

The daring China rescues bringing Vietnam's trafficked girls home

Blue Dragon rescues trafficked women, girls from China

HANOI: Two girls sprint from a hair salon into a car that will lead them back to safety in Vietnam—a snapshot of the daring rescues taking place each month to free women and girls from forced marriages or sex slavery in China. Filmed on a shaky camera phone, the successful rescue saved the Vietnamese teenagers from a brothel in China, where a huge surplus of males has fuelled the lucrative trade for brides and sex workers.

Bringing them home is dangerous work, pitting rescuers against vengeful husbands, pimps and organized trafficking networks who spin tens of millions of dollars selling women from poor Mekong countries. “No one wants their business to be broken,” says a rescuer from Blue Dragon, a Hanoi-based non-profit. Blue Dragon has helped bring about 400 trafficked women and girls home from China since 2007.

They are among tens of thousands trafficked into China from impoverished pockets of Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos. They are tricked, lured or kidnapped and sold as wives and prostitutes across the border, some ending up deep inside the tightly-controlled Communist country. Rescues are a complicated and all-consuming job, says the Blue Dragon rescuer whose identity has been concealed for safety reasons. The stress is constant and the phone buzzes

around the clock. “But I couldn’t walk away,” the rescuer says. “Imagine your child didn’t come home at dinner time. What would you do?”

‘Please help me’

Victims reach out via Chinese messaging services like WeChat and QQ or call the non-profit—if they can get their hands on a phone. “I was trafficked to China please help me,” reads one text. “I’m praying for a miracle,” says another. But most girls—especially sex workers—are barred from contact with the outside world; an escaped girl means thousands of dollars lost for traffickers. With risks high, each rescue can take months to plan and execute.

One girl faked illness and checked into hospital where she called Blue Dragon rescuers, leading them to a remote corner of China where she had been trafficked as a bride. Another who had been sold into a brothel secretly used customers’ phones to contact rescuers before evading bouncers by escaping via a back door. Blue Dragon helps to bring home up to eight people a month and gets one or two desperate pleas for help each day.

The organization keeps photos and videos of successful missions—weeping mothers reunited with daughters, teenaged girls grinning widely



HANOI: This picture shows Le Thi Vu, a Vietnamese woman who was rescued from a brothel in China's Guangxi province, sitting during an interview with Agence France-Presse in Hanoi. — AFP

after being saved—morale-boosting reminders of their work. “If we don’t get her out of there she’s stuck, she’s in slavery,” said Michael Brosowski, the Australian founder of Blue Dragon, which also rescues and rehabilitates street kids, sexual abuse victims and other kids in crisis.

Alive again

Le Thi Vu knew trying to escape could mean being beaten or even killed by her pimp, who

kept her in a brothel for four months in China’s Guangxi province where she was forced to sleep with up to 12 men a day. Traumatized and fearing pregnancy, she secretly bought a phone and got in touch with her family who connected with Blue Dragon. She had no idea of her location and could not read the Chinese street signs outside, but Vu—whose name has been changed—found a phone number for a hotel across the street and relayed it. —AFP

Ghana Gandhi statue removed after student protest

ACCRA: A statue of Indian independence leader Mahatma Gandhi has been removed from Ghana’s most prestigious university after complaints that he was racist against black Africans. India’s former president Pranab Mukherjee unveiled the statue to the global peace icon at the University of Ghana in Accra two years ago as a symbol of ties between the two nations. But lecturers soon began a petition calling for its removal, citing passages written by Gandhi claiming that Indians were “infinitely superior” to black Africans.

The online protest was one of a number on university campuses in Africa and beyond about the enduring symbols of the continent’s colonial past. The Gandhi statue on the university’s Legon campus in Accra appeared to have been removed overnight Tuesday to Wednesday, students and lecturers said. The head of language, literature and drama at the Institute of African Studies, Obadele Kambon, said the removal was an issue of “self-respect”.

