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AWARDS

THE POWER OF TRUTH-TELLING:

Journalism as a Public Good

Fetisov Journalism Awards Annual 2020

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The Power of Truth-Telling: Journalism as a Public Good

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Founder and President, Ethical Journalism Network

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INTRODUCTION

AIDAN WHITE

Honorary Advisor to the Fetisov Charitable Foundation and the Fetisov Journalism Awards

Founder and President, Ethical Journalism Network

The report on the first Fetisov Journalism Awards in 2019 was published in the teeth of the Covid-19 pandemic, a global health emergency that cost millions of lives. Under the cover of this humanitarian disaster governments launched an unprecedented assault on free speech – what United Nations Secretary General Antonio Gutiérrez called "a pandemic of human rights abuse."

As a result, the world of journalism is a poorer and more fearful place, with hundreds of examples of new laws and threats that have put truth-telling in the news media to the sword.[1]

But this report of the Fetisov Journalism Awards (FJA) for 2020 tells a different story. It shows that courageous journalism is alive and well, that news media with a public purpose will not be intimidated by political or corporate bullying, and that in every corner of the globe people still need access to the truth and information they can trust.

This is the second annual report of the world's richest journalism prize, which launched in 2019. It provides evidence in abundance that this award is not just about financial rewards - it is primarily about the promotion of informed and committed journalism and rewarding, through peer recognition, the best examples of stylish and fact-based intelligence about the world around us.

The winners this year provide more good news for the state of journalism worldwide. They come from a pool of entries that provide glittering examples of the excellence and public purpose to be found in journalism around the globe.

[1] *According to Human Rights Watch 83 governments used the Covid-19 emergency as a cover for new laws and a widespread crackdown on free speech, the media and peaceful protest. See https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/24/un-should-speak-covid-19-pandemic-human-rights-abuses*

The FJA were launched to promote and support outstanding journalism and to celebrate truth-telling in a world of uncertainty, disinformation and propaganda.

The awards strengthen the role of the news media and highlight their role in promoting the universal human values of honesty, justice, courage and solidarity.

Journalism is uniquely placed to empower and enrich the lives of communities. By delivering useful and reliable information, journalism is transformative; it can help people solve their problems and enrich their lives. But it is also a dangerous profession and many of the stories here were produced by journalists who showed courage as well as professional expertise.

Entries were solicited from journalists and the news media in four categories:

Outstanding Investigative Reporting: In-depth reporting and journalism that holds power to account, exposes secrecy and corruption and malpractice in public life.

Outstanding Contribution to Peace: Stories that make a significant contribution to peacemaking and promote the protection of human life.

Contribution to Civil Rights: Journalism that highlights individual freedoms and promotes respect for human rights, including those of minorities, women and children.

Excellence in Environmental Journalism: Reporting on the climate emergency and threats from pollution, global warming or hazardous human activity.

From hundreds of entries an expert panel selected 35 stories for a comprehensive shortlist. This shortlist was adjudicated by an international panel of judges from across the world of journalism.

Judging the entries was not easy. This was a high-quality field where every entry on the shortlist showed prolific skills and excellence in their journalistic style and content. Not only were these models of the craft of journalism – fact-based reporting, impartiality, honesty and humanity – they demonstrated a universal attachment to journalism with public purpose.

In this way they illustrate perfectly the mission of these awards - to create a modern vision of journalism, one that suits the age, and which appeals to idealism, truth-telling and dedication to principles that nourish democracy and respect for human rights, not just in the media but across the whole of society.

The winners of the 2020 awards in each category were:

OUTSTANDING INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

First Prize (100,000 CHF)

Rohini Mohan (India) for the report '*Worse Than a Death Sentence': Inside India's Sham Trials That Could Strip Millions of Citizenship.*

Second Prize (20,000 CHF)

'Fisayo Soyombo (Nigeria) for his story *Undercover Investigation on Nigeria's Criminal Justice System*.

Third Prize (10,000 CHF)

Fredrick Mugira, Annika Mcginnis, Geoffrey Kamadi, Nada Arafat, Saker El Nour, Ayele Addis Ambelu, Paul Jimbo, David Mono Danga, Tricia Govindasamy, Chrispine Odhiambo, Sakina Salem, Emma Kisa, Jacopo Ottaviani (Uganda/ Kenya/ Egypt/ Ethiopia/ South Sudan) for their cross-border collaboration in the report *Sucked Dry: Huge Swaths of Land Acquired by Foreign Investors in Africa's Nile River Basin Export Profits, Displace Communities*.

OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION TO PEACE

First Prize (100,000 CHF)

Nick Donovan, Richard Kent, Mohamed Aboelgheit (United Kingdom) for their report *Exposing the RSF's Secret Financial Network.*

Second Prize (20,000 CHF)

Mizar Kemal (Turkey) for his report *The Endless War: Iraq's Heavy Legacy of Depleted Uranium.*

Third Prize (10,000 CHF)

Philip Obaji (Nigeria) for his report *The Child Refugees 'Sold' Through Facebook.*

CONTRIBUTION TO CIVIL RIGHTS

First Prize (100,000 CHF)

María Teresa Ronderos, José Guarnizo Álvarez, Alberto Pradilla Mar, Alejandra Elisa Saavedra López, Almudena Toral, Ángeles Mariscal, Christian Locka, Christian Trujillo, Deepak Adhikari, Eduardo Contreras, Maye Primera, Mónica Gonzáles Islas, Nathan Jaccard, Ronny Rojas, Suchit Chávez, Juan Arturo Gómez, Ushinor Majumdar, Manno Wangnao, Felipe Reyes, Diego Arce, Noelia Esquivel, Mary Trini Zea, Paul Mena, Mónica Almeida, Estevan Muniz, Ibis León, Iván Reyes, Giancarlo Fiorella, Laureano Barrera, and Sebastián Ortega (Colombia, Mexico, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama, Ecuador, Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, US, India, Nepal, Cameroon, UK) for their cross-border collaboration in the series *Migrants from Another World.*

Second Prize (20,000 CHF)

Ankush Kumar, Bhavya Dore, Sadaf Aman, Petra Sorge and Ajachi Chakrabarti (India and Germany) for their report *How Industry Bodies Are Using the NCPCR and UNICEF to Whitewash Accusations of Child Labour.*

Third Prize (10,000 CHF)

Anna Louie Sussman (United States) for her report *The Right to Family Life.*

EXCELLENCE IN ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM

First Prize (100,000 CHF)

Adam Federman (United States) for his story *How Science Got Trampled in the Rush to Drill in the Arctic.*

Second Prize (20,000 CHF)

Paula Dupraz-Dobias (Switzerland) for her story *Why Switzerland Struggles with Dirty Gold: Tales from Peru.*

Third Prize (10,000 CHF)

Dora Montero Carvajal, Andrés Bermudez Liévano, Tatiana Pardo, María Paula Murcia, Ginna Morelo, Sara Castrillejo, Helena Calle, César Rojas, Jeanneth Valdivieso, Lisset Boon, Ezequiel Fernández, Juliana Mori, Isabela Ponce, Vienna Herrera, Alexa Vélez (Colombia, Argentina, Bolivia, Brasil, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela) for their collaborative project *Land of Resistance.*

On April 22nd, 2021 the winners were honoured at the second Fetisov Journalism Awards ceremony held in Zurich where they received diplomas, commemorative gifts, as well as their financial rewards.

This report provides a short overview of the selection process and how the final winners emerged. Also attached are all of the entries that made the final shortlist.

MESSAGE FROM THE FOUNDER

GLEB FETISOV

Businessman, Producer, Scientist, Philantropist
Founder of the Fetisov Journalism Awards

"The world is changing rapidly. A new world order is evolving, and this change is accelerating dramatically with the force of the pandemic. Sadly, one of the major negative implications of this change is that fact that the concepts of justice and truth run the risk of becoming irrelevant, and worse, avoided in this developing world order. The pressure on the free press has never been greater. Politicians and governments use journalists only as the servants of their own interests. Creativity, thought and truth are eradicated from this profession. New journalistic forms require ideological brainwashing and manufacturing an alternate reality. And this must be reinforced by key phrases, tag sets and optimization techniques, - in other words, a re-write of facts or the relevance in truth for spreading across social media. Fact-based journalism is supplanted by pseudo-investigations and dubious facts and opinions in countless fake talk shows and across social media.

But today, unique people have gathered here with a mission that is vital to our time. Their mission is to uncover and speak the truth and seek justice. In the name of this sacred mission, my family has established an award. The award is conceived from a worldwide search for, and an opportunity to find, celebrate and support worthy and courageous journalists. The award is meant to give them courage, standing and visibility, to ensure that the journalistic community and audiences in different countries know about them, what they write, and how courageous and focused they are in carrying forth truth and enlightenment."

A quote from Gleb Fetisov's Opening Speech at the Second Annual Fetisov Journalism Awards Ceremony, 22.04.2021.

Outstanding Investigative Reporting

OUTSTANDING INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

By Aidan White

Investigative reporting is the bedrock of public interest journalism. It is journalism that doesn't work to a deadline, but that takes time, is based upon careful handling of the facts, and concerns the detailed examination of injustice, corruption and wrongdoing in public life.

The shortlisted entries to FJA are shining examples of reporting that hold power to account and expose, with controlled outrage and without cynicism, the consequences of the neglect and inhumanity affecting some of the most vulnerable people in society.

One entry focused on the moving story of a lost generation in the Syrian conflict, revealing how children and infants in Idlib province have been abandoned in the midst of war and now face a deeply uncertain future.

Another sensitively reviewed the challenges and discrimination in health services facing the transgender communities of Latin America.

There were two entries on the theme of modern slavery. One from Nigeria exposed in detail the horrors of human trafficking, particularly of women for sex work. The challenge for the media when covering this all too familiar story is the need to avoid reporting that sensationalizes this inhuman trade.

A second story from Uganda involved a reporter going undercover as a maid to expose a domestic slave labour scandal. Her reporting forced the closure of a slave market in Dubai and also forced the government to strengthen safeguarding rules that are supposed to protect women working abroad.

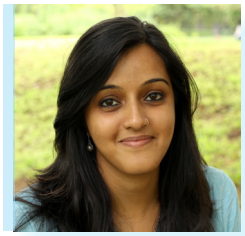
A scandal that has long been a feature of African warfare – the use and abuse of child soldiers – was another story, told this time from the deep mountains of the Democratic Republic of Congo, where the leader of a rebel group has two 12 years old boys as a personal guard. This investigative work has been going on for many years and includes the hopeful testimony of a youngster who escaped the nightmare of jungle conflict.

All of these entries set a high standard, but the judges identified three entries that stood out and were clear and worthy winners.

FIRST PRIZE WINNER

‘Worse Than a Death Sentence’: Inside India’s Sham Trials That Could Strip Millions of Citizenship

Rohini Mohan (India)



Rohini Mohan is an Indian journalist who writes on politics and human rights in South Asia. For over 16 years, she has written for several publications including TIME, VICE, Harper’s, Al Jazeera, The New York Times, The Economic Times, Tehelka, The Caravan, and The Hindu. Her first book is the award-winning ‘The Seasons of Trouble: Life Amid the Ruins of Sri Lanka’s Civil War’ (Verso, 2014).

EDITOR’S NOTE

First prize went to Rohini Mohan for terrific reporting ‘*Worse than a Death Sentence’: Inside India’s Sham Trials That Could Strip Millions of Citizenship* which exposes the shocking denial of justice to millions of people who make up the Bengali minority in the Indian state of Assam.

This was excellent journalism – factual, stylish and meticulous in detail -- revealing a consistent pattern of systematic discrimination against four million people who speak the language of neighbouring Bangladesh and are often Muslim.

A 2019 law threatens to strip this community, who have lived for generations in the region, of their Indian citizenship unless they come forward with decades-old paperwork proving their right to stay. Their fate is decided by judge-free tribunals that hand down decisions laced with inconsistency and anti-Muslim bias.

Telling this story required an indefatigable and courageous spirit, not just to overcome a legal bureaucracy reluctant to provide data on its work, but also to confront the toxic public atmosphere created by an increasingly nationalist and xenophobic government.

The Assam tribunals to create a citizen’s register have led government leaders to suggest similar actions that plan to target minority immigrant communities across the country.

However, the government has created a legal route to citizenship for most immigrants who are religious minorities from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh — except Muslims.

This story is a heartbreaking one of inhumanity and suffering endured by some of India’s poorest and most vulnerable people. It fully deserves recognition not just in India, but across the world.

‘Worse Than a Death Sentence’: Inside India’s Sham Trials That Could Strip Millions of Citizenship

By Rohini Mohan
VICE News - July 29, 2019

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.vice.com/

This article was reported in collaboration with Type Investigations.

“Foreigners Tribunals” in the state of Assam are deeply biased against Bengalis and Muslims, a VICE News investigation has found.

ASSAM, India — Dilip Biswas had lived in the small northeastern state of Assam for 40 years, growing rice on his land and cooking lunch at a local restaurant, when one day in 2009 the police came knocking on his door. Despite being an ethnic Bengali, a targeted minority in the state, Biswas had never doubted his Indianness. But suddenly he was told to prove it, leave the country forever, or go to jail.

Biswas was given the option to appear in a special court called a “Foreigners Tribunal,” a quasi-judicial system that orders the removal of so-called non-Indians from the country. The number of these tribunals has nearly tripled under India’s nationalist leader Narendra Modi.

Biswas says he sold his land to pay for a lawyer and certified documents dating back decades proving his life in India — and his right to stay. But the court was unmoved: Biswas was declared a “foreigner” and thrown in prison. What’s worse, his wife and two young daughters were also declared foreigners, and sent to a separate detention center for women. They were jailed for nearly a decade.

“I didn’t meet my father for nine years. Still they kept us there, separated,” Kalpana, now 17, said, her voice breaking as she cried quietly. Biswas, meanwhile, says he was held in a cell with 60 other men, some of whom were murderers.

In February, the state’s high court said that the tribunal had made an error: It was only Dilip Biswas, not his family, who should have been on trial. Furthermore, the tribunal had been wrong to reject land-revenue paperwork Biswas offered as proof his family had lived in Assam for at least one generation.

The Biswases are among tens of thousands of people who have been declared illegal in India’s Foreigners Tribunals, opaque courts that are unique to Assam. A VICE News and Type Investigations probe has revealed the tribunals to be rife with bias, inconsistency, and error.

Now, on the heels of a resounding re-election victory by Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which ran on an aggressively anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim platform, the state of Assam is using these tribunals to embark on what may be one of largest purges of citizenship in history. The state flagged 4 million people as possible foreigners last year; on August 31, they will find out if they have to face trial in the tribunals that jailed the Biswases.

The fear in Assam is omnipresent. An agrarian state known for its tea and rhinos could soon be the site of a statelessness crisis similar to what Myanmar’s attacks on the Rohingyas have wrought, but with four times as many people in its crosshairs.

The effort to rout out illegal immigrants primarily affects Bengali-speakers, who make up about a third of Assam’s population. While Hindu Bengalis like the iswases are also targeted, Muslims are disproportionately impacted. In Assam, speaking Bengali and practicing Islam — the predominant language and religion of neighboring Bangladesh — have long been conflated with being foreign. In reality, Bengali and Islam are spoken and practiced by a large minority of Indians in the state. Many whose citizenship is under scrutiny are poor and illiterate, unprepared to deal with the tribunals’ opaque legal process.

The anti-Bengali sentiment has roots in British meddling during the Colonial era. A resulting seven decades of tension between Assamese speakers, indigenous tribes, and Bengali speakers over land, forest and language have led to horrific massacres and toxic identity politics. Today, Bengalis may speak Assamese and celebrate local festivals like Bihu, but many Assamese nationalists see them as outsiders siphoning off limited local resources.

Over the years, local and national politicians have fanned the flames. And the roundwork for this latest purge has been laid at the highest levels of the national government.

Modi himself has explicitly targeted Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh; speaking at an election rally in West Bengal in 2014, the then-candidate for prime minister said: “These Bangladeshis better be prepared with their bags packed.” The president of the BJP, now a minister in charge of national security, has referred to Bangladeshis as “ghuspetiya” or “infiltrators,” and “termites” who are “eating our food grains that should go to the poor.”

In 2016, Modi’s anti-immigrant drive became even more starkly anti-Muslim, with the government trying to allow any non-Muslim illegal immigrants from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan to become Indian citizens. Assam protested, seeing it as an attempt to accommodate Bengali Hindus in their state.

The law did not pass, but it remains a BJP priority.

Most recently, as Modi and the BJP sought a second term in Parliament, they promised to implement the tool that's been used to flag the 4 million in Assam as possible foreigners — a registry of citizens — in other states. In May, the BJP was re-elected with their highest vote-share ever.

An investigation into Assam's Foreigners Tribunals reveals an ominous glimpse of what awaits the masses left off the citizens register who will soon be summoned to trial. Data gathered from several tribunals, and interviews with nearly 100 people who've faced the courts, illustrate a biased process barely resembling India's traditional legal system.

We requested judgements issued in the last six months of 2018 from all of Assam's 100 Foreigners Tribunals. Only five courts complied, although all were required to do so under India's transparency laws. Four were in the district of Kamrup [Rural].

In those tribunals, nearly nine out of 10 cases were against Muslims. Almost 90% of those Muslims were declared illegal immigrants — as compared with 40% of Hindus tried. While it wasn't possible to discern exactly how many people were Bengali speakers, every person VICE News found who had faced the tribunals was from that ethnic group.

Decisions made by those presiding over Kamrup's tribunals — who are not actual judges — were deeply inconsistent. The percentage of people declared foreigners varied dramatically from tribunal to tribunal. In one of the courts, every single person processed in six months was declared a foreigner because they weren't present at their hearing. Some people said the Assam Police Border Organization, a force unique to the state that files complaints and summons accused illegal immigrants to court, had never notified them in the first place.

It's unclear how many more people will be sent to the tribunals in the coming months, but Assam seems to be preparing for a major crackdown. Modi's government has approved the state's proposal to add 200 new Foreigners Tribunals to the existing 100, and plans for another 800 are in the works, according to a senior official at the Assam ministry for national security. The state is also building a new detention center and has proposed constructing 10 more, the official said.

The coming purge was set in motion in 2015, when Assam's government announced a "National Register of Citizens," or NRC. It required every person claiming Indian citizenship in Assam to submit proof that their ancestry in the country dated to before 1971 — the year Bangladesh was formed. Those who could prove their citizenship to the government's liking would be listed on the register. Citizenship is not a birthright in India; if an applicant's parents don't make the registry, the applicant wouldn't either.

By 2018, nearly 33 million people — more than the population of Texas — had submitted documents. In July of that year, Assam released an initial list of those it deemed Indian.

Over 4 million applicants — 12% of the state's population — weren't included. It immediately became apparent that the vast majority of those left off were Bengali.

Panic spread; people broke down in despair, spent their life's savings to gather more documents and file appeals, and went underground. Some committed suicide.

Those left off the list were able to appeal their exclusion. On August 31, the state will release the final list of citizens, and the appellants will find out if they were successful. If not, they face the tribunals — and the possibility of losing their liberty and country.

Ahead of the deadline, three United Nations special rapporteurs issued a statement expressing concern over the "potentially far-reaching consequences for millions of people, in particular persons belonging to minorities who risk statelessness, deportation or prolonged detention." They said they had sent three letters over the past 13 months and received no response.

The Biswases' case shows the potential devastation to come. Kalpana, her sister, and their mother spent nine years in a locked room with other "foreigners" from all over Assam. The conditions were abysmal; the girls say they washed floors in exchange for blankets and clothing.

If a friend hadn't challenged the tribunal order on their behalf, the family might have remained in detention indefinitely, stateless.

In February, the Biswases finally went home to a quiet village in the region of Mayong. From their elevated straw and mud house, Kalpana gazed at the hills and paddy fields around her. After nearly a decade behind high walls, it felt unreal.

"For nine years I was called a Bangladeshi, and not allowed to go to high school even," Kalpana said. "When I came out, I was told there was never a case against me. I'm angry. I'm angry about my fate and angry at the government."

Meanwhile, Dilip Biswas' freedom might be temporary. He was released on bail, pending a retrial. He'll soon have to face the Foreigners Tribunal again. This time, he will be tried alongside an untold number of people left off the NRC list.

A VICE News analysis of 515 orders issued by four of Kamrup's five tribunals and interviews with attendees of those tribunals, as well as courts in nine other districts, offers a window into what awaits them.

The judgements and witness accounts reveal a broken and prejudicial system where the burden of proof is on the accused.

Kamrup's tribunal judgments showed that about 82% of people on trial were declared foreigners. The numbers varied widely; one declared all its cases Indian, while another declared every person tried foreign. The judgements don't list the accused's religion, but names in Assam do indicate that heritage. We worked with

an Assam ethnicities expert to confirm data on Muslims and Hindus in the tribunals.

There are many flaws in the system, but five stand out:

- *Significantly more Muslims were being tried, and a much greater proportion were declared foreigners as compared to Hindus.*
- *Names in Assam don't reliably indicate ethnicity. But in addition to lawyers and tribunal members attesting to the focus on Bengalis, every one of the 113 people we found from those judgements were Bengali. Kamrup, meanwhile, is home to many Assamese speakers as well.*
- *Three-quarters of the orders were issued without the accused present, known as an ex-parte judgement. In one tribunal, this was the case in every judgment.*
- *The police investigations that form the basis of the complaint often appeared botched, superficial and biased.*
- *Some individuals who had managed to prove they were Indians received fresh summonses from the same tribunal.*

The lawyers sitting as judges in the tribunals had differing views on what documents could be submitted, what statements should contain, and how much time the accused had to produce witnesses. Some accepted verbal explanations for variations in age or spellings of names on documents. Others declared people foreigners on the basis of what defendants called clerical errors.

Colin Gonsalves, a lawyer and the founder of the New Delhi-based Human Rights Law Network, said the tribunals force "poor and desperate people" to hunt down "documents of ancient vintage."

People cobble together what they can. Many Indians do not have birth certificates, so they apply for copies of voter rolls that show their grandfather's name, or bring proof of farm loans or government relief payments that are decades old. Elderly relatives come to testify on their behalf.

But still, many are declared "foreigners" because their paperwork is deemed insufficient, or because their documents have inconsistencies. And witness testimony is not weighted heavily.

"Sadly, because witnesses are grandmothers, neighbors or uncles, they tend to be from the same Bengali community [and] they are already mistrusted," said a Gauhati lawyer who requested anonymity because he feared retaliation against his family. "Many tribunal members" — the term for the lawyers who preside over the tribunals — "don't find their documents authentic or their word credible."

Those under trial said the rules were unclear and that there was little clarity on why they were suspected in the first place — or what would happen to them if they were declared illegal immigrants. Even if they were ultimately judged to be Indians, while fighting for citizenship many could not vote or get food rations, loans, or jobs, and many spent money they didn't have on lawyers.

Amrit Lal, a social worker who discovered that his mother had been declared a foreigner without trial only when their family's food subsidy card was blocked, described the whole tribunal process as " mazakiya"— ridiculous.

A spokesperson for the national Ministry of Home Affairs asserted that Foreigners Tribunals provide "adequate opportunity" to accused individuals, and ex-parte orders are issued only if the individuals do not access these opportunities. Anyone who's not satisfied with the outcome may also take their case to the Gauhati High Court. Moreover, the spokesperson added, "It is incorrect to say that working of FTs is flawed. These do function as per the procedures laid down and as per rules." Assam's Home and Political Department, also called the Assam home ministry, declined to comment on the workings of the tribunals and whether there is bias in the system. The prime minister's office did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Several Indian states share a border with Bangladesh, but Assam's resentment of Bangladeshis — and Bengalis and Muslims by association — is unique.

This hostility dates back to when the British wooed Bengalis through land and jobs to the largely Bodo- and Assamese-speaking region. As the Indian subcontinent's borders were drawn and redrawn over a century — creating East Bengal, then East Pakistan, and finally Bangladesh — relations between the groups soured.

In the past, Bengali-speakers who have lived in the region for generations have been targeted in riots. The violence reached its peak during the 1983 Nellie Massacre: In a single morning, machete-wielding Assamese youth killed about 2,000 Bengali Muslims they suspected to be illegal immigrants.

To appease nationalists, the government devised three major ways to detect, try, and deport suspected foreigners — with a focus on Bengali-speakers. One is a voter suppression campaign in which electoral officers flag people listed on voter rolls, supposedly without adequate Indian documentation, as "doubtful voters." Another is the filing of complaints by police against people based on tips that they're Bangladeshi — which is what happened to Dilip Biswas.

The Foreigners Tribunals are currently processing the people affected by those efforts. Since 1985, the courts have declared more than 100,000 people foreigners, with a steep uptick since 2016. About 900 are in detention centers today.

The National Register of Citizens — which is actually an anti-foreigner reframing of a 1951 registry — is the latest and broadest effort.

Inside the Tribunals

At noon on a muggy June day, nine families had gathered outside the Hajo Foreigners Tribunal. The half-constructed building in Kamrup had four small usable rooms and no seating for visitors. A woman used a motorbike seat as a desk as she slowly etched her name in Assamese on a sheaf of documents.

A village headman who was there to give his eighth testimony for people in his village — "I know this person, she lives in my village, she is Indian" — frantically searched his record book for a name.

In the garden outside, Ayesha fixed her pink sari and patted her hair. She went over the details in Assamese with her lawyer in preparation for cross-examination. Switching to Bengali, she asked her nervous husband and older brother to recall dates and events from the past 50 years. "I am confident, there is nothing to fear," she reassured them. "We are only going to say the truth."

It was her 20th wedding anniversary that day, Ayesha said, and the month of Ramadan. She was amassing as many good omens as she could.

Ayesha, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, was issued a summons alleging she illegally entered India after March 1971. But she was born in Assam in 1979, Ayesha says, holding out documents that prove an entire life in India: school, a master's degree, marriage, and children.

Her cross-examination lasted about 15 minutes. Indians draw citizenship from their parents, so Ayesha had submitted voter lists with her father's name and address on them from before 1971. This would establish that he was Indian.

Next, she had to prove that she was her father's daughter. "I went to school, so I had a school certificate that mentioned my father," she said. Her father had passed away years ago, so her brother served as a witness. But when the judge questioned him, the elderly farmer could not recall where their father had cast his first vote, Ayesha said.

She said the tribunal member had also asked Ayesha why she had not registered to vote until she was 26.

"Ayesha's is a good case, I know it," said Zakir Hussain, the Gauhati-based senior lawyer representing her. "But they are always under the apprehension that 'I may be arrested at any time'."

Women, who made up about a quarter of those on trial, often face special challenges gathering enough evidence.

In rural areas, especially in the Muslim community, "there is a tendency to marry daughters off very early, as teenagers, before the age of voting," said Hussain. "Most women in these parts do not go to school either, so their only official record is the voter list or ration card, in which they appear with their husband." They end up with no official document linking them to their parents.

Women can produce certificates from headmen of their father's and husband's villages vouching for their birth and marriage. But these certificates are admissible only if the headman brings a record of the life events for his entire village. More than 71% of women in Kamrup's tribunals were declared foreigners; a headman not having sufficient record-keeping was often the reason given.

Ayesha's case is pending, but her education may be what saves her. Having gone to school provided crucial documentation. It also gave Ayesha the ability to understand and the confidence to face the tribunal.

Later that week Ayesha asked her lawyer to help three other women from her village. Her illiterate neighbor Laili was barely able to hold her voter certificate the right way up. "Everyone is poor," Ayesha said.

The tribunal system confounds most people. One tribunal analyzed accepted a card issued by the income tax department as evidence, while another considered that suspicious. One tribunal considered an ancestor's name in the NRC from 1951 valid, while another said a census document was not legal evidence.

Ayesha's lawyer, Hussain, said there should be a standard practice, but in reality, "all judges are not the same."

The members who declare people nationals or foreigners are, unlike in other Indian courts, not actually judges. It used to be that only serving and retired judges presided over the tribunals. But when 36 courts mushroomed to 100 in 2015, the upreme Court approved the government's request to fill vacancies with lawyers who have at least 10 years' experience.

A senior official at the Assam home ministry speaking on condition of anonymity said that members only get only one or two days of orientation before overseeing a tribunal. One tribunal member who is a retired district court judge, also speaking anonymously, said that some members were not experienced enough and made mistakes in gauging evidence.

One thing is consistent: The members expect record-keeping that few in Assam have.

Many people in the judgments knew their place of birth, but rarely the exact date. And the date of birth on school certificates often didn't match the ages on voter lists. In interviews, parents recalled that if they didn't know their children's exact birthday, a school headmaster would sometimes write down an estimate based on the child's height. The differences in Assamese and Bengali pronunciation of letters can lead to different spellings when documents were written in English. Some Muslims said government officials added names and titles, like Abdul, Sheikh, and Mohammed, to their given names, creating more confusion.

Members often disregard documents over discrepancies like these.

"If this parameter is applied on every Indian, almost all will become stateless," Aman Wadud, a Gauhati lawyer, said.

A former member in a Foreigners Tribunal now practicing in the Gauhati High Court criticized the tribunals' reliance on documents alone, ignoring the local context of illiteracy, poor record-keeping, and frequent migration during floods.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, the former member added he'd been led to believe that Assam was filled with unidentified foreigners, but the first few months presiding over his tribunal proved him wrong. "I thought, why am I not finding any foreigners? Then I realized that they are just not there."

A younger former member, also requesting anonymity because he works in the High Court, believed he was fired for being "too lenient."

Both were part of a group of 14 former Foreigners Tribunal members who in 2017 sued the Assam government in the High Court to be reinstated as they believed they had been wrongfully terminated. Among other allegations, they said the state had fired them for not declaring enough people foreigners. "In the latter part of our tenure, there was an undercurrent from the authorities that we should produce more foreigners," the younger former member said.

The Assam government responded in the High Court, "The performance of Foreigners Tribunals have always been an important topic of discussion." It also attached a telling annexure: A table with columns for the percentage of cases heard, and the percentage of those declared foreigners. When the latter was below 10%, the member was usually marked "Not satisfactory. May be terminated." One member who had heard 10% of cases pending in his court and found 59% of the defendants to be foreigners was recommended for a contract extension. Another who had heard 26% of the tribunal's cases and declared only 4% of people foreigners was fired.

In its official response to the members' petition, Assam's home ministry dismissed the allegation that they assessed the performance of members by their conviction rate. Two serving members also said they were not under any direct pressure from the state to declare people foreigners. After the petition was filed, a High Court monitoring bench took over the appraisals of members. The bench chair turned down a request for an interview.

In May, after the government of India approved 200 more Foreigners Tribunals, Assam decided to appoint retired civil service employees with some judicial experience as members.

"[Foreigners] Tribunals are the most important tribunals in the country," said the older of the former members, his voice rising in anger at the idea of bureaucrats deciding foreigners' cases.

"It's not a joke. Making a person stateless is worse than a death sentence."

Living in Fear

Many people don't even get a hearing. In the Hajo tribunal where Ayesha is fighting for her citizenship, in the last half of 2018, every single one of 299 judgments issued declared the accused a foreigner in their absence. Nearly 98% of those people were Muslims. Another Kamrup court, the Amingaon Foreigners Tribunal, declared 98% of the accused foreigners.

Across all four tribunals, more than three-quarters of the orders were delivered in the absence of a defendant.

When asked about the ex-parte decisions, a tribunal member who spoke on the condition of anonymity blamed the high number on people who live on islands moving homes often due to flooding and not updating their addresses on records. A senior officer in the border police station in Amingaon, also speaking anonymously, said that after being issued a summons, many people go into hiding. Both spoke on the condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to speak to the press.

But the tribunal member also acknowledged that when the border police cannot issue a summons, they routinely say they can't find the accused individual, without explaining how they tried.

Type and VICE News found 11 individuals who had been declared foreigners in their absence in the Hajo tribunal. They were living in their villages, all at the same addresses listed in the court orders.

Sarabari, a village of about 6,000 people under the Hajo tribunal's jurisdiction, is home to 18 people declared foreigners in absentia in the Hajo tribunal during the six months reviewed. One of them, Fatima, was unaware of the judgment against her until VICE News and Type Investigations knocked on her door.

Fatima, who is illiterate, struggled to explain the legal mess that she had been in for months. Her lawyer said that the judgment seen by VICE News and Type was actually the second time she had been declared a foreigner in an ex-parte order within two months.

He said police delivered the first summons alleging that Fatima was Bangladeshi to a different villager. That person lost the notice and only told Fatima about it later, according to the lawyer. When she went to court in October, Fatima found out that she had already been declared a foreigner in absentia the day before.

A person who has been declared a foreigner in absentia has 30 days to challenge that judgment, and Fatima's lawyer said he was able to have it thrown out. Fatima began fighting her case, attending hearings with receipts, voter lists, and certified photocopies of her grandfather's Indian passport with her childhood address.

But while that case was still ongoing, the police issued Fatima another summons in the same tribunal. It was the same accusation — that she was an illegal immigrant

from Bangladesh — but opened up an entirely separate case. A December order says the police "could not serve a notice" upon her "personally" and that they pasted it "in a conspicuous place" in the village in late November. Someone told Fatima about this notice, but she was afraid and thought it was a mistake, so she didn't look for it.

In December, the same member chairing Fatima's ongoing trial once again declared her a foreigner in her absence in this second case. The order declared her "liable" to be deported from the country.

Fatima's son, Mustafa — both their names have been changed to protect their identities — left his job delivering water in Saudi Arabia to come home and help his mother fight for her citizenship. Mustafa is trying to win the ongoing case, while his mother said she had more faith in god than in the courts now.

Fatima is optimistic; she's sure it must be a mistake, or that her lawyer will find a way out.

That evening, though, when the family broke their Ramadan fast with a prayer, she could not stop crying.

Villagers said that in addition to not properly notifying them on a summons, police often don't do an initial investigation. Before officially filing a complaint and summoning a person to a Foreigners Tribunal, border police are supposed to visit their home, giving them an opportunity to present documents proving their nationality. But about two dozen lawyers and nearly 100 people who've been through tribunals said this initial inquiry wasn't done.

The second order against Fatima says the border police visited her to ask for identification, which she didn't have, but she says they never came for an inquiry.

Sarabari's elderly headman Yakub Ali said border police regularly file complaints without giving his villagers an opportunity to present proof of their citizenship. In fact, in all the decades Foreigners Tribunals have existed, and Ali has ministered to Sarabari, he said he's never been contacted by border police for an initial inquiry nor heard of one happening. Nazmul Islam Bhuiyan, a Gauhati lawyer who estimates he has worked on about 200 cases in six tribunals, said police had not done a proper initial inquiry in a single one of his cases.

This shoddy police work was recently exposed publicly. The Boko tribunal had declared a retired army serviceman a foreigner based on differences between his details and the police complaint and had him detained in May. The family of the accused man, Mohammed Sanaullah, told the media they were shocked.

Eventually, the policeman who filed the complaint admitted that he had investigated a different man, a laborer, but the policeman who served the summons had issued it to the ex-serviceman. The officer that it had been a mistake, as the two men had the same last name. Three witnesses named in the complaint have sued the policeman, claiming that he had never met them. The high court allowed Sanaullah out on bail in June.

In an interview, Sanaullah's son said that if this could happen to a retired Army servicemember, what about others with fewer resources? "I appeal to PM Modi," he said, who "should see the reality of what is happening" in the NRC process.

If Sanaullah had seen the original complaint against him, the mistake could have been caught. But the border police and tribunals, unlike other Indian courts, don't share complaints with the accused. Some tribunal members do allow advocates to petition for a copy of the police report, but lawyers said most don't.

Assam border police chief Bhaskar Mahanta said, "Police has been doing enquiries as per law." He acknowledged that there are cases where "they ought to have established it a little more properly," but he added, "This is not the rule. These are exceptions."

An Uncertain Future

In March, the chief justice of India, Ranjan Gogoi, reprimanded Assam's state representative about the small number of detentions of those declared illegal immigrants.

"The existing [detention] centers are housing 900 people as against the so many who have been declared foreigners? Why are there not thousands?" Gogoi, who is Assamese, reportedly asked.

His comments were made during an activist's litigation against allegedly inhumane conditions in Assam's detention camps.

The chief justice also said that foreigners "had mingled with locals" and were part of electoral lists. The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, whose members include a retired Supreme Court judge and former Assam police chief, said in a statement that Gogoi's "unfortunate" comments "fly in the face of India's constitutional and international obligations."

Of the nearly 59,000 people who have been declared foreigners in the tribunals since 2009, the government of Assam said it had only 823 in detention at the end of January. Only four have been deported; illegal immigrants can be deported only if Bangladesh confirms their nationality. Since the chief justice's comments, the order police have detained about 125 more.

Some of the dozens of people we spoke to who had been declared foreigners in Kamrup's Foreigners Tribunals were challenging the order in the High Court. But most were simply living in fear, hoping the police wouldn't come for them. A few were not even aware that they had been declared foreigners.

Others had already been detained.

Two brothers were declared foreigners by the Rangia tribunal on the same day, then detained, according to their wives. The wives now live in their two-room house with their elderly mother-in-law, doing domestic work for a living. The orders declaring Asmot and Asgar Ali foreigners said that they did not have sufficient proof that their deceased father was Indian. Both had provided their mother's tribunal order, declaring her Indian, but the member dismissed it.

The Ali brothers, both of whom drove bicycle rickshaws in Gauhati, had gone to the tribunal on the day it delivered its judgment. As soon as they were declared foreigners, they were taken directly to a detention center.

Their mother, sitting with her wheelchair-bound grandson, said, "Do people know what it is like to lose two sons? Their father was dead, but now I am."

Most advocates advise their clients to stay home on the day a tribunal is to deliver its judgement. "If they come to the tribunal and are declared foreigner, from that moment they lose all their rights as Indians," said a policeman stationed in one of the tribunals. "We are under orders to immediately detain them."

Even those who have won their cases could still be targeted. The Assam Home Ministry plans to go to the high court to challenge 430 tribunal orders declaring people Indian. An official said they would also file 551 new complaints against people already declared Indian. Their legal division was re-examining another 1,178 cases.

Several senior Assam state officials speaking anonymously admitted in interviews that the foreigner detection system suffered from inefficiency, lack of transparency and inconsistent databases. They have now devised what they call the Electronic Foreigners Tribunal, which the Assam home secretary says will integrate the police, Foreigners Tribunals, NRC and the state's immigration office so "there is consistency of information."

Border police chief Mahanta said, "This will make the border police functions more efficient and accountable."

It's unclear what the future holds for the millions of people who may soon be sent to the tribunals. The proposal of additional detention centers suggests many will spend long years imprisoned.

In May, Ashrab Ali, an elderly farmer in Assam, killed himself by ingesting pesticide a day after an NRC official indicated that he might not make the list. Ali's son said the old man had "felt shame and guilt" about the future of his children and grandchildren.

As villagers joined the candlelit funeral, Ali's wife showed them all the documents her husband had submitted to the NRC.

"See, we are Indian," she said.

"I am sharing 25 percent of the prize money with groups helping people affected by citizenship issues to help them access legal aid."

ROHINI MOHAN

SECOND PRIZE WINNER

Undercover Investigation on Nigeria's Criminal Justice System

'Fisayo Soyombo (Nigeria)

'Fisayo Soyombo is best remembered as the Nigerian journalist who spent five days in a police cell as a suspect and eight as an inmate in Ikoyi Prison — to track corruption in Nigeria's criminal justice system, after which the authorities contemplated arresting him, or the journalist who drove the equivalent of a stolen vehicle from Abuja to Lagos, passing through a whopping 86 checkpoints in a journey of over 1,600 km that lasted a cumulative 28 hours 17 minutes.

A former Managing Editor of SaharaReporters and the pioneer Editor of TheCable, Soyombo has also edited the International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR). His brand of investigative reporting has won him multiple awards. He is a three-time winner of the Wole Soyinka Award for Investigative Reporting, a 2013 winner of the Deutsche Welle/Orange Magazine Reporting Fellowship and a 2014 finalist for the Kurt Schork Awards in International Journalism. In January 2020, he co-won Gatefield's inaugural People Journalism Prize for Africa (PJPA) with BBC Africa Eye's Kiki Mordi; and in April, he emerged the only African on the longlist for One World Media's International Journalist of the Year award. He would eventually make the three-man shortlist, alongside Sky News' Alex Crawford and BBC News' John Sudworth. Also in 2020, he won the West Africa Media Excellence Award (Investigative Reporting category and was a finalist for the WJP Anthony Lewis Prize for Exceptional Rule of Law Journalism and the One World Media Awards (International Journalist of the Year category). He closed the year by winning the Local Reporter category of the 2020 Kurt Schork Awards in International Journalism in December.

An op-ed contributor to Al Jazeera who has also written for TAZ, Journal Du Dimanche, the Daily Mail UK and Africa In Fact, his writings have been translated into German, French and Arabic.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The second prize winner, 'Fisayo Soyombo, was locked up and suffered torture in order to expose the bribery and corruption that infects the justice system in Nigeria.

His story *Undercover Investigation on Nigeria's Criminal Justice System* is based on his own harsh experience of spending two weeks in a police cell in jail and detention.

Going undercover is a hard choice for a journalist, and one which is only made when the story cannot be told without subterfuge, so by adopting a pseudonym and confessing to an offence he didn't commit, 'Fisayo placed himself in the hands of a brutal system of policing.

His story reveals how the police will arrest innocent members of the public when bribed to do so, how there is routine exaggeration of charges against suspects, and how there is routine exchange of cash before suspects get food or access to family visits.

It is the same system of bribery whether under police custody or in jail, where prisoners bribe guards for access to habitable cells, or pay cash to erase their personal records as well as paying in cash for drugs and sex in prison.

This three-part series details how he set up his own arrest and detention; how he suffered torture in custody and how he finally secured his release. But his troubles did not end there.

When his story was published he was threatened with arrest again, by the Nigerian Prison Service (NPS). Luckily, the plan was leaked, prompting a public social-media campaign in his defence. It was a high-risk strategy for reporting, but one that lays down challenges for Nigeria and its commitment to the rule of law.

Bribery, Bail for Sale… Lagos Police Station Where Innocent Civilians Are Held and Criminals Are Recycled (I)

By 'Fisayo Soyombo
The Cable - October 14, 2019

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.thecable.ng/undercover-investigation-i-bribery-bail-for-sale-lagos-police-station-where-innocent-civilians-are-jailed-and-criminals-are-recycled

The investigation was published with collaborative support from Cable Newspaper Journalism Foundation and the International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR).

Investigative journalist 'Fisayo Soyombo spent two weeks in detention — five days in a Police cell and eight as an inmate in Ikoyi Prison — to track corruption in Nigeria's criminal justice system, beginning from the moment of arrest by the Police to the point of release from prison. To experience the workings of the system in its raw state, Soyombo — adopting the pseudonym Ojo Olajumoke — feigned an offence for which he was arrested and detained in police custody, arraigned in court and eventually remanded in Prison. In the first of this three-part series, he uncovers how the Police pervert the course of justice in their quest for ill-gotten money.

It cost only N500 for a policeman to arrest me, and N1,000 for another to hurl me into a cell. Of course they didn't know I was a journalist; I had assumed a pseudonym and grown my hair long enough — for 10 months — to blend with artificial dreads. My locks were tinted in gold and almost all my facial hair removed. I cut the profile of the kind of youth the Police indiscriminately railroad into their notoriously ramshackle vans for no reason, for onward transfer to their cells. One look at me and the typical policeman would have mistaken me for a compulsive hemp smoker, an incorrigible internet fraudster or a serial drug abuser.

The Police in Nigeria have a history of illegitimate arrests and extrajudicial killings. In July, Chinedu Obi, a musician better known as Zinquest, was accosted for spotting tattoos and shot in Sango, Ogun State. Only two months ago, policemen in Lagos shot two unarmed civilians — they died instantly — suspected of phone theft. In April, anti-cultism policemen killed Kolade Johnson, a civilian, at a football viewing centre in the Onipetesi, Mangoro area of Lagos. One bus driver in Ayobo, Lagos, was even shot dead by a policeman in May for refusing to part with his money. In Ifo, Ogun State, in April, a policeman shot a motorcycle rider during an argument over N100 bribe. All five incidents happened within the last six months; all six victims died in the end.

Therefore, it didn't take too long after my arrest for me to begin to see the Police in their true elements. My supposed offence was that someone had sold me a car worth N2.8million in November 2018; however, after paying N300,000 cash, I began to avoid him — until I was eventually apprehended on Monday July 8. Once I was arrested and whisked into an innocuously passing danfo, I imagined I would be immediately taken to the cell of Pedro Police Station, Shomolu, Lagos. But it wasn't that straightforward. I was first shoved behind the counter; and after half-an-hour, the Crime Officer (CO), Inspector Badmus, fetched me into a back office where I as grilled for close to two hours, culminating in a written statement from me that represented his thoughts more than mine. He asked me questions but only allowed me to write the answers that suited him; if the answers didn't, he cut me short halfway. Afterwards, I was led to the expansive office of the Divisional Police Officer (DPO), a tall, dark, rotund, middle-aged man who pronounced me guilty in a matter of minutes. "This is one of the many criminals destroying this city," he yelled after a long, menacing glance all over me. "Please hold him well!"

Armed with this new order, the CO, who had been relatively civil all along, groped for my trousers then grabbed me by the waist as we made the short return trip to the counter. It was a walk of no more than 50 metres, but by the way he held me, anyone would have thought we were walking over a thousand kilometres and there was the potential for escape.

The complainant was already registering the case with a policewoman by the time we returned, and soon after they were haggling over the fees. Chigozie Odo, the policewoman, had rejected his offer of N500. After some five minutes of talking, he handed her a N1,000 note. Immediately the money touched her hand, Odo turned on me: "Look at you. Fine boy like you; just look at yourself. *Instead make you go find better work, you dey defraud people. Oya, come here!*"

The suspects in the cell had gathered by the iron barricade, hungering for an entrant, clinging to the bars and chillingly rolling their eyes from the policewoman to me and then to the complainant. My heart began to pound: *Are they going to pummel me? Would they accept it if I offered some cash in exchange for beating?*

Odo stripped me of my shirt, singlet, belt, wristwatch, shoes and cash. "Look at his hair; *na you gangan be Ruggedy Baba*," she said as she unlocked the cell and bundled me in.

A Minor in the Cell

As I take my first steps into the cell gate, I immediately attempt to ingratiate myself with my 'new friends' by asking what they want — food or drink? It endears me to them, and the policewoman immediately proclaims me the new "leader". It didn't take quite long for the food to arrive; it was around 3pm or thereabouts and they apparently hadn't been fed that day yet. As they guzzle their food — rice for some, bread for others — I embark on a quick, surreptitious survey of the cell.

To the right is a small opening housing a bathroom and a latrine oozing with thick fecal stench, one I very quickly resolved my buttocks would never near. To achieve this, I would eat only once daily — bread with a bottle of water or soft drink — throughout my stay. Opposite it is the smallest of the inner cells. Lying awkwardly on the floor is a mat too small to contain even one person; but every night, five or six cross-breathing inmates share it. Being the warmest inner cell, it proved the popular cell of choice — particularly at nighttime. Further ahead are two bigger cells, dingy and often damp, each measuring roughly 16 by 16 metres, with fading, defaced blue walls. Holding my head in my hands, I slump into one of the cells, enveloping myself with thoughts of the hardship to come.

"Do not disturb; the leader is in a very bad mood," a faint voice arrests my thoughts. "Let's come back to see him later," adds another — that of a boy who, by his mien and slender build, couldn't possibly be more than 15. *What's a minor doing in detention?* I motion them over.

"Wetin happen?" asks Maxwell, the fair-skinned, slim-figured, natural dreads-donning leader I inadvertently deposed minutes earlier. In the prison and in police cells, "wetin happen" is the lingo for asking an inmate or prisoner how they landed in prison or detention. I give them my prepared line and hand them the baton.

Maxwell, a gate keeper at a small company in Lagos, was accused of illegal gun possession by his boss after an unlicensed pistol was reportedly found inside the gate house. He vehemently denied knowledge of the act, but his claims of innocence had been ruined by his previous backdoor sale of the company's 50 litres of diesel for N8,000. Determined to let him rot in the police cell, the accuser left with Maxwell's phone, obliterating any chance of phoning a friend or family to process his bail.

With Maxwell is Loris, the minor whose arrest and detention was masterminded by his sister. Loris had electronically withdrawn the sum of N23,500 from his sister's account, without her knowledge, to pay for the General Certificate Examination (GCE) of the West African Examinations Council (WAEC). Since the exam actually costs N13,950, it is either Loris stole more than he needed or he registered at a special centre. The boy claims his sister declined his initial requests for the funds when he asked. Asked how he pulled off the funds transfer, unnoticed, he replies:

"I now where she keeps her ATM; I also know the password."

Also in the cell is Buchi, a young man accused — and he didn't deny it — of stealing a phone. Small matter it may have been; but after the Police tracked him to his house with the same phone he allegedly stole, his accuser claimed N100,000 had also gone missing from the car where the phone was 'moved'. Like Buchi, the fourth suspect is also accused of stealing a phone worth N17,000; too bad for him because the Police then went on to set his bail at N50,000.

The Police have always insisted bail is free, but this has got to be the most barefaced lie of the century! In 2015, and again in 2017, the Police embarked on a nationwide bail-is-free campaign; apparently, it has been a futile experiment. Coincidentally, while I was in that cell, Zubairu Muazu, the Lagos State Police Commissioner, was busy saying "any policeman who collects money for bail is not different from a kidnapper; the only difference is that everyone knows where you keep the uspects".

An Innocent Man in Police Cell

We continue our chit-chat without the knowledge that two young men, one imminently, are primed to join us. The first, Uchenna, was accused of attempting to dispossess a motorcycle rider of his property. But he fiercely denies, insisting a quarrel only broke out between the duo because the rider could not provide the balance of his fare for the ride. "How can anyone say I tried to snatch a motorcycle in broad daylight yet no weapon was found on me?" he argues, to the bemusement of all. "I had no knife, no gun, no spade. No cutlass or machete. Do you rob in daylight without any weapon?"

Much later, sometime between 8pm and 9pm, another young man joins us. The accusation against him was that he stole a phone from a barbing salon. By his own admission, the CCTV had reportedly identified him as the culprit. Yet he denies any wrongdoing. "I swear I didn't steal the phone," he murmurs. "I swear!" *Who's this one fooling? The CCTV fingered you as the thief yet you say no? You think everyone here is a criminal? There's a journalist here, you know?*

"Wait a minute," I ask. "Didn't they show you the CCTV footage? Didn't the Police watch it before arresting you?"

"I didn't watch it, neither did the Police," he answers. "The Police arrested me because the phone owner said I was the thief. They didn't watch any CCTV footage."

I still do not believe him until the rest of us rouse from sleep the following morning to find out he was gone. The CCTV footage had finally been watched, and it turned out the wrong man had been arrested! An innocent man had spent a night in jail over a crime he knew nothing about.

N50,000 Bail for Five Hemp Smokers

Five for the worth of one; that was the scenario on Tuesday when the phone-theft suspect was freed. Shortly before midday, five new suspects — one male, the others female — join us. The quintet — two of them are sisters — had been arrested at a hemp-smoking joint in Gbagada. On arrival, they all look subdued, their faces sunken, their hairs dishevelled. Off they are marched to the female cell, situated adjacent the male cell but close enough for communication and exchange of items with their man, Maxwell. Unlike the male's, the female cell is less punishing — just one room, bare but cemented, dry and generally habitable.

Maxwell makes no claim at sanctimony. "They caught the girls in the act, but me, they should never have arrested me," he laments. "I f**ked up big time."

Tall, fair and stunningly handsome, Maxwell had learnt of the arrest of his girls, and had sped to the scene only for residents to clandestinely signal the Police that he was one of them, in fact their ring leader. Maxwell was bullish in maintaining innocence as the Police tried to arrest him, but he would earn himself a succession of slaps after a strand of hemp was found in his wallet. *"I no know say I get one tiny claro for my wallet," he says. "I f**ked up, mehn."*

When observed at close quarters, Maxwell cuts the picture of a man of two extremes. One minute he is mouthing obscenities, the next he is speaking with impeccable courtesy. Asked which of the girls is his girlfriend, he mutters: "None of them is my girlfriend but I f**k them all." However, when any of the girls calls for his attention, his answers range from "yes, please" to "yes, darling" or "one minute, love." And, usually, when he asks anything of anyone in the cell, it is hardly for himself but for one of his girls.

From time to time, Maxwell would dip his right hand into his crotch, and scratch away the poor thing with mind-blowing absentmindedness. Then he would run the same hand over his tinted hair, down through the thin threads of his hairy chest and back to his crotch. He was impulsive, too, once declaring, without prompting, "It's been a long time I had measles like right now", and abruptly informing us another time: "The Police have set our bail at N10,000 each."

The father of the two girls shows up much later, upset, disappointed and threatening to let them rot in detention. He didn't mean half of those things, though; the following day, he returns to settle the Police, and all five regain their freedom. It is unclear exactly how much he paid, but the Police had demanded N50,000 for all five.

How the Police Cook up Crimes Against Suspects

On Wednesday, I discover, in the crudest of ways, how the Police often exaggerate the allegations against suspects — to drive up their bail. It is evening and I have not had a bath all day, so I politely ask a policewoman, fresh from assuming duties, to open the cell so I can draw water from the tap servicing the cells.

"What is your name?" she first asks me, before shifting her gaze to a whiteboard detailing the offences of each suspect in the cell. "Ojo Olajumoke? Your offence doesn't warrant you having a bath. *Cell no be for enjoyment, abeg.*"

Crestfallen and unable to read the board from afar, I beckon a cellmate over for help. "Your offence reads 'stealing and hijacking of car,'" he tells me. "Did you actually hijack a car?"

I hadn't. The original complaint against me was that I'd bought a car worth N2.8million, paid only N300,000 and defaulted on the balance. Car hijacking? Stealing? By framing me, the Police violated Section 340 (f) of the Police Act 2004, which compels them to exhibit "strict truthfulness in the handling of investigations, and in the giving of evidence".

Maxwell and the girls were framed up, too. On the whiteboard, they were designated as "cultists", but their real offence was that they smoked hemp. They were picked up smoking hemp, not while engaging in cultism-related activities. Are all hemp smokers cultists?

"It's the Police's well-known way of bargaining for hefty bail sums from suspects," Oto Omena, a lawyer with long-standing experience of dealing with policemen, would later tell me in late August. "They typically make suspected crimes bigger than they originally are; you know, the bigger the crime, the bigger the bail sum."

Innocent Destitute, Drunkard Arrested on Trumped-up Charges

In the evening of Wednesday, Haruna joins us. He tells no lies about his offence: he and his brother were involved in a nasty fight during which he slashed his opponent's neck with a knife. Brother landed in the hospital, Haruna ended up in the cell. Deserved maybe, but not for the next two suspects.

In the wee small hours of Thursday, Japheth and Sunday arrive, both having been picked up while sleeping at unauthorised locations in Gbagada. The Police accused them of lurking around to break into shops. It's a robbery-prone location, they insisted. But we all know it's a false claim.

It turns out Sunday is very known to many officers at the station. A chronic, foul-smelling, gibberish-spilling drunkard, this isn't his first arrest and probably won't be the last. Spirits and dry gins are his specialisation. His wife would show up at the break of dawn, cursing her luck at ending up with a man contributing no more than his manhood to the marriage, always disappearing for days on a drinking spree and reappearing, bearing no cash for her or the children.

Japheth, meanwhile, is a destitute. He had naively relocated from Benue to Lagos weeks back in search of greener pasture, with no real plans for feeding, housing and

accommodation. In daytime, he roamed the streets hunting for odd jobs; at night, he slept wherever the call of nature found him. The Police knew he was harmless. Not one weapon was found on him, much like his co-suspect. With neither Japheth nor Sunday able to afford the N10,000 bail set by the Police, night falls on them in the cell.

Sunday's innocence would become clear in the morning when a new batch of police officers takes over duty. "Mr. Sunday, they've picked you again!" one of them exclaims on sighting him. "What was your offence this time?"

Apparently, the Police know Sunday as someone who lives in the neighbourhood; they know him as a harmless but indiscriminate drunkard; not the robber they had lebelled him as. His arrest and detention was nothing more than a fundraising expedition.

Policewoman Defrauds Her Boss

In a matter of days, it becomes clear that all policewomen on duty at the counter are perpetually on the lookout for brisk business. Every visit to a suspect, even if it lasts no more than two minutes, is impossible without the payment of a N500 bribe. Charging one's phones also costs N500 per time. Since roughly two people visit me daily, the policewomen can sometimes make a minimum of N1,500 off me in a day.

On Thursday morning, something interesting happens. Policewoman Angelina Abubakar's voice rouses me from sleep. "Jumokeeeeeeeeee," she bellows. "Do you have N500? I want to use it."

Does she really think I have an option? I let her have it: a deduction from the sum of money seized from me at point of detention and deposited at the counter. Few hours later, with my phone out of battery charge, I request her attention, expecting her to for once grant me a free favour. "You'll have to drop something," she affirms. I decline, which means no phone for the rest of the night. *How can I give you N500 in the morning and you can't charge my phone for me in the afternoon for free?*

Less than half-an-hour later, her greed returns to haunt her. When Senami Kojah and Zainab Sodiq, my two visitors, brought breakfast in the morning, Angelina had collected N1,000 bribe from them. Apparently, she had lied to her boss she got only N500. Somehow suspicious that her boss doubted her and could ask my friends next morning, she begs me to appeal to them to insist they received N500 balance after parting with N1,000.

Well! Well!! Well!! Your sins have found you out. "My phone is not charged, so no way I can reach them," I tell her. She speedily charges the phone and fetches it for me afterwards. Without a dime. Angelina's boss is just as guilty, though; Section 355 of the Police Act 2004 prohibits an officer from receiving "any token from a subordinate in rank…"

The Early-Morning Bail Ritual

Friday morning, neither the Crime Officer nor any other policeman asks me if I want to call anyone to process my bail — clear indication I probably will be arraigned in court. By then, I'd become all too familiar with the Police's early-morning bail shenanigans. In each of the previous days, at least one police officer asked almost every inmate first thing in the morning if there was someone they wanted to phone — a relative, friend — just anyone who could potentially show up at the station with cash for bail. Those mornings were the only times every suspect had the immediate attention of the officers at the counter. Every other time was a struggle — but not that early-morning call. Meanwhile, in all those days, repeated pleas by one of my lawyers for bail were flatly rejected by the Police.

The previous day, the CO had called out early in the morning to ask if I wanted to phone anyone. "Since you came here, we have not seen anyone mature come for your bail. Just those two small girls," he had noted. Do you have any mature person you can phone? [Turning to the policewoman at the counter], please get him his phone so he can call anyone he wants to."

Sometime just before 10am, a policewoman unlocks the main cell and asks me to step out. "The DPO said you should go and meet your IPO. You must leave this cell today anyhow; [it's] either they arraign you or they let you go," she informs me with glee in a thank-me-for-the-information manner. Actually, it was a big relief — because, by then, all my regular cell mates had been released, and I had become the longest-serving suspect. Maxwell was released on Thursday. Taofeek, a man who joined us on Tuesday after his involvement in a scuffle over land, had regained his freedom since Wednesday after parting with N5,000 for bail. The same day, Maxwell and his four 'wives' were freed. Only four of us — Uche, Japheth, Sunday and I — were left. For all of us, our detention for more than a day was illegal. Section 35 (5) (a) and (b) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) are explicit: detention should be for a period of one day "in the case of an arrest or detention in any place where there is a court of competent jurisdiction within a radius of 40km"; and "in any other case, a period of two days". Detention can only be for a longer period if a court so decides. Meanwhile, a magistrate court is less than 15km from Pedro Police Station.

Soon, I would find out how much the complainant paid the Police to get me to court: N2,000 for typing, N2,000 for fuel, N1,000 for photocopying. So, either bail or court, and at the very worst scenario, the Police have devised a means of collecting at least N5,000 from every suspect and another N5,000 from the complainant at the point of leaving the cell.

Before long, a police van pulls over in the sweltering afternoon heat. The IPO handcuffs my hands and leads me into the van while the CO wheels it away, leaving behind a hail of dust, a station brimming with police officers filled with hate and a cell housing their preys.

Drug Abuse, Sodomy, Bribery, Pimping… The Cash-and-Carry Operations of Ikoyi Prisons (II)

By 'Fisayo Soyombo
The Cable - October 21, 2019

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.thecable.ng/undercover-investigation-ii-drug-abuse-sodomy-bribery-pimping-the-cash-and-carry-operations-of-ikoyi-prisons

In the second of this three-part series,'Fisayo Soyombo exposes how the courts short-change the law, and the prisons are themselves a cesspool of the exact reasons for which they hold inmates.

Too many unforeseen obstacles had sprung up against me by the time I arrived at the gates of Ikoyi Prison, Ikoyi, Lagos, on July 12: I'd had my most tortuous night in the police cell; I had been messed up by the typically ruthless Friday evening Lagos traffic; I had arrived under the cover of darkness, which wasn't the plan. Even the few things that went well would later come back to haunt me.

Proceedings were well underway at Court III when we stepped into the Chief Magistrate Court, Yaba, Lagos, after my extrajudicial detention for five consecutive days at Pedro Police Station, Shomolu. It was a little after noon — or thereabouts. A funny but very contentious matter was ongoing. The protagonist, a woman, was being tried for, allegedly, illegally selling a piece of land belonging to a former associate of hers. This woman — ostensibly in her late 50s or early 60s — claimed, vehemently so, that the complainant indeed owed her millions of naira in accumulation of unpaid earnings for executed projects. She sold the land because she had been instructed to, to defray the cost of her service, she said. But the prosecutor insisted otherwise, arguing that the sale was fraudulent. The woman, irritated and incandescent, embraced and perhaps enjoyed every window to have a go at the prosecutor. Once, the prosecutor got under her skin by scoffing at how two of her high-profile witnesses were deceased. "Excuse you!" the woman fired back in protest. "Are you suggesting I killed them? Is it my fault that you've been dragging me from one police station to another and from court to court for more than 10 years?"

The magistrate — a dark, soft-spoken, middle-aged man whose eyes often evaded the lens of his pair of glasses when talking — adjourned the matter, as expected. And after two or three other cases, mine was mentioned. His orders: remanded in prison custody, two sureties in like sum of N500,000 each, N150,000 to be paid into the Registrar's account by each surety, sureties to be from father's side of the family. Not long after, the court rose, to be followed by my preparations for a long and difficult journey to the prison.

Prison Warders Ask for Bribes Right in Court

Before the authorities take my freedom away from me, the first thing they do is give me a final semblance of it by unfettering my hands from the handcuff, as is the custom. That was just before entering the dock. Minutes later, the same man who released the handcuff returns to hand me over to a policeman who, accompanied by Zainab Sodiq, the lady posing as my sister, leads me downstairs. First stop on the ground floor is the office of the prisons service. Manning it, comfortably sitting opposite the entrance, is a gun-wielding prison warder, legs waggling, whose shirt hangs loosely on the wall inside, leaving his trunk scantily covered by a singlet. Inside that office are three more warders. The next room is a holding cell — for momentarily detaining inmates until the arrival of the prisons bus that conveys them to Ikoyi. I expect to be led to the holding cell, but I am taken into the prisons office and encouraged to "take a seat". *What manner of magnanimity is this?* I was wrong!

The three officers summon my sister. "You can have a look at that holding cell and see if it's the kind of place a human being should stay," one of them tells her with feigned sympathy. "Your brother can stay in our office but it will cost you N10,000." My sister takes a moment to peep into the holding cell, then returns to bargain. The negotiating parties reach an agreement of N5,000, collected by the singlet-donning warder.

Money in the bag, the warders' initial measured disposition turns happy-go-lucky; I notice the ease with which they regale one another with tales of similarly shady financial dealings. "The day Naira Marley was billed to be taken to prison, I was on this chair making cool money," says one of them. "I made some good money, I won't lie. Transfers were just going up and down." Naira Marley, the hip hop artiste whose original name is Azeez Fashola, had been arraigned at a Federal High Court in Lagos on May 20 by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), on 11 counts of alleged Internet and credit card fraud.

A second warder describes how he facilitated the payment of N300,000 to a senior colleague of his in Abuja, by a man who wanted to 'smuggle' all his three children into the employ of the Nigerian Prisons Service (recently renamed the Nigerian Correctional Service) during a recruitment "some years ago". Though unqualified, all three were eventually employed by the service. It suddenly dawns on the warder that an ongoing promotion exercise in the prisons service offers him fresh opportunity for corrupt enrichment. "Let me quickly call the man; he may be interested in a deal to facilitate his children's promotion," he adds, running his hand through his breast pocket for his phone.

‘If You Have Your Money, You Can Never Suffer in Prison’

Seeing the lack of restraint with which they discuss acts of bribery and corruption, I approach them for guidance on the allocation of accommodation in prison. Apparently, it’s a high-wire fraud involving prison officials in court and those in the yard proper.

“You can get a cell for N30,000,” one of the warders tells me. “You can also get for N100,000 or N150,000. You can even get a N1.5million cell.”

“A million and five hundred thousand?” I protest.

“Of course!” he insists. “When Ayodele Fayose was remanded in Ikoyi Prison, what kind of cell did you think he stayed in?” Fayose, the immediate past former Governor of Ekiti State, was remanded at Ikoyi Prison in October 2018 at the start of his N2.2billion fraud trial initiated by the EFCC.

Another warder cuts in. “Don’t worry, you can never suffer in the prison yard,” he says. “As long as you have your money.”

Patience, a third urges me. “The warders at the prison have warned us off striking deals with inmates while still in court,” he explains. “They’ve told us to leave them to push their own deals when the inmates get to the prison. So, when we get there, we will hand you over to the warders you will negotiate with.”

Emergency Bail for Sale by ‘The Magistrate’s Man’ and Prison Officials

Minutes later, one of the warders — dark, mild-mannered and diminutive — walks up to me to ask if I’m making progress with my bail conditions. The question confounds me. *Who makes progress on bail application within two hours of a court hearing?*

“My lawyer is working on it,” I reply, “but it’s too early to know since it’s just a few hours ago we left court.”

“No, no; it doesn’t mean,” he says. “I have a lawyer in this court who will help you perfect your bail ‘today today’. In fact, you will not get to Ikoyi Prison at all; you will go home straight from here. He works in concert with the court authorities. I can call him right now and he’d be here any minute, if you want.”

Stunned and curious in one breath, I nod in the affirmative. In a matter of minutes, the lawyer, ostensibly in his late 40s or early 50s, shows up. He speaks in carefully considered and restrained patches, sporadically wiping the lens of his glasses with a silky piece of cloth.

“What exactly is your offence?” he begins, then proceeds to hearing my bail conditions. He assures me that the problematic components of my bail requirements would be waived, but the process would cost me money.

“Did the Magistrate order you to pay any money to the Registrar’s account?”

“Yes. N150,000,” I say in error. It should have been N300,000 — at the rate of N150,000 per surety.

“Okay, that’s no problem,” ‘Mr. John’, as he introduces himself, says. “Can you make everything N200,000?”

I tell him I can’t. That’s a lot of money. Fifty thousand naira on top of the N150,000 is a lot of cash. But he disagrees. “You see, I am very close to the Magistrate,” he says. “I am very close to the man; therefore, we will waive many of these bail conditions for you.”

We haggle for a while: N180,000, N170,000, N180,000. We eventually settle for N170,000.

John takes a quick look at his watch; it’s a little past 3pm. “Hurry and get the money. It’s almost too late already — why did you wait till this long?” he laments. “Today may or may not be possible. If you had mentioned it immediately the court rose, say around 2pm, I would have been able to totally guarantee you that you would go home today without ever reaching the prison.”

We exchange numbers and I promise to call, but I never do (The plan, really, is to end up at Ikoyi Prison.). Instead, I fold my secret recording device and tuck it away carefully. Yes, I’d taped all the conversations held inside the prisons office in the court premises. The original plan was to put the device away before going to prison, then retrieve it afterwards. I had been told that there was literally nothing I wanted to smuggle into the prison that I couldn’t; I only needed to grease the palms of warders and they would fetch it for me. But with accommodation negotiations set to take place on arrival at the prison, I began to nurse the ambition of smuggling in the device outright at point of entry. This was not the original plan. But if it works out, I would have more evidence of prison-yard corruption. If it fails, I’m doomed. Big risk, I know. But I do it all the same.

Physical Pain in Exchange for Digging the Story

The prison warders do not quite know what to make of me when they find a hidden device on me, a supposed inmate, during the routine search at the entryway shortly after an Ikoyi Prison bus conveying the latest inmates pulled over at the prison gate. After a second, more thorough search during which nothing else is found on me, they hand me over to the ‘Section’ — a position occupied by the most senior convict in a cell — of the welcome cell. As I would later find out, this was under strict instructions: no phone calls, no out-of-cell movement, no frivolous interaction with inmates.

Very early the following morning, Sunkanmi Ijadunola, the third most senior warder in Ikoyi Prison, sends for me. They had seen the videos; they’d extracted the memory card from the device and watched footages of the five prison officials

demanding bribes from me and the court official negotiating a premature bail with me. Sunkanmi, as he is widely known, asks me to confess: "Who are you and what is your mission here?"

But he was asking the question a few hours too late. I'd spent half of the night deliberating on what to expect in the morning. I had imagined that in the best scenario, some senior official would have been thoroughly mortified by the sight of their bribe-demanding colleagues captured on tape, and would be keen to convince me about helping to further unravel the bad guys in the system. I didn't deceive myself, though: this thinking was more or less illusory. I'd also thought that in the bad scenario, I'd be handed over to the Police; and in the worst, I'd be extrajudicially executed. After several hours of carefully considering all possibilities overnight, I resolved that even if they held a gun to my head, I would not disclose my true identity. I knew once I did, that was the end of the story. After five excruciating, emotionally and psychologically destructive days in a police cell, I wasn't prepared to ruin everything so cheaply.

Seeing I am unwilling to offer any useful information, Sunkanmi, the Assistant Chief, accuses me of plotting a jailbreak. "You're here to understudy the prison security so that you can send the videos to your gang members outside," he says. "You're planning a jail break. Or you're working for Boko Haram; you're a Boko Haram spy!"

I do not flinch. Instead, I stick to the original story line I'd preconceived to offer in the improbable circumstance that my cover was blown. At this point, Sunkanmi sends for a cane and orders me to remove my shirt and trousers, leaving only my singlet and boxer briefs. Then he descends on me. Three rounds of beating: the first with several lashes of the cane searing straight into my skin and leaving me with blood and blisters; the second in similar pattern, with my hands cuffed behind my back; and the last with a thick stick targeting the interior and exterior joints of my ankles, knees, hips, elbows and shoulders.

Still, I refuse to disclose that I'm a journalist. By enduring the beating, I succeed in buying myself at least another 24 hours of understudying the corruption seeping through the different layers of prison operations. Bearing the pain was worth it in the end; someone needed to expose the scale of criminal corruption going on in that prison.

Corruption-Laced Registration

The first benefit of enduring the pain is that I am still accorded the treatment of a regular inmate, therefore I am sent for registration and documentation. The documentation holds inside a building opposite the Assistant Chief's office. It's a fairly big office with a small inner room littered with stacks of ragged files and paper, plus a narrow, hollow, open cell to the left where awaiting-documentation inmates sit without much latitude to stretch their legs. The inner room is manned by a warder easily noticeable by the ungracefulness of his chemical-bleached yellow skin. A light-skinned, heavily-built woman-warder spearheads the documentation process in the major office, assisted by three convicts. The documentation is both manual and digital, but to avoid compromising the security of the prison, I'll skip the details. Prison warders are themselves the biggest threat to prison security, but I won't aid them.

In the very final stage, a convicted inmate tells me to step forward for my cash. The procedure is always that an inmate turns in his possessions, including cash, at the gate. At the end of documentation, the money goes to the records department, from where he can retrieve a small sum every time it is required for a specific purpose. Just before I collect mine, one of the three convicts — they're easily recognizable in their deep blue uniforms — whispers some instructions into my ears. "You will give that woman [the warder] N1,000," he tells me, "then you can have the rest." It's standard practice, I soon find out. Every inmate who comes in with cash must give up some of it at every registration point in bribes demanded through proxy, but with the full knowledge of the receiving warder. It looks a small amount but by month end it could be some stash of notes in dubious earning. In my one week in that prison, there were 16 new inmates on the day with the least number of new inmates. On one day, there were 45. If only five had enough cash to forfeit N1,000, that's N5,000 daily, amounting to a little below or above N100,000 — depending on the number of court sittings — in the month. Numerous honest, hard-working Nigerians do not even earn that!

I give up N1,000 of my N7,200 as instructed, and I receive a slip indicating my new cell will be D2 — that is, Block D Cell 2. I ask to be given the outstanding N6,200 but the convict tells me the money will be handed over to the warder overseeing the block — a happy-go-lucky albino who seemed very popular among inmates. Six thousand two hundred naira quickly becomes N5,200. This fresh N1,000 deduction, I am told, is to guarantee nobody in the cell lays hands on me. Again, if five inmates forfeit a thousand naira daily, that's another N100,000 in corruptly-earned money by month end. This is more than thrice the national minimum wage approved by President Muhammadu Buhari in April, but which still hasn't taken off five months after!

Cover Blown but Too Late to Conceal Corruption

My stay at D2 is short-lived. Two members of my backup team show up as planned. They had been unable to reach me but they assumed all had gone well so far. With the extra scrutiny around me, it doesn't take too long before they're found out. It leaves me with no option but to admit I'm an investigative journalist and to fully disclose my mission. I just couldn't see them endure the pain I had. This was a watershed moment in the investigation, as from then on, the prisons service bends over backwards to put its best foot forward while also eliminating my exposure to all

ongoing ills. I remember overhearing a prisoner say even a death-row convict should still have the sense of self-worth to ignore the beans that was served that Saturday morning; but in my eight days at the prison, the warders ensure that I do not come in contact with the food served to inmates by the prison. The authorities relocate me from D2 to the welcome cell, with strict warnings never to leave the cell on my own under any circumstance. Unfortunately for them, it was too little too late.

Before they knew who she was, one of my visitors had actually been made to pay a bribe of N1,000 at the prison gate before she could be allowed to see me, much like the setting at the police station. This wasn't at the discretion of the visitor; it was no act of voluntary tipping. Rather, she was expressly asked to part with her money as a condition for access to me. On the surface, this looks a pittance, but not so when viewed in the context of the human traffic to the prison. On Saturday evening, I had managed to do a head count of visitors: 18 of them in an hour. Do the math! This Ikoyi-visit corruption has grown in leaps and bounds, evidently; back in 2016, a N200 bribe gave a visitor access to an inmate. Not anymore!

Also, one of the few lawyers who visited me was nearly asked at the gate if he was willing to enter a deal to relocate me to a more enjoyable cell. "You look too clean for your client to be in D2," a warder at the prison gate had told the lawyer, who, several years before his admission to the bar, had earned a reputation among colleagues for his clean shaves and bespoke suits. The warder waved the lawyer in, all smiles and niceties, and suspiciously keen to converse. Once a second warder turned up abruptly to announce the name of the client in D2, everything changed. The first warder slipped into jitters; his eyes became reddened, his face contouring into a frown. "You cannot sit there," he said as the lawyer attempted to settle into a seat. "Come this way; remove your glasses; we need to thoroughly search you."

N10,000 Is the Cost of Deleting Your Details from the Prison's Records

Until I was called to come receive my visitors, I made my every second in Block D count. Even before reaching the block, I knew I was on borrowed time. I was certain that it was only a matter of hours before I would have to reveal my true identity. So, in between registration, feeding and dispatch to D2, I mixed with inmates as often as I could. On one of those occasions, I overheard three inmates discuss a birthday celebration by a 'Yahoo boy' — Nigerian lingo for internet fraudster — in prison the previous week. "It was 'lit'," one of them said. A second, obviously the shortest-serving inmate of the trio, asked how some of the birthday items were smuggled in. "It's the warders," the third answered. "With N5,000 and above, most warders will help you smuggle anything you need into the yard."

Elsewhere, I'd also run into a group of four inmates fielding questions from an inmate who was worried about the implications of his conviction. I was interested in it, knowing the consequences are long-lasting. Section 107(1)(d) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) states explicitly that no person shall be qualified for election to a House of Assembly if "within a period of less than ten years before the date of an election to the House of Assembly, he has been convicted and sentenced for an offence involving dishonesty or he has been found guilty of a contravention of the Code of Conduct". A similar provision in Section 137 (1)(e) makes it clear that a person shall not be qualified for election to the office of President if "within a period of less than ten years before the date of the election to the office of President he has been convicted and sentenced for an offence involving dishonesty or he has been found guilty of the contravention of the Code of Conduct".

"What's your business with that?" one of the inmates fires, irritated. "We will delete your name from the records. There will be no trace of you. Nobody will have any evidence that you ever came here, so forget whatever the implication is. My brother's friend did it before and it cost him only N10,000. I'll link you to the warder who did for him; he will help you too, but that will only be after you have regained your freedom."

Sodomy, Booze, Sex and Drugs… As Long as You Have Your Money

While in prison, I'd exchanged contacts with an awaiting-trial inmate who had promised to reach out once he regained freedom. True to his words, he called on the day he exited Ikoyi Prison. Weeks after, I drove about 340km out of Lagos to meet up with him.

"I saw how you were beaten up in prison and I didn't want you to suffer in vain," he says as we exchanged handshakes, each sizing the other up for elements of trust. "I'm going to help you by giving you additional information to what you already have. But this will be a very brief meeting, and this will be the only time ever you'd see me. That's the best way for me to stay alive, because I know these bad guys will come after me if they trace any information to me."

He explains that the special accommodation mentioned by the prison warders in court, which I was shielded from seeing, is called 'Nicon Luxury'. It's an apartment where inmates pay between N20,000 and N50,000 for a night's sleep, plus access to cigarettes, drinks, Indian hemp, drugs and girls.

"The apartment has air conditioners, good couches and mattresses; meanwhile, 118 inmates are packed like sardines into one room that should normally hold 30 inmates. Those at Nicon are not only political prisoners or people of influence; just people who have the money."

He describes the unfair world that the prison is, with only the poor truly imprisoned while the rich live fine.

"There is a lot of impunity in the prison," he says. "An inmate, so long he is rich,

can have almost everything, even sex. Inmates sleep with prostitutes. If you want to have sex, just tell the warders. They will bring a girl to the Nicon Luxury for you, set the two of you up; you f**k, you pay. It's that easy," he reveals.

"There is free flow of drugs in prison, which is impossible without the facilitation or compromise of warders. You'll find Colorado [a hard drug] in huge sale; I took it myself. I paid just N5,000 each time I wanted it. Tramadol and refnol are sold, too, but Colorado is the highest in demand.

"Look at Vaseline, it is a very scarce commodity in prison but it is available at expensive rates for use in sodomy. At Ikoyi Prison, the powerful inmates sodomise the others, and it happens right under the nose of prison authorities. They know that these things happen. But, you see, the warders are the problem — because inmates do not have access to the outside world, and those coming from outside are screened from head to toe. Therefore, nothing can enter the prison without the knowledge of warders."

Nothing Like Reformation or Correction in Prison

Despite the signing of the Nigerian Correctional Service Act 2019 into law by President Muhammadu Buhari, to reflect the new thrust of inmate reformation and correction, Nurudeen Yusuf, a Lagos-based legal practitioner and human rights activist, says any prison reforms that doesn't kick off with warders is an "absolute waste of time".

"With the sex, sodomy and abuse of drugs at Ikoyi and other prisons, there can be no reformation in the prison system. Under the law, inmates only have a right to one stick of cigarette a day, but look at the sheer availability of drugs to them," he says.

"For instance, we got a guy out of Ikoyi Prison through our advocacy programme; we paid his bail sum of N100,000. We were shocked that he was desperate to go back. In less than three weeks, he got himself sent to prison — because of the big life he enjoyed there.

"The prison world is like an animal world. Inmates who have access to drugs, money and gadgets use that power to oppress the others. You see prisoners who have access to phones, they can extort outsiders right from inside the prison. Many prisoners convicted for fraud and murder are rich, and they live a big man's life in there. Prisoners make cash transfers from their accounts while in prison.

"While in prison, inmates are supposed to learn new hands-on skills with which they can earn legitimate income after serving their time. But many of the workshop centres are not functioning, even in Kirikiri Maximum prisons; no materials, no resources to work with."

Yusuf says he has had clients who were sodomised at Ikoyi Prison but the warders turned a blind eye because the victims were suspected Boko Haram members. "These people are innocent until proven guilty in court," he noted. "Therefore, sodomising them is criminal; and this happens at almost every prison in the country."

Possible. A 31-page piece titled 'Sodomy of Children in Maiduguri Prison and The ICRC Conspiracy of Silence', released by imprisoned-for-life Independence Day bomber Charles Okah in March, details child prostitution, sodomy, abortions and even outright murder at the Maiduguri Maximum Security Prison, Borno State. Then Governor of Borno State, Kashim Shettima, subsequently set up a panel to investigate Okah's claims, but its work was frustrated by Ja'afaru Ahmed, the Controller-General of the Nigerian Prisons Service and Sanusi Mu'azu Danmusa, the Maiduguri State Controller.

'Set The Prisoners Free, Jail the Warders'

Prisons in Nigeria exist to "take into lawful custody all those certified to be so kept by courts of competent jurisdiction, produce suspects in courts as and when due, identify the causes of their anti-social dispositions, set in motion mechanisms for their treatment and training for eventual reintegration into society as normal law-abiding citizens on discharge, and administer Prisons Farms and Industries for this purpose and in the process generate revenue for the government".

The NPS continues to fulfill all these basic functions, bar two — identify the causes of misbehaviour, and kick off treatment and reintegration to society. Incidentally, these two are the most important of the lot.

Yusuf worries that prison sentence is turning a catalyst for more crime rather than the deterrence it was intended to be. "The implication is that inmates have no remorse over the offence for which they have been convicted," he says. "They are willing to commit more crimes. They have just become terrors unto the society, either in prison or out of it. If you have money, you can live the life of a governor while in prison. The only difference is that you don't have freedom to go out of the prison."

My ex-inmate-friend sums it up more chillingly. "I was convicted for fraud but I left the prison knowing I was a better human that many of those warders," he tells me. "You see those warders, they're the ones who should be in jail. They're far more fraudulent than I was. Their freedom should be in my hands, not mine in theirs!"

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A Reporter's Diary — Living with a 'Mad' Cell Mate, Set up by Prison Warders, Abducted by the Police (III)

By 'Fisayo Soyombo

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The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.thecable.ng/undercover-investigation-iii-a-reporters-diary-living-with-a-mad-cell-mate-set-up-by-prison-warders-abducted-by-the-police

In the third and final installation of the series, 'Fisayo Soyombo documents the soft side of his time in police cell and prison, and how prisons, police and court officials conspired to abduct him after his cover was blown.

I hadn't yet spent a full day at Pedro Police Station, Shomolu, Lagos, when I asked myself the question: "Who sent me?" But it was nothing new; I knew I would ask myself that question at some point during this investigation, and I knew too that it wouldn't make me call it off. If you asked any hardcore investigative journalist, they would say the same of almost every daredevil story they have covered.

As I lay in that warm cell in the wee small hours of Tuesday July 9, it dawned on me that surviving the days ahead would require more than brawn. Five of us 'suspects' had crammed ourselves into that narrow, filthy cell, all wanting to get our bodies on that small mat but none fully succeeding. So, intermittently, one suspect pushed or snuggled into the other. The four of them were in deep sleep but I lay there wide awake. How could I sleep? To my immediate left was Uchenna, whose snores could dwarf the grunt of an elephant; and on my other side Austin, coughing so laboriously as though his heart was about to be flung out through his mouth, and in a manner predisposing cell mates to air-borne infections. The air was reeking of alcohol, too. Back in the evening, one suspect had tipped a policewoman to help him buy two sachets of gin that he didn't down until just before midnight. I looked at the cell gate again and it was firmly padlocked. There was no escaping; this would be my home for a few more days.

My Cell Mate 'Runs Mad'

Two of the next three days proved tumultuous, even for the police officers.

It started over the night between Wednesday and Thursday, at about 1am. Three of us were in the entire cell, but only Uchenna and I shared the inner cell. Suddenly, he hit me in my deep sleep and asked me to look at a hole in one of the walls of the cell. "There's an eagle in that place," he howled, spilling a sachet of water in that direction. "Can you see it? That's the eagle!"

It marked the onset of a two-day turbulence in the cell. Uchenna sprang up and began sprinkling water in all three rooms of the cell, casting and binding, shouting and crying out prayers. "Jesus is here, Jesus is here," he screamed at a time. "Leave this place, you demon! No space for you here. I am no longer with you. I'm a new man now. Jesus is here!"

Uchenna went on somewhat schizophrenically for the next six to seven hours, punctuated only once by the arrival of Sunday and Japheth in the cell. The police officers ignored him altogether, but we, the suspects, were worried; we weren't sure if he had run mad or if he was pretending, to force an unlikely release. By Thursday, it had become so unbearable the officers had to handcuff his left hand to the gate of an inner cell. It was a big shock to find out he had disentangled himself in a matter of minutes. He was re-cuffed but he again freed himself; this time, I caught him. He had signaled to Japheth to help him fetch a sachet of water; with this, he greased his hand and the handcuff, and boom, he was free again.

This time, the officers removed him from the cell gate and chained him in the inner cell proper, alongside his helper Japheth who was first blessed with a few smacks. Still, it didn't deter Uchenna; it emboldened him to tacitly pray for the death of the officers, over the night.

"Kill them all. Fire, burn you. In the name of Jesus. Fire, fire, fire, fire, fire, fireeeeeeeeeeee," he yelled at one time. "Jesus is here. I need the fire from heaven, the fire from heaven, the fire from heaven. Jesus, release it on me now. You did not disappoint Elisha, Elijah… I need your fire now to quench and destroy all the people tormenting me. Die in the name of Jesus! You die! Dieeeeeeeee!!!"

Japheth, on the other hand, was having a torrid time. The inner cell in which they were caged was mosquito-infested, due in part to the volume of water Uchenna had moistened it with. Even when he wasn't caged, I'd furtively observed how Japheth frequently scratched his crotch region with great discomfort, sometimes even peeping into his dingy briefs to catch a glimpse of what was going on down there. Now in that inner cell, it worsened. "My body is rotting," he screamed in a manner that broke my heart. "Please help me, please!"

His pleas were loud, persistent and touching. "Help me out!!!" he would say. 'Who is there to help me out? My body is rotting. Help me out! Help me out!!!"

Even though he had rebuffed my repeated warnings not to pass water on to Uchenna, I felt pity for him. I would later crawl over to the cell to hand him an anti-mosquito cream smuggled to me earlier in the day. It helped a bit but didn't entirely solve the problem.

It was such a relief to be taken out of the cell to the court on Friday morning and to Ikoyi Prison in the evening. When 46 new inmates, I think, arrived at the prison on Monday evening, I was stunned to spot Uchenna's sparkling white teeth shining through from the crowd. He had become markedly lean and his laughter this time was shallow. How he got to prison, I still don't know.

The Sniper Challenge Is Real

How many times have we read in the papers and on social media how someone committed suicide by gulping a bottle of the lethal insecticide, Sniper? It now appears many successful suicide attempts escape media notice. On Friday, while taking in some fresh air at the IPO's office in anticipation of transfer to the court, a young man sped into the police station with a little note in his hand. He pleaded for a police report. His friend, an artisan in his late 20s whose wife had just been delivered of a second baby, had made an attempt on his own life, leaving a suicide note revealing his encounter with a diviner during which his struggles in life had been linked to a family curse. He wrote that he was leaving to escape the curse. Life hadn't been completely snuffed out of him when he was found, but the hospital to which he was rushed demanded a police report to complement treatment. The guy who rushed in for the report owned the shop where the suicide mission was surreptitiously executed. I could sense from his eyes he thought he would be held liable should his friend pass on.

Having obliged, the Police were shocked to see him again within 30 minutes of his exit. Well, the man died. His family, summoned, started arriving one after the other. "He's a very foolish boy," one of them, an uncle, said. "You have a wife; you have a baby; God just blessed you with another. You may not be making millions but you're not begging or stealing to feed your family. Then you take your own life? He was extremely stupid!"

After leaving the prison a week later, I scoured the papers for this story. To my surprise, it didn't make it.

Congested Prison Cells

I was less than an hour old in prison when I discovered stories of cell congestion were not made up. Sixteen of us, I think, were taken in that Thursday. As is the practice with fresh inmates, we slept in the welcome cell. The cell always had its own base members, the number usually hovering between 10 and 15. The tradition was that stale inmates slept 'comfortably'; they didn't have to shrink their bodies into narrow spaces, even though they slept on bare floor with or without blankets and bed sheets. Only the four most senior inmates slept on bunks bearing threadbare mattresses. After the stale inmates had marked their territory in the room, estimated to about 20 by 16 metres in size, the rest of us were arranged like logs of wood on a trailer. None of us slept face down or face up; we all slept on our sides, one's head positioned in north-south fashion, the other's positioned south-north. If an inmate turned sideways, the next complained. Therefore, from time to time, the Section barked out orders resolving arguments from such tussles.

Little did we know we were lucky. The 45 inmates who arrived five days later had no such luck; they sat down all through the night! With the total number of inmates that night trumping 60, there was no chance for sleep. Instead, they were arranged in long rows in which an inmate sat in between the legs of the one behind him, and opened up his own legs for the one in his front to sit. As I would later discover, more than 3000 inmates inhabited a prison built for 800; of a higher consequence, the number of awaiting-trial inmates usually hovered beneath or just over 2,500, proving the slow dispensation of justice is a major contributor to prison congestion.

Sunkanmi Ijadunola… From Beater to Patroniser

Over the course of my seven days in prison, it was, quite simply, too easy for me to separate the corrupt warders, who were in the majority, from the clean ones. The corrupt ones were usually pensive and jittery whenever they came in contact with me, and they were the ones who were most vicious during the initial attempt to unravel my identity. I could see the apprehension in the eyes of two of those filmed demanding and receiving bribes from me in court. The corrupt ones in the prison yard who didn't appear in the videos were nevertheless furious, knowing it could have been them as well. The blameless ones wanted to know my mission quite alright, but they were calm and civil with me. No violence; their strategy was to engage with me and look out for any loopholes in my answers. Fair enough.

Assistant Chief Sunkanmi Ijadunola, for example, the word in prison was that he was one of the numerous warders for sale. And, boy, was he vicious with the cane and, latterly, the stick! If he was the only warder on duty, he would surely have beaten me to death! No question. I remember he flogged me from his office to the records office and back to another office just by the prison gate, where an apparently senior warder appealed to him to stop the beating and remove my handcuff. Rather than accede to that request, Sunkanmi claimed the key to the handcuff was in his office. With his hands and that cane, he continued the beating until we were back in his office; and in his office, he fetched the stick once again and continued hitting the joints of my legs, elbows and shoulders. And in all that period, my two hands were still handcuffed to my back. By the time he belatedly lifted the handcuff, he and some warders had trumped up some allegations against me and had succeeded in making some inmates believe I'd come to film them and expose them to the world. They had also alleged that I was plotting a jailbreak. I had a gang, they said, and I'd come to study the prison's security architecture, film it surreptitiously and send it to my gang so we could finally return to set inmates free. Even while the beating was going on, I found those claims so hilarious my inner laughter knew no bounds.

All this was on Saturday morning. By evening when I finally revealed I was a journalist, I was stunned to see Sunkanmi transform from a ruthless beater to a barefaced patroniser. First, he asked if I would eat. He offered to buy the food but I knew it would be too dangerous to eat. With the offer of food rejected, he bought me a stone-cold bottle of Pepsi. When it arrived, I checked the seal very painstakingly to be sure it hadn't been previously opened. I drank it, knowing I could continue to endanger my life if I flatly refused every offer. In the six days that followed, Sunkanmi would buy me Pepsi on two more occasions. The arrogant man that he is, he just couldn't bring himself to verbally apologise for his actions even though at least three other warders who didn't lay a finger on me had profusely apologized for his indiscretion in taking the law into his hands. For Sunkanmi himself, the Pepsi was his way of saying 'sorry'.

Mocked by Inmates

Other inmates were still locked in their cells when Sunkanmi sent the Section of the welcome cell to fetch me. But at about the time he was completing the first round of beating, the convicted inmates were needed for a task. While they trooped out in their blue uniforms, I noticed from afar how they giggled and pointed fingers at me. I was sprawling on the ground with my hands chained back, but I looked at them eyeball to eyeball and listened to their snide remarks.

"I thought he was gay," one of them said. "I heard he came here to record the prisoners and expose them to the public," remarked another. Some said nothing but cast nasty glances at me and made funny gestures.

Still, I looked straight at them. I was full of pity for them, in fact. I knew I had committed no crime in practice, something not many of them could boast of. In the eye of the law, they were convicts, some left with many months to serve, others even years. They were stuck in there in the long term; I wasn't. What irony that prisoners, convicted prisoners, were mocking a fresh inmate who would be granted bail and released in a matter of days!

But it wasn't all gloom. One convict and an awaiting-trial inmate showed me compassion. "Bros, there's a lot of sun here. Why not shift towards that side," the convict told me as he swept the expansive ground. It was soothing in that moment, so I asked him for his freedom date, phone number and where I could find him afterwards. That day is faraway but when it comes I'll find him. And I'll hopefully be friends with him. The awaiting trial-inmate is now free; you already read about him in the preceding series.

'House Arrest' in Prison

Once the time came for me to admit I was a journalist, the warders huddled together to discuss their next line of action. I was isolated, like a bacterium from a colony, when I heard Sunkanmi scream from afar: 'Hey, squat down there!" That bark, quite frankly, sums up the master-slave relationship that largely defines the handling of inmates, even awaiting-trial inmates, by warders. No inmate in his right senses, even if not yet declared guilty by the court, will approach a warder for a conversation sitting or standing. He first has to "squat down"! It's the unwritten rule.

The warders' deliberation soon morphed into a full-fledged meeting. One after the other, they filed into a room, but the meeting had barely taken off when the Comptroller of Prisons, Lagos Command, phoned in. "What is going on at Ikoyi Prison?" I would later learn he had asked. He had received a call from Abuja — the offshoot of my support team's activation of the Plan B reserved for the unlikely event that my cover was blown. Shocked that the matter had reached Abuja in a little over an hour, the warders started to become friendly and courteous, almost obsequious, with me. Sunkanmi withdrew his squat-down order, asked me to sit in his office, asked if I wanted to eat (which I politely declined) and sent an inmate to fetch me a bottle of Pepsi. "Fisayo the big man!" he would later exclaim.

In the evening, after their apprehension had subsided, I was plucked from Cell D2 to the welcome cell. Their plan was to restrict me to that cell, and they were very strategic about it. Sunday morning, a warder whose name tag included 'Ishiguzo' was my first guest. I hadn't even had a bath or brushed my teeth when he arrived. Ishiguzo engaged me for well over an hour — on issues ranging from politics to governance, love life, humanity and sex. No sooner had he left than Sunkanmi arrived. He stayed close to an hour. I jumped into the bathroom after his exit but before I was done, a third warder, Timmy, had asked after me. It wasn't long before the strategy was laid bare before me: I was under house arrest by style. The plan was to take turns in engaging me, to such extent I couldn't leave the cell without wondering who was already waiting for me. Still, I occasionally managed to wriggle my way out of the human cul-de-sac.

Communication by Style

My first days in the welcome cell were hellish. No inmate wanted to talk to me or come near me. At night or during the day when no warder was visiting, I lay alone in a corner. But when I did, it was with my eyes open; I wasn't sure no inmate was considering attacking me. I didn't blame them; a few warders had made them believe I was in prison to record them and circulate their photos and videos online. Of course that was false.

Soon, a lifeline presented itself. I noticed during Ishiguzo's first visit how all the inmates listened in as we engaged. It became clear it was my clearest chance of explaining my mission to the inmates. From then on, whenever a warder showed up, I made sure not to always hand over the initiative to them. As the talks progressed, I always found a way to redirect them to my reason for coming to prison. On an

occasion, I told them the real-life story of an acquaintance whose father died of heart attack, due to delay in the availability of an ambulance and the pot-hole ridden road leading to their estate in Ogba, Lagos. This was a stupendously rich man who carved out heaven for his family in that estate, but he was ultimately failed by his state. "No one — rich or poor, mighty or miniature — is immune from the consequences of a malfunctioning society," I chipped in. "It's the reason I'm here. If the criminal justice system works effectively, everyone — policemen, lawyers, warders, even inmates — benefits. If it doesn't, we all lose someway — because we're all in this vicious cycle together. The only problem is that rather than enthrone a society that works for all, too many want a society that works for them — at the expense of everyone else."

After hearing that, one warder gave me a long, unusually emotive look, then nodded in affirmation. "You are right," he said. This warder — I won't name him — was once a victim. He narrated the experience. One of his children arrived at birth several weeks premature, requiring mother and daughter to spend extensive time at a hospital. He visited every day, before and after work. He soon noticed how quickly the baby ran out of drugs he paid for through his nose, how drugs that should last three days were gone in just over one. He observed the hospital keenly and spotted a disturbing trend: the hospital was redistributing the drugs bought by some patients, among those who couldn't afford them! This warder was distraught; he told me he felt cheated. I apologized to him for the unpleasant experience, though this didn't colour my knowledge of his aversion to my mission in the prison.

So I asked him a question: "If I'd undergone an undercover visit to that hospital to expose the disguised robbery of some patients to treat others, would you have been unhappy with me, as you are now?"

He went silent, but his eyes were latent with penitence. He didn't have to say it; I new I had just won a convert.

The Thoroughbred Prison Warders

On Sunday evening, some 24 hours after my cover was blown, I was summoned to the building housing some offices, including those of the Assistant Chief and the Chief. I was taken into an office I'd never really taken notice of, welcomed by a burly but innocuous-looking man, dark in complexion and spotting a noticeable belly. A warder I was seeing for the first time instructed me to hold the recording devices found on me. He held a regular camera opposite me, wanting to take pictures. I quickly posed for the pictures so we could get down to business.

The dark man introduced himself as "Mr. John, sent from Abuja to Lagos with taxpayers' funds" to investigate my matter.

"I'm sorry for disrupting your Sunday," I said. "You probably should be resting or relaxing with your family."

"Not a problem," he answered with the kind of courtesy atypical of many of the warders I'd come across in prison in those three days.

He asked to hear my side of events. It was unarguably the longest single conversation I had with anyone in prison. I explained my interest in the criminal justice system and the justifications for my undercover method. "I wanted to experience what the regular guy gets to taste in police cell, in court, in prison," I told him. "You're never going to get this by talking to people; you have to taste it. And if the system is itself clean, no warder should lose sleep over my presence." I told him some of my findings in undercover work, generally; I particularly recall saying how much it "grieves my heart" and "burns my skin" the extent to which Nigerians are short-changing their country for personal pecuniary reasons. "We'll ruin this country someday if we continue this way," I submitted. "We'll bring it crashing to earth in a few decades."

John proved himself a rare breed, a cut above all other warders I encountered. I noticed how he listened to me carefully, urged me to take my time, asked not to be distracted when some warders thought we were taking too long, asked his questions politely, and repeatedly asked for a description of the warder who spearheaded the beating and the others who witnessed it. He also asked to know the officers in the bribery video seized from me. "I apologise for the beating," he said at some point. "That was an exception; not the norm. It is not in the character of the prisons service to take the law into its hands."

We discussed a few other things I'll keep confidential — because he won my respect. Not to say he was perfect. Although he repeatedly said he was from Abuja, lodged in Lagos on taxpayers' account, I found out John was actually based in Lagos; he is the spokesman of the Prison Controller in charge of Lagos. Still, he retains my respect with his calmness and professionalism.

What Nigerians Can Learn from Prisoners

I witnessed a few interesting developments in prison, the most significant being the impressive levels of tolerance level in the welcome cell. At the welcome cell, everyone made way on the floor at or about 4:45am for Muslims to observe their call to worship and the prayer proper. Just before 5:30am, the Muslim leader would begin winding down the prayers "so that our Christian brothers can take over". Whenever the Muslims prayed, no one dared murmur, much less talk. And it was the same during the Christians' praise and worship, sermon and prayers. If Nigerians generally had this level of tolerance for people of divergent faiths and ethnicities, our peace and unity would be impregnable and boundless.

Shadily Released from Prison, Abducted by Police

My release from prison was complicated. The prison officials at Ikoyi desperately wanted my bail to sail through; the more I stayed, they reasoned, the higher the chances I could implicate them. But the ones in court, specifically the corrupt ones I filmed, preferred that I rot in jail. The latter group would then work closely with officials at the Magistrate Court, Yaba, to keep me back in prison. Therefore, what would have been a simple granting of bail was repeatedly frustrated. The court wouldn't grant me bail after conditions had been met — until the intervention of senior judicial officers on Friday July 19. The court then granted me bail but a sinister plot was hatched.

Some court officials, collaborating with prison warders in court, alerted the Police to my release date and time. They only contacted my legal team hours after they'd notified the prison of my impending exit. Then the prison itself fast-tracked my release; the strategy was for me to be out of prison before the arrival of my people. And it worked. I stepped out of prison and had barely walked 50 metres when three gun-wielding policemen swooped on me, truncating my delirium at finally tasting freedom after eight dramatic days in prison that indeed seemed like eight weeks. One corked his gun while the other two hooked me by the waist. I was still figuring out the confusion when two plain-clothed officers stepped forward from the rear, bearing a handcuff. I knew them. Crime Officer Badmus and Inspector Obadiah from Pedro Police Station. I slid my hands into the handcuff and watched Badmus pay off the Ikoyi prison policemen. He made for the same rickety bus with which we went to court the previous week, while Obadiah frisked me and bundled me in. My lips were static but I started to pray in my spirit.

What are they going to do to me? Kill me extra-judicially? Rope me into an existing crime in another police station? I was still drunk in thoughts when Badmus interrupted me with an instruction to Obadiah: "Search him very well to confirm he doesn't have a phone on him." It was then I knew I was in big, big trouble. Why the desperation to ensure I can't reach anyone? This was a little before or after 5pm.

Miraculous Release

The sun was starting to set when we arrived at Pedro, where my repeated pleas to contact my lawyer were rebuffed. "If you have a phone on you, bring it out and call your lawyer," Obadiah said, knowing I didn't have one. "It is not our work to give you a phone to make phone calls."

There were multiple signs that the decision was to commit me to cell that night. However, some 23 minutes before midnight, their hands were forced. I stepped out of the station in the most unpredictable of circumstances. What happened between my arrival at the station and my enforced release at about 11:37pm is only the stuff of movies. I'd watched similar plots unfurl in movies, without the knowledge it was possible in real life. It is an experience that cannot be sufficiently captured in journalese. You will read those details in a book — if I get the right backing and if I'm alive to tell it — but, until then, spare some thoughts — and prayers — for Nigeria. If I were a judge I would pronounce Nigeria's criminal justice system 'guilty as charged', knowing, from this experience, that majority of its actors and gatekeepers are deserving of various lengthy times behind bars.

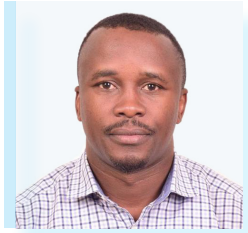
The investigation was published with collaborative support from Cable Newspaper Journalism Foundation and the International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR).

THIRD PRIZE WINNER

Sucked Dry: Huge Swaths of Land Acquired by Foreign Investors in Africa's Nile River Basin Export Profits, Displace Communities

Fredrick Mugira, Annika Mcginnis, Jacopo Ottaviani, Geoffrey Kamadi, Nada Arafat, Saker El Nour, Ayele Addis Ambelu, Paul Jimbo, David Mono Danga, Tricia Govindasamy, Chrispine Odhiambo, Sakina Salem, Emma Kisa

(Uganda/ Kenya/ Egypt/ Ethiopia/ South Sudan)



Fredrick Mugira (Uganda) is an award-winning water and climate change journalist and development communication specialist. He is the director and founder of Water Journalists Africa, a non-profit media group that brings together over 700 journalists in 50 African countries to report on water-related issues. He is also co-founder of InfoNile, a GeoJournalism project that maps data on water issues in the Nile River basin and overlays them with journalism stories to promote transboundary peace. In addition, Fredrick works as an editor with Uganda's leading multimedia house, Vision Group. A National Geographic Storytelling explorer and a Pulitzer Center Grantee, Fredrick has reported from various countries in Africa, Europe and Asia and the US. Among his accolades are the prestigious CNN/Multichoice African Journalist award and the UN Development Journalism Award.

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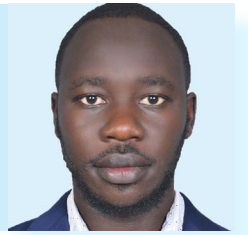

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Saker El Nour is a freelance researcher and journalist who has more than 15 years' experience in study, policy analysis, advocacy, and teaching about rural development, environment, and agricultural issues in the Arab world. In 2013 he was awarded a Ph.D. in sociology from Paris - Nanterre University. Between 2009 and 2019, he conducted fieldwork in Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Sudan, and Tunisia. He published for both academic and general audiences in French as well as in English and Arabic. In 2017 he published his first book, Land, peasant, and investor: A study on the agrarian and peasantry questions in Egypt, Dar El-Maraya, Cairo. And he co-authored a book, Mrahrah Bread: Political Economy of Food Sovereignty in Egypt (Dar Safsafa, Cairo). Over the past five years, he has concentrated on reporting rural water, agricultural, and food issues at the independent media, including Mada Masr, Al-Manasa, and Jadaliyya.

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Geoffrey Kamadi is an award-winning freelance journalist based in Nairobi, Kenya. He specializes in science and environment reporting.

Sakina Salem is a Tanzanian graphic and data visualisation designer at Code For Africa. She is always keen to present data in a form that would be most compelling to a reader including motion graphics and interactive design. This is the first time Sakina has been part of presenting an investigative report of such a scale and she looks forward to creating more.

Chrispine Ouma Odhiambo is a visual designer based in Nairobi, Kenya, experienced in Data Visualisation, UX/UI design as well as Motion graphics. Ouma is passionate about using design thinking to solve complex problems.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The Third Prize was won by a team of reporters from Uganda, Kenya, Egypt, Ethiopia and South Sudan who carried out a year-long data journalism investigation of large-scale foreign land deals in the Nile River basin.

Their report - *Sucked Dry: Huge Swaths of Land Acquired by Foreign Investors in Africa's Nile River Basin Export Profits, Displace Communities* – is a masterpiece of data journalism, analyzing the impact of land grabs by foreign speculators on the people of 11 countries in the Nile River basin.

They discovered that foreign investors are acquiring huge swaths of land, draining enormous amounts of water, displacing communities, and exporting profits.

From Egypt to Ethiopia, South Sudan to Uganda, Kenya and beyond, the team carried out cross-border journalistic investigations, generating in-depth multimedia story packages, incorporating scientific research, data visualizations, video and photography on land use issues in their communities. In all, 12 stories were produced, all of them based on expert testimony and stylishly set out with data visualizations and maps. This work is an example of how modern communications technology in the hands of journalists with public purpose can produce excellence in reporting.

Sucked Dry: Huge Swaths of Land Acquired by Foreign Investors in Africa's Nile River Basin Export Profits, Displace Communities

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Alice Nyamihanda was only a toddler beginning to walk and talk when she was forced away from her home. At just three years old, the child was evicted from the land where she, her family and her people had lived for centuries.

To the Ugandan public and the international community, this was an act of environmental conservation of some of East Africa's most biodiverse natural forests that host half the population of the world's remaining mountain gorillas.

But to the Batwa pygmies, a forest-dwelling group of hunter-gatherers who are accepted as the first inhabitants of these montane forests, the act turned the peaceful tribe into so-called environmental refugees.

Alice's family of five and hundreds of other Batwa pygmies, a forest-dwelling group of hunter-gatherers, were evicted from their ancestral forestland in Mgahinga, Bwindi and Echuya in southwestern Uganda by the government of Uganda with no compensation when it turned the forests into conservation areas in 1991.

Since then, life has not been easy for her. Her father died in 1996. Her mother, a single parent, struggled to raise her and four other siblings. In order to survive, Alice's mother had to offer hard labor for a number of years in exchange for a small piece of land where the family is staying now in Gatera village, Busanja Sub County in Kisoro, just on the border of Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Unlike many others in her situation, Alice has been lucky: At 31, Alice is now pursuing a bachelor's degree in social works and administration after completing a diploma in 2010. "If God wishes, I will graduate next year," Alice says, hoping to use the skills gained to advocate for land rights of her landless tribemates.

"Up to 10.3 million hectares of land have been acquired by investors in 11 countries that form the countries of Africa's Nile River basin since 2000."

Angela Harding, data coordinator at Land Matrix Africa

The Land Matrix is an independent global land monitoring initiative that compiles data on land grabs from governments, companies, NGOs, the media and citizen contributions. These are, "just concluded deals," says Angela, and there are many other land deals underway.

The Nile River basin covers an area of 3.18 million square kilometers, almost 10 percent of the African continent, and includes 11 countries from the river's source in Uganda up to Egypt. For the diverse peoples that live and sustain upon the Nile, the mighty life-bearing river is not only a source of livelihood, but also a cultural icon that flows with thousands of years of history, beliefs and tradition in its waters.

