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Cyprus threatens to block EU-Turkey migrant deal

Page 12

Page 10

HISTORIC VOTE GIVES MYANMAR FIRST CIVILIAN PRESIDENT IN DECADES

THOUSANDS OF MAIDS IN HONG KONG ARE IN 'FORCED LABOR'

NEW REPORT FUELS GROWING CRITICISM

HONG KONG: Tens of thousands of foreign maids in Hong Kong are in "forced labor", according to a new report that fuels growing criticism of the city's treatment of its army of domestic workers. The study by the Justice Centre estimates that one in six, or 50,000 of Hong Kong's more than 300,000 migrant domestic workers—mainly from Indonesia and the Philippines—fell into the "forced labor" category.

Its findings come after a report by the UN Committee Against Torture in December urged Hong Kong authorities to reform laws in order to protect victims of forced labor and trafficking. The plight of the city's domestic workers was also thrown into the international spotlight by the high-profile abuse case of Indonesian maid Erwiana Sulistyansih, whose Hong Kong employer received a six-year jail sentence last year. The new report defined forced labor as employment for which the worker had not been recruited freely, was not doing the job freely, or could not walk away from work.

Fourteen percent of those in forced labor had been trafficked into the city, it said. "Hong Kong must come clean and acknowledge these problems. It can no longer afford to sweep them under the carpet," said Piya Muqit, executive director of Justice Centre, a non-profit rights group. "Current regulations can actually increase the vulnerability of workers to exploitation and victims face very real barriers in seeking assistance and justice," she said. Debt incurred by unscrupulous employment agencies both in Hong Kong and the workers' home countries also played a major role in trapping workers in their jobs, the report found.

"Forced labor does not always involve physical violence, there are many tools of coercion and deception," said Victoria Wisniewski Otero, co-author of the study that interviewed more than 1,000 workers. One Indonesian maid named as Indah told researchers she felt she had no choice but to continue working because of the debt she had incurred. She also said she had no access to her passport, which was being held by her employer. The study found migrant domestic laborers worked an average 70-hour week and more than a third



HONG KONG: This file photo taken on February 10, 2015 shows a group of protesters gathering outside the courthouse in support of Indonesian former maid Erwiana Sulistyansih. — AFP

were not given the full 24-hour rest period required under Hong Kong law.

The report called on the Hong Kong government to review legislation, improve workers'

living and working conditions, and penalize agencies that overcharge. Rules that say foreign maids must live with their employers and leave the city within two weeks of terminating

an employment contract must also be scrapped, it said. "The government will have to be pushed and pulled into doing something," said legislator Emily Lau, head of Hong Kong's

Democratic Party, who also called for workers' home countries to take action. Hong Kong's labor department had no immediate response to the report. — AFP



BERLIN: Rescuers and police officers work around a damaged car after a blast caused by an explosive device killed its driver travelling down a street yesterday. — AFP

CAR BOMB KILLS DRIVER IN BERLIN

BERLIN: A car bomb killed a driver travelling down a street in central Berlin yesterday, police said, as investigators suspected that it was likely a case of homicide. The blast caused by an explosive device "on or in the vehicle" occurred during peak-hour traffic on Bismarckstrasse, within sight of the Victory Column monument, leaving the front of the car severely dented

after it flipped over, while debris was strewn a few meters away.

No other injuries were reported, although the car rammed into a parked vehicle. "The identity (of the victim) is unclear," police spokesman Michael Merkle told N24. "We believe this was a homicide," prosecutor's office spokesman Martin Steltner told the daily Tagesspiegel. The Volkswagen

Passat station wagon was heading downtown when the explosion struck close to the subway entrance to Deutsche Oper station, in front of one of Berlin's three opera houses. Police had asked residents to stay indoors and keep their windows shut before giving the all-clear to after completing a sweep for further explosives. The broad avenue remains cordoned off. — AFP

QAEDA THREATENS FRANCE AND ALLIES

ABIDJAN: Al-Qaeda's North African branch threatened France and its allies fighting against jihadists in the volatile region, in a statement boasting about the group's deadly weekend attack on an Ivory Coast beach resort. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb (AQIM) said the shooting rampage at the Grand-Bassam resort on

Sunday that left 18 people dead was one of a series of operations "targeting dens of espionage and conspiracies".

It warned that those nations involved in the regional anti-insurgent Operation Barkhane and the 2013 French-led Operation Serval in Mali would "receive a response", with their

"criminal leaders" and interests targeted, according to the SITE group which monitors extremist organizations. The statement was issued on the eve of a visit by French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault and Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve to Ivory Coast after the beach attack whose victims included four French nationals.

Barkhane, which succeeded Serval in 2014, has at least 3,500 soldiers deployed across five countries—Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger—to combat jihadist jihadist insurgencies. AQIM warned Ivory Coast and all allies of France in the region that their "crimes will not pass without a response" and issued a wider threat to Western nationals to leave Muslim lands or "we will destroy your security and the security of your citizens". The group had also claimed the attack on a top hotel and a nearby restaurant in the Burkina Faso capital in January that killed 30 people, and a hostage siege in the Malian capital Bamako in November that cost 20 lives. — AFP



GRAND-BASSAM: An Ivorian soldier holds a Rocket-propelled grenade while manning a position in a street near the the Etoile du Sud hotel in Grand Bassam on Monday. — AFP



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