

Analysis

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FOCUS

Could new slavery numbers complicate efforts to end it?

Despite being widely hailed as a turning point in the global fight to end modern slavery, a new estimate of the number of people living as slaves worldwide could in fact complicate efforts to tackle the crime, several academics have warned. About 40 million people were trapped as slaves last year - mostly women and girls - in forced labour and forced marriages, according to the first collaboration by leading anti-slavery groups to count the victims of the lucrative crime worldwide.

The International Labour Organization (ILO), Walk Free Foundation and International Organization for Migration (IOM) jointly agreed on the estimate, having previously used different data, definitions and methodologies to reach their own figures. But they cautioned this number was a conservative estimate. Many activists hope the estimate, published last month, will galvanize rights groups and governments as they strive to meet a global goal of eradicating modern slavery by 2030 - part of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted two years ago.

Yet some academics say the limitations of the data, such as a lack of surveys in the Gulf states and conflict-hit nations like Libya and Syria, and the inclusion of forced marriages for the first time, may divide the global anti-slavery movement. "One of the main problems here is that 'fighting slavery' now means all kinds of different things and relates to all kinds of different issues," Joel Quirk, head of political studies at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa, said by email. "Instead of a single cause and category upon which everyone is agreed, we instead have multiple ... problems which have been uneasily thrown together under the rubric of fighting 'modern slavery, human trafficking and forced labor'," Quirk added.

Political Subtexts

Among the estimated 40.3 million victims of modern slavery last year, 24.9 million were forced to work in factories, on building sites, farms and fishing boats, and as domestic or sex workers, while 15.4 million were trapped in forced marriages. This compares with Walk Free's 2016 estimate of 45.8 million people living as slaves, and an ILO figure of 21 million held in forced labor, but both organizations said the new number does not show either progress or failure in the anti-slavery fight.

Some critics have questioned the difference - of about 20 million people - between Walk Free's 2016 figure of 45.8 million victims - which did not include forced marriage - and the joint estimate's number of people kept in forced labor - 24.9 million. This disparity is due to the more comprehensive methodology used to calculate the latest, joint estimate, according to Kevin Bales, professor of contemporary slavery at Britain's University of Nottingham and a member of Walk Free's statistical team.

However, the new estimate may represent a compromise between the ILO and the Walk Free, as to meet halfway and to not discredit their previous, separate efforts, according to Quirk. "This type of political horse trading is a long way away from the language of neutral and careful analysis, but there are nonetheless lots of political subtexts and currents which sit behind the numbers," Quirk told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. The ILO and Walk Free conducted surveys in 48 countries and interviewed more than 71,000 people with findings supplemented by data from the IOM. The ILO and IOM are both UN agencies. The full breakdown of the methodology has yet to be released.

Forced Marriage Frustration

Experts behind the new figure said forced marriage could be seen as 'sexual slavery' - with many girls and women abducted, raped and treated like property - and its inclusion in the estimate would draw much needed attention to the issue globally. Yet this addition may in fact muddy efforts to end slavery, and could also shift public perceptions, according to Jessie Brunner, a researcher and slavery expert at Stanford University.

About three in four slaves were women and girls and one in four was a child in 2016, with modern slavery most prevalent in Africa followed by Asia and Pacific, according to the estimate. In the old ILO figure of 21 million people trapped in forced labor, women and girls accounted for 55 percent of the victims. "The anti-trafficking movement has made significant progress in the past few years toward broadening public understanding of the issue of modern slavery beyond solely forced sexual exploitation of women and girls," Brunner said. "The inclusion of forced marriage in the new estimate, albeit a relevant addition, could potentially curb this progress owing to the heavy skewing toward women and girls."

Opening Up

The United Nations last week defended the new estimate after local media reported that India's intelligence agency advised Prime Minister Narendra Modi to discredit the research, saying it may tarnish the country's image and exports. ILO officials rejected claims that India was being targeted by the data, saying that there were no national figures in the data, and that the estimate did not "single out any country". —Reuters



King's visit consolidates Russia's power

Saudi King Salman swept into Moscow with a vast entourage for a first ever visit that underscored Russia's growing power in the Middle East, despite deep differences between the two oil giants over Syria. The Saudi king brought 1,500 people to Moscow and had a plane fly in fresh food supplies from Riyadh every day during his four-day visit last week, the first by a Saudi monarch. President Vladimir Putin welcomed the king in a lavish Kremlin ceremony and Moscow was covered in billboards greeting the monarch in both Arabic and Russian.