But in recent decades, the ancient river has been drastically manipulated as the world undergoes rapid change. Dozens of new dams have calmed millennia-old rapids and diverted the river's natural flow. Worldwide land, water and other resource shortages, along with a globalizing economy, climate change and rapidly increasing populations, have driven countries everywhere from the Global North to the Gulf countries to search out new lands – to feed their populations, offset their carbon emissions, or simply search for new economic opportunities as the world moves toward a potential global recession.

Land Matrix data shows that 16.9 million hectares of land, or 169,000 square kilometers, from 445 individual deals have been concluded in the 11 Nile Basin countries, though some of these are outside of the river basin's borders. There are 6.1 hectares of deals still in negotiations. Most are in agriculture, with others in forestry, renewable energy, and mining. *Land Transaction Deals in Nile Basin Countries (Data visualization)*

In the Nile basin, for every land deal, at least someone in local communities suffers. From Uganda to South Sudan, Sudan, Ethiopia and eventually Egypt, the Nile meanders through an intricate patchwork of landscapes: flat, ragged, mountainous, green and fertile, desert. The region attracts a huge number of investors each year from within and outside the region. Many of these investors remain congested close to the Nile.

Companies from countries across the world have acquired fertile Nile-irrigated land for growing food crops, non-food agricultural commodities such as alfalfa, flowers, tobacco, and biofuels, rearing livestock and logging trees. Investor countries include Austria, Belgium, Brazil, China, Ethiopia, India, Israel, Norway, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the UK, and the USA, among many others.

Although there are a few new land acquisitions being signed now – 68 are still in negotiations - others are being abandoned in countries such as Ethiopia, and now "more of the older deals are being brought under implementation," according to Harding, the Land Matrix data coordinator.

Generally, most deals are agricultural leases and forest concessions, and very few are outright purchases. Data from the Land Matrix initiative shows South Sudan as the target of land grabbing in the basin.

It is a story told again and again. Though some deals have brought positive benefits to local economies and peoples – with models worth replicating – in most cases, it is the people in the investor countries oceans away from the Nile that reap the vast majority of the profits, while the host countries are exploited of valuable resources and the local people suffer. Their stories, of livelihoods lost, cultural icons destroyed, families torn apart – all in the name of globalization – are rarely told, or little valued.

Flowers That Dislodge People

As Ethiopia's floral industry blossoms, 3000 people are displaced annually in the country by flower growing investors.

In Ethiopia, large fields of blooming flowers colorfully mask the memories of the thousands of people who used to live and work upon these lands. Now, most of these people are living in nearby towns and cities, struggling to survive in low-paid jobs without access to the lands that had sustained them for thousands of years.

Ethiopia is the second largest flower exporter in Africa after Kenya, shipping flowers to the Middle East, France, Germany, Canada, Sweden, UK, and the Netherlands among other countries. Data from Ethiopian Horticulture Producer Exporters Association indicates that Ethiopia earned 271 million U.S. dollars from the sale of flowers and other horticulture products in 2018.

Flower selling is anticipated to bring half a billion dollars to the Ethiopian economy by 2025, according to the country's second national Growth and Transformation Plan that aims to bring Ethiopia to lower-middle income country status by 2025. *Ethiopia Horticulture Targets (Data visualization)*

But as Ethiopia's floral industry blossoms, three thousand people are displaced annually in the country by flower growing investors, according to the Amhara National Regional State Disaster Prevention and Food Security Program Coordination Office. The foreign horticulture investors are accused of failing to help local communities live decent lives.

"They took large tracts of land and resources in the name of development which we haven't seen."

Solomon Worku, a Nile Water for Nile People Initiative activist

Hiwote Yazie, 27, a resident of Zenezelma Village, close to Bahir Dar city, in Amhara region said that his community members have been reduced to "immigrants on the land that once belonged to our ancestors." She said her community did not only lose land but also water bodies. "We have natural water but we never drink it. Investors took it," Yazie said.

The Land Matrix has documented about 1.4 million hectares of land acquired in Ethiopia in recent decades. 120 deals have been concluded across the country, with 15 deals under negotiation, which would take up another 0.5 million hectares if concluded. *Land Deals in Ethiopia (Data visualization)*

Two thirds of the acquired land in the country was allocated to international investors. Indian companies have acquired the most and largest swaths of land, especially biofuels production and large-scale agriculture, including flower farms. Companies from Saudi Arabia, USA, Italy, Malaysia, China, Austria, Israel, Turkey, Canada and Singapore are also big investors. *Foreign and Local Investors (Data visualization)*

Up to 10 of the largest horticulture investments in Ethiopia are located close to Lake Tana and the Blue Nile, covering 1,200 hectares on the Tana lakeside and another 2,000 hectares on the Blue Nile riverside, according to data from the Ethiopian Horticulture Producers and Exporters Association. The companies include Giovanni Alfano Farm, Condor Farms PLC, Fontana Horticulture PLC, Pina Flowers PLC, Arini Flowers PLC, Solo Agro Tech PLC, Tal Flowers PLC, and Joy Techfresh PLC, among others.

These companies target fertile soils and water of river Nile and Lake Tana. Asrat Tsehay, the head of the Ethiopian Blue Nile River Basin Authority, says roses consume more water than people in the region. They "consume an average of seven liters of water per stem per week" compared to "five liters of water each person uses per week," he said.

Production of flowers in this region requires around "20,000 Olympic swimming pools full of water each year," according to Meselech Zelalem, a water scientist with Amhara National Regional State Water, Irrigation and Energy Development Bureau. This is water from Lake Tana and Blue Nile River.

Flower farms in this region have also been accused of contaminating the two water bodies with fertilizers and pesticides. Tadele Yeshiwas Tizazu, an agriculture and environmental sciences researcher, says fertilizers and pesticides in floral farms easily leach into the groundwater. This contributes to the growth of the invasive water hyacinth plant, which is slowly destroying Lake Tana, according to Dr. Mesay Abebe, an expert analyst in Ethiopia's floral sector.

But floral farm owners say they are working to help communities live decent lives. Sami Banchu from Giovanni Alfano Farm said they have constructed "schools and hospitals [in the region] to stimulate development." Mohammed Mohayub of Yemeni farm said their operations meet "standard requirements," stating that the use of pesticides is the same as "what is permitted in Europe."

Yehenew Belay, the head of investment office for the Amhara regional state, said the government policy that targets "attracting foreign investors at the expense of the host communities" is responsible for land grabs and the suffering of local people.

A range of studies, including a 2008 report by the Forum for Environment, an Ethiopian environmental advocacy NGO, and a 2016 report by Ethiopian researcher Asnake Demena, have cautioned widespread negative effects of land grabs on the local communities in Ethiopia that were originally living on the land, including evictions and loss of access to natural resources that support their livelihoods. Arable lands, virgin forests and woodlands have also been cleared and allocated for biofuel projects, which destroys the natural ecology, the reports found.

The expert Abebe suggested that the government of Ethiopia should investigate these evictions and displacements and ensure that farmers are resettled and compensated in a manner that respects the rights of residents and adheres to Ethiopian law.

He added that a sustainable solution lies in the government of Ethiopian teaming up with the Horticulture Producers and Exporters Association (EHPEA) to formulate clear regulations that call for sustainable extraction of water from water bodies in this region for farming of flowers.

"All flower farms in the region should be forced to use drip irrigation system which helps to conserve water resources."

Dr. Mesay Abebe, Expert Analyst in Ethiopia's Floral Sector

Grabbing Deserts of Sudan or Nile in Sudan?

Upper Atbara and Setit dam complex on river Atbara in Sudan. Its construction displaced up to 30,000 people.

In Sudan, land and water grabs are rampant in Khartoum, River Nile and Northern states where the Nile River passes or has tributaries, according to Stefano Turrini, a scholar involved in the study of land grabs and agricultural development in Sudanese drylands.

Stefano, a PhD candidate in Geography at Padova University in Italy, said land grabbing gained momentum in Sudan in the early 2000s, when the government of the now-ousted President Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir offered "land and water at favorable conditions to the Gulf countries."

Development of the Setit Dam Complex (Data visualization)

The Land Matrix database has tracked 762,208 hectares of large-scale land acquisitions in Sudan since 1972, with most deals concluded after year 2000. Most of this land was allocated to 28 transnational deals, with companies from mainly Middle Eastern states – including Qatar, Egypt, Lebanon, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Syria – acquiring huge swaths of land to produce food crops, alfalfa, and biofuels. *Land Deals in Sudan (Data visualization)*

Investors from countries including Jordan, Turkey, Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia are also vying for another 3.4 million hectares of land, which are under negotiation. Alfalfa, the most commonly grown crop on the acquired land in Sudan, is exported to Saudi Arabia and the UAE to be used as animal feed.

The rush to acquire land in arid Sudan for irrigation-reliant projects reveals investors' target for Nile water and not just land. "A great many investments combine the two," said Tom Lavers, a lecturer in politics and development at the University of Manchester's Global Development Institute.

Dispossession of land is not only associated with land but with other resources that are available in the land or near it, said Dr. Jeltsje Kemerink-Seyoum, a senior Lecturer in water governance at IHE Delft Institute for Water Education in the Netherlands. "In soil, there is always water available and most of these lands are taken away for agriculture purposes," she said.

"The biggest agricultural acquisition in Sudan is perhaps that of Moawia Elberier, a multinational conglomerate of 30 companies, which gained an area of up to 480,000 feddans." - Stefano Turrini

Before being ousted, President Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir's government was considering establishing more alfalfa projects. The increase in land grabbing in Sudan has pushed over the edge local communities that were already facing land scarcity due to desertification even before their lands were converted to large-scale agriculture. Many communities also lost wells and vast tracts of corridors for cattle. Because of this, "tribal conflicts" for control of "land and water resources" are flaring, according to Stefeno.

As a deliberate government intervention to scale down negative effects of land grabs on local communities, since 2013 the National Investment Authority has been directing private investors to allocate 25 percent of their land acquisitions to the local community. However, some investors reportedly ask for 25 percent more land than they need so that they can acquire the same amount of land after allocating 25 percent to the communities.

The Sudanese parliament has also put a ban on agricultural investment ventures, with members of parliament citing depletion of the country's underground water resources.

Gulf Companies Grabbing Reclaimed Desert Lands

Corporations from Gulf countries are working with Egypt to reclaim such desert land for agricultural production.

In Egypt, corporations from arid Gulf countries facing an impending water crisis have capitalized on the country's strategy to "reclaim" desert land for agricultural production to boost their own imports.

In the Western Desert, rapid changes are in full swing to make green what was mostly sandy desert two decades ago.

Vast expanses of green extend across the horizon, tended by the advanced machinery that has replaced hundreds of agricultural workers. The land is watered using center-pivot irrigation systems, connected to one another in a series of canals through which water is driven by one of the biggest water pump stations in the world.

A number of engineers oversee the expansion works to cultivate new fields of alfalfa on land run by one of several Gulf investment companies in the Toshka project.

The desert's greening is part of an agricultural development and investment initiative framed as aid to the Egyptian people. But in fact, Gulf corporations acquired most of the land as part of the oil-rich countries' plan to ensure their food security by cultivating land outside their borders. *Area Allocated Per Company / Organisation (Data visualization)*

In January 2009, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia launched the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz initiative for agricultural investment abroad, outlining plans to achieve food security by investing in countries with agricultural potential.

This initiative included offering financial support to Saudi investors, with the government covering up to 60 percent of construction and production costs. The government also committed to negotiating bilateral agreements with other governments to facilitate business for investors abroad and secure the export of at least 50 percent of their produce to the kingdom.

This long-term agricultural strategy evolved with one ministerial decision after the other, starting from limiting wheat cultivation in 2005. A 30-year program of wheat production and cultivation in the kingdom then decreased gradually until it was completely halted in 2008 due to concern over the depletion of water resources. Last year, while the Saudi government lifted the ban on wheat farming under certain conditions, the cultivation of green feed was completely banned as it consumes up to six times more water than wheat.

Saudi Arabia wasn't the only Gulf country with an impending water crisis. The United Arab Emirates was also facing diminishing water resources and turned to importing about 90 percent of its food. The UAE thus also began to push for investment in farming ventures abroad.

Facing similar challenges, the two countries jointly announced "The Strategy of Resolve" last year to strengthen economic, political and military cooperation. This includes establishing a unified strategy for food security, with plans to harness the full potential of agricultural and livestock production and to work together on joint projects.

In the last few years alone, the Emirates has managed to gain control over almost 4.25 million feddans of land spread out over 60 countries, while Saudi Arabia now controls about 4 million feddans around the globe. (1 square kilometer is equal to 238.09 feddans)

Some define the rush by richer countries to buy or lease large expanses of land in countries with agricultural potential as a form of neocolonialism, which achieves food security for the investing countries while exploiting non-renewable resources, including water, in the farming countries.

Gulf investors found their panacea in Egypt, which is increasingly adopting a capitalist agricultural production model that prioritizes investment in large-scale, modernized farming to export crops over pursuing strategic crop cultivation and traditional farming methods in the Nile Valley and Delta.

In Egypt, the Land Matrix has tracked 14 land acquisitions making up 185,000 hectares – almost all in the agricultural sector – with another 151,000 hectares in negotiations. *Land Deals in Egypt (Data visualization)*

"Come along with me around Egypt to see what has become of our country, a different picture than two years ago, or three. Between two reigns, I do not compare, or despair, or shout in glee. It's my children's right to see Egypt, my country, in the millennium, shining new as can be."

So went the anthem played on all state-run Egyptian TV channels in early 1997 during the visit of former President Hosni Mubarak to Egypt's Western Desert, just 225 kilometers south of Aswan. In what became an iconic photograph of the Mubarak era, he can be seen raising his hands in salute to the engineers to inaugurate the Toshka project.

The project's plan was designed to start construction in 1997 through to 2017. The main objectives were to erect a new Delta south of the Western Desert, add up to 1 million feddans of farmland, create new industrial and residential communities, and generate 45,000 new jobs every year to accommodate 4-6 million Egyptians in 10 years. *Toshka Project Development (Data visualization)*

But years have gone by, and Egypt has not noticeably benefited from the Toshka project. The crisis of overpopulation in the Nile Valley and the issue of food security remain unresolved. The project has, however, achieved considerable success for some foreign investment companies.

The Emirates gained a foothold in the project as early as 1997, with a $100 million donation made through the Abu Dhabi Fund for Development. The money went toward constructing and lining the project's main water canal. Extending for about 51 kilometers, it has since been renamed the "Sheikh Zayed Canal" after the ruler of Abu Dhabi.

The concerned authorities earmarked one-tenth of Egypt's total quota from the Nile's water (5.5 billion cubic feet out of 55.5 billion cubic feet) for the project. A 250 MW pumping station was built to pull the water from Toshka valley, which is linked to Lake Nasser and filled from flood water, to the Sheikh Zayed Canal, which then feeds four branches extending along the areas to be "reclaimed."

After water was pumped into Sheikh Zayed Canal in 2003 for the first time, it brought with it an influx of Gulf investors into the Toshka area. The Toshka project currently spans about 405,000 feddans, 49.4 percent of which are owned by the Saudi-based Al Rajhi International for Investment company and the Emirates-based Al Dahra for Agricultural Development company. The Egyptian government and state-owned agricultural reclamation companies also own shares in the project.

Suspicious Contracts

The contracts between the Egyptian government and Gulf investors, particularly in Toshka, are rife with violations, according to information released in previously published media reports, as well as copies of the official documents obtained by Mada Masr.

In 2011, the Egyptian Center for Social and Economic Rights filed a lawsuit against Al Dahra calling for the annulment of the contract. The lawsuit stipulated that the sale of 100,000 feddans of land in Toshka to the company involved gross squandering of public funds and the sale of state land at a lower price than the estimated market price, since the land was sold at LE50 (US$3) per feddan at a time when the average land price was LE11,000 EGP (US$637) per feddan. *Price Paid for Land (Data visualization)*

A handful of lawyers have filed lawsuits against some of the Gulf companies intertwined in Egypt's network of agricultural investment, contesting that some of the contractual terms had violated Egypt's Constitution and squandered the country's resources.

According to a lawyer who worked on one of these lawsuits, major corporations often operate under a web of entangled investment interests as a strategy in order

to gain complete monopoly over the market under the guise of multiple companies.

The lawyer, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said that this strategy also helps cover up how much control a certain investor exerts over the market, because the share is distributed over several companies, which also makes tax evasion easier.

This arrangement ensures benefits for all entities involved. For example, the Saudi company Al Rajhi, which grows alfalfa, a grain cultivated to feed livestock, is an affiliate of Almarai, a dairy production company. It's also an affiliate of Alkhorayef, which works in irrigation systems. All of these companies operate under the Saudi agricultural investment conglomerate Jannat, which helps them expand their market share and meet their supply demands. It also facilitates indirect deals with other companies like Wafrah, a Saudi food products company that makes grains and pasta, and Marina, an Egyptian company that works in animal feed production.

This investment strategy aims to control the entire food supply chain, starting from the production materials to the production and industrial processing and, lastly, the market in order to exert complete monopoly over food commodities.

We're Buying Water, Not Alfalfa

In official statements about agricultural acquisitions, investors stress their concern with preserving water resources and the long-term sustainability of their projects through producing crops for local consumption. But the reality is quite different.

In Egypt's case, the government has pressured the companies to cultivate wheat as one of the strategic crops that sustains most Egyptians. However, the government has failed to supervise the companies to ensure uptake of wheat. According to a source working at one of the Gulf companies in Toshka, who spoke on condition of anonymity, the total wheat produced by the company was only 15,000 tons, meaning that the total area cultivated with wheat was only about 6,000 feddans.

In water-scarce Egypt, the investors acquired a huge amount of water at an extremely low cost. In an economic feasibility study he prepared, Seyam explained how the total area cultivated by both companies was about 29,000 feddans. The average amount of water consumed is about 210 million cubic meters annually, while the companies pay the Ministry of Irrigation about LE20 million (US$1.2 million) annually. If we estimate that the market price for a cubic meter of water is LE2 (US$0.12), this means that the investor purchased water worth LE420 million (US$24.3 million) for just LE20 million (US$1.2 million). *Price Paid for Water by Foreign Investors (Data visualization)*

This "water grab" is not limited to the 29,000 feddans which make up the currently cultivated area of land, but extends well into the future when the two companies will own 200,000 feddans between them.

Seyam's analysis was confirmed by a source working at one of the two Gulf-owned companies in Toshka, who quoted one of the Emirati alfalfa importers as saying: "We're buying water, not alfalfa." *Average Water Consumed by Crops (Data visualization)*

The same amount of water, around 210 million cubic meters, said Seyam, would be sufficient to cultivate 84,000 feddans of wheat, thus raising Egypt's production of a strategic crop by about 62,000 tons. Egypt consumes about 16,000 tons of wheat annually and is the world's largest wheat importer. Last year, it imported about 6 million tons of wheat. *Amount Of Alfalfa and Wheat Grown Using 210 Million Cubic Meters of Water (Data visualization)*

Hamdy Abdel Dayem, the official spokesperson for the Egypt's Ministry of Agriculture, said most contracts limit investors to cultivate only 5 percent of land with alfalfa in order to protect water resources. But MP Raef Temraz, the former deputy for the parliamentary committee on agriculture and irrigation, did not believe this.

He said alfalfa cultivation takes up 25 percent of the total cultivated land in Toshka and the New Valley governorate. Temraz noted how alfalfa is exported in huge quantities to a number of Arab countries, chiefly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Gamal Seyam, a professor of agricultural economy at Cairo University, stated that this type of foreign investment gives zero return to the state because it allows investors to buy the water for cheap, acquire land at a low cost and export most of their produce. Furthermore, the capital for these corporations is not based in Egypt. Thus, there is no real benefit to the national economy.

Land Deals Gone Bad

Near Kisumu town along Lake Victoria in Kenya lies the graveyard of a once 60-square-kilometer massive American farming institution.

On the shores of this enormous lake that sustains the fishing economies of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, towering rice silos and a sugarcane processing plant lie eerily idle, slowly falling into disrepair. Spilling out of a huge empty workshop are strewed a hapless collection of defunct agricultural equipment, including tractors and ploughing machines.

The only sign of life in this desolate scene are a few women from the community, bathing their naked toddlers beside a small stream, and the lazy grazing of cattle, milling around the abandoned farming tools.

This is the sad outcome of Dominion Farms Limited, an American company that acquired a 175-square kilometer area of swampland next to Lake Victoria with a 25-year lease to conduct large-scale rice, banana, cotton and sugarcane production as well as aquaculture farming.

Touted as the single largest investment project in the Lake Victoria region of Kenya, the Dominion Farms' agricultural interests were initially hoped to be a major boon to the economy of Siaya County.

Besides creating jobs for the local residents, it was hoped that this investment windfall would have the ripple effect of stimulating the entire economy of the poverty-afflicted lake basin region.

But with 12 years remaining on its lease, the U.S. investor abandoned the project when its CEO Calvin Burgess swiftly left Kenya due to what he called an unfavorable business environment, the Standard reported.

Over the company's tenure in the 200-square-kilometer Yala Swamp, thousands of local residents complained that their lands were unfairly stolen.

Originally, part of the swamp was controlled by the Lake Basin Development Authority (LBDA), an oversight government agency in the Lake Victoria Basin. At the time, the government used to occupy the left-hand side of the swamp, whereas the community worked the land on the right-hand side.

But two local county councils leased away the land to Dominion without community input, leaving the local people without a means of livelihood.

Community members tried to force their way back into the swamp, clearing papyrus reeds and planting small farms to grow food for survival. But the government would frequently drive them away, displacing a total of 6,000 people as a result, according to Jacob Ouma, the area chief of Kadenge Sub-location of Siaya County.

Over its 13 years, aerial spraying of chemicals on the swampland destructed fragile wetland environments that are key to purifying water that enters Lake Victoria as well as serving as the breeding ground for the African catfish fry, according to Christopher Aura, assistant director of the Freshwater Systems Research at the KMFRI's Kisumu Centre.

A recent technical report by the KMFRI, which is still in the process of being published in a scientific journal, found that River Yala is one of the two major rivers north of Lake Victoria that majorly contribute to pollution in the lake. This river directly parallels the former Dominion Farm.

These latest findings are consistent with another study published in 2014 in the International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR). "This study observes that degradation of the environmental resource base such as excessive resource extraction and severe land use by Dominion Irrigation Project has not only affected the quantity and quality of the services that are produced by ecosystems, but has also challenged the resilience of the Wetland to ensure sustainable development for the households in South Central Alego," the study found.

As with many large-scale land acquisitions, the investment spurred some community development just as it harmed the environment and local livelihoods. Dominion assisted several several local primary schools to gain new classrooms, wrought-iron goalposts and rehabilitated playgrounds. The farm was also the first in the area to implement research by the Kenya Marine and Fisheries Research Institute, including introducing cage fish farming in Lake Victoria in 2005, according to Veronica Ombwa, a research scientist at the institute.

52 land deals making up about 393,000 hectares have been signed and concluded in Kenya since the year 2000, according to the Land Matrix. Foreign and domestic companies have invested primarily in agriculture, renewable energy, conservation, tourism and forestry. *Land Deals in Kenya (Data visualization)*

With 160,000 hectares allocated to the project, the Bedford Biofuels is the largest of any such deals yet. The project intends to invest in jatropha plantations in the Tana River Delta.

Enslaving Local Communities

Several foreign investments in DR Congo target tree logging.

In resource-rich Democratic Republic of the Congo, lands in the northwest Equator region are parceled out into foreign investments targeting tree logging, mining and growing of food crops, according to Land Matrix data.

There are 87 deals taking up 10.6 million hectares of land across the DRC, according to the Land Matrix – the highest amount of all Nile basin countries, though only a small part of the vast country is actually part of the river basin. Of these, forest logging takes up the vast majority (53 deals) of the acquired land, with an average deal size of 184,623 hectares and the largest deal taking up 383,255 hectares. *Land Deals in Congo (Data visualization)*

A study of land-grabbing, agricultural investment and land reform in DRC by Chris Huggins, a researcher on land and natural resources rights in Sub-Saharan Africa, identified USA, Germany, Belgium, France and South Africa and China as some of the main investing countries in the DRC. The Land Matrix also identifies Switzerland, Canada, Liechtenstein, Lebanon, and the UK as other major investors, particularly in logging.

In June 2018, an investigation by Global Witness, an international NGO focused on human rights abuses and corruption, found rampant illegal logging across 90 percent of sites owned by Norsudtimber, a European company registered in Lichteinstein that logs in more than 40,000 square kilometers of rainforest in the DRC.

Dorothee Lisenga, the coordinator for Coalition des Femmes Leaders por l'Environnement et le Development Durable (CFLEDD), a Congolese NGO that strives for the recognition of women's land and forest rights in the provinces of Equateur and Maindombe in the DRC, said women are the most affected group by land grabbing in the country.

She said apart from denying local communities, "farmlands and food", land grabs have turned most local communities into, "slaves working on investors' farms and mines on land that once belonged to them."

"Land grabs mean "slavery" to women"
Dorothee Lisenga, Coordinator for CFLEDD

Most members of the CFLEDD organisation are indigenous pygmy women. Congolese pygmies live forest-based hunter-gatherer livelihoods in the forests of the DRC, the world's second largest forest. Citing research by her organization, Lisenga says 70 percent of women in the DRC do not have access to land and forest titles.

Forests in Uganda. Lakeside Communities Trapped Under the Guise of Fighting Climate Change

Four communities making up 7,500 people settled within the forest reserve in Mayuge district, three along the lakeshores and one within the forest.

Otewu John never thought he would end up in a life of crime. But when the 56-year-old's garden of 20 years was slashed and he was forced from the land, he found himself resorting to illegal fishing, lacking the small amount of money needed to invest in a more expensive legal fishing net but needing to provide for his 9 children.

The fisherman first moved to the tiny remote village of Walumbe along the shores of Lake Victoria in 1984, searching for prime waters in which to fish for tilapia and other species.

He soon landed upon a better opportunity, discovering a huge expanse of seemingly unused land within a 9,000-hectare forest located deep in Mayuge District, Uganda.

There, many other villagers were already planting small gardens among the trees, growing maize, cassava, potatoes and other crops to sustain their families and sell for small profits.

For decades, hundreds of people provided for themselves from these gardens and other resources obtained from the forest, including firewood, grazing land for their animals and sources of freshwater. But when the the National Forestry Authority leased the land to Norway-based Busoga Forest Company in 1996 to plant pine and eucalyptus trees for timber export, these people, who had no official land titles, were forced from their gardens. About 830 families were evicted from about 360 hectares of land that they used to farm, according to David Kureeba, a Program Officer at the National Association of Professional Environmentalists, which conducted a research and advocacy campaign about these communities.

Many of the people had migrated to the forest to work on a government beef farm and center to fight the parasitic sleeping sickness during former President Idi Amin's regime in the 1970s. Others came escaping warfare in the north in 1987. When the current government came into power, the area was re-gazetted as a forest reserve, but "the gazettement was kind of informal," Kureeba said.

So the people remained, many claiming not to have been given terminal benefits after the government projects closed. People continued to come. Between 2002 and 2010, these villages grew by an average of 53 percent, according to a 2011 Ministry of Water and Environment report.

Today, there are four communities making up a total population of about 7,500 people located within the reserve, three along the lakeshores and one within the forest.

The National Forest Authority (NFA), the government body entrusted with managing forest reserves, contends that the area was gazetted as a reserve in 1948 and therefore these people are landless encroachers who "just forced themselves on the land which was not theirs," according to Steven Galima, NFA Natural Forests Coordinator. But complex land laws in Uganda do give some rights to people who settled on land 12 years before the 1995 Constitution came into place.

In April, the government through NFA and the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) began degazetting about 3,000 hectares of the 9,000-hectare Bukaleba Forest Reserve along with areas in the nearby South Busoga Forest Reserve, partly to find land to resettle dozens of villages that were evicted from the South Busoga area decades ago, Galima said.

The land currently occupied by the Bukaleba forest communities will be degazetted, as well as the 200-meter buffer zone alongside Lake Victoria that must be maintained to reduce pollution and conserve the environment of the lake, according to Stuart Maniranguha, the Kyoga Range Manager at NFA. Lake Victoria is the largest lake in Africa and shared by three countries that depend upon its resources, but pollution

by the growing populations living near the lakeshore has severely polluted the water body and reduced its fish populations, a key economic resource.

But when NEMA completes the 200-meter demarcation within the next several months, the people living along the lakeshore will be made to leave their homes according to Naomi Karekaho, NEMA corporate communications manager, whether they get compensation for the value of their lost land and crops or resettlement on degazetted land will be determined by the Office of the Prime Minister in time to come.

While National Forest Authority officials said the four villages that exist within Bukaleba are not likely to be among those resettled, the beneficiaries are still being identified, according to the Mayuge District Chairman, Hadji Omar Bongo, and the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development Public Relations Officer, Owbo Dennis.

Bongo also claimed that these forest communities will also be officially allocated a small portion of land within the degazetted area to sustain their livelihoods, a struggle that has been ongoing for eight years. Currently, the villages are fighting over a 500-hectare allotment that has been dominated by just one of the four communities.

Busoga Forest Company's tree plantation is one of 6 large-scale forestry projects in Uganda with deals taking up a total of 47,339 hectares. Owned by companies from countries including the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands and Norway, most of these concessions are monoculture plantations of non-native, fast growing tree species such as pine and eucalyptus that are cut and sold as timber in Uganda and abroad. At the same time, many of the companies say they are fighting climate change through reforesting degraded lands and selling 'carbon credits' to polluting companies abroad. Investing in commercial forests is a national strategy to increase revenue and wood-based products to the Ugandan people, according to Galima from the NFA.

But while such projects are intended to inject economy and development into poor, low-resource areas, in many places, including Mayuge, their presence has often ended up depriving the most marginalized communities of their livelihoods without adequate efforts to replace them. People already living on the margins of society end up further ignored, and with even less.

One of these villages is Walumbe, population 1,500, a tiny landing site of grass-thatched houses nestled in a 200-meter buffer zone between Lake Victoria and wall of perfectly spaced trees marking the Busoga Forestry Company plantation.

After their forest gardens were slashed, residents of Walumbe resorted to fishing to sustain their lives. But lacking enough money to invest in legal fishing gear such as nets that do not harm small fish, the fisherman say they are forced to use cheaper illegal nets and thus face the constant threat of arrest.

Without money for strong boats or lifejackets, the waters aren't safe. This year, one fisherman was eaten by a crocodile. Residents first found his shoes, then his torso.

"You fish on the gunpoint now," the fisherman Otewu said.

238,033 Hectares of Land Acquired by Foreign Investors

The Land Matrix has tracked 238,033 hectares of large-scale land acquisitions in Uganda since 1990, with most deals concluded since year 2007. *Land Deals in Uganda (Data visualization)*

Most of this land was allocated to 25 transnational deals by investors from countries including the United Kingdom, Germany, Mauritius, Norway, and India. Twenty-seven deals are currently in production, including another 10 domestic deals by Ugandan companies or the government. Investors from Bangladesh, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and India are also in negotiations for another 12,500 hectares of land mainly for export agriculture.

Busoga Forestry Company (BFC) obtained a 50-year lease of 10,054 hectares in Mayuge District in 1996, according to the Land Matrix. According to John Ferguson, the managing director of Busoga Forestry Company, the total area BFC plants in Mayuge is 6,300 hectares, and the remaining 2,700 hectares goes to conservation along with the 500 hectares for community activities. *Busoga Forestry Company Land-use (Data visualization)*

Busoga Forestry Company is a subsidiary of Green Resources AS, a private Norwegian company established in 1995. Green Resources claims to be East Africa's largest forest development and wood processing company, with 38,000 hectares of forest in Uganda, Mozambique, and Tanzania, a sawmill in Tanzania and electricity pole and charcoal plants in the three countries. The company manages 15 plantations including two in Uganda and in 2016 had net sales of $5,673 according to its 2016 Environment and Social Impact Report.

On its website, the company says it is one of the first companies in the world to benefit from carbon revenue from its forests. Under the international REDD+ scheme, carbon-emitting companies that contribute to climate change have an option to "offset" their negative emissions by buying "carbon credits" from tree-planting initiatives elsewhere in the world.

This year, BFC will sell about 325,000 tons of carbon, including 65,000 tons from Bukaleba, to the Swedish energy agencies under the United Nations advanced market operated by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, according to Ferguson of BFC.

But time and time again, this model has proven too good to be true. In a 2018 study published in the Global Environmental Change journal, researchers at the IHE Delft Institute of Water Education in the Netherlands found that two participatory forest

conservation projects in Ethiopia that supply carbon credits as part of the REDD+ scheme had ended up aggravating conflicts over the use of natural resources among the local communities. Another 2018 study published in the Climate Policy journal found a "a gap between the REDD+ narratives at international level… and the livelihood interests of farming communities on the ground," referencing also a climate finance forestry projects in Indonesia.

According to John Wanyu, a gastroeconomist scientist at Slow Food Uganda, an NGO that promotes the development of sustainable food communities, the planting of monoculture alien tree species such as pine and eucalyptus also uses huge amounts of water and destroys the natural biodiversity of the environment.

But the Ugandan government claims that investing in commercial forests is a lucrative venture for the developing country, which makes 30,000 shillings ($8) per hectare a year in ground rent – amounting to about 190 million shillings ($52,000) a year for the company's 6,400 hectares. Ferguson said his company contributes 2-3 million dollars a year to the Ugandan economy in taxes alone. One hundred percent of the company's products are sold domestically, most to the national electricity supplier UMEME as electrical poles, he said.

In 2016, eighty-six percent of BFC's products in Uganda were sold domestically, according to Busoga Forestry Company's 2016 Environment and Social Impact Report.

Busoga Forestry Company is not the only forest deal in Uganda. In the country, 3 of the top 4 transnational deals making up a total of 42,236 hectares are in forests, with companies from the United Kingdom, Germany and Norway investing in monoculture timber plantations located on government-run forest reserves in eastern, western and central Uganda. These deals have all been rife with similar controversies as the Mayuge deal.

Smaller land acquisitions have also affected many Ugandans. Constance Okollet, chairperson of Osukuru United Women Network based in Osukuru Sub County, Tororo district of Uganda said 100 women out of the 1,286 women that belong to her organization are now facing untold suffering after their husbands sold their family land to Chinese investors. And for some women whose family land was acquired by investors, their husbands used the money they were paid to marry more women. The rest was spent on alcohol, according to Okollet.

While much public attention has been on such deals by foreign investors, most land grabs in Uganda are actually by individual Ugandans who encroach upon protected or private lands, according to Isaac Kabanda, the Food Community Coordinator at Slow Food Uganda, an NGO that promotes the development of sustainable food communities.

For example, River Rwizi, a lifeline river for over four million people in southwestern Uganda, has seen up to 80 percent of its water dry up as a result of land taken by individual Ugandans. 200 people have illegally acquired over 500 hectares of land along River Rwizi, destroying wetlands on its banks.

Community Development?

On its website, Busoga Forest Company affirms its commitment to developing the communities affected by its projects and mitigating negative impacts of its presence such as loss of livelihoods.

Ten percent of company profits are intended to be used to develop the community.

"Green Resources' strategy is based on the sustainable development of the areas in which it operates. The company believes that forestation is one of the most efficient ways of improving social and economic conditions for people in rural areas and aims to be the preferred employer and partner for local communities in these areas," the company writes on its website.

In Bukaleba village, about 120 villagers are employed in the company as slashers, sprayers, and termite killers, the village chairman Aliphonse Ongom said. But in a month, the average employee makes only 60,000 Uganda shillings – about $16 – despite claims from BFC that they pay a monthly minimum wage of 205,000 Uganda shillings, according to the company's 2016 Environment and Social Impact Report. *Green Resources Employee Wages (Data visualization)*

After conflicts with the local communities, BFC agreed to a 'Collaborative Forest Management Programme' in October 2011 that stipulated that 1.1 billion Uganda shillings (about $296,000) would be spent over the next five years to strengthen company-community relations and support the communities through various capacity building activities. Most of this money would come directly from the company, the agreement stated.

Dividing 1.1 billion Uganda shillings by five, it was expected that BFC would spend on average about 218 million shillings per year on community development. However, according to the publicly available Environment and Social Impact Reports released by BFC, the company spent only about 30 million shillings on community development in 2015 and 128 million shillings on the same in 2016. *Green Resources Expenditure on Community Development (Data visualization)*

However, according to the managing director of BFC, the company has been able to contribute more to community development since it finally became profitable in 2018. The company spent about $125,000 USD (about 462 million shillings) for community development in 2018, and this year it plans to spend about $250,000 (about 924 million shillings), Ferguson said.

The 2011 agreement also promised that BFC would contract plantation management to the local communities, hold skills trainings and mobilize resources for community

income generation projects, and demarcate a community tree growing zone of about 30 meters from the line of the present settlements. The agreement also promised to move other settlements such as Bukaleba and Walumbe into the larger Nakalanga village.

But as of July 2019, none of the other settlements had been moved into Nakalanga, leaving them unable to access the 500-hectare community land located around Nakalanga. There was further no evidence or discussion of such a community tree growing zone around the four villages within the forest. Ferguson of BFC said that the communities had been provided with seedlings, but while a 2018 Social Impact report provided by the company specified that 74,518 seedlings had been issued to community members in Kachung, there was no mention of Bukaleba.

According to Green Resources and BFC reports, some of the projects the company has undertaken to support the local communities include constructing three new water boreholes in 2018 in Bukaleba that benefited more than 3,000 people; providing medical supplies for two health centers with a monthly patient count of about 1,223 people, expanding a medical dispensary, maintaining more than 35 kilometers of community roads, sponsoring three girls to attend higher education, and increasing HIV/AIDS awareness with support from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation. BFC also implemented a multiyear improved cook stoves project that trained 256 people from 8 villages in 2016. Green Resources further permits community members to harvest small sticks from the forest to use as firewood, Omoro, the Nakalanga village resident, said.

But after training a group of Community-Based Organizations in the villages, the company left without providing the promised startup capital except to a single group, said the village chairman Ongom.

Villagers further maintained that losing the land where they grew food to survive was still the source of almost all their problems and one that has never been adequately addressed by the company or the government. The government maintains that they never had rights to the land.

According to Ferguson of BFC, the company has increased food security for more than 1,823 households in its two forest reserves in 2018 through distributing cassava cuttings and groundnut seeds. In the entire history of the project, the company has helped ensure food security for more than 12,761 people, according to a report compiled by Kizza Simon, the company's 8-year ESG Manager.

Ferguson said the company had nothing to do with any history of communities being forced off their lands. When BFC came in in 1996, nobody was on the land, and since then, the company has invested a large amount of resources to support the neighboring communities, he said.

"We don't own the land. When they talk about people being moved, we've never done it; it wasn't our company that did it."
Ferguson, BFC

"NFA put out a tender for people to operate on these plantations. We applied for that tender and we were successful based on our plan for what we would do. We moved onto land that required to be planted; there weren't any people there when we moved onto it, and the history behind it is something that NFA would be able to give a lot more insight than we can."

A 2014 report based on more than 150 interviews by the Oakland Institute, a U.S.-based environmental think tank, found that more than 8,000 people in Bukaleba and Kachung Forest Reserves had faced "profound disruptions to their livelihoods" due to the presence of Busoga Forestry Company, including forced and violent evictions, the denial of access to land that sustained them to grow food and graze cattle, and the lack of access to forest resources.

The authors termed the situation in Bukaleba a form of 'carbon violence' to explain how subsistence farmers and poor communities have borne the brunt of costs related to expanding forestry plantations and global carbon markets in Uganda.

Alibhai of the National Forest Authority said the communities need to "seek help" by officially writing to the NFA to be recognized as a formal Community Forest Management group, after which NFA can support them such as by giving them trainings in tree nursery management, among other benefits.

According to Ferguson of BFC, while forestry projects have often been condemned as the "smelly family member," the sugarcane plantations such as Kakira Sugar Works that own more than 50,000 hectares near BFC's operations in Mayuge actually take in 15-20 times more water than trees while leaching land that used to be used to grow food crops.

"The perception of forestry around the world is that they're seen as the bad boys for some reasons, maybe because trees are big beautiful things and how can you cut them down and yes those are the realities," Ferguson said. "But if you look at how sugarcane is taking out the business of the gardens and where people are growing their crops, you see it's getting dryer and dryer every year."

Hunger Strikes as Acquired Land Lies Idle

STORY UPDATE: Green Horizon Chief Executive Officer, Gen Israel Ziv was sanctioned by the US government in 2018 after his sister company, the Global CST was implicated in an arms deal in South Sudan. However, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Affairs (OFAC) lifted the ban last year after sufficient measures were put in place by the USA to ensure Gen Ziv does not obstruct the peace implementation process in South Sudan, according to the US Embassy in Juba. General Ziv has since promised to return to South Sudan to continue with the Green Horizon food security project.

In South Sudan, a young country mired in a decades-long conflict, the scramble for land along River Nile by foreign investors has seen swaths and stretches of hectares of fertile communal lands being allocated without the due involvement of local communities. Though renewed conflict in 2016 drove many investors away, some have come positively to help grow food to ease the country's hunger crisis.

The Land Matrix database has tracked about 2.6 million hectares of land grabbed in South Sudan since 2006, with another 1.5 million hectares of intended deals. *Land Deals in South Sudan (Data visualization)*

Most of this land was allocated to 11 transnational deals, with companies from the UAE, Sudan, Norway, UK, Saudi Arabia and Egypt acquiring vast swaths of land for food crops, timber production, carbon sequestration and tourism.

Until the 2016 civil war, foreign investors such as ones from the United States, United Kingdom and some Arab countries owned about 10 percent of the country's land for extracting resources, oil mining and agricultural production, according to the Norwegian People's Aid-South Sudan.

The land acquisitions were largely in the greater Equatoria region and some parts of Bah er Ghazel region where thousands have been displaced by the renewed conflict in July 2017.

Massive land grab in these regions were focused on resource extraction, oil mining and agricultural production, RT News reported.

Along the Nile River on Gumbo to Rajaf Road, about 10 kilometers south of Juba city, a running row of signposts with many in Chinese language indicate how far and wide investors have come for a stake of these prime Nile-irrigated lands.

Forty-eight-year-old Paulina Wani, a Bari by tribe, decried land grabbing in her ancestral land. The mother of seven said the stretch of land between Gumbo and Rajaf belonged to the Bari community, but individuals have been pushing them out since conflict in the 1980s.

"During the 1983 Anyanya 1 warfare, some people came here to claim were hosting rebels here, so they literally ran over this village. Some of us were displaced by raging perennial floods up the river."

Paulina Wani, Resident from Bari Tribe

It was at this time that some politicians and multinational companies started targeting fertile land along River Nile, she said.

"Can you believe they have grabbed even the small highlands in the river? Those small 10 by 10 feet patches you see there have their owners," Wani said as she pointed at the tiny and rocky islands.

Wani, who said her grandfather owned swaths of land, said today she has been left only with a very small portion of land to host her family and do some small-scale farming.

Pushed by the unending land pressures, the River Nile has been forced to redefine its course. The Nile River's rugged banks are evidence that it is struggling to breathe and enjoy its once good health.

Some South Sudanese communities have successfully fought back against unfair land grabs. A $25,000 agreement between a U.S. Texas-based firm, Nile Trading and Development, that gave the company sweeping rights over a 600,0000-hectare area of land in central South Sudan was eventually cancelled due to community protest. The farm would have displaced more than 600 households, and the local community was not consulted in the leasing process.

Much of the struggle over land arises from a lack of clear land laws and processes after South Sudan gained independence from northern Sudan in 2011, according to Moses Maal, the Acting Director General at the South Sudan's Ministry of Lands.

Currently the country relies on the pre-independence 2009 Land Act while each state has its own land policies, laws and regulations. Though the government is formulating a new nation-wide land act, a draft Land Policy document has lain in the assembly awaiting approval from Parliament for five years.

Easing Food Scarcity Through Attracting Commercial Farmers

To some, South Sudan is in dire need of foreign investment. Over 7.1 million people – more than half the population of South Sudan – are at risk of starvation, due to an economic crisis caused by the civil war as well as drought in recent years.

About 1.2 million tons of food is needed to feed three meals a day to every South Sudanese, but in 2018, the country produced only 404,109 tons of food, according to the Ministry of Agriculture.

Amount of Food Produced Versus Amount of Food Required in South Sudan (Data visualization)

The government is thus now encouraging investments in hope that the foreign companies will help ease this food scarcity crisis, said Dr. Loro George Leju Lugor, the Director General of Agriculture Production and Extension Services.

When conflict spiked in 2016, many large-scale international agricultural companies actually left the country, leaving their farms idle. Drought and civil conflict have further displaced most people from the food producing towns of Yei in Central Equatoria, Yambio in Western Equatoria and Torit and Magwi in Eastern Equatoria.

"As we speak, three quarters of the country is going to be hit by famine because we have

less food production. We don't have farm under irrigation now, no, no commercial farm but we used to have them before the 2016 war," said Dr. Loro George Leju Lugor, the Director General of Agriculture Production and Extension Services.

The government's 2014 Drought and Flood Vision Comprehensive Agriculture Master Plan envisions large-scale commercial production of food through local and foreign investors. The government plans to gazette land into agricultural areas, grazing lands for cattle and national forest reserves, as well as rehabilitate stalled farming machines that have lain abandoned since the war.

'Land Grabs?' Not All Bad

On the margins of society, almost ignored, there are land deals that have empowered local communities to fight hunger and develop their communities. One of these investments is the Israeli company Green Horizon, which was contracted by the government in 2015 to help fix the gap in food production.

According to local leaders, this foreign agricultural project is helping alleviate poverty and improve livelihoods through training local farmers and producing food for both local and international markets.

The project was allocated 500 hectares of land in Jebel Ladu, 37 kilometres in the outskirts of Juba city. It runs modern farms in Juba and Jebel Ladu in Central Equatoria State, Bor Jonglei State, Renk Upper Nile, and Torit, Eastern Equatoria State.

It also has Community Commercial Farming Projects, which empower local farmers to increase production of crops on a large scale by giving them certified seeds, equipment, fertilizers and technical guidance, with farmers expected to give a percentage back to Green Horizon after selling the output.

The project has also been celebrated for introducing modern farming technologies to the country, including pivot and drip irrigation systems.

The company produces about one tenth of the total production of food in the country, according to the Ministry of Agriculture.

Beyond benefits to the national economy, the company also has a good relationship with the local community, residents said.

Catharina Poni, a mother of six, said Green Horizon provides scholastic materials to pupils of Gwerekek Primary School the only school in the area and where her grandchildren study.

The 58-year-old said whenever the company harvests, the community is given part of the harvest – something she said is "unheard of" with most companies.

Vita Samuel, a farmer in the community, said the company has provided farming tools and seeds to local residents, among other benefits.

"During funerals and parties, Green Horizon also provides clean drinking water, onions and some necessities like transporting to the city. It's not easy to get transportation to the city from this village," he added.

"The greatest benefit that Green Horizon has offered to us is the employment of the youths of Jebel Ladu. They have brought jobs closer to the people of this land," Vita noted.

“It has been hard work because these awards are a sign that the world is quite bad and there is a lot to report, and that the investigative journalism plays an important role.”

TERESA CARRERAS
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Coordinator of GAMAG Europe
Member of the Steering Committee of GAMAG
FJA Expert Council Member

Outstanding Investigative Reporting

Shortlisted Stories

SHORTLISTED STORY

In Idlib, Children Are Cast Into the Unknown

Mahmoud El-Bakour, Ali Al-Ibrahim (Syria)

Mahmoud Al-Bakour is a Syrian citizen journalist, human rights defender and independent journalist. Through my work in investigative journalism and writing stories and press materials, I try to document the violations that occur in Syria due to the war and forced displacement of civilians and the effects of the war on the lives of the people in Syria, and we are working to shed light on the most important humanitarian issues. And the rights that include life for civilians and children in Syria, to be an independent journalist, you have to suffer a lot, because the freedom to work without restrictions has no place in our world, so I chose to work independently and be a free journalist. I write and document events in a way that reaches people and the world without restrictions or conditions, and I try to publish them through Al-Swaishel media or broadcast it through media sites, human rights organizations, or media.

Ali Al Ibrahim, investigative journalist, researcher and university instructor, Fellow at TED program, that is a global network of visionaries remarkable in their fields who collaborate across disciplines to create positive change around the world. Al Ibrahim has worked on several of its cross-border collaborations. In 2018 he was awarded as “Best Young Journalist” at BBC. He is one of the best Investigative Journalists in Arabic 2019 was chosen from GIJN. He was awarded as Best Investigative Article from Samir Kassir Award for Freedom of the Press 2019. Earlier, he participated in the launching of a SIRAJ (Syrian Investigative Reporting for Accountability Journalism), he is one of the founders of an investigative journalism network with 35 journalists in five Levant countries, and they are reporting on Syrian conflicts focusing on corruption, human rights violations and the overall economy. He also took part in cross-border investigations with the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project - OCCRP and others. Lately, he has started as a lecturer online to Syrian journalists about TV investigative journalism and fact checking.

In Idlib, Children Are Cast Into the Unknown

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This report was carried out with the support of Syrian Investigative Reporting for Accountability Journalism (SIRAJ), under the supervision of Ali Al-Ibrahim. It was translated into English from Arabic by Nada Atieh and Will Christou.

IDLIB - On the morning of August 23, 2019, Mahmoud woke to the cries of a baby coming from just outside his house. He hurried outside to find a baby - no more than 8 months old - swaddled in white blankets on the doorstep of the town’s mosque. A bag of clothes was left next to the baby, along with a note: “She is an orphan from Khan Sheikhoun and needs medical care.”

“[My wife] and I gave the child medical treatment and now she’s in good health,” Mahmoud, a man in his fifties living in the town of al-Khowary in Idlib province, said. “She was quite sick due to the weather.”

The abandonment of newborns is becoming an increasingly common phenomenon in Syria, mainly due to extreme poverty. Mothers have left their children—some only hours or days old—at the doorsteps of mosques, in public parks, or even on the side of the road to be taken into the care of locals who stumble upon them.

According to a June 22, 2019, report from Syrians for Truth and Justice, there was an “alarming increase in the number of newborns being abandoned in Idlib and northern rural Aleppo.” The report warned that these abandoned infants “will be denied the rights to education and nationality, [and] will be rejected by society,” due to their lack of civil registration by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)-run Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) in Idlib province and lack of access to government-controlled areas.

According to a governmental source, as of March 2018, around 300 cases of abandoned children were recorded in Damascus since 2011. Today, the Justice Department receives one child every two months on average.

21 Documented Cases in Idlib

The baby girl found by Mahmoud in al-Khowary is just one of the 21 infants who were abandoned in Idlib province during 2018 and the first half of 2019. SIRAJ

documented and verified each case for this report, noting the sex of the infant, as well as the time and place they were found. Three of the documented abandoned infants, however, were dead by the time they were found. According to Muhammad al-Hallaj, the director of the Syrian humanitarian organization, Response Coordination Group, between four to eight cases of abandoned infants are recorded in Idlib province each month. Idlib, along with the western countryside of Aleppo province, is the last opposition stronghold in Syria and is currently controlled by HTS.

Province's population was 165,000 in 2011, according to official statistics; today it stands at around four million, a result of various de-escalation agreements that transferred those unwilling to accept the terms of settlement and reconciliation agreements with the regime to northwest Syria. However, since the second half of 2019, Syrian government forces and its allied militias have carried out a fierce military campaign on Idlib province, capturing Khan Sheikhoun, Maarat al-Numan and Saraqeb, among other cities and towns. This latest military escalation has displaced around 875,000 people—most of them women and children—between December 1, 2019 and February 17, 2020, according to the UN OCHA spokesman, David Swanson.

Girl in the Rubble

Just outside the town of Salqin in Idlib province, Sara, a 10-year-old girl, began to scream for the Syrian Civil Defense (also known as the White Helmets) after she spotted a baby girl wrapped in a piece of cotton among the rubble of a demolished building.

"There! She's over there," Sara screamed, pointing at the baby. Her sister spotted the baby as well and began to scream in horror.

Sara and her sister were on a walk around the neighborhood when they came across the baby nestled between pieces of debris. Fortunately, the girl—less than a month old—was still alive when they found her, unlike to many other abandoned infants who died before they could be found by a passer-by. Many children are abandoned in the late hours of the night and only found in the morning—but by then it is too late.

Khaled Rahhal also found a newborn outside his home in Salqin while he was on his way to morning prayers.

Rahhal rushed the baby to a nearby hospital, where he was treated by the attending doctor. The baby, estimated as kept under to be no older than five hours, w"After he on for 48 hours due to his poor health.observatiwas released from the hospital, I took him home with me," Rahhal said.

"My sister has been taking care of him."

A Child or a Piece of Cloth?

Abu Khaled al-Khatib, a thirty-year-old resident of Salqin, found a newborn girl in front of a home downtown.

"At the time, I couldn't believe that a girl was lying there in the street," al-Khatib said. "At first, I thought she was just a piece of cloth, as there was no crying. We immediately took her to a clinic to get her treatment, as the weather is cold here."

Al-Khatib continued, saying that the girl lives now with a family who, after giving her a name, treats her like one of their own despite the fact that she has been unable to obtain official identity papers, when his wife angrily cut him off. "I'm the one who is in charge of feeding and raising her! She's going to be one of my children," she said.

"She will stay with us," al-Khatib said. "We will register her as one of our children after a few years when there's no hope of knowing who her parents are."

"Of course, I will register her locally but not in the official civil registry, since we live in the liberated territories [under control of the opposition] and we cannot travel to the regime-controlled areas," he said.

Ahmad al-Suha from Idlib city faces the same situation. He also stumbled across an abandoned infant left in front of a mosque in April 2019. He immediately took the boy into his care.

Al-Suha put out an ad in an attempt to find the boy's family, but no response came. "My wife and I decided to adopt him; we named him Omar," he said. "He has become one of my children and I am going to make sure that he is afforded all of his rights, like the rest of his siblings, in terms of his upbringing, education and even inheritance [in Islamic law, inheritance only goes to blood relatives and spouses]."

Al-Suha and his family are not the only ones to take in children that they've found by chance. Khaled Jarjanazi, a man from the Jabal Zawiya area in Idlib province, also took in a baby he had found with his son and brother on their way home. They found the baby alone, placed in a half-open piece of luggage left at the entrance of their village.

"When we moved the bag, we heard a baby crying; it was probably just a few weeks old," Jarjanazi said. "I notified the police of the incident. They began conducting medical tests on the child."

Since then, Jarjanazi and his wife decided to take care of the baby girl. However, he has not been able to register her with the civil authorities or obtain identity papers for her.

Poverty is the Origin of Problem

Noor al-Salem, a human rights activist in Idlib province, attributes the recent increase in the abandonment of children to "poverty and early marriages," as well as to "illegitimate relationships and the exploitation of women."

Further, the types of marriages in northern Syria can be a contributing factor to the abandonment of children and their inability to obtain official registration papers.

"Marriage cases in the north are divided into two types," Hallaj said. "The first is the marriage between two Syrians. In this type of case the abandoned child would be of unknown parentage. As for the second group of marriages, Syrians marry foreigners and are not granted identification documents for their children or registered in the civil registry." Based on interviews conducted for this report, those mothers who had left their babies on the streets and in public places seemed to be forced to do so due to extreme poverty.

With little support from local organizations, some mothers have no other option but to abandon their children, with the hope of being taken in by a better caregiver than the mother, said Umm Yousef, a woman in her thirties originally from the countryside of Homs province in central Syria, who had to give up her baby.

Poverty and destitution are particularly severe when the husband is absent. In Saraqib, a city in Idlib province, a widowed mother named Hana (a pseudonym), laid her infant child in front of a medical facility and walked away.

In a private interview, Hana, a high school graduate, said she was displaced from the northern Hama countryside with her husband in 2017. Her husband was in the ranks of a military faction and died fighting regime forces on September 10, 2018. She stayed in Idlib while attempting to reconnect with her family in the northern Hama countryside but was unable to reach them.

Three months after her husband's death, Hana went to a free maternity clinic and gave birth to a boy. Soon after, she was forced to marry another man to support her and abandon her child.

She placed him in front of a clinic and watched him from a distance until he was picked up by a guard.

She described the experience as "one of the hardest moments; a mother leaving behind a part of herself after carrying it for nine months. The conditions we live in during the war and the unbearable poverty mean the child's living conditions might be bad because I'm unable to fulfill our most basic daily needs."

She added that abandoning her child is the "worst possible situation a mother could be in."

Hana's child is about nine months old today, according to pes he is healthy. "My circumstances her estimate. She hoim and raise him. All I won't allow me to take care of hope is for a day to come when I can meet my child again in a better setting," she said. "I hope that the family that took the child raises him well and provides him with daily necessities, and that my case is the last one where hers are exposed to these harsh conditions."

But similar conditions were precisely what prompted Umm Yousef to also give up her baby. She lived with her mother in a displacement camp in Saraqib before marrying a member of one of Idlib's armed opposition factions. He died a year and a half later, leaving Umm Yousef six months pregnant, alone and at a loss about what to do next.

She had no idea how she would provide for the child, or raise a newborn who would never know their father or relatives, she said. "Giving birth was one of the hardest moments, bringing a child into this cruel world. I had no other choice but to leave him in front of one of the mosques and watch over him while another family picked him up. After that, I left the city and headed towards the camps near the Turkish border."

She has lived separated from her baby for nearly a year now and doesn't know where he is. All she knows is that by being away from him, she is missing a part of herself.

Legal Impediments

According to Article 485 of the Syrian Penal Code, those who abandon their children will be imprisoned for a period of up to 15 years. The law reduces the sentence for the child's mother if she does this "compulsively or to protect her honor [in the case of pregnancy and childbearing outside of marriage]." According to the first article of the Legislative Decree No. 107 of May 1970, a foundling child is defined as a "child who was found and whose parents are not known." However, there is room for legal ambiguity, as Syrian law makes a distinction between foundling children and those whose parents are unknown. In the former, it's assumed that the father is Syrian and thus the child is eligible for Syrian citizenship. In the latter, the father is either foreign or is unknown. Additionally, in the absence of evidence of a legal marriage, the child is put in the second category and is ineligible for Syrian citizenship.

Muhammad Qadri, a lawyer from Idlib, explained that when an abandoned child is found, several measures are taken. First, the child is transferred to a hospital and examined by a specialist. Then the opposition-affiliated Free Police force investigates the identity of the child's parents before making a decision on their case.

Under certain conditions, Syrian law allows those who find an abandoned child to raise and care for it. However, single men are unable to take guardianship of abandoned

children; the law mandates the presence of a woman who can care for them.

Before all of this, however, the child is given a special registration in the civil records reserved for orphans and classified as "foundling" by a judge. The child's mother and father are assigned two hypothetical names and declared dead. After that, they are handed over to be raised by whoever claims guardianship or are transferred to an orphanage.

In Idlib, the Sharia Commission of the Unified Court maintains that these children cannot be adopted into the families who take legal guardianship of them; rather, they can only be raised and cared for until they reach adulthood. These children are registered but held in a separate category until their parents bring the necessary documents which confirm their lineage. Otherwise, they remain legally registered as "foundling" and receive a separate name from the family raising them.

A Loss of Identity

Both children with unknown parents and foundlings face a severely negative stigma, due to the belief that they are the product of extramarital relationships. They live in private homes and are denied a lineage and social identity that other Syrians can claim, according to the Damascus-based sociologist, Suha Arafa. This "makes the child live in a state of loss of identity and societal persecution. Unfortunately, this phenomenon has been on the rise over the past few years," she said. With cases of abandonment on the rise, the "unknown parentage" law was proposed in 2017 and was brought to the Syrian People's Assembly (Parliament) the following year. The proposed law aims to ensure that abandoned children receive the same treatment as orphans. Under the new proposed law, the child would be issued a birth certificate and would be registered in the civil registry.

It would be provided a middle name and Syrian nationality and would be registered as Muslim if their religion is unknown. However, the proposed law has not been approved yet. Further, its implementation in areas controlled by the opposition, where marriages are not recognized by the state and thus many children remain outside of the civil registry, remains a challenge. "Despite their exceptional humanitarian situation, there is no legal way to document [the abandoned children's] names in civil records now," said lawyer Muhammad Khalil, "especially that the liberated north has become permanently separated from the government civil registry since it was transferred to government-controlled areas in Hama province." "We are in the midst of a colossal humanitarian catastrophe; the number of [abandoned] children is always multiplying," Khalil said.

Youssef

A man found Yousef under an olive tree at 3 in the morning on June 6, 2019; he was only a few hours old at the time. It remains unknown who left him by the road between al-Haramain refugee camp and the city of Azaz in the countryside of Idlib province.

Today, Yusuf is five months old and lives with a family who was displaced from Homs.

Hind

Hind was found by a 40-year old woman in one of the villages in northern Aleppo on January 25, 2019.

The woman welcomed her into her family, and named her Hind. She was found wrapped in a blanket, with her umbilical cord still attached.

SHORTLISTED STORY

21st Century Slaves

Olatunji Ololade (Nigeria)

Olatunji Ololade, Associate Editor, The Nation, Lagos, Nigeria, is a multiple-award-winning journalist, newspaper columnist, and newsroom manager. He has reported war, emergency situations across Nigeria, Cameroon, Liberia, and Cote d'Ivoire. He is a recipient of 31 journalism awards spanning the UN Migration Reporting Prize, CNN/ Multichoice African Journalist Award, Wole Soyinka Prize for Investigative Journalism. He is a 3-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 is Adjunct Faculty, Pan Atlantic University (PAU), and an alumnus of Thomson Foundation (UK). He is also an Adjunct Faculty at the prestigious Pan Atlantic University (PAU), and an alumnus of Thomson Foundation (UK) and the United States IVLP fellowships.

21st Century Slaves

By Olatunji Ololade
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- *Tragic fate of Nigerian girls sold to servitude in Oman, Lebanon*
- *Over 300 girls are stranded in Ivory Coast as sex slaves – Returnee*
- *20,000 girls forced into prostitution in Mali – NAPTIP*

Growing up, Zainab wanted to be an actress. She yearned to "write stories and act them." She lived for her dream even when quick with monsters. Then she grew up as all adults do, in time, to a sort of apprehension: that a little girl's dreams, like a dismembered doll, may unfurl buried in quilted sleep. Ultimately, it gets tossed in the dump. Thus her imperative for a backup dream; Zainab decided to be a hairdresser.

It's two decades from childhood and the 25-year-old has startled to knowledge. Zainab is a hairdresser now. From her remote base in Ijegun, Lagos, she recounted her forays into acting. But contrary to her fantasies of bliss, she would act as a prostitute and live as a sex slave, in a grisly reality that ran too deep.

Her "journey to hell" started several years after her parents' separation. Zainab moved in with her aunt in Abuja as a young adult. There, she learnt hairdressing but the need to raise money to pay for her graduation and buy her equipment put her under severe pressure.

Enter "Mr. Ben," a travel agent, like a knight in shining armour. Ben sold to Zainab, a colourful tale of gainful labour and enterprise in Europe.

"He said he would take me to the white man's country, where I would make hair for big people and make big money. But I ended up in Cote D'Ivoire, where I saw hell," said Zainab.

"There, he sold me to Madame Beauty, who forced me to work as a prostitute and sex slave from October 2017 to 2019," she told The Nation in a private encounter.

At her arrival in Cote D'Ivoire, Ben took her to Abobo, a village in Abidjan.

In Abobo, Madame Beauty told Zainab that she had bought her from Ben. "She said

I would work for her as a prostitute for two years for her to recoup her money, CFA 2.1 million," said Zainab, adding that Madame Beauty forced her to drink a charmed water, as an oath binding Zainab to her.

"She warned me not to try to run away or betray her, else I would run mad or die. She then showed me a room in an area they called Tina Ghetto, from where she said I would be operating and that I would be delivering CFA 20,000 to her every day.

"I protested but she requested for a refund of her CFA 2.1 million, which I couldn't raise. She then reminded me of the oath water and its consequences…I charged CFA CFA 2, 100 (an equivalent of N1,200) per customer; and she gave me CFA 500 daily for feeding," said Zainab.

Life in Abobo

Abobo was a purgatory her dreamy heart could make no sense of. It was her turning point, where she morphed to suit the random lusts of gangsters, petty thieves, commercial transporters, street urchins and thugs, widely called "vagabonds;" frequent patrons of her hidden graces at Tina Ghetto.

Zainab broke upon Abobo, taking on the look of every ruffian's fantasy and its fruits. Her base, Tina Ghetto, unfurled before her grisly and dark, like a ravine in a robe of pleated thorns.

She came in search of greener pasture but there in Abobo, several miles from her ancestral home in Osogbo, Osun State, she was paraded like a cow to be milked.

Her madame breathed thunder and fire. The vagabonds leered at her lustfully, cupping their calloused lusts to harvest her kernel.

The joke was on Zainab. "Temi bami (I am doomed); I cried," she said. The truth dawned on her like eternal damnation; sadly, she acknowledged that she had become a sexual captive to a fiendish madame.

The horror she read and gossiped about back at home had become her fate. Her reality. She had become the victim whose pathetic fate hitherto incited from her, the passing tribute of a sigh.

A radiant captive in a dingy brothel, she shed her honour on the fields of shame. Zainab slept with 15 to 20 men during the day. Sometimes 30. Even so, she would not sleep at night. "Menacing, ill-smelling vagabonds" banged on her door, intruding her private space, to ravage her paling body, under her Madame Beauty's eagle eyes, till the wee hours of the morning.

Speaking with The Nation, her voice occasionally drifted and flailed, leaving on the wind, a tinge of regret.

She lamented how reality imposed upon her, reprobate acting skills. To survive, she had to adopt a fictive image and stay in character. To repay her enormous debt, she must strip to her bare flesh and work her supple behind to the bones.

Thus Zainab learnt to live and hustle in the nude. Everyday, she shed her body of clothing and clad in her vagabond patrons' lustful wishes. Her hidden graces unclothed, the vagabonds drooled to her door, mauling and harvesting her womanly fruits, till all's left was a mop of faith and a grain of acheke (also spelled attiéké), in her arid body.

Acheke is a side dish made from fermented cassava pulp (an equivalent of the Yoruba Garri) that has been grated or granulated and it was the staple food for Zainab and her co-hustlers in Tina Ghetto.

Sex Work Not Movies

Acting slatternly takes effort; being a bad actress frequently earned her starvation and severe beating by her madame and her thugs, in her first year. Failure to moan and wriggle right earned her vicious blows from irate clients.

She was slapped, strangled and stabbed by her "customers for not servicing them well," she said, adding that, "On the average, I slept with more than 15 men daily, in order to gross CFA 20, 000, the amount I needed to deliver to my madame. On a particular Sallah day, I slept with over 30 men and raked in CFA 200,000 for my "There was a day she had a case with the Nigerian Embassy officials and I tried to capitalise on that to escape, but it seemed like there was a conspiracy with them, as they simply told me to go and settle with my madame and pay her money. So I resigned myself to my fate and continued praying to God to come to my aid."

Sometimes, the vagabonds would drug themselves and sleep with her thus spending as much as an hour. "On such occasions, I get dry with discomfort and the condom would break. I had to drink salt and water as the only antibiotic that I could afford, because madame Beauty would not give me money for medication or invite a doctor to examine us," she said.

Asides her mandatory CFA 20, 000 daily remittance to her madame, all other money that she made must be submitted to Madame Beauty at the end of each day. Failure to gross the figure earned her severe beating even if she had fallen ill.

Zainab must work through ailment, which imposed greater burden on her to act for the benefit of her clients. Soon, she matured into the act and everything fell into place.

A Strategy of Escape

Everytime time she parted her thighs for a "vagabond" on her creaky bunk in Abobo, Zainab shut her mind to his painful gropes, the 'sickening grunts' and the ruts that he made all over her body. To the young adult, each session with a vagabond was akin to a bestial form of organised rape.

To escape her momentary pain, she often stole back in time to relive her quiet life in Ita Olowokan, Oja Oba, in Osogbo, where she lived with her father and stepmother as a child.

She remembered hauling her bag to Great Eureka Nursery and Primary School, while she lived with her mother in Ikare Akoko, Ondo State. She remembered her teenage pranks and saucy ripostes to seedy jokes by commercial transporters while she hastened to and from Mount Carmel Girls' School, also in Ikare Akoko, as a teenager.

On her dreariest days in Abobo, she cringed from the painful irony of being pummelled and ravaged by random thugs for whom she wouldn't deign a glance, back in Nigeria, and recalled her scenic strolls in Osogbo while the grim jewellery of harmattan glistened on fallen leaf and bow of grass.

She retreated to feel the gold rays of the early sun beams bathe her skin and the roof of her mother's house in a brilliant, sallow glow, just before she departed for school, on most days.

"I survived because I had faith. Faith in the possibility of rescue," she said.

Freedom

In November 2019, Zainab's madame threw her on the streets, claiming she had recouped her money and she was free to go. At that point, she was faced with the choice of continuing with Madame Beauty on renegotiated terms or becoming a trafficker and scout for girls that she could sell into sexual slavery.

"She said the girls would work and make money for me. But I had sworn that I would not enslave a fellow human the way she did to me. She gave me two days to work and raise money for myself towards my next move, but I just couldn't," said Zainab.

Within the period, she met one of the women who came to sell Nigerian food at Tina Ghetto. "The food-seller took pity on me and agreed to shelter me in her apartment."

At that time, Zainab stumbled on Project Ferry, a non-governmental organisation (NGO), run by United States based Omotola Fawunmi, on Instagram. She sent representatives of the organisation her video and they intervened by bringing her home.

"Over 300 girls are currently stranded as sex slaves across Abidjan. Our government should rescue them," said Zainab.

The Lebanon, Oman Connection

Unlike Zainab, Grace, 27, is still struggling to secure a passage back home. She got to Lebanon in August 2019 with the help of an old school mate, Lola. Speaking to The Nation from a safe-house in Lebanon, she said: "I got here through a lady working here (Lebanon). Her name is Lola. She was my old school mate. She told me that there is teaching job here and that I should go and legalize my result in Abuja to apply for the job. She asked me to send N400, 000 as processing fee and that I will balance her up when I get here."

Eventually, Grace sent N300, 000 to Adesakin. "My parents had to borrow the money from a cooperative society and they give it to me…When I got to the airport, one man, Mr. Hamad, came to pick me up and took me to his house. He said that I would be working with his wife as a house-help. I told him that I wasn't here to work as a maid but he told me that he financed my trip to Lebanon; that he paid for everything and I have to work with them," she said.

The Hamads forced Grace to sleep on their balcony, "like a dog" and she protested thus earning herself a severe thrashing. "I told them that I couldn't sleep on the balcony and that is how they started beating me. Sometimes, they would take me to one Mr. Abdullah, who beat me with belt," said Grace.

Things got to a head at the dawn of winter; at the onset of the blistery cold, Grace's master refused to buy her a jacket. "They gave me no jacket, and starved me. I couldn't withstand it. I was sick and bleeding seriously and they did not pay my salary. So, I told them to use part of my salary to get a jacket for me but they ignored me. I didn't wish to die, so, I made my move out of their house very early in the morning on December 27.

Grace and 25 others are currently lodged at the safe house in Beirut – at Project Ferry's intervention – on January 16 after staging a protest.

"It's over four weeks since we have been lodged here. We are tired. We want to come home. We don't feed well and we don't get good medical attention. Most of us are sick we need to go back to our country," she lamented.

True, the plight of the ladies deserve urgent attention; there is Busayo, a heavily pregnant woman afflicted with bouts of an inexplicable medical condition; there is Wuraola, a chronic ulcer patient whose persistent crisis and tears has become a cause of worry to her peers; and scariest of all is the case of severely ill Oyeronke, whose medical condition defies explanation. Recently, she gave her peers and Nigerian Embassy staff a frantic scare.

In a mobile video obtained by The Nation, Oyeronke is seen shuddering with spasms of an unidentifiable ailment. She couldn't move parts of her body and a co-tenant in the safe house is seen massaging the immobile part of her body. Further findings revealed that she suffers such sporadic spasms for at least two hours every time it strikes.

According to Grace, "The doctors do not know what is wrong with Oyeronke. They don't have good doctors here. They just prescribed ulcer drug for her ailment but she was trembling and couldn't move parts of her body".

Ayomide's plight equally incites the passing tribute of a sigh. The young lady was subjected to severe abuse by her Lebanese master. She was made to sleep in the toilet and beaten several times. In her desperate search for freedom, she contacted Project Ferry with whose help she was rescued from her slave master. She is now at her agent's office in preparation for her return journey back home.

Then, there is Monsurat Omolara, who is currently in dire straits in Oman. In an audio recording obtained by The Nation, Omolara complained of being subjected to physical abuse by her master, while pleading for urgent intervention from the Nigerian government. In another recording that has gone viral on social media, Omolara's master could be heard issuing death threats to her. He said he would kill her and dump her body.

In a recent twist to her predicament, her slave master dragged her to Al Khoudh police station in Lebanon, because she refused to work in inhuman conditions, but she was returned back to his house. He subsequently beat her and smashed her phone on the floor, ostensibly to cut her off from her people. Omolara has since being incommunicado.

A Not so Lucrative Venture

Several Nigerian women and girls embark on the perilous trip abroad, deceived by the assurances of highly lucrative overseas employment as domestic workers, hairdressers, or hoteliers given to them by traffickers. Some of them revealed to The Nation that they were shocked to learn that contrary to the promises made to them, there were no high-paying jobs abroad. Instead, they had huge debts imposed upon them.

Some actually pay more than the debts imposed upon them; for instance, Zainab's slave master, Madame Beauty, spitefully revealed to her that she had recouped CFA 3.1 million from Zainab even though the latter allegedly owed her CFA 2.1 million.

Arbitrary charges for food, accommodation, medical care, contraception, and fines are also imposed on the victims by their traffickers and madames thus stalling the their ability to have savings.

Some of the girls, argued a Lebanon based trafficker, knew the nature of jobs they were coming to do. "But when they get here and things aren't as rosy as they expected, they start calling for rescue and attention. If you leave Nigeria to serve as a housemaid in Lebanon, don't expect to live a life of luxury," she said.

'What we should focus on are preventive measures' – NAPTIP DG

Julie Donli, Director General of the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), disclosed that five of the trafficked girls in Lebanon have returned to the country.

In an exclusive interview with The Nation, Donli stated that the rest of them would return to the country in due time. Reacting to the plight of the trafficked girls in Oman, she said: "If there is any case in Oman, they have to make their way to the nearest country. Since there is no Nigerian Embassy in Oman, they have to make their way to the nearest embassy. There is nothing anybody can do about that.

"We have been trying to get approval to station NAPTIP operatives in all the countries where human trafficking is endemic. At least, we can have at least a NAPTIP officer in all the embassies to serve as a liaison between Nigerians there (including victims of trafficking) and the people here."

The NAPTIP boss stated that her organisation has been working to stem the tide of trafficking of Nigerians within and outside the country. For instance, following the conviction of the Lebanese and Nigerian traffickers connected to recently rescued victims, Omolola Ajayi and Gloria Taye Bright, they have been charged to court and are currently detained in Ilorin.

NAPTIP has also secured the conviction of one Rosemary Amarachi at the Federal High Court, Ilorin, Kwara State. Amarachi pleaded guilty and was sentenced to one-year imprisonment and a fine of N150,000 to be paid to her victims, said Donli.

Challenges of a Rescue Mission

Omotola Fawunmi of Project Ferry, revealed that so far, the organisation has facilitated the return of 17 girls to the country.

She said, "One of our greatest challenges is getting the relevant authorities to act promptly or respond when we reach out to them. For instance, at the beginning, we usually reach out to NAPTIP. In the case of Lebanon, we reached out to the Nigerian Embassy in Lebanon and also Abike Dabiri, the Chairman Nigerians in Diaspora Commission (NIDCOM). All our efforts at reaching them were not helpful. NAPTIP was for a very long time, between November and January, not responsive. At some point they complained about not having budget approved yet and so they could not work.

"I had to reach out to a contact in UNODC to get a NAPTIP official to respond to us. In fairness, the Office of the Chairman House Committee on Diaspora did reach out and we have continued to communicate via email. We have sent them a partial list of some of the girls in our care and they have done a letter to relevant agencies, a copy of which was sent to us in the course of the week."

Fawunmi disclosed that two of the ladies in Lebanon received the assistance of NAPTIP to return home a few weeks ago, and are currently at the NAPTIP Shelter. Three more girls have returned to Nigeria at press time, thus increasing the number of returnees from Lebanon to five.

Efforts to get in touch with the Nigerian Embassy in Lebanon proved futile. Consular

Zainab, the diplomatic staff handling the case of the Lebanon girls, persistently evaded questions and calls in respect of the trafficked girls. “I will call back,” she promised on two different occasions. She wasn’t picking calls as at press time.

Going Forward…

Few days ago, NAPTIP revealed that it received concrete intelligence that around 20,000 Nigerian girls have been forced into prostitution in Mali. Many of the girls are working as sex slaves in hotels and nightclubs after being sold to prostitution rings by human traffickers, according to a fact-finding mission carried out by the agency in collaboration with Malian authorities in December 2019.

Authorities in Ivory Coast also rescued 137 children, of ages six to 17, who were trafficked to the country to work on cocoa plantations or as sex workers in the eastern town of Aboisso. The children are from Nigeria, Ghana, Niger, Benin, and Togo.

There have been attempts to calculate the overall value of the smuggling of migrants; human trafficking earns profits of roughly $150 billion a year for traffickers, according to the 2014 International Labour Organisation (ILO) report.

Nigeria occupies a central position in West Africa as a country of origin, transit and destination for victims of human trafficking for labour exploitation and forced labour. Victims are shuttled within and outside the country, into Cote D’Ivoire, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Cameroon, Mali, Niger and Europe in a wide range of industries, including domestic work, mining, stone quarrying, manufacturing, plantations and prostitution.

While the Nigerian government does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking, it is making significant efforts to do so. But the efforts are considered inadequate.

The government is expected to hold complicit officials, including security officials, accountable for trafficking offences.

Adedoyin Okin, a social worker and anti-trafficking campaigner, suggested improved coordination among law enforcement actors, including NAPTIP, the Nigerian Immigration Service, police, and others while supporting independent criminal investigations into alleged trafficking abuses among security officials in the country.

But while such efforts may bear good results in the long run, in the short run, more drastic measures are needed to check the burgeoning trade in humans, or modern slave trade if you like, within and outside the country.

In Abidjan, Nigerian girls are beaten and forced into sexual slavery in brothels administered by vengeful madames. In Beirut, slave masters force Nigerian girls and women to sleep on balconies, like dogs, under staircases and on top of kitchen cabinets.

In Oman, they make them sleep in toilets and advertise them on a website with order numbers and passport numbers. They are eventually sold and purchased like household items or garden implements.

Zainab’s case is instructive; in October 2017, she departed the country, ravishing and bustling with hope for gainful work in “the white man’s country.” But she ended up as a sex slave in Abobo. Two years later, precisely November 2019, she returned, her beauty severely ravaged.

“I am currently being treated for Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs). I have started taking my drugs and I have found work as a hairdresser. My life is picking up. But I cannot go home yet,” she said, with the lustre of a moonlike being truest in eclipse.

She is no longer the punching bag of dangerous vagabonds nor is she the sexual slave of a vengeful madame. But Abobo continually intrudes her peace, like an apparition, whose gruesome pangs flourishes in the ruins of her dreams.

Part 2

The Nation (Nigeria) - April 25, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://thenationonlineng.net/21st-century-slaves-2/

Part 3

The Nation (Nigeria) - May 2, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://thenationonlineng.net/21st-century-slaves-3/

Part 4

The Nation (Nigeria) - May 23, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://thenationonlineng.net/21st-century-slaves-4-how-we-fled-sex-bondage/

SHORTLISTED STORY

Undercover as a Slave (a series)

The New Vision (Uganda)

The series was published in the print version of the New Vision Newspaper and on the newspaper's website https://www.newvision.co.ug/.

Undercover Journalist Sold Into Slavery in Dubai - Part 1

by Vision Reporter

The New Vision - April 10, 2020

Undercover as a Slave Part 2: Journalist in the Dark of Dubai

by Vision Reporter

The New Vision - April 10, 2020

Undercover Journalist Sold as a Slave in Dubai - Part 3

by Vision Reporter

The New Vision - April 21, 2020

Undercover as a Slave Part 4: Journalist Taken to Slave Market

by Vision Reporter

The New Vision - April 21, 2020

Read more:
"Dubai closes slave market after New Vision exposé":
https://www.newvision.co.ug/articledetails/90621

SHORTLISTED STORY

Transgender in Latin America. Unfolded from Otherness (a series)

Valeria Román (Argentina)
Margaret López (Venezuela)
Debbie Ponchner (Costa Rica)
Carmina De La Luz (Mexico)

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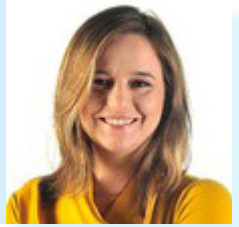

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Transgender in Latin America

El Universal Newspaper (México) / El Tiempo (Colombia)

October 28, 2019

The original publication is available via the following links:

English: https://interactivo.eluniversal.com.mx/2019/transgenero-transfronterizo/index-english.html

Spanish: https://interactivo.eluniversal.com.mx/2019/transgenero-transfronterizo/index.html

Unfolded from Otherness

Written by Valeria Román & Debbie Ponchner

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://interactivo.eluniversal.com.mx/2019/transgenero-transfronterizo/index-english.html

"I'm a survivor," says Yuliana Oviedo, who lives in Avellaneda, a southern province in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She is 55 years old and 1.70 m (5 ft 7in) tall. She makes ends meet by cleaning houses, cutting, and styling hair. She suffers from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and she has encountered several barriers to accessing healthcare. In the 80's, she got pumped—she got silicone injected into her breasts, hips, buttocks, and crotch. After a while, she ended up in the hospital. Doctors initially thought she had pneumonia, yet the black spots in Yuliana's lungs were the silicone that had migratedthrough her body. "When I meet a transgender girl or boy, I urge them to get medical advice prior to any invasive procedure and to do some research," she says.

Yuliana, like other transgender people, has a gender identity that does not conform to what is associated with the sex she was assigned at birth. Yuliana was assigned male at birth based on the appearance of her external genitalia, but she identifies and lives as female. Also, there are cases in which a person who was assigned female at birth, identifies and lives as male.

Transgender people, just like every human being, have the fundamental right to live fulfilled and dignified lives, to education, to health, and to employment. Transpeople are part of the great human diversity. However, they still have to contend with stigma and discrimination in Latin America as they are frequently exposed to violence and harassment, living on the margin of their school, family, job, and health services.

Yuliana is finishing elementary school today. She hopes to start junior high next year. "If my health allows, I hope to major in Political Science." She got off marijuana and cocaine, and left prostitution behind, but—as many other transgender women—she has been exposed to specific social determinants leading to a series of problems that result in an average life expectancy that ranges from 35 to 41 years old in contrast with the 75-year life expectancy of the region according to the project REDLACTRANS (Trans Women Without Borders Against Transphobia and HIV/AIDS) based on partial regional reports.

"It is unacceptable that trans people, as any other vulnerable population group, have a shorter life expectancy. In 2014, Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) member states approved the Strategy for Universal Access to Health and Universal Health Coverage. 'Universal health' is the foundation of a system based on the values of the right to health, equity, and solidarity. 'Universal' means that everyone has access and coverage to comprehensive, quality care, plus it calls to for strengthening intersectoral approaches to the social determinants of health without financial difficulties. This strategy requires both the commitment to transform the region's health systems and a concerted effort to eliminate barriers and improve access," PAHO's Health Services and Access Chief Amalia del Riego said.

Stigma and Mistreatment

Historically, it had been determined that transgender people suffered from a mental health condition as there is a mismatch between their gender identity and the sex they were assigned at birth. In June, 2018, the World Health Organization (WHO) removed categories related to transgender identity from the classification of mental disorders, opting to use the term "gender dysphoria" instead. The United Nations (UN) has emphasized that "pathologization is one of the root causes of human rights violations faced by trans people."

A reclassification made by an institution, however influential, does not guarantee a woke society. Stigmatization has a huge impact on transgender people. According to the REDLACTRANS network—a trans advocacy NGO fighting discrimination in the region since 2004— up to 77% of trans people were kicked out of their house in their childhood. One in four transgender people dropped out of junior high due to harassment by teachers and classmates. Moreover, 52% of trans people faced discrimination in health centers and hospitals. In many countries, administrative personnel, security guards, and even health professionals have not received adequate training to provide appropriate care to trans people which in turn leads to mistreatment and stigmatization. Not long ago, Yuliana remembers when a receptionist in a hospital insisted on calling her by her birth name, but a doctor allowed to change that name to "Yuliana" in her medical record.

Unfortunately, such a touching display of empathy is the exception to the rule. Most of the time, transgender people are not called by the name that matches

the gender with which they self-identify. In other cases, health-care providers link being transgender with living with HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) which in turn leads to greater stigmatization.

Trans people avoid early medical intervention as they have felt stigma from the initial seeking of treatment. They experience fear and most of the time they return to seek medical care too late in the course of their disease, which leads to poorer prognoses. For decades, denial of medical care has led trans people to turn to either licensed treatment in private clinics or illegal treatment as Yuliana did when she modified her body through procedures that lacked both scientific evidence and proof of safety. *(Data vizualization 'Being Transgender in Latin America')*

State of Trans People's Rights in Latin America

Latin American Countries that Allow Gender Identity Change for Trans People. Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Bolivia are the only countries in the region that have gender identity laws – What do they guarantee? (Data vizualization)

Latin American Countries that Allow Gender Identity Change for Trans People Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Bolivia are the only countries in the region that have gender identity laws. (Data vizualization)

Latin American Countries with Changes to Laws for Trans People's Right to Identity Change Mexico, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, and Costa Rica have modified their legal framework seeking to recognize the people's right to change their gender identity. (Data vizualization)

Latin American Countries that Acknowledge Trans People's Right to Sex Reassignment Procedures. (Data vizualization)

The Right to Be Oneself

Still and all, there are indicators that the situation regarding the right to access to healthcare in Latin America is beginning to shift. Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Bolivia—within their federal laws—along with Costa Rica, Ecuador, Colombia, and Mexico enabled trans people to change their name without undergoing gender reassignment surgery. In both public and private hospitals in the region, transgender people can access to medical interventions that have been scientific-based assessed.

There are several procedures that help a person with gender dysphoria to increase the congruence between their gender identity and gender presentation. There is not a single formula. The treatment depends on each individual. Each person decides the possible steps in order to change their body to conform to their gender. Transgender women can choose to go through feminizing hormone therapy, which consists of taking medications to block the action of the male sex hormone testosterone while increasing the female sex hormone estrogen to induce feminine secondary sex characteristics, such as body fat redistribution, reduction of muscle mass and body hair, and breast development, among others. (*Data vizualization)*

Hormone therapy may be combined with surgical interventions, such as breast augmentation, testicle removal, or the creation of a vagina. Trans women may undergo facial feminization surgeries as well to soften masculinized features into a shape more typically recognized as feminine by jaw reshaping, cheek augmentation, and scalp advancement. *(Data vizualization "Femenization surgeries")*

Transgender men can choose to go through masculinizing hormone therapy, which consists of taking medications that increase testosterone which suppresses menstrual cycles and decrease ovarian estrogen production in order to induce physical changes such as facial and body hair growth, body fat redistribution, clitoral enlargement, increased muscle mass, scalp hair loss, and voice deepening, among others. *(Data vizualization "Effects of masculinizing hormone therapy")*

Regarding surgeries, trans men may undergo a chest reconstruction surgery to achieve a more masculine looking appearance by removing their breasts, undergo a phalloplasty for creating a penis or a scrotoplasty for a scrotum. *Masculinization Surgeries (Data vizualization)*

Science and a greater democratic and legislative openness suggest that there could be a change in the near future. Amalia del Riego highlighted: *"Even though there has been some progress in several Latin American countries in terms of expanding access to health services and laws that have extended rights have been enacted, much remains to be done to ensure greater access, without discrimination, to all health services, to absolutely realize the right to health, without leaving anyone behind, bearing in mind both diversity and people in vulnerable situations. Therefore, it is necessary to put an end to stigma among health providers, as well as to enable them to deliver the appropriate care to the transgender population. Stigma and discrimination translates into poor health outcomes and we must eradicate them."*

Trans people such as Yuliana, who lives in Argentina, can already benefit from these regulations. But, without a doubt, it is not enough. Yuliana has been stigmatized and rejected to the extreme that she has risked her life in search of a body that conforms to her genderidentity, yet today she makes an effort to eat as healthy as possible within her limited budget and her energy is focused on finishing the process to obtain an identity document with her preferred name and gender marker and finishing elementary school at 55. "I began my transition as a female at 26. I am proud of myself," she says. Yuliana defines herself as a survivor who has faced stigmatization and rejection from society. Today, her plea is part of the single voice shared by the trans community in Latin America asking for approval and implementation of the gender identity law in the region so that "the right to be oneself does not have to be renegotiated ever again."

Trans Ovaries and the Privilege of Growing Old

Jess Márquez Gaspar (Costa Rica)

Written by Debbie Ponchner / Costa Rica

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://interactivo.eluniversal.com.mx/2019/transgenero-transfronterizo/history-costa-rica.html

San José, Costa Rica. It is Saturday night and as usual, El Jardín de Lolita, a trendy food market in Escalante neighborhood, is full. At the bottom of the garden, under a tree dressed up with twinkling lights, there is a stage, and Jess Mázquez Gaspar is standing on it.

"One day, I spent 45 minutes trying to convince a teller in a national bank that a check was mine. I had to disclose my gender identity, my sexual orientation, the reasons why I had decided to change my name, details about my transition… After almost an hour of talking, we ended up being really good friends…"

With that particular anecdote, Jess begins her comedy stand-up titled "Trans ovaries." In just 45 minutes, with lots of good humor and a tiny bit of pain, Jess explains to the public what it feels like to be a transgender man in Costa Rica. "Being a transgender man in Costa Rica involves educating people on a regular basis. Being a trans man, with a masculine aspect such as mine, but who still has a vulva and a vagina, and ovaries as well… you go through life like a Jehovah Witness, but the other way around: You have to go and explain to each and every person what it means to be a transgender man, plus a lot of stuff that people don't care about."

Through comedy, Jess brings the transgender reality closer to the public. Jess's audience is diverse: transgender, cisgender (people whose gender identity matches the biological sex they were assigned when they were born), homosexual, heterosexual… in the end, just people. The money raised from Jess's stand-up will go to Colectivo Trascendentes, an organization led by Jess and founded in 2018 aimed at providing accompaniment and support for trans people while fighting for recognition, visibility, and full enjoyment of non-cisgender people. Colectivo Trascendentes is also a substitute family for those who have left without one while going through their gender identity journey.

No Tools to Undergo Transition

Jess's story begins in Caracas, Venezuela, where he was born back in 1989. "Gender identity was quite confusing for me. For as long as I can remember, I have always been sure I am male. […] My older brother says that I started talking at two and when I was two and a half years old I began to say that I was a boy, and each and every time my mom heard me saying that she gave me a slap in the face."

Jess was allowed to use male clothing and play soccer in his neighborhood, however when he had to go out in public to attend familiar gatherings, the problems began: Jess's mother insisted that he should wear puffy dresses and patent leather shoes. When he was six, he asked for an Aladdin birthday party and what he got instead was a Princess Jasmine birthday party, costume and all. He spent almost his entire birthday party crying in a corner.

Jess's story is not the only one. His story is repeated over and over again in the transgender community. "Trans people know it since they are very little, I've heard it again and again. Either they don't have the tools or their context is not helpful. They know something is off, that something is different, but they don't know; they can't grasp it; they don't have someone who can guide them, which frequently results in a truth discovered later in their life," explains María José Longhi, Prevention Officer of the HIV/AIDS Costa Rica Project at the Humanistisch Instituut voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking (Hivos). Longhi has been working closely with the transgender community, trans women in particular, the population group with the highest HIV prevalence rate (24.6%) in the country.

Coming Out Twice

College was a major break for Jess. As a Communication student at the Central University of Venezuela, he joined an LGBT+ group, he fell in love—with a woman—for the first time, and he came out as a lesbian. But family issues were not far behind: After several incidents of both physical and psychological abuse and a handful of conversion therapy sessions, his mother kicked him out of his house.

Although it was difficult, Jess already had a professional career and he could move forward with his life—an unusual situation among the transgender community in Costa Rica. A study on HIV and sexually transmitted diseases conducted in 2018 includes a chapter on the trans women population in the country. The study showed that only 14% of the 259 trans women surveyed had completed college studies.

Jess arrived in Costa Rica as a Tal Cual daily correspondent to cover the 2014 presidential elections and since then he has been in the Central American country, the place where he discovered his gender identity thoroughly. The first chapter took place when Jess worked for El Venezolano newspaper. His contract required him to follow specific standards of appearance and so he went to a beauty salon, yet right after he left he had a crisis. At that moment, Jess finally understood that he was not the person he saw in front of the mirror. He ran to the bathroom to undo his hairdo, he wiped the nail polish off his nails, and decided that on his 27 birthday he would present himself to the world with a masculine appearance.

The masculine demeanor was followed by a second coming out boosted by an episode ofthe TV series The L world. "At the start of the third season, there's a character that identifies as female, but later on he comes out as a trans man adopting the name Max. Over the course of the episode, I identified with Max's situation. It was about 2 a.m. and I got up, took my clothes off, ran into the bathroom, and began to stare at myself. I looked at my body with no tits, without feminine hips, and a penis. In that moment, I said to myself 'Well, now you've gone completely nuts.' From then on I couldn't sleep and at 6 a.m. I phoned my therapist and booked an appointment at 7 a.m.

As my therapist sipped his coffee, he stared at me with his tired-looking eyes and said: 'Well, you are dealing with a gender identity crisis. We are going to follow some steps and let's see where they take you.' To identify as a transgender man was like opening the Pandora's Box of all the violence I had been suffering by repressing my masculine self. It was a hard time. Even though I had the support of my therapist, I lost my job, my partner left me, and I even attempted suicide."

The next step was to begin a masculinizing hormone therapy. "A hormonal therapy is aimed at reaching similar cisgender—people whose gender identity is congruent with their sex assigned at birth—hormonal levels," explained the Head of the Endocrinology Department at San Juan de Dios Hospital, Alejandro Cob, who has recently treated over 60 patients in his private practice.

However, Jess had to save enough money to undergo transition. He was able to start transitioning in January 2018 and since then he has been under treatment with the male hormone testosterone. A year and a half later, Jess is able to grow facial and body hair, his back has widened, and his hips have narrowed. Luckily for Jess, his menstruation has stopped completely.

Hiding Your Identity in Exchange of Health Care

But not every transgender person can have access to a private treatment. "You hear trans women talk about birth control pills, about self-medication with hormones," Longhi says. Doctor Cob is aware of the situation. *"I think that transgender people are a population group that had been left on their own, self-medicating with treatments that are potentially dangerous,"* he says.

Legal actions had unprecedented results in the issue. After writs of amparo were filed at the Constitutional Chamber against the Costa Rican Social Security Fund (CCSS) demandingattention to this population, the institution decided to implement a treatment protocol for trans people which came into action this year.

The protocol exclusively comprises hormone therapy and psychological or psychiatric accompaniment of the patient. It does not cover surgeries. Even though the protocol is already available, the Endocrinology Department at San Juan de Dios Hospital has not experienced patient overflow. It is possible that those who need the treatment do not know about the protocol nor that they have the right to its access.

More often that not, access to healthcare is denied to transgender people, assures Cob and Longhi agrees. Longhi has worked with several trans women that feel—or rather they are made feel—that they live in a sub-society, that they do not have rights, that they cannot lease a house, or that they cannot go to a public institution, for instance a hospital. 26% of the trans women surveyed in the study conducted in 2018 said they had to hid their gender identity in order to receive healthcare. Transgender people often have to disclose their birth name and attend their appointments matching the sex they were assigned at birth.

But law has changed. Today, trans people can change their legal name to match the gender with which they self-identify. In compliance with a resolution of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, since May 2018, the procedure can be carried out for free in the Civil Registry. To date, 450 people have already changed their name.

The law applies to foreigners as well. In April, Jess Márquez Gaspar became the first foreigner to obtain the Costa Rica Foreign Resident Card (DIMEX) matching the gender with which he self-identifies: male.

The Privilege of Growing Old

It is Wednesday night. The Teoré/tica's small room is crowded. About 50 people are in the cultural spot that probably used to be the living room of a private house decades ago. The audience is diverse: cisgender people, homosexual, heterosexual, but mainly trans women. The neighborhood is not a stranger to them. Some of them spend their nights in the street corners looking for clients, but this particular night they have gathered to share their stories. It is the launch party for the book Atrevidas, relatos polifónicos de mujeres trans (Bold, Polyphonic Narratives by Transgender Women) written by Camila Schumacher comprising the stories of about 30 trans women who are members of the Transvida organization.

While the stories were published anonymously, with each identity hidden behind the author's pen, tonight the stories return to their protagonists, such as Cassandra. She goes to the front of the room. She has short hair and she is wearing jeans, white shirt and white sneakers too. She sits in the couch, crosses her legs, and reads.

"I don't cross dress anymore. I don't wear wigs and I wouldn't wear high heels again. Not anymore. But don't get confused, I'm a woman. I feel like a woman and I'm sure about it, in my heart and in my mind. Where it matters, right?"

In Latin America, transgender people have an average life expectancy of 35 years, however, in Transvida there is a group of trans women over 50 who call themselves

'elderly women.' Cassandra is one of those 'elderly women' who had to live in a Costa Rica more hostile towards trans women. Being arrested for being on the streets was common and once a restaurant denied her service, even when she had the money to pay. A Costa Rica where a book about transgender women would hardly be published.

"Growing old is not easy for anyone, not everyone ages well. For us, trans women, it's harder. For us, growing old is a privilege denied to many. This is to survive, to endure."

Context Hostility

That night, Cassandra is convinced she is a survivor. Despite the joy that the published book brings to the Transvida gals, they are sad too. One is missing. Alondra is gone.

Alondra passed away over a month ago. She was the head and mentor in Transvida, the trans woman who represented them at the 22nd International AIDS Conference (AIDS2018) that took place in the Netherlands. Alondra is gone now.

"She was a woman with HIV who had began her treatment, stabilizing her condition, who had also joined a Central American HIV organization," says Longhi. "She created a trans women group in Guanacaste (a North Pacific province in Costa Rica). She was devoted to her job, she even did the follow up of HIV-positive people," Longhi adds.

But one day, Alondra decided to return to Guanacaste. She quit her job at Transvida and she left. There, says Longhi, Alondra spiraled into a cycle of drug abuse, returned to sex trade, abandoned her treatment and rejected all help. After a while, we were able to bring her back to San José, where a couple of days later, on June 9, 2019, she died in the hospital. She was 38.

"Alondra's story is proof that for a trans woman, even if she has accompaniment, even if she is empowered, even if she has information, even if she has been a supporter for others, the context is so hostile that trans women won't recover altogether. There are trans women who make it, but not all trans women do," says Longhi.

While society and laws change, trans women and trans men, such as Cassandra and Jess, must find the strength to live and survive. Strength to change their current situation for them and for future generations. The resilience and support they give to each other are their main tools.

Backwards Transvestite… That's How I Felt

Written by Valeria Román / Argentina

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://interactivo.eluniversal.com.mx/2019/transgenero-transfronterizo/history-argentina.html

Streets Full of Hate and Transphobia México

Written by Carmina de la Luz / México

The original publication is available via the following link: https://interactivo.eluniversal.com.mx/2019/transgenero-transfronterizo/history-mexico.html

One Injection Away from Happiness: Denangel Meza Venezuela

Written by Margaret López / Venezuela

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://interactivo.eluniversal.com.mx/2019/transgenero-transfronterizo/history-venezuela.html

SHORTLISTED STORY

The Jungle of Kid Killers

Xavier Aldekoa Morales Medina, 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.

Alfons Rodríguez is a documentary photographer and videographer. 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 works have been published in several international media like National Geographic Magazine, Le Monde Diplomatique, Der Spiegel, La Repubblica, Vogue, Geo, Traveler CN, The Courrier, 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 works have been awarded internationally and captured in several books, just as exhibited in cities around Europe, America and Asia.

The Jungle of Kid Killers

By Xavier Aldekoa, Alfons Rodríguez
Revista 5W - February 18, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.revista5w.com/who/la-selva-los-ninos-que-matan

English translation

Rodrigue and Heritier are light and shade of the same resentment. At twelve, Rodrigue is personal guard of a militia leader of a militia in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). He enlisted for one sole purpose: to kill his father's murderers. Heritier use to be also a child soldier from the same rebel group, but managed to escape X years ago. Now he struggles to erase a lot of pain from his life.

Text: Xavier Aldekoa

Rodrigue's favourites in this world were beans with rice, soccer games and dead Rwandans. The smell of beans excited him. When her mother Clodine cooked, the aroma of boiled legumes slowly rose up the slope of Ngenge, a small village of one hundred and ten houses nestled in a clearing in the middle of the Congolese jungle. Sometimes, if she lit the fire early, the fragrance mixed with the mist and settled on the top of the trees as if the smell came from God's kitchen. Rodrigue adored his mother's beans and rice so much that he had learned to hate them. The same happened to him with soccer or his favourite subjects in school, Geography and French: he loved and hated them at the same time, for they evoked a happy past that would never return. Rodrigue was twelve and had a dream that did not match his age: he wanted to kill. Or even further: assassinate, eliminate, dismember, execute, stab, strangle, beat up and torture the men who one damn night blew open the door of their hut with a kick and shot his father dead. Rodrigue explained this episode in this way: his father had plenty of time to escape because the armed rebels preferred his mother, Clodine, instead of him. While she was stripped naked, the father could have run to save his own life as Rodrigue had done running with his three-year-old brother towards the forest. But he stayed in the house to try to avoid the rape of his wife. He paid the price. They killed him. Since that precise moment, Rodrigue has not decided yet whether he loves or hates his mother's beans. He loves the scent, but at the same time it reminds him

of a time when he was just a child. Not like now, now he is something else: a child soldier. A child soldier in the Congolese jungle, on a mission. “One day I will find the people who murdered my father and avenge him. I will kill them”.

A Sip of Mango Juice

Rodrigue has thirst for revenge. He always wears a red hat cut down to the eyebrows, a FC Barcelona shirt and an old kaláshnikov rifle crossed from shoulder to hip. He has not dropped it in four years. Rodrigue decided to enlist just a few days after the murder of his father. It perpetrated by the FDLR, a rebel group made up of those responsible for the 1994 Rwandan genocide who fled to the DRC (then known as Zaire),. Despite resistance from his widowed mother, the boy joined the Action for Change Movement (MAC), one of the more than forty armed militias in eastern DRC. He was then nine years old, but soon gained the trust of the group. Today, almost four years later, he is a soldier among them. he forms the personal guard of General Etienne Mbura Matondi, the leader of the MAC, together with his friend Gloire, of the same age. His job has only one rule: he must give his life to protect him.

Now Rodrigue’s life happens two steps behind that rough man, with piercing eyes and calloused hands. General Mbura is a tough guy. He has a wide nose, thick lips, and the watery gaze of someone who too often smears battle scars with cheap liquor. He uses mistrust as a form of survival. During eight months of talks to arrange our visit to his camp, in an unknown part of the jungle, he changed last-minute the dates of the trip up to four times. The meeting place, away from any road or path where a motor vehicle could reach, was never precise. He barely slipped the name of a neighbouring village, a direction to walk through the canopy of the forest and the promise that his men would find us first. He kept his word.

General Mbura is also a strict man. At Ngenge village, everyone praises his courage in battle, his ability to lead around 3,000 men from the region, and deny, perhaps less emphatically, that in exchange for his protection, they are forced to work in a nearby gold mine owned by the General. Mbura claims that thanks to him the local population can live in peace, but the military way he refers to his soldiers does not match reality. Mbura’s army is not an ordinary one. His subordinates form a sort of disorganized militia, at times pathetic, where they all proclaim themselves captains, colonels or lieutenants, they all shout out to any civilian they stumble upon, and no one knows how to follow even a simple military instruction. There is neither discipline nor uniform: Soldiers wear torn T-shirts, leaky pants, and rotten sandals or slippers. A ridiculous militia too: one of its captains wears a wolf-shaped hat with a Dalinian moustache on the tip of its nose.

General Mbura is also a smart guy. He immediately knew how to get something valuable from Rodrigue and Gloire’s shattered innocence. Two weapons of war. He adopted them.

— Now I am his father. But I haven’t recruited them, you know? It was anger. Do you see them? They are angry. If an NGO comes looking for them, there would be no problem; I have no interest in them being here. I help them because I work with them.

When the general speaks, Rodrigue fixes his eyes on nothing, as if he is not listening. He does not even react when the rebel chief assures that the other adults treat the children of the militia well and they constitute a big family. He also ignores the insults or the attacks that, after each night of alcohol and excesses, the other soldiers unload against the minors. Rodrigue does not even blink when General Mbura forgets the exhausting and absurd military training, in which they must imitate the noise of the shots in order to save bullets, or his refusal to let his two minor bodyguards go to school.

In four years, Rodrigue has had time to learn that submission is his personal shortcut to survival. So, he follows orders. Whatever. On the day marked for our first meeting, we waited for the General in a wooden house on top of a hill. He appeared late at night, drunk, tottery, and escorted by the two children,. On the table, as a compliment, we had placed several bottles of soda. Mbura smiled gratefully and reached for a mango juice. Before drinking he darkened his gaze and abruptly ordered Rodrigue to try it first.

—Just in case you try to poison me.

Rodrigue obeyed without looking up and sipped from the bottle, barely a sip.

Broken Lives

The DRC lives in a suspended war seventeen years after the official end (Pretoria Agreement, 2002) of a civil conflict that shattered its guts. It is a latent, low intensity war, where nobody fights for victory but to maintain a militarized, almost predatory economy that needs blood to continue operating. A cheap and grotesque war, with second-hand weapons and soldiers in flip-flops ready to kill each other for a few coins, and where no one fights for ideals but for a piece of the cake. A war where rebel groups fight each other and terrorize the civilian population to control territories and loot the country’s mineral wealth. A profitable war that confirms a maxim: failed states are the paradise of global neoliberalism. A war where child soldiers such as Rodrigue are mere links in an international chain of plunder, in which mining or technology multinationals, arms dealers or unscrupulous businessmen from Moscow, Zurich, Kigali, Washington or Beijing are enriched by the benefits coming from coltan, gold or cobalt stained with the blood of others.

It is a war of hollow and dangerous hopes. Because in Eastern DRC, where education is destroyed and impunity and unemployment are the norm, endless war does not only bring economic benefits; it also gives meaning to broken lives.

One night, Rodrigue approached his mother’s hut to spend time with her. They

hardly spoke, but the boy sat beside her, in silence, and watched her cooking herbs and roots in a metal pot. She replied with furtive glances at her son —the third of her six children alive— and asked him to leave the gun at the door.

- When I see him with weapons, I go into a I tell him that he is still too young to be a soldier. But he says, “We have nothing.”

Rodrigue became a child soldier for those three words. “We have nothing”. To be able to stop saying them. Because for children like Rodrigue, with no future or exit, the promise of fidelity to a rebel group is not only the most feasible way of staying alive; the kaláshnikov brings something more important: an identity and a vital objective. On the day his father was killed, Rodrigue became just an orphan. Now he had something: an AK-47 and all the hate in the world.

That resentment, in addition, saved the fear of him. The first time he entered combat, Rodrigue killed a man in the bushes, and he did not even feel grief or fear. He couldn’t feel a thing.

- When I went to war, I was not afraid because I had a target. I came back safe and It was a long fight. That first time I only felt hate There was no fear in my heart.

It is not a secret. Child soldiers are the best assassins: they are cheap, subject to manipulation, and easy to replace when, blinded by hatred or unconsciousness, they allow themselves to be killed in the first line of fire. The international weapons industry knows it. That is why it manufactures small arms and light weapons that fit better kids short arms . Manufacturers invest millions of dollars in designing these deadly weapons that allow children to become efficient participants in the battlefield.

The business is huge: one in every five firearms sold in the world belongs to the Kaláshnikov family . According to the Small Arms Survey research center, most sales are for the most manageable model, the AK-47. more than seventy million of this assault rifle have been produced Since it was designed seventy years ago,.

The gears of this industry will not stop shortly. Based on UN reports, the number of child soldiers almost doubled in the last five years and reached 30,000 cases that could be verified. However, the international body suspects that the real number is much higher. They already know who is behind these figures. According to their latest report on childhood and armed conflict, at least 56 armed groups and 7 state armed forces use children in their ranks. They also know where they are. In the past three years, more than 17,000 minors have been released from rebel groups in the DRC.

Forgiveness and Mercy

Heritier Jackson was one of those released child soldiers. he fought side by side with General Mbura and the rest of the MAC guerrilla from the age of eleven till he was fifteen. He participated in their massacres until one day when he said enough and decided to flee. One night, He turned himself in at a UN mission base in the DRC asking for protection and presenting ten cartridges he had stolen the night before as proof of being a child soldier. They brought him by helicopter to the city of Goma, where he lives today with his aunt. At first, the woman feared him, but now she is fine with him around. Heritier has just turned seventeen and is shy. He does not look like a boy trained to kill. He shakes hands gently, smiles when jokes are cracked, and lowers his voice when he talks about his life as a child soldier. Even now, more than two years after his desertion, he still fears the militia will track him down.

