

## International

## Human trafficking may be hidden in hotels in Britain

## Traffickers using the cover of hotel life to hold, abuse and sell victims

LONDON: Sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll - nothing new for the hospitality industry but British hoteliers say loud music, used condoms and alcohol could hint at something darker: modern-day slavery. Add last-minute bookings, paying in cash or landing without luggage - all are warning signs that human traffickers could be using the cover of hotel life to hold, abuse and sell victims. Yet for hotel bosses - this is just the tip of the iceberg.

For modern slavery poses a triple threat to the hospitality industry, from people being sexually exploited in hotel rooms to goods made via global supply chains that are tainted by forced labor and sub-contracted workers at risk of coercion and abuse. Many hotels in Britain are teaching staff to spot the signs, and scrutinizing suppliers of goods from shampoo to sheets. But exploitation of their employees is the insidious threat. Countless hotels are in the dark about the backgrounds of their workforce - and may be inadvertently hiring slaves, experts say.

"Outsourced staff are a key risk in supply chains in the hospitality industry when it comes to modern slavery," said Dominic Fitzgerald, development director at Shiva Hotels group. "Unfortunately, responding to modern slavery is not something that is driven hard enough within the industry - there is no legal requirement," he said in a plush bar at a Hilton hotel near London's Heathrow Airport. Many major hotels in Britain hand control of their workforce to recruitment agencies - leaving mainly low-skilled and migrant workers vulnerable to debt bondage, poor pay and long hours, and working under duress to fill the pockets of their traffickers.

The hospitality sector employs at least 3.2 million people in a country estimated by rights group Walk Free Foundation to be home to 136,000 slaves - with the crime

growing and evolving. But many industry firms focus on the source of their goods rather than their staff - either unaware of the risk of abuse or unwilling to pay more to address the threat, according to Andrew Crane, an academic at Bath University and labor issues expert. "To prevent the misery of modern slavery from blighting our workforces ... companies need to be able to trace the origin of their employees in the same way as most can for their products."

## Less talk, more action

Hospitality is one of Britain's top employers and fastest growing sectors, worth 130 billion pounds (\$172 billion) and set to create 500,000-plus new jobs by 2021, the trade body says. Traffickers are already deeply embedded, and an estimated 93,000 people are sexually exploited in hotels across Europe each year, according to a study funded by the European Union. A gang member who trafficked 19 Asian women to Britain and sold them for sex in hotels in a dozen cities was jailed in 2017 for four years in a case police and prosecutors said exploited the hospitality sector in an "organized operation". But several big players have joined forces to fight back.

The Stop Slavery Hotel Industry Network was founded in 2016 by the Shiva Foundation - an anti-trafficking group funded by Shiva Hotels - to boost ethical recruit-

ment and root out abuse, promote responsible supply chains and tackle sex trafficking. Thousands of hotel staff in Britain - from cooks to cleaners - are being trained to identify possible trafficking signals, such as excess alcohol in a room, or a child staying over.

Yet too few hotels - big or small - are doing enough to ensure their own workers are safe from exploitation, said Martin Birch, head of WGC, an outsourced cleaning services provider. "Modern slavery has become a hot topic, but hotels need to go a lot further," said Birch, who employs about 5,000 staff.

His workers are sometimes nervous on first joining, having suffered abuse from former bosses, seen their pay withheld or deducted, and faced threats of eviction from staff quarters. So WGC pairs new hires with older staff for reassurance, offers a helpline for staff to report complaints, and once even saved a worker from the clutches of traffickers, Birch said. With many firms paying lip service to the threat ahead of Anti-Slavery Day on Oct 18, Birch urged concrete action. "(Modern slavery) is not another health and safety type of heading. It needs to be eradicated ... not just spoken about."

## Sustainability to slavery

Insiders say some hotels are knowingly passing the buck. "Hotels must stop hiding behind contracts - they should have direct contact with all workers rather than

absolving themselves of responsibility," said Peter McAllister of the Ethical Trading Initiative, a group of trade unions, companies and charities. "It is primarily a question of political will and money - and legal liability in some cases," the chief executive said.

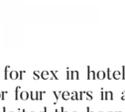
An ongoing review into the 2015 Modern Slavery Act - which requires firms with a turnover of at least 36 million pounds to report on their anti-slavery efforts - could see the law strengthened and force companies to do more, he added. Hotel bosses said sustainability had been the sector's watchword in recent years - from sourcing organic produce to encouraging guests to reuse towels to help the environment - and that slavery now deserved similar scrutiny and robust action. "It used to be the case that hotel chefs could tell you the name of the cow behind the piece of beef on your plate, but not the names of the housekeeping team," said Fitzgerald of Shiva.

