early 2012 and early 2020, police in KwaZulu-Natal killed 1,057 people in 849 separate incidents – more than in any other province, in absolute numbers and per capita.

Between early 2012 and early 2020, case data show that KwaZulu-Natal police management only convicted nine officers following IPID investigations into these killings. This meant that police in the province had the country's lowest rate for converting IPID negative recommendations against officers accused of misconduct in such killings into disciplinary convictions.

Asked about SAPS in KwaZulu Natal's interpretation of the high body count and the low disciplinary outcomes, spokesperson Captain Nqobile Gwala refused to comment.

"Kindly contact IPID for details and comment as we cannot comment on their reports and findings," she said. Versions of this response – a refusal to comment and a referral to IPID – is common from police spokespeople in South Africa when queried about such killings and alleged brutality.

Police in KwaZulu Natal have killed more people in recent years than in any other province. Umlazi, south of Durban, is a hotspot for killings by police according to IPID data. (footage: Jimmy Reynolds).

Across all provinces and all classes of crimes that IPID investigates, the data shows that the problem of SAPS failing to discipline officers with recommendations against them has got worse in recent years.

Police "can do no wrong"

Police management have ample opportunity to scupper IPID disciplinary recommendations to protect their colleagues.

"They stand with their members, always. They don't believe that police officers can do any wrong," said one former senior IPID official, quoted on condition of anonymity.

Police officers in charge of enforcing discipline may exploit a confluence of loopholes and ambiguity in law and SAPS's discipline regulations to nullify IPID recommendations.

Sometimes, says Thabo Lehlo, the long-serving head of IPID in the Western Cape, police refuse to discipline an officer because an alleged offense happened "a long time ago". Viewfinder understands that such an excuse may be rooted in SAPS's interpretation of a regulatory clause which prescribes an "expeditious process" for serious allegations of misconduct such as murder, serious assault and rape.

"(Police management) ignore the merits of the case and start holding on to a technicality that does not exist, or is the result of a wrong interpretation," says Lehlo.

Viewfinder has seen a sample of disciplinary outcome reports by SAPS in the Western Cape which showed that the "time delay" between an alleged offence and a disciplinary hearing was cited by SAPS as the reason for an acquittal.

SAPS Western Cape spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel André Traut did not respond to a question about the interpretation of the "expeditious process" clause in the police's discipline regulations and whether it could be used to acquit officers accused of violence.

"Any process in consideration of disciplinary steps against any member is based on legal principles. Therefore, each case is dealt with on its own merits," he said.

In other instances, throughout South Africa, police management interpret their legal obligation to "initiate" IPID recommendations as cause to appoint their own investigator to reinvestigate an IPID case from scratch. At best this is duplication. At worst, according to an IPID source, these SAPS disciplinary investigators spook witnesses into silence, retraumatise victims and deliberately throw doubt on the findings of the original investigation.

As far back as 2014, the directorate's compliance monitoring head Mariaan Geerds complained to Parliament that this custom "defeated the entire exercise" for which IPID exists.

The loophole was not closed. Instead, it was re-entrenched by SAPS's new discipline regulations published in 2016. Today, still, the police watchdog can do very little if these internal police investigations whitewash the case against an accused officer. In such instances, exculpatory findings by a police disciplinary investigator — or an ad hoc decision by police management not to initiate disciplinary proceedings — will supersede the findings of probable wrongdoing by an "independent" watchdog investigation.

"If I'm the commander and my member that I want, that I'm buddy-buddy with, has done something, I'm not going to take steps against him. I'm going to do everything to stop steps from being taken," said one current IPID official, quoted on condition of anonymity.

In instances where disciplinary hearings actually proceed, police officers deputised as "employer representatives" are tasked with leading evidence. If they are listless or selective in this task, this invariably results in the acquittal of their accused colleague. In such instances, the IPID investigators who originally gathered the evidence can do nothing if their case is misconstrued by incompetence or design. Often these investigators do not even know of the hearing's date and outcome until after the fact. Police management are not obliged to invite IPID investigators or independent observers to ensure the integrity of such hearings. These happen behind closed doors.

In these hearings the accused person, SAPS's representative (tasked with leading evidence against the accused), and the chairperson (who must decide on guilt or innocence and hand down a sanction) are all police officers.

"We've asked many times in the past, 'please involve us, invite us to these disciplinary hearings'. (SAPS management) made it clear that they prefer for us not to be involved," Geerds said during a recent interview.

All but one of the six officers who faced a departmental hearing for Ramncwana's arrest and alleged killing were acquitted, according to IPID in the Eastern Cape. But, the outcome report, seen by Viewfinder, was short on detail and reasons. When queried on the case, SAPS in Eastern Cape refused to comment. "Internal disciplinary measures taken against any employees are a matter between the employer and the employees," said police spokesperson Sibongile Soci.

Last week, Viewfinder provided SAPS in the Eastern Cape with a list of 36 case numbers registered between 2012 and 2016. These included assault and other allegations against the officers implicated in Ramncwana's killing and against Whittlesea police officers, in general. The SAPS Eastern Cape media centre acknowledged receipt, but it did not respond to a query about whether any officers had been disciplined for any of these cases. According to IPID data, only 2 of these cases had led to disciplinary convictions by the end of March 2020.

Low sanctions

"It's so demoralising," said Leholo, reflecting on the lack of transparency in SAPS disciplinary hearings and outcomes.

"IPID investigators put a lot of effort into these investigations. And, you've got a strong or prima facie case against the (police) member. And there is no justification for the brutalisation of the victim. Then you find out down the line a matter is thrown out on the basis of technicality — a technicality, I emphasise, that does not exist ... I do not think it is fair to the victims."

Annelizé van Wyk, former chair of Parliament's Portfolio Committee for Policing (PCP), was instrumental in drafting the IPID Act of 2011. She agrees that regulatory technicalities cannot reasonably supersede the intention of the law. The intention of this law, she says, was that IPID recommendations would be binding, and that SAPS would enforce swift discipline against officers found on the wrong end of these.

Yet, even a disciplinary conviction is no guarantee of proper accountability. In the fraction of IPID cases which result in disciplinary convictions, the sanctions handed down are often light: small fines, suspended sentences or warnings which are struck from a convicted officer's personnel file within a matter of months.

Because SAPS's departmental processes are so opaque, even to IPID, it is difficult to know exactly why this is. One explanation, Geerds believes, is that though officers may be accused of very serious transgressions, departmental hearings only find them guilty of lesser charges of misconduct.

IPID has confirmed that one of the officers accused of misconduct in the killing of Phindile Ramncwana was convicted in a hearing. He was suspended for two months without pay, but kept his job. He is still on duty at Whittlesea police station today, according to a check of the government's PERSAL system by a Viewfinder source.

A slow collapse of police discipline

Research by the Dullah Omar Institute has found that the reluctance of police management to enforce IPID recommendations occurs against a backdrop of a slow decline in SAPS management's ability to enforce discipline. Even though there has been no significant decline in the number of killings and alleged brutality reported to IPID in recent years, SAPS Annual Reports statistics show that there has been a marked decline in the number of officers brought before disciplinary hearings and convicted (across all categories of alleged misconduct, not just ones related to the use of force).

Reported killings and brutality by police has remained relatively consistent in recent years, while the number of disciplinary hearings and convictions across all categories of misconduct have been declining steadily. (Data visualisation: Viewfinder)

For an officer fairly accused of once-off assault, management's increasing apathy

towards discipline amounts to a big let-off. For vigilantes, sadists or repeat offenders, it gives virtual free rein. They may commit and recommit abuses in the knowledge that they will probably never be fired by their employers. As repeat offenders go unchecked, the severity of their crimes often escalates, concludes Lehlo.

IPID case data shows that Ramncwana's alleged killing was probably the culmination of a pattern of brutality at Whittlesea police station (in general) and by a group of police officers (in specific). And, six of the officers accused of misconduct for his arrest and killing were implicated in violent crimes in the months to follow. In each instance IPID investigated and recommended that the officers be disciplined. Its records show that this routinely did not happen.

A pattern of brutality left unchecked? IPID complaints data shows that officers accused of misconduct for Ramncwana's arrest and killing had pending assault cases against their names or would reportedly go on to reoffend. (Animation produced by Viewfinder).

Viewfinder has established that two of the officers accused in the Ramncwana case were eventually discharged from the police and one has also resigned from the service. Yet, SAPS Eastern Cape's failure to respond to queries meant that Viewfinder could not verify whether these dismissals and resignation were as a result of disciplinary action for known cases against these officers.

Last week, Viewfinder submitted a query detailing many of the facts, findings and concerns from IPID officials contained in this article to SAPS national management. SAPS spokesperson Colonel Athlenda Mathe confirmed receipt and said that the query had been sent to SAPS "personnel management" for response. SAPS had not responded at time of publication.

A loss of faith

Sada is the product of successive forced removals. The first families were trucked here by the apartheid government from their homes on white-owned farms around Queenstown in the 1960s. Then families were brought from further afield – from Tarkastad and Adelaide, from Molteno and Port Alfred and eventually from the Western Cape and what was then the Transvaal.

Repressed for decades and still desperately poor, Sada is the type of community that policy makers had in mind when drafting a human-rights-centered mission for the post-apartheid police service.

For Esther Kasam, the failure of that mission is personal, not a datapoint. She loved Phindile Ramncwana like a son, she says. In a community where even food is scarce, she cooked for him and he built a kitchen sink for her to say thank you. Her husband and this younger man were best friends.

Kasam is 85 years old. In the late 1960s her family and her husband's were taken from their homes on a farm outside Tarkastad, loaded onto trucks, and brought to Sada under police guard. For her, the police were a scourge then. They still are today.

"My heart is broken," she says, remembering how she and her neighbours followed in a procession behind the wheelbarrow taking Ramncwana to Sada Clinic. "I have never recovered. I cannot stand to interact with the police. I don't want their greetings."

Are you a police brutality victim whose case was poorly handled? Are you an IPID investigator or a police officer with feedback or info that we should know? Do you have questions about this investigation? We would like to hear from you. Get in touch.

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SHORTLISTED STORY

INEQUALITY UNMASKED

Hélène Seynaeve, Cole Stangler, Filippo Poltronieri,
Maurizio Franco, François Greuez, Valentin Delaunoy
(Belgium/ France/ Italy)

While some stories see the light of day, others remain in the shadows. The Covid-19 crisis has worsened the already existing gap that people of certain origins, social statuses and gender have to face up to.

This series, Inequality Unmasked, unveils the stories of individuals that society often fails to consider. It points out the obstacles they must confront, and which the crisis has multiplied. Marginalised or forgotten, these people are hoping for a fairer world.



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ONLINE AND ILLITERATE

Reportage: H  l  ne Seynaeve. Photos: Valentin Delaunoy
Caf  babel, France — January 10, 2021

The original publication is available via the following links:

English: <https://inequality-unmasked.cafebabel.com/online-and-illiterate/>

French: <http://inequality-unmasked.cafebabel.com/analphabete-a-lere-digitale/>

Italian: <http://inequality-unmasked.cafebabel.com/6/>

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 emergency our everyday lives have become even more dependent than usual on a constant flow of text based digital information. This makes things particularly difficult for the roughly 10% of people in French-speaking Belgium who are illiterate. In Brussels, several associations are looking for solutions to help these individuals find their place in the digital society – but many are worried that a serious social division is already emerging.

Carlos offers us a bottle of Guaraná, a popular soda in his native Brazil, to accompany our croissants. He welcomes us on a Saturday morning, in his bright flat which is located at the corner of a quiet street in Etterbeek, a municipality in the region of Brussels. His living room is filled with homemade decorations that sit side by side with his writing exercises, which are neatly arranged in a glass cabinet.

Carlos settled in Belgium in the early 2000s and had to wait nine years to obtain regular immigration status. In 2015, following a brain tumor, and on the advice of the doctors, he began to pursue literacy lessons. “Right at the beginning the teacher asked us to write something down. What it was we wanted to do. I wondered what I was going to say. I found it difficult, but I needed that. I stayed in the class for five years.”

The Belgian authorities estimate that one in ten French speakers in the country is functionally illiterate (that is, unable to write or comprehend a brief and simple statement about everyday life). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development this number rises to as high as 14% among Flemish speakers. OECD research across 14 European countries has shown that one in five people have poor reading and writing skills.

Given the accelerated transition to a digital society that the Covid-19 emergency has brought about, these individuals find themselves in a particularly delicate situation. In the spring, almost overnight, administrative procedures, public services and other leisure activities migrated online to an unprecedented degree. How is a person supposed to manage the digitalisation of everyday life when they cannot read or write? Carlos, and many others like him, have had to put in extra effort in the past few months, and in some cases have even required support, to complete tasks that were already complex before the health crisis. “When I arrived, I used to ask my neighbors to help me understand my bills,” he recalls.

Yvette is another individual that knows all-too well how important this assistance can be. With her mask pulled up over her nose, the 40-year-old woman describes how even simple, everyday things can present a challenge. “My problem is buying a train ticket. I get stressed when I’m in front of the machine, especially when there are people behind me. So if there are staff at the ticket office I always prefer to go there. Even if there’s a line.” When faced with a new machine, Yvette explains, she tends to get suspicious.

Born in the Congo, and nicknamed ‘Madame Soleil’ by her friends, Yvette has lived in Belgium since she was six years old. After the second year of primary school, her teachers redirected her to a special needs education. A few years ago, now middle-aged, the employment services suggested she enroll in literacy classes.

Since the 1980s the 'Lire et Écrire' association has been fighting to get public authorities in the French-speaking part of the country (specifically, the Wallonia-Brussel Federation) to take an interest in this issue. When asked about the profiles of the learners, the association's Press Officer, Cécilia Locmant, refuses to put people in boxes. "The only thing that unites those who come to us is that they do not have the basic profile expected of them at the end of the primary school cycle in Belgium, whether they went to school or not. Institutions often suggest that it is these people's fault that they are illiterate. We see it as a social problem." Locmant points to inequality in the school system, especially in Belgium, as one example of this.

Given the lack of official studies on literacy in French-speaking Belgium, those studying the phenomenon are forced to rely on data from neighboring countries. In France, in particular, the number of illiterate people is increasing among job seekers and doubling in sensitive urban areas. “We can try to assess the situation here by looking at the number of associations or training centres per municipality,” explains Aurélie Akerman, the outreach officer at ‘Lire et Écrire’. “There are hundreds of them in the municipality of Brussels, for example, compared with just one in Woluwe-Saint-Pierre [a more affluent residential municipality].” Of those currently enrolled, 30% have had no previous education. The rest have had some, though without receiving a diploma. One third of learners are of Belgian nationality.

Covid-19 complicates the equation

Carlos suggests we go out to enjoy some sunshine. Passing by the station near his home, he recalls his first days in Belgium. “The man I was working for handed me a few coins and left me at the Madou metro. I found myself alone, in front of all these stop names, and I didn’t know what to do. I started moving, but I kept going in the wrong direction. It took me several hours to find my way home.”

In lockdown, with all the extra on-screen reading and writing that this has entailed, the equation has become even more complicated. In addition to a heightened sense of loneliness, learners find themselves in greater difficulty given that so many physical services have been forced to shut their doors. According to the sociologist P  rine Brotcorne, some of these peoples' fundamental rights are now under threat because digitisation was not designed to be inclusive. As he wrote in a recent study: "at a global level, digital devices seem to be designed to meet the expectations of

a standard 'mobile and connected' user. This tendency to reduce people in digital difficulties to a 'negligible' minority risks the gradual emergence of two-tier services, despite the apparent mission of tech companies to serve the general interest."

In September 'Lire et Écrire' launched a campaign named 'Digital Forgotten', to raise awareness and to call on the government to take action regarding this issue. "We have highlighted different facets of the problem: from accessing local government services, to making an appointment with a doctor, from registering in a temporary employment agency or job hunting to taking public transport," Ms. Locmant explains.

The thrill and fear of digital spaces

The first time his teacher asks him to turn on the computer Carlos is puzzled. "I didn't even touch a PC until I was 54. Even a phone is difficult. We were taught to use a few pieces of software, like Word, or to search on Google. But it's a bit complicated." He pauses and smiles. "You know, when you're young, your head is like fresh cement. If you make an imprint, it stays there forever. When you get older it's not the same."

Fabien Masson, an educational coordinator in charge of digital training, emphasises that, in the context of literacy, the most important function of these resources is to help the learners meet their concrete needs. "We don't do computer training per se. These are literacy lessons which integrate a digital dimension in order to give the learners tools they can use elsewhere. We've also adopted an artistic and relatively creative approach which enables us to introduce digital elements, like software, and lots of other processes, that will be useful further down the line."

Carlos is particularly proud of a hardback comic book that he made together with his group of learners. "We had to take pictures with our phones, build a story, write the dialogue, and so on. Once all that was done, we went to the computer to put photos in the background and then we had to superimpose the writing over the images. It was really complicated. Overall it took eight or nine months. But when it was over... Wow."

Non-stop adaptation

Montserrat Santin, a trainer at the 'Lire et Écrire' centre in Schaerbeek, is waiting for us in an empty classroom. On the wall, in testimony to 'the old normal', are posters with useful linguistic phrases, and a few photos. She has been giving literacy classes in a women's center in the Bockstael district in Brussels for two years now. Given that only 28% of learners send or receive emails, Montserrat has had to think about alternative ways of keeping in contact with the group. It was the learners that first suggested using the telephone application, WhatsApp. The class already had a group which they used in order to communicate with their former teacher. "At first it was mainly to overcome the physical distance, but I quickly realised it could be used for more than that."

Ms. Santin isn't particularly fond of computers. WhatsApp, though, has the advantage that it can make a bridge between digital and real life. "I use it to encourage learners

to join organised outings. I send them pictures each time, and the ones that don't show up say they've missed out. That was when I realised the positive impact this technology has had on the cohesion of the group. Even the most reserved members have ended up joining in."

When the government instituted a more severe lockdown, the learners insisted on continuing the lessons at a distance. "At first I sent them audio files and documents with exercises and tests. They had to do them on a piece of paper, take a picture and send them back to me by direct message. Not everyone got involved." Since then, Ms. Santin has taken her video lessons up a notch. Now the participants act almost as if they are in a class. "I have to kick them out at the end of the lesson, otherwise they will stay connected for hours," she laughs.

Some of the learners have told Ms. Santin that before the WhatsApp group they would never have dared express themselves in writing, especially in French. "Sometimes they tell me that they have to reread the messages three or four times before they can understand them, or that they have to ask their husbands or children for help. This is a tool that enables them to work at their own pace."

While Fabien Masson supports and encourages these kinds of activity, he is keen to emphasise their limits. "WhatsApp works well, but it doesn't solve all the problems. It helps maintain a certain connection, yes, but in terms of learning it's still a bit early to draw conclusions. I think we have to be modest and accept that while one may not learn lots of new things using this method, one can nevertheless maintain one's skills." Mr. Masson also recognises that some activities are more challenging when undertaken at a distance. "Writing your CV on your smartphone is complicated," he says.

A long way to go

Carlos's phone rings, but he ignores it and looks at us. "The problem is lots of people don't even have a smartphone or internet, because it's too expensive. There aren't many places in Brussels [such as libraries] where you can go to access digital resources. And even if you do go somewhere else, it's not your own space, it's not the same." 'Lire et Écrire' is campaigning for the authorities to set up a regional plan, to offer tax benefits to help marginalised groups to use the internet. For the moment, however, they are focusing on the smaller-scale initiatives that they have already managed to put in place.

Yvette had no computer of her own until a teacher lent her one to follow the lessons remotely. She prefers not to touch her husband's, which she says is "full of viruses." Instead, she's learnt to use several applications, including Word, on her smartphone. To this day she has more control over her phone than a computer.

Before we leave, Yvette shows us her Instagram account. She's passionate about cooking and regularly uploads recipes with a bit of accompanying text. This is a kind of playground where she can test out the things she learns in class, but also find her own place in the digital world.

WORKERS WANT A BIGGER SLICE OF AMAZON'S SURGING PROFITS

Story: Cole Stangler, Photos: François Greuez
Cafebabel, France — January 10, 2021

The original publication is available via the following links:

English: <https://inequality-unmasked.cafebabel.com/workers-want-a-bigger-slice-of-amazon-surging-profits/>

French: <http://inequality-unmasked.cafebabel.com/7/>

Italian: <http://inequality-unmasked.cafebabel.com/amazon-profitti-record/>

Amazon's earnings have soared during the pandemic, along with the company's share prices — but these gains haven't yet trickled down to the company's workforce. After toiling through the health crisis, pushing the company to improve safety conditions, and braving the country's second national lockdown, warehouse employees in France say it's time for a raise.

Emilien Williatte started working at Amazon in October 2016. Since then, the thirty-six-year old has done just about everything inside the company's sprawling warehouse in the northern French town of Lauwin-Planque: retrieving goods in aisles (a job known as “picking”), wrapping them up (“packing”) and preparing them for shipment.

But it wasn't until last summer that he joined the union. A young manager “fresh out of school” as Williatte puts it, was giving him headaches, talking down to him and his colleagues, and assigning him difficult picking duties three weeks in a row. Williatte also happens to be deaf in one ear, a disability that he believes added to the tensions.

“He should've taken this into account, but he didn't want to,” Williatte says of his former boss, as he leans back in his chair inside the local headquarters of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT), one of France's largest trade union confederations, in the city of Douai, about a ten-minute drive from the warehouse. “I felt the tension mounting, and at a certain point I took a leave for depression, because he'd pushed me to the edge. I wasn't far from filing a lawsuit for harassment. I had a colleague at the time, who told me, ‘if you want, join the union, that way, you won't have problems.’ I unionised to protect myself.”

The manager ended up leaving the warehouse a few months later. Meanwhile, Emilien Williatte got more and more involved with the CGT—one of the main unions at Amazon's seven fulfillment centers across France—and went on to play a major role in helping shape the union's special nationwide labour agreement covering disabilities, signed last October.

That deal is a major source of pride for Williatte, now a union delegate, who juggles 24 hours of weekly work with his union responsibilities. Thanks to the agreement, Amazon France is required to begin providing disabled workers with ‘adapted work stations’, and offer an extra three days off annually—on full pay— to allow these individuals to handle their various medical obligations.

Tough work for modest returns

Of course, the particular issues encountered by disabled workers are just some among many challenges that workers at Amazon face. As in the company's warehouses worldwide, employees in Lauwin-Planque are forced to make do with paychecks that leave much to be desired, as well as recurring health and safety concerns. According to the CGT, gross hourly pay for new employees in non-supervisory roles starts at just €10.67, barely above the country's minimum hourly wage of €10.15. But the fast pace of work can be an additional source of stress, especially for the uninitiated.

While the ongoing Covid-19 emergency has helped shine a light on many of these issues, it's also illustrated the crucial role labour unions have played in pushing the company to address and improve them—even if that sometimes means getting into confrontations with management.

“Amazon has wanted to impose an American-style system here, like back at home,” says Williatte, referring to the company's reluctance to cede ground to French unions with whom they're legally required to negotiate. “That's why, at a certain point, there are clashes over certain things.”

This was especially clear in the spring, when France was facing its first lockdown to fight the pandemic. The CGT and other unions led nationwide walkouts over health concerns such as overcrowding and a lack of hand sanitiser. In April, in response to a lawsuit from another union, Solidaires, a judge ordered Amazon to limit warehouse activity to a list of “essential goods” until it improved health and safety conditions with labour representatives—a decision that came with a hefty penalty and that was upheld on appeal. The firm responded by shuttering all of its French warehouses for the duration of the lockdown, all the while continuing to pay out full wages to employees. Despite Amazon's bluster, the end-result was clear: in the middle of a pandemic, unions had managed to keep workers safe at home and at full pay.

Amid the second wave of the virus in France, unions have once again been on the frontline of the fight to address workplace safety. In response to requests from the CGT and others, Amazon had agreed to offer on-site Covid testing on a voluntary basis by late November in at least three of the firm's French warehouses, including Lauwin-Planque.

A bigger slice

But workers also want a bigger piece of the pie when it comes to pay. Alongside other unions like the General Democratic Confederation of Labour (CFDT) and Solidaires, the CGT is calling on Amazon to reinstate its €2 hourly wage supplement—a pay hike

the firm extended during the first wave. Unions are also seeking a one-time €1000 hazard bonus, as well as full pay for vulnerable workers to be able to stay at home.

Williatte feels these are perfectly reasonable requests, especially as the company has been benefitting from the closure of brick-and-mortar stores and a spike in e-commerce during the pandemic to reap record-breaking profits. In its most recent quarterly earnings report, Amazon posted \$6.3 billion in profits, triple the sum it earned during the same period last year. That boom has also managed to woo Wall St, with the firm's share price up a staggering 75 percent for the year and translating into hefty gains for investors.

"We feel like if Amazon is doing well, it's thanks to the workers too," he says. "It's thanks to the price of labour that they're doing well."

So far, however, Amazon has rejected the demands. While the firm did extend a €300 holiday bonus - mirroring the \$300 and £300 bonuses offered in the U.S. and UK- it falls well short of what unions have asked for and national level talks have yielded little progress on the other issues. One of Williatte's colleagues and fellow CGT delegates, Enzo Prouvez, even recalls how an HR representative at Lauwin-Planque responded to union proposals by suggesting the company's success stemmed primarily from its base of customers, not its workforce.

"He said if there weren't any more customers at Amazon, there wouldn't be any more work," says Prouvez, a 25-year-old whose job is to load and unload delivery trucks just outside the warehouse. "But what happens if you have customers and no workers? Are the customers going to come pick up the packages?"

When asked about the wealth of Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, the richest man in the world, whose fortune has ballooned during the pandemic and recently surpassed \$200 billion, Prouvez shakes his head.

"You have billions, billions, billions. And if you give a [€1000] bonus to your employees, they're going to be happy for a year. For a year," Prouvez says of Bezos. "You'll make them smile, maybe let their kids have a better Christmas present, things like that. And they won't do it. They don't want to."

A Multinational movement

In fact, many of the grievances at French warehouses are shared across Europe and North America, says Christy Hoffman, president of the UNI Global Union, an international labour federation made up of unions representing millions of workers in the services sector. As she points out, Italian and Spanish workers also walked off the job due to safety concerns during the first wave of the virus. Meanwhile on Black Friday—one of the busiest days of the year for the firm, which was ultimately pushed back a week in France due to the lockdown—workers in Germany went on strike.

"The fact is, that you're trying to increase the volume, increase the production, while at the same time keeping people apart and slowing things down," Hoffman

says of Amazon. "How do you implement a policy of social distancing while you are at the same time implementing speed-up? It's inconsistent... I don't blame [the workers] for saying we need negotiations now around these issues, and if you're going to put us in this situation, we're going to need to be compensated."

As Hoffman also notes, this is not a company that is particularly enamored with collective bargaining. Amazon's approach to labour relations stems from its roots in the United States, where labour laws are much weaker and where unions are not recognised at all. "I think a lot of it is attitude," Hoffman says of the firm. "The US is very heavily non-union, but they haven't figured out that you can't really play it that way when you're in Europe."

A spokesperson for Amazon France told Cafébabel that the company's anti-union reputation was undeserved. "Contrary to what's often said, we have a constant dialogue with employee representatives and sign numerous agreements together," he said. "Of course, at Amazon each employee is free to express his or her opinion or to join a labour organisation of his or her convictions."

When asked why Amazon has rejected recent demands to raise wages, the spokesperson pointed to the fact that the company had already agreed to a generalised pay hike averaging 1.6 percent and extended a one-time €500 bonus as part of annual contract negotiations earlier this year, in addition to the holiday bonus.

Mobilising the troops

Still, while French unions have managed to win a series of indisputable victories at Amazon in recent years, it's proven far more difficult for them to instill an enduring sense of solidarity at warehouses. Like elsewhere across the private sector in France, union membership at Amazon remains fairly low, and calls to protest are more likely to draw support from a small base of supporters than spark mass walkouts.

For instance, in mid-November the CGT and other unions called for strikes in support of their demands to hike pay and allow vulnerable employees to stay at home. According to the CGT, however, by the end of the month only a few dozen workers had participated in strikes—a fraction of the roughly 2,000 people employed at the warehouse.

This is all the more striking given the area was once a historic hotbed of labour activism. Indeed, Amazon's massive logistics park in Lauwin-Planque sits in the heart of what was the nation's core mining basin—famed for the coal that long powered France, but also for the generations of hard-nosed miners who retrieved it and weren't afraid to walk off the job every once in a while.

For decades, Northern miners were seen as something of a vanguard of the French working class: their strikes helped win the right to the weekend in the early 20th century, they led a legendary walkout during the Nazi occupation, and they dug in for grueling work stoppages in the early post-war years. While the last mine in the area closed in 1990, the industry's history still looms large over the region.

As it happens, Emilien Williatte's grandfather was a union activist in the mines.

“My mother explained to me, sometimes... they would go out and block everything,” he says. “And when they blocked everything, these weren’t small barricades. They barricaded everything, nobody would go in.”

Things are very different today. The area has struggled mightily from deindustrialisation and the broader Northern region of Hauts-de-France now counts the highest unemployment rate in metropolitan France. Under these circumstances, as Williatte explains, the fear of losing hard-earned gains often outweighs one’s willingness to get involved in workplace activism.

“In the 50s, in the 60s, even when I was a kid, there was work. If there wasn’t anything I liked, I could look elsewhere,” Williatte says. “Today, that’s no longer the case. People are afraid of losing their jobs. And because they have mortgages, bills to pay, they get anxious. They’re afraid of going on strike.”

Either way, Williatte believes unions are going to keep pushing Amazon to better share some of its surging revenue. The way he sees it, the company has little excuse not to give its employees a raise. “They can do it because they have the means to do so,” Williatte says. “It’s just a question of will, that’s all.”

NO ONE AT SCHOOL SPEAKS ROMANI

By Filippo Poltronieri and Maurizio Franco

Cafebabel, France — January 10, 2021

The original publication is available via the following links:

English: <https://inequality-unmasked.cafebabel.com/no-one-at-school-speaks-romani/>

Italian: <http://inequality-unmasked.cafebabel.com/la-didattica-a-distanza-nei-campi-rom/>

French: <http://inequality-unmasked.cafebabel.com/lillusion-de-leducation-chez-les-roms/>

Over the past year millions of Italian children have had to face up to a new reality of school closures and long-distance education. The consequences have been particularly severe for vulnerable groups, and above all for Roma pupils. In the camps and shanty towns of the Italian capital, where these people live, education has become a shadow of its former self.

Sitting in an armchair, Tiziano holds his father's smartphone in his hand. He is totally absorbed by the screen. Tiziano is ten years old. He has spent his life so far living in the Roma camp on Via Monachina, a fortress made of mud and sheet metal in the western suburbs of Rome. The sixth of seven children, he is a happy boy and very attached to his parents. Tiziano speaks a colloquial Roman-Italian, punctuated with words from the Romani dialect. It's a rainy afternoon at the end of November. His father, Milos, looks at him smiling as he tries to start the electricity generator. Without it, the container in which he and his family live would remain in darkness until the next day.

In September Tiziano entered the fourth grade. He completed third grade last year, although he hasn't taken any courses since March, when Covid-19 transformed the world of teaching and learning. From the beginning of the spring lockdown until classes resumed Tiziano was confined to the 40 square metres of his house. For months on end he was unable to follow the school curriculum. Unlike his classmates he does not have a tablet or computer; tools that were indispensable for following online courses during the first wave of the pandemic. "I don't know how to use a computer, and even if I did, there's no connection, so what would I need it for?" says the child. "We tried to ask his school to lend us a computer, but they requested a deposit of 200 euros. It's impossible for us to pay such a sum," adds his father.

There are about 25 minors in the camp on Via Monachina. During the lockdown, in order to maintain a semblance of normality and to avoid completely abandoning their education, some of the children managed to get by with their mobile phones,

using their parents' mobile data or borrowing devices from their siblings and other relatives. Tiziano's father regularly recharged his mobile plan, but he was not always at home to act as a hotspot.

Tiziano therefore passed his days one after the other, sitting in front of the television. Susanna, his mother, preferred him to stay at home rather than play around the camp, amidst the steel carcasses of old vehicles, electronic waste and cats balancing on broken windows.

"No one from the school called us to explain how the classes were going to be organised. We don't have electricity here, or even a connection," regrets Susanna. Throughout the spring, Tiziano's only escape from the overcrowded caravan was to accompany his brothers when they went shopping at the supermarket. "At least he was going out," Susanna admits. "We go shopping twice or even three times a day. Seeing as we don't have electricity, we don't have a fridge either, and I have to cook for almost ten people at a time..."

Lockdown has not been the same for everyone

During the second and third waves of the pandemic, education has served as a makeshift barometer of the severity of the emergency in many European countries. The sound of the bell is an emblem of normality; something to be preserved if at all possible. When the number of cases made the closing of Italian schools unavoidable, the only solution was long-distance learning; an emergency practice that seriously challenged the apparently egalitarian stance of the educational institution.

Those who had a high-speed connection on their tablets and computers were able to overcome the physical distance from the classroom. Others, the most marginal strata of the population, faced a situation of complete abandonment. The pandemic has revealed a reality that some find difficult to face up to: not all children are equal.

Tiziano is a particularly under-privileged child. As a member of the Roma community, which lives on the whole in unofficial camps scattered in the most dilapidated suburbs of Italy, he faces the brunt of this crisis. There are between 120,000 and 180,000 Roma people living across Italy, including about 20,000 children, of which over 6,000 are based in the capital. Since the 1980s some of these individuals have been living in state-run camps in isolated areas where they are separated from the rest of the population. Tiziano's family is one of 19 families living in caravans and makeshift houses in Via Monachina following their eviction from another camp in 1995.

Milos is Bosnian (the dominant origin in the camp, followed by Italians belonging to the Sinti ethnic group) and some of his children are documented Italians. The settlement is one of ten camps that are 'tolerated' by the municipality of Rome. There are seven other official camps, known as 'solidarity villages.' As has

so often been the case in the past, mutual tolerance has eroded over time and has now given way to an eviction notice which is addressed to the inhabitants of the camp. Neighbours and passers-by are particularly vocal in their objections to the community, and have turned the green space in front of the complex into a rubbish dump. "The Italians are throwing them out," laments Sandro Luciani, a volunteer from the Community of Sant'Egidio, a Catholic association involved in the fight against poverty. Having followed these people even before they arrived in the region, he is now considered a member of the family.

Who is missing out?

This pandemic has significantly worsened the isolation of the camp's inhabitants, especially the children. According to a study by Kethane - INSIEME, an association defending the rights of Roma and Sinti peoples, four out of ten of the students living in the camps have not been contacted by their school. This contrasts with the 64% of children who, when interviewed, said they enjoyed attending classes. Similarly, two out of three parents believe that attending school is useful for bringing their children into contact with new social and professional opportunities.

Although Tiziano disappeared from the virtual classrooms for a whole term, the child claims to have only been contacted once by his maths teacher, who was worried because he was never signed-in. Nevertheless, she was unable to do anything about it. Tiziano did not receive any messages from his classmates.

Following the school closures, it was local organisations or teachers who maintained contact with the children in the camps. Since lockdown the scuola della pace ('school of peace'), a free community centre set up by the Sant'Egidio community which provides educational support to the most isolated social groups, has facilitated the return of 70% of the children to the classroom. Volunteers have supported the education of many children, acting as mediators between schools and families. By doing so they have also promoted a better understanding of the constantly-evolving rules and regulations.

"Every morning one of our mediators received the homework from the children and, given there was no printer, she transcribed everything onto paper and then distributed the sheets around the camp. This job was done independently: the schools themselves sent the files indifferently, without worrying about the varying capacities of different families," says Dijana Pavlovic, coordinator at Kethane.

At the same time, in Via Monachina, parents and volunteers tried to access projects providing children with tools to connect to their lessons. In the end, however, only one girl in the fifth grade received a tablet from her school. Other schools required exorbitant deposits or the completion of bureaucratic procedures that were almost impossible to understand.

The fight against dropping out

In September, when face-to-face teaching was re-established in primary schools, Tiziano went back to class. Some of his brothers, however, were against this decision. Many in the camp share the fear that contagion in classrooms could enable the virus to spread through the otherwise isolated and close-knit community. Milos and his wife Susanna are very concerned about their children's education: the older children all went to school until the age of sixteen. Tiziano was therefore eager to return to school after the summer, although he had never shown any attachment to school and his classmates in the past.

Not all the children showed up for the new term, however. Even though schools have made commitments to address the dropout of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, many desks have remained empty.

Luciana Cervati is a teacher with a soft voice that masks her stubborn character. She teaches mathematics at the Palombini school in the district of Rebibbia, in the north-eastern suburbs of Rome. Many Roma children who live in the Tor Cervara camp study there. During lockdown, the school gave 70 tablets to children in financial difficulty, literally emptying the computer rooms. Many of these devices were given to Roma children. "We've had a problem with people vanishing. Since March, it's been difficult to keep up relations with those that have left [the country], because the head of the family had lost his job, for example," explains the teacher, who is involved in a project to exchange information and keep in closer contact with families in difficult situations.