Heritier remembers the endless workouts from his days in the jungle, the cold, the hunger and the beatings. Also, the hatre. His child soldier story also begins with death. A rebel group —he does not even remember which one— attacked his village, killing and raping dozens of people. Heritier lost his older brother, his idol, and his cousin. So, he enlisted.

After a few weeks, just eleven years old, Heritier became a murderer. It was during their first combat. Christmas Day.

- We were ambushed and the fight Gunshots were heard everywhere. That day I saw many friends dying. Too many. I picked up the gun and saw someone moving through the vegetation. I shot. He was a kid.

As he finishes recounting how he killed for the first time, Heritier lifts his pant leg as if to explain that he was injured in Saturday’s game and shows a scar.

- They also shot me.

When recalling his past, Heritier recounts the harshness and ill treatment, but he also conveys a certain pride of camaraderie and even a level of gratitude to General Mbura. He remembers the day that, during a combat, they were about to take him prisoner and his boss saved him.

- He fired many cartridges for me. They ran.

Twice a week Heritier attends capoeira classes as part of his reintegration plan. The dance-fight of Brazilian roots allows him to release tension, socialize and have fun without the need for physical contact. It is important that there is not such. He still has uncontrollable outbursts of anger. In other sports, such as soccer, a kick or a push could suddenly make him want to kill his opponent. Heritier says that he no longer feels hate, only fear. He is afraid of not finding a job and having to return to the jungle to be a soldier. He also feels a huge emptiness. When this happens, he approaches the shore of Lake Kivu to look at the horizon, empty his mind and stop thinking.

- I wasted I regret having lost my childhood there. For what? To kill the enemies that killed my brother? During that time in the rebel group they taught me to shoot, to kill. That’s it.

In front of the swing of the lake, sitting on some black stones on the shore, Heritier remains silent for long. Suddenly, he spits out words as if they came from the depths of his soul. A torrent of inconsolable pain where tears are not even needed. As if, at that precise moment, the murderer and the victim of his past were merging into the same outcry for forgiveness and mercy.

- I regret not going to I regret the war, having almost died, having killed. I don't regret killing the FDLR, but I do regret killing my brothers, my people. I regret having done things that I didn't know I would be able to do.

Days before, Rodrigue had leaned his rifle against a tree to chat about Messi and how he longed for childhood games with friends. He explained that in the rebel group he was no longer allowed to play. Sheltered by the lushness of the jungle, he wished out loud.

- In the future I would like to live in a big city, where you know that nobody will come to attack you at night.

Before leaving the shore of Lake Kivu and returning home, Heritier also crossed his fingers about his future. He chose other words, but he said exactly the same.

- I don't know what the future will be, but I feel good here in the city, where no shots are heard.

"It was really difficult to rate the shortlisted submissions because all of them addressed equally important topics, with high journalistic quality."

BARBARA TRIONFI

Executive Director, International Press Institute
Jury Member of the Fetisov Journalism Awards

EXPERT'S MESSAGE

STUART LAIDLAW

National Representative – Communications, UNIFOR (Canada)

Expert Council Member, Fetisov Journalism Awards

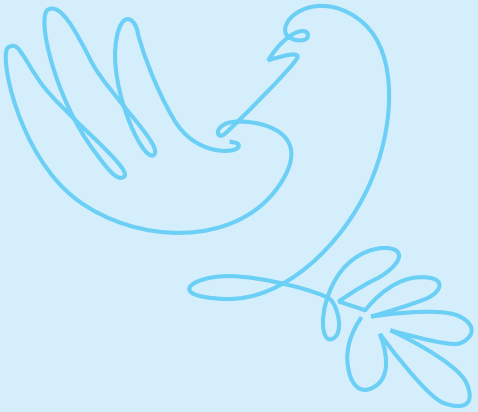
"When I came to going through the award submissions this year, it was incredible to see the level of work that was being done even during the difficult year of the pandemic, whether reporters were covering the pandemic itself or other stories, they were dealing often with difficult situations to begin with, added to that for many of them the conditions of the pandemic, and it was incredible to see what they were able to achieve and just the incredibly high level of journalism being done.

Here in Canada every journalist has had to shift to work from home, including reporters and editors all working in different places after careers built all being in the same room. And they have all really stepped up from what I can see here in Canada as from what I can tell with the awards around the world telling us the very important stories of the pandemic to keep us safe but also continuing to cover their regular stories, making sure that politicians and business people are being held to account and not in any way trying to use the pandemic as cover for any of their acts that they are trying to get away with.

So journalists are really proving through the pandemic year, I think, the value of strong journalism this year, in keeping us healthy and safe as we face the pandemic, but also holding our elites in our society to account, and in doing that they are building a stronger society, they are creating a more informed public, and all of that is just built for stronger democracy, I think, around the world and it has been incredible to see."

A quote from Stuart Laidlaw's speech at the second annual Fetisov Journalism Awards ceremony, 22.04.2021

Outstanding Contribution to Peace



OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION TO PEACE

By Aidan White

Peace journalism is not, as some mistakenly believe, about persistent open advocacy for peace. However, journalism can make a contribution to peace when it reflects the best principles of ethical reporting while developing narratives that give voice to peacemakers and highlight non-violent solutions.

The entries in this category reflect this nuanced understanding of journalism as a progressive and influential force conducive to peace and focused on humanitarian respect for those in the crosshairs of conflict.

One entry, for example, provided a compassionate and thoughtful review of the importance of asylum through the experience of one man's flight from death threats in El Salvador, and his struggle to claim asylum in the United States.

A second traced the role and contribution of women in the uphill struggle to build a viable peace process in the teeth of the long-running and bitter conflict in Yemen. It provided a focus for the authentic voice of peacemaking through the work of women activists.

The winning entries focused on the legacy of conflict, the suffering and experience of victims, and the business of making war.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The First Prize went to the United Kingdom team of Nick Donovan, Richard Kent and Mohamed Aboelgheit for their outstanding investigation Exposing the RSF's Secret Financial Network, which followed the money trail that has nourished one of Africa's most brutal armed groups.

The Sudanese Rapid Support Forces (RSF) are not part of the Sudanese regular army but have their roots in the notorious Janjaweed forces which stand accused of war crimes that have killed at least 300,000 people, which has led to its leaders and former President Al-Bashir being sought by the International Criminal Court.

This is a rare feat of journalism, meticulous and well-researched, and based upon responsibly sourced information.

It reveals how this group has controlled gold mines in Sudan and received cash from the United Arab Emirates, all of which has financed a rogue military outfit guilty of human rights violations, including the killing of more than 100 people taking part in a sit-in demonstration against President Bashir and playing a role in the war in Yemen.

The investigators further traced how the group was financed through a complex network operating both inside and outside Sudan. Using the money they bought and converted 4 x 4 Toyota vehicles and converted them into military vehicles.

As a result of the story the commander of the RSF announced the handover of a gold mine to the civilian government.

FIRST PRIZE WINNER

Exposing the RSF's Secret Financial Network

Richard Kent (UK), Nick Donovan (UK), Mohamed Aboelgheit (Egypt/UK)

Richard Kent has worked as an investigative journalist and researcher covering extractive and energy industries, conflict finance, and commodities for over 10 years, latterly at Global Witness and Argus Media in London.

Richard previously lived in Latin America and the Middle East, where he worked as a Reporter and Editor covering business, energy, and finance for international media outlets. Richard also worked on large climate change adaptation, food security, and development projects across Latin America and Africa, while working at The Centre for Tropical Agriculture in Colombia, and the Environment and Sustainable Development Institute at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon.

Mohamed Aboelgheit (Egypt) is an award-winning investigative journalist. His range of coverage included Egypt, Syria, Palestine, Sudan and Yemen, that he was recently honoured with the UN Correspondents Association Award and Fetisov Journalism Award for his work on arms exports to Yemen war countries. He worked on the files of human rights violations, counter terrorism and Kleptocracy.

Currently he is a senior broadcast journalist for Alaraby TV network, based in London, and he is a contractor with Jordan-based Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ). He is also a well-known Arabic columnist, who had been honoured with the EU-Samir Kassir Award for press freedom in 2014.

Nick Donovan is a freelance investigative journalist, and former Campaign Director of Global Witness.

Exposing the RSF's Secret Financial Network

By Richard Kent, Nick Donovan and Mohamed Aboelgheit
Global Witness - December 9, 2019

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/conflict-minerals/exposing-rsfs-secret-financial-network/

In April 2019, Sudan's social and political upheaval resulted in the removal of President Omar al-Bashir after nearly 30 years in power. Sudan has now entered a new period, where civilians share power with the Sudanese military in the ruling Sovereignty Council.

A militia named the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) is the most powerful paramilitary force in Sudan. At the head of the RSF – and vice chair of the Sovereignty Council – stands a man named Mohammed 'Hemedti' Hamdan Daglo.

Hemedti first rose to prominence in 2003 as one of the leaders of the Janjaweed, a paramilitary force deployed in Darfur which killed scores of civilians.

More recently, numerous witnesses accuse Hemedti's RSF and Sudanese police of massacring pro-democracy demonstrators at a sit-in in Khartoum on June 3rd, 2019, with human rights groups reporting over 100 people killed. These killings fit a pattern of human rights abuses committed by the RSF and their predecessors, the Janjaweed, in Sudan's western region of Darfur (see more below). Hemedti has denied the RSF was involved.

Now, an apparently genuine cache of leaked documents obtained by Global Witness show the financial networks behind Hemedti and the RSF. Not only have they captured a large part of the country's gold industry through a linked company, but the leaked bank data and corporate documents show their use of front companies and banks based in Sudan and the UAE.

Some of the bank and corporate documents were originally published by satirical Sudanese online channel Al Bashoum, while others were obtained by Global Witness in the course of our investigation.

Global Witness has verified the documents using interviews, corporate records, and open source investigative methods including analysis of website infrastructure information.

We have concluded that the leaked documents are, in our opinion, likely to be genuine. In part 2 of this investigation we will publish more information about how we reached that conclusion.

A leaked RSF spreadsheet also published by Al Bashoum reveals how they bought a fleet of almost one thousand Toyota pick-up trucks – easily converted into highly mobile 'technicals' with mounted machine guns – which have been used by the militia to suppress popular uprisings around the country for over a decade.

Video footage taken a few hours before the 3rd June massacre show large numbers of police and RSF militiamen arriving in Toyota Land Cruiser and Hilux vehicles. While we cannot be certain that the vehicles uncovered in this new evidence were the same ones used by the RSF and police on 3rd June, Global Witness has found dozens of videos on social media of similar vehicles – including from earlier shipments – being used to suppress demonstrations, beat and arrest protestors and to indiscriminately shoot in civilian areas.

This briefing provides a rare glimpse into the finances of the RSF, an organisation whose military power and financial independence poses a threat to a peaceful democratic transition in Sudan.

The Rise and Rise of 'Hemedti'

Hemedti grew up in a camel herding and trading clan in Darfur, western Sudan. He first rose to prominence in 2003 as one of the leaders of the Janjaweed, a paramilitary force deployed by former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir in Darfur to suppress an insurrection.

The Janjaweed displaced millions and played a dominant role in a conflict in which an estimated 300,000 civilians were killed. This led to an investigation by the International Criminal Court (ICC). Hemedti was enough of a prominent figure as to feature in the ICC Prosecutor's application for an arrest warrant for President al-Bashir for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.

As violence again intensified in Darfur in 2013, Hemedti led the newly-formed Rapid Support Forces in fighting Darfuri rebels – again with many accusations of human rights abuses against civilians. The RSF incorporated thousands of former Janjaweed fighters. Hemedti reported first to the security services and then directly to al-Bashir – in a parallel structure to the regular military.

Hemedti and the RSF subsequently profited through their takeover of the Jebel Amer gold mines in Darfur. The RSF's provision of mercenaries to fight in Yemen, reportedly paid for by the UAE, also offered another source of revenue.

The RSF were rich enough for Hemedti to pledge over $1bn to help stabilise the Sudanese Central Bank in the aftermath of the economic crisis and protests which led up to the ousting of President Bashir in April 2019.

At that time Hemedti claimed: "We put $1.027 billion in the Bank of Sudan… the funds are there, available now" and that the RSF "supported the state at the beginning of the crisis by buying the essential resources: petrol, wheat, medication."

He went on: "People ask where do we [the RSF] bring this money from? We have the salaries of our troops fighting outside [abroad] and our gold investments, money from gold, and other investments."

The Network of Front Companies and Banks Supporting RSF

Our investigation reveals for the first time the mechanisms enabling the funding of the RSF – and details the powerful grip Hemedti and his immediate family have over the finances of the militia.

This section focuses on the income of the RSF, while the next section focuses on their expenditure. Alongside payment for the provision of mercenaries to Yemen, a key element of the RSF's income comes from their apparent association with major gold trading company Al Gunade. Together, they appear to have effectively captured a large part of the gold market in Sudan. The militia also uses front companies and maintains bank accounts in the UAE and Sudan to receive funds.

Al Bashoum, a Sudanese satirical and anti-corruption Facebook page has published what purport to be bank transaction records, describing them as leaked from 'support companies' of the RSF. The leaked documents, together with official corporate records and archived versions of company websites appear to show that two RSF front companies, GSK – a small technology and security company based in Sudan – and Tradive General Trading LLC, based in the UAE, are both controlled by one of Hemedti's younger brothers. (GSK is no way related or connected to GlaxoSmithKline, the multinational pharmaceutical company).

Tradive seems to have funnelled money into the RSF, while individuals associated with GSK are involved in the RSF's procurement process. The RSF also appears to have close financial ties with Al Gunade, a large gold trading and construction group based in Sudan, owned by another of Hemedti's brothers who is himself deputy head of the RSF.

Below we describe the RSF's financial network in more detail.

Finding #1: RSF finances appear not to be under control of either the Sudanese military or the civilian elements of the country's government

The leaked bank documents appear to show that the Rapid Support Forces hold an account under their own name at the National Bank of Abu Dhabi (now part of First Abu Dhabi Bank). This provides evidence of the financial autonomy of the RSF.

Despite an ambiguous law of 2016 placing the militia under the control of the President as supreme commander of the Sudanese armed forces, it suggests that the RSF might not be under the financial control of the military, let alone the civilian elements of the power-sharing Sovereignty Council.

When contacted by Global Witness a spokesperson for the Sudanese military denied that the RSF had a separate budget from the Sudanese Armed Forces.

First Abu Dhabi Bank, as the owner of, and successor company to, the National Bank of Abu Dhabi, hadn't responded to requests for comment by the time of publication.

Finding #2: Possible front company Tradive General Trading, controlled by Hemedti's brother, is funnelling money into the RSF

The bank documents appear to show money flowing back and forth between the RSF bank account and the account of a company called Tradive General Trading LLC.

Credit notes for Tradive seem to show that it received almost 50 million dirhams (US$11 million) from the RSF in four instalments in April and July 2019. An 'outward customer transfer report' from July 2019 has the RSF bank account being paid 48 million dirhams (US$11 million) by Tradive. Global Witness has seen information from the Dubai Department of Economic Development that confirms Hemedti's brother, Algoney Hamdan Daglo, is a director and an ultimate beneficial owner of Tradive.

In one of the bank documents the purpose of the funds transfer from Tradive to RSF is described as a 'transfer to sister company'. In the opinion of Global Witness, Tradive is probably an RSF front company, funnelling money in to and out of the RSF at least partly in order to obscure the involvement of the militia.

Tradive itself holds an account at the Sudanese El Nilein bank in Abu Dhabi. El Nilein did not respond to a request for comment on its relationship with Tradive.

Despite repeated attempts to contact Tradive by Global Witness, the company has not commented on these findings.

Finding #3: Hemedti and his family have effectively captured part of the Sudanese gold market, and are likely funding the RSF using these profits

Hemedti's rise to power is frequently explained partly by his control of the Jebel Amer gold mines in Darfur, and a gold trading company frequently referred to as Al Junaid. (Letters from the organisation indicate that the company group refers to itself as Al Gunade — the same pronunciation but different spelling.)

Global Witness has obtained a corporate document which, for the first time, provides the precise details of Hemedti's link to Al Gunade.

The Al Gunade gold company is owned by three members of the Daglo family: Hemedti's brother, Abdul Rahim Hamdan Daglo, and Abdul Rahim's two young sons, while according to the document, Hemedti himself is on the Board of Directors.

When approached by Global Witness a spokesperson for Al Gunade said that Hemedti had ended his formal role in the company in 2009, and that the corporate document hadn't been updated. The spokesperson denied that Al Gunade provides any financial support to the RSF but did confirm commercial ties between the company and the RSF. He claimed that certain money movements between Al Gunade and would have related to commercial transactions.

Al Gunade and the RSF appear to be deeply intertwined. Al Gunade's owner, Abdul Rahim Daglo, is widely reported to be the deputy head of the RSF. A Sudanese Ministry of Minerals press release describes a ministerial visit to Jabel Amer, by invitation of Lieutenant Brigadier Abdul Rahim Hamdan Daglo. In former President al-Bashir's corruption trial Abdul Rahim Hamdan Daglo was said, by President Bashir's former office manager, to have received five million euros from the former Sudanese dictator, who handed over the funds in the presence of Hemedti.

Abdul Rahim is also alleged to be partly responsible for the 3rd June massacre. The BBC reported an interview with an anonymous RSF officer that an Abdul Rahim Daglo gave the order to clear the Khartoum sit-in – although the BBC was unable to independently corroborate this claim.

A leaked RSF spreadsheet shared with Global Witness by the Sudanese Al Bashoum Facebook page also suggests close links between Al Gunade and the RSF. The RSF seemingly recorded paying 686,000 Dirham (US $186,000) to wire to an individual for payments to China with a reference to Al Gunade in the same spreadsheet line. Another line of the spreadsheet lists a 50,000 Dirham (US $14,000) payment apparently for the debts of Al-Gunade.

These payments suggest a financial link between the company and the paramilitary group. Evidence of the payments are also interesting in the context of independent reports from Sudanese businesspeople with knowledge of the situation, that the Al Gunade company was in debt in the months leading up to and following the ousting of Bashir – the same financial period covered by the spreadsheet.

In response to a separate investigation by Reuters, the company's General Manager denied any link to the RSF, reportedly saying "Algunade is as far as can be from the RSF."

Al-Gunade has expanded in recent years, perhaps in part due to its apparent relationship with the RSF. The RSF famously took control over the large Jebel Amer gold mining area in Darfur by force in November 2017. A map from the state-owned Sudanese Mineral Resources Company shows that Al Gunade has the only large concession operational in Darfur, in the vicinity of Jebel Amer. The region has some the largest mineral and gold reserves in the country,

according to the Ministry of Minerals.

Al Gunade now operates well beyond Darfur. In addition to Al Gunade's office in Khartoum the SMRC mining registry lists the firm as active in South Kordofan, while interviews with traders indicate their presence in the northern Sudanese gold markets of Abu Hamad and Alabidia.

Recently, according to Sudanese media organisation Radio Dabanga, protests by local people in the town of Talodi, South Kordofan against the excessive use of mercury contamination around Al Gunade mine sites led to a heavy handed response from the RSF, who arrived in Toyota Hilux and Land Cruiser vehicles, reportedly injuring civilian protestors in the ensuing clashes.

In sum, the RSF and a connected company have captured a swathe of the country's gold industry and are likely using it to fund their operations.

RSF Vehicles at Risk of Being Used in Human Rights Abuses Were Bought in Dubai

While the documents discussed above detail some of the sources of the RSF's economic power, another leaked document sheds light on their military power. This power partly derives from their use of highly mobile units of 'technicals' – armed desert vehicles converted from civilian use by welding mounted machine guns on to the back of pick-up trucks.

The leaked RSF spreadsheet seemingly describes how the militia received over 150mn Dirham (US $40 million) 'for technical support' from an unknown source, and used over 111mn Dirham (US $30 million) of that to purchase vehicles and communications equipment.

The document suggests that the RSF bought over 1,000 vehicles during the first six months of 2019, from dealers in the UAE. The shipments included over 900 Toyota Hilux and Land Cruisers, models which the RSF frequently converts into 'technicals' – 4x4 military vehicles mounted with machine guns.

The spreadsheet helps builds a picture of how the RSF have become Sudan's most powerful military force. There is no suggestion that Toyota were aware of the use to which these vehicles have been put at the time of their purchase.

The Spreadsheet Also Reveals Another Probable RSF Front Company – GSK

One payment made by the RSF is described in the spreadsheet as being made on behalf of GSK Advance, an information technology and security company run by Hemedti's younger brother Algoney Hamdan Daglo.

According to the spreadsheet several payments were made by the RSF to (or on behalf of) Algoney directly, or to a network of Algoney's friends and acquaintances who are named in an archived copy of the GSK website as GSK staff members. Some of the line items specify that payments are made by these middlemen on behalf of the RSF (rather than another entity) as part of its procurement activities overseas. Despite repeated contacts, neither GSK, nor Algoney Hamdan Daglo or the middlemen named in the RSF spreadsheet have commented on allegations put to them by Global Witness.

In total, the RSF seems to have paid over 9 million dirhams (US $2.5million) to companies overseas via a network of procurement agents in countries including the UAE, Rwanda, Malaysia and China. Individuals within the network also made visits to Germany, Russia, and the Netherlands, countries to which the spreadsheet shows substantial transfers.

Conclusion

Exposing the workings of the RSF's financial network is a crucial step towards combatting their economic power. If Sudan is to pursue a peaceful democratic transition, it is crucial to ensure civilian oversight of the military spending, and to give the Sudanese people greater control of their own natural resources — that at the moment are dominated by RSF and other security forces within Sudan.

Hemedti sits at the apex of a 'paramilitary-industrial complex'. He controls both a large powerful military force, and an independent source of wealth. Unless he is removed from this dual position, and all military forces are brought under civilian strategic and financial control, he is an obstacle to the transition to civilian and democratic government that many in Sudan yearn for.

SECOND PRIZE WINNER

The Endless War: Iraq's Heavy Legacy of Depleted Uranium

Mizar Kemal (Iraq/ Turkey)

Mizar Kemal is Iraqi journalist, writer and poet. Shortlist nominee for True Story Award 2020. Winner of Professional Investigative Journalism Award 2020 held by NIRIJ in Iraq. Shortlist nominee for Fetisov Journalism Awards 2019 in the category of Civil Rights. Shortlist nominee for Samir Kassir Award for Freedom of the Press 2019 presented by the EU for the category of "investigative reporting". Third-place winner of 2019 ARIJ Awards for Best multimedia piece.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Second prize was awarded to Mizar Kemal (Iraq/Turkey) for his penetrating and shocking study *The Endless War: Iraq's Heavy Legacy of Depleted Uranium*. The report, accompanied by some disturbing and explicit images, exposes how in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War depleted uranium weapons have cast a shadow over future Iraqi generations with increased levels of cancer and a significant rise in the number of newborn children with congenital defects.

The investigation reveals unpublished government documents with grim statistics provided by Iraqi and international doctors and scientists on the impact of radiological contamination resulting from depleted uranium weapons in Iraq.

Many of the pictures – and there is an important health warning at the outset warning of the shocking content – show victims from Fallujah City Hospital, which is one of the Iraqi cities with the highest rates of congenital anomalies.

This is investigative journalism of a high order and it exposes the silence of successive Iraqi governments and their failure to deal with radioactive contamination. Also exposed is the American military in a cover-up over the contamination of sites they bombed with depleted uranium weapons. The US army has refused to make details of the sites involved public – and have not even handed them over to the Iraqi government.

The Endless War: Iraq's Heavy Legacy of Depleted Uranium

By Mizar Kemal
Sasapost, Turkey - December 30, 2019

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.sasapost.com/the-endless-war-iraqs-heavy-legacy-of-depleted-uranium/

In a remote and far village, with no paved roads, and mostly mud-brick houses, 16-year-old Ahmed Daoud goes every day to play football with his friends, in a dirt yard near the palm grove on the edge of the impoverished village of Khalil Al-Husseinawi. But the boys stopped playing for several days in April 2003 because of the heavy shelling of tank and anti-aircraft positions by the Iraqi army in the orchard and around the village (south of Diyala province) to hide from US aircrafts.

After the shelling stopped, Ahmad and his friends returned to play football, and the view of the damaged tanks was not worrying for them; as long as the planes would not return to the skies of the village; but what the young players did not know was that they were dying in the palm grove, in the burning tanks bombed with depleted uranium, and in the dust they inhale running after the ball.

Six months have passed since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, during which much has changed in Iraq, as well as in the village of Khalil Al-Husseinawi, where Ahmad lives with his family, while playing in that dirt arena, Ahmed fell to the ground, and this was his last reign with football, which he would never be able to kick and pass to his friends again.

After many reviews of private hospitals and doctors' clinics, Ahmed was found to have lymphoma, in a video we got from a special source in the Diyala Health Department archive, dating back to 2011, Ahmed appeared as his hair has fallen, and the symptoms of the disease appeared as he talks about his health, which is getting worse day by day, stressing that the doctors he consulted directly attributed the cause of cancer to radiation exposure.

"Our areas came under American bombardment, and six months later I was diagnosed with this disease, I have left my studies, and we don't have the money to get treated, I appeal to the government to help us and get me out of Iraq so that I can be treated".

With these few and tiring words, Ahmed documented his testimony and his illness.

His mother said: "He was in full health before the American bombing, but after that he showed symptoms of fatigue, his feet began to get numb every now and then. Tumors appeared under his armpit, waist and chest, and he was not diagnosed with cancer early, so we could no longer do anything".

Ahmad died in 2011, eight years after being diagnosed with cancer. This video was a sad testimony documenting an urgent appeal to survive, but no one heard, and the government he appealed for to help him, did not lend him a hand, and blocked the only video of him for all these years, before we found it. This story was the beginning of our investigation into the devastating effects of the use of depleted uranium weapons in the 1991 Gulf War, the so-called Desert Storm, the 2003 war that ended with the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, and the entry of the US-led coalition into Iraq.

Ahmad's brother Noman Daoud blames the US military for the death of his brother.

"Our area has been contaminated by radiation from the American bombing; the children who went out to play were all injured. Ahmed was not alone, his friends also had cancer, and many of the villagers" Noman continues: "When Ahmad went to hospitals in Diyala and Baghdad, doctors ask them if they live near army camps or military sites, because tests indicate high levels of radioactive contamination".

Another video we got from private sources in the Diyala Health Department, also from the village of Khalil Al-Husseinawi, shows a group of five women with cancer, talking about the circumstances of the injury, where Sana' Hamad says that two weeks after the bombing of US aircraft went out with other women to the field, thereafter strange symptoms began to appear on them, and when they underwent medical tests found that they had cancer.

We traced all those who appeared in the videos we got, and went to the village of Khalil Al-Husseinawi, to investigate the status of cancer patients there, and to know their fate, but we found no other than the family of Ahmed, who told us about the circumstances of his injury and death. And as for the other women, the residents there told us that they were displaced with their families after 2006 civil war, they have not returned to the village since then, and their fate is unknown, however, they assured us that cancer was rampant in the village and many died of the disease.

Fierce Cancer War

Since the 1991 Gulf War, the high incidence of cancer and birth defects in Iraq has been remarkable, and many international organizations and studies conducted on thousands of Iraqis over the past 28 years attribute this rise to the use of depleted

uranium in the wars of 1991 and 2003 and increased rates of radiation pollution in overpopulated urban areas.

Many requests we made to the Ministry of Health –including Iraqi Cancer Board as well as Planning & Developing of Resources directorate- for their annual statistical reports for the purpose of studying and comparing the numbers and rates of cancer and birth defects in Iraqi cities; every time the ministry rejects our request for reasons that it did not explain, but in the end, with the help of staff from the Planning and Resource Development directorate at the Ministry's headquarters who requested anonymity, we were able to obtain unpublished annual statistical reports for the period from 1991 to 2018.

From 1991 to 2003, the number of cancer patients in Iraq reached 131072, while the number increased significantly after the 2003 war that toppled Saddam Hussein's regime, from 2004 to 2018, 287254 people had cancer, according to the Ministry of Health, but some believe this figure is considerably lower than the actual number of cancer patients.

In his testimony about the impact of depleted uranium weapons, Professor Mohammed Al-Sheikhly, a professor of nuclear physics and former dean of the Faculty of Science at Baghdad University, told us that the actual number of cancer patients in Iraq is close to one million, he adds that he has given the Ministry of Health and the Environment and the United Nations a detailed report on the catastrophic effects of radioactive contamination, where he was part of a research team two weeks after the US-led coalition entered Iraq on April 9, 2003. The team's task was to measure the level of radioactive contamination in areas bombed with DU, as well as military and nuclear facilities that suffered destruction and theft.

Al-Sheikhly, who now resides in Beirut, says he and a team from the Uranium Medicine Research Center investigated sites bombed with depleted uranium from the north of Baghdad to the southern Iraqi city of Umm Qasr, where the border area with Kuwait, in particular, surveyed heavily fortified areas and military facilities which were targeted of large quantities of uranium ammunition as a weapon designed to penetrate armor.

"As we crossed Iraq, we saw the remnants of thousands of armored, burned and destroyed armored vehicles, from tanks, troop carriers, military trucks, heavy artillery locomotives, and others, spread along the battlefields from Baghdad to the far south in Umm Qasr and Al-Fao. All of these shields received devastating strikes from US planes and tanks with ammunition, mostly made of depleted uranium material, these shields spread in the fields and orchards and under the palm and between houses".

What Happens When a Target Is Hit by a Depleted Uranium Shell?

A question we asked to Dr. Muhammad al-Sheikhly, and his response was: "When the projectile penetrates the target's body, 20 percent of the projectile's mass turns into uranium oxides, where it forms with dust and smoke, a cloud that spreads inside and outside the target, and it is capable of killing those in the target circle even if it does not explode or burn, as the percentage of radiation at the penetration site is 30 thousand times more than the normal level, and after penetrating the shell, approximately 60 percent of its body remains in its basic form, the other 40 percent fly in the form of shrapnel from residues and parts, they spread and may cause secondary fires and explosions."

As for the energy of "alpha rays" in the shrapnel, al-Sheikhly asserts that it amounts to about 4.2 million electrovolts, and it is capable of causing ionization capable of destroying the human skin that is caught or touched. These fragments emit radiation at an equivalent dose of 300 millirem per hour.

Al-Sheikhly told us about the results of the field study concluded by the scientific team at the American Uranium Medicine Research Center, and revealed to us four main points that show catastrophic radiation levels, namely:

First: *The high level of radioactive contamination in vast areas of the atmosphere of Baghdad and the regions of southern Iraq, and this level increases in the air in some areas more than ten times the normal level. The radiological readings were higher in the air than in the soil, and this is an indication that the radioactive minutes carried by dust and air are of the exact type that is easy to be inhaled, precipitated and stay in the lung vesicles.*

Second: *It was noted that the uranium fragments left by some explosive releases are spread over a wide area, especially in the fields, what threatens surface water and nutritional and agricultural cycles in addition to the groundwater with time passing. In an area near Basra, one of the shells had penetrated a tank body and entered the wall of an ice production plant, and some shrapnel settled in the main water basin from which ice is produced and used by thousands of people in the summer.*

Third: *The spread of radioactive and toxic exposure to uranium residues among thousands of Iraqis who lifted the engines and tools of infected and burned machinery to sell or benefit from it. The team found that all the machineries and shields examined had their engines and proper parts removed after being bombed and burned. They also found that the radiation level of one of the civilians was a thousand times greater than normal, this is in his hands, face and clothes, in addition to what many children who have fun playing with some shells and their splitting parts have been exposed to. Also, the pollution reached the bodies of the dead soldiers inside the tanks and those who*

were buried near them, where the radiation level in the suit of one of the dead soldiers reached two thousand times more than the normal level.

Fourth: *The occurrence of cases of joint pain, nosebleeds, nervous infections, back pain, visual disturbances and urine burning in the population near the location of the affected armor, which are similar to the symptoms of radiation exposure.*

During the field survey, Al-Sheikhly confirmed that they observed in some locations that the coalition forces was lifting the tanks and the affected vehicles and evacuating them to remote areas, scraping the soil under these mechanisms and replacing them with new soil after throwing the contaminated soil in remote areas. Al-Sheikhly believes that this procedure stems from the knowledge of these forces of the danger of radioactive and toxic pollution which is caused by uranium residues in these mechanisms.

The number of cancer patients from 1991 to 2018 based on unpublished statistics obtained from the Ministry of Health (data vizualization)

In January 1998 issue, the paper journal "Alf Ba'a" published the statistics of the Iraqi Ministry of Health for the incidence of leukemia in Iraq, and then showed a rise that the ministry said it is significant in case of the decline of health services due to the embargo imposed on Iraq under the United Nations resolution 661 issued in August 6, 1990 as a result of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

Statistics covering six provinces in southern Iraq between 1989 and 1995 show that the incidence of leukemia increased from 3.8% to 10.6% in Muthanna province, from 5.4% to 10.3% in Basra province, from 4.6% to 8.2% in Thi Qar province, 4.5% to 7.5% in Maysan Province, 4.8% to 6.2% in Qadisiyah Governorate (now Diwaniyah) and 5.3% to 8% in Wassit Province.

Also in 1998, the United Nations issued a document revealing that cancer rates increased six times after the 1991 Gulf War, According to the document that the increase in the incidence of cancer throughout Iraq reached 55% between 1989 and 1994 and that new types of cancer began to spread in the country, and cancer began to appear in young people.

Radioisotope Nightmare

Data from the Swedish Defense Research Agency indicate in its report submitted to the Swedish Ministry of Defense that the United States dropped a total of 78,214 projectiles of depleted uranium on Iraq in the 1991 Desert Storm War, and the US military's use of depleted uranium in the 2003 war rose to 300,000 projectiles according to the Swedish Agency, stressed the United States ignoring the warnings of the use of this weapon in densely populated urban areas.

The depleted uranium weapon used in large quantities by the US military cost Iraq huge losses, and destroyed most of its military capability and mechanisms. In the 1991 war, the US Central Command announced that the Iraqi army had lost 3,700 of its 4,280 tanks, 2,400 of 2,880 armored personnel carriers and 2,600 of 3,100 artillery pieces.

The destroyed Iraqi military equipment turned into radioactive contaminated scrap metal and was collected in large iron cemeteries near the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border, as well as in several areas of Basra province, as well as in the village of Abu Flus, which is near the largest contaminated military scrap cemetery, in addition, 2,000 armored and civilian vehicles were bombed on International Route 80 during the Iraqi army's withdrawal from Kuwait in 1991, later known as the "Road of Death."

In the 2003 war, there are no statistics on the number of vehicles and military sites bombed with depleted uranium, but what is certain is that the vast majority of them have already been destroyed. To make matters worse, the vehicles – tanks and armor – and air defense platforms were deployed in cities and peripheries and in orchards and remote villages, making them vulnerable to theft and circulation after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime.

Density and distribution of the use of depleted uranium munitions by American A-10s planes, between 20 March 2003 and 15 April 2003 (data vizualization)

After US troops entered Baghdad in June 2003, a team from Greenpeace International Organization assessed radioactive contamination at the Tuwaitha nuclear site, the country's largest nuclear facility, and accused the US military of violating international law for refusing to allow a field survey to find out the amount of radioactive contamination there.

The Tuwaitha Nuclear Research Facility (17 km south of Baghdad), built in the 1960s, consists of a complex of more than 100 buildings spanning 56 square kilometers. This facility was the center of the Iraqi nuclear weapons program. The first activities at this site included several research reactors and activities related to plutonium isolation, waste treatment, uranium mining and neutron initiator development, as well as other activities centered on a number of uranium enrichment techniques.

The facility also includes "Tamouz 1" reactor, bombed by Israel in 1981 in an air strike involving eight US-made F-16 aircraft, in an operation dubbed "Operation Opera" by Israel, which was strongly condemned by the UN Security Council in resolution 487 as the first military attack on a nuclear facility in the world.

In the aftermath of 1991 war, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) removed all known Iraqi stockpiles of nuclear material suitable for use in weapons according to the Security Council Resolution 687. Other radioactive materials, including uranium, were stored in sealed barrels at the Tuwaitha site, It was examined annually by the IAEA under the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

According to the IAEA, in December 2002; 500 tons of "yellowcake" and 1,800 kilograms of low-enriched uranium were still present at the Tuwaitha site, as well as hundreds of high-radioactive industrial sources that remained available in the country.

Tuwaitha nuclear facility after being bombed and robbed, we obtained the video from a special source in the Ministry of Science and Technology.

In a letter to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, IAEA Director Mohamed ElBaradei and World Health Organization Director Gro Harlem Brundtland on July 10, 2003, the Greenpeace team says "Residents of the areas near the Tuwaitha site have seized barrels containing nuclear material known as the "yellow cake" and other containers they needed to store food, water and milk" The residents did not know that the barrels were radioactive and poisonous, and that they put themselves at great risk. According to some witnesses, they saw individuals carrying containers and unloading their low radioactive contents in the soil or in the local water supply networks.

The letter documents the testimony of a local doctor, Ja'far Nasser, who runs a clinic near Tuwaitha site, he said he had treated for five days -after residents took over the site's equipment- about 20 patients, all of whom were poisoned with radioactive substances, developed symptoms similar to those with Acute Radiation Syndrome – bleeding, vomiting, shortness of breath, nausea and rash.

Greenpeace experts took a week to conduct a long survey of the contaminated area. They observed radioactivity in a number of homes 10,000 times the normal level of radiation. In another source outside AlMajidat Primary School which has 900 students, the radiation level was three thousand times higher than normal.

Dr. Kadhem al-Miqdadi, a doctor and researcher specialized in health, environment, radiation pollution and biological damage to the use of uranium weapons told us about depleted uranium, saying: "It is nuclear waste, by-product of the natural uranium enrichment process to obtain the fissionable, highly radioactive U-235 isotope required in the production of atomic weapons and as fuel for nuclear reactors. Depleted uranium weapons also contain radioactive isotopes U-234 and U-238, as well as highly radioactive isotopes U-236, in addition to plutonium, americium and neptunium.

Regarding the limits of radioactive exposure to uranium and depleted uranium, Dr.Al-Miqdadi says that the 1996 Global Nuclear Safety Standards state that an individual's radiation dose should not exceed 1 mSv/year. In certain cases, the effective dose may be allowed to reach 5 mSv for one year provided that the average dose is not more than 1 mSv/year for five consecutive years.

"The empty cartridge (after use) of a depleted uranium shot of a cigarette length, remains radioactive and emits radiation per day equal to or greater than what is allowed for an entire year".

Regarding the radiation levels of uranium shells, Al-Miqdadi asserts that one milligram of the U-238 isotope emits more than a million particles of alpha per day, in addition to beta and gamma rays. The empty cartridge (after use) of a depleted uranium shot of a cigarette length, remains radioactive and emits radiation per day equal to or greater than what is allowed for an entire year.

We asked Dr. Kadhem al-Miqdadi about the biological effect of these rays on the human body, his answer was: "The alpha particles emitted by depleted uranium can affect the synthesis of hypoxic DNA, the changes they cause can lead to cancer within months. In addition, when one particle of these rays settles in a lymph node, it can destroy the entire immune system, resulting in serious cancers and fetal abnormalities".

Al-Miqdadi criticizes the Iraqi authorities' silence on the environmental disaster in Iraq, and he goes further by accusing them of collusion with the World Health Organization (WHO) to withhold the terrifying facts about increasing rates of cancer and birth defects due to radioactive contamination: "The Ministry of Health not only prevented and threatened doctors from giving any information or numbers that reveal the deteriorating health situation, nor by publishing misleading information about it, but also colluded with the WHO to withhold a study by the Finnish scholar Keith Baverstock the Senior expert of radiation protection at WHO, Which included 10800 families from 6 Iraqi governorates and lasted for 3 years, and it has proven beyond any doubt that inhaling the depleted uranium dust particles generates genetic toxic effects on the DNA in the cell, and it spreads by breathing from the lung to the parts of the body through the blood, and causes severe damage to the bone marrow, lymphatic system and kidneys. And in protest against the study's blocking, Baverstock left the WHO."

Genetic Abnormalities

The statistics and testimonies we have obtained show a wide discrepancy between the figures in the annual reports of the Ministry of Health and the numbers of hospitals with regard to the numbers and rates of birth defects, for example, in its 2017 report, the Ministry of Health states that it has reported 85 birth defects in Anbar province (which includes 9 cities), while in a testimony we received from former Fallujah hospital media director Nazim al-Hadidi said the hospital had registered 275 Congenital malformation, this number is in the city of Fallujah alone, as well as in its reports for 2015 and 2016, the ministry did not provide any figures or ratios of birth defects in Anbar province.

In 2004, congenital malformations accounted for 8.9% of all births in Iraq, Baghdad ranked first with 26.5% of the total distorted births followed by Nineveh province with 23% followed by Basra province with 11.7% and Babylon with 6% . The distortions in the rest of the 13 governorates ranged from 1.1% to 5.3%, with the exception of Anbar, which did not have any statistics until 2008 because of the security situation

that was then outside the control of the State and the coalition forces.

According to Ministry of Health figures, the rate of congenital malformations decreased slightly in 2005 to 7.9%. This decline continued in 2006 to 7.6%, then 6.9% in 2007 and continued to decrease in 2008 to 6.2%. Congenital anomalies rank third in the 10 leading to the death of births in Iraq.

In the following years, congenital malformations in births rose dramatically to 7.4% in 2009 and increased to 11.8% in 2010 ,continued to rise in 2011 by 13%, while in 2012 recorded 14.2% and the maximum in 2013 to record birth defects 15.6% of the total births in Iraq, between 2014 and 2018, official statistics from the Ministry of Health cannot be relied on because ISIS has full control over three Iraqi governorates, Anbar, Nineveh and Salah al-Din, and its control over large parts of Diyala and Kirkuk governorates.

In order to know the tragedy closely, we headed to the city of Fallujah, the second largest city of Anbar province, and the most famous Iraqi cities after 2003, and its fame comes from two major battles fought by the US military to control the city in 2004, failed in the first battle, but in the second managed to enter the city after a war that destroyed 70% of the city's infrastructure, and accusations of using internationally prohibited weapons such as depleted uranium, white phosphorus and cluster bombs.

At the Fallujah Teaching Hospital, a special department for congenital malformations was inaugurated, we were prevented from entering, except with a written permission from the Minister of Health Alaa al-Din Alwan, and many doctors refrained from giving us their testimony because they were not authorized to. In Anbar province in particular, the Ministry of Health and its departments reserve information on rates of birth defects and cancer, or talk about levels of radioactive contamination, but with the help of doctors who spoke on condition of anonymity, we were able to get 350 images of children and fetuses with severe birth defects, Dr. Samira Al-Ani, a member of the congenital malformations committee at the Women's and Children's Hospital in Fallujah, agreed to give us her testimony about the rates of birth defects documented in the hospital's records.

Dr. Samira Al-Ani confirms that the deformities in the births of the city of Fallujah are more than 14 times the congenital malformations in the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in just two years, Al-Ani said, she documented 699 cases of malformation. When asked about the extent to which deformation rates are associated with radioactive contamination, Al-Ani confirmed that they searched for toxic metals in samples taken from births with congenital malformation and samples from their families (father, mother, or both) and found high levels of uranium, mercury, lead and other metals.

Al-Ani spoke about the lack of studies and statistics on increasing the rates of abnormalities in the births of the city of Fallujah, it reported that the most recent survey was in 2011, documenting a significant increase in birth defects of 147 out of every 1,000 newborns.

"Malformations in Fallujah births are 14 times more than birth defects in the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki".

The former director of the media of Fallujah Hospital, Nazim Al-Hadidi, while talking to him about the rates and statistics of congenital malformations in Fallujah, told us about what hasn't been told in the story, he told us that the Director of Anbar Health Department Dr.Khudair Khalaf Shalal and in cooperation with Dr. Allawi al-Issawi, director of the women's and children's hospital in Fallujah canceled the role of the Committee of Congenital Malformations, which was responsible for documenting the deformities and archived in private records, they also prevented doctors and the hospital media from making any statements about this matter, and stated that Anbar Health Department opened an investigative board with him because he made statements to the The Independent in 2013.

Al-Hadidi, who was transferred from Fallujah Hospital to Karma City Hospital (30 kilometers northeast of Fallujah), disputed the statistics of the Ministry of Health. "The Ministry of Health's statistics do not represent the truth. They do not represent 50% of the truth, they cover up the real numbers because they are disastrous." he says. He adds: "The community of Fallujah is witnessing a great reluctance to have children and even marriage after the increasing birth defects that occur in the city."

The photographs we obtained from the Fallujah hospital archive date from 2008 to 2019 (except for 2014, 2015 and 2016 for which no information or images are available due to ISIS's control of the city at that time). The images show births and embryos with birth defects including rabbit lip abnormalities, one eye in the middle of the face, enlargement of the limbs, as well as encephalocele, the face without eyes or nose, a deformed skeleton, and other defects.

One of the few studies conducted on the Fallujah community was "Cancer, fetal mortality and gender ratio in Fallujah", Conducted in 2010 by a team of researchers at the British Green Audit, led by Professor Kris Busby from the University of Ulster, who was then the scientific secretary of the European Commission on Radiation Risk.

The study included 711 families in Falluja with 4,843 people. The families were randomly selected for more accurate results, according to Chris Busby, the results were shocking, the cancer, infant mortality and sex ratio were similar in Hiroshima after the fall of the atomic bomb, the study documented a 40-times increase in leukemia, especially among young people and those under the age of 35, a tentimes increase in breast cancer among women, and a significant increase in lymphoma, which affects lymph nodes due to inhalation of radioactive substances, or because of other substances that affect the genetic

makeup, according to the results, cancer diseases were about 4.5 times higher than normal.

Infant mortality also witnessed a significant increase in Fallujah during the period covered by the study, where the mortality rate was 80 cases per 1000 births. The study compared this mortality rate in Kuwait and Egypt for the same period, where it reached 9 deaths per 1000 births in Kuwait, while in Egypt there were 19 deaths per 1000 births.

Gulf War Syndrome

Slightly backward, specifically on April 18/1998, Haaretz newspaper published a report documenting the testimonies of US military officials and veterans about the numbers of wounded soldiers participating in the Desert Storm war of 1991, and according to the testimony of the former US Minister of Justice Ramsey Clark, the number of people infected with strange diseases about 90 thousand soldiers, out of a total of 700 thousand soldiers participated in that war, and these diseases were called "the Gulf War syndrome."

The translated report, published by Al-Quds Al-Arabi newspaper, also documented a poll conducted by the newspaper The Nation in 1996, in which 10051 American soldiers participated with strange diseases after the Gulf War in 1991, where the poll showed that 82 percent of them entered the Iraqi tanks bombed depleted uranium.

The number of those afflicted with Gulf War Syndrome reached 175,000 soldiers, according to a report prepared by the Consultative Research Committee on Veterans Diseases in the United States, published by Reuters in 2008, and the commission's report concluded that "Scientific evidence leaves no question that Gulf War illness is a real condition with real causes and serious consequences for affected veterans".

American soldiers are not the only ones suffering from Gulf War syndrome. According to the Royal Veterans Association in Britain, 33,000 British soldiers who participated in Desert Storm are infected with the disease, and the British Ministry of Defense has acknowledged that consensus on the presence of these strange symptoms makes this illness as a Syndrome".

Symptoms of the Gulf War syndrome include: lung, bone, and liver cancer, skin rashes, breathing problems, kidney failure, as well as limb numbness and muscle pain, chronic headache, chronic diarrhea, and problems with digestion and breathing.

In the October 21, 1996 issue, The Nation newspaper quoted American sources as saying that the M1-Abrams tanks fired 14,000 large uranium shells, while the A-10 aircraft launched about 1,000,000 small shells, which showed great ability to penetrate the most powerful and durable tanks and armor.

The Haaretz report revealed a dramatic incident that occurred during the Desert Storm war of 1991, where it was stated that a fire broke out in a non-condensed uranium warehouse next to an American army camp in Kuwait, and devoured 3.5 tons of uranium, but no one was bothered by the smoke cloud that rose over the camp ,and dozens of American tanks were injured by that friendly fire, and the radioactive contamination was transferred to the bodies of many soldiers who contributed of preparing these burning tanks for shipment to the United States of America.

Thousands of Sites Contaminated with Radiation

Although the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) confirms the presence of thousands of sites contaminated with ionizing radiation in Iraq, however, the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Science and Technology acknowledged the existence of 300-365 sites contaminated with radiation, in Baghdad, for example, the Ministry of Science and Technology acknowledged the presence of 40 contaminated sites, the most dangerous sites Tuwaitha and Aweerij, while saying that Basra contains 23 sites contaminated with radiation, 20 sites in Nasiriyah and 20 sites in Babylon, 16 sites in Diyala, 14 sites in Maysan, 3 sites in Muthanna, and two sites in Nineveh, Adaya and Al Jazeera, have been looted and exhume the radioactive nuclear waste embedded there.

In order to obtain more accurate information about the coordinates of the sites that were not included in the data of the Ministry of Science and Technology, such as contaminated sites in the province of Anbar, Najaf, Karbala and Amara, we went to the ministry headquarters in Baghdad, and asked to meet the minister, but refused to meet us, Ministry officials refused to give us any statement on the grounds that it was a matter of national security, but we were able to obtain a confidential letter from the Ministry of Science and Technology, specifically the Radioactive Waste Treatment and Management Directorate, to the Iron and Steel Factory in Basra, the letter states to transfer "treated waste " from the plant site in Basra to the proposed storage site via the international road in Anbar province, and the letter signed on 12/5/2019 by Majed Shannon Khalaf, supervisor of nuclear activities.

To find out what the toxic and radioactive waste was, we met with Iraqi MP Anbar Yahya Ghazi, who previously served as director of the Office of the Minister of Science and Technology, and told us that the waste was military junk and spare parts contaminated with ionizing radiation from the wars of 1991 and 2003.

In the city of Ramadi (108 km west of Baghdad), where the local government headquarters of Anbar province, we met with the President of the Anbar Provincial Council, Ahmed Hameed Sharqi, to know where the proposed site for the transfer of

radioactive waste , and how they dealt with the confidential letter of the Ministry of Science and Technology, he told us that the proposed site was in the area between the city of Fallujah and Lake Tharthar, and showed us a letter issued a month after the letter of the Ministry of Science and Technology, he said that this letter was addressed by the local authority in Anbar to the Anbar Operations Command, the Police Command, the National Security Service and the Anbar Environment Directorate to prevent the entry of such toxic waste to the borders of Anbar province, which caused great harm to the lives of citizens and the environment.

We tried to get information from the US Embassy in Baghdad about the quantities of uranium used in the wars of 1991 and 2003 and the coordinates of the bombing, and US maps of sites contaminated with ionizing radiation, in relation to high rates of cancer and birth defects, however, we did not get a response; however, part of the GPS coordinates of locations targeted with DU in 2003 were given by the US Department of Defense to the Dutch army based in Muthanna province in southern Iraq as part of the international coalition forces. These coordinates belonged exclusively to radioactive contaminated sites in that province, and the Dutch army handed those coordinates to the Dutch Peace Organization (PAX), which they included in a study published in 2014.

In 2003, New scientist Magazine published a US Defense Department research paper, during which it stated that the United States and Britain used 320 tons of depleted uranium munitions during the 1991 Gulf War, and the paper also stated that the US military used two thousand tons Depleted uranium munitions during the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

In June of the same year, Damas Lopez, head of the "International Depleted Uranium Study Group" (ADUST) presented a research paper he read in the European Parliament in Brussels, in which he stated that the United States used depleted uranium on a large scale during its wars in Iraq, and the Dutch Nuclear Research Foundation (LAKA) estimated that the amount of depleted uranium used in the 1991 Gulf War was more than 800 tons.

In the same year that the 1991 Gulf War ended, a secret report issued by the British Nuclear Energy Agency was leaked, and the Independent newspaper published it at the time, saying that the uranium that remained in Iraq could cause the death of 500,000 people, and after five years of leaking the report, specifically in October 21, 1996 The Nation magazine reported that this figure was calculated on the assumption that the remaining in Iraq is 40 tons, not 320 tons of depleted uranium.

In order to prevent its spread and use, in 2003 a global coalition formed of more than 160 organizations, from 34 countries, called the International Alliance to Ban Uranium Weapons (ICBUW). This coalition was able on several occasions – the last of which was in 2014 – to introduce a draft law at the United Nations to prevent the use of Weapons made of depleted uranium. However, the vote by the United States, Britain, France, and Israel against it every time hindered the ban on the use of depleted uranium weapons.

The investigation was completed with the support of "NIRIJ" network for investigative journalism, and its full version was published on "SasaPost" website, and a short version of the investigation has been published on "Daraj" website and others.

THIRD PRIZE WINNER

The Child Refugees 'Sold' Through Facebook

Philip Obaji (Nigeria)

Philip Obaji is a Nigerian journalist whose work on jihadi groups, terrorism, human trafficking, and Africa has appeared in numerous publications including Sahara Reporters, USA Today, The Daily Beast, The Hill, Equal Times, Refugees Deeply, and The Guardian.

He won the Future Awards Africa Prize in Education in 2014, and the Future Awards Africa Prize for Young Person of the Year in 2015. Obaji was listed among 100 most influential people in Nigeria in 2016 by popular Nigerian news website, YNaija.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The Third Prize went to Nigerian journalist Philip Obaji whose report *The Child Refugees 'Sold' Through Facebook* is one of the most powerful stories on human trafficking published anywhere in recent years.

It is an account of how a human trafficker targeted vulnerable children who had fled fighting between government forces and English speaking separatists in Cameroon's western regions and sought safety in refugee camps in Nigeria.

Human trafficking and the exploitation of children and young people is one of the most harrowing consequences of war, and this report details how the trafficker used Facebook to advertise and sell children as domestic workers. The story reveals how Facebook failed to act immediately after being informed, adding to widespread concerns that social networks are painfully slow in their response to online abuse.

The painstaking work compiling detailed information on this scandal had its rewards, though. The scam was shut down and the local government in Nigeria launched a campaign against human trafficking, supported by the state-owned CRBC radio and TV stations which began to educate the public about the dangers of trafficking.

A vigorous public campaign over its role stirred Facebook into action with promises to do more to combat human trafficking on its platform. In addition, the report has inspired international assistance groups and others to strengthen support and education of internally displaced people.

The Child Refugees 'Sold' Through Facebook

By Philip Obaji
Sahara Reporters - December 31, 2019

The original publication is available via the following link:
http://saharareporters.com/2019/12/31/child-refugees-'sold'-through-facebook

Having fled the conflict in Cameroon's English-speaking regions, a number of Cameroonian child refugees are becoming victims of human trafficking, including being marketed as maids through Facebook.

For over a week in December, Stan Wantama used his Facebook page to upload photographs of teenage Cameroonian girls, who fled the conflict in their country's Anglophone regions to border communities in southern Nigeria, as he sought interest from people willing to pay to have them as maids.

In one post, he put up a photograph of a young girl he said was 16 years of age and asked Facebook users interested in having her as a maid to contact him by sending a private message via the social media platform or through an email he displayed in the post.

In another post, Wantama uploaded an image of a girl he claimed is "intelligent, hardworking and about 17," and asked persons interested in hiring her as a maid to "inbox me."

I reached out to Wantama through the email he gave, asking him about the background of the girls he displayed on Facebook and the process of getting a maid from him. He did respond to my email, but without going into details in many areas.

"They could come from anywhere," he said, in response to my question regarding where the girls he offers as maids come from.

With regard to the average age of the girls Wantama offers as maids, he replied by saying "it depends on what age range you want."

According to Wantama, anyone interested in having any of his maids has to first send him a private message via Facebook or an email stating his or her name, address, phone number, and occupation.

"No fee is paid immediately," Wantama, whose profile photo on Facebook is a drawing of a young man in black and white colours, told me. "You are to pay 30,000 naira (about $82) every month to the maid as her salary and agree to give her accommodation and a day off every week."

"For the first month, you are to pay her salary after she works for a week," Wantama added.

In response to my question about if there was someone available to work immediately as a maid, Wantama sent a photograph of a girl he said is a 13-year-old Cameroonian, whom I'll call Glory, living in Adagom, a small community inside Ogoja Province in Nigeria's south-central Cross River State, along the border with Cameroon. Wantama said the parents of the girl approved of her becoming a maid. He rejected my request to speak directly with the parents or any available relative of the girl by telling me "you have to speak [to any of them] through us."

In another email to Wantama two days later, I asked if the girls who currently had their photos displayed on his timeline were still available as maids, he replied by saying, "on Facebook, we take out the photo of anyone who has been given away as a maid. We've taken a couple away."

A Facebook user, who reacted to one of Wantama's posts, appeared to confirm what he said about deleting photos of girls who've been given away as maids by telling me in a chat via Facebook Messenger, "I think I have seen some other photos of young girls which I no longer see again."

It's difficult to ascertain how many Facebook users Wantama's posts have reached, as his friends are not visible to the public. Nevertheless, his activities on the site did gain some public interest.

In one post in which he displayed a photograph of a teenage girl and offered to give her away as a maid, one person commented by saying, "I'm interested." Wantama then replied, "check your inbox," apparently insinuating that he had sent a private message to the Facebook user on how to go through the process of having one.

It took until the following day for Facebook to respond to my email reporting Wantama's activities on the platform. In her reply to my email at about 10 p.m., Nigerian time, Kezia Anim-Addo, Head of Communications for Facebook in Africa, told me the company was "currently looking into this at the moment." Wantama's account was suspended at about the period of Anim-Addo's reply, nearly 29 hours after Facebook's attention was drawn to his inappropriate posts. The delay in taking action enabled Wantama's posts to gain more views and a reaction to one of his posts from a Facebook user.

Yandex, the Russian tech company which provided the email Wantama displayed in a number of his Facebook posts did not respond to my request for comments for this article.

In his replies to my emails, Wantama didn't give much details about the girls he

had advertised on Facebook but, by mentioning where the 13-year-old girl in his first email lives, I thought I had enough information to pursue an investigation into his activities.

I travelled to Ogoja shortly after my second email chat with Wantama. The town is home to thousands of Cameroonians who are taking refuge in communities like Adagom and Okende.

In November 2016, lawyers from Cameroon's English-speaking took to the streets to protest against the government's decision to appoint Francophone magistrates in Anglophone courts, despite lacking training in British common law. Teachers in the Northwest and Southwest regions also called sit-in protests in response to the appointment of French speakers in Anglophone schools who lacked the ability to communicate fluently in English.

But it was the declaration of a new state called Ambazonia on October 1 2017 by separatists that angered the Cameroonian government. Security forces began a brutal crackdown on protesters, killing people and burning communities.

A number of armed groups began to retaliate, worsening the crisis and contributing to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Anglophones who make up 20 percent of Cameroon's more than 24 million inhabitants and often complain of being marginalised.

Nearly 10,000 of these refugees occupy temporary shelters built with mud bricks and covered with corrugated iron sheets in refugee settlements in a few locations in Ogoja. Many others live in host communities.

In Adagom community, where Wantama had told me Glory lives, I showed the photographs of the 13-year-old and other girls which he had uploaded on his Facebook page to dozens of people in the settlement. While no one initially recognized Glory, a number of persons said they had seen two of the other girls in the camp a few months back.

"I don't think they still stay here," one man, who said he had seen the girls on numerous occasions in the past, told me but he couldn't confirm whether or not the girls lived in the settlement alone or with their families. "They probably have moved into the host community."

After spending more than six hours moving round the settlement asking if anyone knew the girls whose photographs appeared on Wantama's Facebook page, a young girl who initially said she had never met Glory, came back to tell me she knows the teenage girl very well and was ready to take me to where she lives.

We arrived Glory's home a few minutes before 7 pm. The teenager lives with her middle-aged parents and her 15-year-old older sister in a two room mud house not very far away from the refugee settlement.

Eighteen months ago, Glory and her family fled their home in the southwestern Cameroonian town of Akwaya after soldiers stormed their compound and began to burn houses. They arrived in Adagom after spending days in the bush, near the Nigerian border, trying to escape the violence in their country.

A year after Glory's family began to live in Adagom, a middle-aged man, who met the young girl's father in a local carpentry workshop, where the Cameroonian works, offered to connect his daughters to families who'll assist them return to school after learning that he had two female children who were not able to complete their secondary education over lack of funds. He later got to the home of the Cameroonian family and took photos of the two girls.

"He gave his name as Stanley," Glory's father said of the middle-aged man suspected to be Wantama (in Wantama's first reply to my email, he stated his full name as Stanley Wanta Wantama). "He said he could help give my daughters as maids to families who will send them in school and not pay for their services."

"The photo you showed to me is the same photo he took of my daughter," he added.

Glory's father was told by Wantama that he lives in Ogoja town where he works as a public servant, but his profile on Facebook tells a different story.

Wantama wrote on the social media platform that he lives in Abuja, Nigeria's capital, and is a self employed businessman. While he once said to Glory's father that he schooled in Ogoja town, he indicated on Facebook that he had his secondary and tertiary education in the north-central Nigeria city of Lokoja.

When I requested to see Glory, her father told me that someone working for Wantama took her to Makurdi, another city in north-central Nigeria, where she is expected to work as a house help to a family of eight persons.

"They left in the morning," Glory's father said. "I was assured that she'll be allowed to return to school as from September 2020."

After informing him that Wantama offered his daughter to me as a maid in exchange for monthly payments, Glory's father said he was shocked to learn of the development and admitted making a mistake trusting the man he thought will "bring smiles to the family."

"We never discussed paying anyone," Glory's 50-year-old father said. "The man (Wantama) completely deceived me."

Glory's father's biggest regret is not listening to a colleague who warned him about trusting Wantama.

In February, Wantama promised to take the 16-year-old daughter of Collins, who works in the same carpentry shop as Glory's father, to Calabar to work as a house help to a nuclear family of four. He had assured Collins that the teenager will be

allowed to further her education while serving her hosts.

But in the six months the teenager lived in Calabar, she was not only denied the opportunity to attend school but also forced to work for 12 hours, six days a week, as a sales girl in a small shop owned by the family.

“She worked from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. everyday except on Sundays and was only fed in the morning.” Collins, who—like Glory’s father—fled the fighting in southwest Cameroon with his wife and four children in 2018, told me. “If she wasn’t up at 4 a.m. everyday, her madam will beat her up using any object she finds.”

At the end of each month, Collins’ daughter received 15,000 naira (about $41) from the family she served, but Wantama often showed up to take almost 80 percent of the money. The girl’s parents were not aware of such payment at the time.

Fed up with being made to work for very long hours daily without having enough food and rest, Collins’ daughter ran out of where she lived one Friday morning in August to a bus station where she boarded a vehicle that took her to Ogoja, having saved enough money for the journey. She eventually made it back to her parents in Adagom.

“She looked so immatiated when she returned,” Collins said of his daughter. “There were marks all over her body that showed the high level of torture she suffered in the hands of the people she served.”

It was based on what his daughter experienced in Calabar that made Collins advice Glory’s father not to let his own daughter move away with Wantama.

“I wish he (Glory’s father) had listened to me,” Collins said. “He just didn’t want to believe anything my daughter and I told him about Stanley [Wantama].”

Life is generally difficult for Cameroonian refugees in Adagom, where thousands of people face huge challenges getting jobs and accessing basic social services.

An Emergency Food Security Assessment conducted a year ago by the United Nations found that more than 80 percent of Cameroonian households in refugee settlements and those in host communities are “severely or moderately food insecure.”

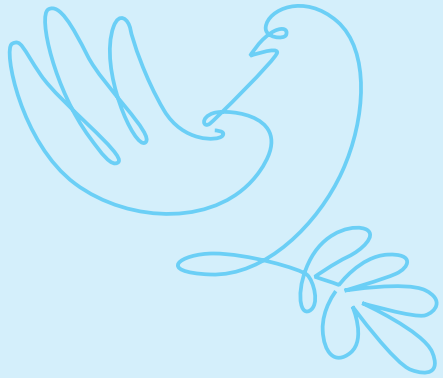
According to the U.N., three in four refugees may be resulting to highly risky measures like child labor and survival sex to cope with the demands of life in where they live. Many, like Glory, end up in the hands of persons with a history of exploiting vulnerable people.

Attempts by Glory’s father to reach Wantama by phone were unsuccessful. The man, who now appears to be in the business of child trafficking, did not respond to my email for comments about the status of Glory. The girl’s father, who now wants his daughter to return to her family, vowed to keep trying to speak with him

“Whenever I can get to him, I’ll tell him to make sure my daughter is back home immediately,” he said. “She can’t be a slave to anyone.”

Outstanding Contribution to Peace

Shortlisted Stories



SHORTLISTED STORY

On the Frontline of War, Yemeni Women Are Building Peace

Kira Walker (Spain)

Kira Walker is an independent journalist and photographer from Canada covering stories about environmental change, biocultural diversity, food and peace across the Mediterranean and West Asia.

On the Frontline of War, Yemeni Women Are Building Peace

By Kira Walker
Equal Times (Belgium) - April 27, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.equaltimes.org/on-the-frontline-of-war-yemeni#.X5pkzIgzZPZ

It was the third year of the war when Muna Luqman heard of a conflict over water in Al-Haymatain, a remote area of Yemen's Taiz governorate well-known for disputes over the scarce resource. Two communities had taken up arms, and were threatening each other, but had not started fighting. Luqman, a peace activist and founder of Food4Humanity, a women-led civil society organisation that provides emergency relief, training and livelihood programmes, sent in a team of engineers to see what could be done.

She then instigated a mediation process between 16 community representatives, who signed a local peace agreement, and formed a council to prevent future water conflicts. Through funds raised entirely by women in the Yemeni diaspora, Food4Humanity repaired the local water station, which now provides clean water for more than 10,000 people. At the end of March, Luqman mediated another water conflict in Taiz governorate. The situation, she says, was exactly the same. "It shows you how local initiatives, when they come together, can have a lot of impact, especially when led by women."

Twenty years ago, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1325, which recognised the vital role of women in achieving peace and security. However, when it comes to Yemen, the UN has failed to ensure that women have a role shaping the future of their country. Despite the crucial work of Yemeni women building peace on the frontline of war, their efforts have been ignored and not adequately supported, and they remain excluded from crucial peace negotiations.

The conflict in Yemen began following a failed political transition, when the Houthis pulled out of the national dialogue process in 2014, seized the capital Sana'a and ousted the new leader Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi the following January. The Yemeni government, exiled in the port city of Aden, requested its allies Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to launch an air and ground campaign to drive out the Houthis, escalating the conflict.

The fighting between the Houthi rebels and the Saudi-led pro-government coalition, armed and supported by the United States, the United Kingdom and France, has not stopped since.

> *Over five years of war have killed an estimated 112,000 people or more, displaced over 3.8 million people (three-quarters of whom are women and children), left eighty per cent of the population requiring humanitarian assistance and pushed half the country to the brink of starvation, in what is considered the worst man-made humanitarian crisis in the world.*

Medical, water and sanitation infrastructure have repeatedly been targeted during the war, and UN human rights experts believe all conflict parties have committed war crimes. Only half of Yemen's healthcare facilities are currently operational, while 17.8 million people lack access to clean water for drinking and sanitation – conditions which enabled the largest and fastest spreading cholera outbreak in modern history.

Yemen recently confirmed its first case of COVID-19, and humanitarian organisations have warned that the country's decimated healthcare system will not be able to cope with the pandemic, and that the impact will be catastrophic. "In Yemen, we cannot advise people to wash their hands with soap and water, because there is neither enough soap, nor much access to water," Luqman tweeted.

Two weeks after the UN secretary-general António Guterres made a global appeal for a ceasefire to slow the advance of the pandemic, the Saudi-led coalition has declared a two-week unilateral ceasefire starting 9 April in a bid to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The UN has called on the Yemeni government and the Houthis to immediately cease hostilities, but it is unclear if the latter will observe the truce.

The Double Burden of Water Scarcity and War

Since the war began, gender-based violence has increased 63 per cent, while families driven further into poverty increasingly turn to child marriage as an economic coping strategy. A study by UNICEF found that over two-thirds of girls are married before the age of 18. Gender-based violence is but one way women are disproportionately impacted by conflict, which intensifies pre-existing patterns of discrimination; women are also affected more by food insecurity, stress, declines in health services, poor sanitation and hygiene, and reduced water access.

> *Traditional gender roles and responsibilities around water, in particular, create additional threats to the physical health and safety of women and girls in Yemen.*

Their needs and interactions with the resource are also different, says Leonie Nimmo, project coordinator and research associate at the UK-based Conflict and Environment Observatory, which has been studying the impact of the conflict on water resources in Yemen.

Women and girls are tasked with collecting water, often from distant sources, which puts them at greater risk of violence and injuries. Women and girls are most in need of clean water and sanitation facilities. And women are most at risk of death from disease when pregnant, breastfeeding or malnourished, or because of their role as caretakers. Therefore, it is essential for water interventions to factor in gender-related impacts, be sensitive to the situation on the ground and conscious of social norms, says Nimmo. "Otherwise they won't be efficient and they won't work."

Access to clean water is fundamental to reducing poverty, breaking cycles of violence and improving the health and well-being of Yemeni women and girls. All the more so as climate change is predicted to further increase pressure on Yemen's water resources, and environmental degradation has been found to drive or exacerbate gender-based violence.

At the Forefront of Peacebuilding

Undeterred by the disproportionate challenges they face, Yemeni women have taken the lead in peacebuilding at the community level, says Rasha Jarhum, founder and director of Canada-based Peace Track Initiative, which aims to localise and feminise peace processes in the Middle East and North Africa, with a focus on Yemen.

Women have been negotiating ceasefires, opening humanitarian corridors, providing aid and mediating disputes over land and water resources, among other issues. In turn, their work on the ground builds trust, and establishes knowledge of community needs, an understanding of which is indispensable when it comes to peacebuilding. For Luqman, women have a greater interest in responsibility-sharing, while male-dominated conflict parties focus only on power-sharing.

> *Luqman says Yemen, one of the most water-scarce countries in the world, has always had water disputes; an estimated 2,500 people die annually due to water-related conflicts in the country.*

However, her experience mediating the conflict in Taiz sparked a realisation that water need not be just a cause of conflict – it could also be an entry point for peace – and Food4Humanity launched Water4Peace, an initiative to empower women and youth to bring their communities out of dispute and poverty by providing access to close, clean water, awareness programmes and income-generating projects. "You give them an incentive for peace instead of violence, through water," she says.

Water, Nimmo agrees, is fundamental to peacebuilding. "Any peace that doesn't address the issue of water is not going to be sustainable or just."

However, the threats Yemeni women face for their work are many, including physical

attacks, arbitrary detention, gender-based and sexual violence, forced confessions, torture and defamation. “The current women’s rights situation is the worst we have ever witnessed in Yemen,” says Jarhum.

No Women, No Peace

A growing body of research shows that women’s participation in peace processes leads to better outcomes: parties are more likely to reach and implement an agreement, and peace is more durable as women’s inclusion brings a different understanding of conflict, diversifies the range of voices heard and enhances the perceived legitimacy of the process.

Only recently have Yemeni women started gaining recognition for their peacebuilding efforts, due to international advocacy. The turning point, Luqman says, came when Yemeni women secured the release of 600 detainees, while none had been released through the UN-led process. “People began listening to us, when they started seeing how women could be impactful.”

For Luqman, the problem is the way the process is built to exclude women completely, and which fails to see women as a priority, which she pointed out in her 2019 briefing to the UN Security Council: “We are frustrated because… women’s role in peacebuilding continues to be ridiculed, and women who are the real peacemakers, continue to be excluded in the ceasefire and peace process.”

Jarhum, who also briefed the UN Security Council, agrees, and thinks the exclusion of women can also be traced to the one-dimensional portrayal of Yemeni women as victims in Global North fundraising to secure donor support. This victimisation, she says, obscures what women do every day on the ground, and creates the erroneous perception that Yemeni women in general are not qualified. “We need to support them without making them look like passive victims.”

> *Double standards rooted in global patriarchy are at play, too. While the bar is low for men’s qualifications, when it comes to the participation of women, Jarhum explains, they have to meet very high, and often very difficult, criteria.*

Moreover, the UN-led peace negotiations are failing to do their part to ensure women are equally represented by limiting them to a consultative role. Yemeni women, Luqman says, do not want to be merely consulted. “We want to be in the negotiations, because the decisions that are made there affect all of us.”

The UN Special Envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, told Jarhum that while he will request that negotiating parties include women, he will not impose a quota. Jarhum, however, does not think national actors will follow through on their commitments to include women if it is not imposed. “There needs to be international and envoy pressure.”

Against these obstacles and more, Jarhum says Yemeni women are done waiting for an invitation to be included in the peace negotiations. “We’re going to claim the space and send our own delegation.”

The lived experience of those most affected by war, and those working hardest to end it, has led to a tangible understanding that without women, there can be no just peace in Yemen.

As Luqman highlighted when she briefed the UN Security Council: “There is no excuse any longer for continuing to exclude women except a poorly designed peace process.”

SHORTLISTED STORY

The Long, Winding, and Painful Story of Asylum

John Washington (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 Martinez, Anabel Hernández, and Sandra Rodriguez 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. Find him at @jbwashing.

The Long, Winding, and Painful Story of Asylum

By John Washington
The Nation Magazine - April 20, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.thenation.com/article/society/asylum-history-united-states/

An ancient concept, asylum has become just another political tool in the hands of our government.

Piedras Negras, Coahuila, Mexico—Fourteen men were slumped on mattresses and chairs, smoking inside the warehouse, watching over the migrants. One of the men had a pistol tucked into his waistband; another had a pistol resting on his lap. The men were fussing with their phones, ribbing each other, killing the morning. A slight waft of marijuana smoke lingered in the air. Someone hocked noisily, spat.

Arnovis, a thin, strong, hard-gazing 24-year-old Salvadoran man, nonchalantly grabbed his black knockoff Puma backpack—the one his mother had bought for him back in Jiquilisco—wove through the maze of sitting and slumped bodies, and walked out onto the patio.

Hey, vato, where you going? one of the men called. Just to shower, Arnovis said.
That OK?

And your backpack?

My clothes.

The shower was a five-gallon paint bucket filled with water, a plastic bowl floating on the surface. It was set next to a tall concrete wall. A few wires crisscrossed the sky above the patio. A couple of the 14 coyotes—Arnovis had counted them—could see him through a large window. He grabbed the bucket and hauled it over to the door, where he plugged a coiled heating rod into an outlet, ran it back outside, and dropped it into the bucket. He stepped out again and, as the water began to warm, scanned the yard. The walls were high—definitely higher than he could jump. The branch of a mango tree growing on the other side of the wall dipped down far enough that he might be able to reach it. But he wasn't sure if it would hold his weight.

That branch, he thought, my only hope.

The basic idea of asylum is simple: Someone comes to your door because they are in danger, because they are afraid. You open your door, and you share your roof. But within this simple idea lies a labyrinth constructed of different sorts of fear. Some fear is grounded in immediate physical danger, some is diffused in general conditions of oppression; some is exaggerated, some completely imagined. Some fears are unrealized, some send you to your grave.

As a legal construct, asylum is less simple. According to the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, which set the original international standard for defining refugees and asylum seekers, an asylum seeker is someone who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it."

Fear is the requisite for asylum, but the definition is based on a fear of a specific entity, the state, and a fear of being persecuted by the state or its representatives. Many of today's asylum seekers, especially those from Central America and Mexico (which, taken together, account for most of the people seeking asylum in the United States), are fleeing non-state persecutors. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status, "in general, the applicant's fear should be considered well founded if he can establish, to a reasonable degree, that his continued stay in his country of origin has become intolerable to him."'

The US Supreme Court also wrestled with the definition of well-founded fear after Congress adopted the language of the Refugee Convention into law with the 1980 Refugee Act. During the oral arguments for a 1987 case, *Immigration and Naturalization Service v. Cardoza-Fonseca*, in which a Nicaraguan woman who overstayed her visa appealed to the United States for asylum, attorney Dana Leigh Marks suggested defining such fear according to the "reasonable person" standard: Would a reasonable person in this same factual situation fear persecution upon return to their country? But the justices sought a more quantifiable criterion than reasonableness—they tried to pin down the quivering subjectivity of fear. In his majority opinion Justice John Paul Stevens wrote, "One can certainly have a well-founded fear of an event happening when there is less than a 50 percent chance of the occurrence taking place."

Justice Harry Blackmun argued in a concurring opinion that "the very language of the term 'well-founded fear' demands a particular type of analysis—an examination of the subjective feelings of an applicant for asylum coupled with an inquiry into the objective nature of the articulated reasons for the fear."

Justice Antonin Scalia tried throwing out a few examples, and here he and Marks, still in the oral argument, engage in some frightful repartee.

Scalia: Let's assume that the persecution in the country you're talking about is very... it's horrible persecution, it's torture; it isn't just incarceration.... Now, suppose my chances of actually being subjected to that if I go back are one in a thousand. Would I have a well-founded fear of going back?

Marks: It depends on whether it would be reasonable to have that fear in view of the small chance that something is going to happen.

Scalia: I know it would, and what's the answer?

Marks: The answer is that the tryer of fact should look at the specific facts which you put forth to show the objective situation.

Scalia: You see, I don't know the answer to that. Is that a well-founded fear or not?

Marks: One in a thousand, I'm sure it's not.

In 1986, Marks was a 32-year-old immigration attorney presenting her first case before the Supreme Court. Today she is an immigration judge and president emerita of the National Association of Immigration Judges. When I spoke with her in 2018, 32 years after she had argued Cardoza-Fonseca, she told me she had been heavily counseled to avoid any attempt at quantification and that Scalia had "backed her into a numerical corner." Stevens finally settled on what has become an unofficial 10 percent standard: If an asylum applicant has at least a 10 percent chance of "being shot, tortured, or otherwise persecuted," they meet the requirements for being eligible for protection.

What we are left with: To be well founded, fear should be "subjectively genuine and objectively reasonable" and can be based on a one in 10 probability of occurrence. The legal grappling with this complex structure of an emotion hasn't exactly made matters clearer. And yet, when you feel it, nothing could be more lucid than fear—more all-consuming, more convincing, more instant.

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Arnovis's brother, living in a suburb of Kansas City, had wired money to the wrong coyote, a man named Gustavo. Well, his brother didn't wire the money; his brother's friend did. His brother doesn't have papers and couldn't send the money on his own, which may have been why there was a mix-up. Gustavo—the wrong coyote—got $700 for doing nothing, and he didn't see any good reason to give it back. The problem—and for Arnovis it was a life-and-death problem—was that the family didn't have any more money. After a deportation to El Salvador from Mexico a few weeks earlier and a down payment on the $6,000 smuggling fee—the family sold a prized goat for 200 bucks to help pay for the first trip—there was nothing left.

El Suri—the coyote who did not get the money—was the guy actually planning to take Arnovis across the border. The two of them had hit it off, joking around on the migrant trails; earlier, El Suri had even suggested Arnovis stay in Mexico and work with him. Arnovis got along with everyone. He liked to tell jokes to quell tension and rarely complained—that is, he was just being himself and wasn't angling for a job in human smuggling. Maybe if it was just between El Suri and Arnovis, they could have worked something out. But El Suri had a boss. The boss wanted his money.

As El Suri made a couple of calls, Arnovis hovered nervously. He remembers one call on speakerphone. Someone was trying to convince El Suri to head back south to take the next load. I'm waiting, El Suri said, for this one last kid to pay up. We're trying to get his brother to wire us. The man on the other end suggested El Suri chop off one of Arnovis's fingers and send it to his brother.

Yeah, maybe.

El Suri hung up. Arnovis leaned against the warehouse wall. He felt his future rushing at him like an oncoming train. A crescendo and then—not boom but silence, death.

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Today, there are two paths by which someone can gain refugee status in the United States—as a refugee or an asylee. Refugees apply from a country they have temporarily escaped to or from their own country, which must be of "special humanitarian concern" to the State Department. There are numerical limits, per region, on the number of refugees admitted each year. The 2018 ceiling for refugees from all of Latin America and the Caribbean was 1,500 people. But that was the ceiling; the actual number of refugees granted protection from all of Latin America and the Caribbean in 2018 was less than 1,000. Overall, in the same year, 22,405 refugees were resettled in the United States, and that number took another nosedive in 2019, with the 2020 ceiling set at 18,000, the lowest ever. White House officials have also reportedly considered shutting down the program altogether. In 1980, the total number of refugee admissions into the US—the majority from East Asian countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, as well as the Soviet Union—was over 200,000.

For asylees, meanwhile, there are no numerical limits. Asylees apply once they're in the United States or when they show up at a port of entry. As the ceiling for refugees collapses—and as the other pathways to immigration are foreclosed—more and more people fleeing danger are making their way to the US and asking for protection through the asylum process. In 2017, 331,700 people applied for asylum in the United States, the most of any year so far this decade—almost twice as many as in 2015, and roughly six times as many as in 2010. Just over 30,000 cases were decided, however, meaning the backlog of pending cases is rising sharply. Worldwide, there were 837,478 asylum seekers in 2010, according to the UNHCR. By 2018, that number topped 3.5 million.

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It all started on a soccer field in 2016. Arnovis accidentally knocked his elbow into the mouth of the brother of a gang leader in Corral de Mulas, a small town on El Salvador's southern peninsula. One gang tried to get revenge, a rival gang offered him "protection" as the situation rapidly escalated. He received death threats, and his brother-in-law—whom gang members had mistaken for Arnovis—had a machete wielded over his neck. Arnovis's life had become unlivable, and there was no resolution or safety except in flight. You're dead, they told him. Sos tumba. It was either submit to his grave at home or take wing. Even if he tried to stay and somehow dodged the multiple threats, he was putting his family at risk, especially his young daughter.

And so, he fled: a months-long journey through Guatemala and Mexico, riding on top of trains, surviving cold and hunger and detention and robbery and the constant, nagging, needling fear that finally brought him here, to a coyote safe house across the border from Texas.

After another call, El Suri explained the situation: I got no problem with you, man. You're only 200 bucks to me. But the jefe, El Suri said, he doesn't f**k around. He wants your money by 10 tomorrow morning, and if you don't have it by then, he's going to come by, and what he's going to do—he's going to cut you into pieces.

Arnovis nodded, trying to take it in, trying to think. Trying to get out of the way of the oncoming train.

No money, and he was dead. That simple.

After a while El Suri called Arnovis's brother again, trying to convince him to drum

up the money.

If you don't send $300, we're going to have to take care of your brother.

There were about 75 people crashed, sprawled, and breathing on the open warehouse floor. Arnovis found an open spot and slumped down. After a while he tried calling his brother again but couldn't get through. Then he tried Gustavo, the coyote who'd pocketed the money for doing nothing. Surprisingly, he answered.

Gustavo! Arnovis said, and explained the situation. It was all a mistake. He was going to be hacked into pieces if he didn't pay his coyote tomorrow, and they had meant to wire El Suri but had accidentally sent the money to him, so if he could just return it....

I don't have it, Gustavo said.

What do you mean, you don't have it?

I don't have it.

The $700 my brother wired you?

Yeah, don't have it anymore. And just a word of advice, Gustavo added. If they told you they were going to hack you into pieces, you better pay, or find a way to get out of there. And then he said something Arnovis already knew: These people don't f**k around.

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To lay bare the political nature of asylum protections: During the 1980s the United States took in Cubans and Nicaraguans (fleeing communist governments that the US openly opposed) but summarily denied Haitians, Guatemalans, and Salvadorans (fleeing US-backed authoritarian governments). In 1987, Nicaraguans were granted asylum at a rate of 84 percent. Meanwhile, for both Salvadorans and Guatemalans the approval rate throughout the 1980s hovered between 1 and 3 percent. A 1982 Immigration and Naturalization Service memorandum revealed the government's flagrantly discriminatory interpretation of the 1980 Refugee Act and the 1951 Refugee Convention: "Different criteria sometimes may be applied to different nationalities... In some cases, different levels of proof are required of different asylum applicants."

Asylum policy has remained both grimly discriminatory and starkly political. The United States denies almost 90 percent of Mexican claims, while granting over 80 percent of claims from Eritreans—a gaping and irreconcilable disparity. In part, the difference owes to the mutual economic dependency between the United States and Mexico. It would be a diplomatic sucker punch for the US to openly acknowledge that Mexico either persecutes or cannot protect its own citizens, but it has no problem making that same assessment about Eritrea.

Although terrorism has replaced the specter of communism, it is still largely fear—the nation's—that drives hard-line immigration, asylum, and refugee policies. We codify the nation's fears into law, yet we delegitimize the fears of our neighbors, the fears of refugees and asylum seekers—many of whom are fleeing not the abstract, future-oriented fear of possible demographic change, "replacement," or improbable violence but actual, immediate, duck-for-cover, jackboots-kicking-at-your-door, the-roof-is-collapsing fear.

***

Arnovis went back to El Suri. He told him he'd work for him, do whatever he wanted. El Suri told him that was great. Terrific. He'd be glad to have him.

But he still needed to pay.

He had 12 hours to figure a way out. That night was long, the floor hard and cold. Arnovis sat in a daze, hugging his knees, listening to the snores and moans of his fellow migrants crowding the open floor. It was like they were in a mass grave, but still alive. In his anguish, he still felt hope; he still rejected the fact that his final truth would come to him the next morning: that train, then silence.

In the morning, walking out to take a shower on the cold patio under the watchful eye of the 14 coyotes, he found his salvation: a tree branch.

If he could reach it, and if it didn't break, he could pull himself up to the top of the wall, grab on, and—maybe—get over. He didn't know what was on the other side, but it was almost certainly better than what was on this side.

After plugging in the water heater and looking up at the mango branch for another moment, he walked over to it and jumped.

***

The marrow of civilization, Thomas Hobbes reasoned, is not mutual interest but rather mutual fear. We are frightened of each other, and so we draw each other close, establish rules of engagement: politics. You intuit the need to protect yourself, but you need to rationalize, or legislate, the need to protect your neighbor. In submitting our authority of self-protection to the state, we expect protection not only for ourselves, but for and with our compatriots. In other words, we are all safer if we are all safe.

But demarcating who is given room under the wing of the Leviathan has been an ongoing controversy that has, in part, sparked conflict, conquest, and holocaust.

It has also spurred the development of institutionalized state protections, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Refugee Convention, that today—at least on paper—extend rights and protection to every single human being on the planet. Sovereignty needs steel and statecraft; the extension of rights and protections needs incubation and cultural shifts. According to the "contact hypothesis," the best way to counteract prejudice—to diminish fear—between majority and minority groups, between residents and newcomers, is by integration and patience. Fear typically prompts the opposite of patience. As Corey Robin writes, "What makes fear such a source of political élan is either the memory or the expectation of political entropy." Nothing signifies political entropy more than—you can almost hear an Ennio Morricone theme—a stranger coming to town.

Two countervailing fears leave asylum seekers outside any state protections: the instigating fear that pushes people to flee their country, and the receiving population's fear that propels them to slam the door. What results is a global crisis of homelessness: millions of people left in the cold of statelessness. To be stateless, as Hannah Arendt cogently observed, is to be rightless. Since the origin of human rights in the late 18th century, laws and protections have been hitched closely to the state. That is, if you fall or are pushed out from under its wing, you fall into a political abyss.

I first met Arnovis in the summer of 2018, just as the family separation crisis, in which the US government was tearing thousands of children from their parents after they crossed the border in search of asylum, was gaining international attention and condemnation. It was about six months after he had been trapped and threatened in the Piedras Negras safe house. At his home in the small town of Corral de Mulas on the rural coast of El Salvador, I interviewed him for this magazine. I would return to his home multiple times over the next year, staying and living with the family.

At that point, when I first met him, he had been deported twice from the United States and once from Mexico. He had spent months in detention, months on the migrant trails, and had had his 6-year-old daughter, Meybelín, taken away by US agents and sent to an undisclosed location. It was just a few weeks after Meybelín had been shipped back to him, and he and his family were in a state of extended shock, starting to pick up the pieces of their lives, assessing the damage. And he wasn't even free yet. He was home, but the threats he had thrice tried to flee were still present, and he and his family were living in a state of constant fear and anxiety.

***

Back in Piedras Negras, the mango branch held. Arnovis reached up with his other hand and clutched the next branch, planting his feet against the concrete wall. In another heave he had a hold on the top edge. He braced his feet, yanked himself up, and then swung a leg over the wall. That was when he heard one of the coyotes. What the f**k!

This f**king vato! another shrieked.

Arnovis looked down the other side of the wall and saw a few dozen kids in uniforms crossing the patio of a school. The mango tree was too far for him to reach the trunk and shinny down. There was nothing to do but fall onto the hard concrete in his black hand-me-down dress shoes.

Arnovis didn't hesitate. He didn't have time. He didn't even jump. He just let go.

MESSAGE FROM THE EXPERT

JULIANNE SCHULTZ AM FAHA
Professor, Media and Culture
Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research
Publisher of the Griffith Review
Chair of the The Conversation Media Group
FJA Jury Member

"The Covid pandemic has demonstrated, painfully and dramatically, what it means to live in a connected world. We have seen how a virus can travel at enormous speed and with huge consequences.

Ideas and journalism can have a similar trajectory.

This year's winners demonstrate the power of international connection and collaboration. The big issues that so many of them explore are global and interrelated.

Reporting these trends demands a different type of journalism where people work together, across borders and in different languages to tell the urgent stories that are changing the world.

There is still a place for the individual journalist to doggedly pursue a story and tell it with power and impact, but this year we see the power of global collaboration in action.

Just as the virus has shown, these brave and determined journalists have also demonstrated that we are all connected, for ill and for good."

Contribution to Civil Rights

CONTRIBUTION TO CIVIL RIGHTS

By Aidan White

News media routinely informs, entertains and sometimes annoys, but journalists are, above all, public watchdogs and nowhere is that role more important than in the protection of human and civil rights. If journalism has any role to play in democracy, it is not to please those in power or to serve as a mouthpiece of governments. The defence of human rights and civil freedoms is, therefore, one of the key areas of public interest journalism.

The shortlist in this category focused on national and global issues, including the story of indigenous groups in Brazil, who have historically been marginalized and abandoned by the state, how President's Trump's aid cuts affected the people of Gaza, and how hospitals in Kenya detain patients and corpses until bills are paid.

Another story was a comprehensive round up of how authoritarian governments have been lining up to unpick democratic rights, taking their cue from the movement's unofficial leader – President Donald Trump in the United States.

Also highlighted were stories that have not been making global headlines such as the violations of the rights of the Anglophone community in Cameroon, a report on the impact of a new law that outlaws domestic violence in Ukraine, and how poor people in Mumbai have been forced to live in a highly polluted industrial zone.

And telling these stories is not without risk, as one entry noted in reporting the heartbreaking search for missing persons in Veracruz, the most dangerous place to practice journalism in Mexico, a country where around 60,000 people have disappeared, many of them in the context of the country's vigorous "war on drugs".

From this extraordinary selection of excellent entries, the judges eventually found three worthy winners.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The First Prize went to a multinational team of reporters, photographers, designers, videographers and engineers from 18 media outlets and 15 countries for a ground-breaking investigation, *Migrants from Another World.*

The winning journalists were: María Teresa Ronderos, José Guarnizo Álvarez, Alberto Pradilla Mar, Alejandra Elisa Saavedra López, Almudena Toral, Ángeles Mariscal, Christian Locka, Christian Trujillo Gallego, Deepak Adhikari, Eduardo Contreras, Maye Primera, Mónica Gonzáles Islas, Nathan Jaccard, Ronny Rojas Hidalgo, Suchit Chávez, Juan Arturo Gómez, Ushinor Majumdar, Manno Wangnao, Felipe Reyes, Diego Arce, Noelia Esquivel, Mary Trini Zea, Paul Mena, Mónica Almeida, Estevan Muniz, Ibis León, Iván Reyes, Giancarlo Fiorella, Laureano Barrera and Sebastián Ortega.

This splendid package of journalism – in video, text and audio formats – takes President Trump's controversial plan to build a wall to keep migrants from crossing the southern border of the United States and tells the other side of the story.

Each year up to 24,000 people, many of them forced to leave their own countries, make the perilous journey from Asia and Africa to the Latin American mainland where they begin the final and most dangerous leg of their journey.

Through countries that make it clear they are not welcome, they head north in search of new lives and fresh beginnings in the United States.

This is powerful storytelling, told in vivid and fact-based style through eight documentary videos and a further eight in-depth reports, supported by two downloadable databases.

This work, coordinated by the Latin American Center for Investigative Journalism who managed a team from Argentina, Brazil, Cameroon, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, United States, India, Mexico, Nepal, Panama, Peru, United Kingdom, and Venezuela, demonstrates that the global story of migration needs to be told through cross-border collaboration, and always with a focus on the rights and humanity of the people themselves.

FIRST PRIZE WINNER

Migrants from Another World (Migrantes de Otro Mundo)

María Teresa Ronderos, Alberto Pradilla Mar, Almudena Toral, Alejandra Elisa Saavedra López, Ángeles Mariscal, Christian Locka, Christian Trujillo Gallego, Deepak Adhikari, Diego Arce, Eduardo Contreras, Estevan Muniz, Felipe Reyes, Giancarlo Fiorella, Ibis León, Iván Reyes, José Guarnizo Álvarez, Juan Arturo Gómez, Laureano Barrera, Manno Wangnao, Mary Trini Zea, Maye Primera, Mónica Almeida, Mónica Gonzáles Islas, Nathan Jaccard, Noelia Esquivel, Paul Mena, Ronny Rojas, Suchit Chávez, Sebastián Ortega, Ushinor Majumdar

(Colombia, Mexico, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama, Ecuador, Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, US, India, Nepal, Cameroon, UK)

María Teresa Ronderos is a Colombian journalist, and director and co-founder of the Latin American Center for Investigative Journalism (CLIP). She is a columnist of daily El Espectador. She founded and directed VerdadAbierta.com, specialised on investigating war and peace in her native country. Author of several books, including best-seller Guerras Recicladas (2014), about the history of paramilitarism. Her investigative journalism career has been recognised with the "Journalist of the year" Simón Bolívar Colombian national award (2104), the Maria Moors Cabot (2007) and the Ortega & Gasset (2020) awards.

Alberto Pradilla is a reporter for Animal Político, Mexico, specialising in migration and human rights. Author of "Caravan: how the Central American exodus came out of hiding".

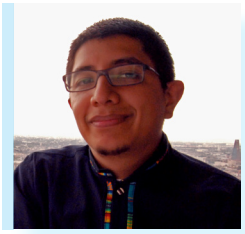
Alejandra Elisa Saavedra López is a Mexican designer and illustrator. She has collaborated in various media, and since 2009 she is part of SacBé producciones, an audiovisual collective focused on human rights and cultural issues in Mexico. Her quest is to build bridges between information, image and the reader in order to trigger critical thinking.

Almudena Toral is a visual journalist and documentary filmmaker. She heads the video and documentary team at ProPublica. Previously, she headed video at Univision Noticias Digital, taught at Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism and worked at The New York Times and TIME.

Ángeles Mariscal is a freelance journalist. She lives in the state of Chiapas, located on Mexico's southern border. She won the 2015 Award of Excellence for Impartial Reporting on Labour Migration for her work 'Migrant Women Trapped on an Imaginary Border', and the German Walter Reuter Journalism Prize in 2019 for her reporting 'La compuerta mexicana'.

Christian Locka is an award winning freelance reporter of Cameroon nationality who exposes corruption, illicit finances, human rights abuses, and organized crime for a couple of years now. His work has appeared in established publications such as 100 Reporters, Washington times, Public radio international, USA Today. The former fellow of the Fund for Investigative Journalism(FIJ) and the Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE) is since 2019 the founder and CEO of the Museba project, a training and reporting news organization in central Africa.

Christian Trujillo Gallegos (Mexico) is an animator with 19 years of experience in motion graphics and post-production in various projects. Currently divides activities as freelance, docente and cultural manager.



Deepak Adhikari is an investigative journalist based in Kathmandu, Nepal. His investigations have been published in websites of investigative journalism platforms including Organized crime and Corruption Reporting Project and Center for Investigative Journalism-Nepal. He is also the editor of South Asia Check, a fact-checking organization based in Nepal.

Diego Arce is a Costa Rican web application developer, who works for the CLIP. Specialised in Front End and data visualisation since 2009.

Eduardo Andrés Contreras is a journalist and documentary filmmaker. He has received four Simón Bolívar National Journalism Awards in Colombia and was nominated for an Emmy Award in 2007. He has collaborated with The Guardian, Channel 4, Natgeo, among others. When he worked on this story, he was the multimedia director of Semana magazine.

Estevan Muniz is a reporter for TV Globo, currently on the weekly programme 'Fantástico'. He covers human rights and health. He has reported on conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Syria. He won the Vladmir Herzog Human Rights prize in 2016. He directed the documentaries 'Ganado Marcado' and 'El Cuaderno de Pacha'. He holds a master's degree in international and political journalism from Columbia University.

Giancarlo Fiorella is a Senior Researcher and trainer at Bellingcat, an open-source digital research collective. Since 2018, Giancarlo has worked on projects focused primarily on Latin America.

Ibis León is a Venezuelan journalist.
She graduated from the Central University of Venezuela.
Ibis is currently working for Efecto Cocuyo as a political reporter.

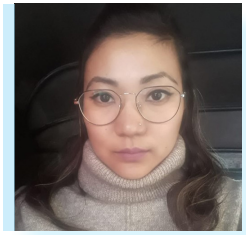
Iván Ernesto Reyes is a Venezuelan journalist and photojournalist based in Caracas. He currently works for Efecto Cocuyo.
He believes in journalism and the power of storytelling.

José Guarnizo is the co-founder of Voragine.co. He is a social communicator (University of Antioquia) and holds a master's degree in creative writing from the Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF) in Barcelona. He worked as the national editor of the magazine Semana, general editor of Semana.com and investigations editor of El Colombiano. He is the winner of multiple awards including el Rey de España twice (2011 and 2020), Excellence in Journalism award of the The Inter American Press Association (2020), the Simón Bolívar Award (in 2018, 2019 and 2020), among others.

Juan Arturo Gómez is an independent journalist from Darién, Colombia, who conceives journalism as a construction of truth, based on different voices.

Laureano Barrera was born in Quilmes, a city in Greater Buenos Aires, in 1980. A teacher, researcher and journalist specialising in Justice and Human Rights, his articles and reports have been published since 2005 in the media in Argentina and abroad: Miradas al Sur, Cosecha Roja, Anfibia magazine, Crisis, THC, Junge Welt and Kulturaustausch, Gatopardo and others. In 2017 he founded his own court reporting agency, Perycia. His first book is in print: a profile of the founder of the organisation Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo.

Manno Wangnao did her honors in Economics and followed it up with a degree in Journalism from Times School of Journalism in India. She had stints with various Indian media organizations before joining the Confluence Media. She is now a freelance journalist.



Ushinor Majumdar is a reporter, researcher, author and a budding screenwriter. He has worked as an investigative reporter with various Indian news organizations before joining the Confluence Media.

Mary Triny Zea is a journalist with more than fifteen years of experience in print, television and radio. During her career she has won seven national press awards, including the Gran Premio Nacional de Periodismo and four international awards, including the Premio Latinoamericano de Periodismo de Investigación. She currently works in the Investigation Unit of the newspaper La Prensa de Panamá.

Maye Primera is a bilingual Venezuelan multimedia journalist based in the United States. She has worked as a reporter and editor for more than 20 years, covering politics, immigration, borders, human rights and violence in Latin America and the US.

Mónica Almeida is a journalist with more than 30 years of experience and specialised in investigative journalism. She is a fellow of the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University, a member of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and part of the team that worked on the Panama Papers.

Mónica González Islas is a photographer and documentary filmmaker based in Mexico, specialised in production and development of independent projects through Web Documentary, Multimedia and Transmedia.

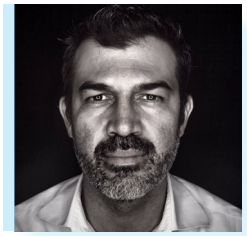
Noelia Esquivel Solano is a Costa Rican journalist who researches and writes about human rights, migration, gender and the LGBTIQ+ population. Since 2017 she has worked at La Voz de Guanacaste, a regional and bilingual media that investigates and portrays what happens in the northern, coastal and border areas of Costa Rica.

Paúl Mena is a journalist and university professor, specialising in data analysis and visualisation. He is part of the Investigative Unit of the newspaper El Universo, Ecuador, and a contributor to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists.

He has a Master's degree in Digital Journalism (University of Strathclyde, UK) and in Hispanic-American Literature (Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, Ecuador).

Ronny Rojas is a Costa Rican investigative journalist based in the US. He currently works with Noticias Telemundo.

His work has been recognized with numerous awards, including a national Emmy, the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award and the Ortega y Gasset Award.



Sebastián Ortega is a journalist specializing in human rights. He was editor of Cosecha Roja and Infojus Noticias. He has been published in Rolling Stone, Anfibia, Crisis, Le Monde Diplomatique and Página 12, among others.

Suchit Chávez (El Salvador) is a journalist since 2004. She has worked in various media and organisations as a staff journalist, editor and freelance journalist, such as La Prensa Gráfica, Plaza Pública, Alharaca, Ojo Público, Internews, CLIP, ICFJ, Connectas and others. She has worked as a trainer of journalists at a regional level.

Migrants from Another World

Migrantes-otro-mundo.elclip.org

May 28, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:
http://migrantes-otro-mundo.elclip.org
(Español, English, Português)

Migrants from another World, is a crossborder investigative journalism collaboration by the Centro Latinoamericano de Investigación Periodística (CLIP), OCCRP; Animal Político (Mexico) and the Mexican regional media Chiapas Paralelo and Voz Alterna, from the network Periodistas de a Pie; Univisión Digital News (United States), Revista Factum (El Salvador); La Voz de Guanacaste (CostaRica); Profissão Réporter deTV Globo (Brazil); La Prensa (Panama); Revista Semana (Colombia); El Universo (Ecuador); Efecto Cocuyo (Venezuela); and Anfibia/Cosecha Roja (Argentina) in Latin America. Other collaborators in the investigation were The Confluence (India), Record Nepal (Nepal), The Museba Project (Cameroon) and Bellingcat (United Kingdom). This project received special support from the Fundación Avina and the Seattle International Foundation.

By María Teresa Ronderos, Director of the CLIP

Every year thousands of people expelled from Asia and Africa cross Latin America looking for the north like swallows disoriented by an altered climate. Along the way, the already painful journey of these extraordinary human beings is made unnecessarily difficult by almost all governments, who put them at constant risk. This collaborative, cross-border investigation tells the story of their passage through our countries.

I met Kamal on the morning of January 16 of this year in Necoclí, a village of about seventy thousand people with a rough green sea and poor fishermen on the edge of the Gulf of Urabá, in the north-western corner of Colombia. Kamal was fleeing from Dhaka, Bangladesh, after religious extremists burned down his tea shop. His country has a Sunni Muslim majority, and, like the rest of the region, it has been affected by the ravages of global terrorism and the war against it and by the sectarian demagogy of leaders in both hemispheres. These have led to criminal attacks on the homes, businesses and temples of Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and Christian minorities.

Every year, half a million Bangladeshis are forced to leave their country. Those exiled by violence, like Kamal, are joined by those displaced due to climate change, which has especially affected this low and overpopulated country: increasingly frequent floods and landslides sweep the land under their feet.

Like most migrants, many of them take refuge in neighbouring countries, seeking to rebuild their lives not too far away from their regions. Many, however, decide to leave for the Americas. Between 2017 and January 2019, 1,608 Bangladeshis requested refuge in Brazil.

Kamal, too, flew to Sao Paulo, but he connected directly to Bolivia and there began his journey northwards overland. That's where he was going when we talked to him in Necoclí. Throughout 2019, Bangladeshi were in the top-five list among the Africans and Asians who took this route to the United States or Canada. Seven hundred and three travellers with this passport were registered by Colombian migration points, and officially, 1,561 were presented to migration authorities in Mexico.

The forces of globalization that now shape our lives - transnational economies, multinational militias, remotely ordered bombings, climate change, the Internet - have turned on the taps of migration across the planet. There are 50 million more migrants today than there were ten years ago, and the percentage of people living in a different country than their own has been increasing.

This cross-border investigative collaboration, involving 18 media organisations in 14 countries, uncovers an intense and little-known chapter of migration in our world today.

We have called it *"Migrants from Another World"* because it tells the stories of people who travel between five and ten thousand miles to the opposite side of the planet. Once in the Americas, they cross the continent in express buses or planes, in speedboats or rafts, in clandestine taxis or private cars taking hidden routes and tricky shortcuts, always towards the north, to the United States or Canada, like stunned swallows. Often, they cross entire stretches relying only on their legs, the wings of hope.

They are *Migrants from Another World* because the moment they set foot on the continent, their Bengali, Lingala or Hausa, Fula, Hindi or Nepalese, Arabic, Urdu or Sinhalese lose all their value, and not even French, Portuguese or English are of any use to them in the deepest villages, where no one understands them.

They are from *another world* because their courage and conviction are extraordinary. Determined to make a new life for themselves and - often - to open paths for those they leave behind, they take on the exploitation of swindlers on the road, the hostility of migrant posts and the corruption, they endure assault and rape, hunger, fear and threats, imprisonment and death.

"Death is also a form of freedom," says my colleague Juan Arturo Gómez, a member of this journalistic team who lives in the Gulf of Urabá region, very close to the border with Panama. He heard the phrase from an immigrant, and it stuck with him.

Why Such a Long Journey?

Many reasons make migrants take this route, which seems absurdly long. One often mentioned by Africans is that the road to Europe via Libya, where they torture and enslave travellers, terrifies them. Another is that the United States offers fewer and fewer quotas for refugees, which made it possible to wait patiently at home or in a friendly country until they were allowed to fly safely and directly.

In fact, the Trump administration has narrowed refugee quotas (reducing the 110,000 planned by the Obama administration for 2017 to 18,000 this year, and now reduced to zero with Coronavirus). This left them with no choice but to attempt this tortuous route that can take months and enter illegally and beg for asylum once inside. It's the case of the 1,327 Indians who were granted asylum in the United States in 2018, the last year for which the government provides figures.

Moreover, with instant global communication no place seems so distant, no journey seems so lonely. On phones and in internet cafés they follow the digital pebbles left behind by their fellow countrymen. Relatives and friends extend a helping hand, sometimes paying for the trip. Other times they pay for it themselves by borrowing from their families, selling whatever goods they have - like Kamal, who sold his land -, or getting in debt with their future as sole guarantee of payment.

They have Facebook and WhatsApp on their phones, and they can report what happens to them along the way. They spin networks by nationality, like the one Malians and Senegalese have been building in Brazil and Argentina since the late 1990s. In chat groups, those who have already made it through put them in contact with some migrant protectors - like Luis Guerrero Araya, whom I met in La Cruz, Costa Rica –, and they can let others know if there are problems.

Once some find soil to lay down roots, they call the others, and those call others. This is what humanity has always done: migrate in clusters.

This long journey is also possible because, although they are unwelcomed almost everywhere, their money is always welcomed. It flows easily from accounts in Karachi in Pakistan and Douala in Cameroon to Cruzeiro Oeste and Sao Paulo in Brasil or to Apartadó in Colombia, it crosses all borders with very little paperwork, through multiple international instant money transfer services like Western Union or MoneyGram, often mentioned.

This is what this journalistic alliance heard from many migrants in different parts

of the American geography, as well as from the official sources, academics and activists who spoke to us.

Over 40 journalists and editors and translators, cameramen and photographers, producers and creators, programmers and developers, designers and artists built Migrants from Another World. We were united by one purpose: to put flesh and blood on these migrants who have been almost invisible to the world. Even in the annual reports of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), they barely show up.

Their stories are only printed when tragedies happen or, worse, when their perpetrators are the subject. In this nine-month investigation, however, we followed their stories from beginning to end. We wanted to hear from those who managed to settle in the North and ask them whether it was worth the cost they paid; we wanted to find out what happened to those deported or imprisoned, to put a face and a name to those who died and whose remains lie in unknown places or mass graves by the roadside.

Our hope is that after cruising through the five chapters of *Migrants from Another World* more people will know that these migrants exist, in all their humanity, and that more will hear their only clamor: a safe and dignified passage through the continent.

Read more at http://migrantes-otro-mundo.elclip.org.

Following the Trail Left in the Colombian Jungle by Pradhan from Nepal

By Deepak Adhikari with the reporting of Nathan Jaccard and José Guarnizo

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://migrantes-otro-mundo.elclip.org/rutas-por-america/siguiendo-el-rastro-de-ramesh.html
(Español, English, Português)

Three images tell the journey of this Nepalese migrant, who went through 15 borders to reach the USA.

For many migrants, Puente América, was the last stage before hell. This hamlet of 30 houses is located in Chocó, the poorest province in Colombia. The village is less than 25 kilometers away from the border with Panama if you draw a line between the two points. However, there are no such things as straight roads in this thick jungle.

Usually travelers who are seeking a better life in the northern countries of the Americas are not allowed to go by regular means of transportation from Colombia to Panamá (even though there are several, including direct flights, speed boats, and ecological paths).

Hence, they are forced to take dangerous paths through the jungle, like the one that goes by Puente América. From this place, people have to make a trip of several days, sometimes on speed boats sorting out mangroves, or sometimes walking on slimy trails, to reach Juradó, a bigger town on Colombia´s Pacific Coast, and then again, on a boat to navigate by river into Panamá to arrive at Yavisa, a town where the paved highway that connects to Panamá City starts.