## 'Yet that is changing'

The industry is also mulling how Brexit - Britain's planned 2019 departure from the European Union - and the rise of short-term home rental companies like Airbnb may affect worker rights and abuses, as well as sex trafficking in hospitality, he added. For 20-year-old Theodore Melbourne, a part-time cleaner with WGC who works at a Hilton when not at university, such concerns are beyond him as he goes about his daily housekeeping routine. After being misled and underpaid at another hotel, he is simply content to have an employer who treats him with respect. "The job is great - it is a friendly, positive environment," he said while making up a hotel bed. "It just feels right here." —Reuters



## Something darker: modern-day slavery



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## News in brief

## Mob kills three in Ecuador

QUITO: A mob in Ecuador killed three people mistakenly suspected of stealing children, police said Tuesday. Officials said those three were not in fact accused of such a crime but rather had been arrested on suspicion of stealing money and cell phones. When they were brought to a police station in the southwest town of Posorja, a crowd outside overpowered officers and beat the detainees to death with rocks and sticks. Footage of the attack circulated on social media. The mob also burned a taxi and six motorcycles. Three police were injured. Police at the station tried in vain to convince the mob that the suspects were not accused of abducting children. —AFP

## Greek minister quits

ATHENS: Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias quit his post yesterday, the government said, in a cabinet dispute over the country's controversial name deal with Macedonia. "Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has accepted the foreign minister's resignation," the PM's office said in a statement, adding that Tsipras himself would take over the post. Kotzias on Tuesday had clashed in a cabinet meeting with Defense Minister Panos Kammenos, who is also the coalition partner holding up Tsipras' government. Head of the nationalist Independent Greeks party, Kammenos has threatened to defect from the government in opposition to the deal brokered by Kotzias and Tsipras earlier this year to rename Greece's neighbor North Macedonia. The deal has raised strong objections in both countries. Greece also has a northern province named Macedonia, the heart of Alexander the Great's ancient kingdom. —AFP

## 12 killed in Mali violence

BAMAKO: Eleven people were shot dead in restive central Mali on Monday by unidentified gunmen, while a blast killed one person and injured two, sources said. The gun attack took place in the village of Telly, a few dozen kilometers from the town of Tenenkou, a local official said. "They killed 11 civilians. Some of them came by motor bike," the source said. A Malian security source confirmed the attack in Telly and the death toll, and said "criminals" were to blame. "There are also people who have been reported missing. We don't know how many," the security source said. The defense ministry did not immediately return a request for information. In the central-eastern town of Menaka, meanwhile, a deputy mayor said one woman was killed and two others were seriously injured by a landmine on the road between Chamane and Tin Fadimata. —AFP

## Ukraine plane crashes

KIEV: Ukraine's military and the US Air Force said yesterday that a US serviceman was one of the two pilots killed in a fighter jet crash during military exercises. The two pilots were aboard a Ukrainian Sukhoi-27 plane when it came down on Tuesday afternoon in the south-west of Ukraine during exercises dubbed Clear Sky 2018. "The bodies of the pilots have been found, the crew commander was Colonel Ivan Petrenko," the Air Force command of Ukraine's Armed Forces said on its Facebook account. "The second crew member was a member of the United States National Guard Air Force," it added in an updated report yesterday. US Air Forces in Europe and Africa said on its website that the unnamed American was a member of the 144th Fighter Wing of the California Air National Guard. He was taking part in a "single-aircraft familiarization flight with a Ukrainian counterpart". —AFP

## Beijing ready to improve soured military ties: US

SINGAPORE: Beijing appears ready to normalize its interactions with the American military, a US defense official said yesterday, after relations soured during a sanctions spat and trade war. Randall Schriver, the Pentagon's assistant secretary of defense for Asian and Pacific Security Affairs, said Defense Secretary Jim Mattis is set to meet his Chinese counterpart General Wei Fenghe in Singapore on Thursday at a regional security summit.

A meeting between the two men had initially been scheduled to take place in Beijing last weekend, but it fell through after China declined to make Wei available. "I think the fact that (Mattis is now) meeting with Minister Wei is some evidence that the Chinese are interested in keeping things normal and stable-as are we," Schriver told reporters travelling with Mattis. "What we have heard in our dialogue is the Chinese are interested in having a military relationship that's a stabilizing force in the overall relationship."

## 'Action!' US campaign videos go viral

WASHINGTON: An eye-popping \$4.5 billion is projected to pour into US political advertising in 2018, but a few thousand bucks last spring may have been the best-spent money of the entire midterm election cycle. When working-class New Yorker and political newcomer Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez heard the offer by two socialist-leaning videographers to produce her introductory congressional campaign ad for under \$10,000, her cash-strapped campaign jumped at the opportunity.

The result was a riveting, two-minute online video, with a persuasive voiceover by the then-28-year-old candidate who is shown changing into heels on a subway platform and making her case to voters. "This race is about people versus money," Ocasio-Cortez says in the video released in late May. "We've got people. They've got money." The ad - empathetic, defiant, authentic - was an instant hit, earning a staggering 5.1 million views.