Luciana Cervati teaches mathematics at a primary school in a suburb of Rome. During the lockdown, she participated in the project to deliver educational material, including to inhabitants of nomadic settlements.

"We followed three boys who went to Romania from the very first days [of the pandemic] and kept in touch directly with their families. We exchanged messages, including words of encouragement for the children who were sometimes catapulted into another reality because their parents had lost their jobs due to the lockdown. We have completely lost contact with one of them and have been looking for him for several months," explains the teacher.

According to research conducted by the Associazione 21 Luglio ('21 July Association'), a non-profit organisation dealing with discrimination, only 20% of Roma children in the Italian capital attend school regularly, and just 14% of them reach the fourth grade. Integration projects are therefore essential to preventing these children from being permanently forgotten by a society that prefers to avoid facing-up to this situation.

So far none of Tiziano's classmates have come to visit him. "What parent would want their child to play here," Susanna asks sadly. Meanwhile, the school bus, which

picks up the children every morning around 7 o'clock, is empty. The bus picks up the Roma pupils who live in the camp and stops at the top of the asphalt hill that separates the inhabited centre from the rubbish dump. At 5 o'clock the bus returns and four Roma children get off. They are the last to go home. "We don't want to show the normal children, the Italians, the conditions we live in," says Milos.

The names in this piece have been changed in order to protect the privacy of the respondents.

SHORTLISTED STORY

SERIES: “A SILENT PANDEMIC”

John Washington, José Olivares (United States)



John Washington is a writer, translator, and activist. His first book, “The Dispossessed: A Story of Asylum at the US-Mexico Border and Beyond,” about the ancient origins and current legal regime of asylum, traces one persecuted Salvadoran man’s long and arduous search for refuge. A regular contributor to The Nation magazine and The Intercept, Washington writes about immigration and border politics, as well as criminal justice, photography, and literature. Washington is an award winning translator, having translated Óscar Martínez, Anabel Hernández, and Sandra Rodríguez Nieto, among others. A long term volunteer with No More Deaths, he has been working with activist organizations in Mexico, California, Arizona, and New York for more than a decade.



José Olivares is a bilingual investigative journalist and audio producer whose work focuses on immigration, criminal justice, Latin America, and human rights. He is a Lead Producer for The Intercept podcasts. In 2020, he was part of a team including ICIJ, The Intercept, WNYC, and others, who received a New York Press Club award for reporting on solitary confinement in immigration detention centers. He is originally from Mexico City and is based in New York.

“A SILENT PANDEMIC”: NURSE AT ICE FACILITY BLOWS THE WHISTLE ON CORONAVIRUS DANGERS

By José Olivares and John Washington

The Intercept — September 14, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://theintercept.com/2020/09/14/ice-detention-center-nurse-whistleblower/>

Irwin Detention Center, run by LaSalle Corrections, has refused to test detainees and underreported Covid-19 cases, the nurse says.

A nurse at the Irwin County Detention Center in Georgia is speaking out about a host of dangerous medical practices at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility amid the coronavirus outbreak.

The whistleblower, Dawn Wooten, says that Irwin, which is run by the private corporation LaSalle Corrections, has underreported Covid-19 cases, knowingly placed staff and detainees at risk of contracting the virus, neglected medical complaints, and refused to test symptomatic detainees, among other dangerous practices. On September 8, Wooten submitted a letter detailing her complaints to the Department of Homeland Security’s Office of Inspector General, with the help of attorneys from the Government Accountability Project. The grim situation inside the facility reflects what she called “a silent pandemic” running rampant behind the prison bars.

“You don’t want to see what you’re seeing,” Wooten told The Intercept. “You’re responsible for the lives of others,” but Irwin management, in her eyes, downplayed the threat of the virus from the start.

When the first suspected case of Covid-19 arrived at Irwin in March, Wooten says, she overheard the warden, David Paulk, tell a member of the nursing staff not to tell anybody that the man recently transferred might have the coronavirus. “He didn’t want there to be mass panic,” she said. (Reached by phone, Paulk said he had no comment.) Another member of the medical staff ordered Wooten to triage the man, even though she didn’t have a mask. She refused. “They’re still not taking this seriously,” Wooten said. “Enough was enough.”

In a series of interviews with The Intercept, Wooten described how she repeatedly complained to staff leadership before she was demoted in early July from working full time to an on-call position, where she was only offered a few hours a month —

a move she charges was retaliation for speaking up and demanding stricter medical safety protocols. She has worked at the facility for three years in three separate stints as a licensed practical nurse, and has over 10 years of experience working as a nurse in prisons.

Her own health was imperiled while working at Irwin during the outbreak. She has sickle cell anemia, and although she told her supervisors her doctor had warned her that exposure to the coronavirus could be deadly, management at Irwin neglected to tell her that detainees she had contact with were symptomatic and, in three cases, had tested positive for Covid-19.

Wooten's account was bolstered by interviews with another current member of Irwin's medical staff — who asked not to be named for fear of retaliation — and four people currently or recently detained there.

The legal advocacy group Project South also submitted a complaint to the OIG on Wooten's behalf, which also included similar testimony collected from interviews with detainees. Priyanka Bhatt, a staff attorney with the group, told *The Intercept*, "Ms. Wooten's whistleblowing disclosures confirm what detained immigrants have been reporting for years — gross disregard for health and safety standards, lack of medical care, and unsanitary living conditions."

LaSalle — which runs 18 detention centers throughout the South, capable of holding over 13,000 people — isn't the only for-profit detention company to face scrutiny for dangerous mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic. But as the virus took hold in the region this summer, a pattern emerged of alleged abuses in LaSalle facilities. In July, medical staff at the LaSalle-owned Richwood Correctional Center in Louisiana submitted a letter to Congress detailing troubling allegations, including that LaSalle management withheld personal protective equipment from both staff and detainees, dismissed positive Covid-19 test results, and ignored symptoms. In the same month, medically vulnerable asylum-seekers detained at Richwood told *The Intercept* they were handcuffed, pepper-sprayed in the face, and thrown into solitary confinement after protesting the dangerous conditions. One of the men was transferred to River Correctional, another LaSalle-run detention center, where he told *The Intercept* that management there also neglected to take proper medical precautions to stop Covid-19's spread. Asylum-seekers have described similar abuses at LaSalle-run Winn Correctional Center.

A spokesperson for LaSalle declined to respond to a detailed list of questions, saying only, "LaSalle Corrections is firmly committed to the health and welfare of those in our care. We are deeply committed to delivering high-quality, culturally responsive services in safe and humane environments." ICE also declined to comment.

In July, LaSalle's CEO Rodney Cooper submitted a letter to Congress outlining LaSalle's response to Covid-19, claiming that the company was being "diligent in operating our facilities at the highest level," and stating that no LaSalle detainees have "succumbed" to Covid-19. In fact, at least two LaSalle guards and one member of medical staff have died of the disease.

People detained at Irwin have been protesting since the first weeks of the pandemic, and have faced punishment from staff. A series of hunger strikes and protests chronicled in the *New York Times Magazine* in early June brought increased scrutiny to the facility, but according to Wooten, little has changed over the months. The perilous conditions the detainees decried earlier this summer continue, she said.

"I would cry," Wooten said, reflecting on what she had seen after a shift. She worried about the detainees locked up and unable to protect themselves, but also about contracting the virus herself, imperiling her own health, and bringing it home to her children. "I've got a kid with asthma," she said.

Lack of Testing Leads to Underreporting

According to ICE, 31 people detained at Irwin have tested positive for Covid-19 since the pandemic began. But Wooten suspects that there were most likely at least 50 by early July, when she was demoted, based on the number of detainees she personally knew who had tested positive, and what she heard from her colleagues. The other member of the medical staff agreed with her estimation.

Wooten maintains that management at Irwin has been underreporting cases of Covid-19 to ICE, the state of Georgia, as well as to LaSalle headquarters, and not conducting sufficient tests. Even when people had Covid-19 symptoms or had been in contact with people who had tested positive, only those individuals or other people who complained about symptoms were tested. She described one instance in which a person in a crowded dorm tested positive, and only his bunkmate was subsequently also tested. "Everybody in that dorm should have been tested," Wooten said.

Wooten was warned of "wasting tests" on people she suspected of being infected.

In her complaint to the OIG, Wooten claimed that the director of nurses "routinely rejected" symptomatic detainees' requests to be tested. Other medical staff were also unsympathetic. "He ain't got no damn corona, Wooten," she was once told by a co-worker when she inquired about testing a detainee. Another detainee asking for a test, she said, was told, "Get your ass back in that room." Wooten was also warned of "wasting tests" on people she suspected of being infected.

"Everybody want to be sick with corona, everybody want corona," she said other nurses would often say.

According to Wooten, ICE had purchased two testing machines for Irwin, which arrived in June, and which, she claimed, could deliver results in eight minutes. But to her knowledge, no staff had been trained to use them, and the machines were only used twice before being locked away. Instead, medical staff collected swabs from detainee testing and drove them in their personal vehicles to the local hospital to be processed, which was against protocol and inevitably meant delayed results.

"I was told by [management] that they were not going to be used and she was not

going to put them out, because she didn't want us testing each other," Wooten said. "They were still sending people to the hospital and had these machines in the facility."

The virus also spread among staff. According to Wooten, more than 15 LaSalle employees she knows personally have been infected with Covid-19; she provided the names of at least 12 staff members, including both correctional staff and health care workers, who tested positive.

The list included Marian Cole, the health services administrator who hired Wooten at Irwin. Cole had told Wooten she was being extra careful to avoid infection, traveling only from the facility to her home. But in May, Cole fell ill and passed away from complications from the virus.

Management at the facility said Cole had contracted the virus at a family event. "I knew better," Wooten said. "And me, being who I am, said, 'That's not true.' [Cole] told me she didn't go anywhere but here and home." (Cole's daughter, reached for comment, did not want to discuss her mother's passing.)

Wooten's account of systematic undercounting of the true spread of the virus accords with what has been reported at other facilities, where ICE has resisted testing because it didn't have space to quarantine people or ignored glaring symptoms. Detainees at Irwin, echoing those held at other detention centers, also said they were afraid to report their symptoms because they would be locked in solitary confinement, with little medical attention. "It is complete torture, because it's like a punishment," one immigrant said, who declined to give their name for fear of reprisals. "I didn't want to say I had a pain in my throat, or that I had symptoms, because I didn't want to go back to the punishment cell."

Dangerous Practices

In March, when fears of coronavirus began spreading rapidly, LaSalle acquired hundreds of N95 masks, which the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended for health care workers. Each member of the medical staff at Irwin was given a single mask, though Wooten specified that most N95 masks were reserved for high-ranking staff, even if they had less contact with detainees. No masks, at the time, were given to detainees. Wooten received her N95 mask and wore it consistently while doing her rounds. By May, however, the strap had broken. When she asked for a replacement mask, supervisors refused her request. Worried about protecting herself and the detainees, Wooten purchased a homemade cloth mask. The other member of the medical staff The Intercept spoke with said that management had hundreds of replacement masks they were hoarding in storage.

Detainees, meanwhile, had begun to make their own masks out of whatever materials they had at hand. By late April, LaSalle offered them masks — provided not by the company but donated by a local church group. But one detainee said the masks have not been replaced unless a family member pushes ICE and LaSalle for a new one.

Wooten said that on at least three occasions, management ordered her to interact with patients who had tested positive for Covid-19 without informing her of the diagnosis. "I had been in all of three of their faces," Wooten said. When Wooten and other members of the staff confronted management about the situation, they were told that revealing detainees' test results would be a HIPAA violation, an illegal disclosure of confidential personal medical information.

Gregory Dober, an adjunct professor at Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine and expert in health care ethics and law regarding incarcerated individuals, told The Intercept that alerting staff that a detainee has tested positive for coronavirus "would not be a HIPAA violation." In fact, Dober said that the failure to inform staff of positive cases could constitute reckless disregard of the health of an inmate, detainee, or staff worker.

"A lot of the nurses were not doing nursing. They were just bodies in the building."

The other medical worker, who is currently at LaSalle, said that even when they are working with patients in the medical area, not just doing the rounds with the general population, they don't have enough gowns, face shields, or masks to properly protect themselves. Wooten also said the medical area was dirty: the floor infrequently swept, the exam tables not cleaned after use, and the area cluttered and dusty. "There was often blood on the floor that had not been cleaned up," Wooten said. Detainees told The Intercept the bathrooms are dirty, and they had to disinfect phones and other materials themselves within their units.

Wooten described negligent or perfunctory care for sick detainees, which had been common before the beginning of the pandemic. She witnessed nurses shred and ignore "sick call" sheets, which detainees use to request nonemergency medical help, some of which included complaints of Covid-19 symptoms (the other member of the medical staff supported this claim, saying that the shredding of sick call sheets was common.)

"Every day she is shredding something and throwing it in her trash can," Wooten said of another member of the medical staff. "I had one girl who put in about 12 sick calls. She was oozing out the belly button and nobody ever saw it." In another case, a man with Covid-19 symptoms requested a test. He was isolated in solitary confinement, a swab was taken and sent to the hospital, and more than two weeks later, nobody had called the hospital to check for the test results. When Wooten called, she learned he had tested positive and informed the man herself.

Wooten was with another member of the nursing staff when she declared, without taking his temperature, that a man who had complained of a headache had a temperature of 97.7 F. She "pulled it out of the air," Wooten said. "She falsified it. I watched her." Wooten insisted that they actually take his temperature, and found that it was 101.8. Detainees with fevers were usually just given over-the-counter cold medication, Wooten said.

"A lot of the nurses were not doing nursing," she said. "They were just bodies in the building."

In response to the neglect and refusal to test detainees, Wooten described a “system” that detainees had developed, organizing to isolate people suspected to have Covid-19 near the door to the dormitory, both for their protection and to force the medical staff to test them. And yet, she overheard other medical staff tell detainees, “There was no Covid in here.” In one instance, according to Wooten, detainees staged a “mini-riot” to demand a Covid-19 test.

The frequent transfer of detainees between facilities compounded dangers. Wooten explained that while typically people were tested before being moved to Irwin, sometimes the transfer took place before the results of the test were in. Plus, newly arrived detainees were not always isolated from the others in the facility. She was also aware of at least one occasion in which a detainee who had tested positive for Covid-19 was deported to Mexico.

“They keep piling more people in here. They keep bringing more people in here, and in the end, it’s all about the money,” said a detained woman who had to wait over a week for her sick call. Wooten echoed the statement: “They get seen as a dollar sign. Their heads are counted not as humans but as dollars.”

Wooten’s Demotion

The tinder-box scenario finally brought Wooten to a breaking point. After months of observing troubling medical conditions and, at times, going out of her way to care for detainees who had been ignored, Wooten began to raise the alarm with management in the facility.

“When I started talking about the unfairness and injustice,” pressuring staff to conduct more Covid-19 tests, “I was written up,” Wooten said. “It’s dog-eat-dog in there, at the expense of the detainees.”

By mid-June, Wooten had already been tested twice for Covid-19. And each time, due to her prior health concerns, she was instructed by the hospital to wait until her results arrived before returning to work. Medical records reviewed by The Intercept confirm her third Covid-19 test took place on June 21. In a letter to Wooten’s employers, the medical facility where she was tested requested Wooten be excused from work for 10 days, until her results were available and her symptoms — including muscle aches, headaches, and diarrhea — had gone away.

“It’s dog-eat-dog in there, at the expense of the detainees.”

After her first two tests, the doctors’ notes were sufficient to be excused from work. However, according to documents, on June 27 — six days after her third test — management reported her for “no call no show for her regular scheduled workday.” Her supervisors wrote that she was required “to call out each day she is off work.” They also pressured her to return to work, which she did, working two shifts on June 23 and June 25.

But as of June 27, there was no requirement for staff members to call in sick every

day while awaiting Covid-19 test results; that policy was not implemented until July 1, according to a memo from facility management viewed by The Intercept. One day after the policy was in place, Wooten was demoted, reducing her from full-time status to “on-call,” and drastically cutting her hours. Wooten, who is Black, also said she suffered racism throughout the experience. White staff members who took time off for testing were given “Covid pay” and were not required to call in every day, she said.

With medical bills, sick family members, children to feed, rent to pay, and car payments to make, the reduction in her work hours was a serious blow. As her own health deteriorated and she suffered from consistent stress, Wooten relied on her eldest son to help pay off the car.

She says her demotion was an indirect threat to other health care staff at the facility who had expressed concerns, though more quietly.

“They’re afraid of being fired,” Wooten said. Irwin had treated her as an example, “I was thrown to the wolves.” But, she added, “I have nothing to lose at this point.”

Correction, Sept. 14, 2020, 10:41 p.m.

This article originally misstated Marian Cole’s title. It was Health Services Administrator, not Director of Nurses. It also misstated Gregory Dober’s affiliation; he is a professor at Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine, not Lake Erie College. The article has also been corrected to reflect that Wooten is a licensed practical nurse, not a nurse practitioner, and that Cole died in May, not March.

Update, Sept. 14, 2020, 12:14 a.m.

This article was updated to include the role of the Government Accountability Project and Project South in filing Wooten’s whistleblower complaint.

“HE JUST EMPTIES YOU ALL OUT”: WHISTLEBLOWER REPORTS HIGH
NUMBER OF HYSTERECTOMIES AT ICE DETENTION FACILITY

<https://theintercept.com/2020/09/15/hysterectomies-ice-irwin-whistleblower/>

ICE MEDICAL MISCONDUCT WITNESS SLATED FOR DEPORTATION IS
A U.S. CITIZEN, SAYS LAWYER

<https://theintercept.com/2020/11/02/ice-medical-misconduct-us-citizen-deportation/>

ICE DETENTION CENTER SHUTTERED FOLLOWING REPEATED
ALLEGATIONS OF MEDICAL MISCONDUCT

<https://theintercept.com/2021/05/20/ice-irwin-hysterectomies-medical/>

SHORTLISTED STORY

MURDER IN THE NAME OF HONOUR

Nils Adler, Pascal Vossen (United Kingdom)



Nils Adler is a freelance Journalist from the UK and based in Stockholm, Sweden. He covers a range of topics, including migration and conflict. His latest 'innovation series' highlights local responses to various issues, including Nigeria's mental health epidemic and plastic pollution in Addis Ababa. Nils has written for a number of publications, and his photographs have been featured in the Guardian, El País and Al Jazeera. He has reported from several regions, including the UK, Sweden, Turkey, Ethiopia, Ukraine, Malta, Iraq, Mozambique, Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, and Belarus.



Pascal Vossen (Netherlands, 1983) is a documentary photographer whose work explores the relationships between people and their immediate environment. The impacts they both have on each other, whether this is through conflict, troubling socio-economical circumstances or those driven by a passion or desire to live their life beyond the norm. Pascal received his MA degree in photojournalism and documentary photography (2014) from the University of the Arts London and is currently living and working between London and the Scottish Highlands.

MURDER IN THE NAME OF HONOUR

By Nils Adler and Pascal Vossen

El País — November 29, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://elpais.com/planeta-futuro/2020-11-28/asesinar-mujeres-en-nombre-de-la-mala-reputacion.html>

English translation

A 19-year-old woman sits in a south-London police interview room, her shoulders hunched as she clasps a paper cup. She appears calm, speaking softly in lightly accented English. A camera mounted in the corner records everything. "People are following me," she tells a police officer "at any time, if anything happens to me, it's them".

This was one of five times Banaz Mahmod, who had moved to London from Iraqi Kurdistan when she was 10-years-old, approached the police for help. She had recently divorced her abusive first husband from an arranged marriage and was in love with another man, something that her family perceived to have shamed them in the eyes of the local community.

On the grainy police footage Banaz can be seen asking the officer politely "Now I have given my statement, what can you do for me?". A time code flickers just below Banaz on the screen; it's October 2005.

Three months later Banaz's body was put into a suitcase and buried underneath a freezer in a Birmingham back-garden. Under the orders of her father, Mahmud Mahmud and her uncle Ari, Banaz had been tortured and murdered by two of her cousins and a henchman name Mohamad Hama.

This was one of the first widely publicised cases in the UK of a so-called 'honour' killing, the most extreme form of 'honour' based violence (HBV). Banaz's murder shocked the nation as would the evidence, revealed years later, of the failure by the police to act on her repeated warnings.

Blending into the residential obscurity of a small town in North East England lies a women's refuge, its nondescript facade masking the layers of security protecting its inhabitants. Crouched on the floor in the warm glow of the TV sits Sara*, a young Pakistani woman brought to the UK after an arranged marriage with a British-Pakistani man. She fidgets with her Dupatta, a traditional shawl, as she jokes with one of the refuge's members of staff, a playful grin flashing briefly across her face.

Sara is at risk of being killed in the name of so-called 'honour', but unlike Banaz's case twelve years before, police had responded immediately after a tip-off from her brother in Pakistan.

Her story had begun in 2010 after she moved to the UK following an arranged marriage to live with her new husband and his family. Just two weeks after arriving in the country, her sister-and-law and mother-in-law had called her to the kitchen table and laid out a set of rules that Sara would be forced to live by rules designed to humiliate and condition her into a life of domestic servitude. "I wasn't allowed to use the same toilet I was made to clean and disinfect every day" explains Sara "instead I was made to use a hospital commode". Every day would follow the same strict schedule of cooking, washing, and cleaning.

It's the exhaustion that Sara remembers most vividly "around midnight my sister-in-law would always want a massage, this could last up to two hours, and I would have to be up before anyone else to clean the whole house."

Sara felt helpless. When she had married her husband, she had promised to uphold both her family's and her in-law's honour by staying with him. Divorce was not an option, so she spent the next eight years behind the four walls she now refers to as 'prison'.

On a couple of occasions Sara was taken to see a doctor, but before leaving the house, her sister-in-law made it clear that if she spoke to someone, they would throw her down the stairs.

Sara still can't tell us everything, disclosing too much information about her perpetrators could further determine whether she lives or dies. Her in-laws interpreted the very act of cooperating with the police as bringing their family's name into disrepute and until they feel she has been punished Sara's life will remain in danger.

The Halo Project Charity, a national project that supports victims of HBV, runs the women's refuge where Sara now lives. Within the confines of the building, Sara is safe, but the staff remain acutely aware of the risks she faces on the outside. One wrong move could prove fatal.

There are an estimated 12-15 reported cases of so-called 'honour' killings in the UK each year, a figure which according to the The Halo Project could be much higher because many go unreported as victims fear implicating members of the family or community.

Understanding what exactly constitutes an 'honour' based crime can be difficult, especially in the UK where the judicial system uses it as an umbrella term for various offences that are often covered by existing legislation.

Diana Nammi, the Executive Director of the Iranian & Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation (IKWRO) provides this definition "HBV is normally a collective and planned punishment, perpetrated mainly against women and girls, by their family or community; because it is believed the person has done something perceived to

bring shame on the family or the community."

In western societies, HBV is not always viewed within the broader context of violence against woman and girls where the focus tends to be on specific forms of domestic violence and in particular, acts of intimate partner violence. Instead, HBV tends to be dismissed incorrectly as endemic to one specific culture or religion.

The UNFPA estimate that globally around 5,000 women and girls are murdered each year in the name of so-called 'honour'. India and Pakistan both have recorded rates of 'honour' killings of around 1000 per year. The majority occur in the Middle East and South Asia, but cases have been recorded worldwide.

There are a number of high-profile cases in Europe that have sparked public debates about HBV in their respective countries. The first murder in the EU that was recognised as honour-based violence was in 2002 after twenty-six year old Fadime Şahindal was shot in the head by her father in Sweden. Fadime, whose family had moved to Sweden from Turkey when she was a child, had opposed an arranged marriage and fallen in love with a Swedish man called Patrik; a relationship that ultimately cost her life.

In 2005, Hatun Sürücü, a twenty-three-year old woman was killed by her younger brother in Berlin, Germany because she had rejected a forced marriage with her cousin. In 2006, twenty-year old woman Hina Saleem was murdered by her father in Brescia, Italy after refusing an arranged marriage.

HBV is not specific to a particular religious community, in fact, a number of survivors we interviewed cited their religion as a source of comfort, and in one case, a woman was able to find common ground with one of her perpetrators over their atheist beliefs.

So-called 'honour' killings are just one form of HBV; others include forced marriage, rape, forced suicide, acid attacks, mutilation, imprisonment, beatings, death threats, blackmail, emotional abuse, surveillance, harassment, forced abortion and abductions.

The aforementioned Iranian & Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation (IKWRO) is a UK based charity that represents women and girls from Middle Eastern, North African and Afghan communities at risk of HBV. At their offices in London, Randa and Tara*, two women from Iraqi Kurdistan, discuss how their families' define the terms 'honour' and 'shame'.

Randa who grew up in a small but politically well-connected rural community chooses a local expression to illustrate what honour meant for her family "When I was young I would hear people say: as a woman you are white [symbolizing purity] three times: when you are born, when you are married and when you die." When Randa left an abusive marriage and fled to the UK, she knew what the consequences would be "In my family's eyes I have stained the family name, in order to clean it I have to be made white again". "Domestic violence, and HBV often exist in parallel, the key difference is what motivates the violence," adds Sara Browne, campaign manager at IKWRO.

According to Ms. Nammi examples of acts that are perceived to have shamed a family can include “wearing what are deemed to be “inappropriate” make up or clothes, talking to unapproved people of the opposite sex, expressions of sexual autonomy, public displays of affection, having a boyfriend, resisting a forced marriage, sex outside marriage (losing virginity, pregnancy, adultery), not being heterosexual, being a victim of rape, seeking divorce (even in the event of domestic abuse), reporting/fleeing domestic abuse or forced marriage and rumours or suspicions of any of the above.”

Tara, who was abandoned by the man she was forced to marry as a teenager, explains “honour is like bread, once you break it, you cannot put it together again.”

A secret refuge in Kurdistan

In a secret location outside Sulaymaniyah in the Kurdish Region of Northern Iraq sits a women’s refuge run by the Kurdish Regional Government. It’s a grey monolithic building set against the city’s scenic mountainous backdrop.

The refuge is designed to protect women who face almost certain death if family members see them but with a reinforced wall, half a dozen security guards and security bars on every window the building is in effect a prison for its fifty or so inhabitants.

It’s a warm autumn day when we meet Parwa* in one of the refuge’s therapy rooms. The air conditioning isn’t working, so the tainted windows are edged open, allowing a rare sliver of natural light to enter the room. Her burgundy dress and red nail polish contrast with her strikingly pale complexion, a result of the three years she has spent deprived of the sun and isolated from the outside world.

Parwa had known the man who raped her. They had grown up in the same tight-knit rural community, and like many of the young men in the area, he had gone to find employment in Sulaymaniyah. He was a few years older than Parwa, and when he moved back a few years later, she was in her last year of school. Despite being married with children, he began to pursue her, calling her and eventually following her. She repeatedly rejected his advances until one day, exhausted after a day at school and a gruelling shift at the local bakery, she reluctantly stepped into his car after he had pulled up alongside her and offered her a lift home.

A few hours later as Parwa received treatment at the local hospital, members of the man’s family began to gather in the waiting room. They immediately set about questioning the set of events she had provided to the police “they asked why, if what I said was true, was my underwear not red from blood? I told them you know why because my underwear is black.” Parwa pauses as she threads prayer beads between her fingers “Still today, no-one knows my story, everyone has their versions, but no-one listens to mine.”

Panicked by the rumours circulating in the community her family began to pressure her. They told her, “You have lost your virginity, you have cost us our honour” and

forced her to decide between marrying the man who had raped her or death.

Parwa says she has lost all hope of a normal life. The man who attacked her is now the same man who holds the key to her freedom. Since the event, they have only spoken once, and his closing words still haunt her today “I didn’t take your virginity, you took it yourself.”

A short drive away lies the headquarters of Asuda, an NGO providing support for victims of HBV in Iraqi Kurdistan. Lava* has just finished her session with one of Asuda’s resident psychologists when we meet her. She is brought some Chai Kurdi a local tea which she sips while messaging on Facebook.

It was on the same social media ten years earlier that Lava had first started chatting to Farzad*. They had struck up a friendship that as the years progressed became increasingly romantic in nature.

They began to meet in Azadi Park, once the site of a Ba’athist military base but now a popular hideout for young couples who meet behind the cover of the bushes and away from the prying eyes of any disapproving members of their communities. Lava had to be especially careful, she was Muslim, and Farzad was Yarsani (a syncretic religious group from Eastern and Western Iraq) something, he had told her, his family would disapprove of.

Six years after they had first spoken the relationship appeared to be going well. They were both attending the same university and seeing each other regularly. But it was when they started having sex that Lava began to worry “if my parents knew I had lost my virginity before marriage, their first reaction would be to kill me”. In these moments of post-coital anxiety, he would reassure her “soon, after we finish our studies, I will come and ask for your hand in marriage”.

Slowly he began to grow distant until eventually, he stopped picking up her calls. Rumours of their relationship began to circulate at their university, and finally, she confronted him. My family will kill me! she reminded him, he responded, “if you have slept with me, you must have slept with many people as well, I don’t believe I broke your hymen.”

Lanja Azad Said, a psychologist at Asuda, commenting on Lava’s case explains that she meets people from all backgrounds: Muslims, Christians, Yazidis... “but the problem almost always revolves around the same thing - a woman’s hymen.”

Lava was desperate to stop the rumours from reaching her father. He loved her, but she feared the sense of shame would overcome him “he wouldn’t think it was his daughter he was killing, he would become completely detached.”

In desperation she reached out to Farzad’s father, begging him to persuade his son to marry her, he responded: “If you ruin my son’s life, I will strangle you from behind.” But the fear of what the rumours could do his family’s honour eventually drove him to reconsider, and after initial resistance in which he offered to pay for hymen reconstructive surgery, he arranged that his son would marry Lava.

It was two months into an abusive and miserable marriage that Lava found support from Asuda. Lava says she still carries a sense of shame but is determined to rebuild her dignity. Today, she writes poetry to claim back ownership of her story. A line from a poem she wrote for her mother reads “Keep them away from me, do not let them see my defeated face or touch my broken body.”

Men also suffer from HBV

HBV can also affect men. Karma Nirvana a UK based charity that runs a helpline to help people at risk of HBV estimate that today, one in five cases involves a man.

Lucky Roy Singh, a Sikh from Manchester in the UK, was forced to endure months of abuse after pictures of his marriage to another man emerged on the internet. They showed Lucky dressed in a traditional female ceremonial wedding outfit, the result of a plan by his mother-in-law to avoid rumours that her son, part of the same close-knit community as Lucky, was gay.

Lucky had just moved in with his partner and his family when the pictures went viral. “My mother-in-law was just so angry with the fact that everybody knew that she became violent, she would lock me in cupboards, throw hot water on me or punch me.” Abandoned by his own family and determined to make his marriage work Lucky withstood nine months of abuse before seeking refuge at a homeless shelter and starting on his long road to recovery.

Today, with the support of Karma Nirvana, Lucky’s story has taken a redemptive twist. Now a successful author and actor Lucky describes himself as an ‘honourable Indian Drag Queen’ embracing the identity that had once been imposed on him. “I felt like I was forced to be a woman, so now I find it empowering to make money from it, to do modelling, it’s like a slap in my mother-in-law’s face”.

Lucky doesn’t believe in the term ‘honour’. “It’s a tarnished word, honour is just an opinion someone has of you, but that should never reflect on yourself - you should be allowed to have your pride and dignity.” Lucky would attend the temple during his ordeal and credits it as a sole source of support “Being Sikh means you are your own student, you create your own path, and for me that is progression.”

Since Banaz’s murder twelve years ago, the British Police have taken significant steps in tackling HBV, including the introduction of a Forced Marriage Unit that operates a public helpline offering advice to survivors and women at risk as well as legislation introduced in 2014 that criminalizes forced marriage.

Alongside the dedicated work of charities like IKWRO, The Halo Project and Karma Nirvana the change in legislation had an immediate impact on the number of cases of HBV reported to the police - a 53% increase since 2014.

However, recent figures show that only 5% of these cases are referred to the Crown Prosecution Service. “What survivors want most is to be made safe forever” explains Ms Nammi “but many lose trust that they will be protected

due to failures in the criminal justice and welfare systems. Many also fear what the perpetrators will do their loved ones if they pursue cases meaning too many never see justice”.

The actions of the British police have enabled Sara to rebuild her life but Yasmin Khan, the founder of The Halo Project, believes there is much more to be done “women who we work with are like warriors in terms of their tolerance of inhumane treatment, we must work with communities and individuals like Sara to help them before they reach crisis level.”

The collective nature of cases like Sara’s means she faces multiple risks. In a letter to the police, Banaz had once identified who she thought could kill her. She had written “numbers 2,3,4, and 5 said they are ready and willing to do the job of killing me and my boyfriend.” In the end, it is estimated that there were more than 50 people involved in her case.

Sara shares her story today to inspire hope and tell other women in her situation that there is help out there. “Sara, like so many survivors, can help us to learn, act and change the way society deals with HBV” explains Yasmin Khan “change is now, change is together, together we must eradicate this abhorrent abuse of human rights”.

Some names have been changed to protect the identity of the source.

SHORTLISTED STORY

SERIES: WOMEN@WORK:

From Delhi, A View Of Women's Work Hit By The Pandemic;
Women Run Fewer Than 13% Of India's Small Businesses. Here's Why;
Lack Of Mentoring, Networking Hold Back Women Entrepreneurs;
'I Can't Earn More Than Rs 125 A Day No Matter How Hard I Work'.

Shalini Singh (India)



Shalini Singh is a multiple award-winning journalist based in Delhi/India. Her earlier work on environment issues – investigation into illegal mining in the western state of Goa and livelihood rights in eastern rural Odisha – won all the top Indian journalism awards including the first Cushrow Irani Prize, Prem Bhatia Memorial Award and the Ramnath Goenka Excellence in Journalism during 2011-13. Her work, on climate change in Delhi, told through the lived experiences of the river Yamuna's fisherfolk and farmers, for People's Archive of Rural India, where she's a founding trustee, was shortlisted for the 2020 international Fetisov journalism awards. She has also written extensively about gender, culture, and society during a decade at the Hindustan Times newspaper and The Week magazine, before going on to spend 2017-18 as a Nieman fellow at Harvard University. In 2021, she was a fellow at IndiaSpend, a data journalism initiative, for a series called 'Women at Work'. Four of her stories have been shortlisted for the 2021 Fetisov journalism awards.

FROM DELHI, A VIEW OF WOMEN'S WORK HIT BY THE PANDEMIC

By Shalini Singh

IndiaSpend — January 18, 2021

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://www.indiaspend.com/womenwork/how-the-pandemic-affected-urban-working-women-714688>

Those in formal jobs faced salary cuts, while those in informal jobs lost several months' income and were forced to cut down on basics such as food and education for their children.

New Delhi: Even the value of scrap has gone down in these times. And scrap is more difficult to find these days too. Ask 29-year-old Lutfun Nisha, a rag-picker in north-west Delhi, where about a fifth of the national capital's population resides. "If I do not find garbage, I cannot sell anything to the scrap dealer. Before the lockdown, I used to sell it for Rs 35-40 per kg. Now, the rate has dropped to Rs 10 per kg," said Nisha. She lives with her parents and an eight-year-old son in a 90-square-foot hutment where the rent has doubled--from Rs 150 to Rs 300 a month since the pandemic started. "We could barely eat this year," she told IndiaSpend over the phone from her Delhi dwellings in early December 2020.

On some days, Nisha walks 6 km across garbage dumps and littered alleys to Rithala, an industrial area, to find saleable scrap, taking along her "mentally unstable" father as a token male figure for her safety. Her child stays behind with Nisha's mother. "I used to earn a couple of thousand rupees per month earlier and manage somehow," Nisha told IndiaSpend. "From half a kilo of rice [per person] a month, we are down to a quarter kilo now. During the lockdown, there was no work. We could barely eat one meal a day."

Nisha is but one among an estimated 740 million women in the informal economy, globally, whose incomes fell by 60% in the first month of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a September 2020 report by UN Women.

India's capital and its most urban state (97.5% urban), Delhi, reported the lowest labour force participation rate (LFPR) at 33% and the fourth highest unemployment rate (23.3%) during the first three phases of the Unlock from May to August 2020, according to data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE). LFPR

refers to the proportion of all working-age people in India who are either employed or looking for jobs. Unemployment rate is the proportion of people in the labour force who do not have a job. By gender, Delhi's female LFPR is 5.5% compared to the male LFPR of 57%, while female unemployment stands at 47% as against male unemployment of 21%, CMIE data show.

India's LFPR was 50.2% according to PLFS, 2018-19. The pandemic seems to have further pushed people out of work. Between May and August 2020, the LFPR came down to 40.2%, according to CMIE. Labour participation rates for females was 9.3% compared to 67.4% for males. (Urban female – 7.8, rural female – 10.1). Urban female unemployment rate stood at 21.9% compared to 11.7% for urban males.