Puente America's school, an empty ruin made of large wooden planks, has become a makeshift shelter, where many migrants spend a night in their daunting trip. In 2015, a Colombian reporter José Guarnizo, who has also participated in this journalistic alliance, traveled to Puente America, following the migrant path. He found signatures and greetings left by them on the flimsy walls, like a Tower of Babel. There were messages written in Hindi, English, Nepalese, French, Bengali and Arabic, some of them with a date or a year next to a name.

"I was here Ahmed Salah, Ethiopian". "Alhaji Abass from Mamobi". "Bilal Warrakh, Pakistan". "Zakari Ganiou le Beninois". "I love Bangladesh". "May almighty Allah guide us". "We are on the way to USA".

Faiz Almed Jewel, of Dhaka, Bangladesh, who explained he was travelling with two other fellow countrymen, left, pasted on the wall, a hand-written message in the basic English he could communicate:

"Our destination is U.S.A. When I took this decision that time, I didn't know it's a riskable way. This is the especially request to my brother: don't believe to broker. They are cheaters, they are liars. They don't want to explain to us what real history about this way (...) you should remember my advice every time. Just remember Allah (...) Try to pray Holly Quran. This especially request to warn my brother (...) really it's very danger just to ride the speed boats across the jungle. Finally just pray for us for safe journey. We also pray for you. Allah save us. Don't waste your money..."

The journalistic transnational alliance of OCCRP, the Center for Latin American Investigative Journalism (CLIP) and other 16 media outlets, which produced the joint investigation *Migrants of Another World*, set out to find what had happened to these migrants who had passed such treacherous path. For months we tried unsuccessfully to look for them.

In 2019, Occrp contacted Nepalese freelance journalist, Deepak Adhikari, to help us on the search. He was able to find a Nepalese migrant who wrote his name in the Puerto America's school, and next to it others had written the date 2015.

We are not revealing the migrant's real name, as he preferred not to be interviewed, because he fears it can hamper his immigration process in the United States. But we interviewed his family, some friends and people who know well the life of Nepalese town where he lived.

Here is his story.

1. 2014: Kushma, Parbat, Gandaki province, Nepal

In the spring of 2011, when Ramesh Pradhan, then 28, married a young woman, he hoped that the bond would last for a lifetime. He had returned home in Kushma, a small town nestled in the rolling hills in Nepal's Gandaki province, after five years as a migrant worker in South Korea. Five of his friends drove over 150 kilometers on their motorbikes to Narayangadh to attend the wedding ceremony.

But in less than a year, their marriage began to unravel. "The two parted ways in a bitter and abrupt manner," recalled Binod Pokharel, a friend. Before getting married, Pradhan had built a cement and concrete house near the town's main junction. He built the house on a plot he received from his father, who married another woman and is living with her in Kathmandu. It cost him 1.2 million rupees (US$ 15,800).

As he settled down, dozens of young people made their way out of this town blessed with twin rivers called Modi and Kaligandaki.

Official figures aren't available for migrants who left for the US, but it spiked between 2012 and 2015, according to a local social worker, who tracks the migration trend. He asked not to be identified as his work could be hindered. Data from the United States Border Patrol shows that between 2014 and 2019, 5.200 Nepalese were apprehended in the country, nearly all of them in the south frontier. In one neighborhood of Kushma, 27 men from about eight families have made the trip to the US.

Around 500 migrants have migrated to the US from Kushma, the social worker said. "Around 8-10 traffickers operate here. Each has trafficked migrants from a few dozens to about 200," he said. While the lynchpins of the trafficking networks live in Kathmandu and New Delhi, local traffickers, part of the international networks, exploit their connections with and trust of the would-be migrants.

"First, it's a close-knit society and second the traffickers may have sent one of their family members to the US," the social worker said. "So everything remains a secret despite it being so widespread."

Only one person, Raju Paudel, who ran Manakamana Computer and Multiservice Institute in Kushma, has so far been convicted of crime related to trafficking. On June 17, 2019, the Parbat District Court jailed the 39-year-old for a year and fined him 10,000 Nepali rupees ($88).

Kushma's population is around 12,000, but it hosts a large number of financial institutions including 9 private commercial banks, three state-owned banks, 250 cooperatives, five development banks and three investment companies. There are also informal credit and savings systems such as Dhukuti. The unregulated or loosely regulated financial system is used both by traffickers and the migrants' families. Migrants turn to them for credit and travel.

To raise the money for his perilous journey, Pradhan turned to the local moneylenders, who charged him an 18 percent interest. The entire trip cost him 5 million Nepali rupees, but he convinced his family that it was worth it because of the possibilities that lay ahead in the United States, according to his cousin Surya Shrestha. "He still owes around 1.2 million rupees to the money lenders," he said.

Parbat isn't the only district with large number of migrants taking the risky route locally called Tallo Bato (literally down the road, but more accurately the route from south to north). A dozen districts in Nepal's mid-western region have emerged as centers for human smuggling to the US.

Police officials in the capital Kathmandu said in January that there were 5,000 Nepalese on their way to that country, via Latin America. "We have come up with this figure based on our investigations including the testimony of migrants who have been deported from the US, the traffickers we have arrested, among others," said Ishwar Babu Karki, head of the Anti-Trafficking Unit of Nepal Police. His

colleague, Narahari Regmi, a deputy superintendent of police, called trafficking one of the gravest crimes facing Nepal. “Because of trafficking, international airlines sometimes refuse to board a Nepalese in their planes. We have paid a heavy price due to human smuggling,” he said.

Sitting on the stairs of the house Pradhan built before the trip to the US, Mithu Pradhan, his mother, said her son was inspired by friends who left before him. “One by one, his friends left for America. They returned with money. I think he wanted to follow in their footsteps,” the 69-year-old woman said.

“He would tell me he had big dreams and wanted to go to big countries,” she said “No matter what, I want to reach America,” she recalled him telling her. “It was a matter of life and death, but I couldn’t stop him (from going to the US).”

The failing marriage, lack of employment and his desire to earn quickly seemed to have driven the young man to the US, said his friends and family members. “He had an expensive lifestyle. He used to party and go on tours,” his friend Pokharel, who owns a jewelry shop in Kushma, said. Shrestha, his cousin, agreed. “His expenses were very high, but he didn’t have any source of income. So he decided to go to the US,” he said. Pradhan left Nepal in October 2014.

2. 2015: Puente América, Chocó, Colombia

In March 2015, five months after he began the journey, Pradhan had stayed at Puente América, where this alliance found his name written on a wooden wall of makeshift shelter for migrants.

To reach this point, Pradhan had already paid more than 5 million rupees (USD 44,000) to the traffickers. He had crossed borders of India, Thailand, Russia, Spain, and Brazil and then travelled overland to Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and Colombia.

By the time, the route had already become a well-trodden path for desperate migrants fleeing unemployment, poverty and political instability in Nepal. Sunil K.C., a 22-year-old from Kushma, who travelled through the Darien Gap and was deported from the US a year ago, said he had watched a documentary on the route produced by CBS News on YouTube.

Nabin Gurung, a neighbor and friend of Pradhan, took the same way in 2018. Crossing the rainforest between Colombia and Panamá was one of the hardest points of his journey. It took him and his group eight days to cross on foot. Along the way, he saw a corpse and an Indian man with a broken leg, stranded in the jungle. They were robbed by armed men.

Gurung vividly recalled the grueling trek through the 50-mile route. “The jungle was so wet that you couldn’t walk without wearing rubber boots. It was so dense that I couldn’t see sky for a whole week,” he said. “If you fell ill and didn’t have any medicines, your fellow travelers left you to die alone,” he recalled. “We feared death, arrest and robbery. We subsisted on biscuits, chocolates and water.” He had carried a packet of roasted barley powder called Satu in Nepal, which he mixed with water and drank to fight hunger.

Pradhan, as Gurung did after him, had arrived at Panama in 2015. (In 2019, 243 Nepalese had registered at the border point until November, according to official statistics) Then, as his friends told us, he continued to Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico. He was robbed in Central America. He was arrested in Mexico. Then, he paid an additional 500,000 rupees to traffickers to cross into the US, where he arrived six months after he began his journey in Nepal.

3. 2020: New Jersey, United States

During the first years after he made it to the US, Pradhan worked at department stores in Baltimore, where he fell victim to robbery a couple times, according to his mother. About a year ago, he moved to New Jersey.

A search through his social media posts on Facebook and Instagram provided glimpses of his life in the US. A cover photo on Facebook showed him posing in New York with skyscraper as the backdrop. A search through his Instagram account revealed more: doing barbeque and hanging out with friends in the city. A hint of his life came from a comment on Instagram on a photo posted on May 2, 2018: “You look splendid! Now you may get married!” In one photo, he poses under cherry blossom. In another, he is hanging out his friends. Posing for photos wearing branded clothes and strolling along the beaches, Pradhan seems to be living his American dream.

However, some people in Kushma said such photos not only presented largely false impressions about life in the US, but also fueled further migration of the youths back home. “You can monitor their life on Facebook. They post photos of their trip to Nepal and their outings in the US,” the social worker who has studied the trend, said.

Nevertheless, he argued, migration has had a positive impact on the town. “Half of the young people who migrated have already received green cards. Many of them have taken their family to the US,” he said. “If a family member manages to cross the border into the US, it is a success story. The family builds a cement and concrete house from the money (sent by the migrant),” he said. “They send their children to private English schools. They buy new cars and go on vacations.”

Others such as Binod Pokharel, the jewelry shop owner who tried to migrate to the US, but was dissuaded by his father, see it in different way. “It takes you 3-4 years to pay back the debts incurred after the trip. Actually, it’s the traffickers and local money lenders who have profited from this business, not the migrants,” he said.

Indeed, Pradhan's family members said he still owed part of the money he used to get to the US.

Pradhan had received Temporary Protected Status, which was granted following the 2015 earthquake that killed over 9000 people Nepal. After fighting his case in immigration courts for several years, he recently received a Green Card, according to his friend Nabin Gurung. "He told me he is planning to visit Nepal during Dashain (the annual festival for Hindus in Nepal, which falls in September/October)," Gurung said.

Back at Pradhan's home in Kushma, his mother longs for the day the agonizing wait for her son is over. "He went through a lot of hardship. He's everything I have in life. He's my only child," she said. "I would have liked him to stay with me in my old days."

Probably the Coronavirus will not allow them to reunite in many months.

Shipwreck in Chiapas

By Alberto Pradilla, with reporting by Angeles Mariscal and Christian Locka from Cameroon

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://migrantes-otro-mundo.elclip.org/los-caidos/naufragio-en-chiapas.html

(Spanish, English, Portuguese)

At least three Cameroonians died in the October 11 shipwreck off the coast of Chiapas. Eight others survived. This is the worst accident yet involving African migrants in Mexico. Only one of the families managed to recover their remains. The survivors are in the United States, fighting for their asylum case.

For more than ten days, Maxcellus, a 27-year-old Cameroonian, was unable to change his clothes. On his body, the same sweaty T-shirt in which he almost drowned in the Pacific. The same trousers with which he crawled, soaking wet, onto a deserted beach known as Ignacio Allende, in Puerto Arista, municipality of Tonalá, Chiapas. The same shoes he wore at dawn when he saw four of his companions die. The same clothes he was wearing when Mexican soldiers picked him up and transferred him to a hospital.

On October 11, 2019, Maxcellus and seven other Cameroonian migrants survived a shipwreck. They were seven men and a pregnant woman who lost her baby.

These are the names of the survivors, as written by the Mexican authorities:

Dee Clinton Ngang
Tohnyi Constant Djuawoh
Agbor Aaron Agbor
Goden Mban Gatibo Werewai John
Etiondem Gabriel Ajawoh Justine
Aghot Arron Agbot
Nchongayi Elvis Fomeken
Echengungap M Asong

At least three others drowned:

Emmanuel Ngu Cheo
Romanus Atem Ebesor
Michael Atembe

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) records four deaths. Maxcellus and Derrick, two of the survivors, claim that two people named Emmanuel died on the boat. In addition, Derrick said that there is a fifth victim, a Cuban citizen, but he did not provide a name. Mexican authorities only confirmed three, whose remains were identified in funeral homes in Chiapas and Oaxaca. (Maxcellus' and Derrick's full names will remain undisclosed for protection).

This time it was not the Mediterranean, that mass grave on the way to Europe. It was the Pacific, a lesser known route but often used by migrants trying to reach the United States. Images of African migrants floating in the water, inert, are sadly common on the coasts of Libya, Morocco or southern Spain. Now it was the sea of Mexico that returned the bodies.

"The boat was full of water, the people were screaming, and in the end we were shipwrecked. I thought we weren't going to survive. That nobody was going to survive. I thought we were all going to die," Maxcellus told me, a reporter for Animal Político, one of the members of the cross-border journalistic alliance that created *Migrants from Another World* .

"I have to thank God, who saved our lives. I can't imagine how I got out of there alive. I fought and fought and fought while the waves were pushing us back, but I made it to shore," Derrick told me when I interviewed him by video call in early May 2020. He was at the home of some family members and had only been released a week earlier after spending several months in a detention center in Houston, Texas.

Sometime between 3am and 5am on October 11th 2019, a boat carrying Cameroonian migrants along the Pacific coast lost control and sank. Of the handful of men and women who fell, only a few knew how to swim. They were left at the mercy of the currents off the coast of Chiapas.

This is the story of that shipwreck, which took the lives of at least three people. They were all desperate. They had been camping out in front of the Siglo XXI migratory station in Tapachula, Chiapas, for several months and wanted to get to the United States. They paid $320 to a coyote to try to go around the police checkpoints by crossing through the sea. They didn't make it.

The eight survivors, however, did reach their goal. Four of them are now free on U.S. soil and are waiting for their asylum cases to be litigated before a judge. The other half remain held in detention centers, now hotbeds of contagion for COVID-19.

I Had No Choice

Maxcellus was a welder in Kumba, in southeast Cameroon. The English-speaking minority that resides there is at odds with the rest of the state, where people speak French. Since 2016, both communities have been at war, and a part of the population wants secede from the territory. The separatists of the south know the territory as Ambazonia. This confrontation has been called a "conflict of colonial languages". More than 200 languages are spoken in Cameroon, but the ones that define enemy territories are French and English, the languages used by the empires that colonized them.

Since the beginning of the war, thousands of people have died and many others have escaped, more than 600,000 according to the United Nations. Of these, a small group has managed to cross half the world and reach the United States via Latin America. In 2019, Cameroon was the nation that contributed the most people to this dangerous route. Fleeing violence, they sought to apply for asylum in the United States or Canada. They brought terrible stories of razed villages and massacred families.

"I decided to leave because of the problems in our country. The military was against me. I was a young activist and was arrested in October. My family helped me get out of the place," says Maxcellus, a burly man who, despite months of hardship, keeps a strong body.

I met Maxcellus on November 27, just as he had arrived in Tijuana, Baja California, along with his friend Evis, another survivor. The two of them were staying at a rundown hotel downtown, a dump for which they paid 800 pesos a night. Inside were migrants from India, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and others from Cameroon. They were all passing through. Everyone wanted to get out of Tijuana as soon as possible.

In 2018, Tijuana was declared "the most violent city in the world", according to a study by the Citizens' Council for Public Security and Criminal Justice of Mexico. That year, 2,640 murders were recorded, with a rate of 138 violent deaths per 100,000 inhabitants. Three days before our meeting, Maxcellus and Evis took a bus in Tuxtla-Gutiérrez, Chiapas, and traveled almost 2,500 miles across Mexico from south to north. It is the longest way to the U.S. border, but also the safest. The other route, the Gulf, crosses the states of Veracruz and Tamaulipas, where the kidnapping of migrants is more frequent.

After months of risking their lives, travelling 2,500 miles by bus was easy for these two survivors.

"I had no choice," Maxcellus says of their escape.

We met in a restaurant next to the Enclave Caracol, a social center where activists from all over the area interact. Among its activities are the workshops held by the lawyers of Al Otro Lado, an organization that provides legal advice to hundreds of people that end up in Tijuana trying to seek asylum in the United States.

The two newcomers are worried about their immediate future, but first comes food. They say they spent their last pesos on bus tickets and they are hungry. They each spent more than US$5,000 to get here and now depend on the support from their families.

Maxcellus says he is the oldest of six siblings. He is followed by four females and one male. He explains that an arrest in October 2018 did not discourage the military, which continued to harass him. His family sold some land so that he could escape, and he left for Nigeria. "Many Cameroonians flee there, but the authorities arrest them and send them back to Cameroon," he says.

Persecuted by soldiers and afraid of being killed, he says he had no choice but to go far away. They decided the best option was to seek refuge in the United States, and the way there would be through Quito, Ecuador, where Cameroonians like him did not need a visa until Aug. 12, 2019.

This is a thought you often hear: "I had no choice." The alternative was to die at the hands of the army, or perhaps of an armed separatist group, or to take a chance on the extremely dangerous route to Europe. When you're on the run, you don't have much time to evaluate your options. His was to go to Nigeria and from there to Ecuador. It was the easiest thing to do. The only option, in short.

Colombia, Panama, "The Jungle"

"It can't be explained. It is terrible. When I was inside I thought I had better died in my country, with my family. You see bodies everywhere. Children, pregnant women, men," he says, recalling the journey through the Darien jungle in Colombia. Another recurring thought: if I'd known, I wouldn't have tried.

In the Darién he was mugged and he lost some money and a cell phone, says Maxcellus. He claims that anyone who resists is killed right there. In a way, he felt lucky. He had survived. He says that in this transit he met some of the people who would later be with him in the shipwreck. He doesn't talk much about them. It seems as if there was a pact of keeping to your own story, as if he had no right to speak on behalf of anybody else. He is Maxcellus, the welder with four sisters and one brother, the survivor.

"Panamanian Migration officers took us to Costa Rica. From there we went to Nicaragua, where we were given a pass to Honduras. From there, they sent us to Guatemala. We crossed the river and arrived in Tapachula," he explains.

On July 1, 2019, Maxcellus entered Mexico through the Suchiate River. It's just a few meters that are crossed on a cámara, a kind of boat made of big plastic doughnuts and directed by a guy with a wooden stick. These are precarious gondolas that come and go between Mexico and Guatemala every day carrying products without taxes and workers without papers.

When he arrived on Mexican soil, he tells how he was detained by agents of the National Institute of Migration (INM) and transferred to the Siglo XXI migratory station in Tapachula, Chiapas.

Tapachula was his intended destination, as it was for more than 7,000 African migrants who were registered and detained by the INM in 2019. Sources from this institution who spoke on condition of anonymity said that there are international networks that use this town as a base of operations. According to them, there is a network of hotels and lawyers there who take advantage of a legal vacuum to allow migrants to continue their journey. This theory was confirmed by Tonatiuh Guillén, a former INM commissioner.

"I entered the camp in July. I left on July 12. They gave us a document, but it wasn't good," explains Maxcellus.

Dates are important; they make the difference between life and death.

If Maxcellus had been released four days earlier, he wouldn't have been a victim of a shipwreck.

If Emmanuel or any of the people who drowned in Tonalá had left Siglo XXI before July 10, they would not be dead now.

July 10 was the date that Ana Laura Martinez de Lara, then INM's Director of Immigration Verification and Control, on orders from the government, issued a memo to all detention centers changing the rules of the game.

Previously, non-continental arrivals were released with a document that forced them to regularize their situation or leave the country during the following 20 days. These are nations that have no diplomatic representation in Mexico, and deporting migrants there is expensive. So the Mexican state would label them "stateless" and turn a blind eye when migrants used this document as a safe-conduct to reach the northern border.

The exit permit was not a travel document, but it was used as such.

Everything was different from July 10. The INM modified the application of the rule and gave migrants two alternatives: to regularize their situation or to leave the country the same way they had come, that is, through the southern border with Guatemala.

Martinez, who no longer works for INM, insisted that this was not a major change, that it was in line with previous laws, and that it was a matter of promoting regulated migration. She also said that no one had pressured her to make this decision.

In practice, things did change, but no one informed Maxcellus. He had to find out by force. As soon as he left Siglo XXI, after eleven days of confinement, he took a bus to Tijuana. It passed through the first checkpoint in Tapachula and the next in Huixtla, located 30 miles away. At the third checkpoint, located between Arriaga, Chiapas, and San Pedro Tapanatepec, Oaxaca, he was stopped. He had traveled less than 200 miles and had barely set foot in the second Mexican state on his route.

"They told us we had to go back. That the document only allowed us to be in Tapachula," he explains.

That was the consequence of the agreement signed a month earlier between the United States and Mexico, in which Andrés Manuel López Obrador promised to reduce the flow of migrants over the border in exchange for Donald Trump not imposing tariffs on his exports.

According to that pact, thousands of National Guard agents were deployed in the south to prevent poor families or victims of violence from reaching the border with the United States.

In addition, asylum seekers were sent back from the US to northern Mexico, to violent cities like Tijuana or Nuevo Laredo, to wait for their case there. This only applied to those who spoke Spanish, so of Maxcellus managed to cross over, he would remain in the United States until a judge decided whether he could stay as a refugee or be returned to where he came from.

The closest point to the border was more than 1,000 miles from Tapachula, where he was trapped. Until then, the countries they had crossed had given them documents to carry on, as in Costa Rica or Panama, or they had looked the other way. That was supposed to be the case in Mexico, but they didn't take into account the pressure from the United States.

Maxcellus was among the first wave of migrants to get stranded, the first for whom the INM documents did not get them to the United States. They were also the first to fall into the spider's web of Mexican institutions. From the day he was told at a checkpoint that he could not continue his journey north, he began a pilgrimage from office to office without anyone giving him solutions.

"The day after they returned us we went to Las Vegas (other INM facilities in Tapachula). They told us to go there on July 20 to receive our document. That night we slept out there. But it was no use. We went for months without information," he complains.

That's how the African community came to set up a camp in front of the Siglo XXI migrant station. With no work, no money and no possibility of moving, hundreds set up their tents in front of the detention center.

From that moment on, a grueling routine was organized between the makeshift refugee camp and Las Vegas. For weeks, the migrants went back and forth, waiting for someone to give them the good news and a document with which to travel. But it was impossible. One day they were told that their name was misspelled and that the process had to be started all over again. Another, that their documents had been lost. A third, that they had no reason to return the next day.

As in Asterix and the Twelve Tasks, migrants had to face a bureaucracy designed to wear them out and which they did not even understand, since they did not speak the language.

Meanwhile, the money was running out.

"We had no food, we had nothing, they gave us nothing. They told us we were stateless, that we had to go to the first immigration post. We did, and from there, they sent us back to Las Vegas. They were playing with us," he says, seemingly upset.

Trapped in Tapachula, the migrants began to squander what few resources they had left. They had paid for plane tickets, bus tickets, taxis, hotels and coyotes to go through the jungle. They had paid officials, they had paid for daily food, and they had been robbed.

They were coming close to being left with nothing.

The INM didn't regulate them. Returning to Guatemala was unthinkable, and they didn't want to ask for asylum in Mexico because they feared that if they applied to the Mexican Refugee Aid Commission (Comar) for protection, U.S. judges would reject their case when they crossed the border and all their efforts would have been in vain.

"I looked for work in Tapachula. But they told me they couldn't hire me, that I didn't know the language. I ended up selling hard-boiled eggs on the street," Maxcellus explains.

"We had no choice," he repeats.

Tapachula as a Dead End

With the chaos in the camp, the riffraff and the organization of groups to protest against the authorities, some migrants simply disappeared. Coyotes have always had a strong presence in Chiapas, and Tapachula is one of their main bases.

Until then, Cameroonians, Congolese or Angolans didn't require the services of polleros, which is the name of the guides who take you north: they could cross the country legally with their exit permits. But when the Mexican government decreed a change of rules, a new market opened.

The choice was presented to Maxcellus by a Congolese man, who told him about a guy who could help them. This is how coyotes work in a camp of desperate people. No need for big advertisement. All it takes is for someone to hear about a way out, as slim as it may be, and they all jump at it. There was nothing to lose.

Someone promised to get them to Mexico City without explaining how. Maxcellus refers to that "someone" as "the agent", and gives no details. Ana Lorena Delgadillo, a lawyer with the Foundation for Justice, accompanies the family of Emmanuel Ngu Chao, a victim of the shipwreck in Chiapas, in their legal proceedings in Mexico. According to her, one of the testimonies collected claims that there were police involved in the network that captured the migrants to sail north. There are investigations open in the prosecutor's offices of Oaxaca and Chiapas, but not even

the families of the victims have had access to the investigation file.

So, for now, we only know that "the agent" is a guy who promised a handful of desperate Cameroonian migrants that he would bring them to Mexico City.

The date was Thursday, October 10.

Maxcellus says he almost didn't make it to the meeting, but finally managed to convince "the agent" to send a car to Siglo XXI to take him to the coast. They picked him up at 7 p.m. and moved him to a house.

He thought the trip was by car to the capital, so he was surprised when they gave him a black plastic bag to cover his belongings.

They went to a small river, where there were two boats.

The first one sailed without incident and reached its goal. They came to a place they did not know and slept in a house full of weapons. They were frightened, but there was no longer a way out. The next day they were driven to Mexico City in cars.

In the second one, a tragedy occurred.

A handful of men and a woman are stuffed into a boat where they barely fit. It's night time, you can't see anything. There is a lot of confusion and the coyote in charge of sailing the boat does not seem to know what he is doing.

Maxcellus says he has no idea where they sailed from or how long it was before the water started to come in. Everybody knew something was wrong and started screaming.

In the midst of the chaos, he barely remembers how he struggled for every breath of air. Legs and arms clung to the boat, already capsized, or to his body. "People were pushing, screaming. I fought, but I was tired," he remembers.

Suddenly, through the spray and the half-light, Maxcellus says he saw two men on the shore. It was a fisherman and his son.

"I shouted at him amigo, because I know what amigo means in Spanish," he says.

But he didn't find a friend. The guy just searched the bags with the belongings that were being returned by the sea and stole some of them. Others would wash up on the beach as a testimony to the shipwreck.

"We were confused. We managed to get out. I looked around and saw a body. It was Atabong's. We moved into the jungle, crying, not knowing what to do. Until we saw an army truck," he says.

They were alive.

Maxcellus explains that they were all taken to a hospital in Tonalá, Chiapas, and from there, to the State Attorney's Office (FGE) to take their statements. Finally, they moved them to an immigration station in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the state capital.

The place where they were detained was not the most welcoming for survivors of a shipwreck, as it lacked the most basic conditions for accommodating human beings.

It is a place known as "La Mosca" or "El Cucupape 2". Until 2013 it had been a plant that produced sterile flies for use in agriculture. As it was owned by the Institute of Appraisals and National Assets (Indaabin), it was reconverted into a detention center for foreigners in June, shortly after Mexico and the United States signed the agreement by which the government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador pledged to reduce the flow of migrants. It had previously been used by the Federal Police and National Guard, who complained about its poor conditions.

It was deemed unsuitable for barricading police officers, but it was okay for locking up migrants who had survived shipwrecks.

In Mexico, migration stations are detention centers for foreigners who are caught in an irregular situation. Most of those who enter do not leave unless they are deported. Migration is not a crime, but guys like Maxcellus are detained in jails as if they had robbed or assaulted someone.

The day after the shipwreck, the Tapachula camp exploded. Tired of feeling like puppets in the hands of institutions they didn't understand, hundreds of migrants tried to walk straight onwards and break through the area of enclosure. They marched for more than twelve hours under extreme weather conditions. First came a suffocating heat and after, torrential rains. By the time those ahead were intercepted in Tuzantán, 25 miles north of Tapachula, they were completely exhausted.

That caravan tried to make its way to the United States on the anniversary of the day when 300 Hondurans had gathered at the San Pedro Sula bus station and marched out together in a group that by October and November 2018 had snowballed into a massive horde. Unlike the Central American exodus, which managed to reach Tijuana after a month and a half of walking, the Africans hit a wall composed of National Guard officers and did not finish their first stage.

The eight survivors heard about the attempt from their compatriots who were also detained in La Mosca 2.

They would not regain their freedom until nearly a month after the accident. As they had been victims of a crime, they were provided with a resident's card on humanitarian grounds, although Migration also offered them a so-called "assisted return". This meant to return, now traumatized by the accident and with a lot less money in their pockets, to the place they had escaped from almost a year earlier.

A few weeks after leaving the migration station, the group split up. Maxcellus and Evis opted for Tijuana, which has a border with California. The rest went to Nuevo Laredo

and Reynosa, in Tamaulipas, on the other side of Texas. Between Tijuana and Nuevo Laredo there are more than 1,300 miles across Sonora, Chihuahua and Coahuila, desert states on the border and in which organized crime has gained strength.

In Tijuana, as in all the rest of the border, the options are limited for asylum seekers. Either you sign up on a list and follow the process legally, or you jump the fence and ask for asylum, knowing that you begin your struggle for protection with the handicap of having disobeyed U.S. rules.

Every morning, dozens of people gather at the El Chaparral pass, where you can access the United States on foot. There, every day, the American authorities call out ten numbers for passing. Each number is a family. On the other side they will have their first interview in which the credibility of their threat is determined. If you are not there when they call out your number, you miss your turn and have to wait for the stragglers to be called. A website allows you to follow the progress of the list, which is managed by the asylum seekers themselves.

The wait at El Chaparral is a collection of the horrors of the world. There are Hondurans, Salvadorians and Guatemalans who have been threatened to death by gangs, there are Mexicans who have fled when cartels put prices on their heads, and there are Cameroonians who traveled halfway round the world to get to that very place. Usually, asylum seekers wait two or three months until they hear their name and the door to the United States is opened to them, but there are suspicions that if you pay, you can speed up the process.

On the first day they set foot in Tijuana, Maxcellus and Evis had no idea about any of this.

Ten days later their phone stopped working.

They must have done something to get across so quickly.

It wasn't until April that a Cameroonian recently released from the Otay Mesa detention center in California confirmed that Maxcellus, the shipwreck survivor, was there. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) did not respond to requests for information. Later in mid May, I learnt he had been released.

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Derrick, 26, was released on April 27, 2020, in Houston, Texas. He had been held for several months after he crossed the international bridge from Nuevo Laredo to the United States in early December.

He was also on the boat and now says he does not know how he managed to get out of the water alive. He just thanks God. He is currently being held with relatives and is awaiting an appointment with the American judge who will hear his request for asylum. We talked by video conference at the beginning of May 2020.

Like the rest of his colleagues, Derrick needs protection. He fled his country when the army killed his cousin, a student like himself at Buea University in southeastern Cameroon. Derrick's is a nomadic family looking for a place to feel safe. His brother is in Dubai. His mother is in Canada. His father is the only one left in Cameroon. "I left because of political instability," he says.

The story of young Derrick, a political science student and farmer, mirrors that of his peers. Persecution and then a hasty flight halfway round the world to try to reach the United States. Trapped in Mexico, he also got on the damned ship that sank in Chiapas.

He claims he doesn't know who organized it, only that it was a Mexican man and that he escaped when the crew begged for help and later drowned. Nor does he know the name of the place from which they set sail. But he claims that when he was in the car, he saw they were driving away from Tapachula airport.

As for the treatment provided by the Mexican authorities, he remembers the first immigration station. "I was in very bad condition."

Being detained was not part of his plans, but freedom also caught him by surprise. From one day to the next, Derrick remembers, they were on the streets. It was early November in Tuxtla-Gutiérrez, the capital of Chiapas. None of the eight Cameroonians had ever been to this place or planned to stay, despite the efforts of the Mexican authorities to keep them from going north.

Being trapped in Tapachula had cost his companions their lives. Now, suddenly, the Mexican government had changed its tune and some members of the camp were receiving their permanent resident cards and were on their way north. All they needed was to raise enough money to get going.

"In the shipwreck we lost everything. Documents, papers, money. But I had some bills in my pocket, so we were able to rent a room while we talked to our families," he says. They rented a room for four thousand pesos. The following week, they moved to second room where they paid half.

Families are a basic lifeline for those who flee. Abandoned in the middle of nowhere, traumatized and penniless, the eight survivors gathered in that room and planned their trip north. They received some financial support and they recovered from the shock. They had not put themselves through that hell to stay in Chiapas.

At this point, their paths diverged.

Derrick explains that he went with another of his companions to Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. This is a tough town, where organized crime has a large presence, fundamentally from the Cartel del Noreste, a division of Los Zetas. Kidnappings of migrants and assaults are common.

The system is as follows: the pollero or the migrant pay for the right to be there, for

stepping on that land. The cartel then gives him a password. It is a kind of permit. If you have it, you can continue. If you don't, you can be kidnapped or forced to pay for using a crossing run by the cartel. According to information from the Tamaulipas Prosecutor's Office, since 2016 more than 30 disappearances or kidnappings of foreigners have been reported in the state. Many more, however, go unreported.

NGOs, volunteers, lawyers and migrants tell you about this system, but they all ask for anonymity. No one in Nuevo Laredo wants to expose themselves by talking openly about a system that shows the extent to which criminal groups impose their law in the area.

Africans are not usually targets of crime. They can be lot of trouble when it comes to collecting ransom. Cubans are the preferred target of the mafias, and Central Americans the most common. They may be kidnapped, extorted or enslaved. Some never speak to their families again and their bodies never turn up. In Mexico there are more than 3,000 mass graves and more than 61,000 missing persons. But this doesn't usually affect Cameroonians like Derrick. They are practically the only ones who move freely in Nuevo Laredo.

However, they can be robbed just as easily. Their money is the same as that of Central Americans or Cubans. There might not be a family to extort, but their pockets can be picked just the same.

Derrick learned this when he'd only been in the area for a week. "I went out to shop and got mugged by men with guns. I was terrified," he explains.

The scare got him going. A day later he went for the international bridge. He says there was a group and he simply joined them. He explains that he chose Nuevo Laredo because it is the fastest way. The insecurity of its streets makes it a hostile but fast destination. There are families who prefer to go to Matamoros (212 miles to the east), where more than 2,000 people have been sleeping in a camp on the banks of the Rio Bravo for months; Reynosa (158 miles to the east), Piedras Negras (73 miles to the northwest) or Ciudad Acuña (165 miles to the northwest), the route most travelled by migrants from various African countries.

From the moment he crossed into the United States, Derrick was detained in a prison for migrants. This is how the asylum system works on the other side of the Rio Bravo. Men and women with thousands of miles on their backs, after fleeing from horrors and undergoing hellish journeys, must remain locked up for several months.

The government believes that this discourages the arrival of Central Americans, Mexicans, Chinese, Cubans, Bangladeshis, Congolese or Cameroonians.

Derrick accepted his confinement knowing that it was part of the process. What he could not imagine was the world changing so drastically while he was behind closed doors. When he was admitted, Covid-19 had not even been detected in China.

By the time he regained his freedom, the virus was a global threat and detention centers were a hotbed of infection.

Derrick was in a Houston detention center when one of the officers became ill with the coronavirus. "People were very afraid," he explains.

During the first months of 2020 the pandemic spread through the detention centers. President Donald Trump suspended asylum claims and shut down the border, imposing an expedited deportation plan that undermined international law.

Mexico agreed to receive Hondurans, Guatemalans and Salvadorans and handle their deportation. However, there were thousands like Derrick, who had been detained for quite a while. They watched as the virus cornered them inside their cells. In early May, when the Cameroonian was already free, a man from El Salvador who had lived in the United States for 40 years and was held shortly before the start of the pandemic was the first victim of Covid-19 in the facilities of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

Six months after the accident, Derrick is still waiting for his chance to prove that returning to Cameroon would be a death sentence. "I want to rebuild my life. Maybe I can visit my mother."

His greatest fear: that a judge will reject his case send him home.

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Emmanuel Chao Ngu was the only fatal victim of the tragedy whose relatives were able to say goodbye. On 30 January 2020, the body of the Cameroonian was flown to Douala, the largest city in that country. There, along with his family, was Christian Locka, a reporter with The Museba Project, one of the partners in this investigation. His family buried him a day later in Bamenda, the place where he was born 39 years ago.

In the midst of the tragedy, the family of Emmanuel Chao Ngu, a teacher by trade, had an opportunity that was not afforded to everybody: to say goodbye to a loved one who passed away on the dangerous road to the United States.

"Mexico is responsible for what happened to my brother," Cecilia Ngu said on the phone. She is the sister of Emmanuel, the woman who caught a plane when she heard about the tragedy and traveled through southern Mexico until she found the body. If she hadn't made that trip, her brother's remains might have been cremated. Before recognizing her brother in Ixtepec, Oaxaca, she had to see two other bodies, those of Michael and Atabong. They were in the morgue in Tonalá, Chiapas, 110 miles from the place where he identified Emmanuel.

Emmanuel's body was found on Cachimbo beach in Oaxaca. At first he was identified in Chiapas, because his documentation was found there. Also, according to two of

the survivors, there was another Emmanuel on the boat who also died, although no other details of him are known. Mexican authorities have only discussed three bodies, and the prosecutor's investigations have not been made public. It is possible that they have done nothing else apart from questioning the survivors, still wearing the same clothes they shipwrecked in after a week.

Emmanuel was married with three children. His mother Helen worked as a nurse in Minneapolis, USA and two of his sisters also lived in the north. Cecilia was in charge of handling the return of his remains.

Like many Cameroonians, Ngu was escaping from the war. He had been arrested and tortured and a friend of his had been killed.

That is why the Cameroonian teacher escaped and why he landed in Quito at the end of July. That's why he crossed the Darien and that's also why he arrived in Tapachula, where Africans met a dead end.

Throughout the journey, Ngu carried a letter in his pocket with personal details that backed his request for asylum. He never handed it in. That document is the cruel legacy of the plight of a man who died on his way to protection.

Now the letter is part of a case opened in Mexico and supervised by the Foundation for Justice and the Democratic Rule of Law. But there has been no progress. There are two files in the Oaxaca and Chiapas prosecutor's offices, but the institutions claim that this being an investigation into human trafficking, its contents are secret.

In Mexico, 99 out of every 100 crimes go unpunished, according to a report by the organization Zero Impunity.

Not even Ngu's family has had access to the findings regarding the death of their relative and the way they got him on that boat. The presence of weapons on one of the flats where the members of the first boat were taken suggests that organized crime was involved, but these are only suspicions.

When even local cases are not normally investigated, it is unlikely that anyone will bother to find out what happened to victims born thousands of miles away, whose families weren't even informed.

For some time now, the movement of migrants has been in the hands of the same organizations that smuggle cocaine and methamphetamine into the United States. They either do it themselves or they charge a fee to the pollero. This is what is often said by the sources that monitor the passage.

"This case shows the failure of immigration policies. Above all, of the policies of asylum. He was clearly an asylum seeker, his friend had been killed, he had been tortured. But Mexico, because it was focused on mass deportation, did not see it," says Lorena Delgadillo of the Foundation for Justice and the Democratic Rule of Law, which accompanies the family on their judicial process in Mexico.

Emmanuel was invisible to Mexico when he was alive, and continued to be so after he died.

The only concern of the authorities was that he did not make it to the north. And they succeeded.

From then on, it didn't matter. He had died and could no longer reach the United States. Mission accomplished.

"They refused to help us with the repatriation. All this is a violation of human rights," says Cecilia from Minneapolis. It has been six months since the shipwreck and the sister wants to start forgetting. My questions don't help her, so we only have a brief conversation in which she blames Mexico for her brother's death.

"There are international laws. People have the right to seek asylum. They don't know anything about what's going on in Cameroon," she says, angrily.

It's not just that Mexico's policies led Emmanuel to take that boat that cost him his life. It's also the aftermath, Cecilia complains. For example, when it comes to repatriation. There was neither compensation for being a victim of a crime, nor support for the repatriation of the body. It cost more than eight thousand dollars to send the coffin from a funeral home in Ixtepec, Oaxcaca, to Bamenda, in Cameroon. More than 6,000 miles in a straight line, and four months of anguish for the victim's family.

Since he was not going north anymore, Emmanuel was no longer a problem for the Mexican authorities.

The families of those killed in the shipwreck were left unprotected.

Maxcellus' remains made it back home. Those of Atabong and Michael, on the other hand, were cremated and to this day remain in a funeral home in Tapachula, Chiapas. Not even the dead managed to escape from the prison city.

When Chiapas Paralelo, a partner in this investigation, asked the Attorney General's Office about the whereabouts of the bodies, a spokesperson said that they were being kept at the Medical Forensic Service in Tonalá, Chiapas, until their families were contacted. When asked for further details, the response was that the remains were taken to the Bravo Funeral Home in Tapachula, with the authorization of the relatives, "for cremation and dispatching of the ashes to their families".

But in Cameroon, cremation of the dead is not a common practice.

Manuel de Jesús Chacón Gálvez, in charge of the funeral home, explains that he received the bodies more than a week after the incident. He says he spoke to Michael and Atabong's relatives through other relatives in the United States. The closest he got was a cousin, he says. "Communications were difficult, because of the language

and the weather," he says. Things became complicated.

At first, the relatives sent him 40,000 pesos (equivalent to about US$2,000), half of the 80,000 he estimated it would cost to embalm and repatriate him.

It was important for the family to recover the bodies and return them to their land. Atembe's sister conducted a crowdfunding campaign to send money to Mexico so that her dead brother could be repatriated.

At first, the funeral director thought he could return the bodies. But then, he says, he saw that they would not have made it through a trip with several stops. The bodies were damaged by the sea salt and the heat. So he decided to cremate them. "I thought at least they'd have the ashes," he says.

I didn't know what that meant for the families of those migrants on the other side of the world. When they found out, they protested angrily, claiming that they had been tricked. Chacón says he only charged them 40,000 for his services and that he offered to send them the urns. But they have not responded.

Derrick, the survivor, tells me the version that spread around the immigrant community in the United States: that they paid to repatriate the body and they were cheated.

Emmanuel Ngu's family did get his body back. Cecilia's trip was providential. She managed to get to the funeral home where her brother's remains were, and she was guaranteed that they would keep him until they could move him home.

On January 31, 2020, Ngu was buried in Bamenda, the town from which he had fled almost a year earlier. The ashes of Michel Atembe and Romanus Atem Ebesor were placed in urns in Tapachula. There is no data on that fourth body which the survivors identify as Emmanuel.

As of mid-May, five of the eight Cameroonians who left that beach alive remain free in the United States, waiting to argue their asylum case before a judge. The other four are still detained. This is the last step in the painful transition to international protection.

Meanwhile, Cameroon is still at war and there are hundreds of Emmanueles, Michaeles and Romanus trying to escape.

The rules have changed for them. Ecuador is now asking for visas, Mexico is giving them resident's cards whose effect on asylum applications is unknown, and the Darien is still there, swallowing people up.

Arriving in Canada or the United States to ask for protection is still an inhumane transit in which you can leave your life.

No one understood Nguyen in El Salvador

By Suchit Chavez, with reporting by Ronny Rojas

The original publication is available via the following link: https://migrantes-otro-mundo.elclip.org/rutas-por-america/nadie-entendio-a-nguyen-en-el-salvador.html

In December 2018, the Vietnamese Van Dung Nguyen was determined to migrate to the United States when he was arrested at El Salvadors international airport with a false Salvadoran passport. He was not accused of being a criminal, but he was not allowed to continue his journey. After that he just wanted to go home. He was as invisible as the thousands of other extra-continental migrants...Read more

Back Home and with Broken Dreams

By Ushinor Majumdar, Manno Wangnao and Nathan Jaccard

The original publication is available via the following link: https://migrantes-otro-mundo.elclip.org/rutas-por-america/deportados-de-vuelta-a-casa-y-con-los-suenos-rotos.html

A thousand miles. That was the distance that separated three Indian migrants from the United States when they were deported by Mexican authorities back to their country, along with 308 of their compatriots. After spending a fortune and traveling halfway round the world, they are broke and back where they began... *Read more*

Find more stories at https://migrantes-otro-mundo.elclip.org/.

We want to use the funds to support some of the organizations that are helping migrants along the way in this very very difficult journey, but we also want to use some of these funds to continue our reporting to do more investigative reporting and more collaborative reporting around the issue of migrants, and human rights, and civil rights. So this is a double award for us. Not only because it has given us a lot of joy and a lot of excitement about being there, but also because it's enabling us to probably do even more work. That is good for journalism, good for collaboration and especially it's good for those who want to assert their civil rights out there in Latin America.

- MARÍA TERESA RONDEROS

Due to ethical considerations and, considering the philosophy of the award, we have decided to donate part of the money to two well-known civil society organizations helping migrants in particularly difficult places along the migration routes in Latin America.

We have also agreed that the best use we can give the remaining funds is to do more and better journalism that will help enhance civil rights in the region. Hence, we have reached a consensus to use these funds to support at least one collaborative investigation related to migration in our region that will be coordinated by CLIP, in addition to funding a few individual journalistic projects also of our partners.

- Team of authors of the "Migrants from Another World"

EDITOR'S NOTE

Another cross-border team – this time from India and Germany – was awarded the Second Prize in this category. The entry from Petra Sorge, Ankush Kumar, Bhavya Dore, Sadaf Aman and Ajachi Chakrabarti *How Industry Bodies Are Using the NCPCR and UNICEF to Whitewash Accusations of Child Labour* exposes how powerful players in the German granite industry have been covering up the scandal of child labour in their Indian quarries.

The journalists got together to investigate claims in two reports supported by India's national child protection agency (NCPCR) and the United Nation agency UNICEF that there was "no scope" for child labour in the granite industry.

Conversely, reporters found numerous cases of underage workers in the industry and in the process revealed how industry figures were effectively lobbying government representatives and stifling public criticism.

The team reveals how UNICEF has also been used as an effective tool to whitewash yet another sector – the carpet industry. An NCPCR 2019 report conducted in Agra claimed that "no child was found" working in either looms or factories. But reporters found several children working at home looms who were missing school, including a six-year-old girl.

The reporters confirm that the child labour situation in India is improving, but all the NGOs and safeguarding bodies supporting child rights should be held accountable when problems are covered up. Journalistic scrutiny is an important weapon in the fight for civil rights – and that includes scrutiny of those who are mandated to protect those rights.

After the reports were published in Germany and India simultaneously, political action to make the industry more accountable has followed. In February 2021 three German government ministers announced steps to introduce a "supply chain" or "due diligence" law with effect from 2023 which they claim will be world's toughest legislation of its kind, forcing companies to ensure that their business partners respect child rights and labour standards. Making the announcement, Germany's Economic Minister Peter Altmaier said: *"The solution is of course not that no more tombstones are carved in India, because then these children and their families have no more means to support their livelihoods. The goal is that not the children but their parents get employed – and are paid a fair wage for the conditions there. That is what we want to achieve in a global economy, and the law can help achieving this."*

SECOND PRIZE WINNER

How Industry Bodies Are Using the NCPCR and UNICEF to Whitewash Accusations of Child Labour

Petra Sorge, Ankush Kumar, Bhavya Dore, Sadaf Aman, Ajachi Chakrabarti (India/ Germany)

Petra Sorge is a reporter with Dow Jones Newswires/ The Wall Street Journal in Berlin. Previously she worked as a freelance journalist for German and international outlets.

Photo by Juliane Werner

Ankush Kumar is a freelance journalist and researcher covering energy transition and enterprise technologies. He was previously associated with The Economic Times of India.

Bhavya Dore is a Mumbai-based freelance journalist writing for various national and international publications.

Sadaf Aman is a freelance journalist based in Hyderabad. She writes on education and child rights. She previously worked at the New Indian Express.

Ajachi Chakrabarti is a copy editor at The Caravan, India.

How Industry Bodies Are Using the NCPCR and UNICEF to Whitewash Accusations of Child Labour

By Petra Sorge, Ankush Kumar, Bhavya Dore, Sadaf Aman, Ajachi Chakrabarti

The Caravan Magazine - January 31, 2020

The original article is available via the following link:
https://caravanmagazine.in/labour/industry-bodies-using-ncpcr-unicef-child-labour

Der Spiegel - January 31, 2020

The original article is available via the following link:
https://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/wie-ausgerechnet-unicef-half-kinderarbeit-zu-verharmlosen-a-00000000-0002-0001-0000-000169240303

At the twentieth edition of Stone+Tec, an international trade fair for the natural-stone industry, held at the German city of Nürnberg in June 2018, attendees received a curious invitation. A release bearing the logos of the Indian government and the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights invited them to a press conference to highlight the "Non Prevalence of Child Labour in the Indian Granite Industry in India (Mines and Processing Units)."

At the press conference, held on 13 June, immediately after the press meet opening the festival, Sugandh Rajaram, the Indian consul general in Munich at the time, announced that the NCPCR and UNICEF had found, through a fact-finding mission, that there was "no scope" for child labour in India's granite quarries, since "all processes in the granite industry are completely mechanized." European importers and their customers, therefore, could continue to buy slabs, gravestones and kitchenware made from Indian granite without the guilt of enabling child labour. According to data compiled by the International Trade Centre, India exported granite products worth $6.75 million in 2018, with Europe and North America accounting for about a fifth of the exports.

Rajaram was joined at the podium by R Veeramani, the president of the Chemical and Allied Exports Promotion Council of India and the chairperson of Gem Granites—as well as a patron of the Indian Monument Manufacturers Association—and M Ramasamy, the managing partner of Amman Granites and the president of the IMMA. Dietrich Kebschull, the chairperson 0f Indo German Export Promotion, which had provided logistical support to the fact-finding mission, moderated the question-and-answer session that followed Rajaram's presentation. IGEP provides voluntary certification to granite exporters to declare their products "child labour free." Its brochure warns exporters—its prospective clients—about the "ongoing propaganda against the natural stones," referring to concerns in Europe and North America over the past two decades about the prevalence of child labour in the industry. The Indian consulate at Munich did not respond to a request for comment.

Seven months later, another German trade fair featured a similar presentation by an Indian diplomat. On 11 January 2019, the opening day of the Domotex carpet fair in Hannover, Madan Lal Raigar, the Indian consul general at Hamburg, held a press conference along with Mahavir Pratap Sharma, Siddh Nath Singh and Sanjay Kumar, all senior office bearers with the Carpet Export Promotion Council, on the "Non Prevalence of Child Labour in the Indian Carpet Industry." Carpets generated $122.84 million in exports for India in 2018, according to ITC data, with Europe and North America accounting for about a quarter.

According to the official press release, which was drafted by the CEPC and carried the heading "Child Labour in Hand Made Carpets from India no longer a Big Problem," Raigar "emphasized in the same way as other speakers from the side of the Indian exporters that criticism of child labour in the carpet industry is very strongly exaggerated." He was basing this on an analysis carried out by the NCPCR, in which "UNICEF and the regional and federal state level organizations for the protection of children and safeguarding their education and health conditions intensively participated." Sharma was quoted saying that the CEPC intended "to take strict legal action against organizations or agencies or film producers who create this false, fictional, unreasonable, biased and malicious propaganda for self-gain and in bargain tarnish the image of the entire industry and the country as a whole." When we approached the Indian consulate in Hamburg for comment, we were asked to approach the CEPC. Sanjay Kumar refused to speak to us on the record for this story.

Both press conferences were reporting the results of fact-finding missions constituted by the NCPCR, in response to allegations of child labour by European organisations. The granite report came on the heels of a report by the India Committee of the Netherlands—it has since been renamed Advocating Rights in South Asia, or ARISA—an NGO that focusses on campaigning and advocacy for human rights, which exposed wide-ranging labour violations in India's granite quarries, including the existence of child labour. The report on carpets responded to an investigative report by Plusminus, a business magazine show on the German television channel ARD, which had found children working in carpet-manufacturing units in Agra.

These exposés were in line with previous reports on child labour in the two industries, which have contributed to outrage in the West, and to efforts to ban granite and carpet exports from India, since the 1980s. The changing global distribution of labour, in which many of the world's manufacturing processes have been outsourced to the developing world, has raised frequent concerns over global value chains being

built on exploitative labour practices, including the use of child labour.

All stakeholders we spoke to agreed that the child-labour situation in the two industries has improved over time, but it was only the NCPCR and industry figures who were claiming that child labour had been completely eradicated in the industries. Over the past year, we visited several granite quarries in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, as well as home-based carpet looms near Agra, in collaboration with the facilitators of the original studies. We found a number of adolescent workers at the quarries, and children as young as six years old working at looms in their village. They told us that they were working to help support their families and would rather attend school regularly. Their parents told us they would like their children not to work, but could not afford to go without the additional income their children brought in.

"The child-labour act was passed in 1986, but the act has not eliminated child labour until today," R Kashi Ramulu, the president of the Telangana Trade Union Council, a labour-rights NGO, told us. "Child labour is there," he said. "It is present in the brick industry, in granite, in hotels, the automobile industry, the informal sector."

In attempting to prove a negative, the NCPCR made conclusions based on questionable study design and stated those conclusions without providing any supporting evidence. And while it has been the policy of the Indian government and industry to push back against allegations of labour violations, the enlistment of a statutory body meant to protect children from exploitation for this purpose raises further questions of propriety and institutional independence. We attempted to have the NCPCR chairperson, Priyank Kanoongo, comment on these issues, but although he met us twice, he refused to give an interview on the record. Email requests for an appointment to conduct an on-the-record interview went unanswered.

Shanta Sinha, a former NCPCR chairperson, welcomed the reports, since the eradication of child labour in the two industries would be a major achievement. "But I'm not sure whether this is really true, sometimes, because I know the kind of effort it needs to get children out of work and into school," she said. "I've been working on the issue of abolition of child labour for four decades and I really would like to know how this happened." The processes by which the government had achieved this were important, because "if this has happened, it needs to be replicated everywhere. I would like another document from UNICEF and NCPCR telling us how this happened." She did not want to comment on the specifics of the studies, since she had not studied the methodology involved.

In both reports, the NCPCR leaned on the added authority of UNICEF to support its claims. The reports on granite carried UNICEF's logo. Although the reports never appeared on the NCPCR website, Lithos Marmor und Granit, a natural-stone wholesaler based in the German province of Hesse, published the reports and the accompanying press release on its website, with the heading, "No child labour in quarries in India, confirmed UNICEF & NCPCR." (The press release has since been taken down, but the website still hosts the reports.) The carpet report mentions that the audit in Agra was carried out "in collaboration with UNICEF."

UNICEF, however, distanced itself from the reports and their findings. Javier Aguilar, the chief child-protection officer at UNICEF India, was part of the fact-finding team to the granite quarries. "We concur with the findings which apply to mining sites which UNICEF visited along with NCPCR," he told us. "It cannot be generalised for all mines in India." As for the carpets report, he denied that UNICEF was part of the audit in Agra. "UNICEF did not participate in this exercise," he said. "If we were part of this, I would not hesitate to tell you we were part of this. But this was not the case."

We asked him about a line in the report that said representatives from UNICEF India had attended a technical meeting in Agra, along with those from the NCPCR, CEPC, the district administration and related departments and experts. "We did not participate in that technical meeting," Aguilar said. He had heard of the meeting taking place, but reiterated, "I was not there. None of my colleagues were there."

IGEP had been involved in the carpet report as well, and Kebschull contested Aguilar's assertion. "UNICEF was involved/participate at every stage," he told us in an email interview. He sent us the minutes of the technical meeting, held on 16 November 2018, in which Nirmala Pandey, a child-protection specialist at UNICEF India, was listed among the participants. Najwa Mekki, the media head at UNICEF, clarified that "Ms Pandey attended only this one meeting and informed NCPCR that UNICEF will not be participating in the fact-finding exercise. UNICEF staff did not participate in the subsequent fact-finding exercise nor did we share, develop or assist in developing any questionnaire and neither did we provide any other technical input for the same."

Kebschull also sent us the attendance sheet of a subsequent meeting, held on 4 December, which contained the signature of Sayed Imran, a UNICEF consultant. He also told us that Zeeshan Ansari was present during the field research. Imran told us, and Mekki confirmed, that he is a district-level technical resource person hired by Ram Manohar Lohiya National Law University for a child-protection project and had attended the meeting in a personal capacity. Similarly, Mekki said, Ansari is a technical resource person working for "UNICEF's partner agency, Institute for Entrepreneur Development." He had been asked by the state labour department to participate in the exercise, "as he is familiar with the area."

"UNICEF staff or consultants attend many meetings with various stakeholders and partners when invited, or requests consultants to attend on our behalf," Mekki told us. "This does not mean that UNICEF has It's a huge honor and it also helps shedding the light on a huge problem that still prevails in India and many countries which is child labor. participated in the study or is party to the findings or were the findings shared with us." She shared a letter UNICEF India had sent Kanoongo, on 30 October 2019, asking him to "remove the reference to UNICEF in the report."

ON 23 AUGUST 2017, the India Committee of the Netherlands published a report on labour practices in India's granite quarries, in collaboration with Stop Child Labour, an international coalition of NGOs and trade unions. "Half of the total world exports of raw granite originates from India," the report, titled The Dark Sites of Granite, said. "But this decorative and highly valued natural stone comes with a high price, mainly 'paid' by the workers in South Indian granite quarries."

Glocal Research, a Hyderabad-based organisation that conducted field research for the report, visited 22 quarries—eight in Andhra Pradesh, eight in Telangana and six in Karnataka—between June and November 2016. The three states contribute almost ninety percent of all granite produced in India. The companies that owned the quarries all produced granite for export to Europe and North America, either directly or through intermediaries. Through site inspections and interviews with workers, the researchers found that all the quarries were violating several of the International Labour Organisation's criteria for decent work.

None of the 22 quarries had an "active" trade union, though a few had management-friendly ones with low membership. The quarries followed a form of labour recruitment that has been prevalent in India since colonial times, relying on migrant labourers hired by middlemen. All of them made advance payments to the workers, a practice that, since it prevents workers from changing employers, is a gateway to debt bondage—a form of modern slavery. (Nine quarries were reported as having "prevalence of debt bondage.") Seventeen quarries did not have a provident fund for workers, and ten quarries did not provide overtime pay. Five quarries paid workers lower than the legal minimum wage, which was Rs 250 per day at the time of the study. (The daily minimum wage for unskilled labour in the non-agricultural sector was raised to Rs 350 in January 2017.) None of the quarries provided all workers the requisite protective equipment, and 14 quarries did not have safe drinking water.

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Although it noted "a decrease in the magnitude of child labour in core quarry operations" as compared to earlier studies—conducted in 2006, 2009 and 2014—the report said that researchers found underage workers at seven of the 22 quarries, most of them involved in the ancillary operations of waste-stone processing, which was mostly being carried out by women and children earning less than the minimum wage. Thirteen workers were conclusively determined to be under the age of 18, adolescents who are prohibited under Indian law from working in "hazardous occupations," including mining.

This was almost certainly an underestimate. Lizette Vosman, a spokesperson for ARISA, told us that this number did not include cases in which "a researcher's own assessment was that the worker was a child but [they] could not irrefutably determine this." In addition, the researchers found, only six quarries had an age-verification system for its workers, and none of them had a prevention-and-rehabilitation system for child labourers.

The report was almost entirely ignored by the Indian media, but created a minor controversy in Europe. "This report has changed things," Bram Callewier, a director of the Belgian natural-stone wholesaler Beltrami, which was named as one of the companies importing granite from the sampled quarries, told the trade magazine Natural Stone Specialist. "All our suppliers have come back to us and said they agree it's a problem." The UK-based retailers John Lewis and Habitat stopped selling products containing Indian granite, though the former withdrew the ban within a month after an internal investigation found "that there is no evidence to suggest there are issues with the quarry from which we source our Star Galaxy granite." The Dutch banks Rabobank and ING, which had provided loans to three of the granite importers named in the report, announced on Twitter that they would discuss the findings with their clients.

Callewier added in his interview, published on 30 September 2017, that granite sales were already being affected by the rise in popularity of alternatives such as man-made quartz and porcelain. Indian suppliers, he said, "understand that if the product is getting a bad name it will only make things worse for them."

A rehabilitation exercise was already in progress, however, through an unlikely ally.

Within days of publication of the report, the NCPCR was on the case. It took cognisance of the matter—citing its responsibility, under Section 13 (1) of the Commissions for Protection of Child Rights Act, 2005, to "inquire into violation of child rights and recommend initiation of proceedings in such cases"—and decided to conduct a fact-finding exercise the following month to look into the allegations of child labour.

In September 2017, the NCPCR carried out a fact-finding exercise in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana "to find out the child labour situation in the granite industry." In April 2018, it conducted a similar exercise in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The reports of the two phases, which came out in December 2017 and June 2018, respectively, and carried the logos of the NCPCR, the respective state governments and UNICEF, had almost identical findings—including the same grammatical and typographical errors—which suggested they had been copy-pasted.

"The granite industry is completely mechanized," both reports said. "This means that all processes are mechanized and there is no scope for manual labour especially no scope for child labour. It was noticed that the granite slab mining is a highly mechanized operation using heavy duty machines for excavations, cutting and drilling. The drilling, bolder cutting, slab cutting, loading & unloading and cleaning are all done with the machines. These machines are operated by the workers who are employed by the mines."

This assertion had not been challenged by the ICN report, which had, after all, noted "a significant reduction in recent years" in the use of child labour at granite quarries, as a result of "various initiatives … undertaken by the government, natural stone industry, labour unions and NGOs to tackle the problem." However, the ICN report went on to say:

> *Contrary to core quarry operations, the involvement of child labour in processing of waste stone into cobbles and blue metal chips did not receive much attention thus far. As waste stone disposal is not considered a responsibility of the quarry owner, family labour is involved mainly outside the quarry. As part of this study, six waste stone processing locations were visited (two in each state) and interviews were conducted with 45 workers involved in waste stone processing. Nearly 80% of the labour force in this activity are women and children. Children below 14 years account for nearly 3% of the workforce in waste stone processing and 5% of the workforce is between 15 to 18 years old. With 8% child labour engaged in this activity, the findings of this study indicate that the magnitude of child labour in the processing of waste stone has not changed.*

Vandhana Kandhari, a child-protection specialist at UNICEF India who was mentioned in the acknowledgements of both NCPCR reports, told us that the reports established that "in the mechanised sector, you do not find children working. These are highly sophisticated machines, which are not operated by the children." However, she went on to admit that "there is a possibility that there are allied works that are connected to the mines where children could possibly be involved and do small jobs such as bringing tea or working at home, which you don't see visibly." She said that UNICEF had recommended to the NCPCR, "Even if you don't see children at the mining site itself, very often you will see children working at home on the waste material and other such."

The NCPCR fact-finding teams, however, do not seem to have inspected allied quarry operations at all. There was no mention at all in either report about waste-stone processing. Neither did they mention the other shortcomings on child labour pointed out by the ICN report: the lack of age-verification or prevention-and-rehabilitation systems. Instead, both reports made the blanket statement that the mines "are far from the villages and there is no sign of children being employed there in the mines."

A member of the Glocal Research study team, who did not want to be named, told us that although he agreed that there had been some improvement in the prevalence of child labour in the granite industry, it had "not completely disappeared." The industry had been mechanised, he said, but "advanced technology is being used by only few granite companies. Many companies—more than fifty percent of the granite owners—are still using small drilling machines that are called jockeys. Each jockey has to be operated by three workers. They are all migrant labourers, so there is the scope for 15-to-18-year-old children being employed as jockey operators."

The NCPCR teams did not visit the same quarries his team had, the Glocal Research representative told us. Moreover, his team had visited the quarries in secret, without the involvement of the quarry owners, something the NCPCR fact-finders had not done. This meant that any children who were employed in the quarries could have been hidden away for the duration of the visit.

A former advisor to the NCPCR on child-labour issues told us, on condition of anonymity, that the commission would always conduct unannounced visits in the past. Today, he said, the NCPCR prioritises investing in its website and a digital alarm button. "It's not politically intended to find something." He characterised UNICEF as "the mouthpiece of the government."

In early 2019, we made unannounced visits to granite quarries in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. We found a number of adolescents under the age of 18 working in quarry operations. We visited Virat Industry, a polishing unit in Ballikurava, a village near the town of Chimakurthy in Andhra Pradesh's Prakasam district. There, we met a 16-year-old migrant from Assam, who was polishing granite slabs. At Avenir Granites, we met a 17-year-old migrant from Odisha, who had joined the company three months before. He said he was hired at the recommendation of his brother, a 23-year-old who had been working in local quarries for the past eight years—since he was aged 15. At a mine owned by Kishore Granites, a migrant from Odisha who had celebrated his eighteenth birthday a week before emerged from working the night shift as a slab-cutter. He told us he had been recruited by a middleman at his village, and joined Kishore Granites as an underage worker four months before.

At a migrant colony in Ballikurava, quarry workers—all of them Dalits or Adivasis, who had migrated from Madhya Pradesh—were living eight or ten people to a room. We met a 17-year-old jockey operator who worked at three local quarries. He had never attended school, he told us, and had been in Ballikurava for the past two months, after previously working at a thread factory in Allahabad. He was unhappy with his work. He was earning Rs 300 a day, he said, which is less than the minimum wage. He was planning to move on the following month. Another migrant at the colony told us he was 19 years old, but added that he had dropped out of school after completing his tenth standard—which Indian students complete at the age of 16—two months before.

A few days later, we visited quarries in the Karimnagar district of Telangana. At Venkat Granites, a polishing unit, we met a 20-year-old who had started working at the quarry four years before, when he was 16 years old. At Imperial Granite, a unit of R Veeramani's Gem Granites, a worker told us he was 19 years old, but admitted to dropping out of the tenth standard a year ago. He had had to discontinue his studies in order to support his six siblings after his father, an agricultural labourer, died of jaundice.

During a further visit to Karimnagar, in December, we found more underage workers, who told us they worked at quarries on Sundays and other holidays. A 14-year-old Tamil migrant said that she accompanied her mother to work at the stone-cutting

unit at Aditya Granites on school holidays, between 6 am and 2 pm. "While my mother does the strenuous job, I—along with other children like me—engage in segregation of stones," she told us. "Though the job is not laborious, I don't like doing it because the chemicals used in polishing and the dust cause pimples and rashes. I also find sorting the stones a boring job. But if I spend a few hours with my mother there, we get paid extra." The principal at the government school she attends called her a bright student.

A 12-year-old told us that he had been accompanying his mother to work at granite-polishing units on school holidays for the past four to five years. He also complained that the chemicals used in polishing slabs caused irritation in his eyes. However, he said, he enjoyed going to work, since he could play there once he was done. "My mother ensures that I go to school every day," he told us. "She even beats me up if I say I don't want to go to school or want to go with her to the factory."

Another 14-year-old said that he looked forward to going to the polishing unit with his mother every Sunday. "I get to meet other boys, and we play there after finishing work," he told us. "I get to have fun while contributing to the family income." He added, however, that he found the sound from the cutting units irritating, and that most families prefer to take their sons to work, while their daughters stay at home to look after younger siblings.

At the NTR Tamil colony, we met a 12-year-old girl who accompanies her mother to the polishing factory at Karimala Granites every Sunday. Her mother, she told us, had been working at the factory for the past five years. "I don't like going there," she said. "Collecting and separating stones under the blazing sun is no fun."

We also met a 14-year-old who had migrated a month before from Rajasthan, where he had also been employed at a granite factory. He had found a job at Laxminarayana Stonex, in Waddepally, where he operated machinery that slices granite boulders into slabs. "I work 12 hours a day," he told us. "I just have to operate the machine, and it is not a labour-intensive job. I stay at the quarry, in quarters assigned to us. I cook for myself." He had never attended school and was worried about sending money back home, to support his parents and two siblings.

"THE THING IS that the government would not go unannounced," Kandhari told us. "It was not our decision to take." When we showed her pictures of child labourers we had taken on our visits to the quarries, she said, "Very often, when researchers go unannounced, you may see children. That is a possibility."

If that was the case, we asked her, should the NCPCR's assertion have been so absolute? Would it not have been more accurate to say that although this fact-finding mission had not encountered child labour, they could not rule it out? "The report is actually written by the NCPCR," Kandhari said. "But yes, you are right. It is absolute. But in the formal industry, as it was not seen, whichever place we went to, they didn't see it, so they didn't want to write like that." She noted that "most child labour in India is in the informal sector." However, with over ninety percent of the Indian workforce engaged in some form of informal employment, this was by no means a denial of the existence of child labour.

To counter the ICN's assertion that the children of quarry workers were employed in allied operations, both NCPCR reports said that the workforce at the quarries is mostly made up of "single migrants," who "live in dormitories mostly arranged by the quarry owners or by the workers themselves in a group." However, there was no mention of what proportion of the workers are migrant, or single. In one of the few instances of difference in the two reports' findings, the second report added the caveat that "if there are migrant labours living with their family including children provision may be made for their education in their mother tongue." The child labourers we would find in the quarries were all migrant children. Kandhari agreed that most mine workers in India are migrants. "Some of them travel with families," she said. "Some of them travel without."

Tirupathi Kishore Babu, the mandal education officer for Chimakurthy, told us that many migrants working in the region's granite quarries, especially those with children above the age of 14, travelled with their families. His staff, he said, kept tabs on the school attendance of migrant children between the ages of six and 14, since the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education, 2009 only applied to that age group. They would often find these children attending school for two months at a time. The previous survey they had conducted found 20 children under the age of 14, most of them migrants, had dropped out. The children of the migrant labourers, he said, "won't go to colleges. They study maximum only up to school education, up to 14 years of age. More than that they won't study. So automatically they will recruit in that sector, along with their parents—for less wages, because they are migrant labourers." Like everybody else, he agreed that child labour had decreased in the granite industry, "but zero, I can't say."

UNICEF's primary methodological input to the fact-finding mission, Kandhari told us, was to advise the NCPCR "to do the research with stakeholders other than only the ones at the sites." The fact-finding team does seem to have heeded this advice. In addition to the quarry visits, the team administered semi-structured questionnaires, designed by UNICEF and incorporating suggestions from the NCPCR and experts, to four groups of people in the surrounding areas: children, anganwadi workers, schoolteachers and the community at large.

Only the first group—the children themselves—was asked about child labour. The fourteenth and fifteenth questions in the questionnaire asked whether the children being surveyed had been engaged in any work during the past week, and whether they had spent at least an hour in that week performing any of nine categories of work, including self-employment, wage work, domestic work, unpaid labour or working on a family farm.

The sample sizes for the survey were tiny—only 30 children were interviewed in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, while 178 children were interviewed in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The first report did not mention the response to the question about engaging in any work, and only reported responses to four out of the nine categories of work. Wage work was not one of the categories reported. The report did find, however, that 43 percent of the children surveyed had engaged in unpaid work. It did not say whether unpaid quarry work was included in this category.

The second report provided responses to five categories. It found around ten percent of the respondents engaged in running businesses in each of four categories—working for a wage, performing domestic work, helping their parents with unpaid work and catching fish—while 35 percent of the children said they fetched water and collected firewood. It did not mention the response to the more general question about whether the child had worked at all. Instead, it provided a graph that combined responses to both the fourteenth question and the seventeenth, which asked why they worked, with nine options. For each option—ranging from supplementing family income and helping pay family debt to learning skills and not being interested in school—it provided the proportion of respondents who said "yes" and "no." Adding up the "yes" responses to the nine options, it appears 33 of the 178 children surveyed—18.5 percent—were engaged in some form of employment.

As part of their "holistic" approach, the NCPCR teams also examined the state of the schools and anganwadis surrounding the quarries, and surveyed the local communities on the effectiveness of local governance. After restating that there "is no scope for child labour," both reports found that "some children (13+ age) are not regularly attending the schools," and recommended stronger action to improve educational and skilling facilities. The responses to these surveys, as well as descriptions of the districts surveyed and an introduction to granite mining that seems to have been largely plagiarised from Wikipedia, made up the bulk of both reports, far outweighing any discussion of child labour. There was no mention, either, of the other labour violations reported by the ICN.

While the NCPCR could plausibly argue that those violations fall outside its ambit, the fact-finding teams overstepped this ambit by devoting four points in their findings, and one section in their introductions, to extolling the virtues of the granite industry. Again, the four points were identical in both reports:

> *There are significantly visible economic activities in the regions where quarries are situated. … The revenues being generated are being spent on social infrastructure and other services. This has a positive impact in the socio-economic well-being of the people in the region and districts.*
>
> *It was observed that the road facilities, drinking water, schools, anganwadis are relatively better in the localities where mines are under operation.*
>
> *The industry is a decisive reason for the economic activities and is playing a vital role in local economy. Important economic activities are employment generation, providing housing to the workers, transportation, covering of daily needs etc. There are millions of people connected directly or indirectly with the industry.*
>
> *The granite industry is considerably contributing to the Indian economy and has been an important source of revenue generation for the country. There is a direct positive connection between the development of the economy and of the stone industry.*

However, no evidence other than generalities—such as "capital requirement is less" or that granite "is a major contributor in foreign exchange earnings"—was provided for these assertions either. Besides rubbishing any suggestion that the industry, which has been notorious for its use of child labour, was still doing so, the NCPCR had taken it upon itself to advertise the importance of the industry it had set out to regulate.

Other than noting that it had taken cognisance, the NCPCR did not mention, let alone rebut the specific findings of, the ICN report. However, in the press release accompanying the reports, which was uncritically reproduced by some Indian newspapers, it took a parting shot at the ICN researchers. "The report published by the India Committee of Netherland is based on the visits and survey conducted during the Monsoon when quarries are mostly closed. Therefore, the timings of the visits are questionable."

This was a lie. The section on methodology in the ICN report clearly said that the field visits were conducted between June and November 2016. "Each sample quarry," the report added, "was visited twice for data collection because granite production varies among seasons (during rainy season production comes down as quarries fill with water)."

If anything, it was the timing of the NCPCR's visit to Andhra Pradesh and Telangana that was questionable. The fact-finding mission took place in the month of September, which is part of the monsoon. In fact, the report conceded as much by explaining away the low attendance in schools as a result of the rainy season, helpfully adding that the monsoon lasts from July to September.

"FOR MANY it is absolute cosiness right now, in the autumn. A carpet makes it warmer and more homely. But what kind of product do you bring into your house? Does the smell of new carpets perhaps have something to do with harmful substances? And who produces what we put in our living room? Our reporters have actually found harmful substances, and also child labour."

Thus began the 24 October 2018 episode of Plusminus. The episode presented the results of an investigation into working conditions at home-based looms in villages near Agra, which the reporters visited along with Benjamin Pütter,

a German expert on child labour in India, and Dilip Sevarthi, an Indian activist who has been campaigning against child labour for decades.

The journalists found a number of children working in almost every loom they visited, including a four-year-old girl. Most of the children worked up to twelve hours a day in order to supplement their family incomes, at the cost of going to school. This last detail is significant, because the Indian government amended the child-labour law, in 2016, to allow children below the age of 14 to work in family-owned enterprises for up to 14 hours a week, provided it does not come in the way of attending school. Some of the children had injuries in their hands, sustained while working on the looms.

After obtaining the name and address of the client procuring carpets from the village, the journalists visited their Agra office with a hidden camera, posing as potential buyers. The exporter confirmed that they sourced carpets from the village, and said the carpets are exported to the West, including Germany, the United Kingdom and Canada. On being asked about the persistence of child labour in the industry, one exporter said, "We do our best. The labour ministry does its best. But nobody can rule out child labour a hundred percent."

The journalists contacted two major German carpet importers for comment. "We have concluded contracts with all our suppliers in which they undertake to exclude child labourers," the company Teppich-Kibek said in a statement. XXXLutz, another major importer, was more circumspect. "Since some producers produce carpets at home-based looms, a hundred-percent exclusion of child labour cannot be guaranteed," its statement said.

This time, it was the Carpet Export Promotion Council that contacted the NCPCR. "The content of the documentary was initially examined by the CEPC and found that the report does not have a base," the NCPCR report said. "It was observed that the report can cause irreparable damage to the carpet industry and can effect in the livelihood of hundreds of thousands families engaged in carpet weaving." Following advice received from the ministry for women and child development, the NCPCR decided to conduct "an audit in the area in collaboration with UNICEF, UP State Commission for Protection of Child Rights and the District Administration."

The report said that the NCPCR identified five locations using four sources of information: the CEPC, the district labour department, carpet wholesalers and local stakeholders. Again, the fact-finding team administered four questionnaires. As in the granite study, two questionnaires were used in local schools and anganwadis. Another questionnaire was used in home-based looms, covering "information related to their children and their education," the report said. "Also it allows to examine the fingers of children to learn if those fingers are used in knotting the carpet. It may be noted that, the agile fingers of a child which is engaged in carpet weaving usually affect the part of the fingers which can be seen and felt through physical examination." The fourth questionnaire was a factory-auditing tool designed by IGEP. The audit covered 12 schools, six anganwadis, 63 carpet-weaving families and 14 factories.

We found children as young as six years of age working at home-based carpet looms.

Unlike in the granite study, the NCPCR did not report even partial results of the questionnaires, sticking to sweeping findings. The survey found that all children under the age of 14 were enrolled in schools and that no child was found working in either looms or factories. None of the children showed the physical effects of carpet-weaving in their fingers. "Children of households having looms are going school and their socio economic conditions are better in comparison to other families those who don't have proper economic activities for regular income like carpet weaving," the report said. "Due to regular income, it was observed by the Commission that some families are sending their children to private school."

Another finding said, "Since looms are located at homes, it is quite usual for the children to see the work and sit with their parents to learn the skill of knotting out of curiosity. This may be accepted as far as learning is concerned. However, no child was found working there to subsidize the family income while missing out on school hours and pay."

"MAKE ARRANGEMENTS to feed us; then we will send our children to school," Mariyam Begum told us when we visited her home in Milik, a village in Firozabad district, about a hundred kilometres from Agra. It was June 2019, and four children were hard at work in the courtyard, where she had set up a carpet loom. They work from 6 am to 8 pm every day, with an hour off for lunch. Mariyam's nine-year-old daughter was still learning "the skill of knotting," but her 12-year-old had mastered the art. When we asked the older sister whether she liked the work, she smiled and shook her head. "We don't like this," her 16-year-old neighbour, who was also working at the loom, said. "She does not either. But we have to do it out of necessity."

Across the road, Nabibaksh Khan had set up his own loom in his courtyard. Two of his four daughters were working away at it. He told us that he had started weaving carpets as a child, following in his father's footsteps. "There was no other work," he told us. His 15-year-old daughter does not attend school, he said, but her nine-year-old sister does, working at the loom for three to four hours a day once she returns. "Sometimes they don't go to school," Khan said. "They are unable to go. Then who will make this? How will we fill our stomachs? People say, 'Don't make them work before they turn 18,' but we are forced to."

Naresh Paras, the coordinator of Mahfooz, part of the Child Rights and You network of NGOs, explained how child labour persisted in the carpet industry. "A lot has improved over the years," he said. "In factory-based work one doesn't see kids." But, he added, "work must be done. So they get contractors. They take material from factories and give it in their homes and say, 'Prepare it here.' The whole family

is involved and children work alongside. So they say he is helping the family. So the definition of child labour has changed."

"In Milik, much of the population is Muslim," Dilip Sevarthi, the child-labour activist who had accompanied the Plusminus team and was also facilitating our visit, told us. "This area has brackish water, which is a problem for crops and for drinking water." With limited employment opportunities, especially in agriculture, he said, the carpet industry had been the primary source of work for the past forty years.

Imran Khan, whose family owns Mughal Carpets, a retailer in Agra that is a member of the CEPC, told us that while they sourced carpets largely from factories, most of their durris—woollen rugs—were from home-based looms. "For example, we have a showroom and we need ten or fifteen pieces," he said. "One house can't make all ten or so. One carpet takes between two and three months to make. So the contractors have contacts with multiple villages. They have contacts across houses. They go there and give orders. They know which loom will fall vacant. They play a role as a mediator. That is beneficial for both."

"The carpet contractor is from outside," Sevarthi said. "The contractor gets the maximum benefit. He may give between four thousand and ten thousand rupees per carpet. And a carpet could take months. So the minimum wage is barely anything." The more hands that are deployed, the faster a carpet can be produced and the more money a family can earn, which is why children are roped in.

Khan confirmed that child labour had not been wiped out in the industry. "In the villages, education isn't much," he said. "What they do is they deploy the kids, pay them less and take more work from contractors. For instance, if there is a loom in my house and in the neighbourhood there are homes and kids, I call them and say, 'I'll give you Rs 100 for a day's work.' But, for me, Rs 200 I'm getting from the contractor. Then I give them Rs 100, get them to work all day. For them it's a lot of money."

In the village of Suraj Malkapura, predominantly comprised of the oppressed-caste Nishad community, we visited a loom owned by one Bhagwan Singh. His wife, Usha, told us that none of their three daughters and two sons attend school, though two of their daughters attended a non-formal education centre Sevarthi's NGO runs in the village, for three hours a day. Singh was the first resident of the village to learn carpet-weaving, when he was ten years old. Their nine-year-old daughter was hard at work at the loom. She told us she had been working for the past year, did not like the work and wanted to go to regular school. However, Usha said that she could not send her children to school, as they were needed to work to support their nine-person household.

Another woman, Kamla, told us that all six of her children worked at their loom. Her two oldest children, aged 12 and 14, had passed the fifth standard in the local government school and were enrolled at a private school, which charges Rs 150 a month in fees. She could not afford to educate the others, and the two children who had attended government school could barely read and write. They attended the government school very infrequently, once or twice a month. Now they were attending the private school whenever there were no carpets to weave, for five to ten days at a time. A number of parents we interviewed told us the same story: they wanted to regularly send their children to school, but they needed their children to contribute to carpet-weaving, their only source of income, in order to make ends meet.

The more hands that are deployed, the faster a carpet can be produced and the more money a family can earn, which is why children are roped in.

Only 75 children were enrolled at the government primary school in the village. Aisha Sabreen, a teacher in the school, told us that only about half of the enrolled children attended classes regularly. The school was almost empty on the day we visited, because most of the students were helping their parents with the harvest. She confirmed that many children were involved in carpet-weaving, and said that they had had several meetings with parents in the village, asking them to send their children to school.

The NCPCR report took issue with the Plusminus team, saying that the "reporters have not followed the established procedures if they had truly found any child labour." None of the concerned authorities received a complaint about the use of child labour; "only CEPC reported the same." Sevarthi explained the limited impact of filing a complaint. "The labour department, they have no other work," he said. "If I go and say in so-and-so village children are working, they will undertake a raid. They will go and threaten the people and say, 'Don't put the children to work.' They tell the parents, 'We will send you to prison.' Then everyone will get scared and they will say no children are working. Even if you catch people in a raid, what will you do? There is a loom in the house; the contractor is not there. The kid is working with the parents. What will you do? What about rehab? Solve their problems, not with raids. The law must have the provision of rehabilitation."

BOTH THE GRANITE AND CARPET REPORTS had one finding in common, with almost identical wording: "it is required to have a monitoring system (independent) to control the basic social and environmental standards." In both cases, the NCPCR recommended the "ISES 2020 standard (IGEP Certification)."

This was a curious inclusion. IGEP helped facilitate both studies, as well as the press conferences in Germany where the reports were presented. Independent monitoring systems are already being used in both industries. IGEP is not the only certifying authority, and the reports did not explain why they were recommending IGEP, and not any of its competitors. Since IGEP makes money from certifying products as free of child labour, this recommendation was, in effect, an advertisement for IGEP.

The private certification industry was born out of compromise. In the 1980s, several exposés on child labour, particularly in Uttar Pradesh's carpet industry, by activists

such as the Nobel laureate Kailash Satyarthi, led to considerable consumer anger in Europe and North America. There were calls for boycotts of products made with child labour in several countries. In 1992, Tom Harkin, a Democratic senator in the United States, introduced the Child Labor Deterrence Act. Fearing industry collapse in the wake of a Western boycott, industry groups such as the CEPC and the All India Carpet Manufacturers Association began holding meetings with the NGOs campaigning against child labour—which had come together as the South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude—in 1991. They accepted the SACCS's position that a voluntary-certification system on the part of exporters, who would commit to eschewing child labour and submit to an audit process. Satyarthi got the United Nations Human Rights Commission to pass a resolution recommending the use of voluntary certification and successfully lobbied Harkin to allow a labelling system at the point of export to replace self-monitoring by importers.

The various stakeholders came together to launch the Rugmark initiative. The working group that debated the modalities of the scheme was led by Dietrich Kebschull's IGEP, then an organ of the German commerce ministry, which preferred voluntarism to an import ban. Besides the SACCS and industry bodies, it also included the International Labour Organisation and UNICEF. The group planned to announce the initiative at the 1994 Domotex fair. However, a 1996 history of Rugmark by the International Labor Rights Forum reporteds, as "it became clear that Congress would not take up the Harkin bill for passage soon, due to relevant committee preoccupation with the debate over the North American Free Trade Agreement … enthusiasm for Rugmark by the Indian government and important segments of the carpet industry began to lag. By early 1994, U.S. carpet importers were encouraging their supporters to resist Rugmark, since they had become convinced that Harkin would not gain passage during the 103rd Congress."

The CEPC sought to delay implementation of Rugmark in three ways. First, it argued that instead of being voluntary, the label should include all manufacturers and should not be introduced until most companies could comply. This was resisted by the NGO representatives, who, the ILRF report said, "argued that a voluntary program begun only by those exporters who were able to oversee the terms of their loomowners' labor practices was preferable to no program at all, and was probably also the only way in which a labeling program could ever get off the ground." Second, the CEPC tried to introduce an external monitoring firm to conduct audits instead of internally training inspectors. Third, it contended that the NGOs in the working group were insufficiently representative and sought the inclusion of NGOs that were not affiliated to the SACCS. With international pressure lessening, several exporters threatened to disassociate themselves from Rugmark if their conditions were not met. Nevertheless, the label was launched in September 1994. It soon covered carpet exporters in India, Pakistan and Nepal.

Kebschull was the first chairperson in Rugmark, and has controlled the label since.

He holds the trademark to the label in India, the child-labour activist Benjamin Pütter told us. When NGOs began baulking at Kebschull's proximity to the industry and wanted to expel him, Pütter noted, "he said, 'You see, I am legally the person who owns the name Rugmark. You cannot kick me out.' … He took the name and the label with him. So Rugmark had to rename, otherwise this would have been a big mess." Claudia Brück, a board member of Fairtrade Germany who was involved in the deliberations, told us that Rugmark International was trying to bring the label closer to "the current discussions on sustainability discourse," and that Kebschull was "not to be moved to open up to these ideas." He saw NGOs as "a limitation of his influence than an improvement of the system," Brück said. In 2009, Rugmark International changed its name to Goodweave. Kebschull, however, contested this history, saying that the trademark is held by Rugmark Foundation India, for which IGEP conducts the certification process. As for the rift with Rugmark International, he said, "It was a long discussion involving lawyers on both sides. It ended with an 'amicable solution,' which commits both sides not to speak in a negative way about the other one."

(A slide from an IGEP presentation to Indian granite exporters.)

A year before the split, IGEP signed a memorandum of understanding with the IMMA and a German natural-stone trade association to introduce a similar voluntary-certification system for mica and granite factories, in cooperation with Rugmark. With the growing anger in Europe over child labour in the granite industry, which led to a number of German municipalities to boycott gravestones made in India during the 2000s, there had been growing acceptance of voluntarism to stave off import bans. Other labels for granite, such as XertifiX, co-founded by Pütter—he is no longer associated with the label and focusses on advocacy efforts—and Fairstone, have emerged.

The IMMA has consistently sought to defend the reputation of the granite industry in the West. Its website chronicles its attempts to push back against accusations of child labour in the industry from Germany, Japan and the United States. In September 2007, it brought editors from six European magazines to visit granite-manufacturing sites. It also successfully sued Pütter and the former German labour minister Norbert Blüm, who was then chairperson of XertifiX, to prevent them from informing municipalities that Indian-made gravestones could use child labour, since products made by children are not prohibited in Germany.

IGEP has also participated in this reputation-laundering. In a presentation made to Indian granite exporters, it described the work of Western NGOs as "massive propaganda." The voluntary-certification system is funded by a percentage of the trade value of labelled goods, paid by both the importer and the exporter. Therefore, it is in IGEP's interest to tell exporters that it is on their side. An IGEP brochure expands on this:

Activists and non-governmental organizations in large-scale campaigns raise

the accusation that Indian natural stones are mined and processed in large scale by children. … Final settlement of all legal issues in this context, especially with regard to European law and the rules of the World Trade Organization (WTO) on the prohibition of discrimination, will take some time. Doubts about the adequacy of the approach seems quite appropriate, especially since it is the honorable and traditional branches of industry in the main who have come under suspicion. This has threatened a successful industry and many thousands of lives in the country of India. Given the ongoing propaganda against the natural stones, it is advisable to already adjust to the coming regulations, requirements, prohibitions and effects on trade.

When we asked Kebschull about the presentation, he made an oblique reference to Pütter, who has alleged in the past that auditors and journalists have been killed at granite quarries. (We were unable to independently verify Pütter's assertions.) "Is this not propaganda?" Kebschull asked. "In a country like India where the Hindu tradition makes killing of animals absolutely a taboo and the cow is worshipped as a goddess this can even be seen as colonial arrogance and racism." It is, of course, not true that Hindu religious sensibilities have completely eradicated the phenomenon of Indians committing murder.

In a similar case, when the US news channel CNN published a documentary on child labour in the Indian carpet industry, in 2014, IGEP held a round-table meeting with representatives of the AICMA and CEPC. According to a 2014 IGEP newsletter—which, incidentally, carries an editorial by Kebschull welcoming Narendra Modi's election victory—about eighty manufacturers and exporters attended the meeting to discuss the "dangerous consequences" of the "false allegations." The speakers, including Kebschull, "emphasized that the whole industry has been put on the accusation bench and that fast action is now urgently necessary. … IGEP promised to do its best to help accelerate necessary steps and to create and disseminate information for buyers." The NCPCR's reports seem to be a step in this regard.

The ISES 2020 standard goes further than other labels by declaring certified products "are free of child labour." XertifiX merely states that no child labour was encountered during "unannounced, independent inspections." Fairstone uses a similar formulation. Kebschull told us that "Rugmark gives no guarantee, but a promise along with the best possible control system." If any company is found to be using child labour, he said, "police has to take action and in addition, the buyer is informed and the Indian company loses all its orders. This is sufficient to avoid child labour in that sector."

However, as the ISES 2020 website notes, "Non compliance with aspects of the requirements does not lead to exclusion of certification. Instead, IGEP has chosen an approach of cooperation with the companies. In case of non compliance the auditors and IGEP will—together with the company—develop a corrective action plan … Only in cases of total unwillingness and disinterest in setting socially and environmentally compliant, companies will be excluded from the certification process." Also, Pütter pointed out, unlike XertifiX and Fairstone, IGEP does not engage a third-party audit of its inspection system, "a key point in independent labelling."

Therein lies the problem with a voluntary-certification process: it is only as reliable as the certifying agency. If the agency designs the process to favour manufacturers, whose business it needs, and engages in propaganda on their behalf, it cannot be the impartial auditor the system needs it to be. By recommending IGEP's label in its reports, the NCPCR was essentially advocating for greater privatisation of the fight against child labour, delegating what should be a responsibility of the state to a private entity whose motives are not necessarily altruistic.

We put this contention to Pütter. "Yes, that's what many people say and that's what even I think," he said. "In the end it should be like that. The Indian government has to do all that. For the time being it's not happening or it's not being done correctly—others have to come in and help. It's the same with the funding agencies. When we start schools in India, we don't do it [so that] the Indian government doesn't have to do it anymore, but to show the government, this is the part where you haven't done your task! Please take over! It's the same here: we show how it's possible and we hope that the Indian government will do the job in the future."

At the end of our interview, Pütter put the situation in the historical context. "We started with the Rugmark initiative in the 1990s," he said. "At the time, there was child labour all over the place. Then, up to the year 2010, I saw no child in no place. Sometimes I saw one running child, and there was an empty place at one loom. That could have been the child. But otherwise, no. And now, with the television team, when I went with Dilip, and also the other occasion I went, I saw 180 children at the carpet looms. We wrote down all the names and the stories. For the last ten years, no one in the public has talked about child labour in the carpet industry. So they are so secure now that they can employ anyone and nobody will bother."

The problem must be highlighted, he said, so that it could be addressed openly. "People used to say, 'This is over. We have talked about child labour in the past. Nobody is interested in it anymore. Now we want to talk about something new.' If that happens, the story just starts again."

This article was reported in collaboration with the German news magazine Der Spiegel. Netzwerk Recherche, a German association of investigative journalists, provided part of the funds for reporting the article.

We - a team of 5 journalists - shared 7% of the prize money with the activists who helped us in the field.

- PETRA SORGE, ANKUSH KUMAR, BHAVYA DORE, SADAF AMAN, AJACHI CHAKRABARTI

EDITOR'S NOTE

The Third Prize in this category went to a story that gets to the heart of the 21st Century crisis regarding the role of the family in society. Anna Louie Sussman from the United States and her series *The Right to Family Life* touches on a theme that resonates around the globe – how people are able to have children and create their own family environment in a world of social bias, ideological prejudice and a hostile legal environment.

The series examines political, economic and social challenges that compromise people's right to live their lives freely and without undue interference. But populism in politics and social conservatism in society combines to create barriers to people's right to make families of their choice.

Her report highlights how the fundamental right to family life has been lost when, for example, a 2015 law in Poland bans assisted reproductive technologies for single women, leaving them unable to access frozen embryos made with their own genetic material before the law was passed.

This comprehensive review of different approaches to personal rights includes the United States, where queer couples don't meet the medical definition of "infertile," rendering them ineligible for insurance coverage that would make it financially possible to create a family.

The story is a global one: everywhere people report wanting more children than they have, but there are obstacles to the exercise of basic reproductive rights. The result is that people are denied access to a life in which they can create the families they want.

THIRD PRIZE WINNER

Anna Louie Sussman (United States)

The Right to Family Life (a series)

Anna Louie Sussman is a freelance journalist based in New York. She is currently working on a book entitled "Inconceivable: Reproduction in an Age of Uncertainty," that looks at the challenges people face in having children today. A former reporter at The Wall Street Journal and Reuters, she now contributes to publications such as The New Yorker, The New York Times, Elle, The Atlantic, and MIT Technology Review.

When the Government Seizes Your Embryos

By Anna Louie Sussman
The New Yorker - October 22, 2019

This piece was supported by the Pulitzer Center.

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/when-the-government-seizes-your-embryos

In Poland, single women who have frozen embryos are now barred from accessing them.

In 2012, as she approached her thirty-eighth birthday, Irena, a single lawyer living in Warsaw, began researching fertility clinics with a friend. Neither woman had been having much luck dating—Irena blames her "feminist attitude," which is not widely shared in conservative Poland—but they didn't want to miss out on parenthood. Browsing the Web sites of the clinics, they noticed that almost all of them featured only photos of couples. Irena's friend phoned to confirm that they would treat single women, too.

Irena's first five artificial-insemination attempts failed, and so did her first attempt at in-vitro fertilization, in which eggs are retrieved from a patient's ovaries and fertilized before being transferred to the uterus. At the time, the Polish government was offering to reimburse heterosexual couples for their fertility treatments. The procedures were expensive, and Irena, being single, had to pay for them herself. Still, her second round of IVF, in the summer of 2015, looked promising. She got six quality embryos, froze four, and transferred the other two.

That summer, the laws covering fertility treatment in Poland were shifting. Informed by the Vatican's absolute opposition to IVF, the socially conservative Law and Justice Party, known by its Polish acronym, PiS, had put forward legislation that would ban IVF and criminalize its provision. PiS held a minority in Poland's parliament, but support for the party was growing. A revised version of the IVF bill, seen as a compromise between conservative, Church-backed parties and the governing centrist coalition, proposed to restrict fertility treatment to heterosexual couples who were married or living together. It would require clinics to get signatures from would-be mothers and fathers, who pledged to take legal and financial responsibility for any children they had as a result of the treatment, before IVF could take place.

That June, the compromise law passed. I live in a horrible, patriarchal, conservative country, Irena thought, when she heard about it. Luckily, her transfer had worked, and, in August—two months before the new law was to take effect—she learned that she was pregnant. Then, at ten weeks, she miscarried. The law was now in effect, and, as a single woman, she was blocked from accessing her own frozen embryos unless she could convince a male friend to sign with her. This would make him financially liable for her child and grant him custody rights. Moreover, another provision in the law, intended to insure that unused embryos wouldn't be destroyed, mandated that they be donated to an infertile heterosexual couple if they weren't used within twenty years. The four remaining frozen embryos, stored in a cryotank, were Irena's last chance at parenthood. There was now a real possibility that they'd be given to someone else.

Irena—who, like the other single women I interviewed for this story, requested that her name be changed to protect her identity—is a cheerful person, partial to loose, comfortable clothing and statement necklaces. Recounting her experience, at the dining table of my Warsaw Airbnb, she was indignant. "For me, it was something unimaginable to agree with this legal situation, that my embryos are waiting for me and I cannot have access to them," she said. "So I tried to think, what to do?"

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For the past few decades, church attendance in Poland has been declining; still, eighty-six per cent of Polish citizens identify as Catholic. In 2008, the Vatican released the "Instruction Dignitas Personae on Certain Bioethical Questions," a document that updated its older guidance on reproductive technologies. The Instruction declared it "ethically unacceptable to dissociate procreation from the integrally personal context of the conjugal act." In another passage, IVF and abortion are linked as morally repellent expressions of a world view that reduces human life to a disposable commodity. "The desire for a child cannot justify the 'production' of offspring," the authors argue, "just as the desire not to have a child cannot justify the abandonment or destruction of a child once he or she has been conceived."

Many Catholics object to the fact that embryos are routinely discarded during the IVF process: in explaining the opposition of Polish Catholics to IVF, Tymoteusz Zych, a legal scholar at the Ordo Iuris Institute for Legal Culture—a conservative, Warsaw-based think tank, which has advocated for a total ban on abortion—cited "the notion of human embryos as human beings." Zych also invoked the science-fiction film "Gattaca," from 1997, in which society is divided between those who can afford to genetically engineer their children and those who cannot. A common step in IVF treatment is pre-implantation genetic testing, in which embryos are screened for genetic defects. "This may lead to elimination from society of certain groups," Zych told me. "Human nature is not perfect; human nature is complex. And, as we deal with something as basic as the fertilization of human beings, we have to be extremely cautious."

And yet, in Poland, conservative opposition to IVF is not driven solely by religion. The first Polish IVF child was born in 1987, in the northeastern city of Bialystok; after the collapse of Communism, private fertility clinics proliferated. Some Church officials condemned them from the outset. But it wasn't until 2003, as Poland prepared to join the European Union, that politicians seized on IVF as a nationalist issue. Some borrowed language from the country's ongoing abortion debate, tying IVF to what they called the West's "civilization of death." Others connected it with Europe's cultural liberalism, against which they see Poland as a Christian bulwark. Around the world, reproductive technologies and their consequences have raised novel and complex questions about who or what counts as family, or even as a person. But in Poland these questions have become especially charged. As Magdalena Radkowska-Walkowicz, an anthropologist at the University of Warsaw, has written, the technology has become a screen onto which its opponents can project both new and time-honored fears.

Anti-IVF rhetoric takes a number of forms. Polish politicians and religious leaders have sometimes described IVF using nationalistic overtones that scholars have connected to a resurgent anti-Semitism. Catholic media routinely depict children conceived through IVF as unnatural and genetically suspect; in a survey of Polish articles about IVF children, Radkowska-Walkowicz found that they were often characterized as suffering from physical deformities, such as a protruding forehead or dangling tongue, or from mental illnesses, including "survivor syndrome" in relation to unused embryos. (There is no evidence for these claims.) These purported defects are said to go undetected—and so, Radkowska-Walkowicz writes, IVF children are imagined to lurk among the general population, their "biological otherness" polluting the Polish body politic.

Other IVF opponents position themselves as protectors of frozen embryos. In Poland, the political scientist Janine P. Holc writes, the embryo is sometimes seen as "the purest citizen"—an unformed innocent in need of protection by the Polish constitution. Anna Krawczak, a doctoral candidate at the University of Warsaw and the former chairperson of the patient-advocacy group Nasz Bocian (the name means "Our Stork"), which has fought for a more inclusive IVF law, told me that IVF opponents have found inventive ways of linking the procedure to abortion. Protesters gather in front of IVF clinics holding posters that show images of human fetuses, icy blue against a black background. Each fetus bears an imagined name: "Marysia—Frozen," "Marcin—Frozen," "Olek—Frozen," "Ola—Frozen." The last protester in line holds a color photo of a sleeping, cherubic baby boy: "Mateusz—He's the only one who made it . . . ." So intense is the debate around IVF, Krawczak told me, that "the frozen embryo is one of the main political actors in Poland."

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"I believe in God, yes," Magda, a thirty-nine-year-old human-resources specialist living in Warsaw, told me, in May. "Maybe I'm not going to church as often as I would like." Magda is fairly typical of many Polish young people. Even as it remains connected to the Catholic Church, Poland is coming to resemble the rest of Europe culturally; it has a growing economy, and in its larger cities, such as Warsaw and Krakow, young Poles gather in cafés and bars and meet on Tinder. (Many also work for long stretches in other European countries.) Even to the devout, the alarmist rhetoric about IVF has not proved entirely persuasive. In 2015, a leading Polish polling group, the Public Opinion Research Center, found that seventy-six per cent of Poles supported IVF for married couples, and forty-four per cent supported it for single women.

Like Irena, Magda spent most of her twenties searching for the right partner. "My mom sometimes told me, 'You have too high standards,' " she recalled, laughing. "I said, 'Mom, I could walk on my standards.' " At thirty-four, prompted by the difficulty a younger, married friend encountered when trying to conceive, Magda went for a fertility checkup. She was alarmed to learn that she had the biological profile of a forty-year-old. At first, she thought of freezing her eggs. She learned, though, that she was likely to produce fewer of them than a younger woman would, and that eggs can be damaged in the freezing-and-thawing process. In the end, she decided to choose a sperm donor and create embryos, which have a better chance of surviving freezing and thawing, even though such a step precluded the possibility of using the sperm of an eventual boyfriend or husband. In February, 2015, Magda's doctor retrieved four eggs. Two were successfully fertilized. She envisioned telling her future partner about them: it was unfortunate, she'd say, that they couldn't conceive a child together, "but I have, in the refrigerator, a couple of babies."

After the retrieval, she and her doctor decided to freeze the embryos for a few months before transferring them, so that her body could recover from IVF's gruelling hormonal-stimulation regime. Magda was singularly focussed on having a baby; she wasn't paying close attention to the news, which was filled with debates on the IVF law. When her employer unexpectedly offered her a two-year contract in Krakow, Poland's charming second city, she figured that she could keep her embryos on ice until she returned to Warsaw, where her family lives. At the end of 2016, as she was moving back to Warsaw, Magda made an appointment at her clinic. In an examination room, her doctor said that he was no longer able to help her. By then, she'd begun following media coverage of the new law; she realized that, as a single woman, she could be denied fertility care. She had never considered, however, that she might be barred from accessing her already-created embryos, which had been made from her own genetic material at a time when it was completely legal to receive treatment. "Now I can't do anything," she said. Ruefully, she noted that, despite having no say over their future, she still bears financial responsibility for the embryos and pays annual "rent" to the clinic where they are stored.

The experience has sharpened Magda's political consciousness. Although she did not vote in the October, 2015 election, in which PiS won a majority in the Polish parliament—"I'm furious at myself for this," she said—she told me that she planned to drag everyone she knew to the polls for the next parliamentary election. (The 2019 election took place this October; PiS won another majority.) She lambasted the current government for its hypocrisy regarding family issues. In 2016, at the same time it was barring single women from using IVF, the PiS-led government began paying new parents a monthly child allowance of five hundred zloty per child (around a hundred and thirty dollars) in an effort to boost Poland's birth rate. "Everyone says, 'Yes, it's amazing to have babies. Make them! . . . Have five hundred zloty for a baby,' " Magda said. "O.K., so why can't I do it? I'm not a pathological liar. I'm not a psycho." Her voice rose. "I'm a normal, loving person who would like to have a family."

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Scholars use the term "selective pronatalism" to describe the adoption of social policies that encourage childbearing for some groups while discouraging it for others. Some of the lawyers and doctors I spoke to believe that, although most media coverage of the IVF law focussed on how single women would be affected, its restrictions were actually designed with queer people in mind. Queer couples in Poland can neither marry nor form civil unions; if they have children while abroad, they must hire lawyers to request citizenship for those children, and it is granted only on a case-by-case basis. Under the banner of the five-hundred-zloty program, PiS has established itself as one of Europe's leading "pro-family" parties, inspiring similar programs in Serbia and Lithuania. In doing so, however, it has reinforced a narrow vision of what being "pro-family" means—one from which single and queer parents are excluded.

Maria, a thirty-eight-year-old designer living in Warsaw, always wanted a partner and family but never found the right person. Three years ago, she began surveying her options. She learned that, under the new law, it was impossible for her to receive fertility treatment in Poland; after several months of research and reflection, she decided to order sperm from Cryos, a Danish sperm bank, and attempt intracervical insemination (the so-called turkey-baster method) herself, at home. In an e-mail, she told me that she'd derived a sense of agency from undertaking the procedure herself. It was counterbalanced, though, by "feeling completely abandoned by your own country. . . . I realized one day that, despite being a good citizen, I don't deserve the same rights as the rest of the society, only because I'm not married or in a legal relationship." She added, "It pisses me [off] big time."

Maria and I met for dinner on a warm evening this spring. Wearing jeans and a marinière, with elegantly tousled dirty-blond hair, she was in good spirits, even though her first few attempts to get pregnant hadn't worked. She showed me photos of the canister in which the sperm samples had arrived, each in its own

plastic straw; she planned to try six times, she said, after which she would travel to Denmark for IVF treatment. If she had been able to buy sperm samples in Poland, they would have cost between four and six hundred zloty—around a hundred and thirty dollars—each. The samples she chose cost around thirteen hundred dollars each, including tax and shipping.

Maria told me about "I Won't Apologize for Giving Birth," a book on IVF families that was published, in 2015, by Karolina Domagalska, a Polish journalist. The title captured her attitude, she said: "I'm not going to be sorry. I'm not going to be apologizing to anybody for doing what I'm doing." It's ironic, she thinks, that Poland's nationalist government is compelling its women to conceive with foreign sperm. "You are sending a bunch of rich, loaded women—let's face it—to spend a hell of a lot of money outside the country, and to where? To Denmark, which is already rich," she said. "And we are saying, 'Oh, we are [such a] poor country, we want our Polish citizens to buy Polish products. Well, excuse me—I'm spending forty thousand zloty on Danish products, F.Y.I."

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Shortly after PiS won its first parliamentary majority, in 2015, it packed Poland's constitutional tribunal, which rules on whether laws are compatible with the country's constitution, with conservative judges. In April of last year, the tribunal reviewed a case brought in October, 2015, by Adam Bodnar, Poland's ombudsman for human rights. Bodnar had requested that the tribunal clarify whether and how the IVF law would apply to single, female patients, such as Magda and Irena, who had begun treatment before its passage. The tribunal sidestepped the question of single women's access to IVF, arguing that it could rule only on the text of the law, not on its collateral effects. But it also cited Article 30 of Poland's constitution, which focusses on human rights and liberties. All of those liberties, the Tribunal argued, were based on the concept of human dignity; anything less than a family with both a mother and a father would deprive the embryo of the dignity to which, as a conceived child and a Polish citizen, it was entitled.

Sylwia Spurek, the former deputy ombudsperson for human rights, who worked on the constitutional tribunal case in her first weeks on the job, told me that the verdict, while disappointing, was legally sound. (The tribunal does not, in fact, have to rule on issues not explicitly addressed in the text of a law.) This leaves the affected women with little legal recourse. It was possible, Spurek said, that, if someone were to bring a case before the European Court of Human Rights, in Strasbourg, the court might compel the Polish government to compensate some women for damages. But she did not believe that the European Court could force the government to permit women access to their embryos. Spurek is a longtime public servant, who has worked under six prime ministers. In her opinion, the current government is merely upholding a Polish political tradition of disregard for women. "I cannot see a huge difference, unfortunately," she said. "There was no government that was on the side of women, in the whole of my career."

To Irena, the law is an attempt by a patriarchal government to enforce a family structure that depends on men. Irena, who was raised by a single, divorced mother, can verify that families without men exist and thrive. Meanwhile, as a lawyer who specializes in family law, she sees many cases in which it seems to her that a child would be better off living with one parent than with two parents who "hate each other." In holding this view, she finds that she is in the minority, even among her educated, single friends. "A lot of women in Poland, even if they are single, they have this attitude that a child needs a father," she said. "I have a lot of friends who are single, and I know only one who thought the way I did."

In my Airbnb, over takeout sushi, Irena read over the tribunal's judgment. As she translated one conservative judge's opinion from Polish into English, she could barely contain her frustration. "As I can understand it, he says that, for this conceived child, who he considers a human being, it's better to stay for twenty years and after be adopted, not by his biological mother but by some other [couple], than to be born by his biological mother," she said, bitterly. "For me, it seems quite absurd."

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Irena and the other women in her situation do have one way of getting around the IVF law: they can ask their clinics to ship their frozen eggs or embryos to clinics in other countries. Beginning in early 2016, Irena began trying to find a home for her embryos outside of Poland. First, she arranged to ship them to the Institut Marquès, a clinic in Barcelona. "Everything was going smoothly until we received the documentation from Poland that confirms the embryos were created with a non-anonymous sperm donor," a medical assistant wrote to Irena. "Unfortunately in Spain we are only allowed to do anonymous donation, and so if a donor is known, we cannot accept the embryos."

