

## CHINESE ACTIVIST QUESTIONS ARREST IN IVANKA TRUMP FACTORY PROBE

**BEIJING:** Labor activist Hua Haifeng had avoided legal trouble in his 14 years investigating companies in China, but that changed after he looked into a factory that made shoes for Ivanka Trump's brand. Hua and two colleagues had worked undercover in factories that manufactured shoes for the brand of US President Donald Trump's daughter and other foreign firms when they were detained in May. The 36-year-old activist and the two other men, who work for New York-based non-profit China Labor Watch (CLW), were accused of using "spying and other monitoring equipment".

The government has intensified a crackdown on human rights activists and lawyers in recent years. But Hua said he believes the factory's link to the Ivanka Trump brand may have been a "factor that attracted police interest", though he cannot confirm it. "As for

Ms. Ivanka and her family, I want to say that business activities should abide by business regulations, and not use a family's political resources for personal commercial gain," said Hua. Hua, who was released on bail in June along with his colleagues, said he was interrogated on 16 occasions for up to three hours at a time.

He was kept in a shared cell where he slept beside a urine bucket. For the first week he was not given access to a lawyer, but the father of two said his conditions gradually improved as his wife paid the authorities to give him better food. Li Qiang, CLW's founding director, said the case marks the first time activists have faced police trouble in the non-profit's 17-year history. "But this is the first time we've investigated Ivanka Trump (suppliers), so it may very well be related to the brand," Li said.

### Respect the law

The activists had been probing two plants owned by major footwear producer Huajian Group-one in the city of Dongguan in southern Guangdong province, the other in southern Jiangxi province's Ganzhou. A CLW statement alleged that factory employees worked 15-hour days with minimal breaks and no overtime pay, among other labor abuses. Collectively, the investigators worked undercover at the factories for several weeks between March and May.

Huajian Group did not respond to repeated requests for comment, but it has previously denied the allegations. For her part, Ivanka Trump company president Abigail Klem said in a statement: "After discussions with our licensee, we have determined that Ivanka Trump brand products have not been produced at the factory in question since March."

But CLW said they found the Ivanka Trump company listed on Huajian's production schedules for May and June, along with several other prominent overseas fashion brands.

The investigators' arrest put a fresh spotlight on Chinese business activities linked to the US presidential family. Ivanka Trump, who is a White House advisor, has taken a formal leave of absence from her fashion brand, announcing in January that she is no longer involved with the company's management or day-to-day operations. Her husband, Jared Kushner, is also a top aide to the US president and his own family business has come under scrutiny over its financial dealings in China. "I don't know much about (Ivanka Trump's) women's fashion brand, but any company or brand should respect the law and fulfill their responsibility towards society," Hua said. The activist said the police

in their questioning had been focused on a watch equipped with a camera, which was in a suitcase but had never been used. He said he only took cellphone photos of the public areas surrounding Dongguan. Hua worked in one factory for a day and was detained before he could go to another one.

### World's factory

Hua and his fellow investigators have not been officially charged, nor has a trial date been set. Authorities said the case was still being investigated and declined to provide additional information. Hua, back home in central Hubei province, vowed to never stop doing labor rights work. "China is the world's factory; our workers work for the entire world," he said. "In the decades since economic reform and opening up, the labor community has paid too much." — AFP

## News

In Brief

### Philippines puts big casinos on money-laundering watch

**MANILA:** The Philippines said yesterday it would monitor large transactions at casinos to curb money-laundering, after proceeds from an \$81 million theft were funneled through several gambling establishments last year. President Rodrigo Duterte signed a law this week adding the gaming sector to monitored institutions. Casinos must now report to the central bank's Anti-Money Laundering Council all transactions exceeding five million pesos. The law authorizes the council to obtain court orders freezing these funds for up to six months if it is suspected they were "in any way related to an unlawful activity". Funds proven in a court trial to be related to crime will be forfeited to the state.—AFP

### Singapore offers Manila drones

**SINGAPORE:** Singapore said yesterday it has offered surveillance drones and urban warfare training to Philippine troops battling Islamist fighters, to prevent the militants becoming entrenched and threatening the rest of Southeast Asia. Philippine troops have been battling to dislodge militants loyal to the Islamic State group who seized parts of the southern city of Marawi on May 23 in a bid to establish a base in the Mindanao region, which shares sea borders with Malaysia and Indonesia. IS has said it plans to establish a caliphate in Southeast Asia as it did in parts of Iraq and Syria. Singapore's defense ministry said its offer includes the use by Filipino troops of its urban warfare training facilities and a detachment of drones.