It's well known globally and within India that women get rationed out of better jobs and out of all jobs when jobs become scarce. "In Delhi, there is an imbalance between aspirants seeking employment (both earlier residents and new migrants) and total job availability, made worse by the economic slowdown (and now of course the pandemic), so women are likely to be disproportionately the losers," said development economist Jayati Ghosh.

In this story, we examine the situation for women workers in the Indian capital--envisioned as a world class city--where employment rates (and attitudes) have been nearly static since 1981. While women's work participation has been long invisibilised, the pandemic hit Delhi's informal workers hard and many women lost jobs. Women in the formal sector also faced difficulties ranging from pay cuts to job losses. The crisis was compounded by an increased burden of unpaid domestic work, revealing broader fault-lines. "In case of Delhi, long commuting hours, work timings and safety issues restrict women's mobility and hinder their workforce participation," explained Sanghamitra Singh, senior manager, Population Foundation of India.

This is the third story in the new edition of our Women@Work series, which seeks to investigate the barriers to women's paid work. The first story explored existing data to analyse the lockdown's effect and how it has exacerbated existing challenges, and the second investigated how gig work has increased women's opportunities and incomes but leaves them vulnerable to the same challenges as the conventional economy -- including the gender pay gap and lack of social security.

Working multiple shifts

Durga Devi, 38, for long a resident of Delhi's Okhla industrial area, works as domestic help in three homes in the adjoining upper middle class neighbourhoods of Nehru Place and Greater Kailash. She lost all three jobs the day the lockdown was announced. "I was working at these homes for over a decade, earning a total Rs 9,000 (\$120 approximately), and suddenly it was over. I was not paid any salary during the lockdown," said the mother of three.

While her husband managed to retain his job as a security guard, the six months

until she was able to resume work were difficult. They had to resort to "shortcuts", eating "one potato instead of two". "My younger children needed a computer to study. We could not afford it, so their education suffered," she told IndiaSpend. Worldwide, 72% of domestic workers, 80% of whom are women, lost jobs because of COVID-19, according to the UN Women report.

Women domestic helpers like Durga Devi are paid to work in other people's homes, but they also have to do all chores in their own homes. Women spend nearly five hours in unpaid domestic work at home compared to just over an hour-and-a-half for men, according to Time Use in India-2019, a survey by the National Statistical Office. Durga Devi wakes up at 5.30 a.m. to finish off cooking and cleaning for her family before starting work at 8.30 a.m. On returning home in the evening, she makes dinner and attends to her children. "I do not get any holidays, even on weekends. When it comes to children's exams or school issues, I have to take the day off from work and I lose pay for it," she told IndiaSpend over the phone.

It is also not surprising to find more women in jobs on the lower income spectrum. "Ragpickers and domestic help are mostly women. There's an increase in informal factory work but women are still a minority, given the broader decline in recognised employment," said Ghosh.

The pandemic has greatly increased the quantum of care work and women bear this unpaid - often unacknowledged - burden. "The lack of economic security along with the increased caregiving burden not only threatens to push many women to quit the labour market permanently but will also significantly compromise their mental and physical health, given the evidence from past epidemics," said Singh. "In Delhi, most jobs are in the service sector requiring higher educational qualifications, which would not be feasible for women from the poorer sections of society."

During the pandemic, not only were women the first to lose jobs but they also experienced 'time poverty'--spending more time at home in unpaid care and domestic work.

"This comes from the fact that women's time is not valued," said Jean Drèze, visiting professor at the Department of Economics, Ranchi University. "Forget technology in cooking and cleaning--for instance, even 40 years ago pressure cookers were not being used widely--but men do not help out much at all. India has the lowest men's participation in domestic work among other developing countries."

Precarious jobs, lives

Mehar-un-Nissa, 30, another resident of Okhla, puts in two hours' overtime whenever available at her 9.30 a.m.-6.30 p.m. embroidery job at a garment export factory these days, owing to an "urgent" shipment. "If I do not work, I will not eat," she said in a matter-of-fact manner. From March to June 2020, Mehar, the sole bread-winner in a family of five, was out of work and the family relied on food aid from volunteers. Her 50-year-old diabetic husband, who suffers chronic knee pain, does not work. She relies on her monthly salary of Rs 6,000 (\$85)--or Rs 7,000 (\$97) when she

clocks in extra hours--to feed her three children and pay the Rs 2,000 rent. "I end up with zero savings. Usually the employer gets us dropped home but on days they do not, I have to take an auto [rickshaw], which is expensive. I hope to find a better job soon," she told IndiaSpend over the phone on a late evening in December as she hurried home from work to cook dinner.

The negative economic impact of the pandemic is expected to have pushed 88 million more people into extreme poverty in 2020, the World Bank said in October. The UN Women report put the number at approximately 96 million people, of whom 47 million are women and girls. The pre-pandemic female poverty rate in South Asia was projected at 10% in 2021, but is now expected to reach 13%, the UN Women report said. By 2030, 18.6% of the world's poor women and girls would be living in South Asia, up by 2.8 percentage points from pre-pandemic projections. In 2021, there will be 118 women in poverty for every 100 men globally, rising to a possible 121:100 by 2030, according to UN Women.

Gender problem remains

Even after 73 years of Independence, the biggest barrier to women's work in India remains the gender construction of society. Barriers include not just not recognising the work women do, but also working conditions and division of labour. "Much of women's economic activity is invisibilised," said Ghosh. Cultural barriers "vary from state to state and region to region", she said, adding that southern India is very different to the north, for example.

Another major problem is physical security--the ease of getting to the workplace and getting back. "Girls are not sent to school after a certain age in rural areas, because they are limited by how far they can travel. It is also a matter of control that you cannot move without the permission of the household. Mobility has a big element of control to it," said Ghosh. Delhi is not very different where transport and commuting are concerned, noted Singh of the Population Foundation of India, thereby hampering women's opportunities.

These barriers are not restricted to women in rural areas or lower income strata. A resident of Gurugram in Haryana, Divya Seshan, 42, a human resource professional and a single mother, lost her job during the lockdown. "It was a start-up that was not paying me on time and when the crisis hit, the salary simply stopped coming," she said. Seshan managed to find another job after a while, but it came with a 40% pay cut. "I have 15 years of experience, and the first question they asked me was, 'Will you be stable in the job, given your age and a child?' They would never ask this of a man in a similar situation." While working from home during the lockdown, Seshan was asked who would cook, clean and manage her son's studies. "While there are hurdles to every step of women's work in India, there's a 'caste system' even within that," she said. "For instance, given a choice, employers prefer a single woman to a single mother."

Ghosh points out that these examples of intersectionality are an important barrier

to highlight. "Look at how the middle class reacted to their domestic workers during COVID-19. During the worst of the pandemic, they were not paid or allowed into the house. When allowed in, they were seen suspiciously by the women of the house," said Ghosh.

"Whether it is the government authorities preferring to use my ex-husband's name, prefixed with 'Late' (though he is not dead), instead of mine on my son's forms, to loan officials ignoring my collateral security [of a self-owned apartment] and badgering me about a back-up income, a consultant advising me to get a grooming session for a job interview (why does one need to look glamorous for an HR position?), to a ground floor neighbour fixing a camera to keep an eye on my guests... there has to be a paradigm shift in how the Indian society views its working women," asserted Seshan.

Meanwhile, for the most vulnerable--a majority--in this struggle, it is still a fight for basics. "There are times I feel like having curd or milk, but cannot afford it," rued Nisha, the ragpicker. "If I were a man, I could have done any kind of work, like lifting heavy things on a construction site."

WOMEN RUN FEWER THAN 13% OF INDIA'S SMALL BUSINESSES.
HERE'S WHY

<https://www.indiaspend.com/women/women-run-fewer-than-13-of-indias-small-businesses-heres-why-731610>

LACK OF MENTORING, NETWORKING HOLD BACK WOMEN
ENTREPRENEURS

<https://www.indiaspend.com/women/lack-of-mentoring-networking-hold-back-women-entrepreneurs-731691>

'I CAN'T EARN MORE THAN RS 125 A DAY NO MATTER HOW HARD I WORK'
<https://www.indiaspend.com/womenwork/women-informal-work-poor-wages-gender-bias-738687>

SHORTLISTED STORY

AS OCEAN EMPTIES, SENEGAL'S FISHERMEN RISK SEAS FOR NEW LIFE IN EUROPE

Shola Lawal (Nigeria)



A freelance journalist and filmmaker, Shola has written extensively on conflict and civil rights, climate change, and the environment as well as gender issues. Her work has appeared in The New York Times, the Boston Globe and the Christian Science Monitor. Shola was awarded the Elizabeth Neuffer Fellow in 2019, which took her to MIT and Harvard as a visiting researcher and to The New York Times as a trainee. In 2020, she took the European Union Lorenzo Natali Media Prize for Best Emerging Journalist for her reporting from Mexico, which delved into the conditions of migrants risking dangerous conditions to get from Latin America to the United States. As a filmmaker, she has produced a short documentary, "Ile Ifa," which chronicles the discrimination faced by religious minorities in Nigeria. The film premiered at MIT's Center for International Studies in January 2020. Her first audio project - a podcast produced from Lagos - will be published in the first quarter of 2022. Shola has received a bachelor's and master's degree in Mass Communication from the University of Lagos.

AS OCEAN EMPTIES, SENEGAL'S FISHERMEN RISK SEAS FOR NEW LIFE IN EUROPE

By Shola Lawal

The Christian Science Monitor — January 14, 2021

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2021/0114/As-ocean-empties-Senegal-s-fishermen-risk-seas-for-new-life-in-Europe>

Pointe Sarène, Senegal — The ghosts often seemed to come after six in the evening. From where he sat in the cramped boat, Ababacar Mbaye watched the minds of the men with whom he had left the coast of Senegal start to run mad, the effect of seeing nothing but miles of sea for days and hearing only the waves.

One man said he saw his home in the sea. Another was sure ghosts were on the boat. Both had to be tied down to keep them from jumping overboard. A fisherman, Mr. Mbaye is no stranger to the sea, but even he felt the strain after days without food. It was the thought of a better life in Europe that kept the father of five's hopes up.

But after a week at sea, just as the boat was closing in on Spain's Canary Islands, violent winds forced the men to dock in a Mauritanian village, their mission a failed one. Of the 88 who had boarded, 17 died from hunger, including two young boys who lived close to Mr. Mbaye's home.

Why we wrote this

Messages to deter would-be migrants emphasize the danger of the journey. But as the pandemic's economic fallout intensifies, thousands are willing to risk it. Sometimes more than once.

That was in November. Now, he wants to try again.

"When we fishermen leave, it is because we can no longer live from our boats,"

explains Mr. Mbaye, dressed in a traditional gray caftan embroidered in white lace, as he stands on the beach in the western Senegal village of Pointe Sarène. “When you go to sea, you witness someone dying, you hold your friends in your lap as they are dying and you come back and try again. People should realize that what you’re going through is making you desperate.”

Mr. Mbaye is one of thousands of Africans to brave Atlantic voyages in recent months, seeking a better life abroad as the COVID-19 pandemic batters livelihoods at home. More and more aim for the Canary Islands, a one-week journey away. For West Africans, the territory halfway between Senegal and mainland Spain is Europe’s closest foothold.

Despite fears about weak health care, COVID-19 rates have been low across the continent. Most African countries were swift to act, shutting down borders and businesses. But the resulting market downturns have dealt severe blows, accelerating migration rates even further – especially among workers in Senegal’s fisheries sector, which employs about 1 in 6 workers.

Ababacar Mbaye, photographed in Pointe Sarene, Senegal, in December, tried to reach the Canary Islands in November. He barely survived, but the father of five says he’s willing to try the perilous voyage again.

For years, fishermen have complained of depleted stocks due to overfishing, in part by foreign trawlers. Tons of the fish harvested in these waters are bound for some of the same countries migrants now risk their lives to reach. Last spring, pandemic lockdowns cut his income so badly that it became the final straw, Mr. Mbaye says, pushing him to exile himself or die trying.

The story is similar across the continent. According to the World Bank, 45% of households in sub-Saharan Africa report being worried about hunger, in a region where nearly 250 million already faced food insecurity due to a cocktail of conflict, climate shocks, and locusts.

Now, West Africans are arriving in the Canary Islands in numbers that stun experts. The Atlantic migration route is “the deadliest” because of the distance and turbulent seas, according to Michele Bombassei, who works for the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in the Senegalese capital, Dakar. Since 2006, most migrants have taken their chances on the Mediterranean, but as the pandemic has shut land borders, closing off access to departure ports in Libya and elsewhere, the numbers taking to the Atlantic Ocean have skyrocketed.

About 20,000 migrants arrived in the Canary Islands in 2020, and more than 500 are reported to have died at sea.

Nothing to do in Pointe Sarène

Some of those who make it to the Canary Islands leave from Senegal’s Pointe Sarène, the breezy fishing village two hours south of Dakar, where the sea laps lazily at the sandy shore and children play in the streets all day.

At 10 a.m. on a weekday, the beach is unnaturally quiet. The docks have reopened as COVID-19 restrictions ease, but only a few young fishermen are out working. There’s rarely a good catch these days, Mr. Mbaye points out, crouching on the beach.

Five or six years ago, “we would take a little ride and we would catch enough fish to provide for our family and sell,” says Momodou Ngom, a friend of Mr. Mbaye’s who traveled beside him on the failed bid to reach Spain. “Now you see fishermen at sea for three days and you cannot even sell something worth 5,000 CFA [\$9].”

The pair planned to get jobs in agriculture or on construction sites in Spain, where they could easily make 10 times their usual income, friends who had migrated told them. Economic reasons may be uppermost in the minds of the predominantly young men who make the dangerous journey, but they are not the only reasons, Mr. Bombassei of the IOM says.

“We tend to think these migrants leave because they don’t have anything, but that idea needs to be adjusted. These are not the wealthiest people but they are also not the poorest,” Mr. Bombassei says. “In some communities, the social status of those who have refused to migrate is so affected that they find it difficult to find a wife because the women don’t consider them respectable.”

Men have to take opportunities to help their families, says Mr. Mbaye’s sister Fatou, who sells fish at the Pointe Sarène market. Women are starting to join expeditions too, she adds. Why shouldn’t the men go?

Back to sea

Before Mr. Mbaye and his friend left in November, they sold their fishing boats to pay the smugglers’ 350,000 CFA (\$650) fee. They boarded dug-out canoes, joining a bigger boat far out at sea to avoid Senegalese and Spanish naval patrol boats.

That migrants should be hounded by surveillance ships from Europe is painfully ironic, residents of Pointe Sarène say, because foreign trawlers have contributed to depleting their waters.

For two decades, the European Union has signed fishing deals with Senegal, and

France and Spain are allowed to harvest thousands of tons of tuna and hake from Senegalese waters. And for almost as long, since 2006, Senegal has had agreements with Spain to enforce maritime controls and reduce migrant numbers.

Although the protocol signed claims to advocate sustainable fishing and protect local fishermen, sea activists have complained of massive illegal fishing in West African waters by Asian and European trawlers.

Mutala Cisse, who is 60, says he can't retire because he lost his son to the sea route a few years ago. But young men have little choice, he adds. "I'd like to tell these young men to stay and work but there's nothing to do," Mr. Cisse says. "I want the government to come and help them."

There is little local authorities can do about international fisheries treaties, says Mor Fassa Ndiaye, a local government official. And though his office has carried out several campaigns about the dangers of journeying north by sea, numbers keep surging, he says, because migrants "are calling each other to say, 'They may need workers in Spain. See how they have been affected [by COVID-19]. They may need more workers now so let's go.'"

Some of the migrants embarking on the perilous journey are heartbreakingly young. Fourteen-year-old Doudou died en route for the Canaries last October; in response, a judge sentenced Doudou's father, along with two others, to a two-year jail term for sending their underage kids on the turbulent voyage. Authorities hope the sentencing will deter other families from taking the same steps.

President Macky Sall has launched several initiatives to distribute money and food to people impacted by the lockdown, and his government has refused to allow more Chinese fishing trawlers to operate in Senegalese waters. But depleted fisheries and inadequate education and job opportunities will keep pushing men like Mr. Mbaye to migrate illegally, Mr. Bombassei says.

What's more, "there are few ways for West Africans without contacts in Europe" to migrate legally, he adds. European countries should consider migration more positively, he says, taking account of the role that migrants' remittances play in spurring local development in their home countries.

In November, Senegalese officials met the Spanish foreign minister to discuss the launch of employment schemes to allow more Senegalese to migrate legally. That gives him some hope, Mr. Mbaye says, but since his return, shame has pressed in from all sides.

When he left, villagers awaited news that he had reached Europe. Now he is mocked, he says, the mark of failure permanently stamped on him. His options have gotten

even slimmer because he is cash-strapped, but once he gathers some money, he wants to try again.

"I am praying that things get better," Mr. Mbaye says. "If they do I will settle here, but if they don't, I am nowhere near scared, because I've been at sea all my life."

SHORTLISTED STORY

AFRICA, A FUTURE WITH NAMES AND SURNAMES

Xavier Aldekoa, Alfons Rodríguez (Spain)



Journalist Xavier Aldekoa (Barcelona, 1981) has been working as a correspondent in Africa for newspaper La Vanguardia and as a freelancer for 20 years in 50 african countries. His work has been published in National Geographic, Gatopardo and several Spanish outlets. In 2014 he debuted as an author, and has since published three books on the African Continent: Océano África (9th edition), Hijos de Nilo (4th edition) and Indestructibles (2nd edition). In 2015, he co-founded the 5W magazine, dedicated to international journalism and long distance articles and he is on charge of the African section of the magazine. His work has been recognized with several nacional and International awards.



During the last 30 years, Alfons has been travelling across more than 100 countries, reporting about topics mainly based in documentary and social ranges. His work have been published in several international media like National Geographic Magazine, Le Monde Diplomatique, Der Spiegel, La Repubblica, Vogue, Geo, Traveler CN, The Courier, El Mundo, La Vanguardia, El País, The British Journal of Photography, Lens New York Times, 5W Magazine, Gatopardo or Jot Down. He has collaborated with United Nations, UNICEF, UNHCR, Médecins Sans Frontières, Action Contre la Faim, OXFAM, European Observatory on Memories and other international organizations. His work have been awarded internationally and captured in several books, just as exhibited in cities around Europe, America and Asia.

AFRICA, A FUTURE WITH NAMES AND SURNAMES

By Xavier Aldekoa. Photos: Alfons Rodríguez

National Geographic — October 1, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:

https://www.nationalgeographic.com.es/edicion-impresa/articulos/africa-futuro-nombres-y-apellidos_16512

English Translation

Ten stories of boys and girls from ten African countries to analyze the challenges and achievements of the youngest continent.

In Gambo, life and death are a snap away. The sound of happiness still echoes in the delivery room of a rural hospital, 240 km south of the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, when everything goes wrong. The white coats of the doctors fly down the hall and Hawi Merga, 28 years old, cries because she anticipates the pain: her daughter Jamila, born an hour earlier, has a lung infection and dies. After reviving the girl's heart, a doctor runs with her in his arms to the intensive care room. Anguish makes the air in the room sticky, and every beep from the incubator, every breath of oxygen blown from a bellows into Jamila's tender lungs, sounds like a last chance. And suddenly, poverty: the power goes out. The generator thunders, but the hospital only has the resources to keep it running until midnight and then the incubators will shut down until the next morning. Kedir Ogato, one of the health workers who attended the delivery, bites his lip.

"If the light isn't restored, then she will have hardly any chance."

That Jamila's chances of survival are a coin toss is not uncommon. Although neonatal mortality has been reduced in Africa - in 15 years the figure has dropped by 38%, according to the World Health Organization - each year 300,000 babies die during childbirth and 1.16 million more during their first day of life. Inequality begins at that zero minute: a baby is 10 times more likely to die in its first 24 hours of life in Africa than in a Western country. It could be avoided. Two-thirds of those deaths are due to poor quality healthcare or infections. Ethiopia, the second most populous African country with 109 million inhabitants, resists that written fate. Despite the fact that it is still an unsafe country to give birth, in three decades it has halved neonatal deaths. Its strategy has consisted in creating a health network with

different levels of care, an awareness plan against home births and the training of 38,000 new health workers.

If around midnight Jamila's life is still hanging by a thread, it is because of that slow but constant reinforcement of the Ethiopian health system. If, as it happened with her two brothers, she had been born at home, she would already be dead. At ten minutes to twelve, the doctors resignedly begin preparations to remove the girl from her protective shell and Hawi puts his hands to his face. Sighs. Then the miracle happens. There is a click and the electricity returns. Jamila is still in the incubator, fighting.

The battle for Jamila's survival is that of an entire continent. The region of the planet where more babies are born in the world is already the youngest, with an average age of 18 years, while in Europe it is 42 years. Africa is the future: advances in education, health and women's rights or the irruption of technology has already begun to transform the African reality. The result is an explosion of life. Since 1960, when a wave of independence shook the continent, life expectancy has gone from 40 to 61 years and the population from 283 to 1.34 billion. But the African continent also has shadows. Even today, millions of Africans suffer the ravages of war, jihadism, poverty or climate change. A look at his childhood allows us to dwell on the challenges and achievements of a complex, diverse and constantly evolving continent.

Stolen childhoods

Deep in the eastern jungle of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 12-year-old Gloire Mishiki and Rodrigue Masudi are one of the deepest scars. Both are protagonists of one of the 16 armed conflicts in Africa. There are 34 in the world. Gloire and Rodrigue are child soldiers and three years ago they exchanged their childhood for a Kaláshnikov. It is noon, the sun drenches the temples and a cry breaks the calm: Go for them, now! They both hurl themselves like a broken tree into tall grass, staring at a ravine at the end of an esplanade, and clutching their weapons. All around him, adult screams: "Move forward! Without fear! Shoot!". The two children progress crouched but with a calm look of someone who knows that today he won't die or kill: it is a military drill. A military exercise of the Movement for Action for Change (MAC), one of the more than 70 active rebel groups in the country. At his side, militiamen dressed in torn T-shirts and in flip-flops, scrawny men who get drunk at night and frighten civilians, shoot an imaginary enemy in a gesture that encapsulates the pathos of a war suspended since the signing 18 years ago of a hollow peace: they raise their weapons, aim and make the sound of bullets with their mouths. There is no money to waste. Bum Bum bum. Ratatatatá. Pam Pam.

Rodrigue and Gloire are child soldiers and must give their lives for the leader. They have no alternative. They belong to the personal guard of General Mbura, leader of the MAC, since some armed men from the FDLR, made up of former perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide who fled to Congo, stormed his village and killed his parents. Mbura, 34, claims that his group is defensive and that his child soldiers - recruiting children under 15 is a war crime - are so because of their generosity: "Because of what happened to them, they became volunteers. What can I tell you? I take care of them".

According to a UN report, there are 12,000 child soldiers in the world, half in Africa, although the agency admits that its survey only indicates verified cases and that the real figure is much higher. In 2003, an analysis by a coalition of international organizations denounced that in Africa alone there were more than 100,000 child soldiers. In addition to the DRC, they currently exist in South Sudan, Somalia, Libya, the Central African Republic, and in the conflicts in the Sahel or Lake Chad. Unaware, manipulable and replaceable, children are perfect soldiers in low intensity wars, where they fight to maintain a militarized economy of prey, that feeds on the blood and fear of others to control the black market of weapons, minerals or people.

Gloire and Rodrigue are the weakest link in that chain. At first, Rodrigue is suspicious and seals any question with elusive answers. Until one morning, when on a reconnaissance outing he comes across some children in school uniforms, he explodes and spits words sharp as razors:

"Why did I join the MAC? I want to go back to school, but I don't have anyone who can pay for me. The person who paid for me, is already dead".

Although, the hopelessness of child soldiers is not the whole picture. Heritier Jackson, 17, is the other side of the coin. Like him, from 2015 to 2018, 17,141 minors were released from Congolese armed groups. Since then, Heritier finds that only the trickling sound of water on rocks calms the demons. When the past haunts him and keeps him from sleeping, he approaches the shore of Lake Kivu and gazes at the horizon in silence. From the age of eleven to fifteen, he fought under General Mbura in the MAC until he fled: he stole ten cartridges, ordered three eleven-year-old soldiers under his charge to follow him and surrendered with them to a base in UN blue helmets. The ten bullets were proof that he was not lying; the three children, an intimate attempt at absolution.

"At that time, I had the rank of captain and several child soldiers under my command. I took those three because they were eleven years old, like I was when I started. I was afraid that they would snitch, but I wanted to save them. I do not know why".

Media attention, especially in Africa, tends to focus on the guerrilla, the murderer, the executioner or savagery. But when war and hatred eat away at the foundations of a country, when violence becomes a form of survival there are still millions of Africans who risk acting like human beings by helping others. Djibrine Mbodou, 17, is one of them. He was kidnapped for a year and a half in Lake Chad, a border area between Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger and Chadian territory, where the jihadist band Boko Haram takes refuge, whose name in the Hausa language translates as "Western education is a sin." In the last eleven years, the fundamentalist group, which emerged in the Nigerian north and that seeks to impose a radical vision of sharia, has caused a carnage with 37,500 dead, 2.5 million displaced and thousands of kidnappings, the 219 girls of Chibok among them. Djibrine trembles as she remembers the night she first saw them. When the bearded men entered the island of Galoa, they varnished their message with blood: they gathered everyone in the center of the village, slit the throat of the village chief and kidnapped the 700 residents.

The weeks that followed were a chaotic frenzy of starvation and summary executions for any reason. From stealing an egg to praying inadequately. Then they made an irrefutable offer to young people like Djibrine. If they took a rifle and enlisted, their suffering would end because they would participate in the looting and they could even choose a wife from among the hostages. As the alternative was a likely death, many joined. Not Djibrine. "I am just a fisherman, I am not a murderer. "I fished for them, but I knew that my only way out was to flee".

Djibrine endured the terror of the whipping when he returned without enough fish in the net until one day he left with the canoe and as soon as he stepped onto dry land, he started to run. If they caught him, he had seen this before, they would slit his throat.

Now Djibrine watches his life go by in the Chadian village of Melea, dotted with straw huts on the mainland of refugees like him, where humanitarian organizations are hardly present and the sun transforms the breeze into a warm cotton ball that sticks to your neck. For Djibrine, her life on that site is a victory.

"I am proud to have come here like this." Without killing anyone.

A step for African woman.

There is a different Africa, peaceful and enjoying social achievements. Here women are the highest stake.

Giovanna Delgado Durão, a 12-year-old Cape Verdean girl, is determined to change her inevitable destiny as a housewife in her 270-inhabitant fishing village of Monte Trigo for a future as a singer. The reason? Seven years ago, a local company installed solar panels over the school and brought electricity to the houses for the first time. There is a continental revolution underway: in the last five years, 23 million Africans have had access to solar energy and there will be 250 million in 2030. In Monte Trigo, light has changed the lives of everyone, from the fishermen who can freeze their catch instead of selling them off cheaply, to those who discover the world through their television sets, and now Giovanna in particular. As her uncle can now plug in the radio and play music (previously the poor family economy did not allow buying batteries), music floods the living room and feeds the girl's dreams of emulating Cesária Evora.

"I would like to be a professional artist; sing, travel and see the world."

The ability to imagine another life not only comes from the backlog of technological development such as the irruption of renewable energies or the introduction of mobile phones - Africa is the region where its use is increasing the most (600 million subscribers) or payments from digital banking (450 million accounts) - it also arises from basic concepts such as education and equality. Although African women still have fewer rights than men and there is a wide wage gap due to the fact that they earn on average a third less for the same work and only 15% own the land they cultivate, access to education for girls has increased. No other place in the world has

seen greater growth in female access to primary education. If in 1970 one in every two African women under the age of 24 was illiterate, today the figure is one in five.

The clicks of a few cameras portray that trend. Hawa Faye and Catherine Bassen, 19 and 18, melt into the bustle of the sunset on Tanji Beach in southern Gambia as the fishermen return to sell their catch after spending the day at sea. They observe, frame and photograph every detail. Click, click. When discovered, the young men of the fishing vessels and the stall vendors on the sand stare in disbelief. The girls puff their chests out with pride and smile. Click.

"Photography empowers us," says Hawa, "sometimes I'm embarrassed when I ask to take a photo and they say no, but the camera makes me feel strong."

Both are the youngest students in the first photography course at the Fandema training center for women, in neighboring Tujereng, and they seek to find a place in a historically male profession. They are not naive.

"I know there are hardly any female photographers and it is difficult," Catherine emphasizes. That used to scare me, but not anymore."

The courage that Hawa and Catherine display travels a path which has been opened by others. In recent years, the political representation of African women has doubled, already occupying 24.4% of parliamentary seats while in 2002 they did not reach 11%. The figure is lower than that of Europe (29.9%), but it is above those of Asia, the Middle East and the Pacific. The greater presence of women in decision-making positions is noticeable. According to the World Bank, in the last decade Africa has carried out more reforms - 71 in total - to promote gender equality than any other region on the planet.

The feminist turnaround on the continent has not come in time for many. In the village of Bad Munu, in northern Uganda, the parents of 13-year-old Margaret Ayo have just agreed to marry Joseph Okot, a boy twice her age, in exchange for a dowry of cash and cows. In just a few days, Margaret has gone from playing with her friends, to running a household and serving her husband, whom she had only met a few times before. "This is my life now," she says. Their lives. Every year, three million girls are forced into marrying adult men in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Margaret has long eyelashes, a candid gaze, and an adolescent figure. She seems fragile but she is not. After a week she dusts off her reservations and rises up in a whirlwind. She protests even in front of her husband.

"This is wrong, huh? A girl should be a girl, she should be able to finish her childhood, that would be the right thing to do. If in the future God gives me the gift of having daughters, I would like to be with them and that they will not marry so young".

Sitting at the other end of the hut, Joseph looks at her and lowers his head. He makes furrows with his fingers in the sand and nods.

Beyond its probability of success, Margaret's rebellion heralds changes. Although

she knows that in a rural context like hers it is difficult to avoid customs, Margaret has hatched a plan: she wants her daughters to go to school. It's the key. Each additional year of secondary education reduces the risk of marrying whilst still children, or giving birth before the age of 18 by 7.5% on average.

Perseverance in the face of obstacles

Like a weapon of massive construction, education will define the future of the entire continent. There are two stones on the road: poverty and the sun. The continent that produces the least CO2 in the world is the one that will suffer the most from the consequences of global warming. According to the World Bank, 60% of the 143 million inhabitants of the world will be Africans who in 2050 will leave their homes due to droughts, the advance of the desert or the multiplication of extreme meteorological phenomena. For Marceline Razanantsoa, 15, the impact of climate change will not come tomorrow, it is here now. She studies in Betafo, in the highlands of Madagascar and wants to be a teacher, but the increase in typhoons and floods, coupled with the erosion of the roads by the illegal cutting of trees, whose roots have stopped supporting the land, keep her away from school. Literally.

Before the road was accessible because it went through another valley, but now it is full of holes and you cannot go through. The new road is longer and when it rains it collapses.

The thorny future of millions of Africans has a common denominator. From the stomach rumbling of Kandji Diallo, grandson of the sorcerer from a village in western Mali, to the unwavering tenacity of being a seamstress in Guinea Bissau of Paulo Nenque, one of the 52 million African orphans, or the helplessness of José Albino, a street child in the Mozambican city of Beira, economic hardship is at the core of millions of mangled lives. Centuries of international exploitation and decades of poor governance, with unsustainable corruption rates, have left millions of people without a network. Although poverty has been reduced in percentage terms in Africa —from 54.7% in 1990 to 41.4% today—, if the same standards are established in Western countries, where those who earn less than \$ 5.50 per day are poor, the 85% of Africans are below that income figure.

As she makes her way down a slippery gorge toward her Malagasy school, Marceline refuses to be defined by her empty pockets. Now it takes her two hours to go to school and another two hours to return, and she can only do her homework in the evening, when she finishes housework and caring for the animals. In the absence of a desk, she writes the essays on her knees on the floor, by the light of a flashlight while the others sleep. But she, like the rest of the continent, resists being reduced to injury, trauma, or hardship. In the morning, Marceline avoids a gap in the road by jumping between two stones and when asked for alternatives if she cannot be a teacher, she stops in her tracks.

"I'll be a teacher, you'll see." I know it's difficult, but that's the way things have always been here.

MESSAGE FROM EXPERT



ZAFFAR ABBAS

FJA Expert Council Member

Editor of Dawn

Chairman of "Editors for Safety"

Member of the Executive Board, International Press Institute

“Even when I agreed to be on the panel to shortlist the entries for the Fetisov Journalism Awards, I remained sceptical about the submissions, not least because often those behind some of the real investigative work rarely submit their stories. I'm glad to say I was wrong.

Going through the entries, including those from a number of places in Africa and South Asia, I found investigative articles that were simply outstanding — comprehensive and detailed news reports dealing with diverse subjects, ranging from police excesses and extra-judicial killings to sexual abuse and prostitution rings.

They were so thorough, professional and driven by such dedication, that it made me believe once again that investigative journalism is not only alive, but also able to make a genuine difference to peoples' lives. This wonderful initiative by the FJA is bound to improve the quality of journalism everywhere and particularly in developing countries.”

EXCELLENCE IN ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM

By Aidan White

As this report for the Fetisov Journalism Awards goes to press there have been yet more warnings concerning the stark realities of the climate crisis, such as loss of biodiversity and plastic pollution, and the entries this year have included some stylish, emotional and compelling stories of the environmental challenges we face.

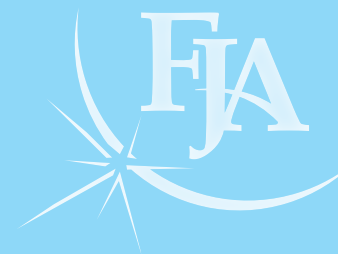
The perilous state of the global environment, for example, is underscored by the ubiquitous presence of plastic materials on land and sea. As one contributor on the shortlist points out, this will remain a potent threat to humanity and our marine ecosystems for decades to come, as plastic is hardly ever recycled.

Another asks a powerful question about our approach to conservation, when our enthusiasm to halt biodiversity loss leads to grand projects that have a darker side – causing hardship and weakening the human rights of people living in affected areas in Africa, for example.

Other entries focus on the consequences of moving away from fossil fuels – just what happens, for example, to the millions of gas and oil wells we've drilled and left behind? And how Bangladesh, one country in the firing line, struggles to cope with the raging whirlwinds and floodwaters that come with climate change.

The first prize was not awarded to anyone this time, as there was a withdrawal of the winning article after the results of the competition were finalized and verified.

The second prize was shared by two teams in accordance with the results of the contest.



EXCELLENCE IN ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM



SECOND PRIZE WINNER

SERIES OF ARTICLES:

Drawing a Line in the Sand;
Permit to Plunder: How the Environment is Paying the Price
for Nepal Local Governments' Greed;
Environment Conservation Takes a Back Seat in the Budget

Bhrikuti Rai (Nepal)



Bhrikuti is a multimedia journalist from Kathmandu, Nepal. During her decade-long career, she has reported extensively on environment, technology and human rights. Bhrikuti loves all things audio and is co-creator of the feminist podcast Boju Bajai, which she started in 2016 with Itisha Giri. Her work has appeared in several Nepali and international media including, Nepali Times, The Kathmandu Post, Los Angeles Times and Radiolab. She holds a Masters degree in journalism from Columbia University. As a Bertha fellow in 2020, she reported on the impact of sand mining in Nepal's rivers.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Bhrikuti Rai (Nepal) is recognized for her series of reports *Drawing a Line in the Sand: Permit to Plunder*. This year-long investigation yielded a rich fact-filled expose of how river mining in Nepal has been a disaster for the environment, as well as for the people and communities whose families and livelihoods depend upon access to the rivers.

These articles look under the surface of a river mining industry out of control, adding to environmental threats and pollution while being ruthless in its approach to dealing with protests from local communities.

There are detailed reporting of beatings, threats to protesters and people killed for speaking out. This provides a grim context for the development of a lucrative business that has also led to potentially corrupt relations between local elected officials and the construction industry.

The result is further evidence that while the world is now wide awake to the dangers of climate change and the need to protect our environment, major battles on the ground have yet to be won.

DRAWING A LINE IN THE SAND

By Bhrikuti Rai

Nepali Times — January 8, 2021

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://nepalitimes.com/drawing-a-line-in-the-sand/index.php>

A year after Dilip Mahato was killed by the sand mafia, his family still seeks justice, and illegal mining continues unabated.

Each time Sangam Mahato passes the excavators scooping up sand from the Aurahi River, it brings back painful memories of her brother, Om Prakash. Also known as 'Dilip', her brother had been protesting illegal sand mining, and pushing for the conservation of the ecologically fragile Chure Hills.