In April, she contacted the Copenhagen Fertility Center—perhaps, she thought, the staff there might feel a patriotic duty toward the Danish sperm she'd used—but she received only a succinct and unhelpful reply refusing her business. She began corresponding successfully with a clinic in Latvia when her mother fell gravely ill. To care for her, Irena put her fertility search on hold. The next year, she reached out to the Latvian clinic again, but they had trouble with her Polish clinic. "Good day, Now the rules is changes, and in this moment . . . we can't get from [your clinic] all necessary documents," someone named Katerina informed her, in March, 2017.

Irena discovered a branch of the Institut Marquès in Ireland, a country that permits non-anonymous gamete donation. (Although seventy-eight per cent of Irish citizens identify as Catholic, reproductive technologies are not as controversial there.) She arranged for her clinic to sign the necessary paperwork and booked her embryos'

passage with a company called IVF Couriers ("Bespoke courier services for the next generation"). More than a year earlier, before she'd begun trying to ship her embryos abroad, Cryos, the Danish sperm bank, had notified her that, somewhere in the world, a child created with her donor's sperm had been born with a birth defect. Irena wasn't too worried—there was no way of knowing whether the defect was due to the sperm, the egg, or chance. But, just before her embryos were scheduled to ship, the board of the Institut Marquès in Barcelona checked with its Irish arm and found out about what they called her donor's "condition." The board decided to reject her embryos—a precaution, Irena assumed, meant to uphold their success rates, which potential clients use to evaluate clinics. Irena understood why an adverse birth outcome would preclude any future use of that donor's sperm. "But if these embryos already exist, and they are mine, then my idea is it is up to me . . . whether I want to take the risk and use them or not," she said. "I think this was the hardest moment."

Katarzyna Koziol, a doctor who co-founded one of Poland's largest IVF centers, in 1994, told me that, at her clinic alone, around a hundred women had been affected by the law; an analysis by Nasz Bocian, the patient-advocacy group, suggested that about five per cent of fertility-clinic patients in Poland were single women. (Koziol, who is the president of the Polish Society of Reproductive Medicine and Embryology, consulted on the IVF law, arguing that it should be more inclusive; the law's omission of single women, she said, was one of its "weak points.") After the law was passed, her staff received calls from many women asking what they should do. Often, the women opted to transfer their eggs or embryos to a clinic abroad. And yet every country's laws reflect different attitudes toward assisted reproductive technology, or art. Recently, in an article for Politico, Marion Sollety described how France's history of "resistance to health care as a business" has led that country to ban technologies such as elective egg-freezing, driving women who need them to Spain. (Amid protests from conservatives, President Emmanuel Macron's government is trying to liberalize French art regulation.) The sociologist Elzbieta Korolczuk points out that, in Poland, the law and rhetoric around art has had the effect of "nationalizing the embryos," so that, instead of being the private property of the person who commissioned their creation, they are "public citizen subjects," who are under the protection of the state.

Governments have an interest in protecting human life, especially when it's vulnerable; that's why they prohibit murder, tax cigarettes, mandate seat belts, and remove children from abusive homes. The Polish government has long maintained that its responsibility for protecting human life begins at conception. In the case of abortion, a government's desire to protect life at a prenatal stage must come at the expense of the rights of women who wish to end their pregnancies. But Poland's IVF law introduces a novel version of this trade-off, in which "protecting" embryos compromises the rights of the not-yet-pregnant women who've created them. The government must exercise something like eminent domain—over biological tissue, or property, or perhaps over a person.

A fertilized egg develops into an embryo after it's implanted in a uterus, where it can grow; after the eighth week, that embryo becomes a fetus. Technically, the frozen embryos stored by a fertility clinic are "pre-embryos," because they have not yet been implanted. According to European Union regulations, a pre-embryo is considered tissue: it must be handled, stored, and transported according to a 2004 directive that also addresses bone marrow for transplants and skin for grafts. But it's possible to ask whether a pre-embryo's genetic uniqueness, or its potential to grow into a human being, sets it apart from other tissues. There is no easy way to answer this question. Conception, artificial or otherwise, is so uncertain that each pre-embryo, once it's implanted, has only a one-in-three chance of growing into a human being. Meanwhile, despite this uncertainty, many resources—financial, biological, and emotional—have gone into its creation. Some pre-embryos are made entirely from a couple's genetic material; others include donor genes; some lack any genetic tie to their would-be parent or parents. Many aspects of an embryo's past, present, and future could bear on the question of who is responsible for its care and destiny.

It took two years, but Irena eventually managed to have her embryos exported to a clinic in Lviv, Ukraine. I asked her how often, and in what terms, she had thought about the embryos during that time. "It's related to your attitude to reproductive rights in general, so I don't think about them as babies, because I'm a feminist," she said. "I try not to humanize them, but of course I have a strong feeling that I am the person who's entitled to decide what to do with them." She paused. "I just don't accept this system, that there is somebody else who takes this decision instead of me. So let's say, I think we can use this word, 'property.' "

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Ewa, a stylish, blond entertainment-industry professional, was almost a casualty of the 2015 law. Now forty-eight, she began fertility treatment in the spring of that year, when she was forty-four. Her first attempt at IVF yielded only one egg. She concluded that she didn't have time for what she called "expensive experiments." In June—the same month that the IVF law passed—she went to a clinic in the central city of Łódź. The doctor there told her that she had to act immediately, choosing both a sperm donor and an egg donor and completing IVF, before the law went into effect.

Ewa had already found a sperm donor she liked, from Cryos, the Danish sperm bank. On his profile, he explained that he'd decided to donate sperm after he and his partner became parents—he wanted others to be as happy as they were. "That was beautiful, the way he wrote it," she said. "It was funny. I fell in love with this donor." But the decision to move forward with donor eggs was more difficult. If it weren't for the law, she said, she would have tried once more with her own eggs.

Within a month, the clinic had located three potential egg donors. She chose one, who produced five high-quality eggs, all of which fertilized. On September 5th, less

than a month before the law took effect, the clinic transferred two of the resulting embryos. Ewa worried about what would happen if neither embryo took. She is now the mother of twins.

Ewa is decidedly unattached to the embryos she left behind in the clinic. She hasn't received a storage bill for them since her treatment concluded, and hasn't called to find out what has happened to them. Since, by law, they can't be destroyed, she assumes that they are either still in storage or have been donated. She is excited about the latter prospect. "My kids are great," she said. She likes to think that there are, or will be, three more wonderful children out there who are related to her own. The law's imperative to donate unused embryos could, potentially, make her small family something larger. "One day, we're going to meet them, if they want to meet us," she told me.

Seen through a feminist, progressive lens, assisted reproductive technologies have emancipatory potential; they have the power to expand the definition of family, creating new familial configurations and notions of relatedness. Poland's IVF law, by contrast, suggests what can happen when such technologies take root in a society that's determined to remain traditional. Single motherhood is neither new nor radical; women have always raised children on their own, for any number of reasons (death, abandonment, divorce). The law, in attempting to preserve a narrow notion of what a family should be, has had the perverse effect of severing the mother-child bond. A government that confiscates a mother's embryos so that it can encourage only the "right" kinds of families creates its own kind of brave new world.

When Irena and I last corresponded, in September, she was twenty-eight weeks pregnant, following a successful embryo transfer in Lviv. She had notified her boss of her pregnancy, and he immediately congratulated her without asking any awkward questions; her mother is excited to become a grandmother. Paradoxically, she said, it was the law's fundamental injustice that steeled her resolve to keep going. "After this law was passed, all the doubts disappeared, and I felt very strongly convinced that I have to continue, and that I can't abandon my embryos," she told me. "We can say that this law helped me, but only in the sense of the state of my mind, and being confident that this is a good idea, and that I should keep trying."

The Case for Redefining Infertility

By Anna Louie Sussman
The New Yorker
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The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-inquiry/the-case-for-social-infertility

Proponents of "social infertility" ask: What if it's your biography, rather than your body, that prevents you from having a child?

Mara Pellittieri, the thirty-year-old editor of TalkPoverty, a Web site devoted to class and inequality, lives with her spouse, who identifies as nonbinary, in the liberal suburb of Takoma Park, Maryland. Pellittieri's spouse was assigned female at birth; the couple married in 2012, just before Maryland voters endorsed same-sex marriage in a ballot initiative, and decided to start a family around a year ago. Like most queer couples, they knew that they'd require medical assistance to get pregnant. They were glad, therefore, to learn that the health plan at Stanley Black & Decker, where Pellittieri's spouse works as an engineer, offered intrauterine insemination (I.U.I.), in-vitro fertilization (I.V.F.), and other fertility care to employees who have been diagnosed as infertile. They assumed that such a diagnosis would apply to them.

Almost immediately, they hit a snag. According to their insurance policy, heterosexual couples could receive an infertility diagnosis after "one year of unprotected intercourse" without conception. Queer couples, by contrast, could be diagnosed only after six failed rounds of I.U.I., which they would have to pay for out of pocket. Each I.U.I., which has, at best, a twenty-per-cent chance of succeeding, can range in cost from five hundred to four thousand dollars. Pellittieri and her spouse were daunted by the expense. They were also alarmed by the difference between the way heterosexual and queer couples were treated. Sixteen U.S. states, including Maryland, now require insurance companies to cover some level of infertility care; in 2015, Maryland extended those requirements to mandate equal coverage for married same-sex couples—although the law also requires six unsuccessful attempts at intrauterine insemination to meet the definition of infertility. And Stanley Black & Decker, like many large companies, is self-insured—it doesn't rely upon an outside insurance company—and so its policy fell outside the jurisdiction of Maryland's regulations.

These divergent requirements for the same diagnosis put Pellittieri and her spouse at

the center of a larger, conceptual debate about the meaning of the word "infertility." Their insurance policy defined infertility physiologically: from its perspective, Pellittieri couldn't receive an infertility diagnosis until doctors discovered something wrong with her reproductive system. She saw things differently. In her view, it was inarguably true that, as a member of a non-heterosexual couple, she couldn't have children without medical help. Definitions drive diagnoses, and diagnoses determine access to care. By hewing to a physiological definition of infertility, Pellittieri's insurance policy would leave her untreated.

In recent years, precisely to take account of people like Pellittieri, scholars, activists, and medical practitioners have begun urging policymakers to adopt a more expansive definition of infertility. They argue that infertility is only sometimes physiological; it's also possible to suffer from social infertility, a condition that stems from the broader factors that shape our lives. In a 2018 paper, "Expanding the Clinical Definition of Infertility to Include Socially Infertile Individuals and Couples," the bioethicist Lisa Campo-Engelstein and the physician Weei Lo propose that an infertility diagnosis should be available to anyone who, during a twelve-month period, possesses the "intent" to conceive but cannot "due to social or physiological limitations." Meanwhile, the sociologists Jasmine Fledderjohann and Liberty Barnes have pointed out that statistics about infertility, which tend to be based on the reports of married heterosexual couples, ignore the "invisible infertile"—the single, poor, or non-heterosexual people who can't have children for reasons that are only sometimes related to their bodies.'

Broadening the definition of infertility, of course, would raise new questions in turn. Many people struggle to have children because of non-physiological factors. Should all of them—would-be parents who are single by choice, overworked women who decide to freeze their eggs, gay men in need of surrogates—be considered infertile? And what, for these different groups, would constitute a fair distribution of infertility treatment? Such debates are complex and morally urgent, affecting the lives of numberless would-be parents. On the phone with Cigna, which administers Stanley Black & Decker's health plan, Pellittieri's spouse tried to absorb the fact that the couple would be ineligible for coverage.

"With your plan, unfortunately, it would not be covered," the representative explained, referring to I.U.I.

"So artificial insemination—period—is not covered," Pellittieri's spouse said, after some back and forth.

"Correct, unfortunately."

Pellittieri's spouse asked specifically about I.V.F. and was told that the procedure couldn't be covered without a diagnosis of infertility, which the representative, reading from the coverage policy, defined as "the inability of a woman to achieve conception after six trials of artificial insemination over a one-year period."

"The person working at the insurance company felt really bad about it," Pellittieri recalled. "They apologized for it." But the policy, with its strictly physiological definition, was immovable.

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On the surface, the effort to expand access to infertility treatment depends on the idea of equal rights. There are different kinds of rights, however, to which we might have equal access. Political philosophers have long distinguished between negative rights ("freedoms from"), which demand noninterference, and positive rights ("freedoms to"), which demand facilitation. In 1965, when the Supreme Court guaranteed marital couples the right to use contraception, in Griswold v. Connecticut, it relied on the principle of "marital privacy," ruling, in effect, that married couples had the negative right to make their own decisions about contraceptive matters without government interference. In 1972, in Eisenstadt v. Baird, the Court extended that right to unmarried couples, deciding that they should have equal access to marital privacy. For most of its history, the fight for reproductive rights has conceived of them negatively. In 2012, when the Inter-American Court of Human Rights overturned Costa Rica's ban on I.V.F., citing the "right to life" possessed by unimplanted embryos, it was careful to note that, in its opinion, the case was not about the "presumed right to have a child or a right to have access to I.V.F." Instead, the ruling focussed on how the ban unduly interfered with couples' private lives.

The shift to a positive understanding of reproductive rights has been driven, to a large extent, by technology, demography, and social change. In the years after Louise Brown, the world's first I.V.F. baby, was born, in July, 1978, reproductive technologies were expensive and unreliable. But success rates for I.V.F., egg freezing, and related technologies improved, and the fertility industry grew into a multibillion-dollar behemoth. During the same period, new kinds of households and families entered the mainstream. In 1992, the protagonist of the television series "Murphy Brown" had a son out of wedlock; in the following years, I.U.I. and I.V.F. helped gay icons such as Elton John and Melissa Etheridge become parents. In general, Americans began staying in school longer, working harder, and marrying later, if at all. In 1960, only nine per cent of Americans over the age of twenty-five had never been married; by 2012, the figure was one in five. (More couples have been living together without tying the knot, of course.) Once exotic, "assisted reproductive technologies," or A.R.T.s, now seem commonplace. It's become commonsensical, therefore, to propose that, just as there is a positive right to education, there is a positive right to have children, and to ask whether all Americans are equally free to exercise that right.

Other countries—especially those with government-run health-care systems—have held spirited public debates about which infertility services to extend and to whom.

In the early nineteen-eighties, Mary Warnock, a philosopher, chaired the United Kingdom's Committee of Inquiry Into Human Fertilisation and Embryology; its findings shaped the U.K.'s first law regulating fertility treatment, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act, passed in 1990. (Warnock elaborated on the committee's findings in a 2002 book, "Making Babies: Is There a Right to Have Children?") In France, where Emmanuel Macron made access to "la procréation médicalement assistée" a campaign promise, citizens are currently debating the extension of state-funded I.V.F. to lesbian couples and single women. Different countries have developed different rules. At the moment, France provides four I.V.F. cycles to heterosexual couples but bans all forms of surrogacy. Belgium offers women under the age of forty-five six cycles of I.V.F. Pro-birth policies in Israel mean that a woman can access as many I.V.F. cycles as she needs to have two "take-home babies," or live births.

Americans utilize assisted-reproduction technologies less often than citizens of other industrialized countries; except for an inconsistently administered program for service members whose infertility is deemed service-related, the nation's public health-insurance programs, which cover roughly half the population, do not substantively fund any A.R.T.s. Private insurance policies vary widely. More and more people now find themselves in need of A.R.T.s., but, in a country where abortion and paid family leave are still contentious issues, the hard work of consensus-building has barely begun.

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In 2015, Barbara Collura, the president and C.E.O. of the U.S. infertility-advocacy group resolve, travelled to Geneva to take part in a series of discussions, led by the International Committee Monitoring Assisted Reproductive Technologies, over the definition of infertility. In 2009, the World Health Organization (W.H.O.) defined infertility as "a disease of the reproductive system"; its definition held that infertility could be diagnosed after a year or more of "regular unprotected sexual intercourse" had failed to produce a pregnancy. But, by 2015, there was broad agreement that this language, with its reliance on heterosexual sex as a reference point, excluded many of the people who currently seek fertility treatment, including queer and single patients. The delegates—most of whom represented professional medical bodies, such as the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, the African Fertility Society, and the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics—hoped to redefine infertility in a new, more inclusive way.

"There were several hours of discussion, of wordsmithing," Collura said. Eventually, they settled on an expansion of the 2009 W.H.O. definition. The new language explained that infertility could also be diagnosed based on "an impairment of a person's capacity to reproduce either as an individual or with his/her partner." It also noted that infertility generates "disability as an impairment of function."

When the new definition was published, in 2017, in the journal Fertility and Sterility, criticism arose immediately, not just from the right—Josephine Quintavalle, the director of the conservative Social Trends Institute, had already called it "absurd nonsense"—but from the left. "The terminology is kind of offensive in terms of using the term 'impairment,' " Cathy Sakimura, the deputy director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights, told me. In her view, the revised definition, even as it encompasses queer couples and individuals, comes perilously close to characterizing being single or queer as a form of disability. "There are other ways to get at that, to use a more neutral word," she said. Lisa Campo-Engelstein, the bioethicist whose 2018 paper had proposed seeing infertility as the result of "social or physiological limitations," warned that categorizing social infertility as a disease risked pathologizing and medicalizing homosexuality. "Medicalization is a double-edged sword," she said. "On the one hand, it gives you access, if you have a medical condition, to treatment. But, on the other hand, it may label something that you don't think, really, is a disease as a disease."

In theory, a social definition of infertility—one laid out in terms of intentions and identities rather than diseases and disabilities—circumvents these problems. But it creates complexities of its own. Last year, researchers from Yale and the University of Haifa, in Israel, shared the results of a study in which they asked a hundred and fifty women who have frozen their eggs to explain their motivations. The overwhelming majority of the women cited what might be called "man problems," including divorces, breakups, and male partners who weren't yet ready to have children. It takes a conceptual leap to see a recent divorcée and a woman with endometriosis as equally infertile, but Campo-Engelstein argues that they are "similar enough that they should be treated the same." In general, she points out, we treat medical conditions without worrying about their origins. "If you never go on any dates, you might never find the person of your dreams, but if you're having lots of unprotected sex, you're more likely to get a sexually transmitted infection—which, if left untreated, could also cause infertility." In her view, women who can't have children are united in their condition.

"If we accept the notion that reproduction is a human right, then I think it would be inconsistent if we were to exclude gay men," Eli Adashi, a former dean of medicine and biological sciences at Brown University, and the author of numerous papers on access to A.R.T.s, told me. "Gay men are people, too." A positive right to the treatment of social infertility, in theory, could require governments or insurance companies to facilitate surrogacy for gay men who wish to have children. And yet some evidence suggests that surrogacy and egg donation are offered mainly by women in need. In countries where commercial surrogacy is banned, altruistic surrogates are few and far between. Spain, where payment rates for eggs have crept slightly above the European Union average and donation is anonymous, has become a hub for egg donation, attracting a significant number of women

from poor countries in Eastern Europe. In her book "Contested Commodities," from 1996, the legal scholar Margaret Jane Radin argues that, even when people enter into consensual commercial-surrogacy contracts, the arrangement comes uncomfortably close to "commissioned adoption," or babies for sale. There are, in short, reasons to be cautious about the idea of a government-mandated surrogacy market. They must be weighed against the principle of equality and the desperate desire of many gay couples to have children.

Faren Tang, a Reproductive Justice Fellow at Yale Law School, points out that physiological and social infertility can coexist within a partnership. "In most cases, at least one member of a 'medically infertile' heterosexual couple is really socially infertile: they could achieve pregnancy if they abandoned their current partner and found another," she writes, in a forthcoming paper. She also grapples with the question of whether single men, gay or straight, should be considered socially infertile, too—part of a larger, more complicated discussion about whether coverage could or should be limited to medical procedures involving one's own body, since single men would require donor eggs and surrogates. Tang argues that, once a government chooses to subsidize care for one group (married couples, say), it must provide it to everyone. "If the state is going to choose to confer a benefit, can it choose to confer that benefit to a group of people on a basis that's fundamentally irrational and discriminatory?" she asked. "My view is, no, it can't."

Costs are frequently another limiting factor. In the U.S., where A.R.T.s are more expensive than elsewhere, a single round of I.V.F. can cost as much as twenty thousand dollars; the surrogacy process—which, in addition to the surrogate herself, requires donor eggs, fertility doctors, and legal counsel—can easily top a hundred thousand. This past February, lawmakers in the North Dakota Senate cited cost concerns when they voted down an infertility mandate. But, from a generational perspective, concerns about cost are ultimately misguided. A 2008 article published in the American Journal of Managed Care by a group of economists and physicians,"Long-Term Economic Benefits Attributed to I.V.F.-Conceived Children: A Lifetime Tax Calculation," found that, based on their likely tax contributions in the course of a working life, A.R.T. babies generate "a net positive return to the government." On a long enough time horizon, infertility treatment is an investment in the tax base of the future.

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If there is no consensus about how to cover A.R.T.s, it is perhaps because there is no consensus about whether people have a fundamental right to have a child. Article Sixteen of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says that "men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family," but it's unclear whether that right is a positive or negative one. In the meantime, the updated definition of infertility first drafted in Geneva hasn't made its way into any American laws, current or forthcoming. In a 2011 review of thirteen state mandates, Valarie Blake, an associate law professor at West Virginia University, found that most excluded the socially infertile: one required marriage; three, the discovery of a medical or "unexplained" cause of infertility; four, a determination that infertility treatment was "medically necessary." Blake hesitates to call lawmakers intentionally discriminatory. Still, it's clear that many of these laws create conditions of unequal access based on marital status or sexual orientation. "It's either intent to promote heterosexual families or at least a benign neglect of alternative families," she said. She would prefer that "fertility" remain undefined. "Don't go into the details of what fertility means," she said. "Then it's up to a physician to dictate the proper course of care for any given patient."

In the absence of a broader consensus about what "infertility" means—or of the treatments that would be covered under a socialized medical system—American employers have begun defining it for themselves. In the past year, the data aggregator FertilityIQ surveyed thirty thousand infertility patients. It found that, out of four hundred employers that offer I.V.F. coverage, thirty-one per cent had decided to cover I.V.F. without pre-authorization—that is, without waiting for an official diagnosis. (That's an increase from eight per cent, of a smaller sample, in 2016.) Benefits managers at some companies may have decided that "it's just not fair to help build some employees' families and not others," Jake Anderson, FertilityIQ's co-founder, said.

The difference of opinion that exists between companies may also exist within the health-care system. Despite being explicitly told that they weren't eligible for coverage under Stanley Black & Decker's policy, Pellittieri and her spouse decided to try submitting the bills for their I.U.I. attempts, figuring that a formal denial would position them to appeal and fight the policy. To their surprise, their insurer started reimbursing them for the procedures. It turned out that, despite how the policy defined infertility, their claims had been coded with an infertility diagnosis. (A spokesperson for Cigna said that the company "respects the patient-provider relationship and relies on its members' health care providers to make diagnoses determinations based on Cigna's coverage policies.") Pellittieri and her spouse welcomed the reimbursements. At the same time, they had been reimbursed for procedures that they might easily have skipped, since their doctor's preferred approach would have been to begin I.V.F. after only two I.U.I.s.

Because of the complexities and confusion of this process, the couple underwent nearly a year of less-effective, costly, and emotionally draining procedures. Pellitieri wanted desperately to move on to I.V.F., but she instead embarked on round after round of I.U.I. "I felt trapped by the policy," she said. Earlier this year, after their fifth I.U.I., she became pregnant. Their joy and relief, though, was tempered by the knowledge that they plan to have a second child. To do that, she said, "We'll have to go through this all over again."

The Poland Model - Promoting 'Family Values' with Cash Handouts

By Anna Louie Sussman

The Atlantic - October 14, 2019

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The End of Babies

By Anna Louie Sussman

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Contribution to Civil Rights

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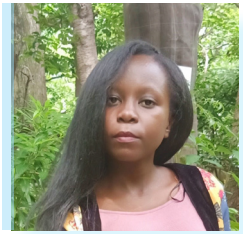
A series of stories

Gloria Aradi
(Kenya)



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She graduated from Kenya's Maseno University in 2016 with BSc. in Actuarial Science with IT. In 2017, she was one of twelve journalists selected by the Standard Group, one of Kenya's largest media companies, for the Standard Media Academy multimedia journalism trainee program, held at the Aga Khan University, Graduate School of Media and Communications.

Help Me Bury My Mother Who Has Been in Morgue for Two Years

By Gloria Aradi
The Standard Newspaper - November 8, 2019

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/nairobi/article/2001348505/help-me-bury-my-mother-who-has-been-in-morgue-for-2-years

It has been two years of despair and unending mental anguish for Francisca Wanjiru. Each day, she has to wrestle with the haunting fact that her mother's body is lying inside a freezer at the Nairobi Women's Hospital mortuary.

Wanjiru's story, although not unique, is a tragic one. Since the death of her mother, Stella Wamuyu Mwangi, on November 17, 2017, the hospital has detained the body over an unpaid bill of Sh4,046,341 accumulated during a four-month stay in the facility.

The daughter says they are victims of circumstance. In July 2017, during a strike by health workers, her mother unexpectedly fell sick. At first, Wanjiru and her sister arranged for Wamuyu to be treated in the house because they lacked medical insurance.

"We called a doctor to treat her from home. One morning we found her unconscious. The next day we took her to Kikuyu Hospital, but they said her condition was critical and advised we take her to a different hospital. There was a strike by health workers so we couldn't get space in the public hospitals we visited," Wanjiru narrates.

She says a nurse advised the family to take their mother to the private hospital.

"She was unconscious when we took her there so she was taken to the intensive care unit. Sometimes she got better and then she would deteriorate, so she alternated between the ICU and the general ward," Wanjiru says.

While Wamuyu was initially treated for meningitis, her daughter says that she also developed tuberculosis which pushed up her bill.

Wanjiru told The Standard that her mother had been healthy before the sudden illness, save for episodes of high blood pressure that started taking a toll on her health after their father died in 2015, leaving her to raise six children.

The daughter says she never saw Wamuyu open her eyes or speak in the months she was hospitalised.

According to Wanjiru, it was only after her mother's death that the family realised

the bill had surpassed Sh4 million.

"The hospital did not ask us for a deposit. Even during treatment they did not pressure us to pay. We only saw the bill after she died"," she says.

By August this year, the family had accumulated an additional mortuary bill of Sh307,800.

Sitting around

Wanjiru says the family has unsuccessfully tried to get help, from attempting to get in touch with leaders to organising a fundraiser.

"I feel very sad seeing her. Even the last time I saw mum, I cried all the way home. It's not easy sitting around knowing your mother is in that state. I know it's her because I'm her daughter, but another person wouldn't recognise her.

"It is not easy for me because her body has changed; it has dried and shrunk and is darker. It does not even look like a body anymore; it's more like a stone," Wanjiru says.

After four visits, she has now stopped going to the morgue where a single visit costs Sh500.

Wanjiru is now appealing for help to get her mother's body and finally lay it to rest. She is jobless and stays at home to take care of the younger children while two of her siblings work casual jobs.

"We have no one to help us. My mother's family is not well-off so they cannot help. My father's family in Murang'a went silent after his death,'" Wanjiru reveals.

She adds: "We plead with the hospital to give us the body. We will never be able to pay the money no matter how long they keep it."

According to Shadrack Wambui, a lawyer, Wanjiru's predicament is just one of many cases where hospitals across the country continue to illegally detain patients' bodies.

Mr Wambui says that although it is unlawful to hold a body over unpaid bills, many families suffer in ignorance because they are unaware that they can take legal action against such hospitals.

"You have a right, but unless you invoke it, you cannot be helped. It remains a piece of paper."

He outlines the procedure for families facing similar problems, explaining, "It is a commercial dispute because the issue is money. The hospital is holding the body as lien. Therefore, you take the issue to the commercial department of the court."

Besides, Wambui adds, hospitals have other proper ways of getting the money owed.

Succession process

"A body is not property. You cannot auction it to get back your money. The reasonable thing to do is release the remains, for sentimental purposes.

"When someone passes away, the law of succession comes into place. The hospital should release the body and wait for the succession process to begin, then go after the deceased's estate. If the estate is not equivalent to the amount owed, the claim stops there," the lawyer states.

The Standard reached out to the Nairobi Women's Hospital several times, but they did not respond despite promising to get back on the matter.

I'm Paying Sh. 20,000 for 58 Years for the Body of my Pre-Term Baby

By Gloria Aradi

The Standard Newspaper - March 2, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/health/article/2001362586/i-m-paying-sh20-000-for-58-years-for-the-body-of-my-pre-term-baby

Family Holds Emotional Memorial Service as Body of Son Is Detained at Gertrude's Hospital

By Gloria Aradi

The Standard Newspaper - March 12, 2020

https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/kenya/article/2001363894/kenyan-family-agonizes-over-sh-14-million-medical-bill-for-dead-son

SHORTLISTED STORY

In Brazil, Indigenous People Are Fighting to Keep Their Children

Jill Langlois (Canada/ Brazil)

Jill Langlois is an independent journalist based in São Paulo, Brazil. She has been freelancing from the largest city in the western hemisphere since 2010, writing and reporting for publications like National Geographic, The New York Times and The Economist. Her work focuses on politics, human rights, social justice, wildlife, the environment and the impact of socioeconomic issues on people's lives. Jill is fluent in French and Portuguese.

She holds a bachelor's degree in journalism from Ryerson University in Toronto and is a grantee for the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting and the International Women's Media Foundation.

In Brazil, Indigenous People Are Fighting to Keep Their Children

By Jill Langlois

National Geographic (reporting supported by the IWMF) - April 22, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link: https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/04/in-brazil-indigenous-people-fighting-to-keep-children/

'I'll always be waiting for him,' says a woman whose baby was taken from her days after he was born.

DOURADOS, BRAZIL The warm wind of summer whipped across the high plains of the Brazilian city of Dourados on the February day in 2015 when Élida de Oliveira's newborn was taken away.

Oliveira, a member of the Kaiowá indigenous group, had given birth to her son alone, in the makeshift house where she lived. The boy's father had left her when he found out she was pregnant with her seventh child. Built of used scraps of wood, plastic sheeting, and tarps, her home occupies a piece of reclaimed land in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul known as Ñu Vera, just outside the perimeter of Brazil's most populated reservation, the Dourados Indigenous Reserve, which itself borders the city of Dourados, some 75 miles from the Paraguay border. There's no electricity or running water on this ancestral Kaiowá land and no room on the parched soil to grow the traditional food—white maize, manioc, potatoes, squash—meant to feed body and soul.

Read more

SHORTLISTED STORY

Democracy Undone: The Authoritarian's Playbook

Kevin Grant, Leticia Duarte, Soumya Shankar, Juan Arredondo, Quentin Aries, Tracy Jarrett (United States)

Kevin Douglas Grant is The GroundTruth Project's Co-founder and Chief Content Officer, as well as Vice President of Report for America. Previously Senior Editor of Special Reports at GlobalPost, he has led reporting projects around the world and his work has been recognized by the Edward R. Murrow, Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University and Online Journalism Awards among others.

Leticia Duarte is a Brazilian journalist based in New York City and she has been awarded numerous fellowships in recent years, including The GroundTruth Project's 2019 Democracy Undone fellowship. She holds an M.A. in Politics and Global Affairs from Columbia University and an M.S. in Sociology from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul.

Soumya Shankar is a journalist and writer with extensive political reporting, writing, and commentary work on South Asia. Her longform narrative stories, investigations, and analyses of all lengths across print, television, and radio platforms in the United States, Hong Kong, and India have appeared in outlets such as NBC, Foreign Policy, PRI, The Intercept, The Baffler, South China Morning Post, CS Monitor, Caravan Magazine and The Hindu Businessline, among others.

Juan Arredondo is a documentary photographer and a filmmaker with a primary interest in post-conflict and social issues. His work has been recognized with awards in art and journalism from International Red Cross, the World Press Photo Foundation, Overseas Press Club, Aaron Siskind Foundation, among others.

Quentin Aries is a European journalist based in Brussels. His current work is with the Washington Post and Contexte. He is also the President of Cafe Babel, the first multilingual participatory magazine made by and for young people across Europe.

Tracy Jarrett is a Peabody and Emmy award-winning journalist, non-fiction director and producer. She is interested in the intersection of race, culture, and politics. She produced VICE News Tonight's explosive coverage of Charlottesville, shining a light on this growing normalized hate from the center of its most egregious display yet.

Democracy Undone: The Authoritarian's Playbook

The GroundTruth Project - October 17, 2019

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://thegroundtruthproject.org/democracy-undone-signs-of-authoritarianism/

Seven Steps By Populists Worldwide To Undermine The Democracies That Elected Them

By Kevin Douglas Grant

WASHINGTON – The hallmarks of populist nationalism are gaining ground in many of the world's largest democracies from Modi's India to Bolsonaro's Brazil and Trump's America. In these, and many other countries, elected leaders are flirting with aspects of authoritarianism in an extreme era of digital disruption, mass migration and the mounting effects of climate change.

In this project, Democracy Undone: The Authoritarian's Playbook, GroundTruth reporting fellows in India, Brazil, Colombia, Hungary, Poland, Italy and the United States chronicled how seven nationalist leaders in each of these countries seem to be working from the same playbook.

It is a playbook that our reporting team has pieced together from the speeches and techniques in use by an interconnected web of populist leaders and their strategists as a way to gain power, impose their values and implement their agenda. The reporting is not intended to suggest that each of these countries is now under an authoritarian regime, but that their leaders are showing instincts and inclinations that lead to a brand of populist nationalism that, if history is a guide, can lead to authoritarian government. Scholars on democracy say they seem eager to join China, Russia, Saudi Arabia and other leading authoritarian states in stamping out democratic protections and reshaping the global order.

Read more at https://thegroundtruthproject.org/democracy-undone-signs-of-authoritarianism/

Meet the intellectual founder of Brazil's far right

By Leticia Duarte - December 28, 2019

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://thegroundtruthproject.org/democracy-undone-meet-the-founder-of-brazils-far-right-authoritarianism-authoritarians-playbook/

Editor's note: This dispatch, published jointly with The Atlantic Magazine, explores another aspect of "Weaponizing Fear," a tactic from The Authoritarian's Playbook.

PETERSBURG, Virginia — Talking with Olavo de Carvalho can be an exercise in self-restraint. As I walked into his house for an interview recently, he was sitting behind his desk, his gray hair neatly combed back. More than 100 smoking pipes were lined up on a rack, and thousands of books were stacked on the shelves of his home office alongside at least 20 rifles. He greeted me with a deep frown and wide eyes before pointing at a printout of a recent article I had written and bellowing, "What the f**k is that?"

So began our second meeting.

Sitting across from him, I saw that he had already set up his computer to film our exchange, his laptop camera framing my face. (He records all his interviews with reporters, whom he calls "enemies of the people," often releasing them on YouTube. These are then spread by his followers, with titles such as "Olavo humiliates journalist.") His wife, daughter, and a handful of other relatives and friends sat on a couch behind me, eating Burger King and smoking cigarettes, like an audience waiting for a show.

I had been trying for months to get back in touch with him, and just two hours earlier, he had agreed to meet. He had read my story about him and wanted a chance to respond. Before long, he was extending his right arm and pointing his index finger at my face. "You're very malicious, naughty, a liar—you are defaming me!" he shouted.

"You're a slut," he went on, wagging his finger. "You come to my house with this cynical smile … You're worth nothing, woman!"

His language could be disregarded if they were random attacks, if he were an eccentric from the political hinterland. But Olavo de Carvalho is something else: Known simply as "Olavo" across his native Brazil, the former astrologist, former communist, and former journalist has become the most virulent voice against the left in Brazil. His commentary immediately reverberates across the country,

propagated by his more than 1 million followers on YouTube and Facebook. Worshipped by the right and ridiculed as an extremist by the left, Olavo and his beliefs are discussed almost daily in Brazil, everywhere from threads on Twitter to long magazine articles.

He is powerful for another reason. The 72-year-old is the architect of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's far-right vision. A self-educated philosopher who never completed high school, Olavo has formed a new generation of conservative leaders in Brazil through an online philosophy course he has taught for 10 years. He estimates that about 5,000 students are currently enrolled in his program, and 20,000 people have watched his classes, including members of Bolsonaro's cabinet.

Now, from his ranch-style home in this rural county south of Richmond, he's at the center of an anti-intellectual ideology shaping the policies of a nation of more than 200 million people, providing inspiration for one of the world's most extreme leaders and, in so doing, turning fringe beliefs into government action.

It would be easy to liken him to another, better-known, right-wing ideologue who offered guidance to a surprising presidential winner. Yet Olavo bristles at the comparisons to Steve Bannon, or at least he used to. When I first met Olavo, a year ago, Bolsonaro had been elected but not inaugurated, and Olavo had not yet met Bannon in person. He told me at the time that he didn't take Bannon seriously. Much has changed since then. Two weeks after Bolsonaro's inauguration in January, Bannon met with Olavo at his Petersburg home, and a couple of months later, Olavo was the guest of honor at an event hosted by Bannon at the Trump Hotel in Washington, where the former White House chief strategist introduced him to a select group of about 100 conservative guests. "Olavo is one of the great conservative intellectuals in the world," Bannon has said.

The day after Bannon feted Olavo, it was Bolsonaro's turn. During a visit to Washington—the Brazilian leader's first international trip as a head of state—Bolsonaro hosted a formal dinner at the residence of the Brazilian ambassador. Olavo sat on Bolsonaro's right, Bannon on his left. Bolsonaro said in a speech that he had long dreamed of setting "Brazil free from the nefarious leftist ideology." Then he looked at Olavo and said, "The revolution we are living, we owe in large part to him."

It was not the first time that Bolsonaro had publicly honored Olavo. In his first speech to the nation after his election, the former army captain placed four books on his desk: the Bible, Brazil's constitution, Winston Churchill's Memoirs of the Second World War, and a book by Olavo—The Minimum You Need to Know to Not Be an Idiot. "What I want most is to follow God's teachings alongside the Brazilian constitution," he said. "I also want to be inspired by great leaders, giving good advice."

Bolsonaro met Olavo in person only after his election victory, but their relationship started almost a decade ago, when Olavo's online accounts came to the attention of Bolsonaro's children, who are themselves politicians. In 2012, the Brazilian leader's eldest son, Flavio, who was a representative in Rio de Janeiro's state assembly, traveled to Olavo's house in Virginia to award him the Tiradentes medal, the legislature's highest distinction. Five years later, another son, Eduardo, a national legislative representative, broadcast a video from Olavo's house wearing a T-shirt that read olavo tem razão ("Olavo is right"). Protestors chanted that same slogan in street demonstrations against the federal government before Bolsonaro's election, decrying the corruption scandals that helped propel him to power.

These days, when Olavo speaks, Bolsonaro listens. The president took Olavo's recommendation in appointing as foreign minister a conservative Christian who has called climate change a "Marxist conspiracy." Those running Bolsonaro's "hate cabinet," charged with maintaining a tone of anger on social media and in his public appearances, appear to have taken inspiration from Olavo. A former student in his online philosophy course is now Brazil's minister of education and has set about converting its teachings into government policy: To combat "cultural Marxism," the government has slashed operational funding for federal universities—considered centers of leftist indoctrination—by 30 percent.

Olavo's stated hatred of communism, however, perhaps most strongly informs Bolsonaro's policies within Brazil. It forms the core of both men's beliefs, providing a rationale for "law and order" policies in which the president has facilitated civilian access to guns and encouraged a police crackdown in the favelas; offering a critique against "leftists" who argue human rights are being trampled; and allowing for a defence of Brazil's military dictatorship, interpreted in Olavo's worldview as a "revolution" that saved the country from communism in the 1960s. In his 27 years as a congressman, Bolsonaro frequently spoke out in favor of the dictatorship, saying its biggest mistake was that it stopped at torturing dissidents, rather than simply killing them.

When I quoted some of these public statements to Olavo, he dismissed them. Bolsonaro's remarks, he said simply, were often "full of hyperbole and jokes."

Bolsonaro and members of his cabinet are followers of Olavo's—in August, he was awarded Brazil's highest diplomatic distinction, for "service and merit"—yet his reach actually stretches further, thanks to his online presence.

Olavo first came to the United States in 2005, to work as a Washington correspondent for Diário do Comércio, then a financial print newspaper. He told me that although he was previously in close contact with American politicians and journalists, he soon "lost interest" because "they are a bunch of boring people." He found his calling on the internet.

In 2009, he created his online course to tackle what he had diagnosed as the main problem facing Brazil: the "leftist dominance" of the country's media and universities. He told me that he hoped to build a conservative political class in 30 years. In reality, it took much less time.

In his lessons, he spreads the falsehood that the Nazis were a left-wing party (rhetoric used by Bolsonaro's supporters against their political opponents), teaches his students that disrespecting the enemy is a basic principle required to defeat the left, and often uses sexually charged language to garner attention—in our initial meeting, Olavo described Bolsonaro's election as a "premature ejaculation." He argues that dissidents should be intimidated and, in one video posted by a supporter on YouTube, instructs viewers on how to use personal attacks to intimidate "communists." His followers should, he says, use "all bad words from the Portuguese language" against critics. "It's not about destroying ideas," Olavo continues, "but destroying the careers and the power of people. You have to be direct, and without respect—that's very important."

Our conversation in his home office reflected that strategy. I quoted multiple examples to him of his public support for Brazil's dictatorship: his statements that the regime was "too soft," that its "mildness" allowed "leftist lies" to perpetuate. He dismissed them all and instead shifted focus, saying I was ignoring people that communists "are killing every day" around the world. Then he became angry, accusing me of trying to paint the right as evil. "Don't you have any real thoughts?" he asked me. "Do you just want to seem cute? Is your life only that?"

As our 90-minute interview came to an end, Olavo said he was barring me from publishing any of his quotes—despite the entire conversation's having been on the record (indeed, recorded by us both)—and threatened to expose me on the internet, although he has not yet uploaded the video of our interaction to his YouTube channel.

After a brief pause, his tone suddenly turned solemn: "I wanted you to know that you disgusted my whole family." Then it rose again as he stood up and snapped, "Get out!"

As I left his home and walked back down the narrow road surrounded by pine trees and American flags, past an old Dodge van with a rear-bumper sticker that read commie hunter, and got into my car to go home, I marveled at him—our meeting had been a masterclass in his philosophy and style: hate speech targeting the press, doubt sown about historical facts, and threats to weaponize his online following to cow his critics.

Olavo proudly told me that through his teachings he has created a "genius factory" online. "My influence on Brazil's culture is infinitely bigger than anything the government is doing," he said. "I am changing Brazil's cultural history. Governments go away; the culture stays."

See multimedia components of the reporting at https://thegroundtruthproject.org/democracy-undone-meet-the-founder-of-brazils-far-right-authoritarianism-authoritarians-playbook/

Europe's failure to protect liberty in Viktor Orbán's

By Quentin Aries

The original publication is available via the following link: https://thegroundtruthproject.org/europes-failure-to-protect-liberty-in-viktor-orbans-hungary/

Ludovic Lepeltier-Kutasi contributed to this story.

BUDAPEST — For Attila Babos and Ervin Gűth, simply doing their job has been getting harder and harder. Their news website, Szabad Pécs, has won plaudits for its coverage of local news in southwest Hungary, from stories about a (consensual) relationship between a priest and a male high-school student to a municipality running out of money to pay its bills.

Now Szabad Pécs is feeling the pinch. Advertising revenues never took off, other outlets are replicating their scoops to cannibalize the web traffic (and income) that come with them, and social media is eroding their readership. The pair has to work on nonjournalistic research projects and lead crowdfunding campaigns just to afford their tiny 50-square-foot office.

And things seem likely to only get worse: The Hungarian government, led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, has been finding ever more creative ways to clamp down on the press, and the European Union—ostensibly an advocate of media freedoms—has been unable, or unwilling, to stop it.

For Szabad Pécs, the issue goes beyond not being invited to news conferences for Orbán's Fidesz party, or having access to government officials restricted. The latest challenge comes instead from an organization called the Central European Press and Media Foundation. Better known by its Hungarian acronym, KESMA, it was hastily created last year and is now made up of hundreds of media outlets, most of them pro-Orbán newspapers that have benefited from substantial amounts of government advertising. Thanks to an artful application of EU rules, it has not been subject to antitrust restrictions or regulations designed to guarantee media pluralism.

The establishment of KESMA fits a pattern in Hungary. Orbán has explicitly advocated for "illiberal democracy" and used the tools of government to overhaul or restrict the power of an array of otherwise independent institutions, from the judiciary to opposition parties, NGOs to universities. In some ways, his efforts are not unusual—autocratic leaders the world over have taken similar measures. Yet Orbán has outsize importance, not simply because his country is an EU member

state, but because he has widely been seen as a trendsetter, inspiring politicians elsewhere with both his actions and his rhetoric.

KESMA says on its website that its nonpartisan aim is to "strengthen Hungarian national consciousness" and ensure that young Hungarians "profess national values," but its ties to Orbán are clear: The organization's three-member board is chaired by Miklós Szánthó, the director of the Center for Fundamental Rights, a Budapest-based pro-government think tank; the other two positions are held by the Hungarian leader's one-time personal lawyer, István Bajkai, and a former Fidesz candidate, Zoltan Hegedus.

The foundation either fully owns or controls a majority stake in at least 476 outlets, according to the Budapest-based watchdog Mertek Media Monitor. Almost all of these are staunch defenders of the government's policies, publishing an array of articles with little, if any, factual basis that paint Orbán and his colleagues in a positive light, or which support the Hungarian leader's narrative: Recent stories suggest that the American actor Scarlett Johansson supported the mayor of Budapest, a Fidesz member; that the Hungarian-born billionaire and philanthropist George Soros, a frequent target of Orbán's, was the de facto leader of the EU; and that a large group of migrants from Greece was en route to Hungary. Other pieces promote Orbán-allied politicians abroad, including France's Marine Le Pen and Italy's Matteo Salvini.

KESMA's creation has amplified worries about media consolidation in Hungary, particularly when it comes to outlets supportive of Orbán. Since he returned to power in 2010 (he had an earlier stint as prime minister), Orbán has consistently sought to curtail the media in his country: Hungary has fallen in Reporters Without Borders' press-freedom index each of the past seven years, dropping 31 spots in that time to 87th overall.

These outlets are not only more in keeping with the government's rhetoric but also dependent on its purchasing power: Since 2010, the Hungarian government has spent more than $300 million on advertising campaigns to promote its policies, according to the investigative website Atlatszo. Along with attempting to sway public opinion, those funds help pro-government outlets survive—Ágnes Urbán, a Mertek economist, told me that the majority of KESMA organizations would not be financially sustainable without the state's advertising. In a report commissioned by the European Parliament's Green group, Mertek found that more than half of KESMA-owned outlets' advertising revenues came from the Hungarian government. (This use of advertising budgets has another pernicious effect, Babos and Gűth of Szabad Pécs argue: Private businesses are reluctant to advertise in non-KESMA outlets, fearing government retaliation, such as preclusion from lucrative contracts.) Mertek says that these funds constitute a form of state subsidy that is illegal under EU law.

Hungary insists KESMA's creation did not violate any such rules, nor create any conflicts of interest, despite the relationships between Orbán and members of the foundation's board. Zoltán Kovács, the Hungarian government's spokesman for international affairs, told me KESMA amounted to "critical infrastructure," and aligned with a government priority that Hungarian newspapers be owned by Hungarian nationals. When it created KESMA, the government announced that it was in the national strategic interest, and thus not subject to EU rules or further scrutiny.

Not everyone is convinced by that argument. Hungarian civil-liberties organizations and independent media outlets, including Szabad Pécs, challenged KESMA's establishment in court and in April, a Budapest court ruled that Hungary's competition authority should have reviewed the foundation's formation. The competition authority has appealed the decision and the case is ongoing. The competition authority declined to comment. Szánthó, the chair of KESMA's board, also declined to comment for this story, or to provide details on the strategy, goals, or financial details of the foundation.

Further distressing press-freedom advocates is the EU's own reluctance to crack down on Orbán—to go beyond critical rhetoric and to police its stated values. When KESMA was created, Frans Timmermans, the EU official then responsible for promoting the rule of law, represented it as a "worrying development" and in February, the European Commission, the bloc's executive arm, described the group in a memo as "controlled by the government." (The document was included in a cache of memos and reports released to me as part of a freedom-of-information request to the commission that has only partly been fulfilled. I have appealed, in particular, to receive full copies of otherwise redacted documents.) A separate report for the commission compiled by the Center for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, a research institute based in Florence, Italy, argued that KESMA has "exacerbated" risks to media pluralism in Hungary. One of the report's authors, Elda Brogi, told me that KESMA's outlets risked being seen as "puppets of political parties."

Yet beyond raising concerns and assessing the risks, the commission—which has significant powers within the EU to investigate mergers, illegal subsidies, and monopolistic behavior—has declined to officially probe whether KESMA complies with EU law. "On the basis of the available information, the creation of KESMA itself … falls outside the commission's jurisdiction under the EU media regulation," one memo, drafted by the commission's competition officials and released to me, said. The commission declined to provide further documents that outlined its internal assessments of KESMA—or of whether Hungarian-government advertising could be considered an illegal subsidy—arguing in a letter that publishing such documents would undermine "the future procedural steps the commission may consider, as well as its investigative strategy."

This inaction regarding Hungary's democratic backsliding is mirrored by other European institutions. Within the European Parliament, Fidesz is part of the right-of-center European People's Party, which also includes German Chancellor Angela Merkel's party, as well as the parties of the Irish leader Leo Varadker and both the current and

former presidents of the commission. In recent years, though, the EPP had done little more than offer moderate criticism of Fidesz, before finally suspending the party from the group in March. The only real pressure against Hungary has come in the form of what are known as Article 7 procedures, under which the EU scrutinizes the rule of law in a member state. Members of the European Parliament voted in September 2018 to undertake such efforts (KESMA had not yet been officially created at the time, though MEPs included press freedoms in their list of concerns).

"By joining the European Union, Hungary accepted the fundamental values of the union—and, of course, freedom of the press belongs to these fundamental rights," Sven Giegold, a German MEP belonging to the Green Party, told me. "Viktor Orbán is systematic in dismantling the plurality of the media."

If 22 of the EU's 27 other member states agree there is "a clear risk of a serious breach," then Budapest could be stripped of its voting rights in the Council of the European Union—the main body where EU leaders meet for discussions—and sanctions will be brought against the 21 Hungarian MEPs. A similar move was triggered against Poland in December 2017.

But European countries have dragged their feet with Hungary's Article 7 investigation, reluctant to question a fellow member state over an issue—media policy and regulation—that many European governments believe is a national matter. Were they to carry out an aggressive inquiry, that could set a precedent for investigations into their own domestic issues, many worry. Thus far, only two (closed-door) hearings have been held about the issue. In the first, according to minutes of the meeting, Swedish representatives did question their Hungarian counterparts over KESMA and other press-freedom issues. At the second, on December 10, German and Danish officials raised their own concerns, according to three diplomats who asked not to be identified so they could discuss private sessions. Both times, Hungary rebuffed any questions.

A small but growing number of voices—including the Green bloc in the European Parliament, and NGOs such as Reporters Without Borders—are calling for greater EU-wide efforts to restrict media consolidation, and to promote transparency in the ownership of media outlets, but it is unclear if these will gain any traction. Thus far, the commission has limited itself largely to providing funding for investigative journalism, promoting media literacy, and helping build regional networks among journalists.

In the case of Hungary, it appears that KESMA will endure, to the chagrin of journalists like Babos and Gűth. "Viktor Orbán wants to preserve a tiny version of a democracy," Babos told me. "People protest, and some newspapers can still write bad things about the prime minister, so it allows Orbán to say, 'See? There is no threat to democracy.'" Yet the truth, he lamented, is that "there is no more press freedom in Hungary."

See multimedia components at https://thegroundtruthproject.org/democracy-undone-meet-the-founder-of-brazils-far-right-authoritarianism-authoritarians-playbook/

The slow death of Colombia's peace movement

By Juan Arredondo

The original publication is available via the following link: https://thegroundtruthproject.org/democracy-undone-the-slow-death-of-colombias-peace-movement/

Not everyone has a vote in the world's largest democracy

By Soumya Shankar

The original publication is available via the following link: https://thegroundtruthproject.org/not-everyone-has-a-vote-in-the-worlds-largest-democracy/

How Trump sells his war on truth

By Tracy Jarret

The original publication is available via the following link: https://thegroundtruthproject.org/democracy-undone-how-trump-sells-his-war-on-truth-authoritarianism-authoritarian-authoritarians-playbook/

Find more stories at https://thegroundtruthproject.org/democracy-undone-signs-of-authoritarianism/

SHORTLISTED STORY

Cameroon's Anglophone Crisis, an Unravelling Catastrophe

Laura-Angela Bagnetto (France)

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By Laura-Angela Bagnetto

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The day the military came to Bella's village in Talingai, in the South-West Anglophone region of Cameroon, the villagers, terrified, escaped into the bush behind the village, where they set up a camp. Speaking to RFI in Mamfe, smartly dressed in a bright blue dress, it is only when she begins her story that her whole body heaves, her shoulders hunch up. She distinctly remembers what happened this time last year, that changed her life forever.

Bella was nursing her second child and sneaked back during the day to pick up some supplies from the house. She spent the night at home after it got too dark to leave. When she returned to the bush, her pregnant sister-in-law and four young children were nowhere to be found. She searched for them for four days.

According to Anglophones RFI spoke to for this article, people are scared, threatened and some have been tortured by the Cameroonian military and rebels, their homes burnt down by men in uniform or had friends and family killed in the fighting between security forces and Anglophone separatists.

The UN sounded the alarm in February, when they confirmed through sources on the ground that armed men carried out the extra judicial killings of at least 21 people in Ngarbuh, the North-West region of Cameroon, including a pregnant woman and seven children, in addition to other reports of military action against civilians in that area.

French President Emmanuel Macron acknowledged the "deteriorating situation" in the Anglophone regions days after the attack, and came through on his promise on Sunday to call his Cameroonian counterpart Paul Biya to apply "maximum pressure", calling the violence "intolerable."

Both Macron and Biya "agreed an impartial probe was needed in reaction to the violence committed against civilians in the village of Ngarbuh in the North-West province," according to the statement released by the French presidency.

Human Rights Watch has since accused the Cameroonian military of carrying out the killings in Ngarbuh, with the help of Fulani fighters.

Cameroon's Defence Ministry initially said on 17 February the government would open an investigation into the killings. It published a second statement later the same day that fighting against "armed terrorists" who attacked government and security forces led to the explosion of fuel containers, resulting in the deaths and burnt homes. Communication Minister René Emmanuel Sadi reiterated that statement the next day.

An assessment carried out by the UN in September 2019 shows more than 700,000 people have been forced to flee their homes in the two Anglophone regions of Cameroon, a number considered to be a significant underestimate as access to the area has been difficult.

Violence began in 2017 in both the North-West and South-West regions in the aftermath of peaceful protests by Anglophone teachers and lawyers who took to the streets to demonstrate against alleged discrimination and unfair working practices enforced by the Francophone central government.

The ensuing government crackdown since then provoked the creation of an armed separatist movement and self-declaration of independence for so-called Ambazonia. The separatists are fighting for Anglophone secession.

The crisis in the Anglophone regions has swelled into an all-out civil war fought by the Ambazonians, colloquially called Amba Boys or Ambas, made up of a number of different armed groups. The Anglophone rebels are fighting the Cameroonian military, specifically the Rapid Intervention Battalion (BIR), the elite fighting unit accused of human rights abuses in the far north of the country.

Changing Strategy and Intimidation

The Cameroonian military's tactics of targeting the Ambas have evolved during the crisis and recently soldiers have attempted to change their approach with the local population, according to Anthony, a resident of Sand Pit, a neighborhood in Buea.

He recounted how two weeks ago, the military travelled in a yellow taxi into Sand Pit in full uniform with weapons. He guessed that they were trying to trick the population. They caught five people and started beating them with cutlasses, he says. Those people now have wounds on their backs.

"Then they put the Pa on the ground," he says, using a respectful term for an older male member of the community, "and they put the gun next to the ear of the Pa, and they shoot the gun right next to him," he says.

The older man has been plagued with hearing problems ever since, says Anthony, who was displaced by the fighting three months ago. He shakes his head as he speaks of how the military intimidated the Pa and others in the community.

The story Gabriella, 32, tells is an example of how the killings in her family cross both sides of the conflict. Speaking in Mamfe town, she had not told her story to anyone outside her family before, in part, she says, because everyone else around her is suffering, but also because she trusts no one.

The military came to Mbeme village two years ago, hunting Amba Boy separatists who operate in the area. Spraying bullets among the dried mud houses in the village, one stray bullet killed Gabriella's husband. Two weeks later, her 15-year-old son, the eldest of seven, was gunned down in the barber shop in the village, a victim of being young, Anglophone, and male.

Her father, a village elder, had questioned why the Amba Boys were shutting down public schools, and pushed for the children of the village to go back to school.

The separatists have blocked the opening of some 4,500 schools across the region for more than three years to protest what they call educational discrimination against Anglophones. To date, this boycott enforced by the gun has affected 600,000 schoolchildren.

A week after his grandson died, the Amba Boys came knocking on his door at night.

"They shot him. It was a premeditated act," said Gabriella, the tone of her voice rising as she confirmed she had lost three male members of her family in the span of a month. She has been bottling up this story and only now feels ready to share the description of the atrocities committed in her village by both soldiers and separatists.

Both Sides Committing Violence Against Civilians

Human rights abuses are being perpetrated by both sides, confirms Ilaria Allegrozzi, senior researcher on Central Africa for Human Rights Watch. She has documented abuses, deaths, and violent acts since the crisis began in late 2016.

"It's important to acknowledge that human rights violations have been committed by the security forces but at the same time, the separatists are not angels and have also targeted civilians," she says.

"The gravity, the scale of the abuses that we have documented coming from the security forces are more significant than the abuse that is perpetrated by the armed separatists," the HRW researcher adds. The abuses are frequently just the start of the nightmare for Anglophones living through the conflict, where their only option is to escape the patrols of soldiers and separatists through their village.

Gabriella says she, her six children and the whole village fled into the bush. Her two cousins died in the jungle, where malaria, lack of shelter, no sanitation, and the absence of running water makes survival difficult.

She brought her remaining family to Mamfe town because she said she could not subject them to the harsh reality in the jungle. In town, she is alone with her children, and she has no relatives to help. She volunteers her cleaning services in the hope that she can beg for some rice for her children.

"I'm finished, I have no talk," she says in Pidgin English. "Since the crisis, look at me," motioning at her bedraggled dress. "I'm tired. I don't have anything to feed the children." Neither she nor her children have eaten for several days.

RFI spoke to more than 30 internally displaced Anglophones in and around Buea, Kumba, and Mamfe in the South-West Anglophone region of Cameroon.

People spoke primarily of military harassment, from looting and burning homes to shooting civilians, either targeting people or shooting in the air, which has killed a number via stray bullets. They spoke of security forces targeting villages where many lived as subsistence farmers or worked on plantations for the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC), a parastatal company that was the country's second-largest employer.

Residents in the South-West region say the Cameroonian security forces will torch a home if they see a young man fleeing in the vicinity. Young men are targeted typically because the separatists recruit young Anglophone men to fight against the military.

After constant harassment and killings by soldiers, Pierre, a 38-year-old from Ekona village, had enough. He says he has been targeted by the military because he is a man, and an Anglophone.

"They killed my elder brother first. Then my second brother. Then they killed my uncle," he says from Buea, the regional capital of South-West Cameroon.

"I can't stay there after they killed them -- I'll be next," he says, nervously wringing his hands. Pierre found it difficult to recall the killing of his family members.

Grace, 38, paid the price after one of her male neighbours ran off into the bush where she lived. She was by herself in her home in Maumu village in September 2018 when the military came knocking, demanding to know where her neighbor had gone.

"The military man went and stood at my door. He called me, and then he shot me in both legs," she says, describing how one of the soldiers escalated the situation without warning.

After neighbours came out of the bush to smuggle her to the hospital, the military searched the local health facilities, looking for her. Hospital staff hid her in a closet.

Grace, crying, says she is afraid they will find her again. She spoke to RFI on the condition that her real name and location would not be revealed. She owes hospital bills of nearly 1,400 euros (900,000 Central African CFA Francs), and is unable to walk. Her left leg is bandaged because she has an open wound from the gunshot that has still not healed, a year and a half after the shooting.

Grace was shot by the military over a year ago, and she still cannot walk. The bullet wound on her right leg has not healed.

"Civilians have been caught in the middle, and have paid the highest price in this crisis," says HRW's Allegrozzi. "People have been displaced, have lost their families, are living in the bush and are in need of humanitarian assistance. And this crisis has yet to be addressed."

A Population Terrified

Anglophones feel that the military is given free rein to do whatever they want.

Meanwhile, those villagers whose houses are still standing maintain they are too scared to sleep in their own homes and prefer to sleep in the bush. They return home occasionally to harvest their crops so they can eat. Those who have migrated to towns also venture back to their homes, but only during the daytime, in order to gather more food to eat and sell.

Bella, the young mother who could not find her five relatives, says she was determined to find out where they were. She puts her hands in her lap, her chewed nails betraying her anguish as she tells her story with little emotion.

"I went to town to report them missing, and to see if they were arrested," says Bella. The military maintained they had not detained her family members, and she would find them in the bush. They even asked her to call them with an update.

While Bella mustered up the courage to speak to the military, most Anglophones RFI met are afraid -- afraid of being shot, or disappeared, or afraid that the military will burn their house down, as they did to their neighbours.

Three years into the horror of losing family members, losing jobs, and losing sleep, many Anglophones, who perhaps were initially on the side of their separatist brethren, now distance themselves from the Ambas, both physically and philosophically. Leigh, 66, said she is afraid of both sides.

"Both are dangerous. Yes, I mean the Amba Boys. If you don't give them money, you will be beaten. They can kill you," she says.

Before her community relocated to the bush, she said that the Ambas would sometimes warn them with a whistle when the military were coming so that they could run.

"Now they don't give any sound. Now they are against us, the military are against us, we are the ones suffering. When the army starts shooting they don't ask who is who, they just shoot," she says with a sigh, after rapidly recounting her story.

Fear Among Civil Society Groups, Too

Local non-governmental and international organisations are trying to provide aid to the most vulnerable members of the Anglophone population, however

the level of fear is reflected amongst the humanitarian workers too. A number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were afraid to go on the record regarding the difficulties they have in maneuvering through the terrain, and in dealing with the government.

Local aid group Authentique Memorial Educational Foundation (AMEF) was at the forefront when the fighting broke out between the military and the Amba Boys in Kumba town, where they operate. The difficulty lies in both the separatists and the government believing that aid organizations are helping the other side.

“There is that fear you’re being branded a spy,” says Atim Taniform, AMEF humanitarian affairs and operations manager in Kumba, saying that NGOs are working in a fog of uncertainty.

“We are afraid that the [government] administration thinks that we are bringing assistance to non-state actors [separatists] instead of the community. At the same time, the non-state actors feel we are taking assistance from the administration and bringing it to ‘their’ community,” she says, referring to how the Ambas refer to Anglophones. Taniform chooses her words carefully when referring to the parties of the conflict.

Both sides do not understand humanitarian principles and how they are applied in real terms, according to Christian Tanyi, head of the Martin Luther King Jr. Foundation (LUKMEF), a human rights organization that operates out of Buea.

“When you look at humanitarian principles, the principle of neutrality doesn’t mean we shouldn’t talk to people. We talk to all parties in the conflict, trying to explain exactly who we are, what we do and how we do it,” says Tanyi, who says he has tried to explain the rules of engagement to both sides.

“The humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate mainly due to multiple displacements as a result of attacks against civilians,” says James Nunan, UN Office of Humanitarian Affairs regional head in Buea, South-West region, Cameroon.

The bottom line, says Tanyi, is the military and the separatists are not respecting international humanitarian law, as humanitarians and vehicles with humanitarian aid have been attacked by both the military and the separatists.

“All these attacks signify that there is still a very long way to go,” he adds.

As of press time, the Cameroonian military had not responded to a request for comment.

‘We Are Suffering, and We Just Want It to End’

The majority of Anglophones still believe the government could stop this with one phone call from President Paul Biya, as well as pulling the military out of the region, including the 1300 troops and police brought in for February’s elections.

On February 11, Cameroon’s Youth Day, Biya spoke in French dubbed into English, calling for young Anglophones to come out of the bush, a move opposition Senator George Kinyang said was inadequate.

“Who’s going to employ them, willing them to come out of the bush when their houses are being burnt down in the northern South-West region,” said Kinyang from his home in Douala. He says he cannot return to his constituency because of the fighting.

“How do you call people to come out when they’re not sure of their security, when they are not sure of their livelihood, when they have no assurance that their human rights will be respected,” he adds, saying that the only way to end the conflict is a ceasefire, a move that would be welcomed by those who have already suffered enough.

A worried Bella, still looking for her missing family, left the military headquarters in her area and rushed back to the bush camp, where she found a shallow grave. Other members of the community helped her dig it up, where she discovered the bodies of her four young nephews and pregnant sister-in-law.

She called the military, telling them she found the lifeless bodies of her family.

“The military told me they were there to shoot Amba Boys,” she says, recalling the conversation, her voice cracking. “And when they saw they killed civilians, they tried to bury them.”

She said the soldiers apologized to her.

“They gave me 2,000CFA (3 euros) phone credit” to compensate for her losses, she says, laughing bitterly, before her laughs turn to sobs. Her reaction borders on hysteria – such a meagre compensation in phone credit for the killing of her family is unfathomable.

“People have lost their lives and [others] are dying,” says Bella, through a veil of tears. “I want everything to be over.”

Names have been changed for the safety and security of those featured in this report.

Women Bear the Brunt of Violence in Cameroon’s Anglophone Crisis

By Laura-Angela Bagnetto

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SHORTLISTED STORY

“Come When Murdered” The NV Survey on Domestic Violence

Oleksandra Horchynska (Ukraine)

Oleksandra Horchynska is a journalist from Kyiv, Ukraine.

She graduated from the Institute of Journalism at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv in 2013, specialising in Publishing and editing.

Oleksandra started her career as a journalist on the newsfeed but later reoriented to the work with big formats of texts. She worked as a journalist with different Ukrainian media such as Ukrainska Pravda, Gazeta.ua, Charitum, Update, Weekend, Detector Media and other.

Now Oleksandra works as a journalist-reporter in online media called NV. Its website nv.ua has two language versions — Ukrainian and Russian. It also has a print version — the magazine Novoye Vremya (New Time in English) and the radio NV.

In her work, Oleksandra focuses on social issues, like storytelling as a good method to present the big story to her audience. She creates big formats: articles, interviews, reports. She specialises in social issues, such as healthcare, medicine, people who live with HIV, drug users, cancer and so on, also — human rights, home violence prevention, LGBT+ etc. She is interested in solutions journalism and science journalism, which is not so developed in Ukraine as a separate type of professional journalism.

She is a Member of the Independent Media Union of Ukraine, nmpu.org.ua (since 2013). Journalist of the Month on IJNet - November 2019.

“Come When Murdered” The NV Survey on Domestic Violence

By Oleksandra Horchynska
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English translation

NV (Novoe Vremya magazine (New Time), together with online education studio EdEra, conducted an anonymous survey aimed at finding out what Ukrainians know about domestic violence, whether they can distinguish between its types and what they do if they witness such situations.

67% of women aged 15 years and older have experienced psychological, physical or sexual abuse by a partner or another person. 47% of women call themselves ignorant or do not know what to do in such situations. These data are cited by the OSCE in its study on the well-being and safety of women. It was held in 2018 in eight southeastern and eastern European countries, including Ukraine.

About one in four women accuses the victims, not the offenders, of commiting violence. According to such women, it is most likely that the victims themselves provoke violent acts against themselves.

HV, together with online education studio EdEra, launched an anonymous survey to find out what Ukrainians know about domestic violence today.

Two thousand 500 respondents passed the polls, of which 87.7% were women, 12.2% were men, and 0.1% identified their gender as Other. 15.2% of respondents are aged 21–25 years old, 17.6% are 26–30 years old, 17.4% are 31–35 years old, 12.7% are people aged 36–40 years. Other age categories make up less than 10%.

We asked our respondents whether they had witnessed domestic violence or committed it themselves, whether they knew of cases where the victims were children and the elderly, and whether the victims were aware of themselves as victims.

Violence and Its Types

According to the WHO definition, violence is a deliberate use of physical force or power, actual or in the form of a threat, directed against oneself, against another person, group of people or the community, resulting in bodily harm, death,

psychological trauma, developmental disabilities or various kinds damage, or a high probability of occurrence of the listed consequences.

Violence can include acts committed against a person or group of persons without prior consent. There are four types of violence: physical, sexual, psychological and economic.

We asked our respondents if they knew about this. 88.5% of NV respondents said they knew about all four types of violence. And only 8.2% thought that violence was when they were only raped or beaten.

“From my own experience, I can say that today most people already actually single out several types of violence. At the very least, physical and psychological abuse is accurately identified. It’s a little more difficult with the economic and sexual,” Oksana Stepanyuk, a psychologist, comments on NV.

In the case of sexual violence, for example, the well-known attitude about “conjugal duty” plays a significant role. Like, if you are married, you must satisfy the need of your partner or partner in sex at any time, even if you do not want it yourself.

19% of women surveyed in the OSCE’s ‘Well-being and Safety of a Woman survey’ responded: having sex with a woman without her consent is considered justified if this happens in a marriage or between partners living together.

At the same time, to the question of NV: “Do you think that your partner / partner should satisfy your need for regular sex?” only 7.1% of respondents said they fully agree with this opinion. 39.6% - do not agree, 27.1% partially agree, 26.2% noted that it is difficult for them to answer this question.

A step forward in terms of a better understanding of this problem is the new law on combating domestic violence, which entered into force on January 11, 2019, said Oksana Stepanyuk. If earlier it was considered consent to sex, if the person did not say “no”, now - only if a clear “yes” was voiced.

According to UN Women, one in four Ukrainian women aged 15–49 years has suffered from sexual or physical violence at least once in their life. Indeed, women are olen the victims, said Stepanyuk.

However, we should not omit the option in which men also suffer from violence. In addition, it’s psychologically more difficult for a man to admit that a woman is beating him, the psychologist adds:

- If we are talking about sexual violence, then, of course, it is more difficult for a woman to do this in relation to her husband. However, in reality, other men often commit sexual violence against men - do not be silent about this.

Zoya Melnik, a former Odessa patrol police officer who specialized in domestic violence challenges in particular, agrees with her. Olen, one person may suffer from the violent actions of another - for example, a father from the actions of an adult son, or a teenage son or step son from the actions of his father or stepfather.

A very small percentage of these men decide to contact the police with this problem, says Melnik. She gives an example:

“Over the four years of my work there have been such cases - you can count on the fingers. For example, once we arrived at a call where the injured person was a man who was beaten by his partner. The woman was drunk, had an alcohol dependence. This man, even though he himself was a victim, did not want to write a statement about his offender, he even felt sorry for her because she had problems with alcohol”.

What Is Domestic Violence?

According to the online education studio EdEra, more than 1 million people in Ukraine annually suffer from various forms of domestic violence. 97% of NV respondents noted that, in their opinion, there really is a problem with domestic violence in Ukraine, 2.7% chose the “Difficult to answer” option, and only 0.3% - that there is no such problem.

For example, 38.6% of respondents in a question with a multivariate index indicated that their parents or older relatives committed violence against them, 7.5% said that they were being abused by their folks. In the field where it was possible to give a short detailed answer, the respondents wrote that they faced bullying, bea1ng, psychological pressure, aggression from relatives, control of actions and expenses and the like.

“A person, so to say, behaves like an animal - the one who is weaker suffers, and the one who is stronger beats. Women can beat older people, children, but men can beat women, children, etc.” says Zoya Melnik.

On the issue of economic violence, 5.6% of respondents said that they committed violent acts of this nature, for example, controlling the expenses of a partner or partner, but then they realized that it was bad, another 6.6% did it, but did not consider it violence.

“This is a very twofold situation. Often situations occur in the family when, for example, a husband earns money, whose duties include maintaining the family. But when he brings this money home, the wife takes the whole amount and decides how to dispose of it. In my opinion, if in this case the husband will be interested in the woman where she spent the money, this curiosity can be fully justified. After all, he earned this money, so he has the right to know what they are going to,” Oksana Stepanyuk suggests.

However, here it is necessary to clearly understand where the border passes, and not to cross it. Enhanced control, coercion to report for every penny spent, coercion to

show online extracts from Privat24, where there is a detailed list of all transfers and expenses - this is economic violence that does not need to be justified.

We also asked respondents if they believed that domestic violence could be justified. 52.8% said that violence can never be jus1fied, 43.1% - only if it is self-defense or a response to other violent acts, only 3.9% said that domestic violence can be justified, but in certain cases . Only 0.3% believe that domestic violence is always justified.

Stereotypes Of Domestic Violence

Stereotypes, attitudes and norms of behavior, which for one reason or another are considered socially "acceptable" or, conversely, "unacceptable," olen affect how people perceive conflicts within the family. One of the most common stereotypes: it's a shame to be a victim of domestic violence, says Oksana Stepanyuk. Moreover, it can be embarrassing for several reasons:

"For example, it's a shame that things came to this – the victims can really consider themselves guilty of what is happening. Or it's a shame for your choice - that the person chose this particular partner or partner. Often, public condemnation influences the formation of feelings of shame, when others blame the injured person, they say, you yourself or you chose this, so why now you complain," says Stepanyuk.

As for the respondents to NV, 12.9% think that being a victim of domestic violence is a shame, another 18.1% chose the option "Difficult to answer". The majority, and this is 69%, do not think that being in this position is embarrassing.

However, these indicators will differ depending on which region or area in question. For example, in rural areas, many women are still convinced that it is better to live with "whatever" but a husband, than generally without him. Even if this husband drinks, beats and deceives, says Stepanyuk. This often happens because rural women, in principle, have no wide choice - there are not many options within the village.

Other popular stereotypes about domestic violence - as if serious, regular conflicts can only happen in dysfunctional families. For example, those where one of the partners is abusing alcohol or drugs. Indeed, alcohol or drugs can be an additional factor that catalyzes outbreaks of domestic violence.

However, it often happens and vice versa: in a completely happy and prosperous, at first glance, family, there may be constant quarrels and beatings. Olen in such families in public, the offender plays the role of a perfect, caring family man, but when he crosses the threshold of his own house, removes this mask. Such people are called toxic - such types of people as narcissists, psychopaths, sociopaths belong to this category.

"The characteristic features of toxic people are observa1on, as well as their ability to play different roles. They put their own needs first, emotionally empty, not able to empathize. These people usually have the main task - to remove someone else's resource. They used to be called emotional vampires," says the psychologist.

8.5% of the respondents to NV believe that if a person who has committed violence asks for forgiveness, he should be forgiven, 37.2% - that it's not worth forgiving. The majority - 54.3% - were at a loss to give a definite answer and chose the option "Difficult to answer".

67.8% of respondents are sure: if a person has committed domestic violence once, he will commit it again and again. 27.7% - do not have a clear answer, only 4.5% answered that the offender, having committed such actions once, would not repeat them again.

Domestic Violence

Oksana Stepanyuk recalls another popular stereotype in society - about the female and male roles. If a person has several girlfriends and a wife at once, he will most likely be perceived as a "macho" - a strong, dexterous man who is able to give his attention to several females at once.

If a woman has several lovers, her behavior is more likely to be dubbed frivolous, compared to a prostitute. That is why adultery is perceived differently.

2.8% of NV respondents believe that a woman has the right to hit a partner for treason, only 0.6% - that a man has the right to hit a woman for treason, 5.1% - that everyone has the right to hit a partner or partner for treason. 92.9% are sure that no one has the right to beat a partner or a partner for treason.

In answers to the question: "Among those situa1ons, mark those that have happened in your life", more percent have the following options: 27.1% - olen cri1cizes me, 20.1% - unreasonably yells at me, 16.7% - unreasonably accuses me of an affair on the side; 11.5% - checks where I was / was and does not believe what I tell.

Usually, people criticize others for two reasons, explains Oksana Stepanyuk. First, they hate what they criticize the other, in themselves. For example, they criticize a person who is late, although they are constantly late, but cannot eradicate this habit in themselves.

The second reason - they criticize another person for the fact that he allows himself something that we ourselves cannot afford for one reason or another. This can be internal attitudes, and upbringing, fear of condemnation, and the like.

"Let's say I will criticize another woman for ea1ng ice cream herself without it to her own child. In fact, the problem is that I have long dreamed of doing the same - to enjoy ice cream myself, without sharing it with anyone," the interlocutor gives an example.

NV respondents left dozens of anonymous stories on the topic of domestic violence in pairs in the questionnaire. Here is one of them:

"For a long 13 years I lived with a partner who despised me, devalued me, insulted me, and did not consider me a full-fledged partner. He perceived me exclusively as

a “function” of the family’s life support - him and his three children. He expressed constant complaints: “You don’t have sex”, “You don’t want sex with me”, “Untidy!”, “You do not tell me where you are and what you are doing”, “Do you think you have achieved something? You are wrong!”, “You do not treat me like you should”. All the time I was in manipulations on his part - give me your housing, your body, your brain, your ideas, your energy. And nothing to myself. All I could do is curse in return.

Until I turned to a specialist, a psychologist, for help, I was sure that something was wrong with me. Being under constant tension, she was frustrated by children: a”acked them, scolded, beat, humiliated. I suffered a lot from this. When I worked with a psychologist, I realized that I was in a situation of domestic violence, both as a victim and as a tyrant. Therefore filed for divorce. A lawsuit is underway, during which my husband continues to tell lies about me. “

Domestic Violence as an Experience from Childhood

Olen the person who commits the violence himself has had a similar traumatic experience in the past, said Oksana Stepanyuk. For example, was a victim or witness of violence in childhood. And therefore, that experience unconsciously transfers the pattern of interaction with people to others already in its behavior: parents did this, so I will do it.

43.4% of respondents said that in childhood they saw parents sometimes shouting at each other, another 40.2% - that parents often shouted at each other. Many responded that they remember how parents beat each other, or how parents shouted at them, committed violent acts of a different nature.

“In fact, not all adults know what to do if they experience domestic violence. What to speak about children? Children very rarely go to the police with complaints of domestic violence by their parents”, explains Zoya Melnik.

Children suffering from domestic violence in the family olen hesitate to ask other adults for help, in par1cular in specialized institutions. They olen run away from home to save themselves - to the street or to friends. Society olen condemns children running away from home without even understanding the reasons, Melnik adds.

She says she repeatedly wrote about such stories on her Facebook. In the comments, people discussed the appearance of the girls who ran away from home, and their “not childish” lifestyle and behavior, instead of analyzing the real problem - cruelty, aggression, and a lack of understanding of the house.

“They rarely run away from good conditions,” adds the former police officer.

There is another side to the coin – state boarding schools and orphanages for children, the conditions in which are sometimes even worse than in the house from which such a child escaped. This psychological pressure and humiliation from boarding school teachers, poor food, old worn clothes, coercion to give personal things, such as a telephone, and the like.

While children are temporarily removed from families where they are bullied, parents usually spend a minimum of work - a fine that most do not pay, short conversations, and if there are no additional aggravating circumstances and reasons for depriving parents of their rights, aler some time is simply returned to the family of children.

What happens? What in such situations is actually punishing children, not parents. After all, children, although they are victims, are forced to suffer additionally,” says Zoya Melnik.

Domestic Violence Between Other Family Members

Olen the victims of domestic violence are completely or partially incompetent people, people with mental disabilities, etc. - that is, those who cannot stand up for themselves and are much weaker than their offenders both physically and psychologically.

The NV survey shows: 19.6% of respondents are unaware that very often elderly people suffer from domestic violence. 41.9% know about such cases only from news or TV shows, 14.9% of respondents had such cases in their family, another 23.6% heard about this from the experience of acquaintances.

“Indeed, older people often suffer from domestic violence. Moreover, yes, often the reason for this is precisely the division of property. This happens, for example, when people live for ten people in a three- room apartment, everyone wants personal space, but there is no possibility to part, so as soon as it becomes possible to apply for some kind of housing from, say, an older relative, sometimes violent methods may turn on”, - Oksana Stepanyuk comments on this issue.

For people with disabilities, the situation is more complicated. Not all people with disabilities can simply go to a social center or the police and admit that they suffer from domestic violence, says Stepanyuk.

Not everyone can even call somewhere and ask for help. It is especially difficult when it comes to mental features, when a person with a disability is simply not able to tell anything.

If such cases become known, the expert says, it is most likely due to a third party - neighbors, relatives who learned about the violence and decided to report it to the police.

Reaction to Violence

Today, under article 115 of the Criminal Code, Deliberate murder in Ukraine is serving 526 women. About 8 out of 10 women who ended up in jail under this article, committed self-defense: they killed their husband or partner, who regularly

offended themselves or their children, says Oksana Stepanyuk.

One of the most striking illustrations for this problem is the case of the Khachaturian sisters, which received wide publicity in the world media. In July 2018, in Moscow, three Khachaturian sisters, aged 17, 18 and 19 years old, killed their own father, Mikhail Khachaturian. Subsequently, it was said that the father regularly offended them, regularly committed violent acts against them.

The popular saying that "you don't have to take dirty linen out of the house" has shaped another common stereotype - that violence is an exclusively internal family affair, in which no one has the right to interfere.

When asked whether a third party can intervene in the situation of domestic violence, 43.2% of respondents said yes, only if this third party is specialists, for example, psychotherapists, social workers, etc. 29.9% say that anyone can intervene. Only 4.3% - that only close friends or relatives can intervene.

"She saved her friend after her husband beat her in front of their young child. In particular, she called the police, took her to the hospital for examination, and then to remove the beatings. After that, I had to fight in the regional police department, because in the call center the policeman was scornful when we brought in documents from the medical examiner. They said that if he kills, then come."

In the end, after all efforts, they apologized, they accepted the statement, they called her husband for an explanation. This whole story ended with that tyrant man paying for the trip to his battered wife, so she took the claim from the police department. Honestly, I was desperate because he had not miraculously killed her then. At that moment, I thought, I frankly admit, let them sort it out later on," we find such an anonymous story among the answers in the questionnaire from NV.

The Carpman Triangle [by the name of the American psychotherapist Stephen Carpman], or the dramatic triangle is a psychosocial behavior model according to which there are three characters: the victim, the persecutor, and the savior. The Carpman Triangle is the most common model of relationships between people. Each role has its own characteristics.

For example, a person in a state of sacrifice constantly experiences suffering, is afraid of life, always expects something bad, feels shame and guilt for his own actions. His condition is vulnerable. And if the Victim displaces aggression, but demonstrates vulnerability, the Aggressor, on the contrary, displaces his own vulnerability. He is angry, in a state of tension, constantly trying to control everything. The Savior is a third person, "trying to help." May feel anger towards the offender and pity towards the victim.

Participants in the Carpman triangle can constantly change roles.

And if at first it may seem that the role of the Savior is a noble position, where the mission is to save the Victim, in fact, it is not so, warns Oksana Stepanyuk. Often, the Savior acts as a "vest for a lament": the Victim comes to the Savior at a crisis time, asks for help, complains and complains about the situation. But when the tense moment passes, the Victim still returns to his abuser.

If the Savior chooses this role for himself, as a result, he can, on the contrary, be made guilty - be ridiculed or cri1cized for having interfered into someone else's problem, where "he doesn't understand anything". One of the respondents lel this story in anonymous form - in response to an open question in the questionnaire from the NV:

"In my youth, my mother intervened between the spouses (the husband beat his wife at home). On the second day, the couple reconciled, and their mother was accused of quarreling and fighting. Therefore, I think that it is better not to get into quarrels and fights between spouses."

"I noticed such a thing: if it is a quarrel or a fight on the street, in which adults appear, then people who have witnessed quite often turn to the police. But if parents insult or beat a child, this is rarely reported, "- says Zoya Melnik. - I think the fact is that in our mentality the child is perceived as the "property" of the parents. Like, if his mother beats him, then he has the right to educate him in this way."

Such ideas about the upbringing of children are now reflected in modern "folklore": they say: "Just you wait till you give birth to your own child - then you will tell how to properly raise, but for now, be silent".

Sometimes this leads to sad consequences, says Zoya Melnik. Say, if a person on the street pulls a crying child by the hand, most likely, passers-by will be sure that this is the father dealing with a capricious kid. In fact, it may not be a father at all, but a person who is a stranger to a child.

What to Do If You Witness or Suffer

We asked our readers if they believe that a lot of violence is being shown in the Ukrainian media. 65.6% agreed with this opinion, 18.2% noted that it was difficult for them to answer this question, another 16.2% - that they did not notice this problem.

As for the Internet, 47.9% admit: they did not no1ce that the appearance of social networks somehow contributed to the spread of violent content. 29.5% - the option "Difficult to answer." 17.8% replied that there was a lot of violent or cruel content in their feed, even though they were trying to hide it. Another 4.8% said that they are not at all on social networks.

Domestic violence cannot be combated if we work only with the consequences. Prevention is also an important step that will at least reduce the number of such cases in the future and increase public awareness of the problem itself.

89.6% of respondents who have been interviewed by NV think that parents should tell their children about domestic violence. When asked whether educational courses on this topic are necessary in schools, 93.6% of respondents answered "yes".

This course was launched by the online education studio EdEra: it is free and tells about the prerequisites, signs of domestic violence and how to act in such cases.

One of the most popular problems of modern youth – bullying - is also a form of psychological violence, so this issue is very relevant for Ukrainian schoolchildren.

Depending on what is happening and what is the complexity of the problem, there are several options for further action. Perhaps the victim will need medical assistance - if there is no way to call an ambulance or get to a medical center, some social centers for children, families and youth can also provide such assistance.

A victim may also require the help of a qualified psychologist - such free services are also provided in social centers. There you can also find qualified lawyers who will provide the necessary legal advice.

It often happens that the victim who eventually escaped from the abuser does not have own housing, or staying in such housing is not safe, as this address is known to the abuser. In this case, victims can apply for temporary asylum in social centers or non-governmental organizations. For example, such services are provided by Convictus-Ukraine.

However, the first step should be to call the police - 102, which will record the case and advise what to do next. Under the new law, the police can issue an order to temporarily prohibit the offender from approaching the victim. Regulations may be urgent prohibitive and restrictive. The first oblige the offender to immediately leave the house, to be near the injured person for up to 10 days.

A restrictive order prohibits the offender from not only being in the house where the injured person lives, but also from approaching him at a certain, clearly established distance. The duration of such a requirement is from 1 month to six months, and may be extended for another six months if necessary.

A new option that appeared in Ukraine along with the law on countering domestic violence is typical correctional programs for offenders [order of the Ministry of Social Policy of October 1, 2018 No. 1434]. A court can send an offender to such a program. Its duration is from three months to a year. The bottom line is that the offender should regularly visit a psychologist in one of the social centers. These services are provided free of charge.

Oksana Stepanyuk, who works in such a center in the Desnyanskiy district of the capital, says: in fact, the offender himself can turn to such a center for help. Even before the case goes to trial. But almost no one knows about this - that's why they don't go.

"In my opinion, the emergence of the project Police Against Domestic Violence, or "Polina", is also a positive innovation. These are police officers who work exclusively on domestic violence. They passed very high-quality, specialized training. I also participated in such trainings - for this, colleagues from Sweden, Denmark and other countries came to Ukraine," says Zoya Melnik.

If you encounter domestic violence, you can contact the National Hotline for Prevention of Domestic Violence – 116 123.

Stories of People Who Have Experienced Domestic Violence or Committed It

Novoye Vremya Strany - September 20, 2019

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://nv.ua/ukraine/events/bila-i-unizhala-svoih-detey-istorii-lyudey-kotorye-perezhili-domashnee-nasilie-ili-sami-sovershali-ego-50037862.html (Ukrainian, Russian)

English translation

93% of respondents think that Ukraine really has such a problem as domestic violence. Such preliminary data is demonstrated by an anonymous online survey, which NV launched together with online education studio EdEra. On the moment of this publication, more than 1900 people filled the survey.

10.2% of respondents admitted that they had once themselves physically abused their loved ones but later realized that they acted badly. 1.8% said they committed such acts, but did not consider it as violence.

In general, an online survey devoted to various types of domestic violence in Ukraine, such as physical, psychological, sexual and economic.

The last question is optional and provides a detailed answer. We asked our readers to share their own anonymous stories about experienced domestic violence. Now about three hundred respondents have gathered such stories. Respondents talk about how they experienced physical violence from their parents, sexual abuse from older relatives in childhood and share stories about how and why they themselves resorted to committing violence.

NV reporter Oleksandra Horchynska selected 15 stories about various aspects of violence and publishes it here.

1

As a child, I came across domestic violence. In particular, I was a victim of psychological pressure from my father. In public, he played the role of an ideal husband and father. But at the same time, he could publicly humiliate, point out the "drawbacks" of appearance, for example, overweight at mom, or her behaviour. At home, he poured all the accumulated aggression and anger: told that there is no orderliness in our apartment, the things are not on their places, everything is not going the right way, and we, the children, are lazy, do nothing, the lopsided ones - we can't do anything. He called me, his daughter, "schmuck." He showed disrespect for the needs of the family, devalued our interests, personal qualities. It seemed to him that family was a duty for him because every man who respects himself "should" have a wife and children. This was expected of him by his parents, it was as it should be.

He also aggressively showed emotions, anger when I or my brother did not meet his expectations. He did not want to spend time with his children - I constantly felt that I was a burden on him. He showed neither kindness nor tenderness. When we were smaller, I could be punished, hit with a leather belt. He never praised our achievements, despised them, compared others to us. With great reluctance, he supported our education. Usually, but not always, he cried if we did not understand something.

In general, my association with childhood and adolescence is screaming, humiliation, discontent from the father, the desire to hide and become invisible. And the mother who wanted to protect us, who cried so that no one saw, and drank medications for her heart.

The situation has emotionally changed in my 30 years. My brother and I moved to another apartment. I started doing psychotherapy. The first I told my father that I love him. Taught to hug, kiss him. I heard from him that he loves me. And my brother too. His attitude also changed, it became much warmer. If earlier he was jealous when it was necessary to spend money on a family, now he offers help with repairs in the apartment. Or pay a taxi if I get home late. The achievements of us children are treated with respect and admiration.

2

A 1,5 months ago, my aunt lost her son. When they called her from the hospital and informed her that his heart stopped, my aunt began to cry. And her husband hit her on the head with h the words: "Shut up, you idiot! The neighbours will hear." Well, now every time an aunt begins to cry from grief, her husband yells at her. For him, silence in his apartment is more important than the feelings of his own wife. And besides, he constantly controlled her, forbade her to go to work because of jealousy, cursed if she went to her friends or sisters, constantly shouted and rudely treated her.

He also molested me when I was still a teenager, but I did not dare to tell about this anyone.

3

I beat and humiliated my own children. First two. The realization of how terrible things I did came gradually. For several years, my sister lived with us with her little son. I watched them daily and how it turns out that you can build relationships with

a child without offences and superficial manifestations; on mutual respect. I watched how to resolve conflict situations without negativity, how to respond to children's moods. This is a lengthy process. I did not know how to respect my children. 20 years have passed. Children say that they have forgiven me a long time ago, but this does not reassure me. Every mention brings pain. I think if someone could stop me decisively then, perhaps I would come to my senses a little earlier. Now I can't watch without tears how on the street or in a public place, the mother screams at her child or hits it. I interfere every time. Not sure if this will help. But I can't do anything.

4

I have a wonderful family. Wonderful parents who always lived peacefully and calmly. When I was 18, I met a guy. He was 27 and this was my first serious relationship.

At first, everything was just fine, but over time, I began to realize that I could not buy my clothes without first sending a photo to him and not waiting for approval. The clothes that I bought alone, I could wear as if I could, but each time I had to listen a lot. My desire to go to graduate school caused him hysteria because he believed that I should clean home and cook instead of education. Naturally, no one asked me. His mother helped me to fight for my opportunity to study. Also, we always invited his friends at home, but for my friends, it was forbidden to enter our house. I understood that it wasn't normal to live like that, but I thought that the family of my parents is an ideal, which means that not everyone is so lucky. Plus - he doesn't beat me, so it's not so bad.

I did not have money, although he had his own business. The man changed as soon as the door to our house was closed. Once he got drunk a lot and chairs and dishes flew into me. For half a night I sat on the stairs to the second floor, talking with my mother, who lived 300 km from me, so that at least someone could call the police if they killed me there. In the morning, he didn't even apologize, said something like:

"Huh, I've been drunk a bit!"

Almost a year later, I learned that violence can be not only physical. Thanks to the information from the Center for Integration and Development, I realized why I felt so bad with an absolutely perfect picture from the outside. Now I have a guy with whom we have been together for three years. I have many friends, they give me the opportunity to develop, I wear what I want. And only now I realized that my parents just have normal healthy relationships.

5

I am 24, my husband is 25, our child is 2.6 years old. Even before the wedding, five years ago, my husband and I fought. Sometimes not seriously, and sometimes with breaking windows in the house. Two years ago, my husband, being drunk, began to provoke me into a scandal - he spat in my face. I answered in the same way and we started a serious fight. For two weeks I was lying with a concussion, my face was not visible. Then I went to the psychologist. Now my husband and I are still together. Ask why? I will not be able to answer.

After that, he never raised his hands on me, but I still can't forgive him totally. But the paradox is that I consider part of myself to blame, if I had not spat in the answer, this would not have happened. I am constantly looking for excuses for him.

6

Physical, psychological, and financial violence from my parents was applied to me. I believe that this is why I had low self-esteem, problems with socialization. This led to suicide attempts and treatment in a psycho-neurological clinic. Mother still justifies domestic violence and says that every family lives that way. Originally I am from the Donetsk region, now this part of Ukraine is not controlled by the Ukrainian government.

7

I had a situation when a partner in affect pushed our three-year-old child through a door jamb. The child fell, scared, began to cry badly. I ran to the child, but my partner stopped me, grabbed the child and began to run around the apartment with him, shouting that we had brought him. The child cried a lot, I was very scared - I did not understand, the child was crying because of pain or because of fear.

I had to pull myself together, very affectionately contact my partner so that he would allow me to examine the baby. Fortunately, there were bruises. I reassured the child, and then the partner, without asking my consent, took the child for a walk - it was summer, there was no need to dress very much.

When he left, I realized that my hands were trembling. I called my friend and asked what to do. She gave the anti-violence hotline phone number. I did not know what was happening with my child and was afraid to call my partner so as not to cause an outbreak of aggression on his part. I called the service, and the woman at the other end of the line began to ask why he was angry. How long time ago have we had sex, have I asked him to buy something expensive before that, have I offended him, or is he doing well at work. At first, I automatically answered questions, but then I began to recover and ask what I should do. I was advised to calm down, think about my behaviour and meet him as affectionately as possible.

I did not receive help from social service. I was able to break out of that circle of violence only because my friends helped me. Because at first my husband shouted at me and limited me in money. He began to scream at the child, and then this situation already happened. And only then I realized the horror I was living in.

8

When I was little, my mother often beat me with her hands, with a belt. There were even cases when she seemed to want to strangle me. And I always heard from her: "I will kill you. Why would I give birth to you, it would be better to kill you at birth. You grow up nobody." My father broke up with her when I was 3, and my brother was a year and a half. It was very difficult for her. She worked at several jobs. At the weekend she has been visited the market and tried to sell our cloth from which we had already grown. And now I understand that then it was difficult for her both psychologically and physically. But, of course, this does not justify her. Because of her action, I began to run away from home, from the age of 15. Often I came to my father and asked to live with him. I could no longer live with my mother.

And so went on, until I completely became independent, until I began to earn and live separately. I never shared my emotions with my mother about the events that happen in my life. And even now, when I already have two children of my own, mom is not the first person for me whom I can trust.

9

My former partner committed physical, psychological, and sexual violence against me. At first, he seemed kind and patient. Then he became very jealous. Constantly suspected of something.

Later, for the first time, he lifted me up in the arm when I later returned from friends. Before that, he took me to them by his own but refused to go with me. He choked and beat me because "I made him wait all night, and he was worried." Confusion and fear drove me into a stupor, and external circumstances were such that I could not get away from him.

After that, he swore and cried that this would not happen again. But this happened several more times. Twice I was in huge bruises and scratches. Even on the face. I had to hide and disguise them. He closed the doors and windows, took my keys and phone so that I could not run away. And then he beat. Beat hard. Even kicking.

The last time he beat me so hard that there were black bruises all over my body. And several times he hit the head, which then was terribly sick. I screamed as loudly as I could, called the police, or at least someone. But no one reacted.

He tried to strangle and blocked my nose and mouth. I almost lost my own when he apparently realized what he could do, and let go. No longer screaming. Because there was no one to expect help from. The neighbours did not react, although it was a sunny day, there were many people walking on the street. Then he let me go. A few hours later he brought towels dipped in cold water. Applied them to my head and hands, which I could not move.

We broke up, I miraculously found the strength to turn to my friends for help, and they forcibly evicted him from the house. Two months have passed. For the past three weeks, I have been having nightmares every night in which the former mocks me and raises his hand again. I can't sleep normally, but I know that I will never allow myself to be treated like that again.

As a child, I witnessed that my father regularly beat his mother. And I always tried to intervene. She was sure that this would never happen to me, but for some reason she allowed it. Something broke in me then. I didn't tell anyone, because I'm ashamed.

10

I'm not sure that this is violence, but the ex-girlfriend humiliated me in front of my friends when I was absent, demanded sex and deceived me about my relationship with others. I don't know what of her stories really happened and what didn't exactly. Fortunately, all this in the past now. When it was unbearable - I was able to overpower myself and leave her. But in the future, this negatively affects the current relationship, I regularly return to this in my thoughts.

11

For 20 years I lived in a family with an alcoholic father, and my mother, who wanted to fix it, but she failed. All my childhood passed on the background of constant scandals of parents and contemplation every night on a drunken father. My sister and I constantly cried and suffered, asked mom to leave her father, move to live separately. My mother then said that she would not pull to live separately, because we never had enough money, she was afraid of condemnation from relatives, wanted to save the family most of all.

Confusion, low self-esteem, problems with socialization, distrust of people - all this as a result, still does not allow me to leave a full life. Now I am 28 years old, it is difficult for me to communicate with people. I do not work, because I am afraid of socialization.

12

I was subjected to sexual and physical abuse when I was from 6 to 12 years old. At 12, I talked about this, but none of the family contacted the police. A paedophile is still a member of our family.

13

My partner was late for a meeting with me for three hours. I felt angry about this. I was not aware of the reasons for his being late. When he came home, he said that it was normal for him. And threw some sarcastic phrases addressed to me. It hurt me, I started to call him different offensive words, also said that if I had a knife, I would hit him and attacked him.

14

When I was 6, my mom has started a relationship with a new husband. A few months later, he beat me for the first time. I got angry that I asked all the time to switch the elevision on football to cartoons and told him: “I’m not afraid” in response to him: “Now you will.” After the next: “I’m not afraid,” he blew himself up from the sofa, caught up with me in the room and hit his head against the wall. After that, he beat me and my mother more than once.

He left when I was 16. For ten years I was afraid to live in my own apartment. Returning from school, he always expected a new quarrel at home. I was always afraid. That first act of violence fell out of my memory until the age of 19. But this fear has changed me a lot.

I can’t say, “I’m not afraid” if I feel threatened. My body just paralyzes, and any words get stuck in my throat. Because of this, I had problems at school - I could never answer the bullying that was arranged for me. Now, at age 20, I am just beginning to overcome this fear of saying: “I’m not afraid,” when necessary.

15

This is not a personal story of mine, but as a child I witnessed it. I did not yet understand that this is domestic violence in the family in relation to an elderly person.

The story is about my grandmother’s friend, also a good friend of mine. Her daughter took that woman from the village to live together in the city. A woman sold her house to help her daughter and son-in-law buy a cooperative apartment. She was very active, always went outside in the afternoon and evening, loved to sit with other elderly people on a bench. She looked after her grandchildren and other children told them fairy tales.

But after a while, I noticed that I did not see this woman on the street. My grandmother also confirmed that she had not seen her friend for a long time either.

When we approached the porch where the woman lived, saw her standing at the window and crying, noticed that she was very thin. She did not go out for a very long time, and after a while, she was found on the asphalt under the house. That woman jumped out of the window and killed herself. I saw her body. There were a lot of police and people from her house. Then the neighbours said that her relatives had starved the woman. I will never forget this story. I was eight then.

Is Domestic Violence Only When Other People Beat Me or Something Else? Where to Go for Help?

By Oleksandra Horchynska

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://nv.ua/ukraine/events/domashnee-nasilie-eto-tolko-kogda-byut-ili-chto-to-eshche-kuda-obrashchatsya-za-pomoshchyu-50037868.html

On Violence and Power in Ukrainian Culture

By Oleksandra Horchynska

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://nv.ua/ukraine/events/bulling-narcissy-toksichnye-lyudi-kak-nasilie-predstavleno-v-u krainskoy-kulture-50042312.html

SHORTLISTED STORY

The Margins of Mumbai: Living in Colony Adjoining 17 Industrial Units

Tabassum Barnagarwala (India)

Tabassum Barnagarwala works with The Indian Express Newspaper in India and primarily reports on health. She also covers women and child development, rural and tribal issues. She has been working with the newspaper since 2013. Her keen interest is in reporting on subjects pertaining to social and human right violations. She is based in Mumbai.

The Margins of Mumbai: Living in Colony Adjoining 17 Industrial Units

By Tabassum Barnagarwala
The Indian Express - September 22, 2019

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https://indianexpress.com/article/india/mahul-resettlement-colony-industrial-pollution-the-margins-of-mumbai-6016921/

5,500 families live in a housing colony in the city under conditions that the high court has said could cause them to die. The Indian Express on a resettlement colony adjoining 17 factories and refineries, the many pollution reports it has failed, the people who have fled it, and those who can't.

It was August 21. Swati Jadhav and her three children travelled 30 km in a tempo from Kurar village in Malad East to Mahul, bundled up like luggage, to a new home allotted by the government to them in a high rise. It was a 125 sq ft flat with a bathroom, a toilet, and a dedicated kitchen space — a far cry from the 100 sq ft hut and community toilet that the family shared in a slum settlement.

Swati was thrilled. She arranged their belongings — four utensils, two bedsheets, a mat, and a few items of clothing — and even set up a tiny temple. But, it took all of 10 days for them to return, in another tempo, to Kurar.

"My neighbours ask me why I left a pucca flat in Mahul for this kuchcha house. I tell them I can't breath there," she says.

On September 3, hearing a clutch of writ petitions filed by Mahul residents, the Bombay High Court expressed shock over the conditions in which the government had pushed people rehabilitated due to its projects to live. Pulling up the Maharashtra government and Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), Chief Justice Pradeep Nandrajog said the State must treat all its citizens, rich or poor, with dignity. "You cannot let these thousands die. This is not correct," he said, directing the government to assess the pollution levels in Mahul.

Hugging Mumbai's eastern front, Mahul used to be a fishing village. Early this century, land was taken over near it to build a housing colony for slumdwellers under the 'Project Affected People' scheme, with construction carried out from 2006 to 2010 by a private developer. The initial idea was to house slumdwellers displaced by the BMC's upgradation of the storm-water disposal system. But over

the next decade, 10,000-15,000 families, roughly 60,000 people, were moved to Mahul as part of rehabilitation for various projects. Now the cluster of 72 buildings, seven to eight storeys each, holds an estimated 5,500 families, all in 125 sq ft flats.

Any given day, a cloud of smoke hangs over Mahul, emitted by 15 chemical factories and two oil refineries. The Maharashtra Pollution Control Board (MPCB) requires a buffer zone of minimum 800 metres between an industrial unit and a residential area; here, a narrow road stands as a nominal divider. Residents claim that not just the air, the groundwater too is contaminated from the chemicals seeping into it.

MPCB Assistant Secretary Pundlik Mirashe insists, "Air quality levels in Mahul are at a par with the rest of Mumbai. We get factory readings every day."

***

The high court based its observations on multiple environmental reports. One such report, by the MPCB in 2014, found the presence of 21 'volatile organic compounds (VOCs)' in the area, among them benzene, styrene, toluene, xylenes, diethylbenzene, trimethylbenzene and dichlorobenzenes. Mainly released by industrial units, VOCs are known to attack the central nervous system, causing irritation in the eyes, nose and throat.

The scariest levels were of toluene in air — 0.169 parts per million, much higher than the threshold of 0.021 ppm. Toluene can affect kidney and liver, and impair the immune system. Toluene, the report added, was released by the two refineries nearby, of Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL) and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited (HPCL).

The same year, a King Edward Memorial Hospital report stated that the health impact on Mahul residents was similar to Toluene diisocyanate exposure, that can attack the respiratory tract and cause asthma. It added that 67.1 per cent of Mahul's population suffered from breathlessness, 86.6 per cent had eye irritation, and 84.5 per cent felt a choking sensation.

A year later, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) said "there is perceptible threat to the health of residents of Village Mahul and Ambapada (adjoining village) due to prevailing air quality in the area". Around the same time, the National Disaster Relief Force (NDRF) rejected a proposal to move its base camp to near the Deonar dumping ground (a few kilometres from Mahul), citing hazardous gases.

The latest report is of the CSIR (Council of Scientific and Industrial Research)-NEERI (National Environmental Engineering Research Institute), released in 2018, after over three years of research. It recommended that Mahul be declared 'Air Control Region', with no residential premises allowed, and called for plugging of equipment leaks, pumps, valves at factories, and thorough inspections to reduce emissions from both plants and refineries. Based on that, the Central Pollution Control Board was asked to devise an action plan.

This year in April, five months before its September order, the Bombay High Court said clean air was a fundamental right and directed the BMC to provide Rs 15,000 rent each to Mahul residents so that they could live elsewhere. The BMC got a stay on it from the Supreme Court.

Even the refineries had objected to the housing colony coming up in their midst. In 2007, BPCL filed a petition in the high court citing security risks from the colony, but it was rejected two years later. Around same time, HPCL moved the high court and later the Supreme Court citing carcinogenic dangers of VOCs released by its refinery.

In 2010, Mumbai Police personnel were allotted flats in Mahul, but no one took them up. While clarifying that possession of all flats had not been handed over to police when he retired, former Mumbai police commissioner Sanjeev Dayal says, "I think police personnel had an issue with the existing refinery and the pollution problem. I don't know if anybody eventually moved there."

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When she moved to Mahul, Swati did not know all this. In fact, she says, she hadn't even heard of Mahul, having never travelled much beyond the slum settlement of Pimpripapa in Mumbai's western suburbs in 12 years of her married life.

Then, on July 2 night, a 35-ft BMC wall holding back a reservoir collapsed under heavy rains, inundating her slum and that of adjoining Ambedkar Nagar, and sweeping huts down a slope. Swati's hut was located just a few feet from the wall. "I was sitting, my husband was standing by the door. Our children were playing around when we heard shouting. Then suddenly, we were swept away," Swati recalls.

An injured Swati spent the night looking for her three children, who were rescued by neighbours. Daylight revealed that 31 people had been killed, including Swati's husband Dattatray Jadhav.

Jadhav made about Rs 20,000 a month, making statues. Swati struggled to support her family on the Rs 8,000 a month she earned as household help. She left Mumbai with her children for her Latur village. About a month later, her brother-in-law called to say the BMC and Forest Department were giving temporary flats in Mahul to those who had lost huts in the tragedy.

Swati says she didn't raise too many questions, delighted that she would get a house in Mumbai — an impossible dream — for free. "I signed the allotment paper." Her first view of Mahul, from that tempo on August 21 — carrying belongings mostly donated or borrowed from neighbours and others — was of towering chimneys. Fire spit out of a few, and smoke filled the air.

The first three days, Swati says, she kept scrubbing the floors of her flat and the corridor outside to clear stubborn grime. Her children had not gone to school for two months by then, and rather than send them to the only school nearby, a BMC-run school up to Class 8, she kept them at home. She tried looking for work as domestic help in the vast industrial sector but could not find any.

On Day 5, Swati's elder daughter Sugandha complained of an itchy throat. The next day, she says, her other two children said they could not swallow food. "I felt it too, the sore throat. There was a smell every time I stepped outside the building."

When the itchiness gave way to persistent cough, Swati was alarmed. By then she had heard of many families falling ill to Mahul's pollution and moving out. So, she decided to go back to Karur

First Swati took a tiny room on rent for Rs 4,000 close to where her demolished hut stood. Four days later, when incessant rains flooded that room too, she moved to another, for the same rent. Her three children still cough intermittently, their recovery hampered by the dampness of their surroundings. But at least they have rejoined the private Queen Mary High School they used to go to, Swati says.

Back in Mahul colony's building number 28, Rashmi Pandit (18) has patches all over her legs, due to reportedly a skin infection persisting for two years now. "The doctor says it is the water," says Pandit, who moved to Mahul in 2017. Having spent Rs 5,000 on medicines, her family now buys drinking water from outside Mahul.

Rashmi claims that she hoped to become a doctor but had to quit after Class 12 as she could not afford the Rs 100-150 daily commuting cost to college. So she joined the BMC school as a teacher.

Usha and Kamlesh Vishwakarma, also displaced due to the Kurar wall collapse, moved into Mahul on August 21. But they left their children behind at a relative's house in Malad so that they could continue school there; their daughter Sudha is in Class 12.