The world's largest energy exporters did not let the fact they have for decades been at loggerheads over conflicts in the Muslim world, from Afghanistan to Chechnya, prevent them from striking a slew of arms and energy deals worth billions of dollars. Saudi Arabia, a longstanding US ally, signed preliminary agreements to buy Russia's S-400 air defense systems and anti-tank guided missile systems and receive "cutting edge technologies", as well as draw up investment and energy deals, the state's military firm, Saudi Arabian Military Industries, said.

Yet the two oil producers find themselves backing opposite sides of the Syrian civil war. Saudi Arabia supports the Syrian rebels fighting Bashar al-Assad, while Moscow has teamed up with Riyadh's nemesis Iran to save the Damascus regime. While the Saudis blame Assad for a conflict that has left over 330,000 dead since 2011, the visit was a sign that Riyadh has come to terms with the major role Russia now plays in the Middle East.

"For Putin, the king's visit showed that he acknowledges this role," Alexander Shumilin of the Middle East

Conflicts Centre in Moscow told AFP. Moscow's air campaign in Syria, launched in 2015, was widely seen as a game changer in the conflict that - at least for now - appears to have secured Assad's grip over his war-torn country. Now, the Kremlin is seeking support for a political settlement in Syria that guarantees Assad's role. At the same time, Moscow wants the Saudis to help fund reconstruction projects in Syria, giving Russian companies beneficial deals, says Vladimir Frolov, an independent foreign policy analyst based in Moscow.



Saudi Arabia has sought to diversify global relationships

US less involved

Saudi Arabia has sought to diversify its global relationships since Washington has reduced its role in the region. "America has become less interested in the Middle East and Russia is taking advantage of that," says Fyodor Lukyanov, of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy in Moscow. Saudi Arabia's grievances

with Washington date back to the Barack Obama era. Like other US allies in the region, Riyadh wanted regime change in Damascus and became disillusioned when Obama refused to take decisive action against Assad.

"America discredited itself, and Russia is coming out of a long period of stagnation," says pro-Kremlin analyst Alexander Filonik of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Moscow could also act as a convenient partner in supporting change inside the Saudi regime. While Russia will not replace Washington as the region's primary security provider, Frolov says, the Saudis could look to Moscow as a more reliable ally in case of an Arab Spring-inspired popular uprising. "They saw the US betray their ally Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in the name of promoting democracy," says Frolov.

Dispute over Iran

For the Saudis, the visit to Moscow was also an attempt to sway Putin to use his position to diminish Iranian influence in the Middle East. "For Saudi Arabia, not letting Iran get stronger in the region is a priority," says Shumilin. "Nobody knows how Putin will act on this, he is in the middle of major players heading in different directions," he adds. Frolov suggests Russia is too dependent on Iranian boots on the ground in Syria to afford a serious rupture with Tehran. "The Saudis will be disappointed with Putin on this and it might affect their economic deals with Russia," he says. Despite their clear differences, Salman's visit confirmed the Kremlin's military campaign in Syria has secured its long-term role as a serious player in the Middle East. —AFP

Columbus Day latest US debate over history, race

Should Christopher Columbus still be honored? Coming on the heels of a growing movement to take down statues commemorating the pro-slavery Confederate Army from the civil war, it's a question many US cities are now asking themselves. On Monday, crowds filled New York streets to recognize the so-called "man who discovered America", even as he is increasingly denounced as embodying the genocide of indigenous Americans. Ruth Edelstein-Friedman watched from a folding camping chair while the traditional Columbus Day parade wound along a damp Fifth Avenue. "We brought our children. We wanted them to see the parade and the statues and everything before they get rid of them," the retiree said.

A government holiday in the United States, Columbus Day is named for the explorer, from what is now Italy, who landed in the present-day Bahamas in 1492. For Edelstein-Friedman and her husband Eduardo, who travelled specially from Miami, homages to Columbus could soon be a thing of the past. And the controversy has only escalated following the August clashes in Charlottesville, Virginia where a liberal protester was killed at a white supremacist rally seeking to prevent the removal of statue of General Robert E Lee, who led the southern Confederacy during the 19th century American Civil War.