Dilip was murdered on 10 January 2020, crushed beneath the wheels of a tipper truck. He was only 24.

"My brother had been in arguments with contractors who he believed were destroying the Chure and the rivers nearby with uncontrolled excavation," recalls Sangam. "But we never thought that his activism would cost him his life."

Dilip's murder made headlines. His body had cuts from a sharp iron rod, and deep injuries from being run over. Social media was filled with 'Justice for Dilip' posts. Everyone, from former president Ram Baran Yadav to Members of Parliament, condemned Dilip's murder and vowed to protect the Chure.

After the crime, on 13 January the Province 2 government said it would put an end to all illegal riverbed mining and handed half a million rupees to the Mahato family for their loss. But a year on, the spotlight has moved on to other injustices. The local and national governments are struggling to control the Covid-19 pandemic, Nepal is in a full-fledged political crisis, and the rampant destruction of the Chure has resumed.

Dilip was an engineering student at college in India and had come home for his holidays. Seeing his community suffer from the consequences of uncontrolled riverbed mining, he had become an environmental activist.

Deforestation and mining were drying up water sources, the ground water table was receding, and in the monsoon the flooded rivers destroyed homesteads and farms. Forest cover in the Chure, which makes up 15% of Nepal's area, is vital for groundwater recharge in the Tarai. The sand and boulders in the floodplains slow the velocity of rivers in the monsoon.

But not even Dilip's death and the ensuing public outrage has stopped contractors from mining the river beds and hills for sand, aggregates and boulders to feed a booming construction industry.

"Earlier, we only had to dig about 20 metres to install a hand pump, but now we have to look for water as deep as 100 metres, and even that does not guarantee water supply for more than a year or two," says Dhanusa activist Dev Narayan Mandal. "The water scarcity here in the dry season is as bad as in a city like Kathmandu."

It is in Province 2 that the consequences of the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources are most acute, and are further burdening an already impoverished region. The province ranks among the lowest on the Human Development Index.

In a 2018 report by the National Planning Commission, Province 2 fared the worst nationally. It said: 'roughly half of the population is poor ... the intensity of deprivation is higher in Province 2 than it is nationally'.

Rampant riverbed mining for sand and boulders have also made the rivers downstream increasingly destructive, breaching their banks and destroying farmlands and villages. While water is in short supply during the dry season, floods and landslides are becoming common in the summer and the monsoon.

According to the Home Ministry, nearly 200 people have lost their lives to floods just in the eight districts of Province 2 in the last decade and thousands of families have lost their homes and property to inundation.

Nor any drop to drink

Digambarpur in Chhireshwarnath municipality is a quiet village on the banks of the Jallad River in Dhanusa. The settlement's 900-odd households are spread out next to sprawling green fields where farmers grow sugarcane, mustard and an assortment of vegetables, from cauliflower to eggplant. The produce is consumed locally, and also sold to the nearby towns of Janakpur and Bardibas.

But with each passing year, growing crops in Digambarpur's fertile soil has become more difficult, and expensive. Despite being situated less than 500m away from the Jallad River, which has its source to the north in the Chure, the once-abundant water sources have dried up. For water-intensive crops like sugarcane, not having reliable irrigation means that much of the cash crop dries up before it can be harvested.

Now, black plastic pipes connected to water pumps jostle for space at the openings of deep wells beside each home, a stark reminder of the water shortage in the plains.

Besides the bigger rivers that flow down from the mountains, Province 2 has more than two dozen rivers and rivulets flowing through its eight districts from the Chure. They have irrigated some of Nepal's most fertile agricultural land. But that might soon be changing.

Ward chair Asheshwar Mahato of Chhireshwarnath 5 in Dhanusa blames deforestation in the Chure, and the wholesale exploitation of the province's rivers for the water scarcity. He says he has been able to limit the use of heavy machinery in his ward.

Just a few kilometres away in Ward 7, however, excavators are digging up the riverbed nearly lowering it by 6m — almost five times more than government guidelines. This has resulted almost directly to a reduction to the water table in the region, according to locals.

Ram Devi Tachamo Shah is a river ecologist at Kathmandu University who has studied the effects of resource extraction on large rivers like the Rapti. Drawing out large quantities of sand and pebbles means riverbeds lose their ability to retain water, which is crucial for groundwater recharge.

“What we see now is just layers of loose material like clay, which cannot hold water and simply flushes whatever passes through,” Shah says.

These signs are already visible in Digambarpur. Ward chair Mahato says: “Our wells have all dried up, now we have to dig up to 150m and use commercial water pumps to irrigate our fields.”

Moving between rows of cauliflowers in full bloom, Gulab Devi Shah deftly cuts off their heads with a large knife, leaving the green leaves in place. But this harvest has come at a steep price. She pays nearly Rs4,000 each month just on electricity bills for a water pump that irrigates her small patch of land during the dry season. These bills eat up a quarter of her profits from annual cauliflower harvest.

“It’s getting harder every year to cover the plantation cost, but we have to pay for pumping the water. There is no other source of income here except farming,” she adds.

Most Digambarpur farmers report the same story. Despite being surrounded by a river, there just is not enough water.

“What was doable for under Rs15,000 using regular motor pumps now requires imported commercial pumps, which are almost five times as expensive and consume much more electricity,” says Ward chair Mahato.

Existing government guidelines aimed at regulating the mining of riverbeds clearly state that industries need to maintain proper standards to protect the environment and the community they operate in, especially along the ecologically-sensitive Chure.

For instance, excavation of sand and pebbles from rivers cannot go deeper than 1m. The guidelines also limit the use of heavy machinery, which adversely impacts riverbeds and risks lowering water tables. Once the mining is over, excavation pits and ditches need to be filled in and levelled. But in districts like Dhanusa and Mahottari, these guidelines are often ignored.

Since being elected to office in 2017, Asheshwar Mahato’s ward has spent close to half a million rupees installing wells and pumps in his constituency, but households still do not have a reliable water supply throughout the year.

“The government’s focus on creating water tanks by spending installing expensive water pumps while allowing exploitation in the Chure to continue is like pouring water into sand,” says journalist and environmental activist Rajkarana Mahato from adjoining Mahottari district.

Bikram Yadav, a local activist from Dhanusa, started the ‘Save Kamala River Campaign’ as he watched the river dying slowly. Along with the Kosi and Bagmati rivers, the Kamala is one of the three primary rivers that start in the mountains and flow across Province 2 into India, providing vital irrigation to farmlands here.

“Drilling deep tube wells isn’t a long-term solution to the growing water shortage, because unless rivers and other water bodies go back to healthy levels, the water table will not recharge,” Yadav says. “For that to happen, we need to overhaul our idea of development, which relies so heavily on sand and pebbles from the rivers.”

Urban expansion in the Tarai, coupled with a growing emphasis on road connectivity, especially since the local elections in 2017, have fuelled demand for sand and aggregates from the rivers.

Nepal is the top importer of heavy earth-moving equipment in South Asia. Backhoe loaders, excavators and wheel loaders facilitate the country’s road building projects, are taking up an ever-growing share of physical infrastructure budgets.

According to the Ministry of Finance, Rs109 billion was earmarked for infrastructure projects in 2018/19, which grew to Rs163 million the following year. This year, the budget allocation was reduced because of the pandemic, but construction projects have continued to be a priority with Rs138 billion, nearly 10% of the federal budget earmarked for infrastructure.

A huge chunk of the provincial governments’ capital expenditure is spent on roads. In 2018/19, Nepal’s seven provinces spent Rs20.14 billion just to build roads and bridges. This is almost 18% of the provincial governments’ total budget. This year, even amidst a raging pandemic, provincial governments earmarked Rs45.33 billion for roads and bridges, almost a third of the total capital expenditure.

Lives lost to negligence

In Mahottari, on the banks of the flood-prone Ratu River, the gouging of sand and pebbles from pits as deep as 8m have left several cavernous ditches deep enough to engulf several vehicles. Government guidelines require these pits to be filled up and trees planted on top once excavation is complete. But they remain wide open, surrounded by weeds, turning into ponds when it rains heavily. Ducks swim lazily in the still waters of these man-made ponds, and in the summer children take dips for respite from the Tarai heat.

But these makeshift swimming pools can turn deadly. Last July, 16-year-old Rohit Mishra of Bardibas drowned in a 6m deep pit left behind by sand miners on the riverbed of the Ratu River. Less than a month later, a boy aged 12 and a 22-year-old man, drowned in abandoned ditches near riverbanks in Dhanusa.

In the last decade, at least a dozen cases have been reported from across the country of people drowning in waterlogged pits left behind by sand mining and crusher companies.

Despite deaths, mining companies, like the Churiya Mai Crusher Factory in Dhanusa,

where Dilip was killed, are rarely penalised. In 2018, the Center for Investigative Journalism (CIJ) reported how companies hush up such cases by paying victims' families compensation money.

These tragedies continue to take place under the watch of elected leaders, many of whom have a stake in the construction industry and allow the excavation to continue unabated, according to Dhanusa-based environmental activist Som Prasad Sharma.

Locals allege that the mayor of Mithila municipality in Dhanusa, Hari Narayan Mahato's family have invested in bulldozers and tippers used by sand mining companies in the district. His son Roshan Mahato is also in the construction business. But Mahato denies this: "These are all baseless allegations. I have nothing to say about them. All the river mining in Mithila municipality is done as per the guidelines."

The cosy relationship between sand mining companies and the authorities was exposed during the most recent local elections.

In Bardibas, businessman Prahlad Chhetri, whose company is one of many that have excavated sand from the Ratu River, contested the 2017 election as a mayoral candidate from the Nepali Congress. Chhetri lost the election but dozens of others like him received tickets from the major political parties and were elected to public office.

A 2018 report in Himal Khabarpatrika showed that a quarter of all elected representatives at the local level have ties to construction companies and sand mining operations. These linkages have made the work of environmental activists even more challenging.

As the chairperson of the Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN) in Province 2, activist Som Prasad has taken up the issue of river conservation with local leaders and policy makers for years now. But he is frustrated by those at the decision-making level who have failed to prioritise Chure conservation and better management of sand mining.

"When we question elected leaders about the illegal mining happening under their watch, they shrug off the criticism saying they have given out contracts to these companies following due process and call for a tender," Prasad says.

Last May, a parliament committee inspection team, led by assembly member Ram Chandra Mandal, visited mining sites along the Ratu River that contradicted guidelines, but no action was taken and the companies continue to operate, he adds.

Despite mining rules and regulations in place, authorities responsible for regulating these industries have not been able to monitor the toll mining is taking on the environment.

Last year, when Dilip Mahato was murdered, Province 2 had already issued a directive mandating industries to strictly follow conservation guidelines and safeguard the welfare of local communities. But companies are openly mining rivers without permission, or beyond the permissible limit, explains Som Prasad.

Often, even elected leaders find their hands tied. Falgun Magar, Ward chair of Bardibas 7, is among the few elected leaders who have made stopping uncontrolled sand mining a priority, but without much success. He acknowledges the rampant illegal sand mining in the rivers, but says the contractors with political connections are too powerful.

As ward chair, he says his authority and resources are limited, despite the looming threat of environmental destruction in his constituency caused by unregulated mining.

"This year, we made a decision that we wouldn't call for tenders for rivers in our ward because mining would flood nearby villages," Magar says. "But the Bardibas Municipality didn't listen and went ahead with the tender because they see the rivers only as a source of revenue."

In two years since taking office, he says he has written to the Bardibas Municipality multiple times, but to his frustration there has been no action. "We are doing whatever we can at the Ward level but it is up to the Municipality to recommend and take action to penalise those who are disobeying guidelines," he says.

One step forward, two steps back

In November, the Home Ministry announced that all illegal sand mining factories across the country would be shut down. While some have welcomed the decision as emblematic of the government's commitment to weed out malpractices in the mining industry, advocate Chiranjivi Bhattarai is more sceptical.

Nearly two decades of environmental activism in Nepal, involving multiple lawsuits seeking to stop illegal sand mining has taught him not to celebrate these governments' decisions until they are implemented effectively.

"These are all half-hearted directives, they are illusions to deceive the people into thinking that the government cares about these things," Bhattarai says. "The government only seeks to address problems when they are raised, and then it is all back to business in a few days because of the nexus between the contractors, police and political leaders."

And his scepticism is not unfounded. In the past decade, there have been countless such directives, regulations, and court orders, all of which seek to address the growing environmental and social problems related to unregulated natural resource extraction.

The latest government decision comes nearly a decade after the Parliamentary Committee on Natural Resources came up with a comprehensive report on better regulating riverbed mining, directing local bodies and authorities to ensure effective monitoring of these industries, and closing all illegal mining operations.

Several new laws and directives issued at the central and local levels have all had the same content — stricter guidelines, better monitoring, and coordination among all the different government agencies. But experts say that unless the deliberate

bending of rules in order to gain influence and resources is addressed, these directives will not have impact.

The Constitution clearly states that the three levels of government have the authority to make their own policies regarding natural resource use and collect revenue generated from the same. But the lack of a strong oversight agency, a sense of ownership towards natural resources, and a business-political nexus have created this mess, says federalism and local government analyst Khim Lal Devkota.

“Unfortunately, our politics isn’t clean, which adds complexities around regulations when it comes to governing natural resources,” says Devkota. “The nexus with sand mining interest groups has resulted in policies and laws being made to favour these industries.”

Meanwhile, the families affected by the repercussions of the actions of these powerful industries continue to live in grief and fear.

Dilip Mahato’s family has set up a foundation to give continuity to his environmental activism. Walking past the deep mine pits all over the riverbed in Dhanusa worries Dilip’s father, Ram Jiwan. He says there is no way to undo the harm, and that placing a limit on how much and how sustainably sand can be extracted is key.

“When people cut their fingers and bleed briefly, they don’t pass out. But syringes jabbed to draw pouches of blood can be fatal,” he says, leaning against a faded blue mud wall near a smiling photo of Dilip. “It’s the same thing with rivers when excavators are used to dig them up.”

Stories from the frontlines of the defence against illegal sand mining

Om Prakash ‘Dilip’ Mahato, 24, Murdered Sripur, Dhanusa

As the oldest of siblings, Om Prakash, or Dilip as he was known, was the ideal son - socially responsible, active in the community, and with hopes of supporting his family as an engineer. But on January 10, 2020, he was found dead on the banks of the Aurahi river, the same water body that he had worked so hard to defend from illegal sand miners. He had been brutally beaten and crushed under the wheels of a tipper truck.

His family alleges that his body was run over by a truck to make it look like an accident. It is largely believed in the community that Dilip was murdered by sand miners with whom he had butted heads countless times in the past over their extraction of sand from the riverbed of the Aurahi. The case is currently sub judice at the Dhanusha District Court.

“My brother lost his life fighting against environmental exploitation. We hope this will not repeat again,” said Sangam Mahato, Dilip’s younger sister.

Sanjay Mahato, 27, Attacked Batteshwor Rural Municipality, Dhanusa

On the night of May 2, Sanjay joined his friends and neighbours in marching to the Badahari river which flows a few hundred meters north of his home. Like numerous times in the past, they demanded that miners excavating the river for sand stop working past the 6pm deadline. The argument escalated quickly, and when they were returning home, the protestors were attacked, with Sanjay struck on the head by a metal lever. He had to be rushed to a hospital in Kathmandu to treat the deep wounds.

“I vaguely remember the first few blows before collapsing to the ground,” he said. “People later told me that the miners would have buried me alive if it hadn’t been for villagers who came looking for me.”

“Since the attack, Sanjay isn’t as physically fit as he used to be, which has impacted his family’s finances. As the sole breadwinner for his family of five, he is worried about not being able to take up as much work as he used to because of his poor health. “I can’t lift heavy things anymore and my head still hurts because of the injury.” he said., “But I can’t stop working so I try to find light work that my body allows me to do.”

Nanda Kumar Silwal, 50, Threatened Mithilnagar, Dhanusa

Last December, local sand mining operators on the Basahi river threatened to burn down Nanda Kumar Silwal’s house when he and his neighbours protested against the unrestrained extraction of sand. A few weeks later, news about Dilip Mahato’s gruesome murder in a nearby village spread like wildfire, and that instilled fear in everybody.

“Earlier, everyone would get together to confront sand mining operators, but now they find excuses to not go to the river. People are scared now,” said Silwal. “Even those who used to take the initiative to organize villagers are fearful now.”

Rajkaran Mahato, 28, Attacked Journalist, Mahottari

Rajkaran Mahato has received countless threats in his 10 year career in journalism, but nothing came close to what happened last April. Mahato was reporting on the activities of crusher companies in Gaushala, Mahottari district when he and his colleagues were chased by a group of around eight-to-nine workers. The journalists ran for their lives and managed to make it out without anything unfortunate happening.

“I have received several direct and indirect threats for my work, but nothing like this physical intimidation,” said Rajkaran.

PERMIT TO PLUNDER: HOW THE ENVIRONMENT IS PAYING THE PRICE FOR NEPAL LOCAL GOVERNMENTS' GREED

By Bhrikuti Rai

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Like most locals from villages dotting the banks of the Indrawati in the Sindhupalchok district of central Nepal, Kamal Ratna Danuwar grew up with stories that revered the river. After all, the perennial waters of the snow-fed Indrawati nourished their fields and gave villagers bountiful harvests twice a year.

Danuwar remembers running barefoot along the banks of the turquoise river with a bamboo fishing rod in one hand and his game in the other. As a young boy, he was told that bringing back anything other than fish was a bad omen. “Not even a pebble,” he remembers his elders berating him. They believed anything brought back from the river would bring home angry spirits since the same river that fed them was also where they performed the last rites of their dead. So, young Danuwar, heeding the elders’ warning, brought home nothing but the fish he caught.

“Twenty-five years ago, we never thought that these pebbles and stones from the river were so precious,” he said. “If only the villagers knew what fortunes these stones hold, they would all have been prosperous by now.”

Danuwar knows very well just how precious the stones from the river are; as the ward chair of Indrawati-12, he has dealt with numerous sand and stone-processing groups vying to set up shops in the areas under his jurisdiction.

When Danuwar was elected to the office in 2017, there was only one sand and pebble mining firm. Today, Sindhupalchok district’s Indrawati rural municipality alone hosts nine such firms—all of which started operations in the last five years—operating along the river. The banks of the once-pristine Indrawati, which originates on the southern slopes of the Himalaya, are now dotted with rumbling trucks and excavators gouging sand and pebbles from the riverbed, leaving behind tainted waters and pits as deep as 15-20 feet.

The rural municipality calls for tenders to excavate the river, raking in millions

of rupees each year. Last year alone, it made about 100 million rupees by selling 7.698 million cubic feet of sand and pebbles, according to officials at the Indrawati rural municipality. This income was nearly 15 per cent of its budget that year, making the river a top revenue earner for the local government.

And, it is not just Indrawati; rivers across the districts that surround the capital city of Kathmandu—Sindhupalchok, Kavre, and Dhading—are being gouged at alarming rates owing to the construction boom fuelled by the pursuit of physical infrastructures like roads, bridges, and the capital city’s urban sprawl. Industries that mine the rivers for sand and pebbles—material vital to construction—are raking in massive profits while sharing the newfound wealth with local governments like the Indrawati rural municipality.

Precisely because so much of their revenue comes from the wholesale plundering of the rivers, the authorities are reluctant to enforce any guidelines that might limit riverbed mining, say locals.

“The ultimate goal is just to collect revenue from the rivers, no matter what the environmental and social costs,” says Anjan Khadka, a tourism entrepreneur from Sindhupalchok.

For the last 10 years, Khadka, along with members from the community, has been demanding accountability from their local leaders and different chief district officers who have come to the district, to protect rivers and livelihoods that depend on them.

They have tried everything, from initiating signature campaigns to submit to the authorities and meeting the leaders in private to organising campaigns, river festivals and marking occasions like World Wetlands Day to raise awareness. Local leaders promise to do better, but they do not always live up to their words, says Khadka, pointing at the banks of the Sunkoshi where excavators and trucks have now become a daily fixture.

“They say they are committed to protecting the rivers, but they call for tenders every year,” says Khadka. “Yes, we need construction materials, but extraction needs to be better regulated.”

Profit over protection

Last April, while the entire country was on the strict lockdown to prevent the spread of Covid-19, with authorities sometimes violently clamping down on people’s mobility, the winding Araniko Highway, which runs past Kavrepalanchok and Sindhupalchok districts, was buzzing with activity. Hundreds of trucks ferrying sand and pebbles were making their way to Kathmandu.

Most of the trucks, as media reported then, were carrying riverbed materials from the Indrawati, just months after authorities in Kavre had accused 31 sand mining operators in the district of not following due processes to protect the surrounding environment.

Ranjan Regmi, who was among the officials at the Kavre District Coordination Committee monitoring the ‘crusher’ operators, says this is only what they can do.

“Our job is limited to monitoring and preparing recommendation reports on the crusher factories operating in the district, but we cannot take action,” he says. “It’s up to the local bodies and other agencies to act on our recommendations, which aren’t always implemented.”

Riverbed mining industries fall under the purview of different agencies across all three levels of government in the new federal structure, making the overall monitoring of these extractive industries even more challenging. For instance, crusher factories need a recommendation from local bodies to apply for a license to be provided by the Department of Cottage Industries, which, until two years ago, was a part of the federal government. Before the department gives them a go-ahead, they also need to provide evidence of approval from the mines and forestry departments, which provide them with environmental clearance. Then, once the factory comes into operation, it has to follow guidelines prescribed by local and provincial governments. Finally, monitoring duties fall on a range of authorities, from locally elected officials to the chief district officer and other district-level officials.

But, it is not just the responsibility that is shared among the different levels of government; so are the profits.

Even as the revenue sources dried up due to the pandemic, money from sand and stone extraction continued to fill state coffers. Data from Bagmati province – the most populous province with the highest budget allocation – shows that revenue generated from sand and boulder mining at the local level continued to be the single largest contributor to the province’s coffers, even during the four-month nationwide lockdown.

According to an official from the Jagati checkpoint in Bhaktapur, over 600 tipper trucks carrying sand and pebbles from the nearby districts of Kavre and Sindhupalchok enter Kathmandu each day.

The Intergovernmental Fiscal Management Act stipulates that local bodies are required to contribute 40 per cent of their revenue generated to the provinces. This incentivises the provinces to turn a blind eye to overexploitation or environmental degradation at the local level as they make most of their revenue from these very industries.

Officials at the Bagmati province’s Ministry of Economic Affairs and Planning have projected earnings from sand and stone mining at the local level to cross Rs two billion this fiscal year. However, until early 2021, only about Rs 250 million, just 12.21 per cent of the projection, has trickled in.

Last fiscal year (2019/20), Bagmati province received over a billion rupees in revenue from local bodies, of which 93 per cent, about 98 million rupees, came from sand and stone mining. This was almost double the Rs 52 million that the province

had received from riverbed materials in the previous fiscal year (2018/19). Kavre, Sindhupalchok, Dhading, and Lalitpur are among the highest contributors to Bagmati province’s coffers. Officials in the province also say the huge difference between the years might also have resulted from many local bodies not reporting their earnings to the province on time.

But, even experts at government bodies warn that relying on riverbed materials for quick and easy revenue is leading to the over-exploitation of natural resources. Juddha Gurung, an environmental expert who is also a member of the Natural Resources and Financial Commission, a constitutional body, says that “short-term gains” are leading to exploitation.

“If elected leaders decide to continue exploiting as much as they can during their terms, these resources won’t last long,” says Gurung. “They should be mindful that such aggressive extraction is going to leave the rivers scarred, and there will be nothing left for future generations.”

Conflict of interest of elected officials

Environmental activists say that things have gotten worse after the local elections of 2017 when a number of candidates with ties to the mining and construction industries received election tickets. In Kavre and Sindhupalchok, people like Ganesh Lama, Tirtha Lama, and Chandra Lama—all with investments in various crusher plants, according to documents from the federal Department of Cottage and Small Industries—contested the elections. While only Chandra Lama won in 2017, Tirtha Lama was a member of the second Constituent Assembly. According to a 2018 report by the Center for Investigative Journalism, a quarter of all elected representatives at the local level have ties to the construction business.

As a result, authorities do not always prioritise regulation of the lucrative mining business. Advocate Chiranjivi Bhattarai, who filed a lawsuit at the Supreme Court in 2019 seeking to stop illegal sand mining in the Sunkoshi river, says he does not have much hope. He is still awaiting a decision in the three-year-old case.

“The overarching influence of interest groups from the mining industry doesn’t allow authorities to act effectively to stem the rot spreading across Nepal’s rivers and hills,” says Bhattarai.

Long-term harm

Uncontrolled extraction of the rivers is a double-edged sword. While there might be profits in the short term, overexploitation will eventually end up damaging the fragile environment of Nepal’s mid-hills.

River ecologist Ram Devi Tachamo Shah of Kathmandu University says uncontrolled river mining, where excavators dig several metres deep, has altered the ecosystem beneath.

“These activities don’t allow the natural habitats in the river ecosystem to thrive,” she says, “and when minerals and algae from riverbeds are extracted while scooping out large amounts of sand and pebbles, there will be a massive decline in ecological diversity.”

These short-term gains also threaten to hurt the local economy of districts like Sindhupalchok, which is trying to tap its rivers to promote watersports and attract tourists. This is already worrying Sindhupalchok-based tourism entrepreneur Anjan Khadka.

Khadka says his interactions with local authorities in Sindhupalchok leave him frustrated and angry. What makes it worse, he says, is that having leaders from the district and neighbouring Kavre in high-profile state positions—like House Speaker Agni Sapkota, former ministers Sher Bahadur Tamang, Gokul Baskota, and Arun Nepal—has not made a difference when it comes to regulating these exploitative industries.

“They talk about environmental protection with such enthusiasm in public forums,” says Khadka. “But, when it comes to making decisions, they don’t do anything to prevent exploitation.”

Recalling the fanfare with which local and several high-profile national leaders, including Speaker Sapkota, announced a 10-point declaration during Sukute Festival in early 2020 to conserve rivers and better regulate riverbed mining, Khadka says, “Their commitment to developing the district’s rivers as a hub of tourism are just empty words.”

Locals who live near the processing plants on the banks of rivers like Indrawati, Sunkoshi, and Roshi also say their communities are suffering because of inaction.

Chandra Bahadur Majhi comes from a family of fishermen in Majhitar, a small village in Sindhupalchok. He is well into his seventies and has spent all his life farming, fishing, and ferrying people on rickety boats across the mighty Indrawati, like most people in the fishing community of Majhis traditionally did. But, today, the river does not look the same. He gets nostalgic and worries about the Indrawati river.

“There are hardly any fish left in the river anymore,” he says looking at the fishing net rolled up in a corner of his room. “All that roaring and thundering from the machines gnawing at the rivers probably scare the fish away.”

Passing the buck

But, crusher plant operators say it is unfair that only they receive criticism. Kuber Singh Shrestha’s Jaldevi Stone Pvt Ltd was one of the first plants to operate in Indrawati back in early 2017 when village development committees were still the governing local bodies. When he applied for permits then, he was told that crusher plants needed to be one kilometre apart from one another. But, in the absence of a strict monitoring mechanism in place, there are now many such

plants operating every few hundred metres on the banks of the Indrawati. That, he says, is not the industry operators’ fault alone.

“If the authorities were so worried about the river and the environment, they could easily limit the number of permits for these plants,” he says. “Yes, rivers are being exploited, but the government has given them permission to do so.”

Gobinda Sapkota of the Community Development and Environment Conservation Forum in Sindhupalchok says he is not surprised by the state’s unwillingness to better regulate these industries. Over the last decade, he has seen local communities struggle with growing water shortages, river pollution, and a disruption of their traditional ways of life because of uncontrolled riverbed mining.

“The rivers are only there for businesses and local bodies alike to plunder and make money,” he says. “Meanwhile, people are bearing the brunt of the consequences, breathing in the dust from these industries all day and watching rivers get polluted.”

But, local officials like Bansha Lal Tamang, the chair of Indrawati rural municipality, say they have no option but to call for tenders worth millions of rupees each year, sometimes often at the cost of the environment.

While he calls his administration “environment-conscious”, he also says that they rely on the revenue from riverbed extraction for the local government’s operations and programmes.

“The central government hasn’t yet been able to help us manage human resources, so we use the revenue generated from these industries to hire technicians in agriculture, veterinary science, engineering etc, as well as for programmes to build river embankments.”

Since Tamang’s election, four new plants have been given permission to operate with one more in the process of starting operations.

Living with the consequences

The 2015 constitution clearly states that the three levels of government have the authority to make their own policies regarding natural resource use and collect revenue generated from the same. While there are issues with fiscal policy and revenue sharing in the federal structure, experts say local levels should take steps to build up their revenue pool, which is informed by a sound policy.

“Right now, local governments are taking the easy route by haphazardly selling riverbed materials,” says local governance analyst Khim Lal Devkota. “If they want to come up with sustainable solutions, they can easily formulate joint policies with other local bodies and regulate these industries.”

But, with no clear demarcation of responsibility when it comes to regulation, local bodies are quick to pass the buck to someone else. Meanwhile, it is the locals who have to live with the consequences.

Along the winding BP Highway, where rivers from the hills flow towards the southern plains, excavators clawing the riverbanks and hills leaving a blanket of dust have become a common sight, particularly in Roshi rural municipality. Named after the Roshi river, the municipality rakes in millions of rupees by selling the river's resources. Last year alone, it made Rs 50 million.

But, all six crusher plants registered at the municipality have been flagged by the Kavre District Development Committee for not meeting guidelines to protect the environment—from being situated too close to forests and human settlements to polluting the environment with no mitigation measures.

One such industry is the Om Satya Sai Crusher, whose operations lie just a few hundred metres from the highway and the municipality office. But, Roshi rural municipality officials, who can hear the whirring of Om Satya Sai's machines from their office, say they cannot do much.

"Yes, it has made the surroundings dusty and it brings in material from outside to process here, but we aren't the ones who gave them the licence to operate; it was the Department of Cottage Industry, which falls under the federal government," says Dambaru Dahal, the seniormost bureaucrat there.

Upendra Nath Gautam, a Roshi local, regrets leasing 10 ropanis of land to the factory.

"They said they would ensure that locals got a job and that the fields nearby wouldn't be disturbed, but look at what they've done," says 65-year-old Gautam, gesturing towards a blanket of dust rising from the factory site, a few hundred meters from his poultry farm. "I feel guilty sometimes, seeing my neighbours' homes and fields covered in dust."

ENVIRONMENT CONSERVATION TAKES A BACK SEAT IN THE BUDGET

By Bhrikuti Rai

The Record — May 30, 2021

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://recordnepal.com/environment-conservation-takes-a-back-seat-in-the-budget>

The government's decision to resume the export of sand and gravel to reduce the trade deficit will lead to the wholesale exploitation of the environment, say conservationists and lawmakers.

For environmentalist Bijay Kumar Singh, who has been rallying support for the protection of the Chure region for decades, his biggest win came in 2014, when the government decided to halt the export of construction material like sand and gravel to control the excessive exploitation of the Chure's rivers and hills.

"It was an impact of sound policy," said Singh, a board member of the President Chure Conservation Board until 2016. Singh was among several environmentalists and lawmakers who had long been pushing for stronger regulations on sand and boulder mining, especially from the rivers. The restrictions in 2014 were welcome as they had not been used to the lack of concrete legislation to effectively regulate industries that are plundering the environment.

"But I fear that the government might reopen the export of sand and gravel because there is no law to stop them from doing so," Singh had told me in April, something that he brings up each time he speaks about environmental conservation.

Singh was prescient, as seven years after the export of sand and gravel was prohibited citing environmental concerns, the government on Saturday announced that it would be lifting the ban. During the budget speech, Finance Minister Bishnu Paudel said that the government would seek to reduce the trade deficit by selling off the country's sand and gravel. The country's ballooning trade deficit currently stands at nearly \$10 billion.

"Yes, the avenues for the export of these materials [sand, gravel, pebbles] will open up," Finance Secretary Sishir Kumar Dhungana told me. "There will be an EIA [Environmental Impact Assessment] before they are exported."

Among the many policies and plans unveiled in the new budget, brought through an ordinance, environmentalists and lawmakers have criticized the government's decision to roll back the ban on export of Nepal's sand, stones, and other construction materials.

Singh says the government's new decision to relax the export bans on sand and gravel could have lasting impacts on the environment, especially in the Chure.

"If the government allows exports of construction materials from fragile areas of the Chure, which are already being exploited for sand and pebbles to meet domestic demand, it will cause unimaginable environmental degradation, leading to water shortages and habitat loss," said Singh. "No amount of money that the sale of these materials will bring will be able to compensate for that loss."

Lawmakers like Gagan Thapa of the Nepali Congress, who have been vocal about the impacts of the mining industry, say that the government's decision is a blow to environmental protection. Thapa was part of the parliamentary natural resources committee in 2014 which had called for stronger regulations on sand and boulder mining, after which the ban on the export of these materials was announced.

"This policy is utterly repugnant," said Thapa. "There are many other things that the government can do to address the trade deficit, rather than allowing for environmental degradation."

The government's decision to roll back the ban on export of sand and gravel without conducting a proper study or holding discussions is dubious, says Thapa. And having dissolved the House before presenting the budget programs might have helped the government slip in these questionable policies.

"Had the government presented this plan in Parliament, it wouldn't have passed," said Thapa. "It was clearly brought about for the gain of a handful of people at the cost of irreversible damage to the environment."

But finance secretary Dhungana defended the government's decision to open up exports, saying a mechanism will be put in place to ensure environmental protection.

"Just because there have been irregularities in the past doesn't mean that we cross our arms and do nothing," Dhungana said. "We are not saying we will open exports right away. We will identify areas to mine following due process, conduct environmental impact assessment, and then proceed."

When asked about where these materials will be exported to, he said, rather irritably, "We will explore where there might be a market for these products. We can't write everything in the budget, can we?"

Déjà vu

People like Singh and Thapa, who in the past decade have witnessed lobbying to allow the export of these materials citing similar financial reasons, say that the government decision is once again a grim reminder of the direct influence that businesses have on the country's policies.

And they fear that despite the EIA, the export of construction materials might once again be a loss for the environment.

"There are EIA provisions for all kinds of projects, from roads and irrigation projects

to riverbed mining, but there is no follow up," said Singh. "How can we be assured that environmental concerns will be addressed?"

Moreover, there have been several instances of these industries strongly opposing government guidelines in the past.

The growing lobbying power of the sand mining and construction industry can be traced back to their fierce opposition to stricter guidelines unveiled by the Nepal government in 2010 following a Supreme Court ruling. This was around the same time when public pressure was increasing to regulate crusher industries in the Chure region, which had just been declared a protected area. Then president Ram Baran Yadav, who hails from Dhanusha, had pushed for an ambitious undertaking to address the ongoing crisis in the Chure, which led to the formation of the President Chure Conservation Board. Following the board's formation in July 2014, the Ministry of Commerce and Supplies, the same month, decided to halt exports of sand and gravel.

This, along with the new guidelines for sand mining, was hailed as a major success, which many conservationists at that time had hoped would pave the way for more regulated and strictly monitored riverbed mining. The new set of guidelines, which among many other things, required sand mining factories to be located 500 meters from rivers and highways, 100 meters away from high-tension electricity lines and 2km away from schools and colleges, health centres and hospitals, human settlement, and religious and archaeological sites.

But crusher plant operators launched a major protest campaign against the new guidelines. They completely halted production of construction materials for months, effectively bringing all kinds of construction activity, including the government's large-scale development projects, to a grinding halt.

Former finance secretary Rameshwor Khanal, who chaired the President Chure Tarai Madhesh Conservation Board at the time, was part of the expert committee that had recommended the new guidelines to regulate the crusher industries. Recalling the protest from the past, he said, "Their [the industry's] argument has always been that Nepal has to sell whatever is readily available, like riverbed materials, no matter what the ecological cost."

Eventually, the government was forced to give in to the industry's demands and rolled back its decision to implement the new guidelines immediately.

According to Khanal, the export of stones and boulders will only be sustainable if the government conducts a proper study about the demand of these materials, putting the environment at the center, and most importantly, investing in infrastructure like roads and electricity in those places.

"Our politicians only look at immediate gains without putting in the work and effort required for a sustained project," said Khanal. "Places suitable for commercial stone mining don't have the infrastructure around them, so businesses will naturally be concentrated around rivers closer to roads, which in the absence of strict monitoring will result in further ecological destruction."

SECOND PRIZE WINNER

SERIES “DISPATCHES FROM THE AMAZON UNDER PRESSURE”

Sarah Maslin (Brazil)

Stephan Kueffner (Ecuador)

James Tozer (United Kingdom)



Sarah Esther Maslin joined The Economist in 2017 and is currently based in São Paulo, Brazil. Previously, she was a freelance journalist based in El Salvador. Her reporting has appeared in The Washington Post, The New York Times Magazine, The Atlantic and other publications. She is the recipient of a MHP Gold Award for Foreign Reporting, a Mirror Award for media reporting, a Norman Mailer Writing Award and a Carey Logan Non-Fiction Writing Residency. She is writing a book about the El Mozote massacre, the limits of truth and reconciliation, gang violence in El Salvador and the US, and the long-term effects of trauma on a community and a country.