"This rehabilitation has separated our family," Usha, 33, weeps. Kamlesh, who works at a furniture unit in Malad, says he would now have to take a bus, then a train, followed by another bus, to reach his workplace. "It will take two hours. I earn Rs 450 a day and I will spend Rs 80 on transport," the 35-year-old says.

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Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) data lists 45 resettlement and rehabilitation colonies in Mumbai, with 208 more under construction. Under the regulations, a housing colony must have social infrastructure, recreation facilities and livelihood for its inhabitants.

The National Building Code of India (NBCI) further mandates 500 tenements per hectare as maximum density for a low-income colony, besides specifying minimum ventilation, space between buildings and courtyard width for high-rise buildings.

In 2018, the Collective for Spatial Alternatives — an association of urban researchers, academics, professionals and community organisers — noted that Mahul had 1,327 tenements per hectare, far in excess of the NBCI guidelines. It also said less than half were occupied.

"The scheme is very poorly planned, designed for stocking up as many tenements as possible, rather than to produce a liveable neighbourhood," the report stated, listing leaks in sewage drains contaminating drinking water, poor construction material, and lack of parking space.

Located at one end of Mumbai, Mahul is connected to the city via one bus to Ghatkopar, with poor frequency, and a few buses to Kurla. An autorickshaw ride to Ghatkopar and Kurla local train stations —the nearest — costs at least Rs 100.

For the 5,500 families of Mahul housing colony, there is that solitary BMC school, which now has 350 students till Class 8. The next closest school is in Chembur, a Rs 100 autorickshaw ride away.

The BMC dispensary, open only during day, receives patients complaining mostly of cough. Many are enrolled for the government's free tuberculosis treatment. In the evenings, with the dispensary shut, a steady stream waits outside the multiple homeopathic clinics in Mahul, including of Dr Ashish Gaud. "This season a lot of viral patients came. But through the year, I get patients complaining of cough," he says.

For a long time, Mahul residents bore it stoically, afraid of losing free housing in Mumbai. Then, in 2017, about 3,000 families were rehabilitated to Mahul from slums razed on either side of the 100-km-long Tansa water pipeline. The high court had directed the BMC to clear the encroachments, saying these posed a threat to the British-era pipeline. It moved them to Mahul, drawing up a plan to replace their settlement near the pipeline with a jogging and cycling track, for a budget of Rs 300 crore.

In 2018, Mahul residents filed a writ petition in the high court against their living conditions. On October 28, over 800 started an indefinite protest on a footpath in Vidyavihar — one of the settlements cleared from near the Tansa pipeline. The protest crossed 330 days on Sunday.

Speaking about the Kurar families settled in Mahul, BMC Ward Officer Sanjog Kabare says they had no choice in the matter. "Only this colony was available for alternative housing for them," he says. A forest official, who doesn't want to be named, insists Mahul is a temporary arrangement. "We plan to relocate them permanently to some other colony."

Asked about the Mahul protests, BMC Deputy Municipal Commissioner Chandrashekhar Choure says, "The matter is sub-judice, we cannot comment."

A BMC spokesperson told The Sunday Express, “Meetings are going on with protesting residents of Mahul for a solution.”

Among the protesters on the Vidyavihar footpath is Kantabhai Shanti, 50, who lived in Mahul for 11 months, after being shifted from the Vidyavihar slum. Shanti claims she decided to move from Mahul after her daughter died of lung cancer and grandson was diagnosed with tuberculosis. “This is because of the air and water of Mahul.” Her frail grandson, who lies on a mat on the footpath next to her, no longer goes to school.

Private physician Dr Shahid Barmare, who sees patients in Kurla, says most common ailments in Mahul are skin infections and respiratory disorders. “This indicates the presence of a high level of air and water pollutants,” Barmare says.

BPCL authorities say they regularly monitor their VOC emissions and have air filters in place. While BPCL refused an official comment, its officers point out that they had themselves raised concerns when the housing colony was planned a decade ago, but were ignored.

Bilal Khan of NGO Ghar Bachao Ghar Banao Andolan, that is leading the Mahul protests, says, “We are not sure if rules are being complied with by all factories. Even if they are, the lack of a buffer zone from industrial units continues to pose a threat.”

Anita Dhole, among the 800-odd protesters sitting on the Vidyavihar footpath, says, “This is a fight for our survival, not for comfort.” Dhole was among those who was moved to Mahul from near the Tansa pipeline, but she shifted out within a year. “Within a few days we realised this is a hell-hole,” she says, listing ailments ranging from persistent coughing fits to skin irritation.

A plastic sheet her only shelter, Dhole sits across the road from where her hut once stood and where labourers are levelling soil now. Polio-afflicted, she attends all the court hearings, has preserved all the documents, and guides whoever wants to leave Mahul.

Over at Pimpripada, Swati also keeps returning to the debris of her hut. Standing atop them, she says, “I came here every day to look for my belongings. We could not find even a needle… The Prime Minister has said he’ll give a house to the homeless. Where do I apply for it?”

Timeline

2006-2009: Construction begins on Mahul housing colony

2007: BPCL files petition in court against the colony, citing security risk

2010 onwards: Rehabilitation in Mahul begins

2015: NGT finds high pollution levels in Mahul

2016: NEERI appointed to conduct three-year study

2017: Thousands vacated from slums near Tansa pipeline and relocated to Mahul

March 2018: Writ petition filed by Mahul residents against rehabilitation to the colony

August 2018: Bombay HC says govt failed proper rehabilitation in Mahul

Oct 2018: Over 800 Mahul residents begin an indefinite protest

April 4, 2019: Bombay HC says clean air is a fundamental right, asks govt to pay Rs 15,000 rent to Mahul residents so that they can live elsewhere, BMC gets a stay

Sept 2019: HC orders reassessment of pollution levels in Mahul

560 Rehab Buildings

Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) website lists 45 rehabilitation and resettlement colonies in the city.

Along with structures developed by the Slum Rehabilitation Authority and Maharashtra Housing And Development Authority, there are 560 buildings for resettlement available in all in the city.

Just for MMRDA projects such as Mumbai Urban Transport Project, Monorail and Mithi river development, over 40,866 people have been rehabilitated across Mumbai.

SHORTLISTED STORY

Finding the Disappeared in Terror Camps

Violeta Alejandra Santiago Hernández (Mexico)

Violeta Santiago (Veracruz, Mexico, 1991) is a journalist and writer. She graduated in Communication from the Universidad Veracruzana and has a Master's degree in Communication from the Universidad Iberoamericana.

She obtained the Regina Martínez Award (2018) from the Alternate Voice Collective. She won the Veracruz' State Prize for Journalism (2019) for "Chronicle" and "Reportage" (2020). Second place in the "Written Press" category of the Walter Reuter German Journalism Prize (2019). She was nominated for the Festisov Journalism Awards (2020) and the Gabriel García Márquez Journalism Award (2020). She received an honorable mention in the National Gonzo Journalism Award (2020).

Her chronicles and her reports on violence and Human Rights have been published in Presencia Mx, Blog Expediente, Vice News, Excélsior and Aristegui Noticias. From 2017 to 2019 she was a Veracruz correspondent for the Aristegui en Vivo newscast. She is the author of the journalistic investigation book Guerracruz (Penguin Random House, 2019).

Finding the Disappeared in Terror Camps

By Violeta Santiago
Presencia.Mx - March 29, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.presencia.mx/especiales/especial.aspx?id=1(Español)

English translation

The Fifth National Search Brigade for Disappeared Persons was held in the north of Veracruz State between the 10th and the 21st of 2020. It is the third time that such kind of collectives have organized themselves in order to search for human remains in the territory of Veracruz State, but it is the first time that is has been held in such region, where 276 reported cases of disappearance were submitted until 2016, although the real number might be much higher, according to those affected from the María Herrera collective in Poza Rica.

This Brigade was a huge challenge, even for the experienced seekers involved. In addition to dealing with inclement weather and adverse conditions in lands that are evergreen most of the times, the Brigade's major discovery were the Cocinas (kitchens): an improved practice for human disappearance that is systematically carried out, under the silence and in collusion with institutions of Public Security of Veracruz and Mexico.

More than nine years have had to pass to speak about what happened to the disappeared ones in the north of Veracruz. Although the "kitchens" are suddenly reducing the hopes of finding the loved ones, the relatives in the María Herrera collective are not giving up in the search for their people, and their fight to stop this kind of bloodcurdling activities, therefore they can be protected against the pain caused by the uncertainty of not knowing where their loved ones are.

For almost two weeks we accompanied the Fifth Brigade established in Papantla City to compose this choral story, with the aims of bringing the problem that represents the enforced disappearances of people in this region of Mexico into the spotlight, sharing the feelings of those longing for empathy from citizens, and serving as a space to remember those who search and are searched.

Because, even if footprints are wiped out, the stories remain.

Dimensioning the Disappearances

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.presencia.mx/especiales/articulo.aspx?id=1&s=1 (Español)

English translation

It has been said that in Veracruz violence entered from the North. Between 2008 and 2010, crime was settled in the northern cities and was gradually spread to the center and to the South. By 2014, almost the entire State, that borders more than 700 km of the Gulf of Mexico, knew about the disappearances and clandestine graves.

The first witnesses of what would leave a mark on Veracruz in the last decade, of the increase in unprecedented violence through enforced disappearances and clandestine graves, were the municipalities located in the La Huasteca and Totonacapan regions, from Pueblo Viejo to Tecolutla, an area that stands out because of its oil production and its citrus industry.

The 'National Registry of Disappeared Persons' database puts in evidence the increase in complaints of disappearances since 2011, when Javier Duarte de Ochoa started his term as Governor of Veracruz.

On average, 1 out of 10 people who disappeared between 2006 and 2016 was in one of the municipalities located in the north of Veracruz, according to the "Registry of Disappeared Persons" of the State Attorney General's Office, the most complete database on the matter which was made public during the Miguel Ángel Yunes Linares' term (2016-2018) from PAN (National Action Party), although some data was omitted during his period. According to this database, 5,934 files for disappeared people were opened in Veracruz in a decade. 3,501 people were located (90% of them alive), but 2,433 have not been found. Of these last cases 1,723 are men, 709 are women and not specified in one.

In Veracruz, 130 municipalities (out of 212) have, at least, one case of disappearance. The northern cities have reported 276 cases in the State Attorney General's Office (11.35% of the total): Poza Rica, an important city for the oil industry, ranks fourth in the state with 113 cases; Papantla comes in ninth place with 41; but also Tuxpan and Tihuatlán stand out with 21 cases each. However, Maricel Torres Melo, a member of the María Herrera collective, estimates that the real number of disappeared ones in the northern area is far higher than the authorities say, since not all cases are reported, in the words of Maricel Torres Melo, a member of the María Herrera collective.

The clandestine graves are places where the bodies of those who have been deprived of their liberty are buried. The first cases in Veracruz took place in the northern area, but they spread to 58 municipalities, leaving a scar in the entire state. The official request for information 02173318 that was made to the State Attorney General's Office (plus hemerographic records) revealed that there were 460 graves and 5 wells with human remains between years 2010 and 2018 in Veracruz, and the victims amounted to 993. The northern area represented about 10% of the total number of clandestine graves with 35 sites, and less than 5% of the bodies, with 45, a relatively low number if compared to the 276 complaints of disappearance in that region, also a pioneer in the registration of cases of people taken by force and whose bodies were not found: sometimes due to kidnapping; most of them, without leaving a trace or having subsequent communication from people who claimed money in exchange for life. The secret that was kept for almost nine years is that, although there are regions in Veracruz State that later ruled both in number of graves and corpses in them, the lack of bodies found in the north of Veracruz is not due to the number of disappearances being low, but rather to the fact that people deprived of their liberty were reduced to less than ashes: they were simply "cooked". Unrecognizable for life. Disappeared forever.

The María Herrera Collective

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.presencia.mx/especiales/articulo.aspx?id=2&s=1 (Español)

English translation

Before disappearing in one of the busiest streets in Poza Rica, Iván used to come home after the gym and ran towards his mother to hug her, who also used to jokingly pushed him aside to avoid him because he was sweating. Now, Maricel Torres Melo mentions that the thing she longs for the most is that one hug. Because of that, she has left Iván's room without any changes since May 25, 2011, the last day she saw her 17-year-old son.

Iván Eduardo Castillo Torres was studying his second year of high school and had told his mother about his concern of studying anthropology. Ironically, she is the one who has learned from forensic anthropology throughout these years, since she is entirely dedicated to the search for her son and the other loved ones of the María Herrera collective, which is composed by 130 families looking for 145 disappeared people.

Almost 9 years have passed since she went out to each ranch around Poza Rica by herself with a photo of Iván in hand to search "like a madwoman," as she refers to herself. Every day, for a long time, to ask if they had seen her son.

Iván had asked for a permission to go, with two female friends and another young man, to the Poza Rica National Chamber of Commerce fair. The night ended with a short walk to eat tacos on Avenida 20 de Noviembre, located in the Cazones neighborhood. It was around 1 in the morning when he called by Nextel

to communicate that he was almost home, but he never arrived or answered his cellphone anymore. What Maricel knows, not from the work of the State Attorney General's Office, but from his own, is that Iván and his friends were detained by the Poza Rica-Tihuatlán-Coatzintla Inter-Municipal Police, cities that make the polygon of disappearances in the hands of an institution of Public Security, which was dissolved in 2015 by the State Government.

Within the next few weeks, Maricel became the target of extortion from a local criminal, who assured her that she must "buy" her son's liberty. Whenever she hesitated, he told her that they already had him at the border and that he would end up in the human trafficking market. Between 2011 and 2012, Maricel paid almost $50.000 (one million pesos) until she was morally and economically exhausted.

While time was passing by, Maricel realized that they took advantage of her because due to the desperation of having no news about Iván's whereabouts. She also learned that the deprivation of liberty of young people, like her son's, was quite common, as well as understanding the joint collusion of both organized crime and the Police, to forcibly recruit young men, in a situation of modern slavery, the one she verified when her collective knew about a training camp located in a jungle area of Tihuatlán, north of Poza Rica, located by the Mexican Army in 2014.

In her experience as a leader of the María Herrera collective, she could know about the cases of groups of young people, middle class students who were taken to forced labor. Others were disappeared by the Inter-municipal Police, and they infer that, after detaining them, the Police gave them over to criminal organizations. Also, even on the same avenue and in the same taqueria where her son was taken, the collective documented disappearances before and after that case.

But before this point, Maricel traveled alone in Poza Rica and its surroundings for five years.

"I used to say if many disappear here, why do people stay silent? Why are people doing nothing to search for their children, since they are not furniture that can be replaced?" Maricel, who until then had no idea about working in a collective, met Juan Carlos Trujillo Herrera and his mother, María Elena Herrera Magdaleno, on the 10th of May 2016, both joined by a very strong bond with Poza Rica: in 2008, Jesús and Rafael, sons of María Herrera who worked as metal brokers (such as gold), were disappeared in Atoyac de Álvarez, in Guerrero State, when they were coming back from a work trip in Oaxaca State to their native Michoacán State. Two years later, Gustavo and Luis Armando, two other sons of María, traveled to Veracruz following their siblings' same business, in order to obtain resources and keep on financing their search, but they were detained at a police checkpoint in Poza Rica, and also disappeared.

The Trujillo Herrera family split into two simultaneous searches for four of its members at opposite ends of the country. María's husband passed away during those years, then, the brothers Miguel and Juan Carlos Trujillo were left at the head of the search, along with their mother.

When Maricel met Juan Carlos on the march for the disappeared people on Mother's Day, she says they "showed her the way". Juan Carlos invited her to a meeting, and she called other relatives of the disappeared people from Poza Rica that she met on social media. José de Jesús Jiménez Gaona, Jenny Isabel Jiménez Vázquez's father, one of the young women that disappeared along with Iván, also participated in that meeting. José was already part of the National Search Brigade for Disappeared Persons, and together with Maricel and Juan Carlos Trujillo, began to organize the first search group for the disappeared people in the north of Veracruz. Willing to search for their loved ones, they started with 20 cases from the area. On the 15th of June 2016, José de Jesús represented the group in a meeting at the Boca del Río WTC, where there were other groups, as well as state and federal authorities such as the Office of the Under-Secretary for Human Rights, the State Attorney General's Office, and the Special Prosecutor's Office for the Search of Missing Persons from the Attorney General's Office. He left the meeting, designated as observer of the actions of the State Attorney General's Office on the investigation and search for disappeared persons in the Poza Rica area. That is where the Family in Search 'María Herrera' in Poza Rica was born as collective.

That man's joy was ephemeral. Maricel recalls that it was difficult for him to get the courage to go out and search for his daughter, and that he participated, with a lot of courage, in the First National Search Brigade for Disappeared Persons that was meant to be tested in Amatlán de los Reyes, Veracruz, since they considered it the preamble to gain experience, and with this, they could go out and discover the horrors happening in their own land. A week after his designation he was murdered.

Maricel could also have died that 22nd of June. She says that she was traveling by car with José and his wife, Francisca, to the place where, the next day, they were meant to have a meeting with Luis Ángel Bravo Contreras, The Veracruz State Attorney General, who would go to Poza Rica for the first time. That was an achievement after the WTC meeting. José de Jesús mentioned that he was hungry, so Maricel decided to stay in a church. Five blocks ahead, in front of the Poza Rica Prosecutor's Office, unknown people opened fire on the couple. José de Jesús died instantly and his wife was seriously injured.

After the attack, Maricel was pressured to abandon the search for her son. But by telling the story of José de Jesús' death in front of the journalists, she decided that she would not give up.

"Since then, when thinking about things, I said: no, now I feel more committed to the fight because I am no longer looking only for my son, but also for Jenny". Later, she would embrace the search for Andrés Cázares, son of a woman who, according

to Maricel, died of sadness while searching. After a while, she became in charge of the collective.

At first, the meetings aimed to look for distraction and understanding. Confidence was born among the members of the group, and their own research led them to know "too much": to identify who was leading the crime in Poza Rica, who was already in prison, or who was murdered. After that, it was very difficult to see the city with the same eyes.

"We can't stay like this, because they are our children," Maricel encouraged the other family members for them to join in the search. She kept on insisting until, two years later, they went from being a group of only four members and relatives, to 73 in 2018, and almost doubling that number a year later.

They do not judge in the María Herrera collective: Maricel considers that a mother's suffering is always the same. It is like what the Trujillo family always exposes and that has become the National Search Brigade for Disappeared Persons' motto: they are not looking for the culprits, but to find their loved ones. The body is their priority, not the executioner's punishment.

However, in 2017 they found the first vestige in the northern area of what is known as a "human kitchen," an omen of what they would find three years later, in the Fifth National Search Brigade.

The group found the "La Gallera" ranch, a property located in Tihuatlán, in the north of the Cazones River which divides the municipality of Poza Rica; it was a property that the Zetas took from a family in 2011, for it to become a meeting point and clandestine burials. During the days of the right-wing party's government, the National Action Party (PAN), after Javier Duarte's escape from Veracruz, was when their request prospered. The Veracruz State Attorney General's Office, then in charge of Jorge Winckler Ortiz (currently a fugitive), reviewed the "La Gallera" ranch in early 2017, but there were no findings. After insisting, they returned in February with the families of the María Herrera collective.

Maricel assures that she was greatly impacted when she entered in "La Gallera" for the first time. After a dirt road, on the left, a path opens up and leads into the thick undergrowth for about fifty meters, to a clearing where a house stands and in front, about ten meters away, a big room with an oven about two meters high and a front of three meters to make zacahuil, a giant tamale (the largest in Mexico) based on beef and pork with chopped corn, very typical of the gastronomy in the northern area of Veracruz and the Huasteca.

"La Gallera" shares its deathly meaning in two parts of the country: in Poza Rica, Veracruz, and in Tijuana, Baja California, because that one is also the name of the property where Santiago Meza López, presented to the media as "El Pozolero," used to dissolve bodies in acid. In "La Gallera" a special word was coined for this practice that also links horror to gastronomy, since the group discovered that due, to the characteristics of the oven, it was said "people were cooked like a zacahuil".

The bodies of a woman and five men were exhumed behind the house, some of them, dismembered. Maricel estimated that there were corpses that had been buried for about twenty days, so she considered that they were looking in an active point. A colleague of the group identified her brother thanks to his tattoos and clothing, while the rest have not yet been recognized.

Inside the house were bloody stains on the walls, like handprints, that even after three years, are still visible. They also found a lot of clothes, which made them think that there should be more people buried in there, than only the six in the courtyard. They concluded that there could be bone remains among the ashes of the zacahuil's oven. The Prosecutor's Office wanted the site to be ruled out and the proceedings to be concluded, but Maricel Torres' collective kept on insisting.

The ineptitude of the Prosecutor's Office was not only witnessed by the Poza Rica collective, but also by Luis Tapia Olivares, coordinator of the Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez Centre for Human Rights' defense area (Centre PRODH). He narrated that the forensic experts could not even distinguish between human and animal bones, or stones and wood, and that they did not even take the necessary measures for not to contaminate the place, such as the use of diverse tools to conserve the scene intact.

The third raid (the second with the presence of family members) was registered on March 1 and on that occasion, they had the support of the National Search Brigade. There came Mario Vergara Hernández, originally from Guerrero, and the person who coordinates the Brigade's field searches. He is looking for his brother Tomás "Tommy" Vergara, kidnapped on the 5th of July 2012. He says that he asked for a proof that his brother was still alive and since this one was not provided, they did not pay the ransom.

"You will regret it and you will never find your brother," they said in retaliation. Although he does not describe himself as field person, he began to look in the field out of necessity and learned to detect when the ground had been recently removed, as a sign of a pit. As it happened with Maricel, Mario and Juan Carlos Trujillo met and discovered that there were other people also looking for their disappeared across the country.

Even if Mario has been touring different parts of the country since then, and helping with field searches, "La Gallera" is one of the cruelest places he remembers because in most of the times that they have found human remains, they are adult people. In the third search inside "La Gallera" they found the skull of a child and when he thinks of it, it gives him goosebumps.

"That really hit me". The government's criminalizing speech repeats that those walking 'bad steps' end up in graves, but "a child?", he muses.

Maricel says that, in addition to the skull that belonged to a minor, it was the first time that they found fragments of charred bones. They added another skull to their findings, a maxilla, more bone pieces, ribs, and a lot of ashes in the oven.

This is what Mario Vergara refers to with "having the luck of disappearing in another state": he explains that, while bodies are buried in other parts of Mexico, they are reduced to dust in Veracruz. A single body can be broken into hundreds, thousands of fragments. If everything would be processed to get answers, it would take years and resources that would mean millions of pesos (thousands of dollars). It is like putting together a genetic puzzle: discovering which little piece belongs to whom, if it is not calcined enough to extract its DNA, otherwise, identification becomes impossible. Mario also highlights that searching in Veracruz is difficult because of the humidity and the speed in which the vegetation covers everything. The María Herrera collective, with the support of the Centre PRODH, requested the Federal Public Ministry that the investigations could be carried out by the then named Attorney General of the Republic, and not by the State Prosecutor's Office, alleging a lack of both technological and human resources capacity for processing such amount of evidence. The Prosecutor's Office kept the human remains of "La Gallera," until the Attorney General of the Republic asked for them.

"That there is no budget, no reagents, nor desire. The Government is not interested in the identification of the bodies, and that one is our concern. What is the point for us to search if there are remains that are being accumulated?" complains Maricel. After these proceedings, more were carried out in November 2017 and in May 2018, in which more than 200 pieces of bones, and even more clothes were added: adults', young women's and children's, diapers included.

And even if with every new visit the aim was to find new clues, the fifth time that all the families returned to this ranch as part of the Fifth National Search Brigade for Disappeared Persons in 2020, was not the exception.

It is hard for Maricel to find others, because she has not yet found Iván. In 2018, one year after the findings in "La Gallera" she confessed that she believes that her son is no longer alive, but clung to the idea of finding him, even if it would mean finding only his remains, so he can rest in peace.

"He was used because of his youth. It is not fair that they stole his life and destroyed ours. He deserves a place where we can go and see him".

By that time, she pointed out that the only thing she was afraid of was dying without finding her son. That she no longer knew of another life. That her search is her ultimate goal.

And, that if he could listen to her, she would tell him: "Iván, wherever you are, your mother loves you and tells you that she will find you".

The Fifth National Brigade's Search in an Extermination Camp Called Veracruz

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.presencia.mx/especiales/articulo.aspx?id=3&s=1 (Español)

English translation

For Miguel Ángel and Juan Carlos Trujillo Herrera, the northern area of Veracruz is indebted to them. In 2011, their brothers Gustavo and Luis Armando and two other relatives were detained at a police checkpoint in Poza Rica. Miguel's theory is that they were detained because they were four men traveling in a VW Jetta with a Michoacán number plate and tinted windows. Miguel says that after the disappearance of his brothers, he could find the location of their telephones and also found out that the points where they appeared, coincided with the place that used to be the Inter-Municipal Police's base of operations for Poza Rica- Tihuatlán-Coatzintla. Also, he would eventually discover that the car where his brothers were traveling in ended up in a junkyard owned by Gregorio Gómez, the owner of Autopartes Gómez and former president of Tihuatlán, where "La Gallera" is located.

This is the third time that the National Search Brigade for Disappeared Persons has worked in Veracruz. Its first two editions, in 2016, took place in Amatlán de los Reyes and Paso del Macho, near Córdoba and Orizaba, in the central area of the state. Then, in 2017, they went to Sinaloa and in 2019 they visited Guerrero.

The Trujillo brothers and their mother, María Herrera Magdaleno, organize the National Search Brigade that launches calls for collectives that are part of the Network of National Links. Since the first time they went out into the field, they postponed their own search in the north of Veracruz to help in other areas where death also abounds. Finally, from the 10th until the 21st of February 2020, they would go into open lands in northern Veracruz, in the middle of oil fields, cattle ranches and orange orchards.

Monday, 10th February

The Brigade congregates in the House of the Church, owned by the Diocese of Papantla that will serve as a shelter for the next two weeks. There are four red brick buildings that rise along a path that goes up a hill. It looks like a country hotel: the rooms with wooden doors and frames are distinguished by a room number, although there are not enough for the more than 200 seekers of 70 collectives of the country, volunteers or human rights observers.

The rooms have two single beds and a private bathroom with hot water. They will end up being three or four people per room, taking turns to sleep in the bed or a mat on the floor. As for men, who could not get one of these rooms, they will simply get a space on the floor of any other empty ward which, in a joking tone, would be referred as "the barracks". There are also restrooms with common showers, but these have the disadvantage of only having cold water. And at this time, during the mornings or nights in Papantla, the weather can be quite cold enough to be considered uncomfortable.

At the bottom of the hill, to the left, there is a wide esplanade with a dome that usually functions as a space for religious congresses, although in this context it is used as a parking lot for the vehicles that will take the seekers (most of them women) to different points according to their search axis.

Some minutes pass 7 in the morning and there is already a lot of activity in the House of the Church. The night before, the coordinators warned us journalist that would accompany the Brigade that we would not be able to go out into the field due to the complications of the terrain, so the majority decided to follow those who would go to the Benito Juárez Park, in Poza Rica.

Edgar Escamilla, reporter from that area, and I arrived early. While we observed the hustle of the first day, we spoke with Maricel Torres, the head of the María Herrera collective. We can go only if there is some space left in the designated transport going out into field. "Search in life! Search in life, they are almost gone!"

Two Nissan Urvan vans are so full that they look like public transport from the state of Mexico in peak hours. A double cab cabin truck is enabled: the seats are soon taken, so there is only space in the back. Juan Carlos Trujillo approves us to go, and we take a spot in there. There are four women around us: with their backs to the tray's back, they are Rosalba, from Baja California Sur, and Tranquilina, from Guerrero. In front of her is Angélica, from Baja California Norte and a friend of Rosalba, and next to her there is a young human rights observer from Mexico City. With our backs to the back window, Edgar and I stayed squatted. "Goodbye! Good luck to you! Good luck!" They wish, and we reply by waving our hands.

Our place in the caravan is the number four. Ahead, the passenger vans and a pick-up truck. Behind, the vehicles of the National Human Rights Commission, the Office of the Attorney General of the Republic with the canine teams, the Executive Commission for Attention to Victims, and the Federal Police patrols.

Rosalba Ibarra Rojas, a very tall and strong-looking woman, wears completely black and her shirt stands out due to her name at chest height, the image of a shepherd dog in the front, and a pickaxe and shovel crossed in her right arm. She breaks the ice from the back of the truck, which is shared with other six individuals.

"I guess people must be panicked with all of this" she says with a very strong accent,

quite probably from the north of Mexico, as we observe the confused faces of people from their homes or the sidewalks as we make our way in convoy through the main avenue of Papantla, a city famous for being the birthplace of vanilla and whose name, as Edgar would explain later to me, comes from the Totonac language and means "the city that perfumes the world", and that some decades ago, the streets really had the smell of vanilla because the pods were put to be dried on the sidewalks; that does not happen anymore, almost all production is now from Madagascar.

After crossing Poza Rica, 30 kilometers to the north of Papantla, we take the road to the left and after a while a sign announces that we are leaving the state of Veracruz and entering the state of Puebla. Angélica and Rosalba talk about the particular conditions of the search in the states of Baja California Norte and Baja California Sur: they highlight the lack of official records, the minimal visibility of cases, the increasing amount of disappearances in small towns, and the strategy of burying people in the building foundations or under concrete floors. They lead the conversation in which Tranquilina barely participates: she is rather concerned about putting her eyes on the road, with her eyes scanning the horizon.

As we were passing by Lázaro Cárdenas village, known as "La Uno," we entered through the village's downtown.

"Look at the 'hawk' that is filming," warns Tranquilina and we observe a young man with his mobile pointing at the row of vehicles.

We went down the hill along a winding road until we crossed a narrow bridge over the clean waters of the San Marcos River that marks the borders of Puebla and Veracruz. A biker that we spotted also seems to discreetly record on the phone. Meters ahead there is a sign with the name of the community we crossed: El Paso, municipality of Coyutla, Veracruz. Almost the only ones watching us going by are dogs; most houses have closed doors and dusty facades.

If it takes time for us to cross the 700 meters of the main street, from the first house in the town to where we have to turn off to the right, it is because it is a rugged dirt road and river rocks.

After the rural health clinic, we see the last houses in El Paso and, at the end of those houses, one of them seems to be saying goodbye to us, like at least eight others, with the logo of the PRI painted on the wall, the party where Fidel Herrera and Javier Duarte belonged to, both former Governors of Veracruz when the number of disappearances and graves increased.

For almost three kilometers the road is traveled without talks, and the only noise that can be heard is the purring of the engines and the creaking stones. The undergrowth grows thicker around the dirt road where only one vehicle can fit. We passed a dried ford and three gates for cattle; in the last one, one of

the Nissan Urvan cannot cross and people have to get off while a group of fourteen cows curiously approaches.

“Comrades, hold on tight please,” says the driver as we seem to practice some curious yoga positions and then feel a sharp blow on the back.

“Well, the thugs did have gasoline,” Rosalba remarks, with irony “and also a good truck.”

The place we are going to, the body of a missing young man from “La Uno” was found the last year, and the Brigade noticed that some bones were left, and that there could be other people’s bodies. Finally, three hours after leaving Papantla, a hill started to be spotted in front of us and we stop with the Sun shining to our left. The vehicles do a U-turn to stay in a starting position, as a security measure.

As soon as the seekers get off the vehicles, Mario Vergara gives instructions and takes a pickaxe, shovel, rod, bar or rake to venture into the undergrowth that smells as if it had been freshly cut by the machetes of those who break through. For being a hill in the middle of nothing, it is uncommon that there is a more-or-less defined path. It is also surprising that the mobile signal is good: even in 2013, the Google Maps car passed by here and there is a street view; for seven years it has barely changed, except for the secret that the hill keeps. Eight Federal police officers guard the rear of the line and we stopped when indicated by those of the Marabunta Humanitarian Peace Brigade, Human Rights observers who oversee much of the logistics. Edgar and I are asked to wait while the family members take a look at the ivory-colored and earth-stained fragments that the exploration group located yesterday in what looks like a riverbed: a piece of skull, some vertebrae next to a sock, a rib, one ulna and a piece of a jaw with some teeth. They also found a bullet casing, but it was lost due to the footprints.

Everything above our heads is covered by a natural ceiling, hence the freshness. This also causes the black earth to remain moist and fertile to the point it looks like a jungle: lianas raining down among the thin tree trunks, some of them with thorns, and others just getting stuck in the ground. Opening your eyes wide, to avoid stumbling and to find bones, is fundamental.

Mario calls people to come closer to see the pieces, so those who have never seen human remains know what they look like. Slowly, they pass by two or three and then they will carefully start raking the ground as if they were peasants about to sow, but the truth is that they will start digging up. Using tools, sticks, or bare hands, they remove the top layer of soil in hopes of discovering something that will lead to identify a person. “Where do I want us to look for?” Mario Vergara yells. “Everywhere!”

It does not like we are on a hill, although it is somewhat remarkable due to the inclination of the terrain. Climbing becomes heavy at some point and holding onto the lianas can be treacherous. If there was no clear path, someone would easily get lost.

“We can be on top of the bones. We have to move the leaves” continues Mario, giving instructions.

Since it is already noon, the seekers are getting ready to check the ground before the afternoon is gone. Carmen Hernández Yáñez concentrates on the ground under the leaves. Víctor Manuel Hernández Hernández, her son, could be around there. He who would be 35 years old now, but he disappeared in 2015 in Lázaro Cárdenas or “La Uno,” when one day some friends went to look for him at night, he left and never returned. His mother has had to combine two tasks: running her local business, a butchery, and searching for her son. It is the second time in 4 months that she has gone to the field in Veracruz and she feels like she’s more from Veracruz than from Puebla, because she belongs to the María Herrera collective in Poza Rica, and she also knows that those who were taken in “La Uno” used to brought to Veracruz and vice versa. Despite what she has read on the news about how decomposing bodies have been found, she is still hopeful that her son is alive.

Carmen tells me that the place where we are is known as “Las Palmas”. It is not until we leave and go away from the hill, when I discover that the place is called like that because, among all the vegetation, very tall palm trees grow and rise from the green roof. Also, with this reference we notice how high we climb.

“Hey, up here!” screams are heard, they’re asking the canine team to go up. The air smells like garlic because of a plant that we cannot spot, but perceive. The how a certain thing, plant or food takes on a new meaning to me would happen at least twice during the Brigade. I will never be able to think the same about garlic: what used to be only a style to prepare food for me, now will always remind me of the spicy air that interfered with the search.

As we climb the slippery ground, three agents from the Criminal Investigation Agency join. There is something that looks like a gap, as if the ground had been removed long ago, and the possibility of a pit is verified with a rod. After burying the rod in the ground, “Sibani” arrives, one of the two dogs that are trained to detect human remains. Negative. Another woman says that she will continue digging because she has a hunch and that the garlic may have affected the animal’s nose.

A few meters down, Montserrat Castillo, one of the organizers, awaits. She is searching for everyone and no one in particular: she is not the only one that accompanies the Brigade as a volunteer of the Network of National Links, despite having no missing family member. Her first approach was eight years ago with the poet Javier Sicilia’s National Movement for Peace, and since that moment, she joined the Brigade when she met the Trujillo brothers, so she has attended all possible national searches from Amatlán to Poza Rica. Montserrat seems to be everywhere at the same time: later, we would discover that she has a twin, although both are such active women, that we got to think that they were triplets instead.

It is similar to Rosalba’s case, a woman from Sinaloa who lives in Baja California.

This hairdresser and mother of two founded the search collective "San José, rastreadores de la Baja," even if she had no missing relatives. Nevertheless, after almost one year of activism one of her friends disappeared, and she has suffered intimidation because of her actions. In spite of how hard his work can get to be, Rosalba proudly says that her children understand what she does, and says that on Christmas Day, her eight-year-old daughter wrote a letter for her, but since she did not understand her daughter's handwriting, she asked her to read it for her.

"Dear Santa, I don't want toys or gifts, I'm just asking you to help my mom to find all the one who are disappeared," wrote her girl. While the agents of the Attorney General's Office fence the area to collect pieces of bones, it is already one o'clock and the lunch is served for everyone: there are meat tamales with vegetables and flavored electrolytes to accompany. The electrolytes can help to get hydrated without having to urinate that many times. This last thing can be difficult for women, and we are a majority, so we have to go as a group to a remote part of the path and get into the bush.

After eating a little, Ana Karen Bautista Santiago works on an unexplored piece of land. She knew that her son was missing when she was informed that he had not come home. After some investigation, she would find out that the Civil Force intercepted the young man who used to work in a supermarket in Poza Rica, on the 17th of January 2016. Although she joined the "Unidos por amor a nuestros desaparecidos" collective just two months ago, she has made six independent searches to find José David. A few meters away from Ana, Reina Barrera García sits behind the yellow tape to observe the work of the agents in white suits. With her 71 years of age, she goes up and down the hill looking for the seventh and youngest of all her children. "I always count him," laments Reina, little Reina, as they call her in the Brigade with affection.

The laminated photo of Luis Javier Hernández Barrera, who disappeared in Poza Rica on the 20th of November 2011, hangs from a cord around his mother's neck. The weight of his disappearance has fallen on her, the one who looks for him, suffers and cries for him. Reina was born in Tuxpan, to the north of Poza Rica, but she moved to Reynosa, Tamaulipas, with one of her daughters until another sister of Luis told her that they couldn't find him, and the two of them started crying on the phone. She decided to abandon her medical treatment to go and find her son.

"Some people tell me he was in bad steps," tells the woman as she clings to a threadbare backpack where she carries her medicines, her mobile and some plants that she liked because of how they bloom. She does not fully believe what people told her, because she states that Luis Javier worked as a bricklayer and his life was not luxurious, but rather with deficiencies.

In addition to an unofficial criminalization, she also faced the typical bureaucracy of the disappearances in Veracruz: the Prosecutor's Office was not aware of the case because his son's partner did not report it, until Reina she did it and they took DNA samples from her. As in many other cases, what she found out was by personal investigations, not by the authorities: her son had been threatened in a sports ground by another man, apparently related to her daughter-in-law.

Reina barely receives some understanding from her family, so she has found comfort in the collectives, where there are women getting organized and looking for children, siblings, parents, nephews or friends are organized, most of the times without the support of their close relatives.

Her black leather boots are already worn out because they were not made to walk in the dirt, only to go for a walk. But she uses them for this and she will use them every single day for the rest of the time that the Brigade lasts, because they are the only pair of shoes that she brought. The only thing that can't be taken away from her is the hope of finding her son, it doesn't matter the way she gets to find him, because for her "even if he was already an adult man, he was my baby".

Marité Kinijara is at the top of the hill, the highest place that the Brigade can reach. She is upset because there were no prayers or blessings before they started the search. It is the first National Brigade in which she participates, and she is wearing a white t-shirt with the printed photo of her brother Fernando, who disappeared on the 11th of August 2015 in Empalme, Sonora.

"No, it's mold, we already smelled it," she replies to another woman who thinks there are burned logs.

When his brother disappeared, she looked for Mario Vergara and, in two months, they set up the "Guerreras Buscadoras de Sonora" collective, distributed into seven municipalities to search for more than 800 disappeared persons. Like Mario said, she agrees that Veracruz is distinguished by its humidity, which makes the search tasks difficult.

The late afternoon comes with worries for the group. Maricel Torres checks a low area with another group, the one that randomly digs the soil. Soon, the terrain looks dark under the undergrowth that is already impeding light to pass through. With the Sun, the energies and hopes of finding more than just remains, irresponsibly forgotten by the Veracruz Prosecutor's Office a year ago, go away.

The members of the Brigade leave the hill and rest on its lower slopes. Maricel and some other women make tuna sandwiches and offer them from hand to hand. Suddenly, nobody knows from where, some two-and-a-half liter cokes appear, and we all celebrate, and pour some in our plastic glasses, the equivalent of a few sips, so it can be enough for everyone.

Then, Marité sits next to me, on the ground, and starts to sing a song written by an inmate from the Old Guaymas Jail, Rogelio Fernández, with information he obtained from the radio or newspapers.

The tools are left lying at the entrance to the tree tunnel that leads to where the forensic experts will be working until they collect the last bone. One of the Brigade coordinators asks them to group together and record a video to say thanks because they surpassed the goal of $7.500 (150.000 pesos) at the donadora.org page (in the end, they would collect 198.555 pesos, more of $9.920).

Then they are called by Father Luis Orlando Pérez, a Jesuit collaborator in the Education area at the Centre PRODH, who actively accompanies them in the field. In a circle, they hold hands, thanking God for the search day and ask that the people who were killed can find peace and that they can be found by their relatives. When the Our Father ends, Reina breaks down in tears.

Marité, Yadira, Maricel, two brigade members from Marabunta and a woman from the Network of National Links run to hug her and start to jump around her to cheer her up. Reina wipes her tears as she smiles and then poses with them with a wistful expression on her face. The way back is serene. The landscapes in that area of Veracruz, especially at sunset, look like a postcard. It is ironic that this kind of horrors happened in such beautiful places. I would to imagine that the search group is actually one of hikers who rent vans, traveling to see some archaeological zone lost in the jungle all day long, having backpacks filled with repellent, food and electrolytes and that, at the end of the day, they meet to return to their hotel; I wish it was like that, but it is not. Although the mood is strong today, there is no pleasure or fun in what they actually did. Then the blow of the fresh air from the highway brings me back to the back side of the pick-up where I am lying in not an easy position, and then a sign reminds us that we are in Veracruz.

Tuesday, 11th February

Today, we have been told that we will go to a river near to where we were yesterday. We remember the crystalline waters of the river that we crossed to go to El Paso, so there is enough excitement at the possibility of taking a refreshing dip in the water, so the seekers wear shorts and flip-flops.

Breakfast is served at 7 in the morning in the dining room located on the ground floor of a brick building at the top of the hill, next to the chapel and a white statue of a virgin. It is large enough to gather the entire Brigade. People line up to pour some coffee in plastic cups, to have a plate with food and a sweet bread; then they are seated at long tables with seats enough for eight or ten.

The dynamics are like Monday's. Each person is noted on a list according to her axis (search alive, countryside, churches, schools, or coroner's office) and hops on the corresponding vehicle. A bus is added to today's trip. I take a place in the back side of a pickup, there are five men and three women (me included), it means we will get numb more easily. Reina is with us because she did not want to leave in the bus. She entertains herself by peeling off her leather boots; when she laughs, she shows her toothless mouth and when she stays serious, her lips remain twisted into a permanent grin and curved down and to the left.

Those who talk about their experiences do so with enthusiasm; It seems to be a lifestyle and sometimes it seems that they can no longer imagine life beyond searching. At 11 am, after a truck was lost and we ran out of gas, we have barely reached Poza Rica, and the convoy stops at a convenience store. The Marabunta member in our unit asks us not to leave the vehicle so there won't be any kind of disorder, but when he sees his own mates running towards the store, he changes his mind. The cokes are taken out of the cooler boxes in a heap and suddenly, there is a line of people wearing caps and backpacks; we look like explorers. The soda keeps us awake: before that, another young man and I were nodding. During the journey, changing positions is essential to avoid losing sensitivity in the legs.

We took almost the entire route yesterday, but instead of turning off towards the El Paso clinic, we continued straight on the main road. Here there is more movement than heading to "Las Palmas" and there are even businesses like the "Doña Mini" cafeteria. Palm groves, dry trees, orange groves and cornfields alternate the view. We turn to the left of a field with people picking tomatoes and when it is almost 1 in the afternoon, we finally stop in front of a ranch.

Mario Vergara announces that in this area they were told that a woman had been buried and that later, next to a river, there would be bags with human remains. This information was obtained by the exploration group that traveled the villages days before us, trying to gain the People's so that they could tell them if they knew where bodies were being dumped or buried, or where the disappeared were taken to. The problem is that, quite often, the information is not verified or there is no exact point where we can search. The seekers split in two teams: the first is for the ones that stay to rod the land, and the second is for those that wear flip-flops and go towards the tributary that is 800 meters away and which is practically the Cazones River, the same one that crosses Poza Rica.

On the way to the river, Yessenia Ramírez, from Coatzacoalcos, in the south of the state, and whose father is missing, complains of pain in her hand because she touched a plant that caused her an allergic reaction. Despite the swelling, she arrives with the group to the shore.

Yesterday's risk was snakes, like the nauyaca that, as we would just realize, was released by Miguel Barrera, the leader of the Marabunta Brigade. Today the fauna is more varied: in addition to snakes, we must also take care of mosquitoes and spiders, plus plants that can cause us some itching.

Flip-flops will be useless because the river is covered by the fall of two trees that caused the water to stagnate and, in addition to the bad smell, the bottom is muddy. Marité, wearing the same shirt with the photo of her brother Fernando, downplays it and gets in with her sandals on. She is followed by Tranquilina, a man and woman

that are also seekers, Miguel and two other Marabunta members.

"Being in the Brigade is like building up some sort of peace. Being in the mud is building up some sort of peace" Marité sings rhythmically, with water reaching up her thighs. From inside they remove the branches and cut the fallen trunk to be sure that, if there were some plastic bags, they are not stuck among the roots. After almost two hours, the river current flows again, but they find anything but sand sacks, the sole and lining of a woman's shoe, and a piece of clothing next to the river.

Next to the water, Angélica Ramírez, from Baja California, tells me that she divides her time between being in charge of two beauty salons and being a volunteer, since she fortunately has no missing relatives, although like Rosalba, she experienced the disappearance of a friend after becoming an activist.

Beyond the water stream, Herlinda Baltazar Santiago looks at some sacks, with suspicious eyes. The experience taught her the strategy of burying people alive in the Cazones River by tying stones to them. A Marabunta member tells her that they are just sand sacks, not cement.

Maybe his brother is around there or not. Armando Baltazar was kidnapped from his home on the 17th of September 2015, when he was 48 years old. The father of Baltazar brothers was the owner of at least 24 hectares of land in Poza Rica and, after donating 3 to the municipality in order to have a school in there, he was able to lotify 12 and sell them, Herlinda explains. That is why she points out that his father could have paid $15.000 (300.000 pesos) that the criminals demanded as a ransom, but he did not want to do it because he considered that they would murder his son, one way or another.

"You stupid woman, if you don't give us the money, you will never see Armando again." His sister-in-law was the one who received the phone call in which, like in many other kidnapping cases in Poza Rica since Fidel Herrera was governor, criminals threatened with disappearance in the absence of a payment.

She also suspects one of her nine siblings. She believes that money and ambition were the reasons to kidnap Armando, who came back to Poza Rica to help with his father's business, when she, who lives in Tantoyuca, to the north of Poza Rica, insisted that he had better not come.

Herlinda uses her pension as retired elementary school teacher to pay for Armando's search: she uses her truck and pays a man, who helps her drive and do field work in searches with the María Herrera collective, since her husband has diabetes and he cannot support her, and as for the rest of her family, she does not get any kind of understanding from them.

It is almost 3:30 in the afternoon and it means lunch time. The food is has finally arrived: tamales, like the ones we had on Monday. Packs of ten tuna sandwiches were left behind. Water and some oranges are also served for everyone. Herlinda sits down. It does not matter if her varicose veins are on top of horse droppings.

Despite the heat and hunger, there are ways to keep the spirits up. Tranquilina, soaked from her neck down, chases some others to give them a hug and wet them. These days the presidential plane raffle is a trending topic, so they allow themselves to fantasize and mention that, if Marabunta won the plane,"By searching for them, we find ourselves," they would write in huge letters, with adhesive tape.

"We are going to continue working because we are already delusional". A group of reporters and I decided to go back to the first point, and the National Guard gives us a ride.

You can enter the ranch without permission from the owners, Mario Vergara later confessed, since the request would significantly delay the searches. This land of about 50 square meters is divided with a string into four quadrants. They are looking for the skeleton of a woman, or at least that was the information given to the exploration group.

In the upper left quadrant, an older man digs and stags. Firstly, he tries with a small rod, then with a large one. The man, who is called Marcos Contreras Román and comes from Córdoba, Veracruz, works together with Lilian Sage, a Canadian woman who spends half the year working in Vancouver and the rest in Mexico City, from where she travels to take part in different volunteer programs in the country .

When they pull the rod out and they conclude it is a negative point, it smells like iron or wet ground; several of us who ask us to borrow our sense of smell to check a point. When positive, it smells putrefied.

Today the results are negative. Neither at the ranch nor in the river anything was found that the first group had been informed of. But it is only the second day, and the mood is still up.

Wednesday, 12th of February

"Stand up or the ticks will attack you."

During breakfast, on the third day of field work, the tick bites are the trending topic in the dining room. When I came back from the river and after entering the land, tired, I decided to sit for a while on the ground next to the path, but a woman recommended that I better would not do it because of these creeping animals. Now, they say that even after taking a shower, ticks were found, like black dots, stuck to the skin.

After eating green beans with scrambled eggs, black beans, bread and some coffee, each one hopped on the truck or van according to their activity.

We move to Santiago Street, in the La Rueda neighborhood, northeast of Poza Rica.

Victoria Delgadillo, leader of the "Enlace Xalapa" collective, told me that we would

go to a place where people were thrown to crocodiles.

We arrived at the entrance of a land of more than 500 square meters, half covered with trees and the other, with brush. The "Club Certoma" elementary school, whose walls adjoin the property, is on the corner. They doubled the wall's height after the constant shootings (that happened even during classes) and because the people of the neighborhood found out that the ground served even as a dump for corpses.

That was discovered by a dog that removed the fresh arm of a woman in 2017. This is what Moisés González Díaz, from the Alliance of Shepherd and leader of the colony, tells. He brought the Brigade to this point after the testimonies he has collected in recent years. The Prosecutor's Office took out a bundle but it was told they had not found anything. "The dog surely took it from another side" was the response that the agents gave to pastor Moisés.

Sometime later, he explains, there was a project to build houses or to sell the land in various lots to the highest bidder for whatever they wanted the land lots for, but they stopped when they found human remains. The only thing left is a human bone in the middle of the undergrowth, where they inform that there are nauyacas, a kind of a poisonous snake. Just like the first day, the seekers enter in teams to observe the bone, possibly from one arm, and its characteristics such as color, size, or texture, which, explains a forensic anthropologist, distinguish them from those of animals. The field is divided into quadrants and they begin to remove the brush at impressive speed. It is cloudy and that allows you to work in a little bit easier way. Mario Vergara, the field search coordinator, and Miguel Barrera, from Marabunta, go to the bottom with three more volunteers and find women's purple underwear. Then, they descend on tracks made by heavy equipment and arrive at an open and cleaner space until they come across a fence made of sheep cloth. Mario points out that beyond that point, there is the Cazones River, where he has heard that people were allegedly thrown to the crocodiles. Miguel, who has accompanied the Brigade since the second search, also says that the complicated thing about Veracruz is that it is always green.

"You have to open it as if you were going to bury a person," says Mario when he detects softened ground. The Marabunta members take turns to take the pickaxes and shovels to soften the soil and dig. Above them, a drone is humming. They ask on the radio if it is from the Brigade, and they confirm that one is property of the Federal Police. According to what their experience says, they can be monitored like this by those who do not want them to discover the clandestine graves.

After digging for a while, a sock appears, then a piece of a shirt, the spring of some underwear and a Christmas boot. Mario explains that in other places they try to hide the graves by throwing garbage to confuse them and that this work could have been done with a machine due to the number of stones that are there and the heavy equipment traces that we saw before.

Before noon they pull out something that looks like a mop. A young Marabunta member shakes it and jokes with others telling them to put on as a wig. But as more ground falls, black root braids and dark red strands are discovered. There is expectation that it could be hair. No, it is a wig, but, what are all those things doing there in a hole of more than a meter deep in the bottom of a land where, in its front side, there is a human bone? The first time I talked to Mario, two years ago, he told me that clothes do not grow on hills, as a way to explain that finding many clothes in places like this is not normal, even less if they are buried. They continue digging, now, to the rhythm of the "El Mecate" cumbia by La Luz Roja de San Marcos, a local band.

As background noise, every few minutes, a water pump can be heard. Pastor Moisés told me that the land where the pump is located was sold by the owner of the property from where we are searching for people, and that the buyer is dedicated to the distribution of water by pipes. The liquid was extracted day and night, the neighbors went to report it to the City Council since the noise was too loud, and then, the man threatened them with death. Between the front and the back of that land, there is a path, to the right, towards a grove that has some tattered clothes, a backpack, a woman's wallet, and a lot of plastic car garbage. There is a possibility that the clothes had reached the ground due to a great flood in Poza Rica, although twenty years have passed since then. On the other hand, the clothes do not look that old, and there is even some sort of a clothesline in the middle of the trees. Tranquilina Hernández Lagunes rests for a moment, leaning on her rod. She came all the way from Cuernavaca, Morelos, to gain some experience for her own search: her daughter Mireya, who disappeared on the 13th of September 2014 when she was 18 years old. That is the reason why she keeps Mireya's same phone number, something common among the seekers, in case her daughter tries to communicate with her one day. She never liked Mireya's boyfriend and she believes that he or his family are involved in her daughter's disappearance, especially after she knew, from official investigations about them, that the brother-in-law of her daughter's boyfriend was also disappeared.

"My hope is that she may be in a tolerance zone or wandering the streets." It can be blood-curling to think that, if Mireya lives, she may be a victim of human trafficking, but it is something that her mother learned from the path she has traveled while searching for her: she explains that the girls, many times, end up working as prostitutes the same as boys, or that they also end up as victims of organ trafficking . Tranquilina's eyes are going teary. That would mean that many people's lives were cut short by reducing them to the same value of any other piece of meat: sexual exploitation or to rip off their viscera. That is why she exclaims that, if they have already abused their daughter, if they have already made money from her in the past six years, they give her daughter back.

"Someday someone else is going to help me know the truth," Tranquilina said, and that's why she has been participating in the searches since the first National Brigade, because, by helping others, she is kind of satisfied and motivates her to keep going on.

Back in the front of the field, this looks like it has been transformed by barely having any undergrowth left. The Marabunta squad honor their name: they are legionary ants that raze everything in their path. Meanwhile, the seekers sift dirt from mounds to see if they can find crushed human remains by the heavy equipment.

The workday ends, and there is nothing left but to rest for a while on the ground or the rubble. There is more silence and less joy than in the last days. Some women go to the toilette in groups. A neighbor is sharing her restroom with them, and she takes some minutes to hear the stories about the people they are looking for, but she says that she knows nothing about where in Poza Rica they could have disappeared, despite how Poza Rica became a place where it is now common to hear about a co-worker or a friend having a loved one that had been kidnapped or disappeared.

Thursday, 13th of February

The weather that allowed to work well on Wednesday became treacherous on Thursday. The 39th Cold Front cancelled the trip to the field, and the team joined the Schools axis. We go to the "Francisco Morosini" kindergarten, in the Arroyo del Maíz 1 neighborhood, on the edge of the city. Along the way, the Federal Police patrols split ways and the agents will spend the day in the archaeological zone of El Tajín.

The dome protects children, mothers and brigade members from the rain. At 11 in the morning the clown "Canica" comes out to talk with the little ones about peace, while the mothers are also paying attention. There are circus shows such as the one performed by Isaac Roberto Hernández Luna, who is characterized as "Picudo Patines Ponzoña" to juggle colored rings.

After a bit of fun, Liliana López, from the group "Madres Buscadoras de Sonora" (searching mothers from Sonora), explains the adults that they come to build peace, but above all, to ask that, in case someone knows where in that zone some human remains could be found, that one can leave an anonymous message or map it in the "Peace Mailbox". The juggling acts continue, and then, with some balancing on a string performed by "Venadito," who makes his triumphal entry, barefoot and playing a cumbia. All these characters are played by volunteers from the Marabunta Brigade. They do some storytelling, sing songs, dominate a soccer ball, and do aerial dance.

Almost in the end, the Brigade members ask the children and their mothers to hold hands and, together, they build a huge symbol of peace. Children hug the seekers and draw some messages of peace and hope on a wall newspaper. Suddenly, Liliana is approached by Katherine, a four-year-old girl, who hugs her.

"If I get lost, my mom is going to look for you, so you both can search for me," the little girl would whisper in her ear, leaving Lily thrilled.

When the children leave, Lily has some fun by spinning the soccer ball with her index finger and she goes surprised when she can do it many times in a row. They take out a Mexican lottery (a very typical board-game in the country) that they bought the day before, and nine people join the game by paying two pesos per cardboard, each one with different colorful drawings.

"What moves the Brigade?" Liliana sings. "The Heart!" And hold up the card with a heart drawn on it.

The ones who have that same figure drawn on their cardboards, rush to mark it with little fluorescent paper balls, made of sticky notes. On the other hand, when El Diablo (the devil), La Muerte (the death) or La Calavera (the skull) come out, Lily tries to sing fast, and without paying that much attention to such cards.

In the face of difficult days, laughing is cathartic.

Friday, 14th of February 14 to Monday, 17th of February

I leave the Brigade for a few days while on Friday they leave to go to "El Chote," a community in Coatzintla, in the middle of Poza Rica and Papantla. The search, despite not losing its intensity, is ephemeral once again.

On Saturday they are back in Poza Rica, in a point about ten minutes south of the La Rueda neighborhood, where had already been on Wednesday. Mecatepec street ends at the edge of the Cazones River, in a section where it opens in a curve. Heka Ríos, a documentary filmmaker who accompanies the Fifth Brigade, tells me that it was said that people were also thrown here to the crocodiles, but there were no more findings than an umbrella and some candles, one of them dedicated to the Devil. By then, he says, the Brigade was beginning to show some discouragement.

On Sunday, Ríos accompanies the Search in Life axis to the Papantla's penitentiary. Although inmates welcome them, no one gives information on search points. There were no trips to field, but they were distributed to attend masses in the region, the "Walk for Peace" in Coatzintla at 11 in the morning, and to distribute leaflets in the afternoon. The next day they go to the northwest of Poza Rica, near the limits with Puebla, to an area of orange groves in the "La Antigua" community, municipality of Tihuatlán. At the base of a hill there is a cabin where they find boots of different sizes, as well as men's and women's clothing.

The people of La Antigua tell Miguel Trujillo that they could hear the screams coming from a some sort of training camp where around 60 young people under 30 arrived, they were made go up and down the mountain, using their elbows against the ground, and the ones who were unable to do this was hit with a board. This place, according to newspaper reports from 2014, is where the Army dismantled a camp.

"We were very surprised that there were some kind of graves, or something that looked like graves, but they were rather used as trenches for the bad guys to hide and hence, they could be able to do the training," says one of the most active women in the Brigade, Yadira González Hernández, from Querétaro. She is looking for her

brother Juan González Hernandez, who disappeared on the 16th of June 2006. She also remembers that there were bullet holes in orange and mango trees, and that, beyond the fields they found some abandoned barrels.

Other searchers find a car mat with blood traces that was buried, and their intuition tells them that a person was wrapped in it, says Tranquilina. In total, they found three pits and one of them was a processed grave: a hundred meters away, on the hill, they unearthed a black bag that for a moment made them think that it had a body inside. In reality, there were cordon tapes and garbage from previous procedures, something that violates the Prosecutor's own protocols, a searcher says.

Tuesday, 18th of February and Thursday, 20th of February

Suddenly, Yadira finds herself surrounded by human remains. Wherever she stands, she will crush them and if she wants to get out of there, she will have to step on them. Today is the sixth time that search for disappeared people at "La Gallera" in Tihuatlán, and the fifth time that collectives enter that ranch. They did not expect to find any more remains behind the house, where six bodies and two skulls were exhumed some years ago, but the touch of Tranquilina's fingers on the ground was enough to take out some pieces of cracked bones.

Yadira responds to Tranquilina's call and repeats the process until she realizes that every here and there, human bones were mixed with animal remains. "I do not want to move, because I am stepping on them," she thinks, but she knows she must do it, because there is no other way to get out of that place. It is painful and frustrating.

I rejoin the Brigade the day after, but I go to "La Gallera" until Tuesday. To get there, we passed "Autopartes Gómez," a junkyard, the same company where the Trujillo brothers' car ended up after they were disappeared by the Intermunicipal Police.

The house and the oven, which caused so much pain among the seekers of Poza Rica, rise at the end of the road full of undergrowth. A huge pine tree shades the pale facade of the house, which shows the lack of maintenance for almost nine years. The shapes of blacksmithing, that once were protections, are embedded in the washed walls. After a halfheight balustrade, I go through the main door that leads to what could have been the pinkwalled living room, with columns with broken mosaics and "Z-35" written on a wall. The floor is different in this and each one of the three rooms on the left. In the first room, the hematic mark of a hand is still clear and the lower part of the wall looks messy, as if someone had rubbed his hands against it, while on the floor there are two packages of condoms that look from recent times, and Yadira remembers that there was a used condom behind a car seat that is in the middle of the room; in the next room there is only an old and broken wooden closet; in the last one, with stained walls, we shudder when we read a name compulsively written with a pencil on the walls.

"Pedro," we read vertically on a column and then, horizontally, on a wall. "Pedro Mora," we hesitate. "Morales! Juares, with 's'!" There are, in total, six "Pedro," one "Morales," one "m" and two "Juares".

They can barely be read. Next to the light switch, there is another name, "María Guadalupe". Also, someone wrote "Jesus" on the kitchen bar. There are two burned cans of beans, and in the corner, there are sprinkled corncobs next to a bottle of beer. To the right of the kitchen and living room, there is the porch and sixteen steps lead to the slab where an unfinished room is. There is a box in the middle, which has some used toilet paper, same scene as in a cistern.

From above, I can see the oven in the front, and behind, there is the yard where Yadira was shocked and unable to move.

One of the strangest things is that around the oven and the house, they found ten water jugs with perforations in the base, they were completely buried. And one of the most painful ones, is that when going out the back door of the house to the yard, you can easily see a pink pacifier. I hallucinate. Then Yadira would confirm that she also saw the pacifier and the she also found diapers.

Two days after the first visit to "La Gallera" by the Fifth Brigade, they continue to search around the oven because Danisha, a Belgian shepherd dog from the K-9 of the Federal Police, marked it as a positive spot, although she was later saturated by the smell of the death.

In addition, there are buried ashes and mounds that were left as unchecked. The searchers are clad in white forensic suits and strain the ashes to detect severed fragments that were not consumed. Yadira believes that the place would have some job to be done for months or even years, which would be too much time, because it is enough for you to sit down and pay some attention to any piece of land so bones can come out, since judging by how burned they are, they look like stones and are confused with the color of the ground. She also showed some evidences on how useless the agents can get to be. She found a rusty machete and marked it with a piece of tape for it to be processed as evidence. But Policeman who would usually investigate these cases, took it to hit the kitchen floor because, according to him, it was heard hollow.

"What are you doing?" She rebuked him. "Why are you doing that, completely gloveless and with an evidence in your hands? It's outrageous that, you as an element for special investigations seems to know nothing about anything, damn it! Can't you see the yellow tape?"

On Tuesday Yadira removed a pile of bone fragments from a hole of around 60 centimeters of diameter. The place is crowded, and the agents of the Attorney General of the Republic are not enough. She chose to hide them again.

"In fact, the human remains look like they were cut with a saw," she says, "and then those little pieces left of our people were mixed up with animal bones. All of this is mixed up, both humans and animals, randomly dumped all over the ranch." Then she

explains that if there would be anything that still remains of them, in case the DNA is extracted, that tiny little piece will be destroyed forever, and the families will receive nothing more than a piece of paper saying that was their loved one.

So, when Yadira found herself as if she would have been besieged in the bone-mined field, she could not help but crying alongside Tranquilina.

"La Gallera is totally an extermination camp."

Wednesday, 19th of February to Friday, 21st of February

A day before, on Wednesday, I rejoined the Brigade, and today we go to a ranch located behind "Lomas Residencial," a luxurious and private neighborhood. A two-meter-high fence topped with coils of steel blades separates the idea of security from a land that vomits clothing, when it is being dogged.

The landscape up here is fabulous. Everything screams green color, and life. It is a place where you imagine a weekend with friends or family, as Yadira would later say, if it was not for the fact that they know that they are tracing the trail of buried human remains. We reached this point with information from a man who contacted a member of the María Herrera collective, although it was Miguel Trujillo who kept the communication by messages. The informant assured that there, he "cooked" people and that they should find the remains, but there are only buried clothing and some bullet holes in the bark of a leafy mango tree surrounded by palms with thorns as fine and dangerous as hypodermic needles. "Royal papanes," black birds with vibrant yellow plumage, eat from a coyol palm and squawk loudly as we pass by. I wonder if those birds have seen the ones that were brought here to die and if they also sang as they were passing by.

For the first time, I hear Maricel Torres saying that they will never find their disappeared. She mentions it as we cross two dried streams, and gracefully makes her way up the ranch which seems to have some sort of a roller coaster topography. Her voice sounds full of sadness and frustration. Things have changed with time, she says. Ticks make us their prey during a break. María Ortiz distributes enchiladas, typical food of the region, among everyone. I tried to make a joke asking for a zacahuil. She replies that such food is prohibited in the collective, and I do not understand why, since it is one of the most traditional dishes in Poza Rica. Then she explains that in "La Gallera" they discovered that some used to say that people "were cooked like a zacahuil" in the oven, so now they have a special aversion to that dish. I apologize.

Almost when we left, Belén González, the leader of a collective that has her name, from Coatzacoalcos, slips on a palm leaf and breaks her hand. She is very angry because she has a search in her area the next week, and she ends up in the hospital needing an operation.

On the way to the House of the Church, we passed by Poza Rica and were happy to see the mural that the Brigade painted below a road bridge: two hands clasped by the wrists, a white dove flying, the DNA double helix, diamonds (which means their lost treasures) and, in the end, in capital letters: "By searching for them, we find ourselves".

On Thursday, we first go to "La Gallera" and then we join another search in Tihuatlán, in a place called "Las Antenas," from where you can see all Poza Rica behind the Cazones River. It is impossible not to notice the word "Zetaz" painted on a wall of the structure that protects one of the numerous telecommunication antennas a few meters from a Pemex well. It is already more than 4 in the afternoon and the group checks an area with many trees, just after Pemex facilities. Vultures fly over us and some giant mosquitoes are devouring us while the agents of the Criminal Investigation Agency cool off the air conditioning inside the van.

On the hill, practically behind the back of the Federal Police facilities, we find a variety of girls' and women's clothing: gray high school skirts, blouses, panties, shoes, and a package of condoms that expires in July 2021. Most of us shudder when we realize that we are in a place where sexual assaults take place.

On Friday morning, in the Church House, the rain falls like fine dew that could barely wet someone but cools the soul instead. The Fifth Brigade ends today. When the day starts, the members of the Brigade inaugurate the mural, and unveil a plaque at the Poza Rica City Hall and read the final report from "La Gallera". There is desolation. Not because they had found so little in two weeks, but because that time was enough to confirm something that the María Herrera collective refused to admit. At the end of the report, the Fifth National Brigade announces the following: the north of Veracruz is full of "kitchens" and for that reason they found nothing, no matter how much they had searched.

The "Kitchens" of Veracruz: An Improved Practice for Human Disappearance

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.presencia.mx/especiales/articulo.aspx?id=4&s=1

English translation is available via the following link:
https://fjawards.com/finalists/56-violeta-alejandra-santiago-hernandez/article

Keep on Searching for the Others

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.presencia.mx/especiales/articulo.aspx?id=5&s=1

English translation is available via the following link:
https://fjawards.com/finalists/56-violeta-alejandra-santiago-hernandez/article

SHORTLISTED STORY

Dreams Live on Behind the Fence

Andrea Backhaus
(Germany)

Zeit Online - July 8, 2019

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2019-07/gaza-strip-palestinians-dreams-israel-blockade-english

"It was a privilege to read the works of so many talented journalists sharing important issues."

TONY SADOWNICHIK
Board Chair, World Heritage International
Former Board Chair, Greenpeace International
FJA Expert Council Member

MESSAGE FROM THE JURY

BARBARA TRIONFI

Executive Director,
International Press Institute (IPI)

Jury Member,
Fetisov Journalism Awards

"We live in very challenging times for journalism. At IPI throughout the COVID-19 crisis we have recorded a growing climate of hostility against independent journalists, a climate of hate that is promoted and at times even instigated, I would say, by political leaders who wish to control the media message and so hold a grip on power. And this economic pressure on the media itself has also increased throughout the crisis. Today there are serious concerns about the future of independent journalism.

But at the same time there is also a lot of hope as we look around and see journalism is reinventing itself in order to face today's challenges and tonight we had some wonderful examples of how journalists have really worked in order to bring out amazing stories. We see journalists who stand up to their oppressors, we see a powerful independent occasionally online news media which is supported exclusively by communities of readers, promoting trust, transparency, accountability and a profound sense of mission. And we see a new solidarity among journalists and the desire to work together within and across national borders to produce the best journalism.

So it is really in this context that the Fetisov Journalism Awards are more needed than ever. They give us an opportunity to celebrate incredible examples of journalism, a journalism that reveals well-kept secrets, uncovers important facts, exposes corruption and abuses of power, and which underscores the values on which our societies are based."

A quote from Barbara Trionfi's speech at the Second Fetisov Journalism Awards Ceremony, 22.04.2021

Excellence in Environmental Journalism

EXCELLENCE IN ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM

By Aidan White

By reporting on issues across the world affecting the climate crisis the media can influence change. And that change is urgently needed according to an unprecedented consensus of eminent scientists and experts who predict a catastrophic climate and environmental emergency in the coming decades.

Across the globe the pressure of human economic exploitation and declining natural resources are creating an additional layer of crisis for vulnerable communities as traditional habitats and ways of living are changed beyond recognition.

Reporting this complex and painfully human story requires journalism of the highest quality – an inquiring mind, a sound knowledge of science, an ability to analyse and translate dry statistical information, and above all, the capacity to chart the impact of change on communities most at risk.

This category in the FJA awards has produced an abundance of examples where journalists show they are up to the task of reporting the greatest challenge of the age – how to save the planet from environmental and climate disaster.

Journalism is vitally important in the cause of environmental protection because the media can connect the local and the global story, which is an essential part of finding a solution to the crisis.

The global environmental and climate crisis which is leading to the collapse of natural support systems and the toxic pollution of air, water and soil is only beginning to become apparent in distant regions and within poor communities.

But the ultimate consequences and impact of the suffering now being felt in many poorer regions will be felt in the wealthier and more densely populated regions of the world. What is a rural crisis today, will emerge as an urban catastrophe tomorrow.

The Covid-19 pandemic has delivered a powerful lesson that unless problems are identified and dealt with early and at a local level, our good health and economic wellbeing will suffer as the problem rapidly spreads across the world.

The journalism in this category focuses equally on local and global stories, but all of it is linked in its description of a crisis which touches the lives of everyone.

Entries, for example, on the decline and disintegration of traditional farming in Somaliland, as climate change has devastated poor rural communities, and another on the current and predicted future impact of climate change in the Israel-Palestine conflict provide compelling evidence of local stories with potentially global impact.

At the same time in a globalised economy there are many examples of how industries are failing to recognise the destructive impact of their activities. One such example here is a comprehensive and impressive take down of global mining and how journalists are at risk in trying to uncover industrial wrongdoing.

Inevitably, the issue of industrial pollution and its impact on the lives of others features in this category with poignant and emotional human interest stories.

From Uganda comes the story of how pollution is taking its toll on Lake Victoria in the heart of Africa and another entry from Nigeria takes the government and the oil industry to task over oil spills that threaten the lives of people in the Ongoni region.

But there are also stories that give hope: there is a wider understanding of the threats now facing humanity, highlighted in a series of interviews with people in Australia, a country particularly threatened by drought and wildfires, and in Brazil one article tells the courageous story of increasing resistance within the indigenous communities to the climate crisis denials of the government of Jair Bolsonaro.

From India another shortlisted entry examines the climate crisis through the testimony of farmers and fishing folk living in and around Delhi. This lived experience has, contained within it, powerful messages for everyone.

The winning entries provide shining examples of journalism at the sharpest end of the environmental crisis – tackling and exposing the political threats, putting a glaring spotlight on the role of corporate culture that makes the crisis worse, and the struggle of people on the ground to preserve their historical culture, traditions and livelihoods.

FIRST PRIZE WINNER

How Science Got Trampled in the Rush to Drill in the Arctic

Adam Federman (United States)

Adam Federman is a reporting fellow with Type Investigations and the author of Fasting and Feasting: The Life of Visionary Food Writer Patience Gray. His work has appeared in Politico Magazine, Wired, The Washington Post and other publications.

EDITOR'S NOTE

First Prize went to Adam Federman from the United States for a ground-breaking story entitled *How Science Got Trampled in the Rush to Drill in the Arctic* which charts the latest phase of a 40-year battle to open up one of America's natural treasures to the oil industry.

It exposes how the government of President Donald Trump sought to distort scientific evidence and undermine the work of professional civil servants in the country's Department of the Interior in order to allow industrial exploitation of oil and gas resources in the Arctic National Wildlife refuge, one of the largest intact wilderness areas in North America.

It is journalism of the highest quality and an excellent review of how politics can trample over academic freedom. It reveals how the willful twisting and distortion of scientific evidence and research is behind the opening up of the Arctic and one of the world's natural wonders to oil exploitation.

The story is a meticulous gathering of facts, through analysis of internal documents as well as interviews with nearly a dozen current and former federal employees.

Detailed, factual and of vital public interest, this story has had a notable impact on the public's understanding of the rush to drill in the Arctic. It has led to calls from the United States Congress to halt the programme.

How Science Got Trampled in the Rush to Drill in the Arctic

Politico Magazine - July 26, 2019

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.politico.com/interactives/2019/trump-science-alaska-drilling-rush/

This article was reported in partnership with Type Investigations.

Every year, hundreds of petroleum industry executives gather in Anchorage for the annual conference of the Alaska Oil and Gas Association, where they discuss policy and celebrate their achievements with the state's political establishment. In May 2018, they again filed into the Dena'ina Civic and Convention Center, but they had a new reason to celebrate. Under the Trump administration, oil and gas development was poised to dramatically expand into a remote corner of Alaska where it had been prohibited for nearly 40 years.

Tucked into the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, a bill signed by President Donald Trump five months earlier, was a brief two-page section that had little to do with tax reform. Drafted by Alaska Senator Lisa Murkowski, the provision opened up approximately 1.6 million acres of the vast Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil and gas leasing, a reversal of the federal policy that has long protected one of the most ecologically important landscapes in the Arctic.

The refuge is believed to sit atop one of the last great onshore oil reserves in North America, with a value conservatively estimated at hundreds of billions of dollars. For decades, the refuge has been the subject of a very public tug of war between pro-drilling forces and conservation advocates determined to protect an ecosystem crucial to polar bears, herds of migratory caribou, and native communities that rely on the wildlife for subsistence hunting. The Trump tax law, for the first time since the refuge was established in 1980, handed the advantage decisively to the drillers.

One of the keynote speakers at the conference that afternoon was Joe Balash, a top official at the Department of the Interior. Balash, who grew up in a small town outside Fairbanks and describes himself as "a local kid," referred to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge as a "jewel," and predicted that the entire North Slope region was "about to change in some pretty astounding ways." The executives were there to hear him talk about what was going to come next: Before development could begin, Interior needed to complete a review of potential environmental impacts, and then get the first leases sold to industry. He recounted for the audience that on his second day on the job—right around when the tax bill was passed—then-Deputy Secretary David Bernhardt sat him down and told him that he would be "personally responsible" for completing the legally complex environmental review process for the wildlife refuge and "having a successful lease sale."

"No pressure," Balash said to audience laughter.

The pressure, in fact, couldn't be greater.

Where Oil and Wildlife Collide

A variety of species such as polar bear and caribou depend on the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to give birth to their young. The plain is also believed to sit atop one of the largest untapped reserves of oil in the United States. A new law has opened up ANWR to drilling for the first time, but some scientists at the Department of the Interior have raised concerns about the adequacy of the environmental review process, which is designed to minimize impacts on the environment.

Today, Bernhardt is the secretary of the Interior, driving energy policy in the Arctic and beyond. And although the tax bill gave DOI four years to complete the first sale, top officials at the department, including Bernhardt and Balash, are determined to get it done in half that time, before the end of 2019.

The only thing standing in the way of establishing an oil and gas leasing program is the environmental review process, which includes an assessment of the proposed seismic surveys and an evaluation of the impacts of leasing and future development on the refuge. Environmental reviews are a standard part of oil and gas drilling elsewhere in Alaska, and normally, such impact statements for ecologically sensitive and undeveloped land would take at least two to three years—or even longer, according to three former DOI officials interviewed for this article. Instead, the administration is compressing it into just over one year. The environmental impact statement for leasing commenced in April 2018, and the final results, already publicly available in draft form, are expected to be published next month.

According to interviews with more than a dozen current and former employees at the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Land Management in Alaska, that speed has come at a significant cost to the reliability and comprehensiveness of the overall environmental review. They describe a process that has been confusing and "off the rails," according to one BLM employee. Documents leaked to POLITICO Magazine and Type Investigations reveal that the work of career scientists has at times been altered or disregarded to underplay the potential impact of oil and gas development on the coastal plain. Moreover, DOI has decided it will undertake no new studies as part of the current review process, despite scientists' concerns that key data is years out of date or doesn't exist.

At least two BLM employees, according to the documents, have submitted strongly worded complaints as part of the administrative record alleging that key findings

in their work on the environmental assessment for seismic surveys were altered or omitted. In one case, according to the leaked documents, a biologist's conclusion was reversed from saying the impacts of seismic surveys on polar bears were uncertain or potentially harmful to a finding that the impact would be "less than significant"—an important distinction in environmental law. In another complaint, a BLM anthropologist was surprised to find that large portions of her analysis of potential impacts on native communities had been removed. A third BLM scientist, who studies fish and water resources, noted that "fundamental inaccuracies" had been introduced into his section without his knowledge. Moreover, these same scientists received an email from the district office instructing them not to modify or correct the changes, which were "based on solicitor and State Office review."

The conclusions of the environmental assessment for the seismic surveying, which has now undergone numerous revisions, aren't yet known. But Balash has already signaled the results: In a recent interview with Alaska Petroleum News, he said seismic surveys, a key preliminary phase of development, were likely to take place this coming winter.

In a written statement, DOI did not respond directly to detailed questions regarding who approved the changes made to the environmental assessment and said the analysis is currently on hold while the license applicant revises its plan of operations. BLM Alaska Associate State Director Ted Murphy said, "The Bureau of Land Management Alaska is not aware of any actions by the agency as a whole, or its partners, employees, agents or outside entities to suppress any science; nor has any evidence to the contrary been presented."

Geoff Haskett, who served as regional director for the Alaska Region of the Fish and Wildlife Service during the Obama administration, said the rush to lease has undermined the scientific integrity of the review process. "In the time they've allotted there's no way they can meet all the legal requirements to do an [environmental impact statement] that's this complicated and this big and this important," Haskett said. "They're going to make mistakes and there will be legal ramifications."

Why the hurry? Observers point out that the tax bill's drilling provision is at huge political risk: If Trump is defeated next year, a Democratic administration would almost certainly move to reverse any effort to drill in the wildlife refuge, which is a far easier task if no leases have been granted. In fact, the Democrat-controlled House of Representatives has already introduced legislation repealing the section of the 2017 tax bill that opens the refuge. Getting a lease issued quickly may be the only opportunity to achieve what no other Republican administration has been able to do: secure leases for drilling in the refuge.

"Balash is there to follow through on the Murkowski legislation and to get at least one lease sale done in ANWR so that whatever else happens in the future with policy, there will be pre-existing rights," a former DOI official who knows Balash told me.

A rushed and incomplete review poses a hazard not just to the environment, but to the companies that want to develop it: The less thorough the review, the less they can protect themselves against future legal risk associated with their drilling operations. More sophisticated and experienced companies have even been known to ask federal agencies to spend more time on an impact statement if they have concerns that the agency might be overlooking something of consequence. Asked about the draft environmental impact statement for leasing in the coastal plain, an Interior official with experience working in Alaska said, "Unless there are some significant changes made, our feeling is it's going to be very susceptible to litigation."

Like many officials inside and outside Alaska, Balash sees opening ANWR as long overdue. And Trump is just trying to make good on a promise that has been made by multiple presidents before him. "The timeline is ambitious, but I think it's an indication of the priority this administration puts on the effort," Balash told me at a meeting in February in Kaktovik, the only North Slope municipality located within the refuge boundary. It could take years, even decades, before actual drilling happens. In the National Petroleum Reserve, a major drilling area also on the North Slope, nearly 20 years passed, he said, between the first lease sale and full-scale oil and gas production.

"Is it going to take that long?" Balash said. "Who knows? The first step is we've got to have a lease sale."

A Battle from the Beginning

To fly over the unbroken boreal forests of the Alaskan interior, the mostly nameless peaks of the Brooks Range—the northernmost extension of the Rocky Mountains—and the ecologically fragile lagoons and salt marshes of the coastal plain is to see a place scarcely impacted by human development. Even in a state with more than 100 million acres of protected land, the refuge seems to stand apart. Jimmy Carter once called it "America's last truly great wilderness."

The 19.6 million-acre wildlife refuge was created by Carter in 1980, when he signed the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. The Act established strong protections for most of the refuge, but gave Congress more discretion over the fate of the coastal plain, a narrow stretch of remote tundra that abuts the Arctic Ocean and where the oil reserves are concentrated.

Environmental science has been guiding development on federal lands in Alaska for decades, not just in wilderness areas, but even in those with active drilling. Since the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in 1970, Bureau of Land Management has routinely carried out environmental reviews of proposed development, including a large percentage of the region's oil rich North Slope. The purpose of the reviews is not to prevent drilling but to ensure that it's done with

a minimum impact on the environment and Native communities. BLM employees are accustomed to working for Republican and Democratic administrations with different policy agendas.

Fran Mauer was involved in some of the early analysis of draft legislation that led to ANILCA in the 1970s, and went on to work as a caribou biologist at the Fish and Wildlife Service for more than two decades until his retirement in 2002. Mauer, who has a deep, gravelly voice and the weathered look of someone who has spent much of his life outdoors, grew up in the Midwest but has lived in Alaska for nearly 50 years. Over that time, he has seen Washington policy seesaw from more protective administrations to those pushing hard for more drilling, sometimes in disregard of science. When I met him at a café in Fairbanks earlier this year, he came prepared with a stack of documents and newspaper clippings detailing efforts by previous administrations to mischaracterize science or undermine FWS authority in order to advance a pro-development agenda.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has the congressionally mandated authority to oversee the refuge, but as an agency focused on managing and protecting wildlife, the FWS has often been at odds with Republican administrations interested in developing the coastal plain. As early as 1981, Interior Secretary James Watt issued a memo trying to strip the FWS of its authority to oversee the first environmental impact statement and assessment of the area's oil and gas reserves, and hand it to the United States Geological Survey, which has historically had closer ties to the energy industry. At the time, the conservation group Trustees for Alaska sued Watt over what it viewed as a brazen power grab. Several months later, a U.S. district court judge in Alaska declared the order invalid and described Watt's effort as "a clear error of judgment."

In 1987, a 208-page assessment—published with input from more than three dozen FWS scientists, including Mauer, and done in consultation with USGS and BLM—provided the first comprehensive overview of the refuge's natural resources and the potential impacts of oil and gas development on the region. The report found that oil and gas activities would have significant impacts on wildlife, including the 180,000-strong Porcupine caribou herd, which migrates hundreds of miles to use the coastal plain as a calving ground. FWS also concluded that development would have a "major adverse effect on subsistence lifestyles" of Native communities and that the "wilderness character of the coastal plain would be irretrievably lost."

The Reagan White House saw it differently. Despite the FWS findings, Interior Secretary Donald Hodel called on Congress to open all of the coastal plain to development. He described the refuge as "the most outstanding onshore frontier area for prospective major oil discoveries in America."

In 2001, in the wake of 9/11, Republicans renewed their efforts to open the refuge, casting the push for energy independence as a matter of national security. Then-Sen. Frank Murkowski (Lisa Murkowski's father), who was chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, decided to revisit the issue of the potential impact of drilling on the Porcupine caribou herd. The Gwich'in nation, an indigenous people whose more than 6,000 members live in villages scattered along the refuge boundary in the U.S. and Canada and view caribou as central to their way of life, describe the coastal plain as "The Sacred Place Where Life Begins."

As one of the refuge's senior biologists, Fran Mauer was asked to provide data and analysis in response to several of Murkowski's questions; but he later learned that the conclusions relayed to Murkowski's office had been substantially altered without his input and that other key information had been omitted from the final version. Mauer's research showed that concentrated calving took place within the coastal plain during 27 out of the 30 years for which data was available. After working its way up the chain of command to Interior Secretary Gale Norton's office, however, Mauer's text was reversed to say that concentrated calving took place primarily outside of the coastal plain, suggesting that the region was not especially critical to the survival of the herd. According to Mauer, the data he provided was also modified to reflect far less frequent use of the birthing grounds.

David Bernhardt, who was then Norton's congressional affairs director, was reportedly involved in rewriting the answers: Documents showing the difference between Mauer's analysis and the final version were leaked to Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility and the Washington Post in October 2001. In response, Bernhardt, in a letter to then-Sen. Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.), claimed that the department had simply made a clerical mistake. But he added: "Scientists can and do disagree. There are often areas of interpretation and judgment." Mauer says shortly after the episode he spoke to a high-level Fish and Wildlife Service employee in Washington, who told him that Bernhardt was "extremely vexed over the leak." Several months later, a vote to open the refuge to development fell short.

In May 2017, just days before Bernhardt's confirmation hearing as deputy secretary of the Interior, the scandal over the caribou data resurfaced. In a news release, PEER, the same group that had blown the whistle in 2001, said Bernhardt had played a central role in the affair and called for a Senate investigation before considering his nomination. PEER's then-executive director, Jeff Ruch, said Bernhardt had an "unfortunate affinity for alternative facts" and accused him of "political manipulation of science."

At his confirmation hearing, Bernhardt said a number of different entities were involved in drafting Secretary Norton's responses and that his office in particular was engaged "at each stage and ultimately transmitted the testimony to the [Murkowski's] Committee." Bernhardt also added that he was not the primary policy adviser on the wildife refuge.

As deputy secretary and now secretary, Bernhardt is shaping that policy. When the tax bill was finally passed several months after Bernhardt's confirmation, it effectively removed the Fish and Wildlife Service from having any meaningful involvement in establishing the oil and gas leasing program.

While previous bills seeking to develop the coastal plain, in 2002 and 2005, had given FWS a direct role in co-managing the program and would have granted the service greater decision-making authority, Senator Murkowski's version omitted any reference to FWS. Instead, it granted exclusive authority over the leasing program to the Bureau of Land Management, which historically has had no jurisdiction over the refuge. "Right now the Fish and Wildlife Service director, acting director or even assistant secretary for the agency, does not have any involvement in the development of this EIS or decision making process," an FWS employee told me. "Everything is done by Joe Balash."

Though FWS is technically a cooperating agency on the environmental impact statement, none of its staff scientists were included as part of the interdisciplinary team charged with drafting the document. Throughout the review process FWS scientists, in particular those who work at the refuge, have been largely sidelined. "Here we find ourselves outsiders," one refuge staffer told me.

In a written statement FWS Alaska Regional Director Greg Siekaniec said the service's technical and subject matter experts were involved in the review process and "provided comments to BLM that reflected the input of this broad team."

The Alaska delegation has also successfully installed pro-development allies in key positions at BLM. Steve Wackowski, a former campaign aide to Lisa Murkowski, was named by former Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke as senior adviser for Alaska affairs. Chad Padgett, a longtime former aide to U.S. Representative Don Young (R-Alaska), was recently named Alaska BLM state director. According to a story in E & E News, he was "handpicked" by Balash. Joshua Kindred, a former AOGA attorney, is now a DOI solicitor in Alaska. Meanwhile, FWS refuge staff has dwindled, due to a combination of early retirements and transfers, and is at its lowest level in years. Until recently there were five vacancies at the refuge and the main office in Fairbanks has been without a botanist and aquatic ecologist for more than a year.

Pat Pourchot, who served as special assistant to the secretary for Alaska affairs at Interior during the Obama administration, said Fish and Wildlife should have played a much larger role in the review process and that he doubts the department can complete an environmental impact statement that meets the legal requirements under federal environmental rules in such a short period of time.

"FWS is chafing that they do not have a bigger role in an area that they are charged with managing," Pourchot told me.

Conclusions First, Science Second

At the Fairbanks office of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the walls are lined with large format photographs of the remote rivers and valleys of the Brooks Range and panoramic shots of caribou crossing the coastal plain. An old banner celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, passed in 1964 and inspired in part by the early effort to protect the refuge, hangs from the reception desk. Another poster describes the refuge as "a symbol of wildlife and wild places, now and for the future."

Fish and Wildlife Service scientists, many of whom work at this office, have historically played a central role in advocating for and expanding refuge protections, even recommending in 2015 that the coastal plain be designated as wilderness. But the new law effectively changed the overarching mission of the Refuge. With the stroke of a pen, the tax act established an entirely new purpose for the Refuge—to "provide for an oil and gas program on the coastal plain."

"It felt like the world got turned upside down," one FWS employee told me.

Oil drilling often relies on seismic surveys, a highly involved process that itself requires significant development. The last time seismic surveys had been done was in the mid-1980s. In 2014, when Balash was acting commissioner of the Department of Natural Resources, the state of Alaska sued Interior over the department's refusal to allow seismic surveys of the coastal plain. David Bernhardt, then a lawyer with Brownstein Hyatt Farber & Schreck, represented the state in its unsuccessful bid. Now, Balash and Bernhardt were calling the shots.

Even before the tax act was passed, the Interior Department was looking at ways to change FWS regulations in order to allow seismic surveys in the refuge, according to one Interior employee who was present at meetings during which the issue was discussed. Though seismic technology has changed considerably since the 1980s, surveys of the coastal plain would still have wide-ranging impacts on vegetation and permafrost, according to an independent analysis by the University of Alaska Fairbanks Geobotany Center. "There will likely be significant, extensive, and long-lasting direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts of 3D-seismic to the…permafrost and vegetation of the 1002 Area," the authors wrote.

The initial BLM timeline for approving seismic surveys was wildly ambitious, even by the standards of this administration. Liz Klein, associate deputy secretary of the Interior during the Obama administration, said the sensitivity surrounding the refuge and the presence of threatened and endangered species on the coastal plain should have compelled a more thorough environmental impact statement. In order to begin surveys during the 2018-19 winter season and obtain data in advance of the lease sale, however, Interior initially pushed to complete its part of the review in just a few months. Under the Marine Mammal Protection Act, FWS was also required to conduct its own review of the application and issue a permit to

ensure that seismic surveys would not do further harm to the threatened southern Beaufort Sea polar bear population.

In May 2018, SAExploration, a Houston, Texas, oil and gas company, formally submitted an application to conduct surveys of the coastal plain, which would require the use of heavy industrial machinery, the construction of ice roads, temporary landing strips for aircraft, and hundreds of workers housed in camps across the leasing area. Two months later, BLM announced that it would publish an environmental assessment—a less rigorous analysis than an environmental impact statement. Even before it had heard from its scientists, the agency had stated publicly that seismic surveys would have no significant impact.

According to two DOI employees in Alaska, there were internal questions about whether an environmental assessment was sufficient, but DOI leadership insisted on the expedited review. In an email obtained by POLITICO Magazine, the assistant manager for the BLM Arctic district office described the effort as "fast paced and often times confusing." Another BLM employee who worked on the assessment told me they had "never seen something so off the rails in my life." The lack of transparency has been compounded by a culture of fear and intimidation, according to current employees of Fish and Wildlife and BLM; even former employees are reluctant to speak on the record because they believe that doing so could jeopardize the careers of their colleagues. "We barely can talk about ANWR with each other," one BLM Alaska employee told me.

Still, in mid-September 2018, according to documents obtained by POLITICO, BLM was prepared to publish the draft environmental assessment, despite concerns from its own employees and the FWS about potential impacts to polar bears. According to a leaked FWS memo BLM was preparing to publish the draft "as early as Monday September 10th, with a provisional Finding of No Significant Impact." On September 13, Sarah LaMarr, assistant manager of the BLM's Arctic District Office, informed the BLM seismic team that BLM hoped to post the preliminary draft of the document to the department's NEPA website the next day. A 30-day public comment period would follow, and BLM had even set a date for a public meeting in the North Slope city of Utqiagvik on October 5. This would leave enough time for SAExploration to begin seismic surveys as early as December or January, when the ground is thoroughly frozen and can support heavy machinery.

Scientific Findings Altered, Distorted and Omitted

Scientists at the Bureau of Land Management in Alaska were asked to submit their findings for an environmental assessment that was part of the permitting process for three-dimensional seismic surveys of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge's coastal plain. The scientific review is a key part of assessing the potential negative impacts of the surveying, which can pose risks to plants and wildlife. These emails show the dissatisfaction of several of the BLM scientists who learned that their work had been altered without their input.

1. ***Sarah LaMarr****, assistant manager of BLM's Arctic District Office 2.* ***Debora Nigro****, a BLM wildlife biologist 3.* ***Stacey Fritz****, a BLM anthropologist 4.* ***Matt Whitman****, a BLM fisheries biologist | Adam Federman for Type Investigation (screenshots at https://www.politico.com/interactives/2019/trump-science-alaska-drilling-rush/)*

Up to this point, the environmental assessment had received a level of attention reserved for only the most sensitive internal documents, according to two BLM employees. "That EA—every word of it—was the most scrutinized, politicized and controversial thing any of us had ever seen," one of those BLM employees told me.

On the eve of publication, members of the BLM seismic team were given one last chance to review their respective sections but also instructed "to not make any changes to this document." After thanking the team for its diligence and hard work, LaMarr wrote, "Please be aware that there have been numerous edits based on solicitor and State Office review. You may see some changes to your sections based on these edits."

In some cases, the changes were deeply troubling to those who had originally drafted the document. At least two BLM employees took the unusual step of submitting complaints, which become part of the administrative record, an internal way of documenting the decision-making process for NEPA reviews. This sort of forceful condemnation of changes made by higher-ups within the department is rare, though not unheard of, according to Klein, who served at DOI under Obama.

In one instance a fisheries biologist wrote in an email to the project managers that, as a result of changes to his text, there were "fundamental inaccuracies in the seismic EA." Another career employee was surprised to find that entire paragraphs on potential impacts to native communities, including environmental justice concerns, had been scrubbed from her analysis. "I am troubled by numerous omissions from my sections," the employee wrote. She also warned that BLM might not be complying with guidance on tribal consultation for the EA. "[BLM] normally conduct government-to-government consultation for large seismic projects in the NPR-A, therefore doing so would not have been extraordinary," she wrote.

Perhaps the most dramatic change was the reversal of a conclusion reached by Debbie Nigro, a BLM wildlife biologist, who found that seismic activity could have a negative cumulative impact on the southern Beaufort Sea polar bear population. Nigro, a long time BLM biologist who has received recognition for her work to protect threatened waterfowl, wrote the section in consultation with marine mammal experts at the FWS.

Polar bears are an important regional predator, as well as one of the best-

known symbols of Arctic wildlife, and they're considered a threatened species: The southern Beaufort Sea population has declined by more than 40 percent to just 900 bears in the past few decades. Based on SAExploration's initial proposal, Nigro and FWS concluded there was a real possibility that polar bears and their critical denning habitat would be harmed by winter seismic exploration. According to Nigro's assessment, "It is unknown to what extent, but possible that cumulative effects to polar bears and their habitats would result from the incremental addition of winter seismic exploration in the Coastal Plain." Yet after undergoing "solicitor and State Office review," according to the email from the assistant manager of the Arctic District Office, the section was changed to say the opposite. The draft version stated that if seismic exploration moved forward, "Cumulative effects to polar bears and their habitats would be less than significant."

In her comments submitted as part of the administrative record, Nigro described the textual change as "significant" and included a copy of her original paragraph alongside the new version. "I know there is likely nothing that can be done," she wrote, "but I would like it to be in the admin record that I do not agree with this wording change or with the new conclusion."

The Department of the Interior says the draft environmental assessment was not reviewed by the department's lawyers in Washington, D.C., or by Bernhardt. Nor was Bernhardt aware of the changes made to the document, according to DOI. In addition, the department said BLM's "approach was predicated and dependent on the presumption that the applicant would be able to" receive the necessary approvals from the FWS. "This never came to fruition and thus the BLM could not move forward."

Asked whether Balash had reviewed the draft analysis and was aware of the changes made to the document, DOI did not provide a yes or no response. His calendars show he was very much engaged with ANWR issues. Between August 23 and September 13, when Sarah LaMarr sent out her email to the seismic team, Balash had no fewer than nine meetings related to the Arctic Wildlife Refuge. He was also traveling in Alaska in late August and, according to his calendars, had a meeting with regional solicitors to discuss coastal plain matters.

Klein said the documents raise "significant questions about interference with scientific integrity processes at Interior and with the expert conclusions of the department's own staff. Their work has been changed in ways they don't agree with. That's unusual and very troubling."

The Final Report, but Not the Last Word

Even without drilling, the Refuge is already undergoing profound changes.

Climate change is warming the Arctic nearly twice as fast as anywhere else in the world, setting in motion changes that have alarmed scientists who study the region.

As sea ice has diminished greater numbers of polar bears have been forced to come inland to den along the coastal plain. This has led to more encounters between humans and bears and the deterioration of the overall health of the bear population. The southern Beaufort Sea population was listed as a threatened species in 2008, which is part of the reason that FWS has resisted approving permits for ecologically risky seismic surveys. Over the next 30 years, scientists fear that the population could be driven to extinction.

In early February, I flew to Kaktovik, population 250, to attend a public hearing on the draft Environmental Impact Statement for leasing the coastal plain. The much-anticipated document had been published on December 20, two days before the government shut down.

Like the environmental assessment for seismic surveys, the draft EIS for leasing, which evaluates the potential impact of leasing on everything from polar bears and caribou to water resources and vegetation, had been produced with unusual speed, in about eight months. The required public hearings commenced less than one week after DOI announced that they were taking place so there was very little advance notice. Robert Thompson, a polar bear guide in Kaktovik and an outspoken opponent of oil and gas development who follows the issue closely, learned about the meeting when I called him a few days before the hearing. "How do you have this meeting if no one knows about it?" he said.

I had attended the first hearing in Fairbanks the day before, when activists holding Defend the Sacred placards protested that the format for the hearings reflected the department's lack of transparency and its desire to stifle public participation. DOI had announced that the meetings would be "open house" style with subject matter experts on hand and that comments would be taken only by court reporters or in writing. I watched as activists seized the podium and, for the next two and a half hours, I listened to dozens of speakers, all of them opposed to developing the refuge, make their case. At one point, Balash, who in his introductory remarks acknowledged that there were "strong feelings on both sides of the issue," conceded that DOI had lost control of the meeting.

Kaktovik proved to be friendlier terrain for the officials from Interior. About 30 residents gathered at the local school, which had recently received a $16 million upgrade, including a new basketball gym, largely funded with oil and gas tax revenue. At least half the population of Kaktovik supports the opening of the refuge and two native corporations—Kaktovik Iñupiat Corporation and the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation—stand to benefit financially if the coastal plain ever becomes a producing oil field. (ASRC and KIC, along with SAExploration, have formed a joint corporation to conduct the seismic surveys of the refuge.)

But in order for that to happen, a considerable amount of infrastructure, including barge landings, docks, spill response staging areas, and road and pipeline connections,

will be required. Steve Amstrup, a former USGS polar bear researcher who is now chief scientist for the conservation group Polar Bears International, is doubtful that this sort of development can happen without doing further harm to the species and its remaining habitat. “The developments and associated activities described in the [draft environmental impact statement] are sure to accelerate ongoing declines in the SBS polar bear population,” Amstrup wrote in a comment letter submitted to the BLM. (A request by POLITICO to speak with the U.S. Geological Survey’s lead wildlife biologist studying polar bear population dynamics in the region was denied.)

The morning after the meeting, I borrowed an old Chevy Suburban with a cracked front windshield and, along with a wildlife photographer and a documentary filmmaker, drove out onto the narrow stretch of land where a polar bear had been seen the day before. It was just after 9:30 a.m. and the sun was coming up over the horizon, casting everything in a pale blue glow. The early morning coastal fog had not yet burned off and the wooden homes and power lines in Kaktovik were barely visible in the distance. Fishing boats half buried in snow were scattered along the shore of the lagoon. We didn’t see any bears but did encounter tracks, about the size of a dinner plate, which led in a straight line to the center of the city.

Just beyond Kaktovik, extending out in a web-like pattern, is the highest density denning habitat for the southern Beaufort Sea polar bear population. As sea ice continues to disappear, this territory will become only more important to the bears’ survival. And according to the draft EIS, this same habitat happens to overlap with what are believed to be the richest hydrocarbon reserves in the coastal plain and where potentially “the least restrictive development activities would be most likely to occur.” But whatever the risks associated with future development, the Interior Department has concluded in the draft environmental impact statement that with mitigation measures in place the impacts to the declining polar bear population would likely be “negligible.”

In late June, Mauer flew into the Sadlerochit Mountains on the north side of the Brooks Range for a two-week backpacking trip. Now 73, he said this might be his last trip to the coastal plain. “It could be my opportunity to say goodbye to what I’ve always known,” Mauer told me a few days before he left. “Because, unfortunately, with a place like that, when you bring industrial activity in, there’s no going back. It’ll never be the same again in anybody’s lifetime.”

The final draft of the environmental impact statement is expected in August, after which the Interior Department can move forward with a lease sale. Environmental groups say they will consider litigation, and have asserted that the leasing process was driven by “political deadlines” rather than sound decision-making or scientific integrity.

“It’s clear the administration is desperate to jam through Arctic drilling while President Trump is still in office,” said Senator Maria Cantwell (D-Washington), the ranking member of the Senate Commerce Committee that oversees marine fisheries and coastal management. “The entire environmental review process has been a rush job, and its integrity has been undermined by politics. The Interior Department has ignored its legal obligations and the findings of their own career scientists.”

Trustees for Alaska and other conservation groups have called on Interior to go back to the drawing board and redo its analysis. But even if the federal court rules in their favour, it’s unclear whether such a decision would delay or postpone the lease sale.

One thing, though, is clear: For the Trump administration, establishing a foothold in ANWR is paramount. Five days before Fran Mauer arrived in the refuge, Trump told ABC’s George Stephanopoulos that, along with the tax cuts and slashing of regulations, opening up ANWR would be one of his most important and lasting achievements.

SECOND PRIZE WINNER

Why Switzerland Struggles With Dirty Gold: Tales From Peru

Paula Dupraz-Dobias (Switzerland)

Paula Dupraz-Dobias is an investigative independent journalist, documentary producer and editor with experience in all forms of media globally, particularly in Latin America, Europe, and the United States. She has a long interest in pursuing of money trails, including money laundering, corruption and commodity supply chains, and their environmental and social impacts. She also covers humanitarian issues, international affairs and climate change politics.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The Second Prize was awarded to Paula Dupraz-Dobias, from Switzerland, for her story Why Switzerland Struggles with Dirty Gold: Tales from Peru, which traces the gold supply chain originating in Peru over the past eight years.

It is a terrific piece of journalism, buttressed by facts and produced and delivered in a stylish and elegant format. It takes the covers off the opaque business of gold mining and reveals the challenges and contradictions of gold mining in an environmentally threatened area.

It holds those responsible to account but also highlights how solutions can be found if there is a willingness to cooperate with all stakeholders, an important demand as producers at all levels are under pressure to become accountable for the environmental and social impact of their operations.

There is a focus on corruption in supply chains where some small producers are now trying to "do the right thing", but others continue to operate with impunity, polluting the rainforest's fragile ecosystems and rivers with toxic metals and continuing to deforest at the same time that the world is struggling to deal with climate change.

Why Switzerland Struggles with Dirty Gold: Tales from Peru

By Paula Dupraz-Dobias
Swissinfo.ch - January 16, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://stories.swissinfo.ch/gold-peru-switzerland-mining-metalor#238278

[Chapter 1: Intro]

Wildcat gold miners have devastated the Peruvian Amazon, leaving large swaths of it poisoned and stripped bare. In a drastic move, Swiss refiner Metalor stopped all gold imports from South American artisanal miners after its main gold supplier in Peru was shown to be sourcing gold from those illegal mines.

But with gold prices the highest they've been in nearly a decade, the quest for the precious metal is heating up in a place where mining and criminal activities overlap and law enforcement is haphazard.

Illegal vs. Legal Mining

Seen from the sky, the landscape on either side of Peru's Interoceanic Highway looks identical, pockmarked with sandy plots of land and muddy pools of water. Yet the monotonous land is of strategic importance. It is the main transport artery into Peru's southeastern region of Madre de Dios, where gold mining is booming.

For the thousands of miners trying to make a living in this jungle region, the highway is also the divide between those who try to follow the law and those who don't. Peruvian authorities have declared the Tambopata Natural Reserve and its buffer zone, on one side of the road, off limits to miners. On the other side is the so-called "mining corridor" where gold extraction is allowed, under certain conditions.

"Only a few of us can work here legally," says Juan Ttamiña, a miner working to support his family. "More common here is illegality."

Weak law enforcement in large parts of this region means the situation is not as clear-cut as the Interoceanic Highway's route suggests, and the government says. The weak enforcement of mining regulations has led to widespread illegal mining here, which in turn has been responsible for large-scale deforestation and mercury pollution, experts say.

And some of that gold ends up in Switzerland, according to watchdog groups. They accuse Swiss refiners, jewellers and watchmakers for sourcing such "dirty gold". That could soon have consequences. Lawmakers in Switzerland, the world's leading gold refiner, are now debating harsher penalties for companies linked to human rights and environmental abuses.

But identifying "dirty" gold is hard. Criminal networks and illegal miners often try to conceal the illegal origins of their gold by mixing it with legitimately obtained gold before introducing it into the international gold market, according to the miners, traders and law enforcement officials swissinfo.ch met in Peru. This makes it difficult for Swiss refiners and gold-buying companies to know if they're importing illegal gold.

Some gave up. In early 2019, Swiss refiner Metalor stopped sourcing from artisanal gold miners in Latin America altogether. The decision came after Peruvian customs officials seized 91 kilos of gold bars from local exporter Minerales del Sur destined for the Swiss refinery. The cargo is suspected by Peruvian authorities to have contained illegally sourced gold including possibly from Madre de Dios.

In that region, authorities have long waged a losing battle against the thousands of illegal miners. In the past three decades, 960 square kilometres of forest – an area roughly the size of Hong Kong – were lost to gold mining, according to estimates by the Center for Amazonian Scientific Innovation, a think tank based in Tambopata, Madre de Dios. Military operations regularly dynamited illegal mining sites but more often than not mining soon resumed elsewhere.

Operation Mercury

But the authorities are not giving up. The Peruvian army recently launched "Operation Mercury" in an area known as La Pampa, on the side of the Interoceanic Highway where mining is illegal. Forces occupied an area the size of a small country in order to drive out wildcat miners. At the same time, the authorities accelerated a programme to certify miners who meet environmental and social standards.

General Luis Vera environmental police chief:

"It is a very sad area to see: a huge extension of more than 12,000 deforested hectares right in the middle of the Amazon. We are investigating. What is the origin and the destination of the gold, which leaves illegally or informally to different regions? Very little is being declared in that zone because there are few companies that have authorisation to process the gold. Most of this gold is coming out of the black market."

[Chapter 2]

Miner Juan Ttamiña Trying to Get It Right

Juan Ttamiña has been mining along the banks of the Pukiri river for nearly three decades. A native of the Andean region of Cusco, he moved with his parents to

the Peruvian Amazon in search of a better life.

"We have been working here for years, out of need, to move forward," he says. "We are trying to create better lives for ourselves… for our children."

For a long time, that meant operating in a legal vacuum, mining and trading gold deep in the jungle, with little government oversight. But that is slowly changing with refiners and consumers increasingly pushing for sustainable mining practices and transparency in the gold supply chain.

The bit of land he is allowed to mine sits in the mining corridor – an area of roughly 500,000 hectares (the equivalent of nearly one million football fields) – where gold extraction is permitted provided that environmental and social standards are upheld.

Certification Requirements

Ttamiña has applied to the government's formalisation programme, which aims to bring a legal footing to his work. As of mid-August, 4,500 miners had applied to be formalised; only 117 had been accepted. He hopes to soon join their ranks.

To be certified, Ttamiña must prove he is reforesting barren areas and adopting mercury-free mining techniques. In a purpose-built structure, he has installed a gold shaker table that separates the gold from dirt without using mercury.

He must also respect labour laws and pay taxes. And he can only sell to one trader, part of a consortium that used to sell gold directly to Metalor.

But he says these rules don't curb the illegal trade, adding that it was well-known among miners that even licensed traders purchase gold from questionable sources. And such traders are not limited to the area largely known as La Pampa, on the fringes of the Tambopata National Reserve.

"We fulfilled everything," says Ttamiña, referring to the state's requirements, "so as not to have any problems." He removes from his pocket a government-issued card that proves he applied for formalisation. This piece of plastic is his only shield against potential police raids.

Juan Ttamiña, Miner:

"We abide by everything the state says, we meet almost 80-90% [of the requirements]. Inside La Pampa, it's not a mining corridor, it's a reserve. With the documents that the state has given us we can prove that we are allowed to work here. Only a few of us can work here legally. More common here is illegality. There are also illegal shops that buy the gold. This is called the black market. From the outside we are misunderstood. They think all of us who produce gold do so illegally, but it's not like that."