However, no one has yet announced the

end of the New York parade which, in good weather, draws more than a million spectators. It is as much a celebration of New York's powerful Italian-American community, which is represented at its highest levels by Mayor Bill de Blasio and Governor Andrew Cuomo. Both men proudly marched in Monday's parade. US President Donald Trump brushed aside criticism on Monday by describing the arrival of Columbus as "a transformative event that undeniably and fundamentally changed the course of human history and set the stage for the development of our great nation".

Unlike his predecessor Barack Obama, Trump cited no possible failings in the "discovery" of America. Dozens of US cities have already replaced Columbus Day with one honoring indigenous people, after a 1992 initiative from the leftist bastion of Berkeley, California. Over the past two years more than 50 cities across the country have followed. These include Los Angeles, the country's second-biggest city which voted in August to honor indigenous people and not the explorer. New York's parade continues but, even there, the fate of its Columbus statues is uncertain. One was erected in 1892 at the top of a 23-m column above Columbus Circle at the foot of Central Park.

'Genocide' or 'revisionism'

Last month somebody vandalized another Columbus monument, smaller and in the center of the park. One of its hands was covered in red paint to protest the blood that the explorer had on his own hands, while graffiti on the plinth read: "Hate will not be tolerated." On Monday a handful of protesters, who have arrived several times, gathered in front of the Columbus Circle statue to denounce "genocide" and "slavery". Police now guard the statue daily. —AFP

Americans and their guns: It's complicated

From muskets to machine guns, Americans have a relationship with firearms that is as old - and as complicated - as the country itself. That intimate connection with guns is under renewed scrutiny after the worst mass shooting in recent US history left 58 people dead in Las Vegas. The United States is a nation born of a bloody revolution, scarred by a grisly Civil War and decimation of the native population and reared on tales of rugged Wild West heroes.

Guns are a big part of the story. "I don't think we're alone in the world in loving guns but clearly Americans have a fascination with guns and love their guns," said Adam Winkler, author of "Gunfight: The Battle Over the Right to Bear Arms in America". "I think it may stem, in part, from the fact that we're a country that idealizes the founding, where armed revolutionaries decided to fight against a tyrannical government," said Winkler, a professor of constitutional law at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). "We're also a nation whose identity is very much tied up with things like the Wild West and the Frontier where there was definitely a gun culture," he told AFP.

"The gun has a more or less central place in the national mythology," agreed A J Somerset, whose book "Arms: The Culture and Credo of the Gun" also examined gun ownership in the United States. "The whole mythology that comes out of the American Revolution places the rifle front and center," said Somerset, a gun

owner himself and former member of the Canadian armed forces. But it wasn't until several decades after the 1775-1783 American Revolution that the gun really became a national symbol, Somerset said.

'A gun was a tool'

"In the middle of the 19th century, you had this sudden burst of innovation in firearms that gives you the Colt revolver, the breech-loading rifle, which leads to the repeating rifle, the Winchester, and so on," he said. "This revolution in firearms technology happens to coincide with the great period of American westward expansion," Somerset said in a telephone interview. "And it's at that point that the country really starts to make a myth out of its relationship with the gun."

There are currently more than 300 million guns in the United States - more than one per American - and firearms are involved in some 30,000 deaths a year, nearly two-thirds of them suicides. About four in 10 Americans live in a home with a gun, according to a June survey by the Pew Research Center, with 67 percent of gun owners saying self-protection is a major reason for having a firearm.

Owning a gun is seen by many Americans as a fundamental right enshrined in the Second Amendment to the US Constitution which states: "A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed."

For the early Americans, "a gun was a tool," said David Courtwright, a history professor at the University of North Florida and author of "Violent Land: Single Men and Social Disorder from the Frontier to the Inner City." "If you were a cowboy on a cattle drive you might pull out a gun and shoot a rattlesnake," Courtwright said. "It was a rare household on the frontier that was not equipped with some kind of a firearm and some people think that legacy still plays out (today)," he said. —AFP