Four weeks later Ocasio-Cortez shocked the political establishment by defeating a Democratic titan in their New York primary, a victory that reverberated nationally ahead of the midterm elections November 6. It also upended the notion of what smart political advertising can be, and how powerful digital campaigning has become. Several first-time candidates, many of them Democrats seeking to reclaim the House of Representatives from President Donald Trump's Republicans, are cutting through the political noise and introducing themselves to voters online.

Indeed, 2018 has been the year of

China reacted angrily after Washington last month imposed sanctions following Beijing's purchase of Russian fighter jets and missiles, and a close encounter between warships in the South China Sea raised the spectre of a military mishap between the two nuclear powers. Beijing's actions, which followed the imposition of the sanctions, included scrapping a planned port visit of a US warship to Hong Kong and cancelling a meeting between the head of the Chinese navy and his American counterpart. Defense ministers from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are meeting in Singapore to discuss a range of regional security concerns.

Front and centre is China's military build-up in the South China Sea and its sweeping claims of sovereignty across the economically vital waters. In an incident the Pentagon decried as "unsafe and unprofessional", a Chinese warship last month sailed within just 45 yards (41 meters) of a US destroyer as it passed by Beijing-claimed features in the South China Sea, forcing the American vessel to take evasive action. The US periodically conducts such "freedom of navigation" operations to challenge China's claims over international waters.

Schriver said Mattis would be encouraging other countries in the region to



SINGAPORE: US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis (right) shakes hands with an official upon his arrival in Singapore yesterday. Mattis is visiting Singapore to take part in a regional security summit. —AFP

assert a presence in the areas which Beijing claims. "Our message will be no single country can change international law, international norms," he said. "We will fly sail and operate where international law allows but we are also looking for partners to give voice to keeping ...

international law ... upheld." Still, he stressed the importance of maintaining clear communication with the Chinese military. "We need to make sure that when we step on one another's toes it doesn't escalate into something that would be catastrophic," he said. —AFP



WASHINGTON: This combo photo shows (left to right), New York Democratic congressional candidate Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez; Wisconsin Democratic congressional candidate Randy Bryce and Texas Democratic congressional candidate MJ Hegar. —AFP

the viral campaign video. Nick Hayes, co-founder of Detroit-based Means of Production which did the Ocasio-Cortez ad, said the rise of Internet platforms has been a godsend for new candidates. "I think what social media and digital campaigning opened up is the ability for candidates who don't have \$4 million from some corporation to be heard, and to be able to communicate with voters in a way that wasn't possible before," Hayes, 21, told AFP in an interview. "By having a strong social media presence, by coming out with effective messaging, by staying on point and talking about working-class politics, you can topple these people, you know?"

## Heroic stories

The "my story" videos have proven to be defining elements of several 2018 campaigns. But those by Ocasio-Cortez and another woman running for Congress, US Air Force veteran MJ Hegar of Texas, are already considered masterpieces of the genre. Hegar's 3.5-minute ad tells her heroic story, from being shot while piloting a search and rescue helicopter that crashed in Afghanistan - "I strapped myself to the skids, and returned fire on the Taliban while we flew to safety," she says - to

her successful effort to break down barriers for women in the military.

Set to Rolling Stones rock music, the fast-paced "Doors" spot also addresses the domestic violence she experienced as a child, and the doors she forced open while rising through the ranks. Broadway superstar Lin Manuel Miranda branded it "the best political ad anyone's ever seen." But will it help Hegar defeat eight-term Republican John Carter in red-state Texas?

## Profound changes

Hegar was largely unknown when she launched her campaign. After her ad went viral (nearly three million views and counting), campaign contributions poured in and her race tightened. Democrats are not the only ones to embrace the genre. Tennessee congresswoman Marsha Blackburn, running for US Senate, cut a long-form ad that makes controversial reference to what she called "the sale of baby body parts" by Planned Parenthood. It was deemed too "inflammatory" by Twitter, which barred her from promoting the video on the platform until she removed the language. Blackburn refused, and fundraised on the controversy.

It has been Democrats who by and

large have exploited the long form to powerful effect. It began in 2017, when an unknown iron-worker named Randy Bryce dropped a spellbinding campaign ad on YouTube, highlighting his mother's illness, his dedication to his craft, and an obsession with keeping his family insured. Bryce's challenge is daunting: he is running in the Wisconsin district held by House Speaker Paul Ryan. "Let's trade places, Paul Ryan. You can come work the iron, and I'll go to DC," Bryce says as music reaches a crescendo.

The stirring video set the tone for the midterms, and reminded other Democratic candidates of their mission to give voters compelling reasons to choose them over the status quo. As the election nears, campaign ads fill Facebook, YouTube and other platforms. "Social media has profoundly changed the way political campaigns communicate with voters," political consultant Neil Oxman, who has managed ad campaigns for hundreds of races since 1980, told AFP. Digital advertising, projected to reach \$800 million this cycle according to Kantar Media, has begun to rival the \$3.7 billion broadcast and cable TV market. "Now you can just see them for free on your phone," Oxman said. —AFP