In 1989, Ttamiña arrived to mine along the Pukiri river, near a town now known as Delta Uno in Madre de Dios. That was well before Madre de Dios became overrun by wildcat miners lured by high gold prices after the 2009-2010 financial crisis.

His hard work has paid off. Back then, the family only had a couple of wheelbarrows and basic water pumping engines to flush the ore. Now, the middle-aged miner employs 22 people who use modern excavators and trucks to move mineral matter on his "cuadricula", or one-square- kilometre concession.

"Production is not always the same: today it could be more, but it could also be less," explains Ttamiña as a pair of workers conclude a sweltering eight-hour shift rinsing gold ore, stationed at two chutes. They sleep on site in a single-story brick dorm.

On average, he extracts 32 grammes of gold per chute per shift. Assuming the operation of both chutes and a price of PEN120 (CHF 35.5) per gramme, he stands to earn PEN15,000 (CHF4,343) per day.

While that may sound like a lot, his net profit can be as low as PEN500 (CHF145) per day. Expenses, he says, are substantial. Petrol is needed to power water pumps and the machinery. He also pays for his wife, two sons and daughter to live in the nearest large city of Cusco so his children can study. He only sees them for ten days every two months.

Ttamiña plans to mine his parcel of land for another 10 to 15 years. Afterwards, he plans "to move to another plot"

He hopes that plans update to Peru's mining law will give small and medium-scale miners like him a boost amid competition from larger foreign mining operations, and that the state will support them as they strive to work sustainably, and relieve them of worries over potential checks and harassment by police and the military that have grown more frequent under Operation Mercury.

Ttamiña credits the government for facilitating the formalisation process, but he is no fan of Operation Mercury. He believes it has contributed to the perception that all miners in Madre de Dios work illegally although some try to follow the rules, like him.

"They treat us like illegals, but the government knows who is and who isn't," he says.

[Chapter 3]

Former Miner Walter Baca

The Black Market. How It Works

Evading the Law

Walter Baca is a former miner who now rents mining equipment. His extended family has been accused of illegal mining and is reported to have had financial relations with Metalor.

When we met him in Huepetuhe, Baca declined to comment on these allegations but he was willing to share his insights and personal experience in the gold trade.

"The greatest evader is the gold buyer," he says. "People continue to work illegally because they have obligations [to the buyers]."

Baca is the nephew of a notorious couple – Gregoria Casas and Cecilio Baca – who were among the first settlers in the open pit gold mine of Huaypetue, where mining first began here. The couple, who owned 18 mining plots, was under criminal investigation for illegal mining and money laundering over many years, according the local investigative news outlet Ojo Publico.

Ojo Publico also reported on allegations by unnamed customs officials in Peru that Metalor made payments to bank accounts owned by members of the Baca family, including Walter Baca's aunt and cousins. Members of the Casas-Baca family have repeatedly denied wrongdoing. Some members of the family have also said that its accusers have unfairly framed them to score political points or even for financial gain.

The former miner did not directly comment on the allegations against his relatives but said that many local traders engage in corrupt practices and in tax evasion. He accused them of manipulating the market by controlling prices and not invoicing purchase, while miners are held captive by what they owe the traders.

"How does that business work? They send a person who collects [gold] from the shops. They collect a kilo, half a kilo, two kilos from each store. And they take it. No invoice. These companies pool together their gold in Lima and sell it to one person or company, to Metalor, let's say. The gold buyers have concessions and claim that they are producing in their mining concessions but this is not true. They have guest workers on their concessions to create a pretence of producing. Where they do actually produce 200 or 500 grams per shift it is invoiced as if they were producing one kilo or two kilos. The real production in Huaypetue is 50 grammes per shift in each chute."

"When the gold reaches Lima, the buyers… combine their gold to sell to the same buyer," Baca explains, claiming that buyer in some cases was Metalor.

Asked whether it was aware of any complicity among major gold buyers in Madre de Dios and the accusation that they combine purchases, Metalor responded, "No. [We do] not take any material from the region."

A company spokesperson told swissinfo.ch that it had been "very engaged" in the formalisation process in Peru and had raised its concerns over traceability with Peruvian authorities.

"All responses we got over time from the different authorities in Peru… were very reassuring," said a company spokesperson.

"However," he added, "we were disappointed because it turned out that the regulatory and enforcement framework is not robust enough."

'People Work on the Run'

Is Baca worried about business now that Metalor is no longer buying gold from Peru? "The producers are not too concerned because there are always buyers here," he says.

Baca says the absence of government authority before Operation Mercury left miners with the freedom to operate as they pleased. When the metal's price rose, many invested in heavy machinery to be able to cut deeper into the jungle, polluting the waterways and subsoils with mercury as they advanced. Although Peru ratified an international treaty on reducing mercury pollution in 2018, the toxic heavy metal is still widely available for sale online in the country.

Baca blames previous government officials for complicity in deals that benefitted criminal networks purchasing gold. He believes the government should prioritise tackling corrupt gold buyers rather than focus so much on smaller mining operations.

"The formalisation process has no goal," says Baca. "It is as if it is moving towards an abyss."

Baca was a miner himself but branched out into other business after his mining equipment was blown up by the Peruvian military six years ago as part of an earlier crackdown on illegal mining. His new business involves leasing equipment "to miners in the formalisation process"

– those seeking to operate legally.

Many of the miners who have been caught up in Operation Mercury this year have, like Baca, found new ways to profit from the sector, locals say. Some have moved deeper into the jungle even closer to the Tambopata reserve or across the Interoceanic Highway into the mining corridor to continue to chase profits at the margins of the law.

Most miners fled the banned mining region of La Pampa when they learned of the operation, but over 200 people were arrested and millions of dollars worth of equipment has been seized and demolished.

Baca recalled his own experience in Huaypetue: "People work on the run. When the government bombs the camps and captures equipment, miners work like crazy. The government's strategy is inadequate."

Baca's upscale villa overlooks a ragtag mining town full of elusive gold buyers, shady bars and nightclubs served by young women. These women, mostly from poor mountainous regions, are drawn by prospects of jobs as domestic workers or waitresses that often turn out to be false, according to law enforcement agents.

General Luis Vera, director of the Peruvian National Police's Environment

Directorate, says in an interview in Lima that his troops found many such places when they went into the illegal mining region.

"There was a lot of abuse and disappearances because there was no public authority," Vera says. "The overseers or the capitalists who had their illegal mining plot, had the authority."

General Luis Vera, environmental police chief

"To enter the area of La Pampa, you need smaller vehicles, such as motorcycles. The main ones to go into that area were workers and illegal miners. A lot of traders entered, as well as miners who were exploited for labour and sex. In each camp, they set up canteens, bars of ill repute, discos, nightclubs, and brothels. Many people who came to this place found that they could not leave, because the foremen, or so-called administrators, gave them lodging and exploited them sexually and economically."

On the fringes of the illegal mining area, residents say miners still work overnight in an effort to escape detention. At dawn, after they finish work, the miners drop planks they use to drive their motorcycles over the swampy forest floor, into the undergrowth, effectively hiding their access routes.

"Sometimes you can hear the engines operating in the distance," says Doris, a woman who runs a hostel located along the road. She declined to give her full name.

"There's lots of gold out there. On a good day, they can make 1000 soles." (The equivalent of CHF290).

Despite continued illegal mining activity, Operation Mercury is credited with slowing wildcat mining significantly in most of La Pampa's environmentally devastated area.

Gold mining deforestation decreased 92% between 2018 (900 hectares) and the first half of 2019 (67 hectares), representing the situation before and after the start of Operation Mercury, according to the Monitoring of the Andean Amazon Project.

Colonel Luis Guillen Polo, the commander of Operation Mercury, explains that his forces are aggressively going after illegal gold buyers and traders, "not just illegal miners".

"We are after those businesses who purchase the gold and give it the appearance of legality."

[Chapter 4]

Lies, Cover-ups and Pollution

But a violent crackdown on illegal miners won't be enough for the Peruvian government to eradicate "dirty" gold. It also needs an army of accounting experts.

Multiple criminal investigations by state prosecutors and investigative reports by local media suggest that traceability of the gold through traders remains opaque. Fraudulent invoicing has been rife among the many Peruvian purchasing companies and their local agents or representatives.

Complex webs of family and business relationships obscure links between many of the companies operating in the region. That explains why small and medium-sized buyers rarely appear on customs records as exporters to foreign refiners and buyers, and many of those that do appear have been linked to illegal mining concessions in Madre de Dios.

Of the dozen miners working illegally that we spoke to, most said that they primarily sold their gold to the Peruvian trading companies A&M Metal Trading and Veta de Oro, among other mineral buyers.

But our efforts to personally inquire about these allegations, and visit the field offices of these companies and others were repeatedly rebuffed. We were told, sometimes by burly security guards, that we had no right to ask questions.

In the most bizarre episode in our effort to get comments from the company, at Veta de Oro's two-storey office in Puerto Maldonado, a clerk who stopped us from investigating further, denied the establishment was buying gold, claiming that the commercial space was a hotel. A large sign outside suggested its proprietors are gold traders rather than in the tourism business.

At A&M Metal Trading's office in the regional capital, Puerto Maldonado, a clerk called the company's lawyer and then declined to answer questions and asked us to leave.

Shop managers at E&M Company in Huaypetuhe pointed at signs behind their counters indicating phone numbers of head offices, but none of them worked when we phoned those numbers. At Veta de Oro and A&M Metal Trading, we were told to direct questions to Activos Mineros, the private company authorised by the government to licence gold buyers in regions known for illegal mining. But six emails and multiple calls to the Lima-based firm went unanswered.

While the company could not be reached, its activities are not unknown to observers and activists. "Activos Mineros receives money from the state for their monitoring functions, but they do not invest in true monitoring," explains Christoph Wiedmer, co-director of the Society for Threatened People, who has studied Peruvian gold imports.

Gold traders are also contributing to environmental pollution. Makeshift ovens used to burn mercury off gold nuggets, which release toxic fumes, were visible at street level in many of the trading offices we visited. Shop clerks at one office threatened us when we tried to photograph the furnaces.

Mercury levels in the air around such shops are 1,000 times higher than the Peruvian limit and 10,000 higher than US government minimum risk levels, according to Adam Kiefer, a chemistry professor with Mercer University. He works with the Peruvian ministry to research air pollution in the region.

Air contamination by mercury (data vizualization)

[Chapter 5]

Bound for Switzerland

The "dirty gold" thus travels from illegal miners through an opaque network of gold buyers. It is then sold to foreign traders and refiners.

This is where Switzerland becomes part of the equation. The landlocked European country is home to several of the world's largest refineries, including Metalor. Most of the world's gold passes through it. Peru ranks sixth among countries exporting gold to the Alpine nation.

(Graphics on importance of gold for Switzerland)

After the gold is refined in Switzerland, it is exported around the globe. China and India are the top destinations. Switzerland exports over three times as much gold, jewelry and precious stones as it does watches.

Madre de Dios grabbed headlines in 2018 after the Switzerland-based advocacy group Society for Threatened People (STP) published a report claiming illegal gold exports from the region went to Metalor.

The group alleged that the trader Minerales del Sur supplied Metalor with gold from Madre de Dios, where most of the mining activity still remains classified as illegal despite government initiatives and crackdowns.

While the trader was licenced to sell gold only from the southeastern region of Puno, its owner holds land concessions in Huaypetue, close to a protected area, the Amarakaeri Communal Reserve, in Madre de Dios.

Metalor denied the accusation, saying the gold came from Puno. But the quantities it purchased from Minerales del Sur exceeded the total production of gold from the region, according to STP, citing figures provided by Peru's energy and mining ministry.

Although investigations continue over its alleged illegal gold sourcing, Metalor has not been indicted in Peru. Citing a lack of "resources to ensure compliance", the company recently decided to stop importing gold from Peru, and then stopped doing business with all South American artisanal miners and traders.

But that might not be a good thing. The governor of Madre de Dios, Luis Hidalgo, said to swissinfo.ch that Metalor's decision to pull out of Peru would actually make it more difficult to stop illegal mining.

"We want them to buy from those who are working legally," says Hidalgo. "What the Swiss company needs to do is to facilitate access by miners of [clean] technology that is so costly for them and help them sell their gold more easily."

So-called "clean" gold mining technology, such as the vibrating table to separate gold pieces used by miner Juan Ttamiña, offer alternatives to the use of mercury.

Mark Pieth, a criminal law professor at the University of Basel who wrote a book on gold laundering, says that he believes that Swiss refiners should engage with artisanal miners to produce gold responsibly. Pieth says that the downsides are minimal. The cost of proper, transparent audits tracking back through the entire path of the gold represents "pocket money" for a company like Metalor and Swiss refineries as a whole, he said in a recent interview with swissinfo.ch.

The Swiss government seems to agree. Martin Peter, representative of the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs in Peru says that "it is in the interest of companies to care about sustainability in order to have long-term access to commodities".

Martin Peter, SECO:

"Nowadays it is hopefully a virtuous cycle. For a long time, there was a certain supply of sustainably produced gold from small scale mining and there wasn't really a demand. Now there is a definite demand in Switzerland by Swiss companies, by Swiss consumers and this is an important signal for producers in the field. This is a very important signal that will drive change".

For its part, Metalor argues what's needed to improve the situation in Peru is a concerted effort by all parties involved: governmental agencies, miners, local authorities and NGOs. "So far, we are not there," a company spokesperson told swissinfo.ch.

Ultimately, pressure by consumers may be one way to curb illegal mining, activists and rights advocates in Peru and Switzerland say.

For years, Swiss civil society groups have expressed concern about the reputational risks of importing "dirty gold" to Switzerland.

That has led to a popular initiative that could finally force the government to act. The Swiss people will soon vote on the "Responsible Business Initiative", which wants to hold companies based in Switzerland accountable for their environmental and human rights impact abroad. Its odds, though, are uncertain.

Metalor Responds

Where do Peruvian investigations into exports by Minerales del Sur or other companies to Metalor stand right now?

To our knowledge, investigation of Minerales del Sur continues by the Peruvian

authorities. However, since Metalor is not indicted in any way, we do not know further details.

Has the Peruvian public prosecutor reached out to Metalor since the seizure of 91 kilos of gold in 2018?

We have been asked to furnish information about the commercial relationship with had with Minerales del Sur and in this respect we provided all necessary documentation (agreement, invoices, proof of bank transfers, etc) in due time.

To your knowledge, was Minerales del Sur aware of the sourcing of the gold in that shipment?

The documentation associated to every shipment contained all the necessary details including the mine concession from where the material was sourced. We have no reason to believe that such information was incorrect but cannot guarantee that. The investigation will figure that out.

Is Metalor reconsidering purchases from Peru now that the government has reinforced its commitment toward formalising gold miners in Madre de Dios - which involves assuring that they comply to environmental and social standards - while clamping down on illegal miners in La Pampa?

We certainly welcome such statement but that has to be transformed into real and sustainable actions. Madre de Dios is a region from where do not take any material and we do not believe this will change, at least in the near future. However, and regarding artisanal mines, we are open to consider options but it has to be under a concerted effort by all parties involved (all governmental agencies, miners, local authorities and NGOs). So far we are not there. However, in Peru we continue to operate with industrial mines.

What is Metalor's response to critics - including the governor of Madre de Dios - who say that the company should help miners in the formalization process and possibly support them in acquiring technology that avoids mercury pollution, rather than stopping purchases from the country?

Metalor has been very engaged in supporting the formalization process. This is the best way for the miners to get a fair price for their gold and hence improving their overall working conditions, including applying best practices that do not pollute the environment. However, Metalor cannot assume by itself this responsibility. As mentioned above, this has to be a concerted effort by all parties involved.

How much do you know about the source of gold from your direct buyers? How transparent are your sources about the origin of the gold?

See the above response about the documentation supporting every shipment.

Have you ever broken business relations with companies because they claimed to be producing more gold as mining companies than physically possible? If so, which companies?

We monitor volumes on a routine basis just to avoid situations like the one you describe. Yes, we have stopped relations due to compliance. We do not compromise values for business.

Has Metalor ever addressed concerns about the origin of gold, and perhaps lax legislation of the gold buying business, with Peruvian authorities?

Yes, at the time of engaging into the formalization process and on a regular basis since then. All responses we got over time from the different authorities in Peru (Minister of Mines, Activos Mineros, Formalization Office, Sunat), were very reassuring. However, we are disappointed because it turned out that the *regulatory and enforcement framework is not robust enough.*

Are you aware of any complicity amongst the major gold buyers in Madre de Dios, and whether they may trade/combine purchases amongst each other?

No. Metalor does not take any material from that region.

The multimedia components of the reporting are available via the following link:
https://stories.swissinfo.ch/gold-peru-switzerland-mining-metalor#238278

Working on a story like this one requires a lot of time, perseverance and resources. Because building relationships with sources who are often trying just to provide food on the table for their families but who know that their work is controversial is difficult. Like many of my colleagues here know it's that perseverance and digging with boots on the ground that is key to bring stories that truly matter to a global audience and make change happen.

PAULA DUPRAZ-DOBIAS

A quote from Paula Dupraz-Dobias's speech at the second annual Fetisov Journalism Awards Ceremony, 22.04.2021

EDITOR'S NOTE

Third Prize in this category was won by another first-rate entry from a team of journalists – Dora Montero Carvajal, Andrés Bermudez Liévano, Tatiana Pardo, María Paula Murcia, Ginna Morelo, Sara Castrillejo, Helena Calle, César Rojas, Jeanneth Valdivieso, Lisset Boon, Ezequiel Fernández, Juliana Mori, Isabela Ponce, Vienna Herrera, Alexa Vélez – whose entry *Land of Resistance* pays tribute to the extraordinary lives of people fighting to save the environment across Latin America.

Fact-based and focused on the courageous work of environmental activists it reveals how defending the natural wonders of Latin America has never been so dangerous.

The story exposes how a majority of countries in Latin America are hostile to those who are fighting to preserve the environment and the ancestral lands of indigenous people. In a collaborative, cross-border journalistic project over 18 months the journalists investigate the root of violence against environmental activists.

The story is told in 29 in-depth investigative stories produced in Spanish, Portuguese and English which chart 2,367 attacks over eleven years in the countries of Colombia, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela.

There are 16 reports investigating murders and violent attacks on leaders in the Amazon region, 20 reports on attacks on 17 indigenous communities and three more from peoples of African descent. These attacks arise because, in defence of their ancestral lands, they confront mining interests, oil exploitation, roads, hydroelectric dams, drug trafficking and the illegal timber trade.

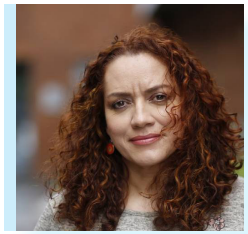
These environmental defenders pay a high price for protecting their homes and culture, but the sacrifices are not just in their own self-interest, say the journalists. The message they send out to the rest of society, both in the region and globally, is that we all have an interest in their fight for clean land, unpolluted air and fresh water.

THIRD PRIZE WINNER

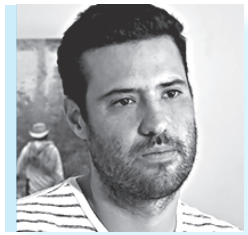
Land of Resistance (Tierra de Resistentes)

Dora Montero, Andrés Bermudez Liévano, Tatiana Pardo, María Paula Murcia, Ginna Morelo, Sara Castillejo, Helena Calle, César Rojas, Jeanneth Valdivieso, Lisset Boon, Juliana Mori, Ezequiel Fernández Bravo, Isabela Ponce, Vienna Herrera, Alexa Vélez

(Colombia, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela)



Dora Montero Carvajal is a Colombian journalist. Founding partner and president of Consejo de Redaccion (CdR); she is an investigative reporter and head of broadcasting at Noticias RCN. Her reporting focuses on regional conflicts ranging from corruption and drug trafficking to armed conflict and environment. On three occasions she has received the Simon Bolivar National Journalism Award and has also been awarded the Luis Enrique Figueroa, CPB (Bogota Journalists Circle) and the IAPA Excellence in Journalism awards. From CdR she has led the project Land of Resistants.



Andrés Bermúdez Liévano is a Colombian journalist and editor at the Latin American Center for Investigative Journalism (CLIP). For the past eight years, he has specialized in issues related to the Peace Agreement and the environment. He has been the general editor of Land of Resistants.

A Caribbean Soul, Ginna Morelo is a reporter and editor of unfinished astonishment and university professor. She is co-founder of Consejo de Redaccion. She is the winner of the 2018 Gabo Award, elected Journalist of the Year of the Simon Bolivar National Journalism Award, two-time winner of the Ortega y Gasset award and the IAPA Award for Excellence in Journalism. She has worked and written for several media outlets.

Ezequiel Fernandez Bravo works as editor at Revista Anfibia, where he also produces the podcasts “Batalla Cultural” and “Muy en una”. He is a journalist, anthropologist from the Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA) and Master in Human Rights and Democratization in Latin America and the Caribbean from the Universidad Nacional de San Martin (UNSAM). He has taught undergraduate and graduate classes at UNSAM, Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO) and Universidad Torcuato Di Tella.

Helena Calle is a Colombian journalist.
She worked at El Malpensante magazine and is currently an environmental, science, health and education journalist for El Espectador newspaper. For two and a half years she was in charge of the Infoamazonia project in Colombia, a news portal dedicated to the Amazon Basin. She is a feminist.

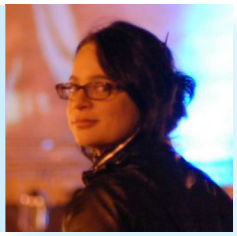
Cesar Rojas Angel is a journalist and political scientist. He is interested in education, environment and human rights. Among other media, he is a collaborator of the channel France 24 in Spanish, with whom he worked for this project.

Maria Paula Murcia Huertas is the Community Editor at @MutanteOrg, journalist and anthropologist in training. She is interested in understanding and explaining human relationships and those of humans with other species. She has covered issues related to the climate crisis, struggles for food sovereignty and indigenous peoples in Colombia.

Isabela Ponce Ycaza is an Ecuadorian journalist and editor. She is co-founder and editorial director of GK. Her work focuses on women's and girls' rights, environment and indigenous rights. In 2018 she published the first investigation into sexual abuse within the Catholic Church in Ecuador. In 2019 she received a mention from the IAPA for an opinion column on gender violence, and was part of the finalist team for the Gabo Award in the Coverage category for the 'Frontera Cautiva' project. In 2020 she was a finalist for the Online Journalism Awards with a project on women adapting to climate change.

Jeanneth Valdivieso is an Ecuadorian journalist. She has lived in Bogota since 2017. She is currently deputy editor of The League Against Silence, a media alliance that publishes stories to combat censorship and silence. Together with a team of journalists she was a finalist for the 2019 Gabo Award in the coverage category for the work 'Frontera Cautiva' (Captive Border). She has reported for different media from Ecuador, Brazil, Cuba and Colombia. She was a journalist for The Associated Press in Quito and content editor at El Telegrafo newspaper and the Andes de Ecuador news agency. She won the 2014 Cupre Journalism Award (Ecuador) for a series of reports made in the Gaza Strip. She participated in the book Los Tele-presidentes: cerca del pueblo, lejos de la democracia. Crónica de 12 presidentes latinoamericanos y sus modos de comunicar by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Foundation (FES).

Juliana Mori is a journalist specializing in audiovisual productions and geospatial data visualization. She is co-founder and editorial director of InfoAmazonia, a vehicle that uses maps, data and geolocated reports to tell stories about the rainforest in the nine countries of the Amazon. She holds a degree in journalism from the Pontificia Universidade Catolica (PUC) de São Paulo/Brazil, and a master's degree in Digital Arts from the Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF), Barcelona/Spain.



Lisseth Boon is a Venezuelan investigative journalist with extensive experience in print and digital media in Venezuela and transnational collaborative projects. For her investigations on corruption, organized crime, extractivism and human rights violations, she has been awarded the national investigative journalism award of the Instituto Prensa y Sociedad (IPYS), the Latin American Conference of Investigative Journalism (Colpin), the Gabo Journalism Award, the Excellence Award of the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA) and ONA. A graduate of the Universidad Catolica Andres Bello in Caracas, she has postgraduate studies from the Universidad Simon Bolivar in Caracas and the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, Spain. She was a fellow of the Draper Hills 2016 summer program of the CDDLR at Stanford University, California, as well as the Fojo Program of the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) in Sweden. She has participated in cross-border collaborative projects such as Panama Papers, Investiga LavaJato, Tierra de Resistentes, Swiss Connection and Fincen Files. Currently, she coordinates the research unit of the digital media Runrun.es in Caracas as well as the research projects of the Alianza Rebelde Investiga (ARI) formed by Runrunes, El Pitazo and Tal Cual.

Tatiana Pardo Ibarra is a freelance journalist. She is interested in issues related to the environment, science, human rights, indigenous peoples and the relationship between armed conflict and nature. She has worked for the two most important newspapers in Colombia: El Espectador and El Tiempo. Her stories also appear in Mongabay, Vice, Dialogo Chino and Todo es Ciencia. She is coordinator and editor of Land of Resistants and winner of the Amway Award.

Alexa Velez has more than 15 years of experience as a journalist and works for Mongabay, a media outlet specializing in environmental issues with a scientific focus with offices in the United States, Indonesia, Latin America, India and Brazil. She is currently the managing editor of the Latin America office. In the last three years, she has received two honorable mentions from the Inter American Press Association (IAPA) for her participation in two journalistic specials: Ganaderia y narcodeforestacion: la lenta desaparicion de los bosques en Centroamerica (Cattle ranching and narco-deforestation: the slow disappearance of forests in Central America) and Tierra de Resistentes (Land of Resistants). She has also been a finalist for two consecutive years for the National Journalism Award in Peru with investigative reports on the advance of drug trafficking in the triple border - shared by Colombia, Brazil and Peru - and on illegal mining and drug trafficking in protected natural areas.

Vienna Herrera is a journalist at Contracorriente with investigative work on extractivism, environment, power structures and sexual and reproductive rights.

Sara Castillejo Ditta is a Colombian journalist and programmer. She has covered the migration, forced disappearance, violence and censorship issues in Colombia and Latin America. She worked in the media alliance The League Against Silence which, promoted by the Fundacion para la Libertad de Prensa (Flip), conducts research on silenced issues in the country. She was also a member of the Data Journalism Unit in the El Tiempo newspaper, where she participated in collaborative projects of national and transnational scope. Her background is specific in the creation of large multimedia reports, cooperating in their ideation, research, field work, writing, design and custom digital editing. In addition, she performs data collection, mining, analysis and visualization tasks. Her contribution to the reports 'La busqueda de los desaparecidos: Colombia y Guatemala gritan por una multitud en silencio' (The Search for the Disappeared: Colombia and Guatemala Scream for a Crowd in Silence) and 'Venezuela a la Fuga' (Venezuela on the Run) has earned her awards such as the 2019 IAPA Excellence in Journalism Award for Data Journalism and, in 2018, the Gabo Award for Best Coverage and the LATAM Digital Media Award for Best Data Visualization. She currently coordinates the collaborative Land of Resistants Open Data project.

Land of Resistance

Tierraderesistentes.com

April 22, 2020

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https://tierraderesistentes.com/
(English, Spanish, Portuguese)

Defending the jungles, mountains, forests and rivers of Latin America has never been so dangerous. 6 out of the 10 most hostile countries for leaders and communities defending the environment and their ancestral lands are in Latin America, according to Special Rapporteur Michel Forst's 2016 report to the UN.

A team of journalists from ten countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela) came together to investigate such attacks against environmental defenders.

We worked for a year, unveiling in March 2020 a database with 2.367 attacks over the last 11 years (2009-2019) and 13 in-depth stories on individual episodes, which complemented the 16 stories we ran when first publishing our project in April 2019. It isn't a complete picture of attacks during that time period, as underreporting is rife. However, our database -built with more than 100 sources, including official entities, press archives, social organizations and on-the-ground reporting- shows a heartbreaking panorama.

Our Findings

Our research found 2.133 attacks against individual leaders and 234 against communities or organizations defending the environment.

78.7% of events were against men, perhaps because they traditionally have held community leadership positions, although we also found 441 attacks against women, including Pemon leader Lisa Henrito Percy in Venezuela, Siona leader Martha Liliana Piaguaje in Colombia or Kichwa leader Patricia Gualinga in Ecuador whose stories we told.

From murders to attacks and even judicial harassment and displacement, they have paid a high price for defending their right to a healthy environment and protecting strategic ecosystems within their territories.

Hard-Hit Ethnic Minorities

Ethnic minorities are the target of an alarming 48% of violence cases (1.146 cases), proving that indigenous and Afro-descendant territories are particularly vulnerable to these criminal interests.

Data show 893 attacks against members of 159 different indigenous ethnic groups, with the Lenca in Honduras being the most attacked (71), including murdered leader Berta Caceres. They're followed by the Guarani-kaiowa (54) and Munduruku (39) in Brazil.

17 of our reports document attacks and actions against indigenous communities who try to safeguard their ancestral lands –Lenca in Honduras; Kolla and Atacama in Argentina; Pemon in Venezuela; Shuar and Kichwa in Ecuador; Piratapuyo, Tucano, Pijao, Siona, Zenu and Nutabe in Colombia; Guarani-kaiowaa, Munduruku, Karipuna and Uru-eu-wau-wau in Brazil; Raramuri and Odami in Mexico; Trinitarian Moxeño and Torewa in Bolivia; or Ashaninka and Tikuna in Peru.

The database also shows 148 cases of violence against Afro-descendant populations and 105 against the Garifuna, also of African origin, in Honduras. Three of our investigations show attacks suffered by Afro-descendant communities in the Colombian Pacific and Northeastern Brazil.

What They Defend

Although in many cases environmental leaders try to protect more than one natural resource, in this research we took into consideration the main resource they defend.

Likewise, in many cases, leaders and communities have been defending themselves against several kinds of stakeholders. Our investigation only considered the main sectors affecting the struggling communities, ranging from agribusiness, oil, mining, hydropower and roads to drug trafficking and illegal timber trade.

These are the main types of violence suffered by leaders. It's worth noting that, in several cases, leaders or communities have suffered more than one event; therefore, we marked either the gravest event or the first in time.

Amazonia, the Epicenter of Attacks

More than half of our reports investigated violence against leaders, communities and park rangers in the Amazon region in six different countries.

These 16 stories show how dozens of indigenous territories, ancestral communities and national parks throughout the Amazon basin are targeted by attacks and criminal interests. We found and documented cases of settlers invading communal lands,

the military attacking indigenous leaders, oil companies omitting responsibility for contaminated water sources, drug traffickers forcing communities to grow coca, park rangers murdered for fulfilling their calling to preserve collective heritage, and woodcutters harassing those who protect the species they covet.

The Hardest Part

The most difficult information to collect was the status of cases within the judicial system. We only found conclusive data from judicial decisions (either convictions, acquittals or pardons) in 303 cases (12,8% of the total) showing that justice is in debt with environmental advocates.

In many of these cases, sentences punish only the perpetrators, but not the masterminds. Such was case with the sentences in Mexico and Honduras regarding the murderers of Isidro Baldenegro and Berta Caceres, both recipients of the Goldman Environmental Prize. In over 1,000 cases -46% of the total-, we found no information on the investigations' status.

Equally alarming were the findings indicating that, at least in 1,325 cases (or 56% of the total) risk reports were previously filed before authorities, including State institutions and international bodies, by the victims and their communities.

Our research found that even bringing a case before the Inter-American Commission or Court of Human Rights, the two bodies in charge of watching over human rights in Latin America, doesn't always lead to effective protection measures.

Tragically, despite popular wisdom indicating that forewarned soldiers should not die in war, violence against leaders has continued or even escalated in five countries –Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, Mexico and Venezuela– where States didn't do enough to protect them, despite precautionary measures or international level risk alerts.

Although our measurement is not scientific but journalistic, the two most violent years were 2017 (13.9%) and 2018 (10%). 2019 accounted for 7.4% of them, even though many sources hadn't yet concluded their investigations at the time of publication. The murder of several indigenous leaders in Brazil, Mexico and Colombia in March 2020 shows that not even the COVID-19 pandemic managed to stop violence.

These advocates not only protect the land that gives them life, but also mountains that provide us with water and forests that clean the air from cities. They're being threatened and murdered at a frightening rate. They're more than a number. These are their tales of struggle and resistance.

See data vizualization at https://tierraderesistentes.com/en/2021/05/13/hallazgos-base-de-datos/.

Colombia. The Siona Governors and Their Disputed Territory

By César Rojas Ángel

The original publication is available via the following link: https://tierraderesistentes.com/en/2020/04/22/las-gobernadoras-siona-y-su-territorio-en-disputa/

(English, Spanish, Portuguese)

On the Ecuadorian border, two Siona women –Milena Payoguaje and Martha Liliana Piaguaje– govern indigenous territories within one of Colombia's most disputed areas. There is a company seeking to extract oil and seismic explosives appeared within their land.

The water reaches her shin, about ten centimeters from the edge of her rubber boots. Her waterproof pants are already wet. On the belt, he carries a machete and a pouch to store essential objects. The governor of the Santa Cruz de Piñuña Blanco reservation, Martha Liliana Piaguaje, carries her baton across her chest as she records on her cell phone camera one of the points where the company Amerisur Resources (recently sold to Chilean company Geopark) installed Sismigel explosive charges to carry out seismic studies.

This photo was taken in early October 2019, when Liliana and her indigenous guard went to their reservation's limits with representatives of Amerisur and the Ministry of Interior, among other officials of Corpoamazonia and other local authorities, to tell them that the company should never have buried that material there. The company states the explosives are outside Siona indigenous territory, but Liliana and her colleagues claim they have evidence to prove that Amerisur crossed the reservation's limits, two hours downstream from Puerto Asis, on the Putumayo River.

"We are a Putumayo original people, we don't come from anywhere else; our grandparents are family, we have Tucano roots, we are their descendants, same as with the Siona Secoya of Ecuador," says Martha Liliana Piaguaje when describing her people. In Putumayo, one of the gateways to the Colombian Amazonia, there are 12 Siona communities. Santa Cruz de Piñuña Blanco is one of six legally constituted reservations in the department.

Martha Liliana Piaguaje does not use her first name. In her reservation, almost everyone calls her Liliana. She is one of the leaders of this indigenous community in Putumayo, Southern Colombia. Thirty minutes upriver, on the road to Puerto Asis, Milena Payoguaje, Governor of the Bajo Santa Elena council, lives. She is the first

woman to govern this community and a leader who, although she has had no direct contact with the advances of the extractive industries, knows the risks of defending the territory just as much as Liliana. Both have suffered due to the conflict; both closely see the coca crops and their growers seeking to expand their borders. They are also aware that the river that serves as a gateway to their communities is one of the most disputed drug trafficking corridors in the country and both Milena and Liliana have been threatened by different stakeholders seeking to control this territory.

In these two communities, as well as in other indigenous organizations in the region and throughout Colombia, women are protagonists in the defense of both the territory and their collective rights, all amidst a hostile environment.

On August 22, 2019, the Cundinamarca Administrative Court ruled in favor of the community of the Santa Cruz de Piñuña Blanco reservation. The judge ordered Amerisur to suspend the seismic studies, urged the parties to form a negotiation table to resolve the dispute and requested the National Land Agency (ANT, in Spanish) to make a visit to determine the reservation's geographic limits and thus clarify whether the Sismigel charges are inside or outside the indigenous territory.

The last meeting of this negotiation table -a means to follow up to the guardianship ruling- took place last December 6. Since then, the community of Santa Cruz de Piñuña Blanco has had no further contact with Amerisur Colombia, the Colombian branch of British company Amerisur. By that time, there were rumors already that the company was going to be sold. The deal was made public on January 16. Chilean company GeoPark, which in addition to its parent company has operations in Peru, Ecuador, Argentina and Brazil, bought Amerisur for US$314 million. With this transaction, GeoPark acquired the 13 blocks the British company held in Colombia, 12 of them located in Putumayo.

In December, when the sale seemed imminent, the Buenavista reservation, the Siona people's largest reservation in the department which was also facing the advances of the oil company, declared in anticipation: "We warn the multinational @GeoParkEmpresa, possible buyer of @AmerisurResourc, that we will NOT allow extractive activities in our lands and that by acquiring the referred assets it acquires the responsibilities of @AmerisurResourc for the violation of human rights and our territorial rights."

Tensions between the oil company and the Siona people began in 2013, when the first step towards a prior consultation process was taken. In an investigation published at the end of February 2020, environmental organization Ambiente y Sociedad highlights that Amerisur separately initiated prior consultation processes with the communities of Buenavista, Bajo Santa Elena and Santa Cruz de Piñuña Blanco. The Buenavista reservation rejected any intervention, but the other two communities signed agreements in 2014. Today, Liliana, governor of Santa Cruz de Piñuña Blanco, explains that they did not have enough information, that by doing the consultation separately they tried to divide the Siona people and that, in any case, the area where they installed the explosives for the seismic study was not included in their agreements.

That is why the ruling in her people's favor issued in August was a small victory for her in the midst of a long dispute between the oil company and the Siona people. But the celebration was short-lived. The ANT heeded the Court's call to delimit the territory and has already issued its opinion: "The Sismigel charges are outside the Siona Santa Cruz de Piñuña Blanco Indigenous Reservation." The community interprets that this could open the door for the oil company to continue exploration activities. Liliana Piaguaje and her community do not know what the next step in the process is. The possibility of the oil project's advance adds to other latent concerns, such as inhabiting a territory historically affected by conflict, disputed by different armed stakeholders outside the law and surrounded by illicit crops.

Putumayo is the third-largest department in the country with more hectares of coca crops, according to the 2018 report of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's Integrated Monitoring System for Illicit Crops. Those 26,408 hectares are equivalent to 16 per cent of the total registered cultivation in the country. In addition, 10% of the country's coca crops are located in indigenous reservations. Regarding the threats that this implies, the report is clear: "A greater presence of coca crops is directly related to internal forced displacement, harms by public forces (murders or injuries), and terrorist acts, attacks, fighting and harassment at the municipal level."

As if all that was not enough, Liliana has to deal with her own security situation. As a leader, in August 2018 the government's National Protection Unit provided her with a security detail comprising two escorts, an armored van and a cell phone with minutes. The detail arrived a year after her appointment as governor and accompanies her solely in the urban area of Puerto Asis.

But the threats, which are transmitted by word of mouth or by a anonymous notes, have been received at her reservation, where neither vans nor cell phone signals reach.

The Siona, an Endangered Indigenous People

"We are ayahuasca people," says Liliana, "we drink a lot of yoko and we purge ourselves with tobacco, which are part of our elders' beliefs; we as the young people are passing those beliefs on to our children, so that they're not lost." In Santa Cruz de Piñuña Blanco about 40 families, almost 200 people, live who have stayed despite several years of violence and isolation. "The general census reported 105 families," says Liliana, although she quickly clarifies that the figure includes displaced families, who, as she says, "have left to improve their quality of life and live in the urban areas."

For several decades, the Siona people have lived in the crossfire. Located on both sides of the Putumayo River, in both Colombian and Ecuadorian territory, the indigenous people have seen paramilitary groups, guerrillas and Public Forces pass by.

Some, like the inhabitants of the Bajo Santa Elena council, bear deeper scars. In 2011, before the peace process began, demobilized members of the then Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC, in Spanish) reported that they had installed anti-personnel mines near the territory. The Colombian Campaign against Mines (CCCM) has already cleared some of the known devices, but there is a new field to be dismantled. The community is simultaneously proceeding with the Ministry of Interior so that its council becomes a reservation. Milena says that if they were a reservation, they could have access to collective ethnic budgets directly provided by the central government.

The governor feels that, with that State recognition, the community could have better tools to face those who unscrupulously cut down the forest, expand the agricultural frontier or increase the number of hectares of illicit crops, such as coca leaf. In the end, 13,903 hectares of forest were cut down between 2017 and 2018 in Putumayo, the fourth-most deforested department in the country, according to the annual deforestation report prepared by the Institute of Hydrology, Meteorology and Environmental Studies (IDEAM, in Spanish.)

Meanwhile, Milena and Liliana have always defended their neutrality and, unarmed, have done everything in their power to prevent any of these stakeholders from entering their territory.

“Threats? Of every kind,” says the governor of Piñuña Blanco. Neither she nor the Indigenous Guard can do the monitoring tours they used to do in the most remote areas of their own reservation. “If you come back this way, you’ll leave in a bag,” Liliana was told by a settler, one of many farmers who have settled near the reservation to cut down the forest, plant coca leaves or exploit the fertile lands of the Amazon foothills on their own way. Liliana prefers not to talk about it. She doesn’t know if retelling the threats is riskier than keeping them to herself, and simply recognizes that danger surrounds her and her fellows.

This community can only be reached by river. A speedboat leaving from Puerto Asis every morning takes about two and a half hours to reach the banks of Piñuña Blanco. In this area of the department, the Putumayo River is wide and plentiful, but it has no rapids or abrupt turns. It meanders through the jungle, which grows thicker as it moves away from Puerto Asis. A few minutes after leaving the municipality’s modest pier, the light posts disappear and, almost simultaneously, the cell phone signal is lost. A village comes into view a full hour later, on the left bank of the river, a sign three or four meters wide: “Buenavista Reservation,” the Siona people’s largest one in the department.

The Siona of Buenavista do not look kindly on GeoPark either. Two oil blocks were granted to the company by the National Hydrocarbons Agency (ANH in Spanish),

but no attached production rights. They are located outside the reservation’s limits, but in an area the indigenous people have been claiming as part of their ancestral territory since 2018. They have even asked the First Civil Court of the Specialized Circuit for Land Restitution, which hears cases of land dispossession on account of the armed conflict, to claim their right to 58,000 hectares. The have also requested precautionary measures for these lands. The court granted these measures, so that on August 21, 2018 it ordered the company to stop its activities in the area until ownership of the territory was properly defined.

One hour by river from Buenavista and about 30 km away, Liliana says that even her reservation has received messages for her to stop opposing the oil company’s intentions, she has been told to “save yourself the troubles.”

The history of threats and precautionary protection measures is long. In Order 004 of 2009, the Constitutional Court included the Siona in the list of the 34 most threatened indigenous peoples in the country due to conflict and forced displacement. Nine years later, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) issued precautionary measures to protect the integrity of the lives and territories of the Buenavista and Santa Cruz de Piñuña Blanco reservations. The Commission asked the Colombian state, among other things, to adopt measures so that the communities in these reservations “can live safely in their territory, without being subjected to violence, threats, and harassment.” Both communities claim that the Colombian State has not met these obligations, while they see that risk factors grow more and more diverse.

“[to army] “I’ve been forced to go and tell them to leave. Then they say that we are harboring other groups, that we are the ones who are accompanying them.”

Milena Payoguaje

“The Army has come here, and neither the Army nor any group can enter here,” says Milena Payoguaje of the Santa Elena Council. “I’ve been forced to go and tell them to leave. Then they say that we are harboring other groups, that we are the ones who are accompanying them.” And the accusation is repeated in many ways. The governor tells FARC dissidents, who went back on the peace agreement and kept their weapons, that they cannot be in their territory, to which they responded saying that she is on the army’s side. And if she rejects the presence of an illegal armed stakeholder such as the so-called ‘Mafia’, she runs the risk of being associated with one of their enemies. For years, indigenous leaders have insisted that they do not take sides, and so they advocate for the expulsion of all armed stakeholder from their territory, something that is not well regarded by any of the parties.

Governors in the Crossfire

On September 26, 2019, the Ombudsman’s Office issued an early warning that highlighted the risk situation in the Piñuña Blanco area, where in addition to the

reservation governed by Liliana, there are other villages and small towns.

The State entity monitoring human rights compliance in Colombia reported eight violent episodes between July and September 2019. Among others, one of the episodes occurred when one of these groups – which insists on being called FARC – arrived on July 28 in the Pueblo Bello village. They told the community that they planned to stay and in the afternoon, in a neighboring village, they confronted the so-called 'Mafia', a group partly made up of former paramilitaries. One farmer was injured and taken to a hospital in the urban area of Puerto Asis. Between 29 July and 2 August, there were no classes in these villages. The inhabitants took refuge in the school and the health center, the only concrete structures in the hamlet.

Liliana recalls that similar episodes were experienced in the reservation during the 2000s. The army and the guerrillas fought mere meters from their houses and the community had to take refuge behind the most solid structure's walls. That was why many of the people left.

"The continuous individual displacements have also entailed risks for the people who have been exercising leadership within the peasant, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, since any violent action against them necessarily and directly impacts on the territorial autonomy of the communities and their mechanisms of self-protection and resistance in the face of armed disputes between FARC-EP dissidents and the Mafia," the Ombudsman's Office says.

Among its recommendations, the Ombudsman's Office asked the Army – in line with the requests made by the Constitutional Court for several years – to "fully apply the principles of IHL" and to "evaluate" the best action for the "effective protection of its inhabitants." The control entity also stressed that the operations must "contain concrete measures to reduce the risks that may arise as a reaction to the presence of the Public Force."

In addition, the Ombudsman's Office requested urgent action from the National Government, the Putumayo Governor's Office, the Puerto Asis Mayor's Office and the Attorney General's Office. But the risk is still there. "The control entities did nothing," Governor Liliana says.

"The recommendation is not to go there until the situation gets better," says Amanda Camilo, a respected leader of victims who today is also the Putumayo and Southern Huila territorial coordinator of the Commission for the Clarification of the Truth, a State entity created with the peace agreement to reconstruct the country during 52 after years of war. Amanda, who works in the urban area of Puerto Asis, has not been able to travel with her team to the Santa Cruz de Piñuña Blanco reservation to interview the inhabitants and clarify the truth about what happened to the Siona.

"The recommendation is not to go there until the situation gets better"

Amanda Camilo, líder de víctimas

This activist is familiar with different Putumayo women-led processes in defense of the territory, water and fauna. She knows that, in order to limit their actions, some stakeholders direct their threats at their families and children, and in many places they discredit their arguments simply because they are women. "Unfortunately, despite the strong female leadership in Putumayo, women are stigmatized, because many concepts of a patriarchal culture are still in place, where negotiations should not be held with women, but between men," says Amanda.

For several years, she has also worked with the Ruta Pacifica de las Mujeres (women pacific route) and is one of the founders of the Alianza de Mujeres Tejedoras de Vida del Putumayo (Alliance of Putumayo Women Weavers of Life), an organization that supported Liliana Piaguaje and the Siona people of Piñuña Blanco in the guardianship proceeding that was ruled in their favor in August.

In particular, Amanda knows what the Siona indigenous people have faced. "They are a people that historically have been affected and have been losing their integrity and their status as a native people of the Amazonia," says the leader. "They have stayed between Puerto Asis and Puerto Leguizamo and every time this boom in extractive economies -including oil production- comes around, they lose a little of their idiosyncrasy and their community becomes affected. They have had to move around and lose much of what living a harmonious life in the territory means."

The Siona and Their Ancestral Territory

Liliana Piaguaje explains, while successively pointing to her crown, her belly and the ground, "in the environment we have our being, the belly of our children, and life, which is in the ground, which gives us the strength to continue in this struggle to defend the territory."

That defense of the territory is present in their daily conversations. Liliana effortlessly remembers a reconnaissance excursion in the reservation when she talks with her neighbors. Her struggle for land is part of all their assemblies, they instill it in the youngest, and on many occasions it is the subject of conversation with her husband, Manuel Carlosama, president of all the Siona people in the department. When they take the remedy, as many people in Southern Colombia call ayahuasca, they ask their grandparents -their ancestors and spiritual guides- for advice to guide them in their struggle.

But now, there are some explosives buried in one of its cananguchales, a complex floodable ecosystem, dominated by palms which roots protrude from the surface and which are a source of life and connection to the earth for the Siona. When you hear Manuel talking about these Sismigel charges, you can feel the anguish in his voice. He and the governor are uncertain about what GeoPark's next move will be. "Now we are at the last stage, at the endgame, you could say, where the judge orders a negotiation table to be set up among the parties, the company

and the community," Liliana explains. Three meetings have already been held. In the last one, held last December 6, the ANT concluded that the oil company was operating outside of Siona territory.

Since the sale is recent, GeoPark says it is studying its processes and does not want to meet in person with journalists yet. After several weeks of attempts, it was not possible to arrange an interview.

"GeoPark is in a stage where it is assessing and understanding all the processes and details of operation in the area. Once we have all the necessary information, we will prepare an action plan that we will share with our interest groups," the company wrote to us via email on January 23, in response to a request for an interview.

Eight days later, its connections coordinator, Maria Camila Casallas, wrote to us again. "On August 22, 2019, the Cundinamarca Administrative Court issued a ruling ordering the creation of a negotiation and compliance table chaired by the Ministry of Interior and made up of delegates from the National Land Agency (ANT), the Ombudsman's Office, the Delegate Attorney for Ethnic Affairs, Corpoamazonia, two delegates from the indigenous reservation elected by the community and representatives of the company. Since that date, the seismic acquisition project has been preventively suspended pending the agreements reached at the negotiation table," she said.

However, the company has not provided this information to the community. Days before this last email, this was the version that Governor Liliana had: "The company tells us that they have a schedule ready to come and detonate the Sismigel charges they have buried, and so far we are very concerned because, if they come to detonate them, we would have a huge loss in our territory because all the fauna and flora that is in that part would be lost."

"We are very concerned because, if they come to detonate them, we would have a huge loss in our territory because all the fauna and flora that is in that part would be lost"

Gobernadora Liliana

In the photo taken by one of the reservation's Indigenous Guard members in early October, almost four hours on foot from the center of the Santa Cruz de Piñuña Blanco reservation, a tree branch with a handmade sign reading "STK 1241" stands out from the cananguchal. These are the initials that mark the points where sensors are installed to determine if there is oil in the subsoil after the detonation of a charge. Other signs, also marked by hand on red posters, say "SP", marking e detonation points. Some branches with signs are broken, others are illegible.

The charges are buried about ten meters deep and no one is comfortable with them remaining there.

Honduras. Death and Oblivion in the Tolupan forest

By Vienna Herrera

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://tierraderesistentes.com/en/2020/04/22/muerte-y-olvido-en-el-bosque-tol/
(English, Spanish, Portuguese)

The Tolupan San Francisco de Locomapa Tribe, in Yoro, Honduras, has suffered murders, judicial harassment and attacks due to its opposition to the power generation projects in the territory where they have always lived, but which is now in dispute. In the past 20 years, 40 Tolupan indigenes were murdered, a population that faces its own extermination.

Consuelo Soto speaks always looking at the other side of the street, as if expecting another attack from the members of her community who have harassed her for years. A couple of weeks ago, she was threatened again. She answers questions almost whispering, in front of her house, which preserves the memory of the violence perpetrated against the tribe.

Consuelo is one of the Tolupan leaders facing threats and attacks for defending the Tolupan territory of San Francisco de Locomapa in the Yoro department, North Honduras. The conflict within the tribe was triggered in 2009 when two companies, Venta Local de Madera y Transformación Ocotillo (Velomato) and Industria Maderera Rene Eleazar (Inmare) along with the National Institute for the Preservation and Development of Forests, Protected Areas and Wildlife (ICF, in Spanish,) developed forest management plans giving rise to the sale of wood extracted from forests located within Tolupan territory.

In San Francisco de Locomapa, there is a division based on different visions on territorial management. Although the Tolupan manage themselves through a hierarchical structure with a cacique, who provides advice in the decision-making process, and a Tribal Council responsible for taking them, not everybody in Locomapa agrees with these council's decisions.

On the one hand, there is the Tribal Council and 800 people out of the tribe's total of 3,000 who agree on giving permission for chainsaws to extract and sell wood. On the other hand, the remainder of the tribe rejects that possibility or are afraid of expressing their opinions. In order to face the other side, they decided to create a parallel entity called the Preventive Council of Tribes.

The Tribal Council chairman, José Alberto Vieda, affirms that the forest is "renewable" and that most of the tribe members are making the decision on the sale. The 40-year-old man said he sold 14,800 mts of wood at 250 lempiras ($10) each to Honduran businessman Wilder Domínguez. He subsequently affirms the profit was distributed in the meeting. The community pays 15% over the sale to the Federation of Xicaque Tribes of Yoro (Fetrixy, in Spanish,) an organization gathering all Tolupan tribes of the country, and an additional amount of 40 lempiras ($1.62) per cubic meter for municipal taxes, according to an investigation conducted by the Study Center for Democracy (Cespad, in Spanish.)

This potentially accounts for an approximate of 2.5 million lempiras (around $100.000) for the community. The approximate 800 persons agreeing with the cutting down receive 500 lempiras ($20) for each 5.000 meters of wood approved in meetings, according to the information published on the Tribal Council's Facebook page.

"They also face discrimination, which makes them vulnerable to unfair and precarious working conditions"

Victoria Tauli-Corpuz.

93.9% of the Tolupan hardly cover the expenses of the basic food basket, living below the extreme poverty line according to a report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples. "They also face discrimination, which makes them vulnerable to unfair and precarious working conditions," Special Rapporteur Victoria Tauli-Corpuz said.

Their precarious situation is notable in a country ranked 132nd out of 189 countries in the Human Development Report prepared by the United Nations Development Programme – UNDP and where, according to other organizations, over half the country (67.4%) lives in poverty.

The State's oblivion is much more evident for the Tolupan people.

As almost all indigenous peoples in the country, the San Francisco de Locomapa tribe's conditions are precarious. However, the State's oblivion is much more evident for the Tolupan people: there are no paved streets, no public lighting, no cell phone reception in nearly the entire community and many of them must walk for hours to receive healthcare services.

To contact Consuelo, you have to wait for her to pay 10 lempiras ($0.45) to charge her cell phone. When working, she places the cell phone on buckets close to the roof, as she claims reception is allegedly better sometimes.

Historically, the Tolupan have devoted themselves to agriculture, producing mainly corn, beans and coffee to subsist. This was how they built a close relationship with nature and developed a sense of responsibility and care about the treatment natural assets must receive… *Read more*

Venezuela. Attacks Against Indigenous Communities Aim to Militarize Our Territory

The original publication is available via the following link:

https://tierraderesistentes.com/en/2020/04/22/lisa-lynn-henrito-percy-guardiana-del-pueblo-pemon/ (English, Spanish, Portuguese)

Lisa Lynn Henrito Percy, Guardian of the Pemon People, has been accused of secessionism and treason by the Venezuelan military high command, which triggered urgent action by Amnesty International. In a context of predominantly male leadership, this female leader stands out for her uniqueness as an indigenous woman in a region threatened by mining and smuggling, as well as for her tenacity in defending her land and her people's self-determination.

A short woman with long, dark hair faces a major of the Venezuelan Army who is guarded by three men in olive-green uniforms. Neither the men's insignias nor height seem to intimidate her. "If you want to do in this municipality what you are doing in the rest of the country, you are very much mistaken, because there is a people here and we are not going to allow it," she tells him, defiantly. With strong, determined mannerisms, she stands her ground in the argument with the military man who was trying to get past an indigenous checkpoint on a road in Great Savanna, Southeastern Venezuela. "You are looking out for your own interests. We are defending ours. You know full well who are corrupt here and now you are trying to accuse an entire people," said the woman in an anonymous video.

The woman who firmly achieved the military's withdrawal from the road is Lisa Lynn Henrito Percy, a native female leader of the Pemon indigenous people, who have lived in the territory demarcated as Venezuela's southern state of Bolívar (bordering with Guyana and Brazil) since ancient times.

"If you want to do in this municipality what you are doing in the rest of the country, you are very much mistaken, because there is a people here and we are not going to allow i."

Lisa Lynn Henrito Percy

The video, which ends with applause and cheers from a group of indigenous people, recorded one of the many clashes that the leader has faced with military men in the last four years. It is not posted on YouTube and it has not been leaked to social networks. It is shared among the Indigenous communities through modest cell phones as an amulet of courage and pride in a region without Internet connection

or electricity service and where gasoline scarcity makes it difficult to traverse Mainline 10, a road that crosses the East of Canaima National Park and connects Venezuela with Brazil.

Lisa Henrito (46) is convinced that the battle she has fiercely waged since the '90s will end in her death or incarceration. However, this prospect does not frighten her: she simply sees it as her unavoidable fate.

"I always tell my people: If I have to die fighting this battle, I don't want to die in vain. I want to be sure that you will continue fighting. And if I'm imprisoned, don't try to free me. You need to understand that what they want (the military) is the land, not me. Don't waste your efforts trying to get me out, the fight is that way," she says to her fellow Pemon as she extends her arms and hands in front of them, as if delineating the path her people should follow if something were to happen to her.

"If I have to die fighting this battle, I don't want to die in vain. I want to be sure that you will continue fighting. And if I'm imprisoned, don't try to free me"
Lisa Lynn Henrito Percy

Lisa has dedicated more than half of her life to fight the power, a struggle so intense that she feels the passing of time has been harder on her. "I feel as if I've lived for a thousand years," she states.

According to Henrito, that struggle has made her develop a "collective mentality" that prevents her from thinking about herself whenever she receives a threat. That was what happened when she learned that, on a primetime program on Venezuelan state-run TV channel VTV, broadcast on July 23, 2018, Brigadier General Roberto González Cárdenas, a high-ranking military officer, accused her of leading a secessionist movement within the Pemon tribe and of "betraying the homeland." At that moment Lisa remembered her parents and was concerned about how the statement made against her on screen might affect them, and about the true intent of such slander.

"'They're starting the attack and they're trying to justify military intervention,' was my first thought. I try to stay rational when such things happen. The attack was on me, but it was intended to create an overall smear campaign against my people – Lisa reflects. It was also clear that they had no evidence of anything and, if they ever produced any, it would be fabricated. They wanted to justify a military intervention to continue trafficking gold and arms. Their final goal was to militarize our territory," she adds.

The high-ranking officer's accusation triggered a series of repudiation actions. Amnesty International raised an alert about the attack and sent appeals to the Ministry of Interior, Justice and Peace, the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples and the Ombudsman's Office… *Read more*

Argentina. White Gold: The Water Dispute

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://tierraderesistentes.com/en/2020/04/22/oro-blanco-la-disputa-por-el-agua/
(English, Spanish, Portuguese)

In the Jujuy puna, in northwestern Argentina, thirty-three indigenous communities of Salinas Grandes and Laguna de Guayatayoc resisted the advance of lithium mining a decade ago. Neither the judicial conflicts nor the threats that are current in the province paralyzed their claim: they defend water, they want to sustain their way of life linked to the salt flats and they demand that the companies that put the area at water risk leave their territories.

For some years, the Puna desert in North Argentina has been experiencing a particular mutation. Near the crossroads of national routes 52 and 70, at a height of 4,000 mts, a bunch of channels spread out for 14 kilometers connecting the Cauchari – Olaroz basin with the lithium carbonate plant owned by Exar, a mining company. They are about the width of a person and, in 2021, when extraction starts, thousands of liters of brine per day will go through them until reaching the evaporation stream pools.

Once they have dried, the lithium carbonate will go to several destinations, mainly the United States, China and Japan. These countries are going to convert it into lithium ion to be used by almost the entire light technological industry we carry in our backpacks: tablets, cellphones, notebooks and, in particular, the production of batteries for electrical cars. Exar's forecasts (owned by Chinese and Canadian capitals) indicates that this basin has reserves to produce a total of 40,000 tons of lithium carbonate a year for 40 years and they have already announced an initial investment of USD 565 million. Just in the Jujuy province, 13 projects of this kind are now operational.

Cristian Aragón is 55 years old and owns a contractor company that mining extraction sells supplies, in particular for works in the salt flats. In this project, he is responsible for building a part of the external pipe through which Exar is going to transport the brine.

Now, he stands at in the security cabin that controls the employee's access to Exar's plant. He is waiting for a ride, smokes, and wears black sunglasses, a grey shirt,

a silk kerchief around the neck, blue jeans, working boots, and carries a crocodile leather bag that matches another couple of boots made of the same material.

On the other side of the cabin, around 2 kilometers far from there, 24 stream pools (300 m x 2 km each) are ready. Cristian comes from Santiago de Chile, but has been living in Susques for several years, a locality that serves as temporary base for area miners and companies, such as Sales de Jujuy, which already extracts lithium carbonate from the Olaroz salt flat, or Southern Lithium, which is going to start building its camp in the Cauchari salt flat in march this year. Cristian will work in the project for another year, but he does not want to go back to Chile. Before taking the bus of the Jujuy Ministry of Culture and Tourism, he says he does not miss his country. He takes one last puff until burning the filter and smiles:

— I came here to become a millionaire, dude.

***

Just some decades ago, lithium started to be recognized at a global scale due to its capacity for energy storage. It irrupted into the world market on a specific date and with a specific brand and model: In 1991, Sony presented a hand video camera that, unlike previous ones, bore a smaller, lighter and longer-lasting battery, the three key elements for the boom.

From this point on, the lithium market grew and became present in each innovation: cellphones, tablets, laptops, digital cameras, and electric cars. Without them, Samsung would be unimaginable. Apple would not exist as we know it today, nor the electric car market that currently accounts for 40% of the worldwide lithium demand. That is maybe the reason why chemists Akira Yoshino and Stanley Whittingham and physicist John B. Goodenough – the fathers who collaborated in different moments and laboratories for this energy storage creature to exist – won the 2019 Chemistry Nobel Prize.

It is said that the reserves shared by Chile, Argentina and Bolivia are enough for the whole region to hold the title of the "Lithium Saudi Arabia."

Many things are said about lithium: The future white gold, the starlet mineral of the next 50 years, the oil of the 21st century, the mineral that will redeem over two centuries of fossil fuels once they exhaust. It is said that the reserves shared by Chile, Argentina and Bolivia are enough for the whole region to hold the title of the "Lithium Saudi Arabia." Some people find this name as synonymous with development, some others disbelieve this salvation promise unless a thorough prior discussion on the energy transition occurs. The truth is that, from the beginning of the century, the lithium carbonate value per ton increased tenfold, to USD 16,100 in 2018 from USD 1,560 in 2002.

Nowadays, the countries competing for the primary resource are in the North part of the planet: China, South Korea, United States, Germany and Japan. But it is the Asian countries -mainly China- that produce the greatest added value: They import or extract the raw material, manufacture industrial and technological goods with it for domestic consumption and also for exports, even to United States and Europe. About 50% of the supply in the world battery market comes from Asia. They are winning the innovation race: The energy transition is based in Shanghai.

***

As every day, on the morning of February 4, 2019, Inés Lamas got on her motorcycle. The sun was beginning to clear the hills of the Jujuyan Puna. As usual, she rode 35 kilometers of gravel road up to the shopping stand located on the side of National Route 52, near Salinas Grandes.

In that area, East of National Route 40, in Salinas Grandes and the Guayatayoc Lagoon, is the main focus of the Australian, Dutch, Canadian, Chinese and Japanese mining companies.

That day, Inés did not make a stop to sell llama sweaters or to offer herself as a guide to the salt flats. This time, she continued to the Guayatayoc Lagoon, North of the salt flats. Along with her, 200 people arrived from all local Kolla indigenous communities that were alerted: The lagoon was being dug to find out if lithium could be extracted... *Read more*

Find more stories of "Land of Resistance" at https://tierraderesistentes.com/

The winning team of authors made a decision to reinvest the prize money into the project "Land of Resistance".

*“On 22 April, 2021, the most important environmental treaty “El Acuerdo de Escazú” signed by Latin American countries entered into force. Although only twelve have ratified it, many hope that it will be an essential instrument to prevent the assassination of environmental leaders and, contrary to what has happened in the last two decades, to protect the environment.”**

* *Find more information at* https://tierraderesistentes.com/en/2021/04/22/entra-en-vigor-el-acuerdo-de-escazu-una-esperanza-en-medio-del-caos/

Excellence in Environmental Journalism

Shortlisted Stories

SHORTLISTED STORY

Flight to the Future: One Land's Quest to Defuse a Climate 'Timebomb'

Belinda Goldsmith, Claudio Accheri (UK/ Italy)

Belinda Goldsmith is the Editor-in-Chief of the Thomson Reuters Foundation, where she runs an award-winning global team of about 50 staff journalists and 250 freelancers covering under-reported stories on humanitarian issues, women's and LGBT+ rights, human slavery, and climate change. Belinda joined Reuters in 1994 from Papua New Guinea, where she was a foreign correspondent for Australian Associated Press, and has worked for the company in Australia, Sweden, the United States and Britain in a variety of leading roles. Belinda is a regular speaker on careers in journalism, and is on the judging panels of the European Press Prize and the International Network of Street Newspapers' annual awards.

Claudio Accheri is an award-winning journalist, photographer, filmmaker and creative producer focusing on new media and digital storytelling. Originally from Cagliari, Italy, Claudio has over 10 years experience covering climate change, human and digital rights. His work has been featured on Reuters, Washington Post, AJ+, NBC, RTSI, El País, Internazionale as well as regional publishers in Africa, Latin America and Southern Europe.

Flight to the Future: One Land's Quest to Defuse a Climate 'Timebomb'

By Belinda Goldsmith and Claudio Accheri
Thomson Reuters Foundation, news.trust.com
September 10, 2019

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://news.trust.org/shorthand/flight-to-the-future/index.html

When Hawo Mohamed woke one morning to find about a dozen of her goats dead, she knew her life as a herder was coming to an end.

Raised in a remote village in coastal Somaliland, in northeast Africa, Mohamed remembers taking her family's goats to feed on green pasture flanked by a sprinkling of trees.

But in time the trees began to die, she said, and then, about eight years ago, seasonal rains grew much more erratic, seemingly worsening each year.

Little by little, her animals, starved of enough forage and water, grew weaker too.

"One day I went to collect the animals as usual and brought them home but the next morning 10 to 12 of them were dead," Mohamed recalled, sitting in the sand nursing her newborn son outside a corrugated iron shelter in the coastal city of Berbera.

"When only a few of our animals were left, I saw my neighbours had already started to move and I went with them … I knew nothing would be the same again."

Mohamed, 32, her husband Ahmed Ali, and their four children this year joined an estimated 600,000 people in Somaliland who have fled rural villages to seek new lives in cities, unable to cope after years of drought decimated their livestock and crops.

Somaliland, a self-declared republic of 4 million people in the Horn of Africa, is one of the world's most vulnerable places to climate change. Poor and drought-hit, and without legal status as a country, it is struggling to adapt for the future.

As the Syria-sized republic battles worsening weather crises and growing migration within and out of the region, it is racing to find ways to stem a tide of climate migrants, keep people on ever-less-productive land and create new jobs for the unemployed.

In particular, soaring youth employment, as destitute families leave farming but find nothing else to do, is creating a social and political "timebomb" in a region already

struggling with migration and extremism, Somaliland representatives warn.

“It is a nation moving,” Minister for the Environment and Rural Development Shukri Ismail Bandare said in an interview in her office in the capital Hargeisa, where goats roam the streets, some with their owners’ phone numbers written in pen on their side.

“Climate change is real in Somaliland … and it is becoming a disaster.”

But the crisis in Somaliland is also seen as a forewarning, with the World Bank estimating climate change could force about 140 million people to migrate in three of the world’s poorest regions by 2050 unless action is taken.

Hotter, Drier

Analysis by the University of California, Santa Barbara’s Climate Hazards Center for the Thomson Reuters Foundation found average daily maximum temperatures in Somaliland have risen by about a degree over the last 30 or so years, to about 34 degrees Celsius (93 Fahrenheit).

Meanwhile there has been a marked increase in the number of dry seasons, with only three good March to May rains in 20 years. That has hit crops and the herds of goats, camel, sheep and cattle that are the backbone of Somaliland’s economy.

Faisal Ali Sheikh, head of the Somaliland National Disaster Preparedness and Food Reserve Authority, said Somaliland faced greater challenges than other countries in part due to poverty and poor infrastructure, with little transport and few roads.

Government data puts the republic’s GDP at $646 per person, making it one of the 10 poorest places globally, according to World Bank figures. The government estimates 50% of urban and 64% of rural people are poor.

Adding to the complications is Islamic Somaliland’s legal status.

It broke away from Somalia in 1991, and has operated independently since, largely without the terrorism and violence that plagues parts of Somalia.

But the self-declared state is not recognised as a country, which rules out direct aid or loans from most global institutions.

“We are different from other countries … the challenges here are far greater,” Sheikh said in an interview in his office in the government sector of Hargeisa, a dusty city of about one million where there are few tarmac roads and no street names.

“We don’t have rivers or any water deposits. Our life on the whole in this country depends on water from rain … and we can’t get loans from other countries.”

Long-Running Crisis

Climate change has exacerbated a long-running humanitarian crisis in Somalia and in Somaliland, which makes up about 30% of Somalia’s territory, in the northwest of the country.

The unusual circumstances make it one of the world’s most complex emergencies.

After 20 years of civil war in Somalia, famine swept it and much of East Africa in 2011, claiming 260,000 lives. Photos of emaciated children shocked the world as 13 million went hungry and many fled their homes during a brutal drought.’

As signs of a similar drought-heralding El Nino weather pattern formed five years later, aid agencies moved quickly and averted another famine and widescale loss of lives during a drought in 2016 and 2017.

But the crisis killed about 80% of Somaliland’s livestock, its major export and the basis of the state’s economy.

As people struggled to recover, the republic then was hit in May 2018 by tropical Cyclone Sagar - the strongest recorded cyclone to make landfall in that part of the world – forcing thousands more from their homes.

Hopes were high for a reprieve this year. But the March to May rainy season, known as the Gu’, again failed, leaving Somaliland teetering on the brink of catastrophe.

“It is pretty much game over for getting any precipitation in Somaliland until October or early November,” said Chris Funk, research director for the U.S.-based Climate Hazards Center.

“Overall the situation is looking really grim.”

He said Somaliland was particularly vulnerable to climate threats because it was one of the few regions to receive droughts during both El Nino and La Nina weather oscillations, the dominant pattern of large-scale tropical climate variation.

The increased regularity of droughts was also tied to climate-change-driven warming in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, which has tended to produce more rainfall over the ocean and less over eastern East Africa, he said.

“It seems in the long term this increasing frequency of drought will continue as that seems to be the new normal,” Funk said. Somaliland “seems to be getting drier and much hotter”.

‘Worst Ever’ Conditions

The United Nations’ food agency, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), said a third of the population of Somalia, including Somaliland, was now facing food shortages - 30% higher than estimated at the start of 2019.

With a crisis looming, the United Nations’ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in May launched a call for $710 million in drought aid for Somalia.

The appeal came four months after a U.N. humanitarian bid for more than $1 billion, to support aid operations in Somalia during 2019, fell far short, as donor response to repeated drought appeals wavered.

For many rural families in Somaliland, however, it is already too late to ride out the drought.

Much of the country's livestock is dead and families have been forced from their homes, leaving the future of the next generation uncertain, with nearly two out of three young people unemployed.

A government spokesman said about 600,000 people were believed to have left their homes in recent years, driven by pressures linked to climate change - and the number was rising.

Fatima Aden, who put her age at about 80, moved to the Sheikh Omer camp for people internally displaced in Somaliland about six years ago, abandoning a pastoral life that had supported her family for generations.

In the camp of about 1,500 people, about 10 km (6 miles) from Hargeisa, Aden spoke about her childhood from her buul - a traditional hut that used to be built from branches and grass but is now made of wood, corrugated iron and pieces of cloth.

"When I was young it was green, with forests everywhere, and people had enough livestock in every family that could be sold to buy anything they needed," said Aden, a mother of six who lives with 15 members of her family.

"In my life I have seen many dry spells and different levels of drought but the severity of the drought we have had for the past 10 years really is the worst ever."

Aden, who earns some money selling the stimulant leaf khat in the camp, said more and more people were coming to the cities and the camps with no work, nothing to do and no access to running water or electricity.

"We have never seen people lose all their animals before and get to the point where they risk losing their lives," said Aden, as cats sniffed around her feet searching for scraps of food.

"Life is changing every year, and every year is becoming more difficult," she said. "I worry for the future, for my children, their families.

Aid Lifeline

With few opportunities to earn an income and youth unemployment soaring, charities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) this year have stepped up efforts to assist the rising numbers in need of help.

In Sheikh Omer camp – one of an estimated 20 such camps in and around Hargeisa, according to charity workers – Save the Children has provided grants since 2017 to keep youngsters out of child labour and in school.

This year the charity started a cash transfer scheme, giving families $75 a month for food and other supplies amid projections of growing numbers of people in crisis.

"Malnutrition, drought-related diseases and displacement are on the rise," Save the Children spokeswoman Jamillah Mwanjisi told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Some families are only managing to hold on to their rural homes and livelihoods with help from local and international aid groups.

The village of Abdigeedi, about 160 km (100 miles) northwest of Hargeisa and near the border with Djibouti, is particularly hard-hit.

Sited in one of the most drought-affected areas, it has lacked good rains since 2014 and was then flattened by Cyclone Sagar last year.

The cyclone destroyed every home in the village of 2,000 people, with only the brick mosque, school and health clinic left standing.

"For the past four or five years this community has been suffering with a failure of rain and is heavily dependent on assistance," said Nour Abdi Indanoor, food security and livelihoods project manager with Save the Children.

Signs around the village indicated at least eight NGOs and charities - from the Norwegian Refugee Council to UNICEF - were helping the community with everything from food vouchers to latrines.

"They could not survive without that," said Indanoor, swatting away flies in the sweltering heat.

Loss of Independence

Saleban Sead Ali, head of the village elders, said help was welcome but no one was able to provide for the goats and camels that were central to their lives, with many animals dying.

"After the cyclone people tried to carry their weak animals to another village for help but they came back with nothing. They all died," said the father of 10, who estimated his age at 47 and spoke via a translator.

"We can't move to another location. Our land is not suitable to farm so our only opportunity is to rear livestock again," he said. "I hope to (do so) again despite the harsh conditions, to be independent again."

Ayan Mahamoud, Somaliland's resident representative in Britain and the Commonwealth, said climate-driven crises were now nearly a constant in the state, weakening the traditional nomadic way of life and the clan system of Somaliland society.

"Every other year now we have something huge," Mahamoud told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"The pastoral community has been affected the most, losing so many animals and their social structure," she said.

As people move to cities, where youth unemployment is huge, "it is becoming a timebomb", said Mahamoud, who lobbies for Somaliland's official recognition and supports the 150,000 or sopeople from the republic now living in Britain.

Staying on the Land

Efforts are underway to try to help rural people remain on their land and adapt to worsening droughts and other climate pressures, through measures from building irrigation systems and water storage to introducing drought-resistant seeds.

Drought early warning systems are being put in place to help pastoral communities sell livestock before conditions turn threatening, avoiding economic losses.

Officials also are trying to find ways to stabilise food prices across the region.

In Biyoguure Village, about 30 km down a sand track from Berbera, 40-year-old farmer Ahmed Ali is determined to stay in his village with his wife Zaynab Abdi and four young sons.

"Every year it is getting worse and worse and the droughts are getting longer and longer," Ali told the Thomson Reuters Foundation in an interview in a school building sheltered from the scorching 40 degrees Celsius (104°F) heat outside.

"But I don't know what the other options would be if I tried to leave."

Ali's family is one of several in the village of about 140 people to this year start receiving $70 a month from a local NGO called GRASHO - Grass Roots Support For Humanitarian Organisations - which gets FAO funding to work on crop projects.

GRASHO spokesman Abdulkadir Buuh said the organisation had increased assistance this year, with a drought emergency predicted, and now works with about 18 villages.

Humanitarian aid experts say providing such help in advance of a disaster, rather than just responding afterwards, can cut losses and aid costs.

But even with this help Ali doubts his children will remain on the family's land.

"I don't think my children will stay farming because they have seen what I have faced and the environment," he said as he walked up to the family's enclosure, on a hill overlooking the barren village where thorn fences keep the hyenas away at night.

Still, "I feel it is my duty to take care of the village and the peace like my forefathers."

About 10 km away in the village of Magab, Maryam Jama, 19, also doubted she would ever leave her village despite the worsening conditions. Generations of her family had been pastoralists, she said.

Jama was married at the age of 10 to another villager, Mahdi Mohamed, and had her first child at 11. She now has two sons.

"We have lost a lot of livestock - camels, goats, sheep and donkeys," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation in a buul in her village, where residents receive animal fodder and deworming treatment from GRASHO.

"I tried to leave a couple of times but I had no better options," she said. "I am a native here and I see my future here. I am hoping with help it will only get better."

Drought-Resistant Crops

Some efforts to help rural families adapt to the harsher conditions have started to pay dividends.

Local non-governmental organisation HAVOYOCO - the Horn of Africa Voluntary Youth Committee - set up a community seed bank in 2015 in Galoley.

The village, about 50 km from Hargeisa, is in an area known as the food basket of Somaliland.

Project manager Mohamed Ali said the bank distributed drought-resistant, disease-free seeds - ranging from maize to sorghum and tomatoes - to local farmers who then contributed seeds from their own harvests back to the bank.

HAVOYOCO, which receives funding from a range of organisations, from The Development Fund of Norway to Oxfam, CARE and the FAO, also has improved water harvesting in the area, capturing rainwater for crops and animals.

"People had many challenges before. It was difficult to get seeds during drought seasons or good quality seeds," Ali said, surveying acres of green, healthy crops that contrasted vividly with the rest of Somaliland.

But now "people from the east and other regions are coming here for better pastures and food", he said.

With weather patterns becoming more extreme each year, "we support people because we want people to keep their livelihoods", he said.

But Edna Adan Ismail, Somaliland's first female cabinet minister and a former foreign minister, said many rural people had no choice but to move and try to find other work as traditional livelihoods were lost.

"Their survival depends on it," said Adan, who set up the Edna Adan University Hospital in Hargeisa.

In a bid to diversify its livestock-dependent economy, Somaliland is courting overseas investors tempted by the country's position along a vital sea transport route.

Somaliland controls 760 km (460 miles) of coastland along the Gulf of Aden. In

that zone, the United Arab Emirates is funding a $440 million upgrade of the deep-water port at Berbera as well as setting up a military base.

“It is critical that we diversify our economy to bring trade and jobs,” Adan said.

But winning political recognition as a state is also critical to Somaliland’s future, she said.

“When you are recognised, people will come and they will invest.”

Fighting for Independence

Somaliland was a British protectorate until 1960 when it united with the formerly Italian Somalia. It later broke away from Somalia in 1991 in a bloody civil war.

Hargeisa became known as “the Dresden of Africa”, with the city devastated by aerial bombardments. Much of its population fled.

But as Somalia spiralled into chaos after 1991, following the ouster of dictator Mohammed Siad Barre, northern clans in Somaliland restored peace, eradicating piracy and the Al Qaeda-affiliated jihadist group al-Shabaab within their borders.

The republic now has its own parliament and elections, its own currency, passports, flag, military and self-declared border, with police checkpoints in operation across the state.

But despite operating peacefully, Somaliland has not won recognition from any country - although local authorities in Cardiff in Wales, Tower Hamlets in London, and the English cities of Sheffield and Birmingham recognise its independence.

“With or without recognition we are a country but we do want our people to be able to progress,” said Mahamoud, Somaliland’s representative in Britain. “But no one is willing to make the first step.”

Western nations have said it is up to the African Union to decide whether to recognise Somaliland. But there is little incentive for that body to set a precedent in a continent where about 15 of 54 countries are struggling with civil conflicts.

Repeated calls and emails to the African Union and the Somalia government went unanswered.

Somalia has insisted that Somaliland is not independent. It accused the West African nation of Guinea of “violating Somalia’s sovereignty” when it officially hosted Somaliland’s President Muse Bihi Abdi in July this year.

Britain’s foreign office said the United Kingdom did not recognise Somaliland as an independent state but supported and encouraged talks between Hargeisa and Mogadishu.

“We firmly believe that it is for Somaliland and the federal government of Somalia to decide their future, and for neighbours in the region to take the lead in recognising any new arrangements,” a spokeswoman said by email.

Future Generations

With limited foreign investment, the Somaliland government and other organisations are trying to create new jobs for young people in a republic where 70% of the population is under 30.

The government this year launched a year-long military service programme for 1,500 young men and women while HAVOYOCO is running a vocational training project to teach carpentry, welding, and administrative skills used in the workplace.

Oxfam has helped fund an innovation training facility in Hargeisa called HarHub where youngsters from camps for displaced people can learn IT skills at the Hargabits academy.

“We see youth unemployment as a major challenge in Somaliland and major investment is needed in that sector to create jobs and diversify,” said Oxfam spokesman Abdiaziz Adani.

“The traditional ways of living as pastoralists, due to climate change and droughts, won’t be the same again.”

Hamse Sulub is one of those making the change.

The 19-year-old moved to Hargeisa seven years ago from a village near the Ethiopian border after drought killed most of his family’s camels.

After studying at Islamic school, he saw an advertisement about Hargabits and dropped by the centre one day. The staff assessed him and took him on as a student, teaching him graphic design and how to use spreadsheets.

“When I was young in the village it was my responsibility to take care of the animals… I didn’t have any knowledge,” said Sulub, sitting by a chicken coop at the shelter he shares with his mother and four brothers in Sheik Nuur camp.

But “this has given me confidence. My plan is a few more years in education then I plan to have my own business,” he said.

“I worry about my family having enough food every day to eat. What young people need is to get jobs and for that they need the skills and facilities to learn.”

Without jobs or hopes for the future, increasing numbers of Somaliland youth could join the rising number of young Africans seeking to migrate, said Environment Minister Shukri Bandare, stressing migration due to climate change was a global concern.

“They will go to Europe, to the United States, across the ocean to get a life,” she said.

“If we don’t collaborate, hold hands to solve the world problems when it comes to climate change, we will be doomed. We won’t be leaving anything for the coming generation, nothing.”

SHORTLISTED STORY

Mines' Dirty Secrets Echo on Three Continents

Cécile Schilis-Gallego, Marion Guégan (France)

The "Green Blood" series pursued the investigations of several reporters who faced threats when covering possible environmental damage and other abuses by mining companies. Reporting on environmental issues can cost journalists their jobs, the land they live on and even their lives. The more journalists cover these issues aggressively, the more they are provoking powerful interests that will retaliate and block access to information. This is particularly true of the mining industry. For the first time, 40 journalists from 15 countries organized by Forbidden Stories were able to go into the field, track supply chains and use open source tools to look into mines in India, Tanzania and Guatemala that once tried to cover up their activities.

Mines' Dirty Secrets Echo on Three Continents

By Marion Guégan and Cécile Schilis-Gallego

Forbidden Stories - June 21, 2019

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://forbiddenstories.org/mines-dirty-secrets-echo-on-three-continents/

Indian reporter Jagendra Singh posted his last contribution to his Facebook page – where he regularly published his reporting – on June 1, 2015. He had been posting for over a month about local politician Rammurti Singh Verma and his alleged ties to illegal sand mining, which the United Nations has identified as a major environmental threat. That day, Singh was brought to the hospital with burns over 50 percent of his body. "The motherf**kers poured petrol on me. They jumped over the wall and got in. If they wanted to, they could have arrested me instead. What was the need to kill me?" said Singh in a video before he died from his injuries.

With his eyes closed and unable even to look into the camera, he accused police officers and supporters of Verma of setting him on fire. In the video, one can see his devastating burns. He died from his injuries seven days later. He was 46 years old.

Official reports claim that Singh killed himself. Yet, the day of his father's funeral, Singh's son filed a complaint against Verma and five policemen for conspiracy to kill and immolation. He later withdrew his complaint after interactions between Verma and the family. Forbidden Stories met with several members of the Singh family who – after being afraid of retaliation for years – now say they accepted money from Verma in exchange for their silence.

A spokesperson for Verma said he was unable to respond because he was hospitalized.

Singh is one of four Indian journalists who have allegedly been killed reporting on the sand mafias, which are among the most prominent, violent and impenetrable organized crime groups in India… Read more at *forbiddenstories.org*

SHORTLISTED STORY

Pollution Takes Toll on Lake Victoria

Ezaruku Draku Franklin (Uganda)

A teacher-cum-journalist, Ezaruku Draku Franklin joined Radio Pacis based in Arua district, West Nile region of Uganda shortly after graduating from Kyambogo University as Secondary teacher, majoring in English Language and Literature in English. He is a fellow at Africa Centre for Media Excellence where he attended six months fellowship in 2014. In addition, he attended a number of short courses in news writing and editing with different media institutions.

Draku is a staff reported at Daily Monitor, based at the head office in Kampala, holding over 15 years of experience in journalism, across different media platforms. He is passionate about environmental journalism, data journalism, climate change and politics with about 10 year of experience in environmental reporting as well as in other beats.

He is a finalist in 2020 Pan African Climate Justice Alliance, ACCER (African Climate Change and Environment Reporting) awards and Fetisov Journalism awards in Excellence in Environmental Reporting Category.

Pollution Takes Toll on Lake Victoria

By Ezaruku Draku Franklin
Daily Monitor (print and online) - February 17, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://www.monitor.co.ug/SpecialReports/Pollution-takes-toll-on-Lake-Victoria/688342-5458516-v9xkp7z/index.html

For three months, Nation Media Group and scientists from University of Nairobi combed different parts of the lake from Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda. In Part One of the series, their findings indicate that heavy metals, pesticide and faecal matter threaten the lake, writes Franklin Draku.

As you sit at home or in a hotel, drinking that glass of water, you could be putting your life at risk since some of it, whose source is Lake Victoria, may be contaminated.

For more than three months, a combined team of NMG journalists from Uganda and Kenya, accompanied by scientists from University of Nairobi, combed different parts of the lake right from the border with Tanzania down at Rakai where Kagera River pours it dirty waters into the lake, to Kenya where the lake faces stark reality of rotting from the deep. A total of 52 samples were picked from 28 spots across the two countries.

Led by Prof James Mbaria, the chairperson of the Department of Public Health and Pharmacology Technology at University of Nairobi, the team found out that Lake Victoria and a number of rivers that either drain their waters from the lake or pour it into the lake are heavily contaminated with heavy metals, pesticides and other microbial organisms that have adverse effects on human and aquatic life.

Fish, water and sediment samples taken from different spots both in Uganda and Kenya showed that they contained pesticides and other pollutants that are hazardous to human beings. In Uganda, fish samples were taken from Ggaba in Kampala and Masese Landing Site in Jinja.

Water and sediment samples were taken from Nakivubo Channel that drains into the lake and from the Source of the Nile in Jinja. The rest of the samples were taken from the Kenyan side of the lake and the rivers that drain water into the lake.

The results of the analysis showed the presence of microbiological and chemical

contaminants at the various sampling points across the lake.

According to the results, total coliforms and Escherichia coli counts, which are useful in determining the bacterial quantity of effluent discharged to the environment, were present.

Their presence in water is, therefore, an indication of the possibility of there being other highly pathogenic micro-organisms transmittable through faecal contaminated water.

The presence of coliforms and Escherichia coli could be explained by the fact that many of the islands and landing sites on Lake Victoria have very poor sanitation, with dwellers discharging raw sewage in the lake.

Various factories and other facilities near the lake are also known for discharging effluent from their facilities right into the lake, further polluting the waters. The situation has not been helped by degradation of wetlands, mostly by investors who set up factories and other businesses in the wetlands that used to act as natural filters.

Sanitation

When our reporters visited different landing sites, the sanitary facilities were wanting. At Luzira and Ggaba, dirty refuse from the city ends up in the lake through Nakivubo channel, with all the impurities from the city.

At Kasensero Landing Site in Rakai District, dirty water pours into Lake Victoria from Kagera River. There is a clearly visible difference in colour of the water from Kagera pouring into the lake.

Residents at the landing site say huge deposits of impurities brought to the lake by the river pose great health risks to them. Across the Lake at Lukunyu Landing Site, residents deposit faecal matter in the water. Fishermen who spend days in the lake defecate in the lake. Even water borne toilets on the island discharge faeces in the lake when it rains.

Effects. A man fetches water at Kasensero Landing Site in Rakai District. Study.

Mr Joshua Mununuzi, a businessman at the landing site, say the situation is horrible. He says the locals are not sensitised about sanitation and all they know is defecating in the lake, which pollutes the waters.

“People defecate in the polythene bags and throw them in the water, which causes pollution. On top of that, the fishermen who go into the lake spend days in the water and just defecate in the lake. Even people use condoms and throw them in the lake. Those toilets are water toilets and these people open them when it is raining and release the raw sewage into the lake,” he said.

Prof Mbaria says the findings show that both the water and fish from the lake may not be safe for human consumption and the aquatic life.

“Lake Victoria is contaminated with both the living organisms that cause disease and chemicals that cause poisoning, they can cause acute and chronic problems. The water in the lake is not safe; the fish is also not safe in most areas but that can be improved through control of pollution,” Prof Mbaria says.

He says now is the time to act. According to him, a number of interventions, including review of policies and attitude change, can save the situation.

“What we can do is to first have behaviour change and then even the policies that are there need to be revised,” Prof Mbaria says.

“For example, if you are to treat the effluent before it goes into the lake, I am sure there are some organisations charged with doing that. Are they sleeping on their jobs? We need to find out what is the root cause, then people need to take up their responsibilities,” he adds.

In Namayingo District where artisanal mining is taking place, local veterinary officials have reported strange diseases in livestock. The miners there use mercury to purify gold, which eventually ends in the lake.

Mr Peter Wambuzi, who has lived in the area for more than 50 years treating animals, says animals that drink from the lake near the point where artisanal miners operate are affected by strange diseases. He attributes this to use of mercury that eventually finds its way into Lake Victoria. “What I am seeing this time is different. The animals start rotting when they are still alive and it only stated after gold mining started in the area,” Mr Wambuzi says.

Heavy Metals

According to the findings, there were traces of heavy metals detected in all the five fish samples tested during phase one and two both in Uganda and Kenya, including lead detected at levels above CODEX (FAO/WHO) permitted maximum residue levels. The heavy metals include lead, cadmium, chromium, zinc, iron, copper and manganese.

The report notes that while all the fish samples tested had at least six different types of heavy metals detected at levels lower than the WHO recommendation, those sampled in the second phase from Uganda, Kenya and China had lead at levels far above the CODEX recommended residue levels of 0.1ppm.

The same fish samples had relatively high levels of zinc though below the CODEX of 30ppm. Sediments, on the other hand, had seven heavy metals, with none having mercury. There are no guidelines available for concentrations in sediment.

Pesticides

Up to 21 different pesticides, including organochlorines, organophosphates and pyrethroids, were detected at different concentrations and frequencies in the water samples.

While the World Health Organisation evaluation scheme programme approves pesticides for direct application to drinking water for control of insects, the report says some of the pesticides found in the samples from the Lake Victoria basin and its catchment rivers are of known toxicity to both humans and aquatic life.

The samples include Fenitrothion, an organophosphate used as insecticide and is toxic to aquatic life; chlorofenvinphos, which affects the respiratory system in humans; and cyhalothrin, which has been shown to cause irritation of the mucous membrane.

Others are bifenthrin, which is harmful to aquatic life and has been classified as a human carcinogen, capable of causing cancer. Also found is Oxyfluoren, which is used to kill broad leaf and grassy weeds.

The results also show that some of the globally banned pesticides with advance effects on humans and aquatic animals, including DDT and its metabolite, endosulfan and mirex, were detected in some of the water samples. In sediments, 25 different pesticides were detected at varying concentrations and frequency.

"A few of the pesticides detected in the water and other samples have been globally banned due to their toxicity and environmental persistence. These include DDT, which is highly persistent in the environment, is very soluble in water, affects reproduction in humans and has been classified as a possible human carcinogen," the report says.

Endosulfan, which was globally banned in 2012, is an insecticide and a known neurotoxic that causes birth defects. Another banned pesticide detected was mirex, which is also a bio accumulator and persists in the environment as a persistent organic pollutant thus affecting aquatic life. It is carcinogenic with potential to cause cancer and an endocrine disruptor.

The research findings showed that 25 different types of pesticides were detected in sediments at varying concentrations and frequencies in the study area, though mostly on the Kenyan side.

The most frequent pesticide detected in fish was pyridaphenthion at 4/5 (80 per cent) while linuron, pyrazophos and cypermethrin were each detected in three out of five (60 per cent) fish samples.

Homa Bay in western Kenya had the highest level of pesticides 10/19 (53 per cent) contaminating the fish samples, followed by fish obtained at Ggaba Landing Site in Kampala at 11/22 (50 per cent) while fish from Sondu in Kisumu had 42 per cent (8/19) pesticides. Officials from the Ministry of Water and Environment that are charged with responsibility of protecting Uganda's environment refused to offer interview on the implications of the findings of the research. The same was with the National Environment Management Authority (Nema), whose officials also refused to respond to the issues in the research findings.

Our team of reporters spent the whole of January trying to fix interviews but all the officials declined, even after the management presented official requests for information to the Nema Executive Director, who said he was on leave. A source at the authority, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said there was a decree that it should only be the executive director to respond to the media inquiries.

Govt Speaks Out

At the Ministry of Agriculture, Animals Industries and Fisheries, officials dismissed the findings and said they have been carrying regular tests on the fish from Lake Victoria and their findings show that Uganda's fish is still safe.

Ms Joyce Ikwaput, the assistant commissioner for fisheries, told NMG Uganda that they have carried out a number of tests both on the fish and waters and found no risks. She also said another report is expected next week, confirming the safety of Ugandan fish for consumption.

"The fish in Lake Victoria is still safe, it is still safe as far as human consumption is concerned. We have been carrying out tests for more than 10 years on our fish. We test on the water, we do tests on the fish and sediments and we have not found the levels," she said.

Ms Ikwaput, however, said while small portions of metals and other dangerous chemicals and pesticides have been found in the sediments, they are below the WHO permissible levels.

"There were some levels on the sediments but still below the maximum risk levels but on the fish, it was still safe. Even our factories are doing tests every two months and the fish is safe," she said.

"We have picked samples from those areas and we have submitted them and we expect the results next week or the other week to reconfirm because we have to submit this to EU also to show that our fish is safe for human consumption," Ms Ikwaput added.

You Poisoned L. Victoria, Now Pay the Price

The original publication is available via the following link: https://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/-price-poisoning-L-Victoria-Nakivubo-channel-NWSC/688334-5460472-s6g702z/index.html

Lake Victoria Pollution: Act Now or Never, Experts Urge Government

The original publication is available via the following link: https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/special-reports/lake-victoria-pollution-act-now-or-never-experts-urge-government-1876102

SHORTLISTED STORY

The Climate Interviews

James Button (Australia)

James Button is a former feature writer and deputy editor of The Age, and former Europe correspondent for The Age and Sydney Morning Herald, two Australian broadsheet newspapers. In 2009 and 2010 he worked in Australia's Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, writing speeches for then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, an experience he describes in his book, Speechless: A Year in my Father's Business. He has also written Comeback: The Fall and Rise of Geelong, and has won three Walkley awards, Australia's main journalism awards, for feature writing. He is a freelance writer and editor.

The Climate Interviews

By James Button

The Monthly (print edition and online)

March 2, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link: https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2020/march/1582981200/james-button/climate-interviews

Despite growing awareness of the looming catastrophes of climate change, life for most of us goes on largely as usual. But there is understandable anxiety among the community. How do we personally plan for a future we now fear? How do we talk when we're lost for words? JAMES BUTTON speaks with everyday Australians to see if we can articulate hope and provoke action.

She always knew she wanted kids. Even at five years old, she had to hold any baby who came into the house. She loved going along when her mother worked as a volunteer in a home for abandoned children. As Jayde Harding grew up, whenever she heard a nice name, she would try to remember it.

Her family migrated from South Africa to Perth in 1999, when she was 10. After university, Harding studied film and television in Melbourne, grew to love the place and stayed. She made films, acted on stage, had relationships, made plans. Her days were full. One day, she would have children, the natural step in a happy life.

It's mid January, the worst of the fires has passed, but outside the cafe where we meet Melbourne is blanketed in smoke. A girl rides past wearing a face mask. The world's most liveable city, with the world's worst air.

Harding says it was 2018, the year she turned 30, when she really started taking notice. "It crept in slowly," she says. She read a lot of articles, wrestled with the science. In October, the official global body of climate scientists, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, released its "Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C". If there was a tipping point for Harding, that was it.

She read that some climate scientists thought the IPCC's findings had once again been too conservative. She read reports of rising alarm within the Australian Defence Force. "Hardly soy flat white drinkers like me," she says, pointing at her coffee. In a short time, a peripheral concern became a central anxiety.

In February last year, the Australian Conservation Foundation and 1 Million Women, an organisation of climate-change activists, published a survey of 6500 women showing that about a third of those under 30 were reconsidering having children, or any more children, because of climate change. The survey was far from representative – the organisations had polled only their own supporters – but even so, Harding was nonplussed. The women in the survey were people like her, yet no one in her circles talked about this issue. Was no one thinking what she was constantly thinking – wondering whether she could bring a child into a world that might be descending into catastrophe at the very outset of that person's adult life?

The question was consuming her. So, she decided to make a film about it. "I didn't want to make it," Harding says. "It was my way of grappling with the issue. I wanted to find people who had been through this and then made a decision."

On Facebook she asked for interview subjects. About 150 people, nearly all women, replied to one post. Their responses were intense, searching: "I have not spoken about this to anyone"; "I have not told my partner"; "What are other people saying?" Their concerns were much less about the carbon footprint of the children they might have than about the world these children might inherit. Harding did four long interviews in two days. "After that I sat on my couch and sobbed."

As she made her film, life and work merged. One day she told her dad she didn't know whether she was going to have children. "He's very jokey, he loves to tease me about my 'radical lefty' views. But when I said this he just stopped. His whole mood changed. He was, like, 'Really?'

"I'm his youngest child, his only daughter. He really wants this for me. My mum really wants this for me. But it's not about me."

I ask her to paint the world she fears is coming. She thinks: "I worry that our food systems will fail; there won't be enough food and water to go around. Towns in Australia are already running out of water. I worry that less and less of Australia will be habitable because of the heat. I worry that the rule of law will fall. In my darkest moments I wonder if I should be burying cans of food somewhere for when it all goes down. But where? Violence against women will go up, entire populations will become refugees, how do we deal with that? Will it start wars? Invasions? People fighting each other over food and water?"

Near our table, a young mother is having coffee with a friend; her baby sits in a highchair while her toddler stands by unsteadily, gripping a chair leg. Harding leans forward and lowers her voice: "I know I sound like I'm crazy."

So, I ask, have you decided? Are you going to have children? In that moment, I think I see tears in her eyes.

"I don't know, but I don't think I will have kids," she says. "The time lines are just so scary. All the predictions keep getting worse. And governments are doing nothing.

"If the world changed, if it looked like we were getting on top of this, then I would change my mind. But I don't think we will."

To have a child may be the oldest, most elemental, act of hope. It shows that life will always go on, and however bad things are, life can get better. What does it mean, then, when a group of young women – at this stage a small and no doubt privileged group, but also a group that reads the news – is saying, "Life stops with me"? Perhaps the answer lies in the title of her short, stunning film. She called it Inconceivable.

I know I sound like I'm crazy. A few years ago, maybe. But in the past two years – for most people, no longer than that – something has changed. Language once confined to science fiction – civilisational collapse, emergency, extinction – has crept into the pages of scientific reports, parliamentary records, the august medical journal The Lancet. The suited and sober heads of the United Nations and BHP speak of "existential threat". A report signed by 11,000 scientists and published in November warns of "untold human suffering" without urgent action to address climate change. "Our house is burning. Literally," tweeted French President Emmanuel Macron in 2019, a year of so many fires – in the Amazon, the Arctic, Australia, and other places – that the European Space Agency asked: "Is Earth on fire?"

And, of course, the typically cautious IPCC published its "1.5 degrees" report, depicting a world racing towards crisis by 2040, without "rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society" for which "there is no documented historic precedent".

Looking up from reading these reports, sometimes you have to pinch yourself. In my corner of inner-city Melbourne, a warbling magpie on the wire announces the morning. The local cafe is full; later there will be skateboarders and kissing couples in the park. When I walk the dog in the late afternoon, the shouts of cricketers rise from the oval, and the advancing evening is so lovely – even this summer – that I struggle to reconcile the irrefutable evidence of the science with the immediate evidence of my senses. Civilisational collapse, because of a change in the weather?

But something is stirring, and maybe shifting. Six-year-olds are able to discuss the fate of the Earth, and 16-year-olds are on strike to save it. Reducing greenhouse-gas emissions is now reportedly the business of every business, government, university, think tank, community organisation and sporting club. Investment funds controlling trillions of dollars promise to get out of coal, while Shane Warne worries that runaway heat and drought might kill cricket. On May 1 last year, the United Kingdom's government became the world's first to declare a climate emergency; 17 days later a wave of anxiety and anger in the leafiest suburbs of Sydney swept a former prime minister who dismissed the idea of climate change as "absolute crap" out of his seat. "Climate politics will soon enough define all politics in ways none of us can fathom," Chris Barrett, a former adviser to federal Labor governments and to

the European Climate Foundation, told me. Change is still very little, and late, but it might give us a shot. As British philosopher John Gray wrote in 2019: "the state of the planet is forcing itself into the centre of the human mind".

In July last year I put a message online asking people to tell me how, if at all, climate change was entering their minds. I wanted to hear a mix of big thoughts and the mundane reveries we have in the shower, the supermarket, the park, in the middle of the night. I thought that if we could understand whether a version of Gray's idea was true, we might get a better handle on what to do next, or at least protect a stubborn hope that something can be done.

About 120 people replied, sometimes at length, and I did about 30 separate interviews. The written responses, at least, are mostly from people who are well educated and relatively well-off. They are revealing nonetheless, because they show how challenging and elusive is the subject of climate change, even for the social class apparently most focused on it, inner-city progressives like me.

Jacqueline Magee, a 31-year-old education policy analyst and teacher:

I would like to pretend that I have always cared deeply about climate change, or at least since I became part of the lefty urban elite about 12 or so years ago. But this probably isn't true. I buy carbon offsets for my flights, recycle some stuff, try not to waste water. But the truth is I haven't really gone out of my way to do anything spectacular to save the planet. Since I discovered I was expecting a baby, I have worried a lot more. Is the planet going to live long enough to sustain this life I already care about more than my own? When I was 28 weeks pregnant, I was snorkelling on the Great Barrier Reef, filled with awe and gratitude at its beauty, and wondering: will my son ever get to see this? I'm not sure he will. And I don't know what I can do about it. So, I guess I will just keep worrying, and recycling my soft plastics a little more frequently.

"Immediate, unvarnished feelings – frightened, frustrated and helpless," writes a magistrate. A manager of migrant services: "I feel utterly defeated by climate change." A writer and education analyst: "I do think we've passed the point of no return and find myself committing that primary sin in the catechism of the Left: failure to perform the duty of optimism; worse, cynicism, despair."

I know these people and have never seen any of them in despair. They have good jobs, are always up for a laugh, and seem to thoroughly enjoy their lives. Maybe they're not really as miserable about climate change as they say. Or maybe their sorrow is private. Or, if I think of my own experience, maybe it's something else.

I became an adult in the 1980s, just as collective awareness of climate change began to stir. Since then I kept up with events, if at a distance. I observed Rio, Kyoto, Copenhagen, droughts, floods, hurricanes, the tortured birth and swift death of Australia's emissions trading scheme. I read books by Tim Flannery and Bill McKibben, went to a few demos, rode my bike as much as I could. My partner and I put solar panels on the roof. We had children, ate meat, drove, flew. People talked in a new way about the weather. It's hot, isn't it? I don't think it was this hot when we were kids. That's got to be climate change.

For those 30 or so years, as Australia never once slipped into recession, as the supermarket shelves filled with a profusion of cheap goods and produce that would have astonished the kings and emperors of old, as Jetstar began offering $370 flights to Japan, as nature documentaries and screensavers grew more hauntingly beautiful while nature herself wilted outside the window, it turns out that an event of world historical importance had been unfolding before our eyes, but we couldn't see it. Half of all the carbon dioxide that humans have put into the atmosphere since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution has been emitted in the past 30 years. In other words, we have doubled the amount of carbon dioxide in the air in the time since the dangers of doing so became widely known, and since powerful people, from the United States president down, pledged to do something about it.

All of us, including most scientists, thought we had more time. When I worked in the Australian Public Service 10 years ago, it was assumed that severe changes in the climate would not be felt until the 2030s, giving Australia time to undertake "mitigation" before it turned to "adaptation", as the bloodless jargon has it. It would all be orderly, in the public service way.

Instead, we have become like passengers in a boat, floating on a once gentle stream that has turned into a stronger river, long aware of a distant thrumming gradually getting louder – until, all at once we have swept around a corner and been tossed into rapids, oars useless, some people shouting, others still enjoying the view, and no one at all clear what lies beyond the next bend.

"It is worse, much worse, than you think," writes American journalist David Wallace-Wells, in the first line of The Uninhabitable Earth. Environmental campaigner Bill McKibben writes, in Falter: "What I'm calling the human game is unimaginably deep, complex, and beautiful. It is also endangered. Indeed, it is beginning to falter even now." As I read these books, both published last year, some dim, deeply buried sorrow rose up. Then the ground closed over. I kept my thoughts to myself, and got on with my life.

A survey by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication last year found that 67 per cent of Americans believe global warming is happening but 64 per cent say they "rarely" or "never" talk about it with family and friends. My experience is that people do discuss climate change but only glancingly. "I can only come at this stuff in bursts," writes a friend. "I blanked out a bit in response to your message," writes another, before revealing that when she raised the issue with a work colleague,

he casually told her he thought humans had one more generation left to live.

In a restaurant, I told a friend about the subject of this article. He sighed: "I feel like we're on Easter Island, with three trees left, and six men running around with axes saying, 'We need more wood.'" I asked whether this knowledge would change his life. For example, he flies overseas often for his work – would he change that? No, he said, he wouldn't. He sounded regretful but resigned. Later, we went to a bar, gossiped about old friends, laughed a lot.

During the fires, Sanaya Khisty, a friend in her late twenties who is very focused on climate change, texted to say that her anxiety levels were "pretty high". All her friends were talking about the children issue. Also, "I asked Will to marry me last night and he said yes!"

Last year I had a meal in town with my 23-year-old son. He walked into the dumpling place a little agitated. "Dad, I've been reading about climate change. I'm worried." This worried me – he's a very calm guy.

For the first time, beyond my using climate change to scold him for leaving lights on or staying too long in the shower, we talked about it. I tried to reassure him, without feeding him bullshit. Things were serious, but there were many different views; no one knew what would happen.

That night I understood why young people might feel more strongly about the subject than anyone else. It's not just about the far greater number of years ahead of them. It's about their libidinous attachment to life. My life might yet throw up some surprises but even if it's long, it's two thirds over, and its course is pretty much set. For young people the years ahead are mysterious, unscripted, beckoning. Climate change violates that promise.

It also damages the bonds between old and young, built on trust and truth, and handing things on in reasonable shape. Both sides feel they are betraying the hopes of the other, as Jayde Harding must have done when she broke her news to her dad. A Canadian friend, Patricia Pearson, a writer, describes watching climate-change stories on the news with her two children, both in their early twenties: "Sidelong, they look at me for reassurance; sidelong, I try to give it." A woman in her eighties writes "What I won't tell my grandchildren", before sharing her fears with me.

And so we struggle to talk about the biggest issue on Earth. Spencer Glendon is an American economist whose job is getting businesspeople to respond to climate change by genuinely changing the way their companies work. He told The New Yorker that when he started this work 10 years ago he noticed that normally "you can get people in the business community interested in just about anything. You can get uptight white guys to talk about erectile dysfunction and diarrhea, if there are stocks involved. But you couldn't get them to talk about climate change."

Uptight white guys who deal in stocks have certainly been lagging. But they're hardly alone. Climate change is invisible, incremental, insidious… and therefore ignorable. It is also systemic. Emissions are embedded into so many daily acts of modern life.

Paul Posterino, a 47-year-old teacher, writes:

I teach at a middle-ring-suburb private school, where the students' substantial fees are paid for by the perspiration, aspiration and even speculation of their parents and grandparents. Climate change is a distant thought in the mornings, when a boa-constrictor line of prestige SUVs snakes its way in and out of the school drop-off zone. Few kids walk to school and even fewer ride, but the urban design is hostile to that kind of thinking. There isn't even a zebra crossing outside our school gates. I used to ride to my previous workplace, but only the truly committed would make the death run here through industrial estates and narrow suburban streets, where high-vis, alpha males in deluxe utes rule with a white-knuckled grip. I am part of the school's Social Justice Club, a fringe group who try to recycle soft plastics, start worm farms and petition politicians. Our voice is feeble and ineffectual, but we persist. I am aware of my hypocrisy as I drive home on the freeway, plotting my international flight to a faraway paradise. I keep a small vegie garden, a compost bin and have planted as many trees as will fit in my humble allotment, one of many subdivided townhouse developments. I shake a small fist at a big problem.

Climate change has come along at a time when many people have abandoned a faith in collective politics. Of the 120 or so people who responded to my message, maybe 10 had joined Extinction Rebellion or other groups such as Climate for Change or Lighter Footprints. These people tended to express more optimism and sense of purpose, perhaps confirming Greta Thunberg's idea that if you act, hope opens up. No one in my survey spoke of getting active in an established political party, including the Greens, except for two members of the ALP, both men in their early eighties. More common themes were recycling and consumption. When I made a word cloud of the 40,000 words people had written in total, there was much use of hope, future, planet and children. But by far the most popular word, used twice as much as any other, was plastic.

On one level, this makes sense. Plastic anxiety reflects the unease of the affluent middle class about consumption, and the fact that most people have no choice but to go to the supermarket and benefit from its cornucopia of goods at ridiculous prices, even while sensing that ever-increasing abundance and affluence cannot be sustained on a finite planet. And unlike a warming atmosphere, we can see a six-pack ring stuck around a bird's neck, or the vast, floating plastic landscape, as big as Texas, known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch.