**JAKARTA:** In this file photo, members of Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia hold posters during a rally in Jakarta, Indonesia. — AP

### Indonesia bans local branch of Hizb ut-Tahrir

**JAKARTA:** Indonesia's government yesterday banned the local branch of Islamic group Hizb ut-Tahrir, rejecting criticism from rights groups that the move was undemocratic. The government said it revoked the license of Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) because the group conducted activities that were against the state ideology. Hizb ut-Tahrir, which calls for Islamic law and wants to unify all Muslims into a caliphate, has been operating for decades in Indonesia and has tens of thousands of followers. "With HTI's legal status revoked, the group is therefore disbanded," the justice ministry said in a statement. HTI said it would challenge the decision. "This is a true form of abuse by the government against its own citizens," HTI spokesman Ismail Yusanto said.

### Four Shiites shot dead in SW Pakistan: Police

**QUETTA, Pakistan:** Gunmen ambushed a car and killed four family members from the Shiite Muslim minority in a sectarian attack in southwest Pakistan yesterday, police said. The men sprayed bullets at the vehicle of the Hazara Shiite family travelling to Karachi as they passed through Choto, a town some 40 kilometers south of the Balochistan provincial capital Quetta. "Four people of a family, including a woman, were killed and another man wounded when gunmen fired with automatic weapons on their car as it slowed down on a speed bump," local police station chief Abdul Qudoos said. "It is a sectarian killing as the family had no enemy," Qudoos said.

### China aggressive in border row, says India diplomat

**NEW DELHI:** A top Indian diplomat said China is being unusually aggressive in a month-old border dispute with India that shows no sign of easing, media reports said yesterday. Beijing has made virtually daily warnings to its neighbor over the deadlock on a remote Himalayan plateau, where Indian and Chinese troops have been locked in a tense face off. Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar told lawmakers in a closed briefing on the dispute that India wanted a diplomatic settlement, the reports said. "Jaishankar told us that China's aggression and rhetoric on the recent standoff is unusual," a member of the parliamentary panel at Tuesday's briefing told Indian media. "We will continue to engage with them through diplomatic channels," the foreign ministry number two was quoted as saying by Press Trust of India news agency. —Agencies

# COURT FINDS THAI GENERAL GUILTY OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

VERDICT IS BEING CLOSELY-WATCHED INSIDE, OUTSIDE THAILAND

**BANGKOK:** A Thai general was found guilty of human trafficking yesterday as a Bangkok court convicted scores of people in a mass trial exposing the lynchpin role of corrupt officials in the grim, lucrative trade in Rohingya and Bangladeshi migrants. Thailand's junta launched a crackdown in May 2015 on a network funneling desperate migrants through southern Thailand and onto Malaysia, holding some for ransom in jungle camps.

It unspooled a crisis across Southeast Asia as gangmasters abandoned their human cargo in the camps where hundreds died from starvation and malaria, and at sea in overcrowded boats which were then "ping ponged" between Thai, Malaysian and Indonesian waters. After a day delivering verdicts for many of the 102 defendants, Bangkok Criminal Court found Lieutenant-General Manas Kongpaen guilty of multiple human trafficking charges. A judge said he was also guilty of complicity in a "transnational organized crime" network and "worked with others to facilitate human trafficking."

The ruling is an extremely rare conviction for a senior army officer in junta-ruled Thailand. Manas, the highest-ranking official on trial, was a top figure in the security apparatus covering Thailand's south—a key transit zone in a trafficking trail that stretched from Myanmar to Malaysia. The court heard he received bank transfers from trafficking agents worth 14.8 million baht. But the police investigation found he also used his position to guide trafficking gangs around checkpoints after their arrival on remote beaches as they headed to the jungle camps.