“If we show that we have no respect for ourselves and look down on our own heroes and praise others who had no respect for us, then there is an issue,” he said. “If we indeed don’t show any self respect for our heroes, how can the world respect us? This is victory for black dignity and self-respect. The campaign has paid off.” Student Adelaide Twum said the move was “long overdue”. “I’m so excited. This has nothing to do with diplomatic ties,” she added.

Another student, Benjamin Mensah, said: “It’s a massive win for all Ghanaians because it was constantly reminding us of how inferior we are.” The university authorities refused to comment while an official at Ghana’s foreign affairs ministry said only: “It’s an internal decision by the university.” Ghana’s former government had said the statue would be relocated “to avoid the controversy... becoming a distraction from our strong ties of friendship” with India. — AFP

Meditating Buddhist monk killed in India leopard attack

NEW DELHI: A Buddhist monk has been killed by a leopard while meditating in a protected forest for the big cats, the fifth such attack in the area this month, Indian police said yesterday. Rahul Walke Bodhi was seated beneath a tree in Ramdegi forest in western India for morning prayers on Tuesday when the leopard pounced. The 35-year-old monk was fatally injured, police in Maharashtra state said.

Two other devotees meditating with him at the time escaped unscathed to alert police, who started a search for his body. “His badly mauled body was found further into the forest, indicating the animal tried to drag it along,” Krishna Tiwari, a senior police officer in the region, told AFP. The forest, roughly 825 kilometers west from the state capital Mumbai, falls within a protected reserve for big cats where four other fatal attacks have occurred in recent weeks.

The monks, in the area for an annual prayer conference, had ignored warnings from local officials about venturing too far into the forest, police said. The attack followed a separate fatal incident on Monday, when shopkeeper Sandeep Arjun was killed outside his stall on the outskirts of the forest. It was unclear whether the same leopard was responsible for both attacks. Three more deaths attributed to leopards and tigers have been reported around the reserve in the past month, officials say. Official estimates suggest there are between 12,000 and 14,000 leopards in India. Urban expansion has reduced their numbers as forest habitats shrink, bringing them into closer contact—and conflict—with humans. —AFP

Doctors operate on child whose shooting in eye sparked Kashmir anger

SRINAGAR: Doctors have removed a metal shard from the eye of a toddler shot in Kashmir, whose horrific injuries became symbolic of India’s controversial use of pellet-firing shotguns in the conflict-torn region. Surgeons who operated on Hiba Jan said it was too early to know if the 20-month-old girl would ever use her eye again after being shot with a pump-action gun that discharges high-velocity fragments.

The girl’s parents said they were shot at while trying to escape from clouds of tear gas during clashes between Indian forces and villagers in late November. Her maiming underscored the contentious use of pellet shotguns against civilians in Kashmir, a disputed Muslim-majority region where protests against Indian rule often turn violent. “We have removed the pellet, but her eye was devastated,” said one of the surgeons who operated on Hiba at the Shri Maharaja Hari Singh Hospital in Srinagar on Wednesday.

“It is difficult to say (if surgery was successful) in the case of an infant, who cannot take a vision test or describe what can be perceived by the damaged eye,” said the doctor, who was not permitted to speak to the press and requested anonymity. Hiba’s father Nisar Ahmad, seated by his daughter’s hospital bed, told AFP she was calm following her second surgery.

India introduced the officially “non-lethal” 12-gauge pellet shotgun in Kashmir in 2010 when major anti-India protests and clashes with government forces left over 100 dead. Reliable data is hard to come by in the disputed Himalayan region, which is claimed in full by both India and Pakistan. But government data from 2017 revealed the weapon killed 13 people and injured more than 6,000 in eight months alone—including nearly 800 with eye injuries. “We deal with such devastation every day at the hospital. Hiba is no different,” her surgeon said. An insurgency in Kashmir against Indian rule has left tens of thousands of people dead since 1989 — most of them civilians. —AFP