But on another level, it makes no sense at all. Plastic waste doesn't have a lot to do with climate change. All the research shows that if you want to make a personal difference to emissions, eat less meat, buy an electric car – and, above all, don't fly. The average Australian produces more emissions than citizens of any nation except a few Gulf states. Up to a half of that average annual output can be generated by one return flight to London alone.

Yet flying is a particularly hard habit to give up, especially for the progressive middle class, so keen to travel and experience other cultures. My Facebook feed is full of excited posts from around the world. In Europe there is a movement to fly less and lower one's levels of flygskam, a Swedish word denoting "flight shame". It is harder to avoid flying in Australia, with its size and poor public transport. Nevertheless, Mark Carter, a 65-year-old Melbourne graphic designer, has formed the organisation Flight Free Australia, to raise awareness of the damage caused by flying. Carter says his commitment to no longer fly is his way of recognising a new normal, in which none of us can keep living the way we have. But no other person in my survey was prepared to make that kind of commitment.

I don't say that to shame anyone. I've done my share of flying. But the very least we can do is recognise the contradiction. Sean Cooney, a professor of law at the University of Melbourne, told me that in the previous few months he had flown overseas three times for his job. He tries to restrict his travel but notes that these flights alone attributed to him 10 times the total annual carbon emissions of an Indian. They were also "probably a lot more than most climate sceptic Pauline Hanson voters".

Cooney's point nails it. Apart from the super-rich, conservatives or populists don't emit more than progressives. Emissions don't drift left or right; they go straight up.

"Study after study finds that the primary determinant of a person's actual ecological footprint is income," writes David Roberts, climate-change reporter for Vox, in the US. Key factors in individual emissions are dwelling size, amount of consumption and number of holidays; not "recycling and buying canvas tote bags full of organic veggies". A German study cited by Roberts found that the actions emphasised by people who identify as environmentalist tend to have relatively small ecological benefits. "In fact, energy use and carbon footprints were slightly higher among self-identified greenies."

These findings might be modified in Australia, with high solar panel take-up among the middle class, but the larger point holds. Yes, there are some deniers in positions of power who need to be fought. Otherwise, with climate change there is no good or bad side, no enemy, no "other". We are all in this together. Understanding this might give us the humility and empathy we will need in the time to come.

"That log over there was where we learnt to swim. That's what we'd hang onto. Bit of a panic if you let go and drifted off, the older ones would have to come and get you."

Standing on the bank of the Murray River in the Victorian town of Barmah, Paul Briggs points across to the site of the old Cummeragunja Mission Station, where he grew up. At 65, Briggs can still spot the logs, mussel shells and middens he knew as a boy around the river, which the Yorta Yorta call Dungala. But many things have gone, the result of white settlement, economic development and climate change, three tides of history that Briggs bundles into one:

The mussels in the river are disappearing; leeches, certain fishes are disappearing, the river's up and down artificially. When the river's up, birds start breeding, putting nests in the bank. The river drops and they get caught without water and support. But you've gotta get the water onto those rice and cotton farms, you gotta get water to those industries that depend on it – that's the economy churning. We are not part of that thinking. We are sitting on the riverbank still, watching the water go up and down.

Briggs is president of the Rumbalara Football Netball Club in his home town of Shepparton, among many other roles. He has spent his life fighting to help his people find their place in the mainstream while maintaining their way of life. Although that struggle is endless, with many setbacks, Briggs moves confidently in Western society. Yet his ties to ancient Yorta Yorta life are recent and strong: his great-grandmother lived on her land, in the traditional way, by the Moira Lakes in the Barmah Forest.

"That act of dispossession was so brutal and so swift," Briggs says. "Her children could speak our language, the next generation could not, and the aftermath is still with us.

"Can the Yorta Yorta have the luxury of a dream about the future?" Briggs hopes that climate change will provoke non-Indigenous people to think in new ways about the land and environment. "I'm not sure if Western society can change its behaviour but I think we Aboriginal people have a lot to offer."

On the other hand, he says, "we don't see any answers being put on the table about our survival, or the survival of the rivers we have lived along for thousands of years. Climate change is symptomatic of the depth of the abuse that has been delivered to the flora and fauna, to the Indigenous place that is now called Australia. We're a part of that abuse. The rivers and the environment are dying with us." As Briggs speaks, his words are momentarily drowned out by the chug of a pleasure boat ploughing up the river.

Two hours drive south-east of where Briggs stands, Anthony Griffiths, 51, runs a farm at Greta West, near Wangaratta. Some of the farm has been in the family since settlement, and Griffiths is now replanting the trees taken out by his forebears. He writes:

Climate change is often in my thoughts. Cattle produce large quantities of methane, but if I did not run cattle, what could I do with my land, which is not suited to cropping or horticulture? The industry answer is to intensify, which reduces methane and is more productive, but being stuck in small pens of dirt and mud reduces the livestock's quality of life, whereas mine roam freely in their paddocks, able to eat and sleep where they wish. Kangaroos produce virtually no methane and are very edible, but neither the government nor the red-meat industry has any interest in pursuing a kangaroo-meat industry. And so our colonial past continues to limit our imaginations of a possible future.

From the most hard-nosed farmers to community sportspeople there is wide agreement that the climate has changed, and that the way things were done before will not work anymore. What will the landscape look like if most of the existing vegetation is dead due to the climate shift? As more properties have houses built and each puts down another bore to tap into the ground water, as I see springs that fed little creeks and native wells in my grandfather's time now dry and dusty, I wonder how long the underground aquifers can hold out, and when water authorities will realise water is not endless.

I also ponder the great climatic changes Indigenous people survived and prospered through. Even my own family's adaptions to living and farming in a landscape that was so different to their native UK give me hope that when humanity realises that we must change, we will find ways to do so.

This summer's fires bring closer what Briggs and Griffiths saw coming. Not today, but not in the faraway future either, Australia is in trouble. CSIRO scientist David Karoly saw it 11 years ago when he said: "We are unleashing hell on Australia."

All our big cities and 80 per cent of our people are on the coast, subject both to sea-level rise and water scarcity. Perth already has two desalination plants, Melbourne one. In the interior, remote Aboriginal communities are struggling to survive in staggering heat. Feral camels have invaded settlements in search of water. "If we don't do anything, the NT will become unliveable," said Northern Territory environment minister Eva Lawler last year.

Perhaps it's not just the Territory. Dave Griggs is a climate scientist who used to run the Monash Sustainable Development Institute at Monash University but who has returned to his native Britain, partly for climate reasons. In 2017 Griggs told the ABC Lateline program that people in Darwin and Brisbane should think about leaving. He told me he knows CSIRO scientists who have bought places to live in Tasmania, in preparation for hotter, darker times. An ANU tool developed last year to visualise climate data calculates that by 2050 – 30 years from now – Tasmania will be the only part of Australia to have a discernible winter.

In 2018, the National Resilience Taskforce published "Profiling Australia's Vulnerability". Couched in the careful prose of the public service, the report notes that Australia's infrastructure and social, economic and environmental systems have evolved slowly and surely, in times of stability and prosperity. As a result, we tend to assume, "often unconsciously", that they will always work, and that our lives will "continue in safety and security". But in a "rapidly changing natural environment", Australians' resilience, of which we are so proud, is eroding.

"Against this backdrop," the report states, "catastrophic consequences from natural hazards intersecting with societies are not only possible but are highly plausible, and their effects will likely exceed the capacity of the nation. The consequential damage, loss and suffering would be immense and enduring" [my emphasis].

This is the report that Prime Minister Scott Morrison stands accused of having ignored, a charge he denies. The head of the taskforce, Mark Crosweller, a former senior public servant in Peter Dutton's Department of Home Affairs and of Emergency Manageme, told The Australian Financial Reviewin January that policy on climate change at all levels of government had been "confusing and difficult" and there was "still a big gap within the context of existing leadership capability".

"We've got to get out of the habit of living in ignorance of what's possible," Crosweller said.

Decoded, Crosweller's message is clear. The world has changed. We need to look this fact square in the face and respond. But we are not doing so.

Is our political system even capable of responding, geared as it is only to evolutionary change? The catastrophic bushfires have diminished Morrison, perhaps fatally, revealing him as unable to empathise with people suffering trauma, unable to offer comfort or hope to a country filled with fears for the future. Morrison has gone quiet on celebrating "the quiet Australians", since many no longer are.

The question looms not only for Morrison but for Anthony Albanese. His party has a substantially stronger commitment than the government to reduce emissions. Even so, the Labor leader cannot tell the full truth about climate change, since it might expose his solution as not being up to the job. And to be fair, even now the iron laws of democratic politics still apply: hope is a duty; your vision of the future must inspire not frighten; you have to bring people with you. If you don't, the only warming you will prevent is that of your own bums on the government benches.

And so the irresistible force of physics meets the almost immovable object of politics. "Democracies are not designed to be efficient, they are designed to ensure everyone gets heard," says John Daley, chief executive of the Grattan Institute. "But when they finally move, they can move very fast." Will that be fast enough?

Six months ago, I spoke with the climate researcher David Spratt. His book Climate Code Red: The Case for Emergency Action (co-authored with environmental activist

Philip Sutton) made the case 12 years ago for shifting the political frame from one of incrementalism and gradual ratchets of policy levers to acceptance that we were living in an emergency. “It’s 1938 and people still think we can have peace in our time,” he tells me. “We need Churchill. It’s decision-making for end times.”

Spratt, 69, labels himself with a defiant grin as “a politically self-identified outsider – always have been and always will be”. A socialist, he has worked on many political campaigns while for many years running a graphic design business and a yoga studio. But climate change has brought him to a surprising place.

Through writing his book, Spratt got to know Ian Dunlop, a former Shell executive. Dunlop had chaired both the Australian Coal Association and prime minister John Howard’s expert group on emissions trading. A Scot by birth, an engineer who once drilled for oil in the North Sea, Dunlop describes himself as apolitical, but he is part of Australia’s business and political elite. Yet over more than 30 years he has grown increasingly alarmed by what he sees as the refusal of that elite to confront the threat of climate change.

He and Spratt began to write together, shaking hands across the great political divide. The pair’s 2018 paper, “What Lies Beneath: The Understatement of Existential Climate Risk”, argues that the professional reticence of scientists, the “cognitive dissonance” of politicians, and the refusal of business and others to confront climate change using standard paradigms of risk, is producing a “policy failure of epic proportions”. Human survival is threatened because the truth lies outside the window of conventional debate and policy formation.

Spratt’s work with Dunlop has been praised by leading German climate scientist Hans Joachim Schellnhuber and former Australian Defence Force chief Chris Barrie. But what interests me more is Spratt’s approach to the politics of climate change. Although socialism is in vogue again in the West, and its supporters see the looming crisis tilting history in their favour, Spratt dismisses that kind of talk.

“There won’t be a revolution, there’s no time,” he says. “And it’s not a left–right issue. If it’s a partisan approach, we’re stuffed. If we have to smash capitalism as a necessary precursor to real climate action, then we are all going to end up very hot.”

Instead, Spratt sees capitalists as holding the key to the crisis. “In my warped view of the world, the issue is business. Business needs to call this out and say that if we don’t act, we understand that our grandkids are going to die in hell. But there might be a way out. If half a dozen of the biggest companies said, ‘Oh f**k, this is the end, we need to act’, the politicians would fold.”

Spratt and Dunlop’s rough plan calls for unprecedented global cooperation, an immediate end to all new fossil-fuel extraction, and the creation of governments of national unity that would start making heavy investments in research and technology to speed the necessary economic transformation. Such governments might introduce a carbon price, along with emissions standards for power stations and cars. They would create a system of carbon rationing – limits on flights, for example – that in the interests of fairness would protect poorer people and fall more heavily on the better-off.

Spratt accepts that such large-scale government intervention is unlikely to please conservatives, but he points out that the World War Two mobilisation in the US “saw a lot of employment and healthy profits for business”. Spratt has proposed a way to frame the political narrative that might appeal to conservatives and to Labor. Governments’ core duty, he writes, is protection: to keep their people, and those who come after them, safe.

Spratt’s analysis sparks the thought that the radical approach we need is only possible if conservatives, or at least some of them, are on board. But two things trouble me. A good deal of evidence suggests that talk of emergency puts a lot of people off. “People who see the world as just, orderly and stable have a deep-seated loathing of this kind of apocalyptic messaging,” writes British activist George Marshall, who examines the communication of climate change in his book Don’t Even Think About It.

It is true that an Australia Institute poll, taken during the fires last November, found that two thirds of Australians agreed that “governments should mobilise all of society to tackle climate change, like they mobilised everyone during the world wars”. But one poll does not prove that business and the public are anywhere near endorsing the kind of wartime mobilisation Spratt and Dunlop propose. Spratt admits to disappointment that no leading business figure called for dramatic change after the bushfires. The work of Rebecca Huntley, a leading social researcher whose book on how to communicate climate change will be published this month, might help to explain why.

When we first spoke, in spring 2019, Huntley said that while public concern about climate change was rising sharply, it was still not shaping how most people voted. An analysis of the 2019 election result she conducted for the World Wildlife Fund found that Australians who were less educated, poorer, and lived in rural and regional areas, were especially switched off from the issue.

Huntley’s research suggests that the war-footing message resonates most powerfully with the two groups on either side of the political spectrum: those who are alarmed by climate change and those who dismiss it as an issue. She says this second group is quite small – less than 10 per cent of the population – even if some within it run big countries and companies. The war language energises this group “because it proves to them that climate activists are agitating to reorganise power structures in our society via this complete mobilisation”.

In the middle – perhaps half the population – are people who express varying levels of concern, caution, doubt or disengagement about the issue. In July last year Huntley conducted online focus groups on attitudes to renewable energy and coal

among residents of outer suburban Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. The groups comprised people in two, sometimes intersecting, categories: those with lower levels of education, and swinging voters who described themselves as concerned or somewhat concerned about the environment but who did not vote Labor or Green in the 2019 election. Huntley says they came from many backgrounds and were ethnically diverse, but they were united by a sense of "patriotism and optimism about this country. How good is Australia? Pretty good."

These people accepted the truth of climate change and loved renewables. But they saw the problem as distant rather than immediate. They rarely talked about it. They thought the media overplayed it and disliked the debate's remote and inaccessible language, its "doom and gloom" tone. When asked about scientists' views that the world might have 10 years to act or face catastrophe,their reaction was explosive, almost hostile. "Scare tactics – that can't be true. Where's the evidence?"

Huntley says only one environmental message inspired these groups. "It was relentlessly positive. Australians are clever. We have come up with inventions like wi-fi. We should be world leaders in renewable energy, allowing us to generate jobs and address rising cost-of-living pressures."

Have the fires changed their opinion? Huntley says it's too soon to tell. "Don't be fooled by your Twitter feed – think about people who see climate change as a 20- to 30-year time horizon. The failure of services, the fact that government saw it coming but failed to act – that is what will upset them. That presents an opportunity for a conversation."

Huntley says that many in the focus groups had "genuine and open questions" about how climate change might transform their world. That is why the "post-election trolling of Queenslanders, and the characterisation of people who resist climate messages as mean and stupid bogans" was so disastrous.

In other words, people who feel strongly about climate change need to find a way to talk to people who think differently, without superiority or anger. They probably need a new language, too. Huntley says that many terms used by environmentalists – sustainability, diversity, social justice – turn off people outside progressive circles. "So much climate-change language is about massive economic, social and cultural change. It carries that influence of the social movements of the left, the sense that we need a dramatic reorganisation of society. But most people don't want to be reorganised."

Huntley asked the focus groups about a "Green New Deal", the proposal of left-wing Democrats in the US to create a mass mobilisation of society to fight climate change in the way that Franklin Roosevelt introduced the sweeping economic New Deal to fight the Depression. "People didn't know what it was," Huntley says. "Someone said, 'I think it's an American thing.' When it was explained, they hated it. They said things like, 'But isn't this about more solar panels and less coal and looking after koalas?'"

She sighs. "This [divide] may be the big thing that gets us all undone."

A study from France echoes what Huntley heard in the Australian suburbs. Tim Dixon is a former speechwriter for Labor prime ministers Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. He now runs More in Common, an organisation that seeks to fight polarisation and find common ground among communities in Britain, the US, France and Germany. Late last year it conducted a survey on views of climate change among 6000 French people of generally low education and income.

Dixon says the poll showed that climate denial is a much smaller issue than the media often makes out. A much bigger problem is a loss of faith in government and corporations, and in elites of both right and left. "Very few people deny the reality of climate change," he says, "but they don't trust institutions to be able to fix it. People in this group feel strongly that the world is not fair right now. They don't feel listened to or respected."

In Dixon's view, that is why any narrative of emergency, or of the massive scale of the crisis, only reinforces this group's feelings of lack of agency, and does not motivate people to act. What does resonate are ideas about taking back control. "In one group, someone talked about making her own detergent. Everyone wanted to talk about it – how did she do that? People want clean food; they don't want to wash clothes in poisonous chemicals. They want anything that makes life better for their kids."

Huntley and Dixon both say the best approach to communicating climate change is to stay positive, focus on building trust in the political system and on a fairer deal for those who are missing out, and to not stress crisis or conflict. But such nuanced views are getting lost as politics polarises and right and left become warring tribes. Cass Sunstein's 2019 book, Conformity: The Power of Social Influences, cites studies showing that a group of people who hold diverging views, put into the same room, will try to find common ground. But ask a group of like-minded people to discuss a topic and they will compete to adopt the most extreme position. The problem, says Dixon, "is that we're losing forums for the first kind of conversation, while we're having the second kind every day – on Twitter".

In January, Science Minister Karen Andrews said that climate denial was wasting precious time needed to address climate change. Instead of encouraging Andrews for what seemed like a sensible contribution to the debate, given that she works in a government that contains climate deniers, my Twitter feed erupted in scorn and personal attacks: "Oh, we have a Science Minister?" and "Amazing what some shit polling can do. I didn't know the person existed until today."

We have to get past such incontinent rage. The world is on fire as it is.

"I think most Liberal voters firmly believe we need to take action on climate change, even if there are some who still want to argue the science," says Victorian Liberal shadow treasurer Louise Staley.

"Part of my job and that of the parliamentary leadership is to bring our people and the community with us. There are a lot of centre-right governments – New South Wales, the UK – that have legislated for zero net emissions by 2050. My starting point is, what does that look like?

"The science is telling us that if you keep emissions at current global levels, you will ruin your way of life. The environment is going to eat you. Scientists are saying that a world 2 degrees hotter than it is now is not an attractive place to be living in."

Perhaps the problem is so grave, I suggest, that we need to take radical actions, such as forming a government of national unity. How would that go down on her side of politics? Staley sounds amused. "I'm going to use John Howard's line when he was asked questions like that: 'I'm a politician, not a commentator.'"

What are the chances, then, of the two major parties coming together to enact radical legislation? Could they, for example, jointly introduce a carbon price, then pack off responsibility for adjusting the price to an apolitical body, as financial journalist Alan Kohler has proposed? Could they work together to try to create a regional bloc – with Indonesia, Malaysia and the Pacific nations – to get some heft in global climate talks, as Australia did with agricultural tariffs in the 1980s? Such unity, which might inspire the public to reconsider its soaring disrespect for politicians, sounds pretty far-fetched.

Nevertheless, people coming from very different places are converging on a similar idea. Extinction Rebellion's slogan is "Beyond Politics". Independent MP Zali Steggall is introducing a private member's bill to take Australia to zero emissions by 2050, and wants it to be subject to a conscience vote. Former federal Labor minister Jenny Macklin proposes the creation of an emissions and employment accord that would bring together diverse sectors and viewpoints to produce a package to tackle climate change and economic inequality at the same time. British climate scientist and former IPCC member Mike Hulme, who is seen as being on the conservative side of the science, argues that change will only come when "people with different worldviews and perspectives get together at the government level to consider solutions". American political scientist Robert Keohane has said that to accept difficult action on climate change, voters need to understand that this issue will define the lives of their children and grandchildren; that we are all now part of a "community of fate".

The author Helen Garner writes:

One night last autumn I had this dream. With several other watchers, I don't remember who they were or if I even knew them, I was looking at a landscape and the sky above it. Clouds moved swiftly across it, behind tall trees and above vast distances, perhaps Tuscan – very civilised, vegetated, deeply human. The edges of the clouds were like fine lace, almost frilled, and they knitted together and parted again, over and over, very graceful, never pausing. They were magnificent, their colours unnameably subtle – but I knew that what we were witnessing was the drama of the death of our planet. I was filled with powerful emotions – grief, terror; but also exhilarated and awed by the glorious beauty of what was happening before our eyes.

I am sitting with six young women in Armadale, a comfortable Melbourne suburb that sits in Higgins, a safe Liberal seat – although not as safe it once was, thanks to climate change. Some of the women are in the same mothers' group; all have a child no older than two. "A warning before we start," says Elinor Hasenfratz, a 31-year-old primary-school teacher who has just taken a job at the Jewish Climate Network. "Some of us are going to cry."

Sure enough, Rachel Davis, a 34-year-old public servant, whose arresting smile would normally dissolve any anxiety in a room, fights back tears as she speaks:

I have a 10-week-old, a little girl. My climate awakening has happened simultaneously with my motherhood. I am thinking about climate stuff all day, every day. I'm holding her all the time, she is always on me, feeding from me, sleeping on me. I have this dual-track mind of "Take the dummy" and "Oh, what have I done? I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry for my contribution, so sorry that I've brought you here. I hope we can fix it." There's hope and grief, and it's all on this tiny little person who didn't ask to be here. My husband says, "We need good people in the world, people who are going to be able to change things." But it still feels completely unfair to have brought her here. On the other hand, there is some part of me that thinks she would prefer to be alive than not. Children are hope.

The word hope seems to give Sarah Lockett, another primary-school teacher, her cue. She says she comes from a privileged background, has never been political, and none of her friends talk about climate change. She has a two-year-old girl, and the pride and pleasure in her child beam through. "I don't have that deep despair," she says. "I have fear, but I also have great hope. The kids I teach, they are amazing. They will change the world."

The group's driving force is Hasenfratz, who this summer put a post on Facebook:

Before the climate went batshit I wasn't protesting for some other worthy cause. I was living my pleasant life. I enjoyed dogspotting, potting plants, planning to have a baby, teaching kids music and dance, dissing vegans and happily ignoring politics, as it seemed to be chugging along without needing serious intervention, and who would I be to intervene anyway? I stayed in my lane, and my lane was pretty great.

But I just can't anymore. I used to feel like such a knob posting on Facebook. I felt

like it was at best useless, at worst hypocritical and attention seeking. But this summer I reached my tipping point and haven't looked back.

If you're reading the news about Mallacoota and the 4000 people sheltering on the beach, or about bats falling out of the sky mid-flight, or if you've simply decided enough is enough and you will listen to the experts – you're invited, you're needed, and you are bloody powerful. It's time to stand up, jump in, roll up your sleeves, get those thumbs ready for posting on social media and writing to pollies, and your brain and family ready to change the way we all live and work and eat and travel and spend and even think.

This isn't a perfectly worded post, but I'm not a professional activist. I'm a primary-school teacher, I'm a young mum, I'm a centrist, and just like you, I've started paying attention. Of course, I'm doing it for my sweet little wriggler, but I'm doing it for your children too. And the kids in Tuvalu, in Beijing, in Mallacoota. All the little boys and little girls who want to grow up and have kids of their own.

Over two hours, each woman tells how she became alerted – awakened – to the climate crisis. The room hums with laughter and tears, and as I listen it strikes me that these feelings, if they are widespread, could upend our political system. Yet these mothers are, in the main, middle-class progressives. How does this degree of concern move beyond that group?

In early December I visited Broken Hill, in NSW's far west, and knocked on the door of its newspaper, Barrier Daily Truth. Myles Burt and Callum Marshall, both in their twenties, are reporters there. Burt is a local; his father worked in the town mines. Their newspaper had just run a Facebook poll on whether the NSW and Queensland bushfires were related to global warming; three-quarters of respondents had said they were. The result had surprised and cheered the two young men, who themselves are convinced of the reality of climate change.

Burt says: "I've been out at Menindee and seen the dead fish, the kangaroos stuck in mud dying, the lakes dry except for one tiny pool of disgusting, lime green water. It was that hot we were panting."

But he has a message for city people. "We're all pro-mining here. We know what mining does. Everyone in the country sees people in metro areas as comfortable. But our town used to be 36,000; now we are 17,000. The job losses scare people. You have got metro areas saying we have to give up fossil fuels – hang on, that is going to leave us with nothing."

How, then, should the city talk to the country about climate change? "It's all about the tone, the voice, the body language," Burt says. "If you go all guns blazing – 'Look you f**king idiot, climate change is real' – they're like, 'I will never believe you because I hate you.' My mum is a classic example. She's no climate denier, but on any subject I can put all the evidence on the table and unless I'm respectful, she's like, 'Nah, whatever.'"

Marshall says: "In the city they think keeping the planet alive is a moral imperative. I get that. But there has to be a here-and-now argument to convince people. You have got to go back to economics and real-world living."

Burt agrees. "The arguments need to be practical. New industry will bring jobs. Renewable energy grids will lower the cost of power, planting trees will lower the temperature. People change their mind when they see a dollar. The world revolves around it. It's unfair, but you have got to play the game."

In that game there might be some good news, including for Broken Hill, if Australia plays it right. In 2008 and 2011, economist Ross Garnaut wrote landmark reports for the federal government on how it should respond to climate change. Last year he published Superpower: Australia's low-carbon opportunity.

The book contains some chilling sentences delivered in Garnaut's restrained style: "If the nation were to experience the consequences of a failure of effective global action on climate change, I fear that the challenge would be beyond contemporary Australian society. I fear that things would fall apart." He tells me: "We're probably locked into a 2 degree rise over land, twice the increase that fuelled this summer's bushfires. Climate change won't cause the extinction of our species, but it could cause the end of our civilisation. At 4 degrees – our current trajectory – it's very hard to see Australia surviving as a sovereign entity."

And the good news? "I now believe that Australia – and especially regional Australia – can do very well in the new economy. We will be the lowest cost place for green energy in the world."

Garnaut's book carefully sets out the potential of this new economy, built on production of metals "at an immense scale" and the sequestering of carbon in the soil – an economy powered by Australia's unrivalled blessings of sun, wind and water. He maintains that plummeting costs of renewable energy and battery storage make these potential benefits so great that Australia should chase them even if the threat of climate change did not exist.

What, I ask, are the biggest threats to his vision? Garnaut replies: "News Corporation, and the absence of the sort of leadership in the Liberal Party that can recognise the advantages of breaking with the past. I cannot think of any single action that has been more damaging to our national interest than discouraging global effort on climate change."

Garnaut's ideas have special resonance in the South Australian city of Whyalla, where the vast steelworks employs 2500 people, one in nine jobs in town. In the past 30 years the plant has struggled to compete on global markets and was on

the brink of closure in 2017, when a British steel magnate, Sanjeev Gupta, turned up with a $750 million rescue package. Gupta says he plans to produce "greensteel" powered by a huge solar farm. But for now they are only plans and the town's future remains tenuous. Can the steelworks make the transition that Garnaut sets out: from an uncompetitive producer fired by coal to a powerhouse drawing its energy from the sun? Eddie Hughes, state Labor MP for the local seat of Giles and a self-styled "solar tragic", spends much of his time working to ensure that it can.

"People here are proud of making the materials that have helped to build Australia," Hughes says. "We could transform to doing that in a far greener way. Can we do it? I honestly don't know."

Hughes used to work in the steelworks, as did his father, mother, brother, and one of his sons. Like many Whyalla residents, he was once a British migrant, who understands the opportunity that Australia and the modern industrial economy gave him. His grandparents' tiny brick cottage in County Kildare, Ireland, had no running water and its heating came from a stove fired by peat from the bog. "Now I live in a nice house, in a deeply affluent part of the world,' he says. "Human ingenuity got us into this mess, but we did a lot of really good stuff. We provided good lives for a lot of people."

Yet Hughes is less cheery about the future. "I think we're heading for disaster, a fundamentally different planet. Monsters and clowns are taking over in a whole range of countries," he says, quoting the BBC TV drama about the near future, Years and Years. "I'm worried my kids are going to live in a hard world."

Hughes thinks that getting people to understand the importance of climate change "is more serious than the Second World War". Even so, he doesn't talk to his constituents in that kind of language. "People have immediate problems they have to deal with – their jobs, families, the education system. I generally talk about the opportunities that might come to this town."

Of all the people I spoke to, Hughes perhaps got closest to explaining the paradox of how to talk candidly about climate change, without pushing people to apathy or despair. Even if pessimism is indicated, optimism is still required. David Spratt, quoting Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, called it "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will".

That is not a dishonest position. We cannot know what is going to happen. Even climate scientists differ widely about our possible future. British climate scientist Mike Hulme believes that saying it will be catastrophic is as false scientifically as saying it will be merely lukewarm. Hulme, who calls himself an "extinction-denier", disputes the idea that the world will fall over a cliff if global warming rises more than the targeted 1.5 degrees, and thinks we should do away with metaphors of deadlines, closing windows and ticking clocks, which he says are being used above all to wind people up to achieve a policy outcome.

Dave Griggs, the British scientist and former Australian resident who gave that grim view of the future to Lateline in 2017, is more upbeat when I speak to him in January. While prone to despair on some days, Griggs thinks that "the phenomenal rate of technological innovation" and the phenomenal rise in public awareness are giving humans a chance. Emissions are still rising, yet our actions, however inadequate, are already flattening the upward curve. "The adjustment will not be as quick, graceful and painless as it should have been," he says, "but neither will it be a doomsday scenario." Griggs is not giving up. Soon he will travel to Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, a mostly grim city of skyscrapers, building sites and sand, to lead a program to plant 7.5 million trees.

In his book Radical Hope, American philosopher Jonathan Lear tells the story of Plenty Coups, the great leader of the Crow people, whose land lies on the plains of what is now Montana. Plenty Coups lived between 1848 and 1932, and was a chief when the Crow gave up their old life hunting buffalo and fighting the Sioux and moved onto a government-established reservation. Some years before, when Plenty Coups was nine years old and the Sioux and a horde of white settlers were encroaching ever further onto Crow land, the leaders of the tribe sent him into nature to induce him to dream. This was a common practice, Lear writes, when the Crow wanted to "push at the limits of their understanding".

On the second night, the boy had his dream. The buffalo had disappeared from the plains, replaced by cows without number. A vast storm had blown down every tree but one and killed every bird but one. By listening to others and learning from them, by developing his mind, that bird had withstood the storm.

When the boy returned, the leaders interpreted his dream as saying that the Crow way of life was coming to an end. However, the bird had shown that with intelligence, courage and openness to other ideas, the tribe could survive. And so it went. The Crow lost their way of life, and suffered incalculable grief, but under Plenty Coup's leadership, Lear writes, they made the transition to a new life more smoothly than many other tribes.

In telling the story of the dream, Lear writes that he is not recycling the Western trope that Indigenous people have special magic or insight. Rather, the dream has a universal meaning, regardless of whether one sees it as literal prophecy. Lear writes: "A way of life was anxious about its ability to go forward into an unfathomable future." But the Crow embraced what Lear calls radical hope: "a daunting form of commitment to a goodness in the world that transcends one's current, limited ability to grasp what it is."

Our situation cannot be compared with that of the Crow. But our old stories are also coming to an end, and we will need new ones. Stories that bind us into a community of fate. Stories of what Jayde Harding, describing her daily thoughts, calls "foreboding hope".

Harding had thought about – lived – climate change more deeply than just about anyone I met. She could talk about IPCC reports, the Great Filter Theory, the wonder of kelp. She could talk about how much coal had given us, and how it was time to say "thank you coal, goodbye".

"I was very angry and yelling for a while," she says. "I have come such a long way. But some days, it feels like such a loss. All the insects, all the birds, all the big mammals. All the culture, the art, the languages, the music, all the witty banter." She sighs: "Humans – so rich, so destructive."

She isn't burying cans of food yet. But she is going to learn how to plant things she can eat. She has developed a three-point manifesto to guide her life: "Gratitude for what I have, adapting to the world that is coming, fighting for a better one."

She tells me about Anote Tong, the former president of the tiny and threatened Pacific nation of Kiribati, whom people call a "climate warrior". It struck me that Harding had also become a climate warrior, an unusual one, both fierce and kind. And that Australia, another threatened country, will need many more.

MP Eddie Hughes is standing on a hill overlooking Whyalla. He points out a bay where giant cuttlefish, once nearly extinct, are thriving after laws were introduced to protect them. "We can still do good things, but you need government – political will," he says.

From this lookout, the whole world seems to be on show, like a child's drawing. There are distant mountains, a vast sea and sky, the endless Australian blue. Two freighters make steady progress up the gulf, families stroll on the beach, a train chugs towards the smoke stacks and piers and rust-red sheds of the steelworks. Australia: a little battered by human hands, but still beautiful.

Far from here, in my south-east corner of the country, I love the way the seasons turn. The cool nights start closing in around Easter. In July, the wind will whip off the sea and go right through our coats. But behind it, the first fine, fragile days of spring. To want to save this is politics – not of the left or right side, but of the body. Can we find a new patriotism to appeal both to those on the left who dislike the idea of nationhood and dream of global citizenship, forgetting that we live in one place and spend our days in its weather, and to those on the right who say they love Australia but whose policies are helping to destroy it? A patriotism forged out of our shared sorrow and loss – the flaring stands of eucalyptus, flames dwarfing the tallest trees, people under ember attack cracking hardy, so many dead. The parched kangaroos, valleys that no longer hear lyrebirds, koalas on fire. The writer Helen Garner said in a recent speech that she felt "over these recent months of fire and destruction, mourning and rage, and acts of splendid bravery and comradeliness and self-sacrifice, a sudden astonished awareness of our country and what it means to us".

My wife and I drive from Whyalla to Port Augusta. We see the coal-fired power station, now shuttered, and the 115-metre solar tower that soars over the town like a sentinel from the future. Maybe, just maybe, it's not yet game over, but game on.

It is getting dark in the Port Augusta caravan park. I am sitting with a plate of chops and a beer, lost in thought, when out of nowhere a riot of sulphur-crested cockatoos explodes above the trees and goes wheeling and screeching deliriously into the dusk.

SHORTLISTED STORY

Silent killer: Oil Pollution Continues to Kill Nigerians in Delta Region

Kelechukwu Iruoma, Ruth Olurounbi (Nigeria)

Kelechukwu Iruoma is a multi-award-winning freelance development and investigative journalist covering global health, environment, social justice, anti-corruption, climate change, agriculture, business, among others.

His works have been published by Al Jazeera, TRF, NPR, The Fish Site, African Business Magazine, Ripples Nigeria, ICIR, among others. Kelechukwu is a committed journalist who speaks for the voiceless. He has won several national and international awards. He recently emerged the overall winner in the Business Category of the West Africa Media Excellence Awards (WAMECA). He has also emerged as the first Runners-up of the Africa Climate Change and Environmental Reporting (ACCER) awards.

Ruth Olurounbi has spent nearly 15 years of her life as a journalist writing business and investigative reports for national organisations. She is a nominee for the prestigious investigative journalism award, 2020 The Paul Foot Award, One World Media Award, the Fetisov Journalism Award, among others. She is a member of the Nigerian chapter of WanaData, a network of female journalists developed by ICFJ and Code for Africa that is driving digital storytelling across the continent. She is a recipient of ICFJ Alumni Reporting Grant for investigative journalism.

She has held the positions of Business Editor at Per Second News and Sports Editor of aclsports.com before joining Bloomberg LP where she interned for a few weeks and continues to freelance for the global news organisation.

Ruth has double honours degree in Communication and Language Arts and English at the University of Ibadan and a master's degree in Project Development and Implementation from the same university. In her free time, she mentors young journalists (12 of whom she has mentored over a 12-months period) and consults for non-profits using her expertise in Project, and Communications Management.

Silent killer: Oil Pollution Continues to Kill Nigerians in Delta Region

By Kelechukwu Iruoma & Ruth Olurounbi

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A six-month investigation unravels how frequent oil spill in Ogoniland, Rivers State contaminates the environment, silently killing the people, and how the slow pace of the cleanup exercise worsens the living condition of the community people.

Eric Dooh, 60, had just returned from Goi, a community in Ogoniland in Nigeria's Niger Delta. He visited his family property in the community he left a few years back due to air pollution. Near the property is a large river where men fish, but it has been constantly contaminated by oil spills that has made the entire environment unsafe.

Exhausted, Dooh sat on a red couch in his sitting room, with eyes as red as fireballs. Moments later, he stood up, went to where he had hung a plain trouser he wore to the community the previous day and dipped his right hand inside one of the pockets. He started searching for a sachet of Franol (a drug that relieves breathing difficulties) he usually takes after returning from the oil spill site but could not find it.

Goi, where Dooh comes from, is one of the affected communities ravaged by oil spills.

"Our people suffer very seriously; they inhale chemicals," Dooh lamented. "My mother and father died in 2005 and 2012 respectively. They were diagnosed with respiratory disease and could not survive it."

Nigeria has the largest oil-producing mines in Africa with the bulk of its crude laying beneath farmlands and rivers in Ogoniland with oil companies like Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) extracting about 100 million barrels of crude every year.

Crude oil is very important to Nigeria's economy. According to the Nigeria Bureau of Statistics (NBS), Nigeria exported crude oil to the tune of N3.74 trillion or

70.84 per cent of total exports in the third quarter of 2019, contributing 9.77 per cent. to the Gross Domestic Products (GDP). Despite this, the oil-producing communities suffer from numerous oil spills.

Between 2003 and 2014, there were devastating oil spills from the Bomu manifold, a Shell facility at Kegbara Dere (K-Dere) located in Gokana local government area of Rivers State. Shell has been pumping oil from the Niger Delta since 1958 and it remains the largest multinational oil company operating in the region.

Although Shell has not pumped oil from its oil wells in Ogoni since 1993 when Ogoni activists led protests against the oil company for destroying the environment, halting its operations, its pipelines still carry oil worth 150, 000 barrels daily through the region to its export terminal at Bonny Island on the coast.

The pipelines were reported to be ageing and poorly maintained, making them burst and spilling thousands of barrels of crude oil. Amnesty International, a global human rights organisation, in its 2015 report said about 352, 000 barrels of crude were spilled from 2007 to 2014.

Dooh said the major oil spill occurred in 2009. The fire from Bomu manifold burned for 36 hours and spread to neighbouring Mogho, Bodo and Goi communities, causing damages that destroyed the people's livelihoods.

Loss of Livelihood

That night, 35-year-old Dorgbaa Bariooma said goodnight to her children and husband, turned off the light switch and went to sleep. Neither she nor thousands of people at K-Dere knew the event of the night would change their lives forever. The first thing she woke up to see was the heat from the explosion.

"It was as if our house had been set on fire. Later came the smell of crude oil. It was so bad we could not breathe well for the first few months," said Bariooma.

The oil spills had devastating impacts on the forests and fisheries that the people depend on for their food and livelihood. Many K-Dere residents grew up near Kidaro Creek, where they fish. Fishing was the mainstay of the local economy but the harvest has dwindled because of the pollution of the water body.

"Growing up, I would watch my father fish from this very creek and on sunny days like this, many of us will come to the creek to cool off. Here, there was once luscious vegetation and the sound of laughter and happiness was infectious," said Erabanabari Kobah, an environmental scientist from K-Dere.

At an intersection leading to Goi, the smell of crude oil pervaded the air and several deserted houses littered the community. A kilometer or thereabout from the spill site, reporters covered their nose as the noxious smell of polluted environment became more intense.

Near the riverbank was a public notice inscribed "Prohibition! contaminated area. Keep off."

The river has been contaminated with crude oil gliding on the water. Fishermen could only catch a few unhealthy crabs after several hours of trying.

Raphael Vaneba, 47, still goes to the river to fish despite the environmental and health risks involved. He came out of the river carrying a fishing net on his right hand and an open gallon containing five crabs he had caught. His body was soaked in crude oil. Soon he dropped the fishing net and started to scratch every part of his body.

"I scratch my body whenever I come out of the contaminated river after fishing. We do not catch fish here anymore because the spilled crude oil has killed them and we don't get money," he lamented as he opened the mouth of a crab to show crude oil inside.

As a farmer in Bodo, Caroline Gbogbara's farmlands also were affected by the oil spill but she continues to farm. During harvest, her cassava and vegetables smell of crude oil.

"We don't have anything to eat. Farmers farm on lands filled with crude and have no choice but to feed on the contaminated produce. Families are forced to eat from poisoned crops," she said.

According to the Center for Environment, Human Rights and Development (CEHRD), oil spills could lead to a 60 per cent reduction in household food security and were capable of reducing the ascorbic acid content of vegetables by as much as 36 per cent and the crude protein content of cassava by 40 per cent, which could result in a 24 per cent increase in the prevalence of childhood malnutrition.

Besides the contamination of rivers and farmlands, the communities' sources of drinking water, which are mainly underground water and streams, have also been contaminated with crude. Goi has a stream where the people collect water to drink. The stream which pathway is now bushy no longer receives visitors to fetch and drink from.

"If you fetch the water and pour on a glass cup, you will see crude oil inside. We are drinking poison here," lamented Dooh.

Before oil was discovered in Bodo community, Emma Pii, chairman, the council of village heads, said the people were living a peaceful life. The economy was buoyant, everybody enjoyed themselves and every family was happy. But with the discovery of oil, they started living in misery.

"Instead of oil to be a blessing, it has become a curse to us," said Pii. "What Shell has done is to take our oil and make money from it while the people who own the oil are suffering."

It's a terrible moment for the people of Ogoni who now live with the consequences of a mistake that was not their doing.

Eleven years after the major oil spill that ravaged the oil-producing communities, people's health is now failing. They complain of symptoms they do not know the underlying cause.

Oil spills release certain harmful chemicals such as benzene and toluene. Benzene is a known carcinogen while toluene can cause kidney and liver damage. Many spills also cause fires, which release toxic fumes that can cause respiratory problems.

Blood Tests

Each year, hundreds of post-impact assessment studies are conducted to assess the impact of the hazards generated by the oil industry on the social environment and human health due to oil spills. The reporters decided to conduct blood test to determine how oil spills impact the health of the people of Ogoni.

The reporters contacted Dr. Olawale Shipeolu of the Sapphire Health Group in Port Harcourt. He recommended we carry out blood tests to check the kidney and liver functions of the people.

Chukwunonso Okoye, a clinical lab scientist with the Union Diagnostics and Clinical Services, traveled with the reporters to Ogoniland to take blood samples of 50 non-smoking and non-drinking volunteers from Bodo, Goi, K-Dere, and Mogho communities. The collected samples were then taken to the lab's headquarters in Lagos for analysis.

Full Blood Count (FBC), electrotype urea and creatinine (e/u/cr) and Liver Function Test (LFT) was conducted on 50 blood samples drawn from 26 males and 24 females, including youths and adults.

Based on the results generated by the Union diagnostics and clinical services, no electrolytes were deranged, indicating nothing was happening with the kidneys. However, the results showed some level of derangements of liver enzymes.

Out of 50, 38 people representing 76 per cent of the total number were found to have elevated Aspartate Aminotransferase (AST); 18 people representing 36 per cent of the population had elevated Alanine Transaminase (ALT); 22 people representing 44 per cent of the population had elevated direct bilirubin; 11 people representing 22 per cent of the population had elevated total bilirubin while none had an elevated Alkaline Phosphatase.

For instance, Stephen Kpea had an elevated AST of 253 U/L and ALT of 107 U/L while Clement Glogo had an elevated AST level of 164 U/L.

Young people within the age of 18 – 25 also had elevated liver enzymes. 19-year-old Gbogbara Barriduula had an elevated AST of 60 U/L while 20-year-old Happiness Sunday had an elevated AST of 62 U/L and ALT of 79 U/L.

The United States Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2008 put the reference range for Alanine Aminotransferase (ALT), an enzyme found primarily in the liver and kidney at 11-47 U/L for males over 20 years and 7-30 U/L for females of the same age.

CDC in 2012 also put the reference range of Aspartate Aminotransferase (AST) at 13-38 U/L for 10 to 20 years of age and 13-33 U/L for 20 years and above for both genders. Based on the results, more than half of the tested volunteers had their unit levels higher than the CDC reference range.

On the other hand, total bilirubin normal levels fall between 0.3 and 1.2 milligrams per deciliter (mg/dL). Anything above 1.2 mg/dL is usually considered high while direct bilirubin level is less than 0.4 mg/dl, according to Union Diagnostics.

For example, Lucky Yira's total bilirubin and direct bilirubin were 8.0 mg/dl and 3.9 mg/dl respectively.

"Such elevated liver enzymes may indicate damage to the liver cells and such patients might be prone to liver disease," said Dr. Festus Davies of the Sapphire Health Group.

A study published in the Journal of Hepatology by Dr. Kezhong Zhang of the Wayne State University School of Medicine's Center for Molecular Medicine and Genetics and his team discovered that exposure to airborne particulate matter in fine ranges (PM 2.5) has a direct adverse health effect on the liver and causes hepatic fibrosis, an illness associated with metabolic disease and liver cancer.

Also, research by Kesava Reddy and Mark D'Andrea of the University Cancer and Diagnostic Centers, Houston, Texas, linked elevated AST and ALT to exposure to toxic substances due to oil spills.

"That is the effect of the polluted environment," said Dooh, when he learnt he had an elevated AST. "The environment should be taken care of and there should be medical outreach to treat the people so that they can recover."

Exposure to Toxic Substances

Petroleum hydrocarbons can enter the body through the air, food, and water or when one accidentally eats or touches soil or sediment that is contaminated with oil. Crude oil contains a significant amount of aromatic compounds including Benzene, Ethylbenzene, Toluene, and Xylenes (BTEX), which are the most dangerous gaseous elements of crude oil and poses the risk of acute or chronic toxicity in humans during its production, distribution, and use.

In 2011, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) published a study

on the impact of the oil spill on the communities in Ogoniland after the federal government hired its services to assess the extent of the oil spill.

The report revealed an appalling level of pollution, including the contamination of agricultural land and fisheries, drinking water, and the exposure of hundreds of thousands of people to serious health risks.

The report revealed that water from wells in communities in Ogoniland is contaminated with benzene, a known carcinogen at levels over 900 times above the World Health Organization (WHO) guideline.

At 60, Dooh still remembers how his parents suffered and died due to diseases caused by the oil spill. Dooh's anger was felt through his voice as he spoke.

"Any young man who wants to [continue to] stay here will definitely not see tomorrow," Dooh said angrily as his voice intensified. We are inhaling poisonous air."

Migration Looms

Houses in Goi have been deserted as residents run for survival. While some migrated to Port Harcourt, others migrated to neighbouring communities.

Dooh now lives with his family in a small bungalow house his father built in Bodo since UNEP advised them to leave to protect themselves. He has been living there ever since but still visits Goi occasionally.

"We are migrating," said Pii. "We are refugees because when the means of livelihood of the people have been destroyed and you do not have what to sustain you, you have to migrate to where you can do something to survive."

89-year-old Tudor Tomii is from Goi community but now lives in Bodo due to the oil spill that ravaged his community.

"Here I am living in diaspora because of oil pollution. We can't eat anything we plant there. We order anything we eat from Port Harcourt. We buy water from outside Ogoniland. Normally we drink from streams. Since the stream is polluted, we don't have anywhere to drink from," he lamented.

Compensation to the Communities

Of the communities affected, only Bodo has been compensated by Shell after its people filed a case in the United Kingdom, where Shell is incorporated. Shell accepted the responsibility for the oil spill in Bodo in 2008 and 2009. The parties settled in 2015 and US$83.4 million, 82 percent short of their original demand of US$454.9 million was paid to the people of Bodo.

Pii said every indigene of Bodo who was 18 years above received N600, 000 from the money. But they are still not satisfied because the oil spill is yet to be cleaned.

Goi, Mogho, and K-Dere are hoping to be compensated by Shell for destroying their livelihood. K-Dere had filed a case for compensation in a Federal High Court in Port Harcourt against Shell for the havoc caused on its land.

But Shell said it can only pay compensation to communities whose oil spills happened as a result of operational failure and not spills caused by sabotage and vandalism.

"The majority of the spill recorded in the Niger Delta, including in Ogoniland were as a result of sabotage and vandalism," said Shell's spokesperson Bamildele Odugbesan.

"We don't pay for sabotage spill. Every operational spill with impact is what we pay compensation for and if there is no impact, we don't pay. Our pipelines have continued to suffer third party interference."

Slow Cleanup Exercise

UNEP in 2011 said the environmental restoration of Ogoniland was possible but could take 25 to 30 years if a comprehensive clean up exercise could begin immediately. It recommended the creation of an Environmental Restoration Fund (ERF) for Ogoniland with a capital of USD 1 billion, to be co-funded by the federal government, Nigeria National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) and Shell for the remediation of polluted sites in Ogoniland and restoration of livelihoods of people in impacted communities.

A year later, the Nigerian government established the Hydrocarbon Pollution Restoration Project (HYPREP), an agency under the ministry of the environment with the mandate to implement the environmental clean-up programme in Ogoniland.

In 2016, the government then launched a USD 1 billion clean-up and restoration programme of the Ogoniland, with $200 million to be released every year. But the cleanup exercise did not kick off immediately.

UNEP said continued delay in the implementation of the recommendations will not only undermine the livelihoods of the Ogoni communities, but it will also cause the pollution footprint to expand, requiring a fresh investigation to rescope the place and determine the extent of the contamination. Ogoniland is a high rainfall area and the spill has been carried across farmlands and into creeks and the root zone to other areas.

The cleanup exercise later took off in 2019, eight years after UNEP's recommendation. So far, the sum of $360 million has been released to HYPREP out of which less than $30 million has been spent.

But the cleanup exercise has been slow.

"The cleanup will not be successful," said Kobah.

"The speed of the cleanup is so slow that the desired results will not be achieved. Since 2011, this place has remained contaminated. This is what the people have been living with all through their lives. This is suicide. The people have been crying and complaining."

HYPREP said it is only following due process to have a successful cleanup exercise. Being quick without observing the rules, according to HYPREP, will be the reverse side of the slowness and that will be counterproductive.

"The Ogoniland clean-up project is not slow, it is on course and going at a pace that standard remediation practice allows," said HYPREP's spokesperson Joseph Kpoobari Nafo.

Sam Kabari, an environmental expert and a lecturer at the Nigerian Maritime University, Delta State disagrees. He sees the drag as a bureaucracy every government agency experiences in the procurement and civil service processes. He believes HYPREP will only achieve its mandate if it functions independently.

"We wanted an independent HYPREP that would own its processes and take critical decisions towards achieving its aims and mandates itself. HYPREP should be in charge of its funds, decisions and day-to-day running," he suggested.

Dooh accused HYPREP of only cleaning less impacted sites, leaving the highly impacted areas. But HYPREP said the highly impacted sites are not being cleaned yet because they are complex sites, which will be difficult to clean by any of the Nigerian contractors.

According to HYPREP Project Coordinator Marvin Deekil, "We are coming to the highly impacted areas. We need more detailed and extensive work in delivering those sites. That is why we had further strategic meetings in Geneva with UNEP so that we can come up with a better way of addressing those sites. We need international contractors."

Declare State of Emergency in Ogoniland

Ogoni people want the federal government to declare a state of emergency in the region to clean up the entire affected areas. Pii said the oil spill has affected the people socially, politically and culturally.

"With what we have seen here, what we have passed through, what has happened to our children, the elderly and pregnant women, we want the government to declare a state of emergency in Ogoniland," he said.

They said the emergency measures such as the construction of hospitals and providing alternative sources of water for the affected communities have not been done, putting the health of the people at risk.

Kabari, who is the head, environmental and conservation unit of CEHRD described UNEP's inability to implement the emergency measures as unacceptable. He said the emergency measures were supposed to have been implemented before the actual remediation activities began.

"Stakeholders are yet to see the provision of portable drinking water in communities where the groundwater was significantly impacted. Stakeholders are however doubtful of HYPREP's understanding of the UNEP report given the misplaced priority of sequence of the UNEP report implementation," he said.

"Water for Ogoni is almost there," said Deekil. "This year, we told you there would be water in the communities. That is the commitment the government is keeping and we are working very hard to ensure it happens. We are going to be seeing the [water] contractors in the communities very soon," he assured.

To avoid future oil spills, Shell said it has taken effective steps. For the last seven years, Odegbesan said, Shell has replaced 1,300 kilometers of its pipelines, including those in Ogoniland.

"We also monitor the pipelines to ensure nothing is happening to them. If something is happening to them, we can respond swiftly. We have helicopters with high definition aerial cameras hovering over our assets daily to capture the illegal activity on our pipeline. We have intensified our campaign among the local people not to go near oil facilities and engage the public on the danger of pipeline vandalism.

Dooh is sad the cleanup exercise has not been effective as expected. He said until the people are compensated and HYPREP follows UNEP recommendations as instructed, Ogoniland cannot be restored.

"If the cleanup becomes effective, people will go back to the communities and start living well. But if the cleanup is not successful, Ogoni people will continue to suffer," said Dooh.

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SHORTLISTED STORY

From Heatwaves to ‘Eco-apartheid’: Climate Change in Israel-Palestine

Matan Kaminer, Basma Fahoum, Edo Konrad (Israel)

Dr. Matan Kaminer is an anthropologist and a postdoctoral fellow at the Martin Buber Society, Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Through ethnographic work on migrant farmworkers from Thailand in Israel, Kaminer’s work focuses on the relationship between neoliberal capitalism, settler colonialism and political ecology in Israel/Palestine.

Basma Fahoum holds an MA in culture research from Tel Aviv University. She is currently writing a PhD dissertation on the history of tobacco cultivation in Palestine in the late Ottoman and British Mandatory periods, as well as in Israel.

Edo Konrad is the editor-in-chief of +972 Magazine. Based in Tel Aviv, he previously worked as an editor for Haaretz.

From Heatwaves to ‘Eco-apartheid’: Climate Change in Israel-Palestine

By Matan Kaminer, Basma Fahoum and Edo Konrad

+972 Magazine

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https://www.972mag.com/climate-change-israel-palestine/

While Israel’s nascent climate justice movement tries to get the public’s attention, Palestinians under occupation remain the most vulnerable to the dangerous effects of climate change.

July 2019 was, according to European climate researchers, the hottest month ever recorded. Coming just one year after the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its landmark report warning of an impending climate catastrophe, temperatures soared to unprecedented levels in places like Alaska and Sweden, forests incinerated in Siberia, glaciers melted in Greenland, and entire cities in India went without water.

Faced with rising temperatures, addressing climate breakdown and its effects on humanity has become a key issue for governments, politicians, and movements for social justice around the world. Israel-Palestine, located in one of the hottest regions of the globe, is expected to warm at an even faster pace.

Polling among Israelis shows a great deal of indifference to the coming crisis, which means the Israeli government is facing little popular pressure on the issue. No equivalent research has been done in the occupied Palestinian territories but the ongoing occupation of the West Bank and siege on Gaza at once compound the risk of climate catastrophe for Palestinians, and make it virtually impossible for their government to do anything about it.

Late last year, a group of Israeli researchers published the first detailed forecast of what climate change could mean for Israel-Palestine. The results were frightening: relative to the benchmark period of 1981–2010, the 30-year period beginning in 2041 is expected to see average temperatures rise up to 2.5 degrees Celsius, and a drop in precipitation of up to 40 percent in non-arid parts of the country.

According to one of the researchers, professor Hadas Saaroni of Tel Aviv University, the heat and humidity Israelis and Palestinians living along the coast experience

during the summer months will only grow more extreme. We already have almost 24 hours of heat stress in the summertime, she says, but it tends to lessen in the evening and nighttime hours. "That will get worse: the heat stress will be heavy in the daytime and won't let up at night." And like nearly everything related to climate change, the heat won't be equally distributed. Recent research by the Tel Aviv-Jaffa Municipality predicts that temperatures in the poorer south of the city will be up to seven degrees Celsius higher than in its affluent north.

While Saaroni is surprisingly sanguine about the effects of climate change on sea level rise ("the sea will rise by about one meter, but only by the end of the century. With technology we have time to adjust."), she and other Israeli climate scientists are increasingly worried about the creeping desertification of the country. Higher temperatures and less rainfall mean that the desert, which already covers most of the country, will creep steadily north, says ecologist professor Marcelo Sternberg, also of Tel Aviv University.

Yet without further research it is difficult to say just how far desertification will proceed. "Some research, including my own, shows that our territory is resilient to changes in rainfall within the natural range of variation," says Sternberg. "But climate change means temperatures outside that range — and we just don't know what that will mean." What seems certain is that wildfires, which have increasingly afflicted the country in recent years, will continue to ravage the country during the summers.

Struggling Against 'Climate Apartheid'

The State of Palestine is signed on to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. But due to Israel's military rule over the West Bank and its blockade of the Gaza Strip, Palestinians have almost no control over their own natural resources, are unable to fully implement treaties or take on national projects, and cannot make concrete plans to adapt to climate breakdown.

In the West Bank, the water supply is most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. According to a 2013 report by Palestinian human rights group Al-Haq, Israeli per capita consumption of water for domestic use is four to five times higher than that of the Palestinian population of the occupied territories. Israeli settlers in the West Bank consume approximately six times the amount of water used by the Palestinian population living in the same territory.

Some Palestinian communities, particularly those living in areas of the West Bank under full Israeli military control, are not connected to any water infrastructure and must travel for miles to purchase water, which is often expensive and of dubious quality. Meanwhile, the Israeli army makes it nearly impossible to approve new water cisterns, and those built without permits are routinely destroyed by the authorities.

According to Al-Haq, the water sector in the occupied territories and Israel is characterized by highly asymmetrical overexploitation of shared water resources, exhaustion of long-term storage, deterioration of water quality, and increasing levels of demand driven by high population growth. Meanwhile, the area is seeing a per capita decrease in water supply — a burden that is disproportionately borne by the Palestinian population.

Dr. Abdulrahman Tamimi, the general director of Palestinian Hydrology Group, says that while Israel has the technological ability to adapt its agricultural sector to the changes in climate, agriculture will become impracticable in the West Bank within a decade. The situation in Gaza is compounded by Israel's siege, which among other things has led to overexploitation of groundwater resources increasingly depleting the Coastal Aquifer, all of which has rendered 90 percent of the water supply unfit for human consumption.

"There is no hope for Gaza in any aspect as long as the political situation there remains unresolved," Tamimi argues. He says he believes that within the next five or six years Gaza's agriculture, water infrastructure, and economy will be dysfunctional. Solutions such as desalination, which would allow for both healthy drinking water and regular irrigation, are luxuries people in Gaza simply cannot afford, Tamimi explains: "Who would pay $1.5 per cubic meter?"

"Water is already such a scarce resource in the region," says Zena Agha, the U.S. Policy Fellow with Palestinian think tank Al-Shabaka, who focuses on the intersection of climate and Israeli occupation, "climate change simply acts as a threat multiplier."

Agha says that on paper, an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal should have been able to solve the water crisis in the West Bank. Instead, the Oslo Accords, a set of interim agreements that were supposed to have led to a final status agreement over two decades ago, have only exacerbated it. As a result, 80 percent of the water sources in the occupied territories are under Israeli control. Meanwhile, Israeli soldiers regularly destroy small-scale, traditional water collection systems used by Palestinians in areas of the West Bank left under full Israeli military control by Oslo.

"You start to see a formal policy of water and resource theft, buttressed and scaffolded by a swath of laws and policies and licenses and permits and court hearings that are used to steal Palestinian water," Agha says. "On the other hand, there's also this sort of realist approach, which involves the IDF turning up, declaring a closed military zone and directly stealing the resources. This is the active policy by the Israeli state."

Agha says that Israel's policies in the West Bank amount to "climate apartheid."

"What's happening in Palestine is a clear example of one ethno-religious group getting better and preferential resources than another group, purely on the basis of religion and citizenship. The occupation creates a situation in which it is impossible for Palestinians to actually develop these adaptive capabilities to

withstand the very imminent threat of climate change," Agha says.

While the Palestinian Authority's Environment Quality Authority has put out an adaptation plan supported by the United Nations Development Program, Agha argues that such plans are "almost farcical."

"Let's assume the PA has the capacity to plan 40 years in advance, it still doesn't have the ability to predict what will happen tomorrow. The PA is in a paradox: planning for a future over a land it has no control over. Any way you look at it, it is powerless."

And yet, Agha believes the PA has a role to play by implementing long-term strategies to try and adapt to the current reality, including directly confronting Israel about its water policies, promoting sustainable agriculture and agro-ecology, and re-establishing the agricultural cooperatives, which represented farmers' interests and concerns and were popular across the occupied territories in the 1980s.

Some Palestinian NGOs and activists are trying to step into that vacuum. The Nature Palestine Society, for instance, is trying to conduct the first comprehensive survey of Palestine's flora and birds, to better understand the changes in biodiversity as a result of climate change. The Palestine Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability and the Palestine Museum of Natural History at Bethlehem University are leading a program to conserve the country's unique biodiversity, and to research complex questions on habitat destruction and environmental decline caused both by climate change and the politics of conflict.

Palestinian activists in the West Bank have established environmental initiatives such as heirloom seed libraries that preserve Palestinian agricultural heritage and biodiversity, and agroecology and community-supported agriculture, in order to promote food sovereignty while minimizing the environmental effects of farming.

A Political Non-Starter

In July 2018, the Israeli government adopted "The National Program for Adaptation to Climate Change," which includes 30 action items dealing with various aspects of climate change, such as water, energy, and public health. The plan also addresses issues particular to Israel's political and economic concerns, including adjustments to the climate industry, the possibility of using nuclear energy, and how climate change affects the broader Middle East, including refugees, new trade routes, and food and water scarcity.

Great attention is given to issues of military preparedness. The plan includes recommendations addressing the IDF's material and strategic needs, which extends from soldiers' uniforms and the locations of bases, to studying the "effect of climate change on Muslim countries," and forging mutual aid agreements. The plan, however, does not specify the source of funding for each item, and does not provide the overall projected cost.

Israel's energy production remains almost entirely based on fossil fuels. In many countries across the world the climate conversation has focused on breaking free of fossil fuel-based energy production — under heavy public pressure, governments such as those of Germany and California have announced a planned shift to 100 percent renewable energy by 2050 — but in Israel the issue remains a political non-starter. In early 2018, the Israeli Ministry of Energy proposed a plan to shift from "polluting fuels" like coal and oil to natural gas. The plan aims to achieve a target of as little as 17 percent of production from renewable energy by 2030, with an interim target of 10 percent by the year 2020.

The demand for domestically producing 100 percent renewable energy, however, has opponents even within the Israeli environmental movement. While Green Course, a grassroots environmental group, has taken up the call, the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel, Israel's most established environmental organization, takes the position that solar and wind farms pose a threat to the country's rare and valuable biodiversity — the former destroying the habitats of land animals and the latter killing birds.

"We estimate that solar panels on rooftops and other disturbed or degraded surfaces can supply at least one third of Israel's energy needs," says Dror Boymel, head of the planning department at SPNI. "The rest will have to come from elsewhere — either from natural gas, or from other countries in the region with no shortage of space and less vulnerable wildlife."

'It's Hard to Talk About Making This a Better Place'

A study published by Pew Research Center ahead of Earth Day this year found that only 38 percent of Israelis consider climate change a major threat. Out of the 26 countries surveyed, Israel came in last. The study did not include Palestinians in the occupied territories.

The Israeli environmental movement is shifting gears in accordance. While in the past, environmental groups tended to focus on "light" issues such as recycling, today climate breakdown is at the top of their agenda, with many convinced that only radical action will be able to stop the catastrophe.

"Climate activists are no longer considered 'cute,' like they used to be," says Ya'ara Peretz, head of policy for Green Course. Peretz was one of the central organizers of this year's Climate March, the largest ever in Israel, which saw several thousands protesting in central Tel Aviv, demanding the Israeli government take immediate action.

"The IPCC report changed everything and pushed people out of their comfort zone," she says. "We are waking up to the fact that this is serious, and what we're seeing happen around the world is helping. People want to get involved — now is the time to get creative."

One of the biggest shifts, says Peretz, is the engagement of young citizens of Israel — both Jewish and Palestinian — who are now leading the movement with the help of activists from Green Course. Taking their cue from Greta Thunberg, the Swedish teenage activist who has become an icon of the fight against climate change, high school students have held several walk-outs and marched to the Knesset, calling on legislators to start taking the issue seriously. "These kids are much smarter than us," Peretz says.

"I always thought the problems were happening because someone else was making the decisions," said Lama Ghanayim at an event in Tel Aviv's Left Bank Club in mid-July. Ghanayim, from the Arab city of Sakhnin in northern Israel, is one of the leaders of the student strikes. "Organizing these strikes was an opportunity to finally lead something. I won't stand aside and let someone else take the wheel when it comes to such a critical issue," Ghanayim said.

Veteran environmental groups such as Green Course and SPNI are no longer the only voices addressing climate in Israel. The direct-action movement Extinction Rebellion recently started a branch in Israel. The Israeli left-wing movement Standing Together, which until now focused primarily on fighting racism, the occupation, and supporting workers rights, recently adopted climate change as a central issue in its platform.

"There was a sense among activists that when they go from climate protests to peace protests, they see totally different faces," says Ilay Abramovitch, an activist in Standing Together. "They simply aren't the same people. But if you look around the world, you'll see that most left-wing parties do have climate at the top of their agenda."

Abramovitch says his organization's vision is based on the idea that any struggle against climate change must be undertaken in conjunction with labor unions and Palestinian groups. "We believe that when the environment is harmed, people are harmed, and those who are most at risk are the poorest segments of society and the poorest countries. Our struggle must be regional, and of course it must be a Jewish-Arab struggle."

But whereas joint Arab-Jewish work on climate issues comes naturally to activists like Ghanayem and Abramovich, who are citizens of Israel, Palestinian activists and academics in the West Bank face a much more complicated decision. While they realize that regional planning is unavoidable, they are concerned that any discussion of partnering with Israelis on climate issues that does not address the occupation will serve to normalize a political situation in which Palestinian communities are most vulnerable to climate change.

But even on the Israeli left, joining forces with the environmental movement doesn't always seem like a natural fit. "Some people ask, 'What does the left have to do with the environmental movement? Why won't you let us continue fighting the occupation?" Abramovitch says. "People don't entirely understand the opportunity that we have for creating a larger struggle as we grapple with climate breakdown."

Peretz says that despite her optimism, it is still difficult to get Israelis, even those involved in other social justice struggles, to view climate change as an immediate threat. "The environmental struggle is seen as a struggle of the privileged, especially when so many believe that nothing is more important than our national security," she says. "It's hard to talk to people about making this a better place. The mentality is that we should just be grateful we have a state of our own — whether or not it's a good or just state is secondary."

SHORTLISTED STORY

Brazil's Indigenous Communities Resist Bolsonaro

Raphael Tsavkko Garcia (Brazil/ Belgium)

Raphael Tsavkko Garcia is a Brazilian journalist based in Belgium. His work has been published at DW, Al Jazeera, Wired, MIT Tech Review, BBC, among other news outlets. He also holds a PhD in Human Rights from the University of Deusto.

Brazil's Indigenous Communities Resist Bolsonaro

By Raphael Tsavkko Garcia
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The Amazon rainforest is under threat, and so are the indigenous tribes that call it home. As violence escalates in Brazil, activists have vowed to protect their land and way of life.

Rarely has something so precious fallen into such unsafe hands. Since Jair Bolsonaro took the Brazilian presidency in 2019, the Amazon, which makes up 10% of our planet's biodiversity and absorbs an estimated 5% of global carbon emissions, has been hit with a record number of fires and unprecedented deforestation.

At the same time, those who have proved the most responsible guardians of the forest, are under increasing pressure and threatened by escalating violence. Since Bolsonaro came to power, there has been an increase in invasions of indigenous lands by loggers and miners, and seven indigenous leaders have been killed in land disputes.

In November, a group of Brazilian lawyers and human rights groups asked the International Criminal Court to indict Bolsonaro for inciting genocide against Brazil's indigenous people.

They argue that these communities are at increased risk of violence because "the means of existence of the indigenous peoples are grounded on their relationships to the land, the forest, wildlife and water," and that threats to the forest put them "at risk of falling victim to crimes against humanity."

'Bolsonaro Is Taking Away Our Future'

Bolsonaro, who has compared indigenous people to zoo animals and accused indigenous leaders of working to promote foreign interests in the Amazon, has repeatedly threatened to end the policy of land demarcation, whereby indigenous

communities are granted the right to clearly defined territories.

He has also attacked the National Indigenous Foundation (FUNAI) — the governmental agency for indigenous interests — cutting its funding and powers and forbidding its employees from speaking to the press.

At the same time, the right-wing president has scrapped environmental regulations and is set to legalize 300,000 illegally occupied rural properties — 86% of them in the Amazon territory and many of them commercial farming or logging operations.

“Bolsonaro is taking away our future,” indigenous conservationist Olinda Muniz told DW. “A president who encourages genocide and does nothing to curb environmental disasters is a person who should never represent this country.”

Indigenous Lifestyles vs. Economic Development

A recent study comparing Brazil, Australia and Canada pointed to greater biodiversity in areas administered by indigenous peoples and is just the latest research to suggest these communities are exceptionally good at preserving the land they live from.

Yet in Brazil, as elsewhere, their way of life has been under threat since colonialists first arrived from Europe and began exploiting the land’s natural resources and imposing foreign ways of life on its people.

Now, the lawyers argue in their action against Bolsonaro that indigenous lifestyles are being portrayed as a problem in themselves, “hampering the national development plans,” and “infrastructure projects, mining enterprises, logging activities and agribusiness ventures in forested regions.”

Muniz and her husband Samuel Wanderley, both of the Pataxó Hã-Hã-Hãe ethnic group, founded the Kaapora project in the Caramuru Paraguaçu indigenous territory in the Brazlian state of Bahia. They are restoring grazing land back to forest, protecting remaining trees and growing new ones, so the land can once more be a refuge for wildlife.

Now she fears that efforts like hers are under threat. “We have no guarantee of compliance with our constitutional rights,” Muniz said. “Social movements are being attacked head-on, indigenous, black, environmentalists, landless workers, fishermen, etc.”

The Kaapora project is one of many in Brazil through which indigenous communities, independently or in partnership with NGOs, are helping revive the forest and maintain traditional ways of life in the midst of modernity — combining traditional knowledge with new technologies and increasing independence from markets and governments that have rarely worked in their interests.

The Ashaninka in Acre state, for example, have established cooperatives to grow food and provide for their community. They, and groups like the Pataxó in Minas Gerais state, are also teaching non-indigenous communities about sustainable agriculture. By creating a space for dialogue with the external community, and young people in particular, they hope to pass on their respect for nature.

Staking Out Their Own Land

Meanwhile, in southern Brazil, the Kaingang are working to reforest their land with araucaria, an indigenous tree which produces a fruit they can eat and sell, and that supports indigenous wildlife. For Marcio Kokoj of the Kaingang Guarani Indigenous Environmental Association, the Bolsonaro government feels like a throwback to Brazil’s military dictatorship that murdered thousands of indigenous people, drove thousands more from their lands, and tortured many and enslaved others between 1964 and 1985.

“The greatest concern today is with the attacks on the demarcations of our lands, we therefore need to make self-demarcation,” Kokoj said. “If it depends on Bolsonaro, he will open up areas for large-scale agricultural production, multinationals, mining. That worries us a lot.”

Self-demarcation is when indigenous communities draw the boundaries of their own territory, often expelling illegal occupants, such as loggers.

Last July, the indigenous Munduruku from the Tapajós region in the Amazon state of Pará, kicked out illegal loggers who had invaded their territory which they began to self-define in 2014.

The Munduruku were armed with arrows, songs, war paint and “the wisdom of our ancestors,” they said in a note to the Indigenous Missionary Council that made clear their intention to continue defending their own land if governmental institutions fail to do so.

Calling on the International Community

Kokoj too says the Bolsonaro government should not expect the forest’s guardians to step aside without a fight. “We indigenous peoples, over the years and the governments, have created resistance that is still effective today,” he said.

In defense of their land and culture, Brazil’s indigenous communities have long allied with broader social movements, called out violations of their rights to international bodies, and above all, insisted on remaining in their territories despite threats and violence. Since Bolsonaro came to power, indigenous activists have taken the streets to assert their land rights and protest their treatment by the right-wing government.

But Kokoj stresses that support from the wider population of Brazil and the international community is vital.

The group of Brazilian lawyers lobbying the International Criminal Court says the prosecutor at the international tribunal in the Hague is expected to investigate their complaint. It remains to be seen if this will lead to an indictment of Jair Bolsonaro — and amount to the kind of international pressure Brazil's indigenous communities hope for.

The Amazon Burns, Bolsonaro Feels the Heat

Brazil's burning

Four times the number of forest fires have burned so far this year in the Amazon compared to the whole of 2018, Brazil's National Institute for Space Research says. Ranchers and loggers are responsible for setting most of them as part of efforts to clear land for cattle. Environmental groups say land deforestation has increased dramatically since President Jair Bolsonaro took office in January.

Stark satellite view

Satellite images show the true scale of the deforestation over large swathes of difficult-to-reach tropical rainforest. Bolsonaro is facing intense international pressure to tackle the fires. The Brazilian president has blamed indigenous tribes, small-scale farmers and even global NGOs — without evidence. On Friday, he said he was considering deploying the army to help put out the fires.

Dry season fans flames

Brazil's dry season is helping the blazes spread more quickly. In the country's Amazonas state, heat from forest fires has been above average every day throughout August. To step up the pressure on Brazil, Norway and Germany have halted donations to Brazil's Amazon support fund. France has even mooted the idea of blocking an EU trade deal with South American nations.

Chemical deforestation

Brazil isn't the only country involved in deforestation. Peru, with the second-largest expanse of Amazonian forest, is also seeing a growing problem. Illegal gold miners have been accused of causing irreversible environmental damage to more than 110 square kilometers (42 square miles) of forest and river basins through the liberal use of fertilizers.

Other neighbors affected

Brazil's other neighbors Bolivia and Paraguay have also struggled to contain forest fires. About 7,500 square kilometers (2,900 square miles) of land has been affected in Bolivia. The country has even deployed a Boeing 747-400 SuperTanker carrying 76,000 liters (20,000 gallons) of retardant, a substance used to stop fires.

Lungs are burning

As well as political pressure, the sheer scale of the wildfires has sparked public protests against Brazilian interests around the world, including the country's embassy in Nicosia, Cyprus. The Amazon is billed as the "the lungs of the planet," as the rainforest produces about a fifth of the total oxgyen needed for life on earth.

SHORTLISTED STORY

Big City, Small Farmers, and a Dying River; When Yamuna's 'Dead Fish Will Be Fresher';

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 latest, 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 also 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'.

Big City, Small Farmers, and a Dying River

By Shalini Singh
People's Archive of Rural India
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The original publication is available via the following link:
https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/big-city-small-farmers-and-a-dying-river/

City farmers? Yes, sort of – in the national capital, struggling as a choked Yamuna river and the destruction of its floodplains spur the region's climate crisis and devastates their livelihoods.

Insaan ab na jhagde se marega na ragade se
marega tho bhook aur pyas se."
"Humankind will now die not of conflict or stress
But of hunger and thirst."

So, it's not just science ringing alarm bells about climate change then. India's literary epics had it nailed down ages ago, asserts 75-year-old Delhi farmer Shiv Shankar. He believes he is paraphrasing lines from the 16th century classic Ramcharitamanas (see video). Shankar may be a bit rusty in his reading of the classics, and you might find it difficult to locate those lines in the original Tulsidas poem. But the words of this farmer in the floodplains of the Yamuna river seem well suited to our own era.

Shankar, his family and many other cultivators describe, in painstaking detail, the many changes in temperature, weather and climate affecting what is one of the largest floodplains in an urban area anywhere. Just 22 of the 1,376 kilometres of the Yamuna flow through the National Capital Territory, and its 97 square kilometre floodplains account for barely 6.5 per cent of Delhi's area. But that seemingly small presence has a big impact in balancing the climate, also functioning like nature's thermostat for the capital.

Farmers here note the changes now underway in their own idiom. Till 25 years ago, says Shiv Shankar's son Vijender Singh, people here started using light blankets by September. "Now," says the 35-year-old, "winter doesn't start till December. Earlier Holi in March was marked by a very hot day. Now it's like celebrating the festival in winter."

The lived experiences of Shankar's family reflect those of other farmers here. Varying estimates say between 5,000 and 7,000 farmers reside along the Delhi shores of the Yamuna – the longest tributary of the Ganga and second greatest (after the Ghaghara) in terms of volume. The agriculturists here cultivate some 24,000 acres, much reduced from a few decades ago, they say. These are farmers in a big city, not of some remote rural region. They live precariously, with 'development' all the time undermining their existence. The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has been inundated with petitions protesting rampant illegal construction on the floodplains. And it isn't just the cultivators who are worried.

"If the floodplains are concretised as has been happening," says retired Indian Forest Service officer Manoj Misra, "Delhiwallas will be forced to leave the city because temperatures in both summer and winter will become extreme and unbearable." Misra heads the Yamuna Jiye Abhiyan (Long Live Yamuna) movement founded in 2007. The YJA brought together seven of Delhi's leading environmental organisations and concerned citizens, and works on saving the river and its ecosystem. "The city is becoming unliveable and will witness drastic migration. If it doesn't fix its air quality, (even) the embassies will move out."

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Back in the floodplains, the erratic rains in the past few decades torment farmers and fishermen alike.

The communities dependent on the Yamuna river do still welcome the rains each year. Fishermen, because the excess water cleans out the river and allows fish to multiply, and farmers for whom it brings a layer of fresh fertile soil. " Zameen nayi bann jati hai, zameen palat jati hai [the land is rejuvenated and transformed by the monsoon rains]," Shankar explains. "This happened almost every year till 2000. It rains less now. Earlier monsoon would start in June. This time June and July were dry. Rains were late, affecting our crops."

"The namak [alkaline content, not salt] rises in the soil when rain is less," Shankar had told us when showing us around his fields. Delhi's alluvial soil is a result of the deposits left by the river over its floodplains. That soil had long supported growing sugarcane, rice, wheat, several other crops and vegetables. Three varieties of sugarcane – lalri , mirati , soratha – were a pride of the city till the late 19th century, says the Delhi Gazetteer .

The cane was used for making gur (jaggery) in kolhus (crushers). Till a decade ago, tiny makeshift shops and carts selling fresh sugarcane juice dotted Delhi's street corners. "Then governments stopped allowing us to sell sugarcane juice, so cultivation stopped," says Shankar. There have been official bans on the cane juice sellers – and court cases challenging them – since the 1990s. "Everyone knows sugarcane juice fights illness, beats the heat by cooling our system," he asserts. "The soft drink companies got us banned. Their people lobbied with ministers and we were thrown out of business."

And sometimes, weather extremes combine with political-administrative decisions to wreak havoc. The flooding of the Yamuna this year – when Haryana released water from the Hathni Kund barrage in August, it coincided with the rains in Delhi – destroyed several crops. Vijender shows us the shrunken chillies, shrivelled brinjals, and puny radish plants that will not bloom this season in their five bigha (one acre) plot here in Bela Estate (located just behind the national memorials of Rajghat and Shantivan).

This capital city has for long had a semi-arid climate. It was a south-east division of the agricultural state of Punjab before it became the British capital in 1911, and is surrounded by the Rajasthan desert to the west, Himalayan mountains towards the north and Indo-Gangetic plains to the east. (All regions also grappling with climate change today). This meant cold winters and scorching summers, with the monsoon providing a 3 to 4 month reprieve.

Now it's more erratic. Delhi recorded a rainfall deficit of 38 per cent in the June-August season this year according to the India Meteorological Department. It received 404.1 mm rain against a normal of 648.9 mm. Simply put, Delhi saw its poorest monsoon in five years.

Monsoon patterns are changing and the rainfall is patchy, notes Himanshu Thakkar, coordinator, South Asia Network of Dams Rivers and People. "The number of rainy days has been depleting, though the quantum of rain may not go down. There is high intensity on the days it rains. Delhi has been changing and that will impact the Yamuna and its floodplains. Migrations, the number of vehicles on the road and air pollution – all have gone up, which has also sparked changes in surrounding areas of UP and Punjab. The micro climates [of a small area] impact the local climate."

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'Jamna paar ke mattar le lo' ('Buy these peas from across the Yamuna') – the proud cry of vegetable sellers that once rang through the streets of Delhi fell silent somewhere in the 1980s. In the book Narratives of the Environment of Delhi (published by the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage), old timers recall that the melons available in the city were like the ' Lukhnavi kharbuza ' (Lucknow's watermelons). The juiciness of the fruit, grown on the sandy soils of the river, also depended on the prevailing air. The earlier melons were plain green and heavier (implying greater sweetness) and appeared once a season. Changes in cultivation practices have brought newer kinds of seeds. The melons are now smaller and striped – the new seeds give greater yields but smaller sizes.

The fresh mounds of water-chestnut – singhara – that vendors carted house to house two decades ago have all but vanished. They were grown around the Najafgarh jheel

(lake). Today the Najafgarh Drain and the Delhi Gate Drain account for 63 per cent of the Yamuna's pollution, says the website of the National Green Tribunal (NGT). " Singhara is grown in small water bodies," says Baljeet Singh, 80, general secretary of the Delhi Peasants Cooperative Multipurpose Society. "People stopped cultivating it in Delhi because it needs the right amount of water – and plenty of patience." The capital city today is rapidly running short on both – water and patience.

Farmers too want quicker yields from their lands, says Baljeet Singh. So they go for crops that take 2-3 months and can be grown 3-4 times a year like bhindi, beans, brinjal, radish, cauliflower. "New varieties of mooli (radish) seeds were developed two decades ago," Vijender says. "Science has helped increase yields," says Shankar. "We got some 45-50 quintals of mooli earlier [per acre]; now we can get four times as much. And we can grow it thrice a year."

Meanwhile, development of the concrete kind moves ahead rapidly in Delhi, not least in the floodplains. According to the Economic Survey of Delhi 2018-19, cropped area declined by almost 2 per cent each year between 2000 and 2018. Presently, 2.5 per cent of the city's population and nearly 25 per cent of its area (down from over 50 per cent in 1991) is rural. In the Master Plan 2021 for the capital, the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) plugs for complete urbanisation.

It's pace of urbanisation – mainly, rapid construction activity, legal and illegal – means Delhi could be the most populous city in the world by 2030, according to UN estimates. The capital, with 20 million people presently, will have overtaken Tokyo (now 37 million) by then. It will also be one of 21 Indian cities to run out of groundwater by next year, says the Niti Aayog.

"Concretisation of the city," says Manoj Misra, "means more land gets paved, less water percolation, less greenery… paved spaces absorb and release heat."

In 1960 – when Shankar was 16 – Delhi saw an average of 178 days when the temperature reached at least 32 Celsius, according to an interactive tool on climate and global warming of the New York Times. In 2019, that's 205 hotter days. By the end of this century, India's capital city could go from experiencing less than six months of 32 C heat to over eight months of it each year. Human activity has much to do with that.

Misra points to a difference of almost 4 degrees Celsius now in temperatures between Palam in south-west Delhi and the floodplains to its east. "If it's 45 Celsius in Palam, it can be around 40-41 C in the floodplain." Within a megapolis, he says, "these floodplains are a gift."

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Since nearly 80 per cent of Yamuna's pollution comes from the capital, as the NGT acknowledges, what would happen if it 'left' Delhi – a logical step for the aggrieved party in a toxic relationship. "Delhi exists because of the Yamuna, not the other way around," says Misra. "Over 60 per cent of the drinking water for Delhi comes from the upstream diversion of the river into a parallel canal. The monsoon rescues the river. In the first wave or first flood pulse, the pollution is taken away from the river, in the second and third flood pulse, it recharges the groundwater of the city. The 5-10 yearly basis recharge is done by the river, no other agency can do that job. When we had flood-like situations in 2008, 2010 and 2013, the water was recharged for the next five years. Most Delhiwallas don't appreciate this."

Healthy floodplains are key – they give water the space to spread out and slow down. They store excess water during floods, releasing it slowly into groundwater aquifers. This eventually helps recharge the river. Delhi was ravaged by its last devastating flood in 1978 when the Yamuna rose six feet above its official safety level, scores of people died, lakhs were affected, quite a few rendered homeless – not to forget the damage done to crops and other water bodies. It last breached this danger mark in 2013. According to the 'Yamuna River Project: New Delhi Urban Ecology' (led by the University of Virginia), steady encroachment of the floodplain has severe consequences. "The embankments will fall during a 100-year flood event, wiping out structures built in low lying areas of the floodplain and inundating east Delhi with water."

Farmers caution against further construction in the floodplains. "It will impact the water level tremendously," says Shiv Shankar. "For every building, they will make basements for parking. They will plant fancy trees to get wood. If they put fruit trees – mango, guava, pomegranate, papaya – that will at least help people to eat and earn. And birds and animals get to eat too."

Official figures show that since 1993, over Rs, 3,100 crores have been spent on cleaning the Yamuna. Why then, scoffs Baljeet Singh, "isn't the Yamuna clean today?"

It's all coming together in Delhi – in the wrong way: unrelenting concretisation of every available inch in the city; uncontrolled construction on, and misuse of, the Yamuna floodplains; the choking of a great river with toxic pollutants; the massive changes in land use and new seeds, practices and technologies bringing an impact their users may not see; the destruction of nature's thermostat; erratic monsoons, extraordinary levels of air pollution. It's a deadly brew.

Shankar and his fellow farmers recognise some of its ingredients. "How many roads will you build?" he asks. "The more you concretise, the more heat the ground absorbs. Nature's mountains – even they allow earth to get recharged during the rains. The mountains humans have built in concrete do not allow the earth to breathe or recharge or retain and use the rains. How will you grow food if there is no water?"

PARI's nationwide reporting project on climate change is part of a UNDP-supported initiative to capture that phenomenon through the voices and lived experience of ordinary people.

When Yamuna's 'Dead Fish Will Be Fresher'

By Shalini Singh
People's Archive of Rural India
January 22, 2020

The original publication is available via the following link:
https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/when-yamunas-dead-fish-will-be-fresher/

Effluents and apathy have reduced Delhi's lifeline to a sewer. Thousands of fish die annually while the Yamuna's original custodians have nowhere to go. It all feeds into and spurs a climate crisis.

"The water was as clear as glass – when the drains were cleaner – till 20 years ago. A coin fallen in [to the bottom of the river] could be seen from above. We could drink directly from the Yamuna," says fisherman Raman Haldar, scooping a cupped palm into the muddy waters, bringing it near his mouth to emphasise the point. Seeing our mortified look, he lets it run down his fingers with a wistful laugh.

In today's Yamuna, plastics, foil wrappers, muck, newspapers, dead flora, concrete debris, cloth scraps, slush, rotting food, wandering coconuts, chemical foam and water hyacinth offer up a dark reflection of the capital city's material and mythical consumption.

Just 22 kilometres (or barely 1.6 per cent) of the Yamuna flows through the National Capital Territory. But the wastes and poisons emptied into that little stretch account for close to 80 per cent of all pollution in the 1,376 kilometre river. Acknowledging that, the monitoring committee report of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) in 2018 pronounced the river in Delhi a 'sewer line'. The resulting severe depletion of oxygen levels in the water causes large-scale deaths of fish.

Last year, thousands of fish were found dead at the Kalindi Kunj Ghat on the southern stretch of the river in Delhi, and other aquatic life have become a near-annual occurrence in the Delhi stretch of the river.

"For a river ecosystem to survive, it needs a dissolved oxygen (amount of oxygen in water) level of 6 and above. Fish require a DO level of at least 4-5. In the Delhi part of Yamuna, the DO is between 0 to 0.4," says Priyank Hirani, director of the Water-to-Cloud project of the Tata Centre for Development at the University of Chicago. The project maps real-time pollution in rivers.

Sitting next to their fishing nets on a grassy patch at the Ram Ghat bank, along Delhi's north-east stretch, 52-year-old Haldar and his two friends are enjoying a quiet smoke. "I moved here from Kalindi Kunj Ghat three years ago. There's no fish there, earlier there was plenty. Only some catfish remain now. Quite a few of these are dirty and cause allergy, rash, fever and diarrhoea," he says, untangling a handmade net that resembles a puffy white cloud from afar.

Unlike other species that live deeper in the water, the catfish is able to float to the surface and breathe – and so survives better than the others. Predators in this ecosystem, explains Delhi-based marine conservationist Divya Karnad, concentrate toxins in their body because of eating fish lower down in the food chain exposed to those poisons. "So it makes sense that people eating catfish – a scavenger-carnivore – suffer reactions."

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Nearly 87 per cent of India's fish catch potential is available within waters of a 100 metres depth, says Occupation of the Coast: the Blue Economy in India, a publication of the Delhi-based Research Collective, a non-profit group active on these issues. Most of that is within reach of the country's fishing communities. It fosters not just food, but also daily lives and cultures.

"Now you're breaking the small-scale economy of the fishers," points out Pradip Chatterjee, head of the National Platform for Small Scale Fish Workers (Inland) (NPSSFWI). "They supply local fish to local markets, and if you don't get it, then you will bring fish from faraway places, again using transport which aggravates the crisis." Shifting to groundwater means "using more energy, which will then interfere with the water cycle."

That, he points out, means "water bodies will get affected, and rivers won't get recharged. Still more energy, from conventional sources, will be needed to fix this and get clean, potable water from the river. Thus, we are breaking nature-based economies forcibly, and putting labour, food and production into a corporate cycle that is energy and capital intensive… meanwhile, rivers are still being used for dumping waste."

When industries release effluents into the river, fisherfolk are the first to know."We can tell from the stench, and when the fish start dying," remarks 45-year-old Mangal Sahni, who lives at Palla, on the Haryana-Delhi border, where the Yamuna enters the capital. Sahni is worried about sustaining his 15-member family back home in Bihar's Sheohar district. "People have been writing about us, but our lives haven't improved, only become worse," he says, and dismisses us.

There are some 4 million people from traditional marine fishing communities dotting India's coastline, from roughly 8.4 lakh families, according to the Central

Marine Fisheries Research Institute. But there are perhaps 7-8 times that number connected to or dependent on the fishing economy. And, says NPSSFWI's Chatterjee, 4 million of those could be inland fish-workers. There have been, over decades, millions dropping out of fishing as a full-time or organised activity. "Almost 60-70 per cent of marine fishers have turned to other things as the community gets decimated," says Chatterjee.

But perhaps because the very idea of fisherfolk in the capital is so unusual, there seem to be no records, no published data, of how many fishermen there were and are in the Delhi stretch of the Yamuna. Also, several are migrants like Sahni, making counts more difficult. What the surviving fishermen agree on is that their numbers have shrunk. Retired Forest Service Officer Manoj Mishra, who leads the Long Live Yamuna movement, feels that from thousands prior to Independence, there are now less than a hundred full-timers.

"The absence of fishers from Yamuna is an indication that the river is dead or dying. They are a marker of how things are," says Research Collective's Siddharth Chakravarty. And what's going on "adds to, and is spurred by, a climate crisis that is driven by human activity. It also means that the biodiversity that rejuvenates the environment doesn't take place," says Chakravarty. "That in turn affects the cycle of life, given that 40 per cent of the carbon emission is absorbed by oceans globally."

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With 40 per cent of Delhi having no sewer connection, countless tons of excrement and waste material from septic tanks and other sources, is just dumped into the water. The NGT notes that while less than 20 per cent of the 1,797 (unauthorised) colonies had sewage pipelines, "a staggering 51,837 industries are operating illegally in residential areas whose effluents go directly into the drains and ultimately, the river."

The current crisis can be seen in the context of a river's death, in terms of its links with the scale, pattern and economics of human activity.

With their catch falling sharply, the fishermen's earnings are down to a trickle. Earlier, fishing used to earn them enough. Skilled fishers could sometimes pull in Rs. 50,000 in a good month.

Anand Sahni, 42, who lives at Ram Ghat, came to Delhi from Bihar's Motihari district as a teenager. "My earnings halved in 20 years. I get Rs. 100-200 a day now. I have to find other ways to support my family – machli ka kaam [fish work] isn't permanent anymore," he says grimly.

About 30-40 families of the Mallah – or fishermen and boatmen community – live in Ram Ghat, a less polluted spot on the Yamuna. Retaining some fish for consumption, they sell the rest in nearby markets like Soniya Vihar, Gopalpur and Hanuman Chowk, for Rs 50-200 per kilo, depending on the variety.

A climate crisis with its fluctuations in rainfall and temperatures adds layers to the Yamuna problem, says Dr. Radha Gopalan, a senior Thiruvananthapuram-based environmental consultant. With the quantity and quality of the water compromised and the uncertainty of climate change, it exacerbates the problem leading to a huge reduction in quality and quantity of the catch.

"Fish die because of the polluted water," says 35-year-old Sunita Devi; her fisherman husband Naresh Sahni is away seeking work as a daily labourer. "People come and throw in all kinds of garbage, especially plastic nowadays." During religious events, she points out, people even dump cooked items like puri, jalebi and laddoo , adding to the rot in the river.

In October 2019, for the first time in over 100 years, idol immersion during Durga Puja was banned in Delhi after an NGT report noted that such activities were hurting the river in a big way.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, the Mughals built their kingdom in Delhi true to an old proverb about three things that make a city: 'daria, badal, badshah (river, clouds and emperor)'. Their water system, considered almost an art form, today lies as historical ruins. The British in the 18th century treated water as a mere resource, even building New Delhi to face away from the Yamuna. Over time, the populace exploded and urbanised.

In the book Narratives of the Environment of Delhi (published by the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage), old timers recall how, between the 1940s and 1970s, fishing, boating, swimming and picnics at Delhi's Okhla area were a part of life. Even Gangetic dolphins were spotted downstream of the Okhla barrage, while tortoises sun-bathed on the islands in the river when the water ran low.

"The Yamuna has gone down dangerously," says Agra-based environmentalist Brij Khandelwal. Soon after the Uttarakhand high court declared the Ganga and Yamuna rivers as living entities in 2017, Khandelwal sought filing of 'attempt to murder' cases against government officials in his city. His charge: they were killing the Yamuna by slow poison.

Meanwhile, the union government is rolling out the Saragmala Project – linking waterways across the country to ports. But "If large cargos are taken to the hinterland," warns NPSSFWI's Chatterjee, "it'll again pollute the rivers."

Haldar is the last generation of fishermen in his family. He is from Malda in West Bengal, lives at Ram Ghat for 15-20 days a month, and the rest of the time in Noida with his two sons aged 25 and 27. One repairs mobiles, the other sells eggrolls and momos. "The kids say mine is an outdated profession. My younger brother is also a fisherman. It's a tradition – come rain or shine – we only know this. I don't how else I'll survive…"

"Now that the fishing source has dried up what will they do?" asks Dr. Gopalan. "Importantly, fish is also a source of nutrition for them. We must locate them in the socio-ecological space, with the economic aspect woven in. In climate change, these can't be separate entities: you need diversity of income and diversity of eco-systems."

Meanwhile, the government talks about climate crisis in a global framework where the policy seems geared towards fish farming fish for export, says Research Collective's Chakravarty.

India exported $4.8 billion worth of shrimp in 2017-18. Overwhelmingly, says Chakravarty, this was farmed fish of an exotic variety – the Pacific White shrimp from Mexican waters. India is into this monoculture because "there is a huge demand in the US for Mexican shrimp." Just 10 per cent of our shrimp export consists of Black Tiger prawn that is wild-caught in Indian waters. India is embracing a biodiversity loss that, in turn, affects livelihoods. "If the policy is going to be export oriented, it will be expensive and not geared towards local nutrition and needs."

Faced with a bleak future, Haldar still takes pride in his craft. While a fishing boat costs Rs. 10,000 and a net between Rs. 3,000-5,000, he shows us the fishing net they make using foam, mud and rope. One net yields him Rs. 50-100 worth of fish a day.

Ram Parvesh, 45, nowadays uses a cage-like structure of bamboo and thread that can capture 1-2 kilograms of fish. "We learnt to make this in our village. Atte ka chara [wheat bait] is placed on both sides, and the cage is lowered into the water. Within a few hours, the small variety of fish, puthi , is caught," he explains. Puthi is the most common fish here, says local activist Bhim Singh Rawat who works with the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People. " Chilwa and bachua are way less now, while baam and malli are nearly extinct. Magur [catfish] is found in polluted stretches."

"We are the protectors of Yamuna," declares a smiling Arun Sahni, 75, who came to Delhi four decades ago from Bihar's Vaishali district leaving behind his family. Back in the 1980s-90s, he claims, he could get up to 50 kilograms of fish in a day, including varieties such as rohu, chingri, saul and malli . Now it's barely 10, at most 20 kilograms, on a good day.

Incidentally, the landmark Signature Bridge on the Yamuna – twice the height of the Qutb Minar – that can be seen from Ram Ghat – was built at a cost of around Rs. 1,518 crores. The amount spent in 'cleaning' the Yamuna since 1993 – with no success? Over Rs. 1,514 crores.

The NGT has warned that the "… failure of [the] authorities is affecting life and health of citizens and threatening the existence of the river, and also affecting river Ganga."

"The problem at the policy level," says Dr. Gopalan, "is that the Yamuna Action Plan [that came up in 1993] is seen only from a technological point of view" without treating the river as an entity or ecosystem. "A river is a function of its catchment. Delhi is a catchment for the Yamuna. You can't clean the river without cleaning the catchment."

Fishermen are the canaries in our coal-mine, points out marine conservationist Divya Karnad. "How can we not see that heavy metals cause central nervous system breakdowns? And then not see that drawing groundwater from areas near one of the most polluted rivers is having an impact on our mental health? Fishermen, who are at the edge, see the connections, and see the most immediate impacts."

"This is my last bit of peace remaining," smiles Haldar, ready to cast his net late after sunset. Best to cast their last nets around 9 p.m. and haul the catch in at sunrise, he says. For that way "the dead fish will be fresher."

PARI's nationwide reporting project on climate change is part of a UNDP-supported initiative to capture that phenomenon through the voices and lived experience of ordinary people.

JOURNALISM TODAY: PROPHETS OF PROGRESS AND ETHICAL CHALLENGES

by Aidan White

The modern global media system, in all its digital splendour, is the result of 300 years of evolution, beginning in the turbulence of the industrial revolution in Europe and North America.

This age of enlightenment produced fresh currents of thought, particularly the notion of free speech and the autonomy of reason, which challenged old regimes, feudal institutions and religious dogma, setting the stage for historic revolutions in America and Europe.

At the forefront of this process were publisher journalists, radical pamphleteers and political agitators. Fiery journalism and writing were the inspiration for change - American rebellion against the British, revolution in France, challenges to slavery, inhumanity, colonialism and ignorance that were an obstacle to the creation of free and open societies.

Journalists of our age like Jamal Khashoggi, brutally murdered in 2018 by Saudi government agents, Can Dundar, the Turkish editor shot, prosecuted and forced into exile in 2016, and Maria Ressa, the Filipino-American journalist currently facing jail under a barrage of politically inspired lawsuits, were and are outspoken critics of their governments, yet like many journalists before them, they are prophets of progress.

The history of world journalism from the first secret presses operated in the late sixteenth century through to the present, when journalists are killed and targeted in increasing numbers, often simply for doing an honest job with integrity, is littered with stories of the persecution of the press and heroic battles fought by courageous editors and publishers.

In welcoming the Fetisov Journalism Awards and other initiatives that highlight the journalism of our age, we should acknowledge that, although the notion of independent journalism and a free press comes to us via a specific history and through Western cultures, the underlying impulses are universal and from time immemorial.

Ancient societies in every part of the world needed accurate information. Centuries later, expansionist empires opened the world to new ideas and information, as well as to wealth and trade, even if imperialism and colonialism were also harbingers of hatred, exploitation and inhumanity.

The world became a marketplace of goods and ideas, and traders everywhere were also dealers in information. People's ideas were informed, or misinformed, by travellers' tales of foreign lands. We can think of maps as metaphors for modern media – life and death information in beautiful packaging, sometimes meticulously accurate and often disastrously wrong.

The search for accuracy and knowledge has been a driver in all great cultures from China and India, Egypt and Greece to the Islamic scientists of eighth century Baghdad who constructed some of the most elaborate astrolabes to fix time, location and direction.

We learned important matters of fact. The world is spherical, not flat. The earth goes round the sun. This was dramatic new information that led to a struggle for minds.

We should beware, therefore, of thinking of a thirst for accurate information and new knowledge as Western, or the property of one culture, or thinking of the conflict between the right to know and the state or religion as an exclusively modern confrontation.

The first principles of freedom of expression were famously laid down in the French and American revolutions. In August 1789, the National Assembly of revolutionary France issued its Declaration on the Rights of Man and the Citizen, in which Article 11 declared:

> *"The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Every citizen may, accordingly, speak, write, and print with freedom, but shall be responsible for such abuses of this freedom as shall be defined by law."*

The power of the press to hold power to account was increasingly recognised. British statesman Edmund Burke is cited by historian Thomas Carlyle as the source of the famous comment on the power of reporters who sat taking notes in the English Parliament: *"The gallery in which the reporters sit has since become a fourth estate...."*, comparing its influence to that of the Monarchy, Parliament and the Courts.[1]

[1] *On Heroes and Hero Worship (1841)*

The first attempts to articulate the rights and responsibilities of journalists which form the basis for modern notions of ethical journalism were made more than 160 years ago at a time of confrontation between The Times of London and the British government, which was furious over the paper's coverage of its war with Russia in the Crimea.

John Thaddeus Delane, the editor, responded to government attacks by articulating a complete philosophy and body of principle for the guidance of journalism.[1] In two leading articles in February 1852, he underlined the cardinal principle of truth-telling: *"The duty of the journalist is the same as that of the historian – to seek out the truth, above all things, and to present to readers the truth as he can attain it."*

But the press was increasingly a mixture of journalistic principle and a yearning for sensation, mass circulation and influence. During the 20th Century, tabloid excess and "yellow journalism" which came to mean journalism with scant regard for balance or accuracy, or humanity and respect for others, began to provoke public and political outrage.

After the First World War, journalism began for the first time to take seriously its responsibility for standards and ethical conduct, in reaction to the mass circulation battles during the 1920s and the 1930s. The first press council was set up in Sweden and the first journalistic codes began to emerge in the United States.

The International Federation of Journalists was formed in 1926, at a time when notions of internationalism in journalism were beginning to take root.

In 1933, newspaper publishers created their own international organisation and prepared a statement, ratified five years later, which in a call that resonates today, challenged the publication of "false news".[2]

These first international voices began to develop support for the ethical values of independent journalism – fact-based reporting, independence, humanity, impartiality and accountability.

Journalism was inevitably caught up in ideological struggles that dominated the period of the Cold War and efforts to reinforce international standards of journalism foundered in arguments between the communist and the non-communist world over the role of government.

Journalists became divided, but in his famous report to UNESCO more than 40 years ago, Sean McBride emphasised the importance of professional integrity and standards in the creation of a new world information order and wrote in terms that promoted a unifying philosophy for journalism:

> *For the journalist, freedom and responsibility are indivisible. Freedom without responsibility invites distortion and other abuses. But in the absence of freedom there can be no exercise of responsibility…The adoption of codes of ethics at national and, in some cases, at the regional level is desirable, provided that such codes are prepared and adopted by the profession itself without governmental interference.*[1]

This call for journalists and the media to set out codes and standards still echoes as the threat of government interference remains, with new and dangerous challenges also on the horizon.

These include the dangers to pluralism posed by the changed culture of communication and the overweening power of global technology companies who control and shape the information environment to suit their business models at the expense of safe, secure and respectful communications for all.

At the same time, tech-savvy terrorists and media disinformation factories pollute the information space, posing new challenges to the well-meaning principles of ethical journalism.[2]

Journalists may not know the detail of their codes that eloquently articulate the principle and conduct of the profession, but these values provide a bedrock of universal understanding among journalists and media that it is not enough to have freedom of expression.

Unless media freedom is exercised within an ethical framework and based upon independence, pluralism, and, above all, respect for truth and humanity, journalism will never succeed in its mission to inform citizens.

Today free expression, press freedom and truth seeking remain natural allies, particularly when they face common enemies – such as states that impose censorship or use propaganda to shape the public information space. All voices, including dissident opinion – whether in China, or Belarus, or Russia, or Turkey or the Philippines – have the right to be heard.

But it is not enough for us to have the right to express our opinions. We must also have access to quality information that provides context, analysis, and commentary about the complex world in which we live.

The development of citizen journalism alongside new movements inside media,

[1] *From Dangerous Estate by Francis Williams, Longmans (1957)*

[2] *International Federation of Newspaper Publishers Associations, forerunner of today's World Association of Newspapers.*

[1] *McBride Report, Recommendations, Part III, introduction and paragraph 43*

[2] *The late Claude Jean Bertrand has collated a list of more than 100 'Media Accountability Systems' including journalists' codes now in operation around the world. See: http://www.media-accountability.org/*

such as those led by followers of “constructive” or “solutions journalism,” often also involve the active engagement of people outside the newsroom in news gathering, and spreading the news, raising new questions of ethical values and responsibility.

This has become particularly important in the way journalism reports and creates narratives around new and urgent causes – the global demands for an end to the scourge of racism and discrimination in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, the insistence that women in the age of “Me Too” are entitled to live without fear of violence from men, and in the midst of the health pandemic, the demands for equality of treatment for people from the world’s poorest regions with regard to the provision of life-saving treatments.

In achieving these objectives, the ethical code of conduct guides the way journalists should work, putting humanity, non-discrimination and the search for justice at the heart of their work.

A journalism prize like the Fetisov Awards shines a light on journalistic excellence as people in news media take up this challenge. Most, if not all, of the entries here are from journalists who take individual responsibility for their work and who want to express the moral dimension of their journalism.

The question is how, in the next phase of the historical development of journalism, this enthusiasm for truth-telling and progressive change can be mobilised to inspire more transparency and ethics in the news and with it, more trust in ethical journalism as an essential guardian of democracy and human rights.

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Journalist, Columnist
Kashmir correspondent,
The Asian Age and Deccan Chronicle

India

ZULIANA LAINEZ

Vice President, International Federation of Journalists
General Secretary, National Association of Journalists of Peru
President, FEPALC

Peru

FJA JURY 2020

AIDAN WHITE

Honorary Advisor to the Fetisov Charitable Foundation and the Fetisov Journalism Awards

Founder and President, Ethical Journalism Network

BARBARA TRIONFI

Executive Director
International Press Institute

CHRISTOPHE DELOIRE

Secretary General
Reporters Without Borders

DEBORAH BERGAMINI

Journalist
Vice President of the Italian Delegation at PACE

ERIC WISHART

AFP Global News Management/ Special Projects
Honorary Lecturer at the Hong Kong University and the Hong Kong Baptist University

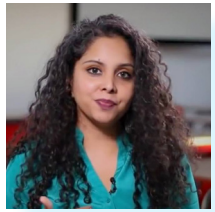
EVA MERKACHEVA

Investigative Journalist
Human Rights Activist

NIKOS PANAGIOTOU

Associate Professor, Google Research Scholar,
DAAD Scholar, Chevening Scholar,
School of Journalism and Mass Communications,
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

RANA AYYUB



Investigative Journalist, Author
Opinion Columnist at the Washington Post

RICARDO GUTIÉRREZ

Secretary General
European Federation of Journalists (EFJ)

ROMAN BERGER

Journalist, Writer,
Media Expert

FJA FOUNDER

GLEB FETISOV

Gleb Fetisov is a businessman, producer, scientist and philanthropist. Fetisov has a PhD in Economics, is a corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, a Professor and a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences of the Russian Federation. Fetisov is a member of Producers Guild of America.

FETISOV CHARITABLE FOUNDATION

MIRIAM LEVY TURNER

President and Board Member,
Fetisov Charitable Foundation

AIDAN WHITE

Founder and President, Ethical Journalism Awards;
Honorary Advisor to the Fetisov Charitable Foundation and the Fetisov Journalism Awards;

YELENA LI MARTINO

Board Member, Fetisov Charitable Foundation

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FETISOV JOURNALISM AWARDS

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YouTube: FJA Youtube channel

info@fjawards.com
Enquiries regarding participation in the contest

contact@fjawards.com
General enquiries (including partnership, sponsorship or participation as an expert)

“My first thought is what a dramatic increase in the quality of entries – almost all of them worthy of proper consideration. The media faces many challenges, but the future of journalism as a bulwark of democracy and respect for human rights is secure in the hands of these enthusiastic and talented professionals.”

AIDAN WHITE

Founder and President of the Ethical Journalism Network

“The world is a dark and terrible place at the moment, but these brave journalists are trying to make it better.”

JULIANNE SCHULTZ

Professor of Media and Culture at Griffith University

“It was tough to make selection because there are so many good and professional works that deserve an excellence in journalism. I am also proud of the courageous investigative reporters who risk their lives to tell the truth and at the same time, I hoped their security is ensured by their organizations.”

NARANJARGAL KHASHKHUU

Honorary Professor, University of Arts and Culture of Mongolia

“There are various regions and visions represented. I have detected good investigative work in several of the articles that underline - from journalism - in the public agenda several fundamental issues for good coexistence, human rights and democracy in our countries.”

ZULIANA LAINEZ

Vice President of the International Federation of Journalists