Stephan Küffner is a German-Ecuadorian journalist based in Quito since 2007, writing mainly about topics including politics and government, oil, mining, debt and the environment. He has written for The Economist and the EIU, Bloomberg News, Time, Platts, the Financial Times, the Wall Street Journal and Dow Jones Newswires, among others and is a member of the board of Fundamedios, a journalism advocacy NGO. Previous stations in his career include Santiago de Chile and Frankfurt am Main. He studied economics, political science and Latin American studies at Universität zu Köln in Cologne, Germany.



James Tozer is a data journalist at The Economist, based in the London office. He uses statistics and coding to tell stories about a wide range of subjects, including politics, business, economics, social sciences, the environment, health and sports. He writes and edits mainly for the Graphic Detail section, which is dedicated to articles with a quantitative focus and striking charts. In 2021 he was named as data journalist of the year at the British Press Awards, along with his colleague Martín González, for their work on covid-19 and excess mortality.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Sharing the second prize are Sarah Maslin, Stephan Kueffner, and James Tozer (Brazil/ Ecuador/ UK) for their powerful series *Dispatches from the Amazon Under Pressure*.

These reports from the Amazon basin, which has always been the frontline of the fight to save our environment, examines the impact of the business of deforestation and its role in fuelling climate change. This is painstaking and fact-filled journalism, reviewing decades of neglect and how local communities have suffered in the cycle of boom-and-bust economics that have scarred the region's development. The focus is on regional products – balsa in Ecuador and soy and beef related deforestation in Brazil.

These reports not only expose the impact of deforestation in these areas, but they target the actions of specific companies. As a result, they have had an impact, with fresh action to eliminate deforestation from business supply chains underway.

This is journalism with a purpose – to expose wrong-doing, but also to ensure that governments and the world's business community are playing their part in delivering on their promises of action to save the environment.

THE WIND-POWER BOOM SET OFF A SCRAMBLE FOR Balsa WOOD IN ECUADOR

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It has had unintended consequences.

In late 2019 loggers started arriving in Ewegono, a village of nine indigenous Waorani families on the Curaray river in the Ecuadorean Amazon. They were looking for balsa, a fast-growing species of tree whose wood is used in blades for wind-power turbines. There was a global shortage. At first, villagers “grabbed chainsaws, axes and machetes to cut it down”, says Saúl Nihua, Ewegono’s leader. The pay could be \$150 a day, a fortune in a region where most people have no jobs.

Soon the harvest became a free-for-all. Some loggers got permits with the help of the Waorani, but others forged them and invaded the indigenous reserve. Many took truckloads of wood without paying their workers. People from less remote places cut all the balsa they could find, stacking it along the road to Arajuno, the nearest town, says Mr Nihua. Buyers in trucks paid as little as \$1.50 per tree. Uncontrolled logging degraded the forest. “They’ve killed off vegetation tremendously...without respecting legal limits,” says Mr Nihua, who partly blames himself. He encouraged his fellow Waorani to earn money from the coveted timber. The influx of cash and liquor fuelled family violence.

The origin of the crisis lies oceans away, in growing demand for wind power from the world’s largest economies. Thanks to ambitious targets to reduce the use of fossil fuels and technology that is bringing down turbine prices, global wind-power capacity has been increasing by 9% a year over the past decade. In 2020 new installed capacity surged by 24% to a record 78gw. Wind farms in China and the United States, which made up 60% of that demand, were rushing to install them before tax credits and subsidies expired. “It was like the end of a gold rush,” says a China-based representative of a Western turbine maker.

Unlike gold, wind turbines benefit the whole world, not just their owners. They are an indispensable technology for phasing out fossil fuels. But “the sudden surge in demand put enormous strain on the entire wind-industry supply chain,” says

Shashi Barla of Wood Mackenzie, a consultancy. Wind fever caused the biggest problems in Ecuador, which provides more than 75% of the world’s balsa. The word is Spanish for “raft”.

A stiff, light wood that is also used in model aeroplanes and real aircraft, balsa goes into the core of a blade, where it is sandwiched between two fibreglass “skins” to add strength. Windmills built in the 1980s had 15-metre (49-foot) blades and could generate 0.05mw of electricity. Now, an offshore wind turbine with blades more than 100 metres long generates up to 14mw. Bigger blades require more balsa. Engineers at the National Renewable Energy Laboratory in the United States have calculated that a 100-metre blade requires 150 cubic metres (5,300 cubic feet) of balsa wood, or several tonnes.

Balsa trees reach optimal density in just five to seven years, which has helped suppliers cope with rising demand. Leading turbine manufacturers like Vestas in Denmark and Siemens Gamesa, in Spain, get most of their wood (along with foam, a less popular substitute) from three core-materials suppliers. 3a Composites, a Swiss firm, has more than 10,000 hectares (25,000 acres) of balsa plantations in Ecuador’s coastal lowlands. Gurit (also Swiss) and Diab (Swedish) depend on independent suppliers and farmers growing balsa along with other crops, to whom they give seeds and training.

It is harder to predict demand for balsa than for, say, Christmas trees. As a result, says Ray Lewis of Diab, “there has always been a bit of a balsa crisis.” Rising demand in the mid-2000s led to new plantations. But in 2011 turbine installations slowed sharply due in part to tighter regulations and a slower economy in China. Balsa prices plummeted. Growers planted less of it in Ecuador.

The most recent crisis was different. Demand, which revived in 2018, outstripped the supply of plantation-grown balsa by a lot, not a little. The price doubled from mid-2019 to mid-2020. In 2019 Ecuador exported \$219m-worth of balsa wood, 30% more than the previous record in 2015 (see chart). In the first 11 months of 2020, it exported balsa worth \$784m. Diab sold balsa for \$1,800 per cubic metre in 2020, three times what it had in 2018.

Easterly wind

The main source of new demand was China, which has built more turbines than any other country. In 2006 it had just 2.6gw of installed capacity, compared with 21gw in Germany and 12gw in the United States. By 2019, when Germany had 61gw and the United States had 105gw, China had blown past both, to 236gw. At the end of last year China’s president, Xi Jinping, announced plans to reach 1,200gw of wind and solar capacity by 2030.

Chinese turbine manufacturers such as Goldwind and Envision, founded in 1998 and 2007 respectively, now have nearly 30% of global market share. They have erected turbines in dozens of countries. At first they used the same handful of Western blademakers and core-material suppliers as their competitors, but before

long Chinese firms had edged into all levels of the supply chain. Sino Composite bought a stake in Cobalsa, a long-established Ecuadorean balsa firm.

The rising price of balsa also lured middlemen “like bees to a honeypot”, says Mr Lewis. A 40-year veteran of the wind industry, he got emails from companies he had never heard of offering to sell him truckloads of balsa. He ignored them. Chinese firms, though, were aggressive buyers. Some set up roadside sawmills. More than 75% of Ecuador’s balsa exports in the first 11 months of 2020 ended up in China. Despite having one of its best years ever, Plantabal, 3a’s Ecuadorean subsidiary, saw its share of balsa exports drop from 20-25% to 8%, while Diab’s fell from 15% to 5-6%.

The balsa boom, and the bust that has now followed, recall the rush to exploit rubber in the Amazon at the beginning of the 20th century. Rubber-tappers employed in slave-like conditions supplied industrialising Europe and the United States until production shifted to Asia, leaving them even more wretched. Indigenous Ecuadoreans have more protections, but are still vulnerable to exploitation. Like miners and oil-drillers before them, balseros “took advantage” of indigenous poverty and naivety, says Mr Nihua. The Waorani have been in contact with society only since the 1950s.

Often payment from loggers was partly in the form of liquor or marijuana; that encouraged drug abuse and violence, which were already big problems. Gilberto Nenquimo, the president of the Waorani Nation of Ecuador (nawe), says that his brother-in-law was murdered with a chainsaw in a dispute over balsa.

Overlogging was another result. Balsa trees get less regulatory protection than older, rarer trees. Fast-growing “pioneer species” can be chopped down almost anywhere, including in the rainforest, using simplified “collection permits”. Balsa taken illegally—without legitimate permits or from protected areas like Yasuní National Park, which is home to uncontacted tribes—can be “laundered” by mixing it with other wood, says a customs agent. At the height of the frenzy, loggers extracted trees too young to be suitable for blademaking or shipped balsa to China without drying it, which meant it rotted on the way. The environment ministry boasts that it checked 1.4m cubic metres of balsa in 2020, twice as much as in 2019, and confiscated four times as much. But the total amount seized was less than 4,000 cubic metres.

Balsa is not an important store of carbon like bigger trees in the Amazon, but unregulated logging encourages traffic, hunting and extraction of species besides balsa. Denuded riverfronts raise the risk of flooding. The Global Forest Watch, an online platform that uses satellite data to track deforestation, recorded an “unusually high” number of “tree-cover loss alerts” in Ecuador in the second half of 2020, concentrated in the Amazon region. Land is Life, an ngo, says that extraction of balsa is partly to blame.

After several assemblies, the Waorani decided in October to kick out the loggers. The Wampís, another indigenous group that lives on a 1.3m-hectare territory on

the border of Ecuador and Peru, made the same decision. When their guests refused to leave, the tribe seized seven boatloads of wood. The loggers retaliated by holding 19 Wampís hostage at a river crossing on December 2nd. They were released later that day, after Peruvian authorities persuaded the tribe to hand over the wood.

To get to Ewegono from Puyo, you zigzag down a narrow road to Arajuno, past two large sawmills. (One, called Hessental, was built in 2018 by a Chinese businessman, corporate records show.) Then, from a tiny port on the Curaray river where all that remains of a logging camp are mounds of sawdust and rubbish, you board a peke-peke, a wooden canoe with a trolling motor. Loggers left Ewegono just before The Economist arrived in December, but signs of the balsa boom were still visible: a new social hall, a satellite dish and sawdust outlining a football pitch.

The bust had clearly begun. Piles of balsa were stacked messily near the river. The price of balsa had fallen by half because Chinese turbine companies halted their work until after Chinese new year in February. Villagers were collecting donations for a man who had burned himself in a drunken domestic dispute. On a scrubby river island stripped of most trees, locals were growing maize. “Three years ago, this was full of balsa,” said Johnny Tocari, of nawe. A few scrawny balsa stalks, identifiable by their heart-shaped leaves, had started to reclaim the banks.

Fresh blades

There is a chance that last year’s balsa boom will be the last. The shortage accelerated a shift to blade cores made partly or completely of pet, a synthetic foam that is cheaper but was long considered inferior. After Vestas, the world’s largest turbine-maker, introduced the first all-pet blade designs, others began to adopt them. In 2020, “all the ceos had to do a second bill of materials” that excluded balsa, says Mr Lewis. “Now their success depends on their ability to switch.”

Wood Mackenzie forecasts that the share of pet will increase from 20% in 2018 to more than 55% by 2023, with demand for balsa staying stable. Chinese blademakers will continue to use it in the short term, since they have yet to make pet price-competitive, says the China-based representative. Balsa’s long-term future as a blade component depends in part on whether the problems Ecuador has experienced over the past couple of years can be solved.

Ecuadorean officials and indigenous folk hope so. In November, after news reports about social and environmental damage from the balsa boom, the environment ministry excluded balsa from the list of the fast-growing species that can be logged with simplified permits. It is drafting stricter rules for how it can be harvested from forests.

The Waorani plan to start a co-operative to harvest balsa sustainably and sell it at fair prices to a lumber plant in Guayaquil. Similar initiatives are springing up across the region, some funded by ngos like the Nature Conservancy, others by balsa exporters like Plantabal. They hope that consumers of green energy will care enough to insist on high social and environmental standards. “Would a person

in Stockholm charging an electric car with energy generated from wood bought illegally in the Amazon feel right about that?” wonders Ramón del Pino, Plantabal’s ceo. The answer is probably no. The question is whether drivers in Beijing will feel the same.

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HOW BIG BEEF AND SOYA FIRMS CAN STOP DEFORESTATION

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They don’t chop down Amazonian trees, but their suppliers do.

The world’s emissions of carbon dioxide may fall by 7% this year because of lockdowns in response to the pandemic, according to Nature Climate Change, a journal. Brazil is a glaring exception. Its emissions will rise by 10-20% from 2018, when they were last measured, says the Climate Observatory, a consortium of research outfits. The culprit is deforestation. In the first four months of 2020 an estimated 1,202 square km (464 square miles) were cleared in the Brazilian Amazon, 55% more than during the same period in 2019, which was the worst year in a decade. Come August, when ranchers set fire to cleared areas to prepare them for grazing, runaway blazes could outnumber those that shocked the world last year. Scientists say tree loss is nearing a “tipping point”, after which trees will dry out and die, releasing billions of tonnes of carbon into the atmosphere.

Environmentalists blame Brazil’s populist president, Jair Bolsonaro, for the catastrophe. He favours deregulation to allow logging, mining and farming in the forest and has weakened enforcement of environmental laws. Less attention has been paid to the role of big firms like jbs and Cargill, global intermediaries for beef and soya, the commodities that drive deforestation (see Graphic detail).

The companies do not chop down trees themselves. Rather, they are middlemen in complex supply chains that deal in soya and beef produced on deforested land. The process begins when speculators, who tend to operate outside the law, buy or seize land, sell the timber, graze cattle on it for several years and then sell it to a soya farmer. Land in the Amazon is five to ten times more valuable once it is deforested, says Daniel Nepstad, an ecologist. Not chopping down trees would have a large opportunity cost. In 2009 Mr Nepstad estimated that cost (in terms of forgone beef and soy output) would be \$275bn over 30 years, about 16% of that year’s gdp.

Under pressure from public opinion, the big firms have made attempts to control the problem. In 2009, a damning report from Greenpeace led jbs, Marfrig and Minerva, meat giants which together handle two-thirds of Brazil’s exports, to pledge to stop buying from suppliers that deforest illegally. (The forest code allows owners to clear 20% of their land.) jbs, which sources from an area in the Amazon larger than Germany, says it has blocked 9,000 suppliers, using satellites to detect clearing.

Soya traders such as Cargill and Bunge have used such systems to enforce a zero-deforestation agreement for the region since 2008, when retail firms like McDonald's and Tesco said they would no longer buy Amazonian soya harvested on deforested land.

These agreements contributed to a sharp decline in the rate of tree loss until 2012 (see chart). Before the "soya moratorium", 30% of new fields in the Amazon involved clearing forests. In the eight years after it was signed, 99% of soya expansion was on land that was already treeless. But, warns André Vasconcelos from Trase, a research initiative that tracks commodity supply chains, the frenzy of deforestation under Mr Bolsonaro could reverse this trend.

The deforestation surge shows that the agreements have an Achilles' heel, says Mr Nepstad. The big firms are still not exerting the control they could over all their suppliers. And even if they did, large amounts of soya, and especially beef, are traded by smaller firms with weaker incentives to persuade farmers to change behaviour.

The problem is especially acute in ranching, which accounts for roughly 80% of deforestation in the Amazon, nearly all of it illegal. "Cows move around," explains Paulo Pianez of Marfrig. Every fattening farm the big meatpackers buy from has, on average, 23 of its own suppliers, says Holly Gibbs of the University of Wisconsin. Current monitoring doesn't cover ranchers who breed and graze cattle, so it misses 85-90% of deforestation. Rogue fattening farms can also "launder" cattle by moving them to lawful farms—perhaps their own—right before selling them. A new Greenpeace report alleges that through this mechanism jbs, Marfrig and Minerva ended up selling beef from farms that deforested a protected Amazon reserve on the border between Brazil and Bolivia. They said they had not known about any illegality.

Soya-driven deforestation more directly affects the *cerrado*, the tropical savannah southeast of the rainforest. In Mato Grosso, a state that straddles the Amazon and the *cerrado*, 27% of deforestation between 2012 and 2017 took place on soya farms, according to a new report by Imaflora and Instituto Centro de Vida (ICV), Brazilian research institutes, and Trase. The state provides a third of the eu's soya imports from Brazil. Ninety-five per cent of clearing on soya farms was illegal. A third occurred in the Amazon, revealing a gap in the soya moratorium. Since it only covers land where soya is planted, a farmer who illegally clears another part of his farm—say, for cattle—can continue selling to traders, who crush and export the soya.

André Nassar of Abiove, a soya-industry lobby, points out that the area of new soya fields planted on deforested land in the *cerrado* has fallen: from 215,000 hectares (530,000 acres) a year in 2000-06 to 79,000 hectares in 2013-18. The industry should distinguish legal from illegal deforestation, he says—it doesn't do annual monitoring in the *cerrado*—but embargoing farms is the responsibility of the government. Nonetheless, Bunge and Cargill have vowed to source only from land that has not been deforested, legally or illegally. They missed their 2020 deadline but plan to succeed by 2025 and 2030, respectively.

Perhaps they would move faster if they felt more pressure from customers and investors. One reason that soya giants seem more serious than meat producers about reducing deforestation, says Maria Lettini of FAIRR, a network of investors

concerned about sustainability, is that most soya is exported. The EU is the second-top destination after China. But companies struggle to get people to pay more for a "hidden commodity", says Juliana Lopes of Amaggi, a Brazilian soya behemoth. "You know your clothing is made of cotton and your chocolate comes from cacao," she says. But few people will pay extra for chicken made with sustainable soya, which explains why just 2-3% is certified deforestation-free. Better labelling could help, she says.

Four-fifths of Brazilian beef, by contrast, is eaten in Brazil. Exports go mostly to China, Russia and the Middle East, where feeding people is a higher priority than saving trees. Investors, for their part, see beef firms as unsexy businesses with thin margins. They haven't demanded huge efforts to reduce deforestation, says João Paulo Dibo of Rio Bravo Investimentos, an asset manager in São Paulo. Sexy or not, beef producers are doing well. While Brazilian share prices overall are down by 18% this year, Marfrig has seen its share price rise by 27% and Minerva has recovered what it lost at the start of the pandemic. JBS, the world's largest meatpacker, said 2019 was the most profitable year ever.

Morgan Stanley, Itaú and Santander declined to discuss soya and meat companies with *The Economist*. A new 58-page report by Itaú recommends investing in jbs, Marfrig and Minerva. (It doesn't contain the word "deforestation".) This reflects "myopia" at a time when investing in sustainable industry is rapidly expanding, says Fabio Alperowitch of FAMA Investimentos. It is one of 230 funds with more than \$16trn in assets that signed a letter in the wake of last year's fires calling on firms to end deforestation. BlackRock, one of jbs's top-ten shareholders, did not sign, even though it is divesting from coal.

Economic turmoil makes it unlikely that companies will soon spend a lot to combat deforestation, says Marcello Brito of the Brazilian Agribusiness Association. "Shareholders won't want it," he says.

Despite these discouragements, the firms say they are making progress. The meatpackers claim they are working towards their promise, made in 2009, to expand tracing to indirect suppliers. One idea is to use animal-transit permits, which track vaccinations as cattle are passed between ranchers, to flag deforestation. But the agriculture ministry has yet to agree. Minerva is considering using a tool developed by the University of Wisconsin, called Visipec, to map suppliers, identify regions with high deforestation and prioritise suppliers in other areas. Minerva gets 30% of its beef via full-cycle breeding, which it can guarantee is deforestation-free. Commercial restrictions could actually benefit the top firms, says its sustainability director, Taciano Custodio. "We're better positioned to adapt."

But change from the top three meatpackers won't guarantee a reduction in deforestation, because they account for less than half of the market. "When we block a supplier, he can cross the road and sell to another slaughterhouse," says Márcio Nappo of jbs. Industry-wide progress will require better enforcement and incentives for ranchers. "We have to make production sustainable as a whole," says Mr Pianez.

That sentiment is echoed in the soya industry, where cracking down on deforestation is logistically simple but politically tough. According to the Mato Grosso study, 80% of illegal deforestation took place on 400 farms, 2% of the total. They are “low-hanging fruit” for action, says Mr Vasconcelos. But two years of talks about expanding the moratorium to the cerrado stalled. According to soya growers, multinational firms failed to raise \$250m to launch a fund for compensating farmers who retain woodland. “They demand, demand, demand, but don’t offer anything in return,” complains Ricardo Arioli.

Cargill says it will spend \$30m on ways to stop deforestation industry-wide. Marfrig and Amaggi are backing an initiative launched by the government of Mato Grosso in 2015 to reduce deforestation through a “landscape approach”. Fernando Sampaio, the director of its committee, which includes NGOs and companies, says municipalities that reduce deforestation will receive technical assistance and credit and more business from the big firms, incentivising others to follow. But although the rate of deforestation in the state between August 2018 and July 2019 decreased by 4% from a year earlier, the initiative looks set to fall far short of its goal of ending illegal deforestation by 2020: 85% of the 1,685 square km cleared were done so illegally.

Among the biggest obstacles to progress is the lack of co-operation from the federal government. In a video of a cabinet meeting in April released by the Supreme Court, the environment minister, Ricardo Salles, called on the government to “push through” deregulation while people are distracted by the pandemic. A rule change in the indigenous agency allows landowners to claim chunks of indigenous territories that are awaiting official demarcation. Even the Amazon soya moratorium appears shaky. Aprosoja, a growers’ lobby, threatened to abandon it (because it forbids legal deforestation). The agriculture minister, Tereza Cristina, called it “absurd”.

Reducing deforestation will require consensus on tricky issues like the fate of tens of thousands of poor settlers on public lands in the Amazon, where half of deforestation takes place. However, environmentalists say that the “land regularisation” bill currently in Congress would also grant titles for big deforested tracts to “land-grabbers”, sending the message that further clearing might also get a pass. An earlier version of the bill was rejected on May 20th after British supermarkets threatened to boycott Brazilian products.

Though still faint, such noises are growing louder. They add to the argument that companies should make changes not just for ethical reasons, but also for business reasons. Supermarkets could speed things up by telling consumers where their beef and soya come from. Getting farmers and ranchers on board will require the right balance of pressure and incentives. The companies have leverage, Ms Gibbs insists. A decade ago, after jbs, Marfrig and Minerva pledged to purge suppliers who deforested, more than 30 other beef firms signed similar agreements. “If you could get a big company to take the first step, others would follow,” she predicts.

Correction (June 11th 2020): A previous version of this article identified Trase as an NGO.

This article appeared in the The Americas section of the print edition under the headline “Of chainsaws and supply chains”.

A RELIGIOUS CHALLENGE TO “NO CONTACT” WITH ISOLATED INDIGENOUS GROUPS

The Economist — July 9, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:

<https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2020/07/09/a-religious-challenge-to-no-contact-with-isolated-indigenous-groups>

Missionaries want to win souls in the Amazon. Brazil’s president is on their side.

Marcos Mayoruna found Jesus 15 years ago. The son of a *cacique* (chief) from the Vale do Javari, an indigenous territory in the Brazilian Amazon larger than Austria, he was converted by a missionary from another ethnic group and became a pastor himself. After seminary in Rio de Janeiro he went home to spread the word of God to the Mayoruna and other tribes.

He sometimes worked with Brazilian and American missionaries, swapping his local knowledge for donations to his humble seminary in Atalaia do Norte, a dusty town in the northern part of the valley. But, he says, the missionaries seemed more interested in reaching isolated peoples, indigenous groups that, unlike the Mayoruna, have little or no contact with the societies that surround them. Worldwide, 100 probably exist today, says Survival International, an ngo. The largest concentration, of perhaps 16, is in the Javari valley.

They owe their survival to a decision by Brazil’s government in 1988. It discourages contact with isolated tribes, except to prevent medical emergencies, warfare between tribes or other catastrophes. The policy’s father is Sydney Possuelo, a revered sertanista, or Amazon explorer, who led contact missions for Brazil’s military government in the 1970s and 1980s. Development projects like the construction of the Trans-Amazonian highway cleaved through forest inhabited by scores of indigenous groups (see map). In some, 50-90% of their members died from diseases like measles and flu. Horrified, Mr Possuelo persuaded the government to adopt the no-contact policy. It has become a model for other countries in the region.

From the start, it encountered resistance, chiefly from people who want to farm and mine on indigenous land. Now, for the first time, Brazil has a president, Jair Bolsonaro, who is a critic of the policy. An evangelical Christian, he shares the proselytising zeal of the missionaries whom Mr Mayoruna has encountered. He is also sympathetic to businessmen who want to develop the Amazon. Though still on the books, in practice the no-contact policy is being dismantled.

One of Mr Bolsonaro's first decrees transferred power to demarcate indigenous reserves from the indigenous agency (FUNAI) to the agriculture ministry, which is friendlier to farmers. The Supreme Court annulled it. This year he nominated Ricardo Lopes Dias, a former missionary, to oversee the part of funai that deals with its policy on isolated tribes. Mr Possuelo says that Mr Bolsonaro poses the biggest threat to those groups since the no-contact policy began. "Contact is a road of no return," he says. The alarm is heightened by covid-19, which could hurt indigenous people more than those with access to modern health care. Mr Bolsonaro, who revealed this week that he had tested positive for the coronavirus, has shown little interest in shielding Brazilians from it.

Even before his presidency, the no-contact policy was under threat. Between 1987 and 2013, funai contacted only five isolated groups. But illegal logging, mining and drug smuggling have pushed non-isolated groups towards isolated ones. Tensions between them have drawn in the state. FUNAI has led as many contact missions since 2014 as it did in those previous 26 years. In 2015 it drew criticism for initially ignoring pleas from the Matis in the Javari valley to make contact with the isolated Korubo, whose members had killed two Matis leaders. funai contacted the Korubo only after the Matis killed eight Korubo in revenge.

With Mr Bolsonaro in charge, religious pressures reinforce commercial ones. "I haven't met an Indian who wants to be naked, and it's a crime to keep them that way," says an American missionary who lives in Atalaia do Norte. Edward Luz, the president of the New Tribes Mission of Brazil (MNTB), whose 480 missionaries evangelise "unreached ethnic groups", wrote in an email to *The Economist* that contact will improve their health. Fear and worry "will be replaced by confidence and they will smile, procreate, have their cultural practices and grow in numbers again," he prophesied.

Mr Lopes was once an MNTB missionary. His appointment to FUNAI is like "putting a fox in charge of the hen house", says Beto Marubo, an indigenous activist. He fears that Mr Lopes will share secret information about tribes' locations with proselytising friends. If contact is needed, it should be done by the government, not missionaries, said Mr Lopes in an email.

Missionaries deny that they are trying to contact isolated tribes. Their actions suggest otherwise. Ethnos360, the American partner of mntb, raised more than \$2m to buy a helicopter to "open the door to reach ten additional people groups living in extreme isolation" in the Javari valley. Mr Luz says the helicopter, which arrived in January, will help MNTB in areas where it already works, like Vida Nova, a Marubo village where it built a church in the 1950s. FUNAI has reported Andrew Tonkin, an American, to the police for flying a seaplane into the Javari valley. Indigenous leaders say he was searching for isolated groups. He denies this and denounces what he sees as FUNAI's paternalism. "What about [indigenous peoples'] right to invite who they want to their community?" he emailed. "To worship God freely?"

It is not just missionaries and miners who challenge the no-contact policy. In

an editorial in *Science* in 2015, two anthropologists, Kim Hill and Robert Walker, suggested that, given governments' inability to protect indigenous lands, isolated groups are "not viable in the long term". "Controlled contact" would be a better policy, they wrote. "If we can guarantee them protection from exploitation they would all choose contact tomorrow," says Mr Hill. His research shows that by at least one measure they would be better off: among the Ache of Paraguay, half of children living isolated in the forest died before reaching adulthood. After contact in the 1970s, child mortality rates spiked for a few years, but are now 2-3%.

The *Science* article caused a furore. The idea of controlled contact ignores native peoples' right to self-determination, say defenders of no contact. Many groups returned to isolation after traumatic encounters, such as enslavement by rubber tappers in the early 1900s. Uncontacted groups "know there's a world out there," says Mr Marubo. "They are making a choice by isolating themselves." Many people doubt that any contact could be controlled, and that it would be accompanied by medical follow-up. "Can you trust that a government won't think about what gold is there, what oil is there, what trees are there?" asks Glenn Shepard, an ethnobotanist.

Even if controlled contact were possible, now seems a bad time to initiate it. The prevalence of covid-19 among indigenous people in cities is five times that among white Brazilians. Mr Hill agrees contact should not happen until there is a vaccine and Mr Bolsonaro is no longer president.

Yet evangelists see the disease as a reason to initiate it. Congress's evangelical lobby tacked on to a law that allocates money to protect indigenous people from covid-19 an amendment that allows missionaries to remain on indigenous lands. After a court ordered the government to evict 20,000 gold miners from the remote Yanomami territory, the army dropped off face masks and hydroxychloroquine, an antimalarial drug that Mr Bolsonaro thinks is effective against covid-19.

Mr Mayoruna, who left the forest because "I wanted to know who God was", recently broke ties with the missionaries. He thinks it is a matter of time before the remaining isolated groups are confronted with modern Brazil, but says it is wrong for pastors to push the pace. "You can't force anyone to convert," he says.

This article appeared in the The Americas section of the print edition under the headline "Christianity, covid, contact".

THE PRICE OF PROGRESS IN PERU

The Economist — April 3, 2021

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<https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2021/04/03/the-price-of-progress-in-peru>

Joseph Zárate spells it out in “Wars of the Interior”

Wars of the Interior. By Joseph Zárate. Translated by Annie McDermott. Granta; 208 pages; £12

Osman Cuñachí was practising free kicks one afternoon in 2016 when thick black oil from a crack in a nearby pipeline started oozing into the Chiriaco river. The 11-year-old member of the Awajún tribe, the second-largest indigenous nation in Peru, heard that government engineers were paying people to clean up the spill. His family was one of dozens who waded into the water with buckets and plastic bottles. Sick from the fumes, his four-year-old brother was the first to give up. Osman stayed in until it got dark, hoping to earn enough to buy a smartphone. In a photo taken that day he is covered in black smears, smiling and swinging his bucket.

“It’s a perverse paradox of development that something as horrific as an oil spill and the death of a river could temporarily benefit a town,” writes Joseph Zárate, a Peruvian journalist, in “Wars of the Interior”. Each of his chapters investigates how a commodity extracted from the rainforest—wood, gold, oil—has changed the lives of the locals, mostly for the worse. Mr Zárate acknowledges that these industries have helped Peru and its Amazonian neighbours grow and modernise. But, he argues, too little thought has been given to the trade-offs. Rifts in Peruvian society over the exploitation of natural resources too often end in violence. A war is raging between “clashing visions of progress”, and indigenous people are losing.

Many books about the Amazon cast its inhabitants as passive victims, or idealise them as guardians of the forest. Mr Zárate does neither. His subjects don’t oppose development itself—Osman’s father wants him to become a petroleum engineer—but rather the brutal way it has intruded on their lives. They are resilient and stubborn, but they are clearly outgunned. An Asháninka chief sees no choice but to fight illegal loggers who are chopping down trees on his tribe’s reserve. He gets killed. A Quechua potato farmer can’t imagine selling her land for a pittance so that a mining company can dredge up a yellow metal of no value to her. Her house is burned down. Doctors find dangerous arsenic, lead and mercury in little Osman’s blood. He just wants to be “a normal kid, and not be scared of getting a tumour one day”.

Though Mr Zárate’s findings could fill scathing exposés of the kind churned out by Greenpeace, his technique is more like that of Svetlana Alexievich, the Belarusian writer who was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 2015. A quote from one of her books stands as the epigraph to “Wars of the Interior”: “I strive desperately to... reduce history to the human being.” Like Ms Alexievich’s narratives, Mr Zárate’s relies heavily on his subjects’ own words. Like her, he focuses on the failure of the state to protect its people.

In Peru extraction companies operate in 70% of the rainforest. Many ignore clauses in their contracts about respecting local people but few are held to account. Though the World Bank estimates that 80% of Peru’s wood exports have illegal origins, only a handful of loggers have ever been sent to prison for illegally felling trees. In the past decade, meanwhile, more than two Olympic swimming pools-worth of oil has leaked into the country’s rivers. Mr Zárate forces readers to confront the human implications of development. “Osman Cuñachí doesn’t understand much about environmental politics,” he writes (in Annie McDermott’s translation), “but he does know how hard it is to clean oil off your body.”

Economic development can no doubt be pursued more carefully, but its force seems to be unstoppable, just like the flood that destroyed the Amazonian village where Mr Zárate’s grandmother grew up in the 1940s. She left to work as a maid in Lima, as thousands of indigenous women still do each year. She married at 14, adapted her speech in order to assimilate into urban society and saved enough money to send all her children to university. To some, hers is an uplifting story. Mr Zárate isn’t so sure: “The question is what we are prepared to sacrifice, as individuals and as a society,” in the name of progress.

This article appeared in the Culture section of the print edition under the headline “The wood from the trees”.

THIRD PRIZE WINNER

DÉJÀ VU AS PALM OIL INDUSTRY BRINGS DEFORESTATION, POLLUTION TO AMAZON

Karla Mendes (Brazil)



Karla Mendes is an award-winning environmental Brazilian journalist working as a Contributing Editor for Mongabay. In 2020, she won the SEJ's top award in the outstanding explanatory reporting category for a project published by the Thomson Reuters Foundation about Maranhão's Guardians of the Forest. The documentary film was also awarded by the Colorado Environmental Film Festival and the Naples Human Rights Film Festival. In 2021, a documentary she directed about Indigenous people in Brazilian cities received the Jackson Wild award; she also won the Geneton Moraes Neto Journalism Award with an article about farmers paid to "produce water" published by the Thomson Reuters Foundation. As a business reporter, she won three top journalism awards with a series about "Pirates in the Amazon," published in O Estado de S. Paulo newspaper.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Still on the frontline, and taking third prize in this category is Karla Mendes (Brazil) for her story *Déjà Vu as Palm Oil Industry Brings Deforestation, Pollution to Amazon* which examines the potentially harsh consequences of palm oil plantation development in South America.

She examines the case of Brazil, where a plantation has been established directly adjacent to the land of the Tembê people of the Turé-Mariquita Indigenous Reserve in Pará state. Her reports reveal how, over a period of 18 months, local people began to suffer from new illnesses, a development which can be traced to chemical sprays infiltrating the water supply.

The investigation has also prompted action by the federal authorities in Brazil. The information set out in the reports – and even the fact that Karla has won this award – has been added to the dossier of evidence assembled by the authorities who plan to intervene to prevent further harm being caused to local people. Here we see another excellent example of public interest journalism making a difference to people's lives.

DÉJÀ VU AS PALM OIL INDUSTRY BRINGS DEFORESTATION, POLLUTION TO AMAZON

By Karla Mendes

Mongabay — March 12, 2021

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English: <https://news.mongabay.com/2021/03/deja-vu-as-palm-oil-industry-brings-deforestation-pollution-to-amazon/>

Portugues: <https://brasil.mongabay.com/2021/03/desmatamento-e-agua-contaminada-o-lado-obscurito-do-oleo-de-palma-sustentavel-da-amazonia/>

Producers say their supply chains are green and sustainable, but prosecutors cite a long record of land grabbing, deforestation, pollution, and human rights violations.

- Palm oil, a crop synonymous with deforestation and community conflicts in Southeast Asia, is making inroads in the Brazilian Amazon, where the same issues are playing out.
- Indigenous and traditional communities say the plantations in their midst are polluting their water, poisoning their soil, and driving away fish and game.
- Scientists have found high levels of agrochemical residues in these communities — though still within Brazil’s legal limits — while prosecutors are pursuing legal cases against the companies for allegedly violating Indigenous and traditional communities’ rights and damaging the environment.
- Studies based on satellite imagery also disprove the companies’ claims that they only plant on already deforested land.

Tomé-Açu, Brazil — Guided by an Indigenous leader, we drove down dusty roads in the Turé-Mariquita Indigenous Reserve, a “green island” encircled by oil palm plantations in the Brazilian Amazon.

Uniform rows of oil palms cover huge swaths of land here in the northeast of the state of Pará, once home to a vibrant expanse of rainforest. Our Mongabay reporting team was there to discover if the palm oil business, worth hundreds of millions of dollars, is sustainable and ecologically responsible, as industry representatives told us.

Federal prosecutors have pursued the country’s leading palm oil exporters in the courts for the past seven years, alleging the companies are contaminating rivers, poisoning the soil, and harming the livelihoods and health of Indigenous and traditional peoples, charges the companies deny.

The stories of abuse we heard from our guide seemed almost unbelievable. After hearing dozens of claims of water contamination in the Indigenous villages, the local chief, Lúcio Tembê, led us to a mill run by Biopalma da Amazônia — Brazil’s top palm oil producer and exporter — close to the Acará River, which meanders through the forest for almost 400 kilometers (250 miles) before spilling out into the Amazon gulf.