In 2013 he was promoted to head the Internal Security Command (ISOC) for the



**BANGKOK:** In this senior adviser to the Royal Thai Army Lt. Gen. Manas Kongpaen arrives at the Criminal Court in Bangkok, Thailand. — AP

entire south. Current junta leader Prayut Chan-O-Cha was army chief at the time. Before the crackdown rights groups had long accused officials of ignoring and even conducting the trade in humans through Thailand's southern provinces. The trial has revealed a lattice of military, police, local political and mafia figures acting as traffickers, agents and logistics men, all soaking up cash from some of Asia's poorest and most vulnerable migrants. Over the years the smuggling gangs are estimated to have netted tens of millions of dollars.

### Soldiers and kingpins

Some reporting restrictions were placed by judges citing national security and Manas was allowed to give evidence behind closed doors. Another well-connected kingpin con-

victed yesterday is Pajuban Aungka-chotphan, better known as Ko Tong or 'Big Brother Tong'. Police accused him of using private Andaman Sea islands, close to tourist spots such as Koh Lipe, to shift boatloads of migrants to the mainland, where they were packed into lorries and taken to the fetid camps straddling the Malaysia border. He was found guilty of human trafficking and links to organized crime.

By evening over 50 people, including two police officers had been convicted of various offences, ranging from guarding the squalid migrant camps to trafficking and negligence. At least ten were acquitted including an army captain and a ranking police officer. Thailand's role as a key trafficking route spilled into full view after officials found dozens of shallow graves in the hidden

camp camps dotting the steep, forested hills of the Thai-Malaysian border in May 2015. They revealed the horrors endured by some of the migrants, who were starved and held in bamboo pens by traffickers who demanded over \$1,000 for their release.

### Big business, big money

The verdict is being closely-watched inside and outside Thailand. The government is desperate to dispel the kingdom's notorious reputation for human trafficking. Earlier yesterday Junta chief Prayut angrily denied the case reflected systemic corruption within the security services. "Manas alone will not make the entire military collapse," he told reporters. Critics say the case was prematurely concluded and describe a trial marred by witness intimidation, secret evidence hearings and restrictions on media reporting.

"We expect there are many more perpetrators out there," Amy Smith, from Fortify Rights, said. "This is a big business with big money." The senior policeman who initially headed the investigation, Major General Paween Pongsirin, fled Thailand under threats to his life.

Days before he left he said the case had been pulled before it could delve further into the complexity of officials. Stateless Rohingya Muslims have fled neighboring Myanmar in their tens of thousands since sectarian violence flared in 2012.

They were joined by Bangladeshi economic migrants on rickety boats southwards across the Andaman Sea, seeking work and sanctuary in Malaysia and Indonesia. Thousands are believed to have died at sea, in a migrant flow that garnered few headlines until the trafficking crackdown in 2015. — AFP

## PHILIPPINES' DUTERTE THREATENS TO END PEACE TALKS AFTER ATTACK

**MANILA:** Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte threatened to end peace talks with communist rebels yesterday, hours after suspected guerrillas wounded four of his military bodyguards in an ambush. Aides said Duterte, 72, was not in the convoy when gunmen opened fire on two Presidential Security Group vehicles along a highway on the main southern island of Mindanao, where martial law is in effect. The government blamed the New People's Army—the 4,000-member armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines—and threatened to shelve peace negotiations unless the guerrillas stopped targeting soldiers in the south.

"The president directed the government panel... not to resume formal peace talks unless the reds (leftist rebels) agree to stop their attacks against government troops in Mindanao," said a statement issued by the presidential palace. The latest communist attack came as government forces on Mindanao fought Islamic State group-inspired militants who have been holed up in the southern city of Marawi since May 23. The communist party, which is waging Asia's longest-running insurgency, called on its armed wing on Tuesday to launch offensives in response to Duterte's plan to put Mindanao under martial law until the end of the year. A 60-day martial rule is now in force on Mindanao as part of the

military campaign in Marawi, but the Duterte government said Tuesday it needed more time to accomplish the mission. The communist insurgency that began in 1968 and which the military says is now mostly waged in Mindanao has claimed an estimated 30,000 lives. The rebels have been in off-and-on peace talks with the government since Duterte, a self-described socialist, was elected last year.

Both sides declared unilateral cease-fires, but these did not last. Duterte suspended formal peace talks in May after both sides failed to resolve a dispute over a rebel order for fighters to step up attacks.

To try and end the two-month impasse, Duterte was planning to send negotiators shortly to an unspecified venue and informally discuss a possible bilateral ceasefire agreement, the government statement said. But it warned that for formal peace talks to resume, the rebels must commit to "suspending operations against the military and the police and stopping all their extortion activities on the ground". A senior Mindanao military official, Brigadier-General Gilberto Gapay, said the communists were behind the attack on the Duterte bodyguards. "This is part of their nationwide call for armed groups to oppose martial law by launching intensified offensives against government forces," Gapay told radio station DZBB in Manila. — AFP

## SURF'S UP! NORTH KOREA TOURISM AGENCY TRIES TO WOO FOREIGNERS

**SEOUL:** North Korea's tourism agency has launched a website offering holiday options ranging from surfing to rice planting, despite strong US warnings to avoid travel to a nation where several trips have ended in jail. Sixteen Americans have been detained in the past decade in North Korea, including 22-year-old student Otto Warmbier who was given a long prison term for stealing a hotel propaganda banner. He was sent home in a coma in June but died several days later.

The "DPR Korea Tour" website, run by the North's National Tourism Administration, depicts the country—which is subject to stiff sanctions over its weapons programs—as just another tourist destination. It introduces package trips to various parts of the country including the capital Pyongyang, and offers various "theme tours" for travelers seeking

something more unusual. Visitors are invited to check out beaches on the east coast, including the Majon Bathing Beach, where "surfing has come into vogue among tourists" for its favorable conditions and clean water.

The website also provides basic travel information like air and train routes and ways to get around Pyongyang using public transport such as cabs and buses. However, it does not allow users to book tours directly and does not list the handful of foreign agencies that arrange trips to the isolated state. The country's official name is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The US State Department strongly warns Americans against travelling to North Korea, citing "serious risk of arrest and long-term detention". Canada, Australia and New Zealand are among other nations giving similar warnings.—AFP



**MYANMAR:** This photo shows a Muslim woman sewing machine at her room in Da Paing IDP camp near Sittwe town in Rakhine state. — AFP

## THAI SMUGGLING CRACKDOWN LEAVES MYANMAR'S ROHINGYA IN LIMBO

**SITTWE, Myanmar:** Five years have passed since Hla Hla Sein was forced into a displacement camp in western Myanmar for Rohingya Muslims, where disease and deprivation are rife and armed guards patrol a barbed-wire perimeter. But after a crackdown on the international smuggling routes that once offered a dangerous-but viable-escape route, she now sees no way out. "We have no idea how many years we will have to live like this," the 40-year-old widow said inside the tiny bamboo hut she shares with her son, tugging nervously at her purple headscarf.

"Our lives are worse than animals... we are human only in name." Deadly sectarian riots in 2012 drove more than 120,000 Rohingya into the camps in Rakhine State, where they live in ramshackle homes and are deprived of adequate food, schools and doctors. For years human traffickers cashed in on the group's desperation, ferrying thousands of Rohingya across the Andaman Sea to countries like Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. The journeys were defined by danger: from rickety boats on high seas to abuse and even death at the hands of the gangs, who held many victims for ransom in jungle camps on the Thai-Malaysia border.

That route was shuttered by Thailand's junta in 2015 and few boats have left the camps since, according to residents, aid workers and migration experts. The move may have spared Hla Hla Sein death at sea or abuse at the hands of smugglers, but it

also cut off a way out of a painful limbo. While a Bangkok court rules yesterday on the fate of more than 100 people arrested for running the trafficking network, she will spend another day distributing food rations in the camp.

### Ready to die

Hla Hla Sein and her son had tried to escape to Malaysia before the crackdown, but their boat was so overcrowded it started to sink a few hours into the journey, forcing the captain to turn back. It was only after they returned to shore that she found out the smugglers had planned to sell them as slaves at their destination. "I was ready to die at sea as we have nothing in this country," she said. "Our children cannot get education, even I cannot work. I thought dying would be better."

Buddhist-majority Myanmar has long been chastised for its treatment of the Rohingya, a group of more than a million Muslims whose rights and freedoms have been successively stripped away since the early 1980s. Over the past five years almost 170,000 have fled the country, according to the UN's refugee agency, leaving many families split across borders. "It's impossible to go to Malaysia by boat nowadays," said a Rohingya camp leader, asking not to be named. "We do not want people to die at sea." Recently, a new outbreak of violence in northern Rakhine pushed more than 70,000 Rohingyas across Myanmar's north-western border to Bangladesh. — AFP