“Look,” Tembê said, “they will throw [palm oil] residue in the river!”

Leaving our car, we watched from the riverbank, filming as unmarked trucks, and then a man with a shovel, dumped waste into the waterway. Tembê told us that the dark brown residue was a toxic sludge of organic materials, insecticides and herbicides from local palm oil mills. Every day, dozens of trucks dump this waste into the Acará River, he added.

Industry representatives would later tell us that such things do not happen, and that palm oil production isn’t harmful to human health or to the environment. But the dumping we saw, as well as the rapid onset of coughing, shortness of breath, nausea and headaches when we inhaled the fumes from palm trees doused with pesticides, was enough to convince us that these claims were worth pursuing.

Over the past year we investigated allegations made by local communities of widespread abuses by palm oil companies in Brazil, discovering what appears to be an industry-wide pattern of brazen disregard for Amazon conservation and for the rights of Indigenous people and traditional communities.

“The oil palm only brought a lot of problems. First of all, it brought destruction of our fauna, our flora, our rivers,” Tembê said as he looked out over the Turé River, close to the Turé-Mariquita reserve, an Indigenous territory about 250 km (150 mi) south of the city of Belém on Brazil’s north coast. “This water isn’t clean. But in the past we drank it. This river and the forest around it were like a supermarket for the population; it was where we fished, where we hunted.”

The rights of Indigenous people and traditional communities are protected under Brazil’s Constitution and international accords to which Brazil is a signatory. The Constitution also establishes that all Brazilians have the right to an “ecologically balanced environment.”

But laws issued by Pará state have often overshadowed these commitments in practice. Biopalma’s mill and one of its plantations lie adjacent to the Acará River and were constructed without a buffer zone as is required by law, according to documents seen by Mongabay.

Since 2014, federal prosecutors have faced a legal battle to approve a forensic investigation into pesticide contamination and the socioenvironmental and health impacts in Biopalma’s production zone in the Turé-Mariquita Indigenous Reserve. “These are not minor problems faced by Indigenous peoples,” Felício Pontes Júnior, one of the federal prosecutors, wrote in a legal filing in the case. “The defendant [Biopalma] is aware of the Indigenous complaints.”

The claims date back to 2012, when Indigenous and traditional communities first raised the alarm. When the lawsuit was filed, a judge rapidly issued an injunction allowing a forensic investigation, but this was later overturned by another judge. The Federal Prosecutor's Office appealed and a final ruling is yet to be issued.

"The company says it has no impact. So, if it says it doesn't have [an impact] and we say it does, let's do the forensic report," Pontes Júnior told Mongabay in a phone interview in January.

A troubled industry booms

Palm oil has become ubiquitous in consumer societies. It's one of the primary vegetable oils produced and traded worldwide. That's partly because of its immense versatility: 80% of its production is channeled into the food industry, where it's a key ingredient in consumer products made by conglomerates like Unilever and Nestlé.

Though most of us will never see it in its raw state, many of us will eat it in some form today. Various derivatives of palm oil are found in chocolate, ice cream, cookies, margarine and countless other products. It's found in hygiene, beauty and cleaning items and even at the gas pump in the form of biodiesel. Rich in vitamins A and E and the best substitute for trans fats, which were banned in the United States in 2018, it is the oil of choice of global capitalism.

But researchers are growing increasingly concerned over the socioenvironmental crises its popularity has brought to many rural communities in tropical nations. The damage done to rainforests, wildlife, Indigenous peoples and water supplies in Malaysia and Indonesia, which together account for 85% of global palm oil production, is well documented, as are problems in Africa, where the industry has grown in recent years. Less studied and publicized to date are its impacts in the Brazilian Amazon.

Though Brazil accounts for just 1% of global palm oil production (about 540,000 tons in 2020), the industry is spreading rapidly here. Oil palm coverage in northern Pará — today responsible for about 90% of Brazilian production — increased almost five-fold to 236,000 hectares (583,169 acres) between 2010 and 2019. While national production dipped slightly in 2018, production in Pará rose by 47,653 tons (3.2%) over the same period.

Despite a push by the government of then-president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva to stimulate palm oil production in 2010 by mandating its use as a biofuel, almost all Brazilian production is still used in the food industry, mostly as a soybean oil substitute. Lula also launched a national biodiesel program in 2004, and a sustainable palm oil production program in 2010, which further stoked demand.

When it was launched, the sustainability policy aimed to guarantee the supply of biofuel while protecting the environment by banning deforestation in native forest areas for the expansion of corporate plantations.

Pará has the highest deforestation rate in Brazil. Although cattle ranching and soy cultivation are the top drivers of deforestation, there are increasingly concerns about the damage associated with palm oil in the region. Researchers expect a massive expansion of the Amazon oil palm crop by 2030, driven by a government target to double the proportion of biodiesel used in the country and phase out fossil fuels.

Most of Brazil's palm oil production is controlled by eight companies. The top producer, Biopalma, was a subsidiary of Brazilian mining giant Vale, which is responsible for the two most catastrophic environmental disasters in Brazil's history in terms of affected area. As part of a divestment plan, Vale sold Biopalma at the end of 2020 to Brasil BioFuels S.A. (BBF), an energy company. In a document sent to Brazil's antitrust regulator, Cade, BBF said all its oil palm is used for power generation.

Brazil exported almost 90,000 tons of palm oil in 2017, mostly to Colombia, the European Union, the U.S. and Mexico, according to Trase, a research group run by the Stockholm Environment Institute and the NGO Global Canopy. Biopalma accounted for almost three-quarters of these exports. The company, which has operated in Pará since 2007, has announced an ambitious goal of becoming the largest palm oil producer in the Americas.

'Poisoned' water

As the palm oil industry expands in Brazil, the threat of water contamination has become a growing concern. We visited Turé-Mariquita in the Amazon's dry season, when companies spray agrochemicals in huge quantities. Activists say that in the rainy season, when river levels rise substantially and flood the land, all the accumulated toxins enter the river system, polluting the water and killing fish and other aquatic life.

We weren't the first visitors to experience the impact of the oil palm plantations. Researchers Jamilli Medeiros de Oliveira da Silva and Brian Garvey told us how they had bathed in a stream near the Acará River where it flowed past a pesticide-drenched field.

"Our skin itched and we stayed sick for two, three weeks," says Garvey, a researcher with the University of Strathclyde, in Glasgow, Scotland. "Several studies show that the water is contaminated. We witnessed them [Biopalma staff] dumping poison just a few meters from the river."

A 2014 analysis by a federal laboratory under the umbrella of the Ministry of Health identified banned pesticides like endosulfan in rivers and streams near oil palm plantations in the Acará region. Researchers collected data from 18 aquatic locations and identified the presence of pesticides in 80% of samples collected during the rainy season, with some agrochemicals linked to hormonal disorders and cancer.

There's no lack of anecdotal evidence regarding pesticide poisoning. "My husband's

aunt died of cancer,” Indigenous leader Uhu Temb  told Mongabay in the Yriwar village. “We say that’s because of this [oil palm-linked pollution], because these diseases didn’t exist in our village before. And today there is a lot of disease in our village ... In the summer, we have a lot of headaches because that’s when they [the companies] throw poison.”

C ntia Temb , another resident of the Tur -Mariquita reserve, speaks of witnessing a previously healthy young man, whose job it had been to spray chemicals over the oil palms, fall ill and die in the local hospital. “He arrived there with exaggerated pain in the abdomen,” she said at his home in the Arar Zena’i village. “It was terrible. Blood started to come out of his ear, nose, eyes ... as if something had burst inside him.”

Brazil is the largest consumer of agrochemicals on the planet, purchasing about a fifth of all pesticides produced globally. Dr. Peter Clausing, a toxicologist at the Pesticide Action Network (PAN) in Germany, said four out of nine pesticides approved for use in oil palm plantations in Brazil are listed as “highly hazardous.” Two of them — glufosinate-ammonium and methomyl — are banned in the European Union.

Waste generated during palm oil production contains a considerable amount of organic nutrients and heavy metals that can contaminate rivers, pollute the air and generate greenhouse gases. The effluent is typically released into rivers as a cheap and easy disposal method, according to Clausing.

“My sister died of cancer because she drank water from the [Tur ] river,” Em dio Temb , chief of the Tekena’i Indigenous village, told Mongabay in 2019, during our visit to the Tur -Mariquita reserve. “She died of cancer [three] years ago due to poisoned water,” he added, referring to the pesticides sprayed by Biopalma. “It’s been nine years since we could not drink water from the river because it’s polluted with poison.”

When Biopalma began planting its oil palm crop in the Tur -Mariquita area in 2010, residents told us, locals experienced a mysterious wave of chronic, debilitating, and sometimes fatal, symptoms: headaches, itching, skin rashes and blisters, diarrhea and stomach ailments. Many of the health complaints arose shortly after drinking from or bathing in local streams and coincided with the annual pesticide-spraying season.

The accounts of the impact of oil palm pesticides on Indigenous and traditional communities are supported by a 2017 study that found traces of three pesticides (two of them typically listed among those used in oil palm cultivation) in the major streams and wells used by the Temb  people in Tur -Mariquita.

According to research from the University of Bras lia (UnB), the number of reported cases of skin disorders in 2011 and 2012 increased considerably. “About a year after planting, there were many complaints of skin diseases and headaches. It was quite intense for about six months,” a local health worker told the researchers. “In 2005, the rates of skin diseases, diarrhea, flu and headaches were almost zero.”

Among the pesticides found in surface and underground water in the reserve were

glyphosate-based herbicides. Glyphosate has been shown to be carcinogenic and has been banned or restricted in more than 20 nations, although not in Brazil. Also detected in samples of surface water and sediment taken by the researchers was the insecticide endosulfan, a persistent organic pollutant banned in Brazil in 2010.

“The most important scientific finding of this study is the identification for the first time, at least as far as we know from the scientific literature, of glyphosate-based herbicide residues in environmental water samples, both superficial and underground, in an Indigenous reserve surrounded by oil palm,” Sandra Damiani, the UnB researcher who conducted the study, told Mongabay. “In addition, our data also corroborates the presence of residues of other organic contaminants in the environment, this time not only in water, but also in sediment samples collected in the same water bodies studied.”

Damiani said they found contaminant residues in all six sampled streams and 40% of the wells sampled. Residue presence in groundwater samples was considered “particularly worrying” because these water sources are the only alternative to streams for Indigenous people in the area.

“We noticed a very large increase [in the number] of water wells after the company arrived,” Damiani told Mongabay. “And the presence of residues in the wells was a surprise, and it was something that caught our attention and requires great care because the [Indigenous] population uses either the stream directly or underground wells. If both have contaminants, what will they do?”

The maximum levels of glyphosate and endosulfan residues found in the water by the researchers were 45.5 micrograms per liter ($\mu\text{g/L}$) and 0.03 $\mu\text{g/L}$, respectively. While these are within the legal bounds in Brazil, they are well above the much stricter levels set by the European Union. “This is a controversial discussion,” Rosivaldo Mendes, a researcher at the laboratory that analyzed the samples, told Mongabay. “For me, the safe limit is having nothing [in the water].”

Following the disclosure of her findings to the authorities, Damiani says, she was told that the companies agreed to not use pesticides around Indigenous reserves in the future.

BBF, the energy company that acquired Biopalma, said in a statement it was unable to assess the accuracy of the academic studies since it did not have access to the results of the analysis. The company said it “faithfully complies with the environmental standards and procedures applicable to palm oil production and is unaware of the situation reported in such a study.”

Legally, the glyphosate limit for drinkable water in Brazil is 500 $\mu\text{g/L}$. “Water is [only] considered unsafe if it is above [this level],” Mendes said, adding he disagrees with this parameter.

Brazilian legislation sets no limits for any pesticide residue found in sediments, even though they could potentially contaminate crops and pose a public health risk. Damiani’s sampled sediments were found to contain DDT and its degradation

products at levels that greatly exceed the thresholds established by the National Environment Council, a regulatory body. DDT is banned in more than 40 countries, including Brazil and the U.S. There is no national limit on sediment contamination with endosulfan.

Damiani said they found residues of at least one contaminant in almost a third of the 33 samples collected in the Turé-Mariquita reserve, with a much higher percentage for glyphosate-based herbicides in water collected during the dry season. Two-thirds of the groundwater samples and more than a third of surface samples contained traces of glyphosate-based herbicides.

Research from the Federal University of Pará (UFPA) also detected glyphosate in water samples collected in the municipality of Tailândia, another key oil palm cluster in Pará's northeast. The 2018 study also found atrazine, a widely used weedkiller, and the presence of aquatic plants, indicative of water pollution from nitrogen-, phosphorus- and potassium-based fertilizers. Its use is not allowed for palm oil in Brazil but family farmers often refer to atrazine as one of the main pesticides used in palm crops, researchers told Mongabay.

In this region, the top palm oil producers are Agropalma, the country's second-largest producer and exporter, and Belem Bioenergia Brasil (BBB).

Agropalma is the only Brazilian company certified by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), the world's leading palm oil sustainability certification scheme. It is a subsidiary of the Brazil-based Alfa conglomerate, a major player in the finance, insurance, agribusiness, building materials, communications, leather and hotel sectors.

BBB previously counted Brazilian oil giant Petrobras, the firm at the center of the Lava Jato corruption scandal that landed former president Lula in jail, as one of its main shareholders. It is now controlled by Portuguese oil company Galp and Ecotauá Participações, a holding company.

The UFPA study, led by Rosa Helena Ribeiro Cruz, collected nine water samples in the tributaries of sub-basins of the Anuerá and Aui-Açu rivers. The toxicological tests, carried out by the same laboratory that analyzed the samples collected in the Turé-Mariquita reserve, found "significant levels of glyphosate," but still within the regulatory limits, from two collection points in the outflowing streams from BBB's plantations, Cruz said.

Atrazine within Brazil's regulatory limit of 2 µg/L was also detected at two points — outflowing streams from BBB site and in a community closer to Agropalma's plantations, the researcher noted — including an intersection between oil palm, corn and soybean crops. Banned in the EU, the herbicide is still often detected in water samples two decades after its use was prohibited. Atrazine is quite toxic, and potentially carcinogenic to humans, and persists in the environment, especially in water bodies.

"There is no way to say that there is no water contamination," Cruz said. "We

came to the conclusion that this pesticide glyphosate is being used. But as they are pesticides that are under the ground, in the water, it will be diluted." She added that no previous data on river contamination for Tailândia were available

No traces of pesticides were detected from collection points inside Agropalma's plantations, where the researchers were escorted by company minders.

"BBB didn't let us enter the company [plantation area], only Agropalma. But we were accompanied all the time," Cruz told Mongabay, adding that the collection points were chosen by the company. "Two people were assigned to accompany us and at the same point where we did the collection, they did it too. But then there is this doubt: I don't know if they really took us to the points where there is leaching into the soil... They wanted us to do my analysis inside their laboratory, they wanted us to stay inside Agropalma, paying for [our] lunch, coffee, dinner, all support, but we didn't accept it."

Agropalma's director of sustainability, Tulio Dias Brito, said the company does not use atrazine. He also challenged the research, claiming that the points where Cruz detected atrazine do not have any connection with Agropalma's area.

"They are far from Agropalma and ... they are upstream... So, there is no way, even if I had sprayed... an atrazine truck at a stream of Agropalma, it would not reach this point," Brito told Mongabay in an interview in February.

Geographer Daniel Sombra, coordinator at UFPA's Laboratory of Environmental Analysis and Cartographic Representations, disagrees. Although the natural watercourse is upstream, he said, it could also flow downstream, given the high level of variation of the tides of the Amazon rivers.

"[This point] is 2 km upstream on the Aiu-Açu river... It may be that they [the pesticides] came from upstream plantations, which are from other properties, including family farms cultivating oil palm, some linked to BBB. But it is not impossible that the effects deposited downstream could move 2 km upwards," noted Sombra, who built the maps for Cruz' thesis. "So, it is undetermined whether it really came from upstream or downstream. The fact is: the pesticides collected are typical residues of palm monoculture."

Bruto also challenged the research's allegations about the presence of aquatic plants as indicative of water pollution from nitrogen-, phosphorus- and potassium-based fertilizers, claiming that the photos from the study didn't show any macrophyte superpopulation; the existence of many factors in the area could have triggered macrophyte growth, including sun incidence and a nearby road, while laboratory testing for these substances was lacking. Brito also argued that none of the collection points are close to Agropalma, adding that other factors should be taken into account.

Bruto says Agropalma has collected water samples from the outflowing streams and within its area as well to check the presence of phosphorus and nitrogen at eight pre-selected points since 2015, as one of the requirements

of the Palm Oil Innovation Group (POIG), an industry group. The results of the sampling are recorded and published in the company's annual sustainability report.

"When comparing streams that cross the palm plantation, we compare them with streams that only cross primary forests," Brito said. "The species composition is not exactly the same: some populations are favored, others are disadvantaged, but the ecological function is fulfilled. And the water quality is adequate, it is good."

Moreover, he said that Agropalma has monitored watercourses within its farms in partnership with NGO Conservation International and UFPA's department of biological sciences, which monitor water quality and aquatic fauna on company property. "So far, we have not received any indication of contamination," he noted. He also cited a UFPA study that found that oil palm plantations "appear to be one of the least deleterious for native fauna" compared to the different options available for use of soil in the Amazon basin.

According to Brito, Agropalma only uses herbicides, mostly glyphosate, but is testing other compounds. "Our mission is not to use [glyphosate] anymore," he said. "But it is very difficult because we have to keep the crown of the plants clean. And we also publish every year the amount of active ingredients that we use."

Smallholders quoted in Cruz's research said that glyphosate, known locally as mata-mato, was the main pesticide used in oil palm cultivation in Tailândia, even though they said the risks are unknown.

Bruto said Agropalma only provides glyphosate after carrying out the due training with farmers.

In a statement, Gilberto Cabral, a BBB spokesman, said the company observes "the best practices applicable in environmental terms" and "without substantial change in land use." According to him, the trees were planted between 2011 and 2015 in areas that had been used as pastures or areas that were already degraded before 2005.

However, he noted, Tailândia's land is also used by independent palm producers and by producers of other crops, such as corn and soybeans, "with recurrent use of pesticides in all areas sown."

As a means of environmental monitoring, Cabral said, the company periodically analyzes surface waters, upstream and downstream, and underground, in order to detect any changes.

"The company strictly observes the dosages and other instructions expressed on the labels and package inserts of the few pesticides it uses, since we prioritize preventive, mechanical (brushing) and biological (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) means of control on a large scale," he wrote.

Roberto Yokoyama, the head of the Brazilian Association of Palm Oil Producers (Abrapalma), said if the contamination of watercourses has indeed occurred in Pará, there should be an official investigation.

Yokoyama challenged Cruz' research, claiming the levels of atrazine found in watercourses and the fertilization period were misrepresented. He also challenged the methodology used by the researcher and argued that the study did not present evidence that proved palm oil plantations were the source.

"The data and results that the master's thesis presents, in fact, do not indicate that oil palm plantations were responsible for the application of atrazine and glyphosate in their plantations," Yokoyama wrote.

Scientific evidence of health impacts

Several studies provide evidence of the harmful health impacts of the contaminants found in Turé-Mariquita and Tailândia. Endosulfan levels of 0.01 µg/L (a third of the concentration found in the water in Damiani's study), for example, have been shown to be lethal to fish. Studies also detected serious health issues linked to exposure to DDT, diuron and glyphosate-based herbicide residues. There is also growing evidence for atrazine's carcinogenic potential.

Another concern is the possible proliferation of cyanobacteria and the generation of cyanotoxins in streams containing glyphosate-based herbicides. Cyanotoxins are powerful natural poisons, and some can cause rapid death by respiratory failure.

The regulations governing the use of pesticides in Brazil apply only to the active ingredients, and fail to consider the toxicity of the complete formulation, as well as the interaction between contaminants, whose health impacts can be worse but are often not studied or poorly understood. Lab tests using human cells have shown that glyphosate formulations can be up to a thousand times more toxic than just the active ingredient alone, which means that individual analysis of active ingredients can underestimate the risks to living organisms.

Brazil banned the use of endosulfan in 2010 and DDT in phases from 1985 to 2009, citing their high toxicity and the capacity for bioaccumulation and persistence in the environment. Both are considered persistent organic pollutants under the Stockholm Convention, a global treaty.

It's thought the DDT found in the Turé-Mariquita samples may have originated from its widespread use to control malaria-bearing mosquitos in the Amazon.

At least seven herbicides and 16 insecticides are currently used in oil palm cultivation in Brazil and other countries that grow the crop. Damiani notes the lack of transparency regarding agrochemicals used by Brazilian palm oil companies, as well as the amounts and periods of application — a lack of publicly available data that could potentially conceal much higher exposure of Amazonian communities to oil palm pesticides.

Damiani obtained access to pesticide data collected by prosecutors from Biopalma and other palm oil firms. "Scientific research corroborates the Tembê's claims," she said. But "this data we obtained is [just] a snapshot of a reality that requires more frequent monitoring."

Another study in 2014 by the Instituto Evandro Chagas (IEC), the federal laboratory that carried out the testing for Damiani's and Cruz' studies, found endosulfan residues and cyanobacteria, but no pesticide residues, in another oil palm-growing area. According to Mendes, the lab researcher, further systematic analysis of the impacts of oil palm plantations' pesticide use in Pará is needed, but previous attempts to secure funding have failed.

While the Turé-Mariquita Indigenous Reserve's residents can point to Damiani's study to corroborate their claims, their neighbors, including in the Tembé Indigenous Reserve, have voiced similar contamination and disease concerns, but lack any scientific evidence to support their accounts.

Their ancestral lands abut oil palm plantations owned and operated by BBB. The reserve's Indigenous inhabitants say BBB is shirking its obligations by denying the existence of a tributary of the Acará-Mirim River that runs inside one of their oil palm plantations. Mongabay visited the area and verified the existence of a river inside the property.

In the nearby village of Acará-Mirim, Funai, the federal agency for Indigenous affairs, has set up a water supply system at the center of the community. But it doesn't reach Nazaré Coutinho Pereira's house by the banks of the Acará-Mirim River. "We keep drinking this water because there's no [other] option," Pereira said. "We consume a lot of water to drink, to wash, [but] the body always becomes itchy and we need to take medicine.

"[When] we fill a can with this water, in a few hours we can see a finger of mud in the bottom of the pan," she added. Come the rainy season, she said, "all the poisons, all the dirt comes ... dead animals on top, oxen, horse, they throw everything in the river ... and we drink the juice from it all."

Pereira said she has experienced symptoms including diarrhea after drinking the once-clean river water, something that didn't happen in the past. "I feel my stomach get big, it gets full, unwilling to eat," she said. "I also have urinary infections very often." Residents who drink from Funai's water supply also describe similar symptoms, she added.

In a statement, BBB denied the use of pesticides, saying it only used "mineral fertilizers that contribute to the growth of plants, both cultivated and native." The company acknowledged the existence of a river called "Rio Pequeno" near its farm, but said that its plantations "are within a regulatory distance from this water body."

It added its technicians are investigating the situation, including "rigorous analysis of all water bodies near the plantations." The company said it received on February 18 a complaint from the Tembé Indigenous Association of Vale do Acará about the carrying of liquid effluents, distributed in the planting plots as complementary organic fertilizer, for streams that flow into the river that serves the community in which they live.

A decade-long legal battle

Local communities have frequently pursued legal action against Brazil's major palm oil players. Biopalma has been targeted by the Tembé people of the Turé-Mariquita Indigenous Reserve and by small farmers and Afro slave-descendant quilombola communities.

The Tembé say they were not properly consulted before Biopalma's oil palm venture got up and running. "We were not listened to for this project; when we saw it, the project was already established around our territory," Lúcio Tembé, chief of the Turé Indigenous village, said. Pontes Júnior, the federal prosecutor, points to a loophole in Brazilian law that requires a buffer zone of 10 km (6 mi) and a socio-environmental impact study for ventures around conservation areas, but not around Indigenous reserves.

For large development projects, like dams, such a buffer zone is also mandatory for Indigenous reserves, given the potentially harmful impacts of these types of developments. But palm oil plantations are considered an "agrosilvopastoral culture" with "low polluting and degrading potential" by the state environmental council, and so are not required to go through the same licensing process, instead qualifying for a simplified licensing process.

Brazil is a party to international conventions that require consultation with, and consent by, Indigenous and traditional communities who will be impacted by major development projects. In this case, however, there was no prior consultation, and the impact was not assessed, Pontes Júnior said. "Everything depends on [getting] this forensic report. From this forensic report, a series of other actions will be triggered... [But] without this forensic report I have my hands tied in this action," he said.

In a statement, the Federal Circuit Court for the First Region in Brasília said a ruling may be made in March.

Another enabling factor in the oil palm industry's environmental violations can be found in the plantation licensing process. In Pará, the state government didn't acknowledge the presence of Indigenous or traditional communities when granting licenses for oil palm cultivation, prosecutors say.

The Turé-Mariquita reserve, for example, was demarcated in 1991, 16 years before Biopalma arrived in the region. The Tembé themselves have been present in Pará since the second half of the 19th century, when they were forced to migrate from neighboring Maranhão state.

Since their first recorded contact with Portuguese colonizers in 1615 in Maranhão, the Tembé have had to face forced proselytization by missionaries, slavery, infectious diseases, persecution, conflict, and extreme droughts that devastated the land. A branch of the Tupi-Guarani family, they called themselves Tenetehara but in the migration process came to be called the Tembé in Pará; those who remained in Maranhão are called the Guajajara.

The presence of several quilombola settlements, or quilombos, also dating back more than a century was similarly ignored during the licensing process. State and federal prosecutors say this renders the process invalid, given the lack of attention paid to the impacts on these communities. Pontes Júnior and state prosecutors Eliane Cristina Pinto Moreira and Raimundo Moraes have also called on the Pará state environmental council, Coema, to reform its palm oil licensing policy to introduce more regulation, but the requests have been rejected.

Researchers at UFPA have found that Biopalma's Castanheira processing mill, next to the Acará River, received two separate licenses — one from the municipality of Acará and one from the state — yet neither defines any buffer zone requirements. "The conditions are ridiculous, i.e., annual reports of activities, something that the legislation already establishes... The environmental authority simply relies on the companies' self-monitoring procedures," lead researcher Elielson Pereira da Silva told Mongabay. He added that the environment secretary in Acará had only shown him the documents on condition he not make any copies or photograph them.

In a statement, Pará's Secretariat of Environment and Sustainability (Semas-PA) said it carried out inspections from May to December 2019 in six municipalities, including Acará and Tomé Açu, and at the time "there were no violations of current environmental standards."

In relation to the pollution of watercourses, Semas-PA said it plans to inspect the area; there are also scheduled inspections for Tailândia's oil palm farms, but monitoring rivers and streams within Indigenous Reserves is the responsibility of the federal government, it added.

Brazil's Ministry of Health, Funai, and the municipalities of Acará and Tailândia did not respond to requests for comment for this story.

'Desperate' strategy to be heard

Brazilian companies like Biopalma portray their operations as sustainable to consumers in Latin America, Europe and the U.S. But palm oil companies the world over have long been accused of destroying traditional livelihoods, leaving poverty and social deprivation in their wake. In Pará, the industry has left many Indigenous and traditional residents feeling estranged from their culture, which is deeply intertwined with the natural world.

By 2019, Biopalma's plantations had encircled the Tembé's lands, and local resistance morphed into campaigns of direct action against the company. Tired of nearly a decade of fruitless campaigning for compensation through official channels, the Tembé took direct action, seizing company vehicles in the hope of forcing Biopalma to hear their concerns. Uhu Tembé, an Indigenous leader, told Mongabay how she and her husband seized a Biopalma tractor during the protest and used it to bulldoze oil palm trees near the village of Yriwar in the Turé-Mariquita reserve.

On November 12, 2019, Indigenous leader Uhu Tembé told Mongabay in village of Yriwar

in the Turé-Mariquita Indigenous Reserve how she and her husband seized a Biopalma tractor during a protest and used it to bulldoze oil palm trees near her house.

"We have been asking for [Biopalma's] help for a long time to clean the area so we can plant; they never answered. Then we decided to get their machinery to do it ourselves ... because we've been asking them for ten years," Uhu said, pointing to the tractor that sat outside her home for three months. "We are cleaning it up here to plant our cassava, corn, rice. We don't eat this here," she added, pointing to oil palms. "They did not respect our land, our area. That's why we feel outraged."

Frustration with palm oil companies has grown across the region over the last years, and the seizure of company property by the Turé-Mariquita residents is not an isolated case.

Like the Indigenous communities, the quilombolas have also protested against Biopalma, blocking roads to call for development assistance. But such actions may have provoked violence, including the murder of a quilombola leader in 2018, and an arson attack on the home of another.

The Mongabay team visited the village of Acará-Mirim in the neighboring Tembé Indigenous Reserve the day after residents had seized tractors and a car from BBB. Indigenous leader Valdevan Evangelista dos Santos Tembé said their goal was to force a dialogue with the company, and that they would return the vehicles once an agreement was reached. In the meantime, residents used the machinery to prepare the area to plant crops.

"All Indigenous leaders in Acará-Mirim and Cuxiu-Mirim villages agreed to do this protest. We agreed to put on war paint [over] our bodies, take our bows and arrows and seize the company's ... tractors," Valdevan Tembé said. "What was our objective? To bring the company's manager to our village to talk to us and sign an agreement. We would only give them back their machines after they start the construction works they promised us."

The protests have had some successes. For Valdevan Tembé and his neighbors, BBB committed to conducting a social and environmental impact study to determine if the plantations had damaged the Indigenous communities. BBB said the study was contracted and is being carried out at the moment, with completion expected for the first semester of this year to be "the basis for the adoption of measures to mitigate any impacts."

BBB also made some improvements to the road requested by the Acará-Mirim villagers, Lúcio Tembé said.

The Mongabay team visited the village of Acará-Mirim in the Tembé Indigenous Reserve the day after residents had seized tractors and a car from palm oil company Belem Bionergia Brasil (BBB). On November 14, 2019, Indigenous leader Valdevan Evangelista dos Santos Tembé said their goal was to force a dialogue with the company, and that they would return the vehicles once an agreement was reached.

In Turé-Mariquita, Biopalma went to court to get its machines back. The villagers handed them back three months after seizing them, with the company agreeing to pay each community 30,000 reais (about \$5,600) quarterly for three years to finance local development projects, according to Urutaw Turiwar Tembê, chief of the Yriwar Indigenous village. “It is not enough for us, but it was what they gave us. We fought for more, but we failed,” he said.

But none of these projects have been completed so far, Urutaw Tembê said, due to higher costs amid the COVID-19 pandemic. According to him, instead of paying the quarterly amount, Biopalma only paid annually.

The Indigenous have tried to seal a new deal to replace the amount for the obligation for carrying out the projects, regardless of the amount but “it became very complicated to negotiate” after Biopalma’s sale to BBF, Urutaw Tembê noted.

In a statement, BBF said its relationship with Indigenous communities close to palm plantation areas “is always maintained in a spirit of technical and social cooperation” under agreements made last year that included providing clean drinking water, ensuring food security, and educational and cultural schemes.

November 2015 saw the first major mobilization of Indigenous people, quilombolas, ribeirinhos (traditional riverside dwellers) and residents of neighboring communities against the palm oil firms. About 140 people came together and occupied Biopalma’s Vera Cruz headquarters, paralyzing the company for 11 days.

The protest began when Biopalma started operating a ferry on the Acará River, close to the Vila Formosa quilombola community. The quilombolas asked if they could also use the company ferry to travel to other communities or even to the city, but were rebuffed, leading to the occupation. Days later, a judge intervened and the protesters left peacefully. Biopalma denounced the occupation, alleging its property had been looted, and a judge in Acará ordered the arrest of the leaders of the associations involved in the occupation. One quilombola leader was jailed for eight months.

However, in a counterargument of appeal signed in early 2020 in defense of the Tembê’s November 2019 protests against Biopalma, federal prosecutor Felipe Moura de Palha e Silva said the demonstration was a legitimate act of Indigenous resistance made in response “to the years of illicit conduct by the company, which severely damages their health,” and was carried out “in a desperate attempt to at least be heard [in] a dispute over Indigenous rights.”

The prosecutor encouraged both sides in the conflict to engage in mediation over Biopalma’s omission of environmental impacts and the need for corrective environmental licensing, among other points of contention. “For these issues, the company omits and tries to criminalize the demonstration of the Indigenous people through lawfare and police procedures,” Silva wrote.

In a statement, Biopalma said it filed a repossession suit given “the repeated undue seizures of agricultural machinery” through “serious threats like wielding melee weapons against Biopalma employees.”

Fewer game animals, more pests

The arrival of the oil palm plantations in the Amazon has driven out the wildlife that Indigenous and traditional communities often hunt for food and ushered in an influx of disease-carrying insects and venomous snakes, the communities say.

Before the plantations encircled the reserve, “we [easily] found, very close to here, paca, armadillo, a lot of fish,” said Nazaré Coutinho Pereira from Acará-Mirim village. “Hunting has changed because there are no more [animals]. It is difficult for us to find [animals to hunt] ... There’s nothing else [left], neither hunting nor fish.”

In Yriwar village, residents say game animals like tapir and tortoise have disappeared since Biopalma arrived. And even when they do catch animals, they are afraid to eat them due to the risk of pesticide poisoning. The few animals that remain, such as foxes, reportedly also suffer symptoms such as hair loss, while many others have been found dead from no obvious cause, according to Lúcio Tembê.

The cultivation of oil palms close to Indigenous reserves affects livelihoods and lifestyle quality in other ways beyond depriving residents of hunting and fishing. Urutaw Tembê said they have seen an increase in the number of insects and snakes.

The plantations “touched our territory [and] didn’t respect the buffer zone. This has brought us a lot of damage today: insects, lizards ... that we had never seen [before]. Venomous snakes, many snake species ... flies, flies that bother us. It ends up hurting the children’s bodies, triggering allergies,” he said.

According to Indigenous residents, the swarms of pests are caused by the loss of native vegetation and the large number of rodents attracted by fallen palm leaves. The snakes, in turn, are drawn by the abundance of the rodents, posing a serious health threat to residents, for whom the nearest clinic is an hour’s drive away and the closest hospital about four hours away.

Urutaw Tembê also complained about the damage caused by the planting of pueraria (Pueraria phaseoloides), a crop in the pea family that is used by the oil palm companies to fix nitrogen in the soil, control weeds, and reduce erosion. The Tembê say it attracts insects during the dry season that burrow beneath the skin, causing rashes.

Forests replaced by palm crops

Biopalma has said in the past that it established its plantations only on already cleared land, but Indigenous residents and researchers dispute this.

Sandra Damiani from UnB, who investigated the pesticide use in the area, said she found evidence of about 300 hectares (740 acres) of deforestation for oil palm around Turé-Mariquita, where old-growth forests were felled as loggers first encroached, followed by agricultural settlers, a mining company whose pipeline crosses the reserve, and finally by Biopalma.

Studies have shown that the conversion of forests into oil palm plantations is a major problem, not only locally, but across northeast Pará. Research suggests

between 9% and 39% of oil palm production occurred in deforested areas in Pará between 1989 and 2014, raising concerns about future expansion. This casts into doubt Biopalma's claim, and that of other companies, that their oil palm production stems only from previously cleared land.

Another study found that 40% of oil palm expansion in Pará had replaced woody vegetation, despite the government's ban on oil palm plantations expanding into forests and lands deforested before 2008.

The use of heavy machinery on the plantations also has an impact on biodiversity by scaring off game animals, Damiani said. The reduction in both abundance and diversity of animals was noticed immediately by Indigenous people after the planting of palm oil crops bordering their land, she said. Numerous bird species, for example, were no longer seen after the conversion to oil palm.

The native vegetation in the now-deforested territory outside the Indigenous reserve was important for the community to collect non-timber forest products, including herbs and honey that are used as medicines, vines for making of utensils, seeds for handicrafts, and fruits such as pequiá (*Caryocar villosum*), uxi (*Endopleura uchi*), bacuri (*Platonia insignis*) and bacaba (*Oenocarpus bacaba*).

The Indigenous people initially welcomed the increased access to urban centers that the new roads laid by Biopalma facilitated. But the roads also increased exposure to outsiders, making them feel that they were losing control of their territory. Another consequence of more roads has been an increase in illegal logging in the area. Numerous studies in the Amazon have identified road construction as an important vector of deforestation, and the Mongabay team regularly saw trucks loaded with timber passing through the area.

In a statement, BBF said it has identified "the role of illegal deforestation gangs in areas close to its farms" since it took control of Biopalma in November 2020 and had reported the allegations to the authorities. It added that palm oil crops were "planted in the parcels of land authorized under the terms of the applicable environmental legislation."

Deforestation in quilombola areas is also occurring as the direct result of oil palm expansion. Nearly 4,800 hectares (11,900 acres) of forest was cleared between 2007 and 2018 to make way for oil palms in the municipality of Acará, according to research by Jamilli Medeiros de Oliveira da Silva at São Paulo State University (UNESP). The study looked at satellite imagery from Mapbiomas — a network of NGOs, universities and tech firms that include Google — and crosschecked them with NASA's Landsat 5 and 8 data.

This further disproves the companies' and government's claims that oil palm plantations were established only on previously cleared land.

In 2010, the federal government launched an agroecological zoning program for palm oil cultivation in deforested areas in the states that make up the Brazilian Amazon. Called ZAE-Dendê, it offered benefits to palm oil companies for meeting

certain sustainability requirements. But as Damiani and da Silva found in their research, some areas were deforested and overlapped onto traditional quilombola communities.

Adriano Venturieri, the researcher who led the palm oil agroecological zoning program, said the quilombola communities were not considered because their presence was not formally acknowledged at the time. He added the program may be updated at any time to include this data.

Quilombolas affected

Like the Indigenous communities impacted by the plantations, the quilombola communities in Acará — the third-largest palm oil-producing municipality in Brazil — complain about similar issues arising from the plantations, including deforestation, reduced water levels in their streams, and pesticide pollution.

"They wanted to plant oil palm here. We did not allow it," José Renato Gomes de Gusmão told Mongabay at his home in 19 de Massaranduba, a quilombola village in the Tomé-Açu region. "People who live close [to the palm plantations] got sick [with] too much poison. The waters are gone, with so much poison that they throw. The streams are all gone.

"I don't like it," he added. "The palm brought a lot of income, a lot of jobs... [But] it is not healthy."

Researchers Brian Garvey and Jamilli Medeiros de Oliveira da Silva said they heard similar stories of water contamination in quilombola communities close to the Acará River. In 2016, a palm oil spill in the river left a yellow slick on the water's surface for more than a week. Quilombola communities including Vila Formosa village, where the protest over Biopalma's ferry began, were devastated as the fish they relied on died out. Since then, fish catches have declined, and even the river dolphins have disappeared, residents say.

In 2019, two palm oil spills near Agropalma's plantations in Tailândia polluted the Acará River and its tributaries. The company's director of sustainability, Tulio Dias Brito, said all of the oil was collected and the impact was "virtually nonexistent."

"We have the floating barriers that surround oil in the river ... We managed to surround the oil there and we managed to collect it to the last drop," he told Mongabay. "No fish, no tree died. So, there was no environmental impact. Although the volume was a few tons of hollow oil, which is a relatively large volume, the environmental impact was zero, objectively speaking ... We have all the proof: the photo before, the photo after."

Elielson da Silva from UFPA visited the area in the days after the second oil spill in October 2019 and documented the environmental impacts, including water contamination and the death of animals and fish. "There was contamination. I was there. I photographed people, I witnessed the [damages of the] oil spill," he told

Mongabay, adding that residents said that there were three oil spills that year.

Water contamination issues derived from both pesticides and oil spills have been faced by quilombola communities close to Agropalma's concession for several decades, but the situation worsens each year, especially the degree of fish contamination, a quilombola, who talked on condition of anonymity after receiving death threats, told Mongabay.

"The water is muddy, it's dark; it's so dark that we cannot have any visibility," the source said.

After the 2019 oil spills, the source noted, one of the main impacts was scarcity of fish. The fishes are only coming back now, the source noted. "The fish eat the palm oil; it fills its belly. Then you go fishing, when you open the fish, where its tripe ends from its gills, everything is full of oil palm... The oil hardens inside the fish... The fish dies with that inside."

Photographs from an environmental inspection released by Tailândia municipality and seen by Mongabay corroborate the allegations of negative environmental impacts from Agropalma's oil spill. The document, dated May 2019, ordered that steps be taken to repair the rivers and streams.

In a statement, Semas-PA said it had recorded an infraction notice against Agropalma, without providing further details.

Community-wide impacts

During our investigation, we witnessed how the oil palm plantations impact the daily lives of people living in the wider Pará community — at a school, for example, which was surrounded by palm trees. Although the companies say the agrochemicals they use are not toxic, this particular school endured a forced three-day closure while the firm was spraying, residents told Mongabay.

"There was no class for three days [and] no one could pass through the area," said Alex de Oliveira Pimentel, a local farmer. "[The company] said [the pesticide used] was organic, [that] it wasn't unhealthy... But the requirement was that nobody could pass through the area for 48 hours."

Beyond the contamination of the soil and water, Pimentel said farmers have lost their crops due to the spread of pests and disease from the palm plantations, including butterfly infestations destroying fruit crops like dragon fruit and cashew.

When the big agribusiness companies first came to the Tomé-Açu region, they approached several small farmers with an offer to lease their lands for oil palm cultivation. Some resisted, unwilling to turn over their land to grow a then-unknown crop.

Among them was José Edmilson Ramos Rodrigues, one of many farmers in his community who rejected the lease offer. But that has not stopped the community from feeling the impact of the plantations, which now surround them. The residents

have regularly complained about water contamination, reduced fish catches, and animal deaths since the oil palms were planted close to the river.

Rodrigues said he has noticed some changes in local crops, including a vine that now grows in coconut trees and which he said didn't exist before. He said the damage done far outweighs any benefits from the lease offer. "There's no way. What we must do is try to avoid ... so that it won't happen again," he said.

Lax agrochemical controls

The spread of pesticide use in Indigenous and traditional communities has once again shone a light on the lax regulatory climate governing the sales and use of harmful chemicals in Brazil. Only one company is officially approved by Pará state to sell pesticides in Tailândia, but a thriving illegal market has flourished, selling glyphosate under the local name mata-mato. The farmers' union in Tailândia, Sintraf, told UFPA researcher Rosa Helena Ribeiro Cruz that the palm oil companies do not dispose of the packaging properly, opening the possibility for misuse later on. Proper package disposal is regulated by a federal law, which holds the farmer, vendor and manufacturer legally responsible for any such misuse.

Tailândia's farmers also said they were initially given personal protective equipment by Agropalma and BBB, but the supplies were short-lived, even though people began falling ill due to the use of pesticides.

Brito, the Agropalma director, denied all the accusations. According to him, the company collects the agrochemical packaging, which is incinerated. He said Agropalma also controls all glyphosate provided to farmers and provides appropriate safety equipment.

Cabral, BBB spokesman, said it is common for farmers to plant other crops in areas adjacent to palm groves, which are managed separately. Pesticide packaging supplied by the company is "inert and recyclable" and is collected by local companies after use; the use of appropriate safety equipment is also inspected, he added.

Sintraf also told Cruz that the use of pesticides by the palm oil firms had led many local farmers to adopt new practices, heavily reliant on agrochemical use, and abandon their traditional farming methods. This has compounded the pollution of rivers, as up to half the farmers in some communities have switched to using pesticides.

The Ministry of Health launched a health surveillance program in the 1990s for people exposed to pesticides, but the system failed to produce any reports for Tailândia, Cruz noted.

For some federal prosecutors, the problems caused by the palm oil industry's inroads into the Amazon over the past decade are a repeat of what they witnessed with the cattle, soy and mining sectors and all development projects.

"The palm oil [sector] doesn't differ at all from the other monocultures established

here in the Amazon,” prosecutor Felipe Moura de Palha e Silva told Mongabay. “The *modus operandi* follows a primer as well, which is a primer for violating the rights of communities.”

In Tomé-Açu, game animals and fish were once plentiful. Now only oil palm trees grow, in some cases within meters of the Indigenous reserves.

“The palm oil company left us in a space like an egg ... Only the company profits,” said Urutaw Tembê, pointing to oil palms just a few feet from his home in Yriwar village. “We are dying with pesticides, with water contamination. How does a company like this come from outside to enrich [itself] on our land? We don’t accept it ... We will keep fighting.”

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JURY'S MESSAGE



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EXCELLENCE IN ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM

SHORTLISTED STORIES



SHORTLISTED STORY

ON THE CREST OF A TOXIC WAVE

Anna Geroeva (Russia)



Anna Geroeva, 39 years, Russian reporter, worked as a reporter for the newspapers Kommersant, Gudok, Ecovestnik. Her articles cover all of the actual ESG subjects.

ON THE CREST OF A TOXIC WAVE

By Anna Geroeva

Kommersant — August 13, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:

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English Translation

The world is drowning in plastic waste that has become part of the human food chain.

Uncontrolled production and unrestrained consumption of plastics are the reasons for the emergence of global garbage islands in the world's oceans. Their area is growing every day, poisoning the marine fauna. People around the world eat toxic seafood. The problem is aggravated by microplastics, the remains of which scientists find in drinking water and tissues of living beings. Despite this, no radical decisions are made to eliminate toxic pollution, as well as changes in the scale of production and consumption of polymers. But even if such measures were taken now, in 20 years more than 700 billion tons of such waste would remain on the planet.

Plastic feast

Waste plastics appeared in the world around the mid-50s of the last century. Over the past 70 years, their volume has grown several hundred thousand times and continues to grow. In the last century plastics production increased from 2 million metric tons in 1950 to 360 million metric tons in 2018. «Our research has shown that the annual “leaks” of plastic into the ocean will almost triple by 2040. If 11 million metric tons are dumped into the world's oceans, then by 2040 this figure may increase to 30 million metric tons, “Sara Baulch, managing partner of Pew Charitable Trust, told Kommersant-Regeneration.

PlasticsEurope Market research Group estimates the growth of plastic production in the world from 348 million tons in 2017 to 360 million tons in 2018. According to Grand view research, the volume of the global plastics market in 2019 was estimated at \$ 569 billion. Russia's contribution to the total production of polymers and products from them is not very large. However, in 2015–2019, their output in the Russian Federation grew by more than 22%, which is associated with both the modernization of existing production facilities and the launch of new capacities, and the total capitalization of the industry increased from 705.4 billion rubles in 2015 to 910 billion rubles - in 2019, the Ministry of Industry and Trade reported.

The prerequisites for a global catastrophe are obvious. Over the past 50 years,

plastic has become the most popular packaging material for many of the products we consume. It is durable, lightweight, presentable, and relatively cheap. Experts are convinced that this will continue to be so. "It dominates disposable packaging, shopping bags, ready-made containers and cutlery in restaurants and cafes. The modern world prefers plastic packaging to any other, the demand for it is growing. Every year, plastic waste grows by tens of millions of tons, and half of it comes from Asian countries," says Rob Watson, founder and co-chairman of the SWEEP solid waste management standard, to Kommersant-Regeneration. In February of this year, a group of scientists from the United States and Australia, led by Jenna Jambek, Ph.D. and environmental engineer at the University of Georgia, released a report on the current levels of plastic waste in the world.

According to the document, most of all plastic waste is produced in Asian countries, in particular in China (about 30% of the world volume) and Indonesia. According to the study, China produced 8.8 million metric tons of plastic waste, Indonesia 3.2 million tons, followed by the Philippines (1.9 million tons), Vietnam (1.8 million tons) and Sri Lanka (1.6 million tons). "There is more and more garbage, it is necessary to deal with it together and as soon as possible," Jenna Dzhambek told Kommersant-Regeneration.

Plastic rivers, seas and islands

Scientists are investigating the sources of plastic waste and its circulation. According to the Helmholtz Center for Environmental Research in Leipzig, about 50% of the plastic waste that can be traced globally falls on landfills. There is another part - not obvious, which goes into the world ocean with the waters of rivers, and one can only guess about the volume of this part of pollution. "Rivers are turning into dirty arteries, contaminated by the world's oceans," explains Christian Schmidt, a professor and hydrogeologist at the Helmholtz Center for Environmental Research, to Kommersant-Regeneration. The results of the center, published in November 2019, show that 93% of all garbage in the global economy comes through ten rivers: Yangtze (dumps about 1.5 million metric tons of plastic waste into the Yellow Sea per year), Yellow, Hai, Pearl, Amur, Mekong, Indus and Ganges in Asia, and Niger and Nile. "Rivers, according to the most rough estimates, together discharge into the sea and into the oceans from 0.47 million to 2.75 million metric tons of plastic per year," says Christian Schmidt. waste management process. Almost 500 million people live in the Yangtze basin alone - more than a third of the PRC population."

The discarded plastic debris travels a long way to get into the ocean's garbage dump. Plastic caught with river waters in the sea is picked up by currents, bringing it to the already accumulated garbage, and garbage rivers turn into garbage seas. Today, there are five gyres in the world's oceans that use plastic accumulation data. Each of these zones is formed by collisions of headwinds. According to a study conducted by scientists from six countries based on NGOs, the Institute of 5 circles, the largest of which is located in the Pacific Ocean - the Pacific Garbage Patch. The spot is located approximately in the North Pacific Ocean between 135-155 degrees north latitude

and 35- 42 degrees north latitude. It consists of two parts: western, "Japanese", and eastern, "North American". It was discovered in 1997.

Over the past 20 years, the spot has turned into a huge level, in area twice the size of Texas, with a size of about 524 thousand people. square miles. "The Pacific Island is located a thousand miles west of California and a thousand miles north of Hawaii in an area called the North Pacific hurricane, where currents from the equator, from North America and Asia move in sync, accumulating all the plastic waste into huge ... islands," explains Aleksey Kiselev.

Another plastic debris stain was discovered in the Indian Ocean in 2010: hundreds of tons of plastic and other debris fall into it with the waters of the rivers and the Ganges. Around the same time, the North Atlantic garbage patch was discovered, which is now drifting in the Sargasso Sea.

Garbage patches in the ocean are of anthropogenic origin, but a combination of meteorological and hydrological factors is formed. "From the whirlpools in the connection of the Pacific Ocean in relation to the collision of warm and arctic currents due to the rotation of the Earth. Plastic, thrown into the water in California, falls into the center of the whirlpool and, caught up by the current, the coastal environment of America occurs, where it is overtaken by the equatorial current and carried across the entire ocean to Japan. There, the garbage is picked up by the powerful northern current and enters the western part of the northern Pacific current," explains Markus Eriksen, Ph.D. and director of research, to Kommersant-Regeneration. Other scientists confirm that currents deliver plastic to the most inaccessible places.

Some parts of the ocean have seven times more plastic open than fish Scientists of the Faculty of Geography of Moscow State University are accused, plastic debris threatens the world's oceans, polluted - islands of plastic appeared where they were not ten years ago: in the Arctic Ocean, on the Northern Sea Route, between Novaya Zemlya and Greenland, in the eastern regions of Greenland and Barents seas. "The planet is being filled with plastic waste," concludes Professor Natalya Frolova, head of the Department of Land Hydrology, Faculty of Geography, Moscow State University. M.V. Lomonosov.

The Arctic Ocean is a dead end for plastic waste entering the seas from northern countries. "The pole branch of the thermohaline circulation carries plastic to the Arctic Ocean, which drifts in the North Atlantic towards the Greenland and Barents Seas. This place on the globe is a dead end for debris - over time, currents will bring even more plastic debris here, and the slick will grow," explains Eric Van Sebille, oceanographer from Utrecht University, to Kommersant-Regeneration.

"Until recently, researchers talked about five garbage islands in the world's oceans. Now there are already six such garbage cans. Their size is exceeded.

The big problems of microplastics

The general name "plastic waste" implies a fairly wide range of substances. We are talking about thermoplastics, polyurethanes, thermosetting materials, elastomers,

adhesives, coatings and sealants, polypropylene fibers, as well as PET fibers, polyacryl fibers and much more. A separate problem is microplastics, which are small, no more than 5 mm in size, plastic particles. These fragments enter ecosystems from a variety of sources, including cosmetics and clothing. "Microplastic accumulates in the environment in large quantities, especially in aquatic and marine ecosystems," Professor Natalya Frolova explains to Kommersant-Regeneration.

The University's Association of Water Problems, which regularly conducts research on the topic, found that most of the microplastic debris that ends up in the ocean is made up of tiny pieces - each weighing less than one tenth the weight of a paper clip. "They are blown off from open landfills or dumped directly into the ocean. Some areas have a density of 520 thousand bits per square mile, or roughly 200 thousand bits per square kilometer. By comparison, the Great Pacific Landfill spots are 1.9 million bits per square mile, or roughly 750,000 bits of plastic per square kilometer (and several tens of feet below the surface)," said Markus Eriksen.

According to the Ministry of Natural Resources of Russia, today there are two sources of microplastics entering the environment - surface runoff and sewage from treatment facilities. "There is much more plastic in everyday life than it seems. It is found in toothpaste, scrubs, cleaners and detergents. Microparticles increase the consumer properties of household chemicals. There is still no technological solution for capturing them in the wastewater treatment process in the world: the nature and size of the particles do not allow them to be recognized," Dmitry Kirillov explains to Kommersant-Regeneration.

Microplastics are divided into industrial (primary) and natural (secondary). The first is granules or powder, which are added to cosmetics, household chemicals, hygiene products, and are also used in the production of fabrics, car tires and other goods. The second includes plastic objects that fall apart into small pieces under the influence of the environment. Microplastics in reservoirs are becoming more and more both in the world and in Russia. Scientists from the University of Basel conducted a study of the content of microplastics in the Rhine 810 km from Basel to Rotterdam and identified microplastics at all points where samples were taken. "The Rhine has turned out to be one of the most microplastic-polluted rivers: it brings more than 191 million plastic particles to the North Sea every day, which corresponds to about 25-30 kg per day and 10 tons per year. In Russia, the problem of microplastics is still very little studied. In 2018, a number of studies were carried out on the Gulf of Finland, as well as the Barents and Kara Seas. At the same time, today there is no information about any research that would be carried out in the rivers and lakes of Russia," says Markus Eriksen.

Particles of plastic are capable of absorbing heavy metals in themselves, and also, due to fouling in the aquatic environment, biofilms are a vehicle for various bacteria, including pathogenic ones. "A lot of microplastics particles enter the human body every day; it has long entered the food chain. During the study by the researchers of the Institute of Lake Science of inland water bodies, microplastic particles were found in all samples of their bottom sediments, where its concentration turned out to be an order of magnitude higher than in the water column. The smallest

particles of plastic enter the food chain through the communities of living organisms," says Shamil Pozdnyakov, head of the RAS Institute of Lake Science, to Kommersant-Regeneration.

Today, 97% of research on plastic and microplastics is devoted to the ocean, and only 3% is focused on inland water bodies. The proliferation of plastic is a consequence, it is necessary to solve problems at the early stages of its life cycle and impose restrictions on its use," Dmitry Kirillov is convinced. The actual scale of microplastic damage to Russian waters is still unknown.

The Russian Academy of Sciences is investigating its distribution in water bodies of the country, working, among other things, on a method for identifying plastic microparticles in an extended range of sizes. Research has already been carried out on the Katun River, Teletskoye and Ladoga lakes, the Kuibyshev reservoir and other reservoirs. Scientists have found that the concentration of microplastic particles ranging in size from 100 microns to 5 mm in the water of Lake Ladoga is on average 0.5–1.0 pieces per liter. In the southern part of Lake Ladoga, the concentration of microplastics in bottom sediments ranged from 25 to 70 particles per liter. On the territory of the Neva Bay of the Gulf of Finland - 200 particles per liter. According to scientists from the RAS Institute of Lake Science, toxic substances, including bisphenol-A and phthalates, were found in microplastic particles. What is the concentration of harmful substances in the waters of other rivers and lakes - this is yet to be learned.

Plastic is out of control

The planet is drowning in plastic debris, experts unanimously say. It is possible to reduce the volume of plastic in landfills and in the oceans by reducing the level of its consumption. "We must stop using this material, and as soon as possible," Amirkhan Magomedov, deputy head of Rospirodnadzor, told Kommersant-Regeneration.

However, the consumption of plastic is growing. Over the past five months, which the inhabitants of the planet have spent in self-isolation due to the coronavirus pandemic, the amount of plastic waste has increased, but now medical waste has also been added to it. "At the end of February this year, Hong Kong-based OceansAsia discovered masses of surgical masks washed ashore on the Soko Islands," said Gary Stokes, director of operations for OceansAsia.

Many countries tried to limit the use of plastic during the pandemic. In the aftermath of the coronavirus outbreak, the US government of Oregon has banned the use of single-use bags, and the UK has decided to charge again shipping fees for groceries ordered online. However, the authorities of Asian countries, which are the main polluters of the planet with plastic waste, are not taking restrictive measures. To understand how Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, China, Vietnam and the Philippines (these countries most of all produce, supply and dispose of plastic waste) relate to this problem, UNEP (UN Environment Program) specialists from January to April of this year interviewed consumers and business representatives in these countries. 2 thousand consumers and 400 food industry enterprises were interviewed. 91% of those surveyed said that they are aware of the problem of plastic

waste, but only 54% of them said that they sort waste. Business representatives turned out to be less conscientious than citizens. 82% of the surveyed enterprises are concerned about the problems of plastic pollution, but more than half of them believe that they themselves will not be able to cope with the solution of the problem of pollution. However, 51% of enterprises in these five Asian countries do not deal with the problem of collecting and recycling plastic waste in any way. In Vietnam, there are 76% of such enterprises, and in Thailand - almost 25%. Consumers and businesses are aware of the complexity of the situation and are waiting for solutions from the leadership of their countries. "Plastic pollution is choking the waters of Southeast Asia," says Dechen Tsering, UNEP's regional director for Asia Pacific.

The authorities of many states directly declare that it will be difficult to get rid of plastic addiction: thanks to such production, jobs are created, and production is a profitable business. In Russia, in 2019, the volume of production of plastic products increased by 6.2% in physical terms compared to 2018 and amounted to about 7 million tons, while GDP increased by only 1.3%. "In the first half of 2020, there was also a positive trend in the production of plastic products: the volume of production increased by an estimated 12.7% and amounted to about 3.9 million tons. Over the past five years, 13 large investment projects have been implemented, thanks to which an additional 860 jobs have been created. The total investment amounted to about 10.5 billion rubles," said Kommersant-Regeneration in the Ministry of Industry and Trade.

However, experts assure that there are economically viable ways to reduce plastic waste in the global economy. The first step is to stop using disposable plastic items. It is necessary to replace them with reusable ones, banning the packing of fruits in separate plastic bags, and instead of raw materials made of plastic, use compostable plastic made, for example, from seaweed or corn starch. "We produce more than 300 million tons of plastic per year, 50% of it is intended for single use," says Guy Eames, head of the RuGBC Green Building Council, to Kommersant-Regeneration.

Achievement of such goals is possible only with close cooperation between government and business. In June, As you Sow, a non-profit organization founded in 1992 with the aim of promoting industry, presented a report on the 50 largest companies that are phasing out the use of plastic in manufacturing. Based on the results of the study, a rating was compiled in which the first line was taken by Unilever, which intends to switch to the use of 100% recyclable plastic by 2025. The remaining 49 companies, including Procter & Gamble, Coca-Cola, MacDonald's, are not yet ready to completely abandon plastic in production. If the existing procedure for handling plastic waste is maintained, the production of plastics will quadruple by 2050, since only 14% of plastic packaging is recycled in the world. "Companies are ultimately responsible for reducing plastic pollution," said Konrad McCherron, senior vice president and lead author of the You Sow report. "But the consumer goods industry cannot solve the single-use plastics problem and take financial responsibility for improving waste recycling. Companies are not ready to work together to achieve.

Cut the plastic wave

While some steps are being taken to reduce plastic pollution, they are ineffective

on the scale of the problem. And these measures were delayed by several decades. If the world were to make a consolidated effort to reduce plastic consumption right now, there would still be about 710 million metric tons of unrecovered plastic waste by 2040. This conclusion was reached by an international group of scientists, whose report was published on the Science portal in July.

Bridging the Plastic Wave: A Comprehensive Assessment of Ways to End Ocean Plastic Pollution, the report not only assesses the status of plastic waste, but also offers several scenarios. The main thing is to reduce the consumption of plastic, otherwise in 20 years the annual volume of plastic waste will grow from 11 million metric tons to 29 million metric tons. That is, on each meter of the coastline on the globe there will be 50 kg of plastic waste, and about 600 million tons of such waste will float in the ocean.

But this is just one of the scenarios, which the study calls "Business as usual" (BAU - business as usually). To get out of this situation, scientists offer four more. The most optimistic of these is "System Change" (SCS) - a reduction in the production and consumption of plastic products. If it is implemented, the amount of waste dumped into the ocean will decrease by three times compared with the current indicators. Scenarios "Collection and Disposal" (CDS), "Recycling" (RES), "Reduction and Replacement" (RSS), according to scientists, will help reduce the level of plastic pollution in half.

The authors of the report suggest several ways to solve the garbage problem. One of them is a radical reduction in the production and consumption of plastics, replacing plastic raw materials with paper or compostable materials. The second is the use of large quantities of biodegradable and recycled packaging. All of these measures will help save up to \$ 70 billion by 2040, reduce annual greenhouse gas emissions associated with plastic by 25% and create 700,000 new jobs. If nothing is done, the problem of plastic pollution will become unmanageable. This is not an option," says Dr. Winnie Lau, co-author of the study and manager of the Pew Ocean Plastic Pollution Prevention Program.

It is possible to solve the problem of littering the world's oceans with plastic if we establish a system for collecting plastic waste on land. The report notes that at least 500,000 people need to be involved in the waste collection system. If the collection system is left as it is, then the volume of plastic entering the ocean by 2040 will be reduced by only 7%, and almost 4 billion people will be bogged down in plastic waste. "It is impossible to recycle what you have not collected. We need to educate people about the link between the plastic dishes they use and the pollution of the oceans," says Ms. Lau, pointing out that existing technologies can reduce the flow of plastic into the oceans by 80%.

Scientists emphasize that the implementation of the best scenario requires large investments - both technical and financial, because there is no simple and quick solution to the problem. "Breaking the plastic wave can only be done with swift and concerted action by the authorities of many countries and large companies," summarizes Tom Dillon, Pew's vice president of the environment.

SHORTLISTED STORY

WHEN NATURE CONSERVATION GOES WRONG

Jack Losh (United Kingdom)



Jack Losh is a journalist, photographer and filmmaker, with a focus on conservation, humanitarian issues and traditional cultures, often in areas of conflict and crisis. His work has been published by The New York Times, National Geographic, The Washington Post and Foreign Policy among others. He has also directed and produced documentaries for Al Jazeera English, VICE News Tonight and The Guardian.

WHEN NATURE CONSERVATION GOES WRONG

By Jack Losh

Foreign Policy — April 2, 2021

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<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/02/uganda-conservation-poaching-crisis-poverty-national-park/>

Environmentalists' intent on saving the planet by protecting natural habitats are creating human disasters of their own.

Kyambura, Uganda — The dry season had only just begun, but Muhammad Bwambale was already running out of options. Money and decent work were always in short supply for villagers in the Ugandan community of Kyambura, but a bad harvest had pushed them to the edge. One tantalizing option remained.

Bwambale and his neighbors lived atop a dramatic escarpment overlooking the vast savannah of Queen Elizabeth National Park—a diverse mosaic of grasslands, lakes, and forests teeming with big game. The community understood its conservation value and welcomed its stream of tourists who occasionally visited the village to buy handicrafts. But there were tensions.

Villagers felt snubbed by the authorities when they failed to get compensation after crop-raiding elephants trampled their valuable produce. And those whose desperate living conditions compelled them to venture into the park and hunt game faced being arrested—or worse.

But if Bwambale could just sneak in and return with a few antelope or buffalo, he could help his malnourished daughter and terminally ill wife stave off hunger, selling the remaining bushmeat to make some money. According to his neighbors, he and four others armed themselves with a rudimentary arsenal of machetes, spears, and traps—guns were far too expensive—and headed into the park before dawn.

Two days later, he was dead.

Wildlife rangers patrolling the park had stumbled on the group, allegedly shooting Bwambale and causing the other four to scatter. Eventually they returned to Kyambura with the tragic news. Soon afterward, his wife died, leaving their young daughter, Bira, without either parent. The Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) did not refute the allegations, instead saying it was “not aware of the case of Bwambale’s shooting.”

But Bira would not be the last child from her village to be orphaned by parents who tried hunting to keep their families fed. As hardship drives villagers to poach, a sisterhood has formed to raise Bira and other orphans whose fathers were killed while hunting. Some of these women are themselves widows of the poaching crisis, having lost their husbands in this park—yet forced to mourn in secret.

Anger toward so-called subsistence poachers often outweighs empathy for their difficult circumstances and the families they leave behind. But the pressures on this tiny village point to a wider conflict unfolding globally that divides environmentalists on the most effective and appropriate solution to a complex puzzle that resists easy answers.

As the climate crisis intensifies and wilderness areas are lost at a precipitous level, mainstream conservationists are calling for the expansion of protected areas to safeguard the survival of threatened species and halt the fragmentation of habitats in which they live. But protected areas typically promote the enforced division of people and nature—an ideology that has proven disastrous for Indigenous communities. It raises an uncomfortable question that can no longer be ignored: Conservation of nature may be necessary to save the planet—but what if it creates human disasters of its own?

One humid, overcast morning last February, Dan Namara walked briskly down a muddy track atop the scenic escarpment above Queen Elizabeth National Park. A few hours earlier before dawn, groups of tourists had set off in the opposite direction, packed into four-by-fours for the chance to spot the park's dazzling array of wildlife. But this wiry, smartly dressed 35-year-old wasn't interested in the view. He had a meeting scheduled with Martha Kabugho, who had adopted Bira, and her fellowship of foster mothers and had agreed to take me with him.

Three years earlier, Namara had founded a charity called the Kyambura Orphanage Needy Development Centre. Despite the antiquated name, its mission was urgent: to help children whose parents had died from disease or while hunting and to encourage the community to diversify livelihoods and coexist with wildlife. "People living around the park face serious challenges," Namara said. "They rely on farming for survival, but if their crops are damaged, they struggle to support their children. We help them find alternatives so they don't retaliate against the animals when their crops are destroyed. If they keep hunting, there will be no park left."

Namara's small organization supports 75 children — a third of which are orphans — along with more than 40 widows and single mothers living in hard-up households across five villages. He monitors their welfare and runs traditional dance courses for the youngsters, who perform at surrounding hotels to pay their school fees. When meeting with villagers, he explained the importance of conserving this wildlife-rich area, highlighting its draw to tourists from whom these families can derive an income.

Although his charity dates back to 2017, Queen Elizabeth National Park traces its origins to 1952, 10 years before Uganda won its independence from British colonial rule. Straddling the equator and spanning more than 700 square miles, the area has become a thriving ecosystem encompassing fertile wetlands, grassy plains, and a forested gorge.

Dotted with volcanic craters and framed by the jagged Rwenzori Mountains, it is home to some 95 species of mammals, including 10 types of primate and more than 500 species of birds, from the African emerald cuckoo to the pink-backed pelican. Pods of hippos mingle on muddy banks among buffalo and elephant, while the park's famous tree-climbing lions lounge in acacias after stalking herds of duiker, reedbuck, and topi antelope. Whether first light or sundown, this majestic landscape appears blessed with awe-inspiring magic.

Yet, as with so many national parks, the idyllic impression of an untouched Eden hides a troubled past of conflict, displacement, and social injustice. These rolling plains once formed the traditional territory of a pastoralist group called the Basongora. Under imperial rule, this community of cattle herders fell victim to outbreaks of sleeping sickness and rinderpest, spread by way of European colonization. They then lost 90 percent of their grazing land to the national park, according to Minority Rights Group International, which describes how they "were evicted, their animals destroyed and huts torched, and no alternative settlement was provided, all in the name of wildlife protection."

Post-independence governments intensified pressures on this vulnerable, landless group. Facing constant eviction and intercommunal clashes, the Basongoras were forced into the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Compounded by the onslaught of modernity, this protracted exile has eroded the group's cultural heritage and storytelling tradition—a cornerstone of the group's collective memory — to the brink of extinction.

The Basongora's original territory was also changing in dramatic ways. In the decade following the park's creation, an estimated 30,000 elephants roamed this and Uganda's other large reserves during the 1960s. However, during the tumultuous 1970s and 80s, as coup followed military coup, poachers decimated the population of these magnificent creatures to a low of 700 to 800 elephants, while Uganda as a whole lost an estimated 50 percent of its biodiversity from hunting and habitat destruction. During the 1990s and 2000s, the spillover effects from the Rwandan genocide and the insurgency waged by the Lord's Resistance Army intensified pressures further, as poaching escalated alongside a drop in revenue, staff morale, and visitor numbers.

The combination of growing political stability and increased ranger patrols eventually produced a resurgence of elephants in Queen Elizabeth National Park. In 2014, its population surpassed the 3,000 elephant mark, even as the continent's total elephant numbers continued their decline. Ivory poaching at the park was dropping in tandem with the arrival of refugee elephants fleeing the DRC's drawn-out war where rebels traded tusks for guns.

In 2006, the Basongora was forced to flee the DRC, and the herdsmen began returning to Uganda with their cattle. Shortages in communal grazing land prompted some to enter the park, bringing them into direct contact with predators like lions, leopards, and hyenas. In retaliation to attacks on their livestock, they started killing off lions and other carnivores by lacing the carcasses of dead cows with toxic pesticides.

These mass poisonings triggered outrage. A Ugandan tourism consultant deplored one such killing as a “national disaster” while a leading Ugandan newspaper published an article under the headline “Tears over Dead Lions,” describing “devastated animal lovers.” “The war between man and animal has erupted again, as it often does, in Queen Elizabeth National Park,” it added.

But few acknowledged the underlying cause of this harrowing flash point: poverty. With the Basongora’s needs and well-being neglected for so long, it was inevitable that herders would start acting on their survival impulses. Park officials faced criticism for slow responses to emergency calls and ignoring demands for compensation from lion attacks. One cattle farmer described his frustrations after a lion attacked one of his pregnant cows. “If it had stayed alive and given birth, I’d have got some milk for my children,” said Francis Kayiwa, speaking to the BBC in 2018. “I went to the wildlife authority, and they promised to investigate. They did not come.” After repeated requests for help, he just gave up.

“As long as a growing rural population remains tethered to poverty, the risk of losing more lions stays high,” wrote Michael Schwartz, a conservation researcher, following another poisoning. “Human poverty and wildlife is like oil and water. Not only are they incompatible, but they exist at the heart of so many tragic events contributing to wildlife loss in Africa. ... And if we (the Western world) react to every wildlife tragedy with nothing more than moral exhibitionism toward the disenfranchised, then the root of the problem will stay buried beneath the conflict.”

The tug of war between marginalized communities and vulnerable wildlife species was playing out among Kyambura’s impoverished villagers. Following the death of Bira’s father, her neighbor Doreen Masika lost her husband in 2017 when he and five others went into the park to hunt game, armed only with spears.

On their first day in the bush, a lion attacked and killed him. His fellow hunters fled in terror—one of whom was subsequently killed by a buffalo, gored by its horns. Fearful of punishment, Masika never recovered her husband’s remains, denying her the closure of a burial. “We couldn’t get his body,” said the 33-year-old mother of four. “It’s illegal for us to go in there and look for it. That made it so much more painful as I couldn’t even bury him.”

The following year, a 4-year-old named Cedric—the son of the hunter killed by the buffalo — was orphaned after his mother passed away from diabetes, unable to afford proper treatment. As with her fellow foster mothers, Masika promptly

adopted Cedric, buoyed by the strength and solidarity of her sisterhood. However, unable to care for more children, she was forced to send his siblings to relatives near the DRC. “I know it helps the animals, but to be honest, I don’t feel good about the park,” she said. “The children suffer. It’s hard to know the solution.”

Her neighbor Jane Tomushana has faced similar adversity. That same year, her destitute husband hoped to earn some money by selling firewood, but wealthy landowners sealed off areas surrounding the village. The park was the only option. As he collected firewood, he was cornered by an elephant and trampled to death. Today, she struggles to pay rent and afford her children’s school fees. “We’re facing great difficulty,” Tomushana, aged 39, said. “My four kids sometimes miss a whole term of school.”

Although unlawful, the men’s desperate attempts at mere survival pale in comparison to the lucrative, transnational conspiracies of smuggling cartels. In 2019, for example, the year after Tomushana’s husband died while gathering logs, two Vietnamese nationals were arrested in possession of \$2.4 million worth of ivory and \$1.3 million worth of pangolin scales.

Although low-level subsistence hunters are easy targets, those higher up the chain can act with impunity while driving the most destruction. Uganda’s Entebbe International Airport offers a key hub for smuggled elephant tusks, rhino horns, pangolin scales, hippo teeth, and other animal parts destined for Arab and Asian markets. Ugandan soldiers and even officials of the UWA—the government agency tasked with fighting the illegal wildlife trade—have faced repeated corruption and trafficking accusations, which UWA spokesperson Bashir Hangi dismissed as “mere speculation and conjecture.”

Last year’s lockdown prompted concern that the decline in tourism revenue would fuel a rise in illegal activities as penniless, densely populated communities tried to make ends meet. More than 20,000 people are estimated to live in enclave villages within Queen Elizabeth National Park while an ever-growing population of 70,000 immediately surround it. These concerns appeared to be borne last June when poachers killed a well-known mountain gorilla in the nearby Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park—the first such killing in years.

The chief warden at the park last year reported a surprising increase in wildlife numbers, attributed to intensified patrols and a nighttime curfew. Numbers of savanna elephants there have now surpassed 4,000, even as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) added the subspecies to the endangered list last week, downgrading its status from “vulnerable” and painting a bleak outlook for its future survival across the wider continent. Buffalo and antelope populations in the park have also grown. Yet this level of law enforcement cannot last as funding plummets from lost ecotourism revenue—Uganda’s leading foreign exchange earner. An emergency United Nations scheme has offered a grant to communities whose livelihoods have been wrecked by the pandemic, but further lifelines are vital.

In February, a year after first meeting Namara, a phone call with him laid bare the economic and social ruin that the lockdown and travel bans had inflicted on the community in Kyambura. “The children’s guardians were affected so much,” he said. “They lost all their income. Lockdown brought everything to a standstill and caused costs to shoot up. Life has been so hard.”

With schools shut, Namara saw an increase in family problems, including a spate of underage pregnancies. The absence of tourists and income forced villagers to cut meals. “Some survived by eating just once a day,” Namara said. “Others would eat one day, then not the next. Life is challenging, but there is nothing we can do but push on.”

Despite past controversies, the authorities highlight the park’s conservation gains and attraction to tourists, which—in less fraught times—has spurred on local employment. “This park is gazetted to benefit the people and future generations, and we should jealously protect it and the wildlife therein,” said Otto Benjamin, chairperson of UWA’s trustees.

Rangers put their lives on the line daily, with dozens killed or injured while on duty in Uganda alone. Organizations like the Uganda Carnivore Program aim to conserve the area’s lions, leopards, and hyenas while promoting inclusive, educational, and community-based activities as part of what it describes as “a collaborative, holistic plan to reduce deadly instances of human-wildlife conflict.”

UWA spokesperson Hangi declined to disclose how many suspected poachers had been killed since 2010, saying the police were responsible for such records. “Desperate living conditions cannot be a justification for breaking the law,” he added. “It is not common to kill poachers. We normally arrest and hand them to police, and we pursue their prosecution in the courts of law. There are cases where armed poachers engage our personnel and death occurs during the crossfire. In such a case, we report the matter to police, and police takes the body and guns recovered from the dead. Families of the deceased deal with police regarding recovery of the body.”

Hangi said a new compensation scheme is being finalized, under which “people will be compensated for injuries, damage to crops, and death.” The UWA also shares 20 percent of entry fees with surrounding villages to fund classrooms, health centers, income-generating projects, and other public services. The idea behind this revenue-sharing scheme is to instill conservation with a pragmatic, economic value—thereby soliciting support for the protected area in the long run. “Maybe they expect more than what they are getting, but there is a benefit for them,” Hangi said. “We are doing enterprise development for communities to ensure they have sustainable income as an alternative to poaching.”

However, the initiative has previously been hampered by bureaucratic hurdles and has not always targeted local priorities, while community leaders have criticized the substandard quality of its projects. A study as far back as 2005 noted how local communities felt the costs incurred from the park “far outweigh the benefits they get.”

Although a new arrangement will see UWA disburse grants to fund specific projects requested by communities, ill-feeling remains. “We feel forgotten,” said Kabughho, Bira’s foster mother. “When someone is killed, we can’t collect the body. When animals destroy our crops, we don’t get proper compensation. We don’t even see any direct benefit from revenue sharing. Where is that money? There is no accountability. Tourists come to see the park, but they never see us.”

Calls are growing for a new approach to conservation. Violence has always been a part of militarized attempts to save the natural world. Some areas of Africa and Asia are so besieged by loggers, miners, or heavily armed poaching gangs that robust deployments of rangers in defense of nature are critical. But the potential for excess is always present, from the eviction of Indigenous peoples from the United States’ first national parks a century ago to the people murdered in the name of conservation in the developing world today. The question is whether, and how, a balance can be struck between maintaining an ecosystem and emptying it of all people.

The irony of such death and displacement is that it can alienate potential allies among Indigenous communities who often have a proven track record of living harmoniously with nature. Lands governed by such groups in the Brazilian Amazon rainforest, for example, have shown to lose trees at even slower rates than formally protected areas.

This dispute is reaching a crescendo as the United Nations pursues an ambitious plan to protect 30 percent of the world’s oceans and land by 2030. This momentous “30 by 30” proposal aims to halt the decline of biodiversity and avert Earth’s sixth mass extinction by shielding almost a third of the natural world from destruction and depletion. Currently just up to 15.3 percent of land and 7.5 percent of marine areas are protected. The draft text will be put to governments in May at a U.N. summit in China, having been postponed last year by the pandemic. U.S. President Joe Biden has already backed the plan, issuing an executive order in January that committed his administration to protecting 30 percent of U.S. land and coastal seas by the end of the decade.

The proposal has garnered support from major conservation groups, but condemnation from scores of other nonprofits, in a joint letter last year, dismissed the 2030 target as “counterproductive.” They warn it “could further entrench an outmoded and unsustainable model of conservation that could dispossess the people least responsible for these crises of their lands and livelihoods.” The Indigenous-rights organization, Survival International, has gone so far as to brand it “a colossal land grab as big as Europe’s colonial era.”

There are promising signs that the urge to barricade wilderness areas at the expense of blameless inhabitants is diminishing. The total size of protected areas has increased more than five-fold since the 1950s, but the emphasis has shifted away from exclusionary, state-run parks toward a proliferation of sanctuaries that allow

local communities to co-manage and sustainably use natural resources. Last year's U.N. Summit on Biodiversity saw leaders commit to supporting "the full and effective participation of Indigenous peoples and local communities in decision making."

To bring that commitment to fruition, a clever mechanism has emerged in recent years, which could put their 30 percent target in sight without compromising human rights: "Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures"—a concept as innovative as the term is wordy. Known simply as OECMs, these are territories that have not been designated as national parks or other conventional types of protected area yet are managed sustainably. They must have some form of governance present—whether a national authority, a grassroots group, or even some kind of responsible corporate body—which manages the domain in ways that conserve its biodiversity and combat environmental threats over the long term.

Such areas can be inhabited by Indigenous or local communities and promote the functioning of healthy ecosystems without undermining the cultural, socio-economic, or spiritual well-being of the people who live in them. With good monitoring and sustained support, landscapes and seascapes that meet OECM criteria could support the recovery of threatened species, boost sustainable livelihoods, and link up fragmented habitats.

Case-by-case screening is key. For example, OECM status could be granted to lakes, rivers and wetlands that are managed primarily as a water resource but also result in the enduring conservation of local biodiversity. Pristine natural areas used by universities for biological research could also qualify, as could community-led conservation projects or certain forms of low-impact, organic farming that take a holistic, ecologically-sound approach to agriculture by maintaining native species and their habitat. Likewise, tracts of rainforest sustainably populated by Indigenous people in the Amazon or by Bayaka "pygmies" in the Congo Basin are clear contenders.

In some respects, there is nothing novel about OECMs. Although the name is new, the idea underpinning it is as ancient as Indigenous communities themselves. But they subvert the mainstream Western model of environmental protection, which outlaws the presence of humans to achieve conservation. Instead, communities inhabiting and utilizing OECM areas may not have conservation as their primary goal—yet, so synchronized are their lives with the natural order that conservation is the inevitable byproduct of their existence as opposed to pollution, depletion, and destruction.

A landmark 2018 paper found that, worldwide, Indigenous peoples manage or have tenure rights over at least 14.7 million square miles—more than a quarter of the world's land surface. "Recognizing Indigenous Peoples' rights to land, benefit sharing and institutions is essential to meeting local and global conservation goals," it said.

The inclusion of OECMs among other types of protected areas promises to minimize the displacement of vulnerable communities from their biodiverse lands while

still helping conservationists meaningfully achieve the 30 percent target by 2030. "OECMs provide a very elegant way around some of the problems of protected areas," said Harry Jonas, co-chair of the IUCN's specialist group on the initiative.

Pulling the Earth back from the brink is critical but must not come at the expense of the poorest and most vulnerable, whose environmental impact is tiny in comparison to the industrialized Global North. Disjointed conservation tactics will only reinforce the kind of privations that drove Bira's father, Basongora herders, and others like them to target ecosystems on which, ultimately, we all depend.

"Poverty has crippling effects on the lives of humans, animals, and the environment at large," Schwartz wrote. "What if we traded in empty criticisms for helping hands? Once more, that is the essence of what it is to be a conservationist, not to mention what it is to be human."

SHORTLISTED STORY

GAS COMPANIES ARE ABANDONING THEIR WELLS, LEAVING THEM TO LEAK METHANE FOREVER

Mya Frazier (United States)



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GAS COMPANIES ARE ABANDONING THEIR WELLS, LEAVING THEM TO LEAK METHANE FOREVER

By Mya Frazier

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<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2020-09-17/abandoned-gas-wells-are-left-to-spew-methane-for-eternity?sref=hYLkZkjr>

Just one orphaned site in California could have emitted more than 30 tons of methane. There are millions more like it.

The story of gas well No.095-20708 begins on Nov. 10, 1984, when a drill bit broke the Earth's surface 4 miles north of Rio Vista, Calif. Wells don't have birthdays, so this was its "spud date."

The drill chewed through the dirt at a rate of 80 ½ feet per hour, reaching 846 feet below ground that first day. By Thanksgiving it had gotten a mile down, finally stopping 49 days later, having laid 2.2 miles of steel pipe and cement on its way to the "pay zone," an underground field containing millions of dollars' worth of natural gas.

It was ready to start pumping two months later, in early January. While 1985 started out as a good year for gas, by its close, more than half the nation's oil and gas wells had shut down. How much money the Amerada Hess Corp., which bankrolled the dig, managed to pump out of gas well No.095-20708 before that bust isn't known. By 1990 the company, now called simply Hess Corp., gave up and sold it. Over the next decade or so, four more companies would seek the riches promised at the bottom of the well, seemingly with little success. In 2001 a state inspector visited the site. "Looks like it's dying," he wrote.

Gas wells never really die, though. Over the years, the miles of steel piping and cement corrode, creating pathways for noxious gases to reach the surface. The most worrisome of these is methane, the main component of natural gas. If carbon dioxide is a bullet, methane is a bomb. Odorless and invisible, it captures 86 times more heat than CO₂ over two decades and at least 25 times more over a century. Drilling has released this potent greenhouse gas, once sequestered in the deep pockets and grooves of the Earth, into the atmosphere, where it's wreaking more havoc than humans can keep up with.

Well No.095-20708 is also known as A.H.C. Church No.11, referring both to Hess and to Bernard Church, who like so many in California's Sacramento River Delta sold his farmland but retained the mineral rights in the hope that they'd make his family rich. The Church well is a relic, but it's not rare. It's one of more than 3.2 million deserted oil and gas wells in the U.S. and one of an estimated 29 million globally, according to Reuters. There's no regulatory requirement to monitor methane emissions from inactive wells, and until recently, scientists didn't even consider wells in their estimates of greenhouse gas emissions. With the pandemic depressing demand for fossil fuels and renewable energy development booming, why should owners idle or plug their wells when they can simply walk away?

In the past five years, 207 oil and gas businesses have failed. As natural gas prices crater, the fiscal burden on states forced to plug wells could skyrocket; according to Rystad Energy AS, an industry analytics company, 190 more companies could file for bankruptcy by the end of 2022. Many oil and gas companies are idling their wells by capping them in the hope prices will rise again. But capping lasts only about two decades, and it does nothing to prevent tens of thousands of low-producing wells from becoming orphaned, meaning "there is no associated person or company with any financial connection to and responsibility for the well," according to California's Geologic Energy Management Division.

"It's cheaper to idle them than to clean them up," says Joshua Macey, an assistant professor of law at the University of Chicago, who's spent years studying fossil fuel bankruptcies. "Once prices increase, they could be profitable to operate again. It gives them a strong reason to not do cleanup now. It's not orphaned yet, although for all intents and purposes it is."

The life cycle of the Church well exemplifies this systemic indifference. Hess's liability ended when it sold more than 30 years ago; the last company to acquire the lease, Pacific Petroleum Technology, which took over in 2003, managed to evade financial responsibility entirely as the well's cement and steel piping began to corrode. Letters from state regulators demanding that the company declare its plans for the well went unanswered. In November 2007 the state issued a civil penalty of \$500 over Pacific's failures to file monthly production reports on the well. Instead of paying, Pacific requested a hearing, at which a representative testified that there was still \$10 million worth of natural gas waiting to be pumped and promised the company would secure funds, make necessary repairs, and start producing again. The state was unconvinced and demanded Pacific plug the well. Another decade passed. The company never pumped a single cubic foot of gas and made no effort to plug the well. (Representatives of Pacific couldn't be reached for comment.)

If Church were the only neglected well, it would be inconsequential. But these artifacts of the fossil fuel age are ubiquitous, obscured in backyards and beneath office buildings, under parking lots and shopping malls, even near day-care centers and schools in populous cities such as Los Angeles, where at least 1,000 deserted wells lie unplugged. In Colorado an entire neighborhood was built on top of a former

oil and gas field that had been left off of construction maps. In 2017 two people died in a fiery explosion while replacing a basement water heater.

These kinds of headline-grabbing episodes are anomalies, but all this leaking methane also has dire environmental consequences, and the situation is likely only to get worse as more companies fail. "The oil and gas industry will not go out with a bang," Macey adds, "but with a whimper." As it does, the wells it orphans will become wards of the state.

Days before the 33rd anniversary of Church's spud date, in November 2017, Eric Lebel, a researcher with the School of Earth, Energy & Environmental Sciences at Stanford, arrived at the wellhead. The rusted 10-foot structure — a "Christmas tree," as it's called in the industry—loomed over him.

While Lebel knew the well's depth, it was still hard for him to envision its scale. "If you don't see it, you don't think about it," he says later. "What's underground is impossible to imagine." The Earth's interior has been unfathomably scarred by hydrocarbon infrastructure, he says. For almost two centuries, since the drilling of the first gas well in 1821, the fossil fuel industry has treated the planet like a giant pincushion. The first U.S. gas well in Fredonia, N.Y., extended only 27 feet underground, but drilling since has gone ever deeper. Ten-thousand-foot wells like Church are common today.

Now imagine each of those pins in the global pincushion is a straw inside a straw. In Church's case, the outer straw is 7.625 inches in diameter and made of steel, encased in cement; inside is a 2.375-inch-wide steel tube. The deeper the well, the more the heat and pressure rise. At Church's deepest point, 10,968 feet, the temperature likely exceeds 200F. The weight of the Earth exerts more and more pressure as the well goes deeper—reaching about 5 tons per square inch at the bottom. That's the equivalent of four 2,500-pound cars on your thumb. All of this puts a huge amount of stress on that underground infrastructure. As it breaks down, eventually it begins to leak.

Astonishingly, no one had even bothered to ask how much until the past decade. In 2011, Mary Kang was a Ph.D. student at Princeton modeling how CO₂ might escape from underground storage vessels after being captured and buried. She looked for similar models on methane and came up with nothing; some of the industry sources she spoke with were confident that it wasn't much—and that even if it was, technology existed that could fix it. "It's one thing to assume," Kang remembers thinking to herself. "It's another thing to go get empirical data."

Kang went to Pennsylvania, where boom and bust cycles over the years have left a half-million gas wells deserted. Of the 19 she measured, three turned out to be high emitters, meaning they released three times more methane into the atmosphere than other wells in the sample. "There were no measurements of emissions coming out of these wells," she says. "People knew these wells existed, they just thought what was coming out was negligible or zero." By scaling up her findings, Kang was able to estimate that in 2011, deserted wells were responsible for somewhere from 4% to 7% of all man-made methane emissions from Pennsylvania.

Those findings inspired Lebel and other researchers in the U.S. and worldwide to start taking direct methane measurements. The industry responded by ignoring them and fought fiercely against the Obama administration's efforts to start regulating methane emissions. (A 2016 rule requiring operators to measure methane releases at active wells and invest in technology to prevent leaks was summarily overturned by the Trump administration at the beginning of August.)

Meanwhile, scientists trudged on. So far researchers have measured emissions at almost 1,000 of the 3.2 million deserted wells in the U.S. In 2016, Kang published another study of 88 abandoned well sites in Pennsylvania, 90% of which leaked methane.

Internationally, researchers tracked increasingly bad news. German scientists discovered methane bubbles in the seabed around orphaned wells in the North Sea. Taking direct measurements of 43 wells, they found significant leaks in 28. In Alberta, researchers estimated methane leaks in almost 5% of the province's 315,000 oil and gas wells. In the U.K., researchers found "fugitive emissions of methane" in 30% of 102 wells studied. Such findings are both a threat and an opportunity, says Lebel, who considers abandoned wells the easiest first step to cutting methane emissions globally. That's what brought him to Church in the first place.

According to his field logs, Lebel spent his first hour on site building a secure air chamber using a Coleman canopy tent draped in tarps, which he held in place with sandbags. Inside the tent, fans effectively created a convection oven of rapidly circulating air. As he worked, a farmer who leases the land wandered over. Be careful, he warned Lebel. Sometimes fire comes out of that well. Just yesterday he'd seen a plume of flames erupt from it, he said.

At 3:41 p.m., using an instrument that resembles a desktop computer with an abundance of ports, Lebel took his first methane measurement. "We knew right away it was a major leaker," he recalls. It exceeded the instrument's threshold of 50 parts per million almost immediately. Lebel collected air samples in tiny glass vials to take back to his lab. The analysis was damning: Two hundred and fifty grams of methane were flowing out of the well each hour. A rough calculation shows that over a decade and a half the Church well had likely emitted somewhere around 32.7 metric tons of methane, enough to melt a sizable iceberg.

Despite the flurry of recent research, the full scale of the emissions problem remains unknown. "We really don't have a handle on it yet," says Anthony Ingraffea, a professor of civil and environmental engineering at Cornell who's studied methane leaks from active oil and gas wells for decades. "We've poked millions of holes thousands of feet into Mother Earth to get her goods, and now we are expecting her to forgive us?"

There's no easy way to bring up the thousands of feet of steel and cement required to carry gas out of a well as deep as A.H.C. Church 11. That means the only way to keep the well from leaking is to fill it up. Plugging a well costs \$20,000 to \$145,000, according to estimates by the U.S. Government Accountability Office. For modern shale wells, the cost can run as high as \$300,000.

On a Wednesday morning near the end of June 2018, a crew of workers from the Paul Graham Drilling & Service Co., hired by the state of California after Pacific Petroleum failed to respond to years of notices, arrived at the well site. As they would on any job, they first dropped a "string," a lengthy metal cable, into the well; in ideal circumstances, it'd be a straight shot to the bottom. But not that day.

Well records indicate that a "packer," a ring-shaped device used to create a seal between the outer and inner straws of gas wells, had been installed about 7,000 feet down. It would have to come out first, or they wouldn't be able to get the cement all the way to the bottom. When they tried to pull out the packer, the string broke.

The tiny packer, just 2.5 inches wide, stayed stuck for weeks. As the crew tried to get it out, tubing inside the well broke—"structurally compromised due to corrosion," they told California's Department of Conservation in the work log they submitted. They were forced to go "fishing," using specialized tools to retrieve the tubing, piece by broken piece. But the packer was still in there. Eventually they used even more specialized tools to grind it away.

"We make the same mistake over and over again"

It wasn't until July 26, almost a month after workers arrived at the Church site, that they were able to start "running mud," the industry term for pumping cement into the outer straw. This straw had been purposely perforated to allow oil and gas to flow from the pay zone into the well. The plugging cement is supposed to accumulate upwards as more gets pumped in. But if it leaks off into that porous pay zone, no matter how much mud the team runs, it simply disappears. Unless the cement and other sealants reached every nook and cranny, the site might continue to leak.

Thankfully, Church filled easily, requiring 36,500 pounds of cement. The unforeseen difficulties added \$171,388 to Paul Graham's original estimate, raising the total bill to \$294,943, more than double the crew's \$123,555 bid. (Neither the cleanup company nor the state representatives who oversaw the work responded to interview requests.) Ingraffea examined the myriad work orders from the job and called it a "well from hell."

By late August, almost two months after they arrived at the Church site, the crew had cut off the Christmas tree and welded a half-inch-thick steel plate to the top of the wellhead. It had taken nine days longer to fill the well than it had to drill it in the first place. Looking across the landscape today, it's as though Church never existed.

The atmospheric evidence, of course, shows otherwise.

The cost to plug just California's deserted wells — an estimated 5,500 — could reach \$550 million, according to a report released earlier this year. While not an insignificant price tag, the real shock would come if the industry collapses and walks away for good. In that doomsday scenario, the costs to plug and decommission 107,000 active and idled wells could run to \$9 billion. And yet so far in 2020,

California has approved 1,679 new drilling permits.

“We make the same mistake over and over again,” says Rob Jackson, a professor of Earth system science at Stanford who oversees Lebel’s work. “Companies go bankrupt, and taxpayers pay the bills.”

Congressional efforts to create a well-plugging program for cleanup are stalled. Meanwhile, oil and gas companies have made trillions of dollars in profits over the past century and a half while enjoying relative impunity. On federal lands, where oil and gas companies actively drill, bond levels haven’t been adjusted for inflation since 1951, when they were set at \$10,000 for a single well and \$150,000 for however many wells a single operator controls nationwide. In California a company drilling 10,000 feet or more needs only \$40,000.

Even spending all the billions of dollars required to plug the world’s millions of deserted wells won’t stave off environmental catastrophe. The vast heat and pressure of the Earth’s subsurface—the same forces that crushed dinosaur bones into hydrocarbons in the first place—mean that no plugging job lasts forever. Scientists and engineers debate how long cement can survive in the harsh environment of the Earth’s interior. Estimates typically fall from 50 to 100 years, a long enough time horizon that even some of today’s biggest oil and gas companies may no longer exist, but short enough to be uncomfortably within the realm of human comprehension. No regulations require states or federal agencies to measure emissions after wells are plugged.

While little is being done to prevent methane from creating catastrophic warming, less is being done to prevent water contamination. Researcher Kang, now an assistant professor of civil engineering at McGill University, worked as a groundwater monitoring consultant before getting her Ph.D. In 2016 she published a paper with Jackson showing that California’s Central Valley, where a quarter of the nation’s food is produced, has close to three times the volume of fresh groundwater as previously thought. Such good news came with an urgent caveat: Nineteen percent of the state’s wells came close to these aquifers. “It’s definitely a threat and something that needs protection,” Kang says. “There’s so much we don’t know.”

What we do know is scary enough. “The cement will deteriorate,” says Dominic DiGiulio, a senior research scientist for PSE Healthy Energy, an Oakland, Calif.-based public policy institute, who worked for the Environmental Protection Agency for more than three decades in subsurface hydrology. “It’s not going to last forever, or even for very long.” A.H.C. Church lies in the Solano Subbasin, part of the Sacramento Valley Groundwater Basin. Almost 30% of the region’s water comes from subsurface sources, according to a 2017 report from the Northern California Water Association. “Given sustained droughts, groundwater resources are going to be very important in the coming decades,” DiGiulio says. “California is going to need these resources.”

Among the hundreds of pages of records chronicling the well’s spud, activity,

and plugging, the one consistent name was Bernard Church. One afternoon this summer, I called the phone number listed on the most recent document, from a 2004 inspection, and reached his wife, Beverly Church. She now lives in Walnut Creek, Calif., about 40 miles southwest of the well site, and she told me her husband had died nine years earlier.

He and their family never became rich. Holders of mineral rights can lease them back to oil and gas companies and receive royalties on what their wells produce. But because so little had been pumped from Church, none of the 20 or so family members who eventually held a stake wound up with much. “We didn’t make any money off of it,” Beverly says.

That’s not an uncommon outcome, explains Kassie Siegel, director of the Climate Law Institute at the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity. “Every once in a while someone might” get rich, she says. “But it’s not a thing. Big Oil is getting rich. For individual, ordinary people, it’s all risk and no reward.”

SHORTLISTED STORY

BANGLADESH'S HIDDEN CLIMATE COSTS

Zakir Hossain Chowdhury, Irwin Loy (Bagladesh)



Zakir Hossain Chowdhury, a Visual Journalist based in Bangladesh working as a freelancer producing both reports and photography. He completed his Diploma in Photojournalism, Pathshala South Asian Media Academy in 2014. From 2017 he started both report and photography together by pitching international agencies and magazines. His main topics are Climate Change, Human Rights, Social issues, Child Labor, Transgender and Public Health, etc. His work was published in international outlets like TIME, The Guardian, Telegraph, The New Humanitarian, Wall Street Journal, Paris Match, Mirror, etc. He is now major focusing on Climate-related crisis reporting doing reports, photography and video also. His photo on Climate Crisis won a photography prize as a category winner at 'Health & Heating World', in Welcome Photography Prize 2021! His feature story on "Bangladesh's hidden climate cost" won the 'Covering Climate Now Journalism Award, in the photography segment in 2021.



Irwin Loy, Asia Editor at the New Humanitarian. Irwin joined The New Humanitarian in 2017, covering stories from across Asia and the Pacific. He is a multimedia journalist and editor who has lived and reported in Asia since 2009. Before coming to The New Humanitarian, he filed print, radio, and multimedia stories as a freelance correspondent and worked closely with local journalists from around the region. He started out in newspapers covering local and provincial politics in Canada. Irwin is also leading a reporting project exploring locally driven aid in humanitarian crises.

BANGLADESH'S HIDDEN CLIMATE COSTS

By Zakir Hossain Chowdhury, Irwin Loy

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'We are not able to build our houses again.'

Khulna, Bangladesh — Coastal Bangladesh was lashed by a punishing storm this year, then submerged by monsoon floods. The damages linger long after.

Cyclone Amphan tore across Bangladesh's southwestern coast in May, and severe floods inundated a quarter of the country weeks later.

Photographer Zakir Hossain Chowdhury's images show how the damage endures. Battered communities in parts of Khulna district, a strip of coastal wetlands, are still living in temporary homes on embankments, or in emergency storm shelters meant to house people for days – not weeks or months.

Amphan smashed open kilometres of embankments protecting sub-districts like Koyra and Assasuni. The barriers, which keep tidal waters at bay, haven't been repaired, leaving communities exposed to daily floods that rush in with each high tide.

The fallout goes beyond the physical damage. A chain of disasters – including a pair of storms last year – have drained income and shattered livelihoods. Child marriage is on the rise as families struggle to cope, and as schools remain closed due to the coronavirus pandemic. Tired of rebuilding, some families are deciding to leave. This is a migration pattern that has been repeated across the country, each time disasters chip away at income or destroy homes and fields.

Climate change is supercharging extreme weather, adding to the already ample risks people on the coast have lived with for generations. Researchers say global heating makes high-intensity storms like Amphan more common and more damaging, adding to heavier rains, sea-level rise, accelerated coastal erosion, and other climate change impacts.

Syed Sheikh, 42, isn't willing to live with the risk any longer. Months after Amphan hit, he decided to pack up his life on the coast, moving further inland to a town where he hoped his family would be safer.

He is tired of the constant rebuilding. "Our house was damaged for the eighth time in my life," he said.

The Bay of Bengal is a basin for some of the world's deadliest tropical cyclones. Storm risks usually peak in May and November, bookending a monsoon season that routinely floods millions in South Asia. (*interactive map*)

Cyclone Amphan formed in May, careening through India's eastern coast and striking Bangladesh. The storm caused widespread damage in India's Odisha and West Bengal states before crashing across the border into Bangladesh.

More than 200,000 homes were destroyed or damaged in Bangladesh. Three quarters of families in the hardest-hit areas, including Khulna, reported their food stocks were wiped out or drained.

Amphan was followed by severe monsoon floods across South Asia, which inundated northern Bangladesh and swept southward. The floods set in unusually early in June, and lasted longer than two months in some areas. At the peak of flooding in July and August, at least a quarter of the country was submerged, including parts of Khulna district still reeling from Amphan.

This year's disasters followed two 2019 storms, Fani and Bulbul, which carved a path through the same coastal region. In recent years, countries like Bangladesh and India have minimised disaster casualties through extensive early warning and evacuation systems – storms in 1970 and 1991 are estimated to have killed hundreds of thousands. But the damage from consecutive disasters builds, destabilising communities over the longer term.

Higher ground

Amphan destroyed at least 76 kilometres of coastal and river embankments, according to estimates by the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society.

Wide swathes of land remain submerged during daily high tides. Roadsides and smaller embankments have become narrow islands of refuge, where families and livestock crowd together.

An aerial view shows how families have set up homes on narrow embankments, which usually separate aquaculture shrimp farms, in southern Bangladesh's Assasuni sub-district. (*Photo*)

Shunoy Sarker, 26, said he and some 120 families have sheltered on embankments like these since Amphan hit in May. "For long periods, we are living with saltwater," he said, describing how saltwater rushes in during high tides. "We don't have any income."

Displaced beside their homes

Amphan damaged or destroyed some 83,000 homes in Khulna district, and storm surges – tidal waves that often accompany tropical cyclones – washed away embankments.

Onita Rani and her neighbour walk in front of their damaged houses. (*Photo*)

Many made homeless by Amphan still live nearby: Their homes may still be standing, but the constant flooding makes them uninhabitable.

Daily floods

With coastal embankments destroyed and damaged, the floods return at high tide each day.

Sarder Abul Kashem, 62, sits in his family's mud-covered home. (*Photo*)

"When the tide begins, saltwater enters my house and then I sit up with my goats on my bed," he said. "We are leading life worse than beasts."

Hidden risks

BRAC, the Bangladeshi aid group, says child marriage is on the rise during the coronavirus pandemic as economic pressures build. These pressures also grow after disasters, including Amphan and the nationwide floods.

Some stranded families in Khulna report that child marriage has become more common.

Shopna, 14, said many of her friends are now married: "During this coronavirus period, most of my classmates got married and I am alone now," she said.

Children study and play inside a cyclone shelter, where their families have lived since Cyclone Amphan struck in May. (*Photo*)

Coastal Bangladesh's network of storm shelters – sturdier, concrete buildings on higher ground – are meant for emergency use, but they have become longer-term housing for some families.

"Our houses are submerged in tidal waters," said Kulsum Ara Banu, 68, who is also living in a shelter. "We are poor, and we are not able to build our houses again."

Rebuilding

Residents say they need embankments to be repaired in order to start rebuilding their own homes. Some of this is underway. Local governments are reinforcing damaged barriers with sandbags. However, the material is not permanent.

People repair a damaged embankment using sandbags in Assasuni sub-district. (*Photo*)

Impacts multiply

The longer coastal areas stay flooded, the greater the disaster risks become. Saltwater inundation worsens inland erosion, which already destroys thousands of homes each year in Bangladesh. It also makes crops harder to grow – a threat to long-term food security.

A man collects bricks from his house, which is submerged by daily tides. (*photo*)

"Our embankment collapsed and our houses have eroded," said Habibur Rahman Sarder, 56. "We have no space to live, no space to cook food, and no place to grow food."

BUILDING TRUST TO ESCAPE JOURNALISM'S SUSTAINABILITY CRISIS

By Aidan White

Prior to this report going to press, journalists and the media celebrated World Press Freedom Day, the occasion when the United Nations and the wider international community pay tribute to the work of journalism in building democracy and respect for human rights.

This year's celebration was muted, not least because of the record number of journalists in jail, the increasing number being killed, and the fact that across the globe press freedom has declined over the past five years.

But, as this report illustrates, there is also much to celebrate. Across the world heroic editors and reporters are holding the powerful to account, exposing corruption and contributing to building better lives for their communities.

This was recognised last year by the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to two journalists – Maria Ressa of the Philippines and Dmitry Muratov of Russia. This was an unprecedented recognition of the vital contribution journalism makes to safeguarding free speech and civil liberties.

But even with this headline recognition there is no disguising a crisis of public trust across the information landscape.

The theme for this year's World Press Freedom Day celebration was "journalism under digital siege" which spotlights how the news media is threatened by surveillance and digitally mediated attacks on journalists. It also highlights how journalism has been weakened by the expansion of the unregulated, chaotic, and often abusive online information space.

The impact of the rise of internet and social network power over the past 20 years has impoverished the news media by draining away revenues from advertising

and circulation that have previously been the lifeblood of journalism. It has also undermined public trust in all digital communications, including from the news media.

Rebuilding public trust will not be easy. The anxiety and uncertainty that many people feel in the world today is leading to fear, ignorance, and polarisation, which feed into the instability of increasing intolerance and political populism. To counter this threat, urgent action is needed, in order to create a trusted public information space with ethical journalism at its heart.

The Fetisov Journalism Awards play a key role in helping to build public trust in ethical and high-quality reporting. This year's crop of excellent winners, many of them working in countries where journalism exists in twilight conditions, are examples of reporting that not only strengthens reputations but builds respect for quality journalism.

This year, for example, the winners of the Investigative Journalism award have continued the work of an assassinated journalist in Mexico, one of the most dangerous countries for the media to work in, proving that when there are ethical and independent journalists on hand, the truth never dies.

We congratulate all our winners on their success, but while paying tribute to their achievements it is impossible to ignore the harsh realities of the industry in which they work.

Issues like ownership, pluralism, editorial independence, and sustainability feature prominently in the minds of editors and journalists striving to provide basic public-purpose news. And for many communities their lives depend on it.

In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, for example, trustworthy independent media emerged as a lifesaving public good. News reporters provided accurate, useful information and investigated the handling of the pandemic, and in the process reinforced a sense of community and the common good.

But it is not only in the field of vital health care where independent journalism is a proven winner. The importance of investigative journalism and media development in combating corruption is well established. Even slight improvements in enabling a suitable environment for independent journalism lead to lower corruption.

For this type of journalism to thrive, the media must be independent and economically viable. If the viability of the media is under constant threat, public interest journalism cannot survive.

Media viability gives journalism institutional strength and autonomy, and provides

the environment and resources needed to produce high quality news. Most importantly, it helps resist the pressure to replace journalism with the propaganda of corporate, political or cultural centres of power.

But none of this will happen automatically. Media viability and the public trust crisis are equally important and fresh efforts are needed to resolve both problems by creating an enabling environment for the media and by giving citizens access to trustworthy media brands.

There are some recent developments which have given cause for optimism. In Europe two initiatives emerged around the celebrations for World Press Freedom Day.

The European Union gave notice of a new law that will protect journalists and civil rights activists from lawsuits aimed at censoring them. This law will allow courts to dismiss cases that are “manifestly unfounded” and will help end an epidemic of bogus legal actions by politicians and powerful interest groups designed to intimidate news media and stifle the practice of free journalism.

At the same time, also in Europe, a new initiative to strengthen trustworthy media – the Journalism Trust Initiative – was given funding by the EU to help media build public trust by reinforcing its internal systems of ethical and transparent management and reaching out for public support.

There are also fresh actions in many countries to find new ways of providing public support for independent journalism – either through financial support for investigative journalism groups, or the establishment of public interest foundations that can provide cash for independent news providers.

Inside the media there is a sober recognition of the dramatic shift in power that means the public is now a vital partner in securing the future of sustainable journalism.

The monitoring of media mistakes is more effective than it has ever been. The media cannot play fast and loose with the truth and expect to get away with it. In the online world it is even more essential that the voice of the media is recognisable, truthful and reliable, and high-level exchange with the public is not just an inevitable consequence of change – it is both desirable and beneficial.

Some media outlets – like *The Guardian*, for example – have got the message and turned to their readers for help. The paper has one of the world’s most frequently visited news sites and is an acclaimed leader in quality journalism, but it is not

profitable. In fact, it has amassed eye-watering losses of more than £100 million since 2010.

Part of its strategy for a sustainable future has been direct appeals for cash support from its readers. More than two million have responded with regular donations, which have thrown a lifeline to the paper.

In a similar way, the life-saving support of philanthropists and celebrity tech billionaires has kept alive titles like *the Washington Post* and *Le Monde*. Even big tech giants like Google and Facebook are investing some of the billion-dollar fortunes they have amassed from advertising, which used to fund the news media, in helping public interest journalism survive.

Building trusted brands and winning public respect in the age of online disinformation and distraction may be harder than ever, but it may be the only route to a sustainable future for journalism.

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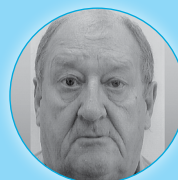
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“The struggle to maintain respect for democracy, human rights and peaceful co-existence is greater than ever. Journalists find themselves on the frontline of a battle to promote truth-telling in a world of increasing uncertainty, disinformation and propaganda. This year’s report tells a positive story — that courageous journalism is alive and well, and that the media is able to push back against political or corporate bullying to give people access to truthful and reliable information.”

AIDAN WHITE

President of the Ethical Journalism Network

Honorary Advisor to the Fetisov Journalism Awards