

Analysis

Kuwait Times
Established 1961
The First Daily in The Arabian Gulf

THE LEADING INDEPENDENT
DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF
ESTABLISHED 1961

Founder and Publisher
YOUSUF S. AL-ALYAN

Editor-in-Chief
ABD AL-RAHMAN AL-ALYAN

EDITORIAL : 24833199-24833358-24833432
ADVERTISING : 24835616/7
FAX : 24835620/1
CIRCULATION : 24833199 Extn. 163
ACCOUNTS : 24833199 Extn. 125
COMMERCIAL : 24835618

P.O.Box 1301 Safat, 13014 Kuwait.
Email: info@kuwaittimes.com
Website: www.kuwaittimes.net

Fathers of child brides trapped in debt bondage

For his 16-year-old daughter's wedding last year, Makhanlal Ahirwal bought Bhawani saris, bangles and anklets, got her in-laws a water cooler, a bed, and utensils as dowry and threw a feast for 500 people in his village in central India. The celebrations added 200,000 rupees (\$2,800) to an unpaid debt of about 100,000 rupees that he'd already taken on for the wedding of another daughter. To repay the original debt he had travelled 800 km to Delhi the previous year, where he was lured by a promise of good pay at a construction site. Instead, he was held against his will and denied wages and food for three months before he was rescued.

His experience is not uncommon in India, which is home to 8 million of a global estimated total of 40 million slaves - and where many poor families take out loans to cover marriages and then fall into modern slavery while trying to repay the money. "I worked over 12 hours and lived in a tent, but wasn't paid a penny," Ahirwal said, sitting outside his clay hut in Dharampura village in the central state of Madhya Pradesh. "I had taken that loan to get my elder daughter married. She was 14 then. But I did not get paid. I had another four daughters to marry, so I took one more loan last year," he said. "There is no way I can repay the loan if I don't migrate and look for work again."

Landless, and at the bottom in the hierarchy of the Indian caste system, the Ahirwals in Dharampura lean on local landlords who lend money at 4 percent interest. Villagers take loans for major expenses, which in most cases are related to healthcare and or their daughters' marriages. With no work in villages, many migrate to cities and send earnings home to repay the money lenders, campaigners say.

But in many cases, unscrupulous employers dupe them into working long hours with the promise of good money, knowing they have debts to repay. Bosses sometimes withhold pay - a practice that can trap villagers for years and is widely seen as a form of slavery. Makhanlal Ahirwal was among the 22 people from Dharampura who were rescued from bondage two years ago and are entitled to government benefits such as cash compensation and housing. Each of them had outstanding loans when they migrated. "Most of us had taken loans for weddings of our children. One daughter's marriage means four years of debt," said Nirmal Ahirwal, who was trapped in bondage along with Makhanlal.

Underage and overleveraged

Many parents in Dharampura plan debt cycles around their daughters' ages, ensuring the older ones are married before the younger ones attain puberty to avoid clustering wedding loans. Despite being illegal, nearly 27 percent of girls get married before they turn 18 in India, accounting for the highest rates of child marriages across South Asia. The practice is especially prevalent among the poorest and the most marginalized and officials said they lean on awareness drives to enforce the law as action against the parents would further victimise families.

Madhya Pradesh is among India's poorest states and in Chattarpur district - home to Dharampura village - more than half the women were married before 18, government data shows. Weddings cost up to 200,000 rupees and in many cases push entire families into modern slavery even as young girls are pulled out of schools and pushed into adulthood. "Both parents and their daughters are victims in these cases ... they are both bonded in different forms of slavery," said Nirmal Gorana, convener of the National Campaign Committee for Eradication of Bonded Labour. "Workers we rescue from bondage often cite loans they took for their child's marriage for taking up the work," he added.

Voiceless

Bhawani, Makhanlal's 16-year-old daughter, comes across as a coy new bride as she walks into her parents' home, dressed in a pink sari and faux gold bangles, a streak of red vermilion along the parting of her hair and her eyes lined with kohl. "I never liked dressing up. But now I do what they (her in-laws) like," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "I wanted to study. I never said I wanted to get married. But people start talking of even 15-year-olds as 20."

Teenage girls in the village fetch water, cook, and clean and roll "beedis" (traditional cigarettes) to supplement family income. Most drop out of school young and are wed soon after. Child marriage without consent is a form of slavery as it pushes children into sexual and domestic servitude, experts say. "We don't ask our parents anything. We do as they say," said Rekha Ahirwal, 14, who dropped out after the ninth grade.

Many parents do not see a future for their young daughters so take loans to marry them off, said Bhuvan Ribhu, an activist with the non-profit Kailash Satyarthi Children's Foundation. "Besides, the girl's marriage is a moment of pride for the family in the village as they discuss with the community what all they did, what they gave her," he said. Awareness drives have checked the practice, but only to some extent, according to activists and officials. "We explain there are cash incentives if they get their daughters married after 18, but parents believe the right age ... is 12," said Ramesh Bhandari, Chattarpur district head. — Reuters



This picture taken on Tuesday shows a taxi driving past high-density apartment blocks in the central district of Hong Kong. — AFP

Hong Kong red-hot property market cools

For young Hong Kongers like Wilson Leung getting a foothold on the city's property ladder has long been a near impossible task but with the notoriously overpriced housing market facing a downturn, they now have a chance of realizing their dream. The cramped financial hub regularly tops the list of cities with the least affordable housing in the world, with even cheap apartments out of the reach of most regular workers. However, after a decade of near continual growth Hong Kong is about to join a global downturn that is buffeting markets including London, Vancouver, Sydney and Shanghai.

And the good news for first-time buyers like Leung, who works in sales and lives with his parents, most analysts believe the trend will continue into 2019 as the China-US trade dispute rumbles on and the Chinese economy stutters. "Now the price range is OK for me," Leung, 30, tells AFP, a sentiment not often heard in a city where many young people save for years under their parents' roofs in cramped flats well into their thirties. "I am not waiting for the market to drop even more, but waiting for a wider selection to show up. Once I find an ideal place, I'll spring into action."

Leung, who plans to marry later this year, might do well to wait some more on the property hunt. Many analysts are predicting further dips, fuelled by the fallout of the US-China trade war, the slowing mainland economy, a weakening yuan and the prospect of further interest rate rises. The Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) last month said property prices declined for two consecutive months while sales volumes have been down for four

months straight, the longest losing streak since 2008 at the height of the global financial crisis.

Micro-flats

Demand from buyers in mainland China - a cash-rich demographic that has been a key driver of the bubble, much to the frustration of Hong Kongers - has also been negative for the past four months. "Against this backdrop, expectations for prices and sales volumes remain firmly rooted in negative territory over the next three months and 12 months," RICS wrote. Iris Pang, ING's Greater China economist, said residential prices have fallen by as much as 15 percent in some areas.

She said jitters over the trade war were having the most significant effect given the "potential impact on the Hong Kong economy, including job security, wage growth and asset price trend in general". "This makes the market sentiment negative currently, and will continue to be so unless we see significant progress from the trade truce," she told AFP, predicting a further 10-15 percent drop in prices in 2019.

Until recently, the financial hub's property has provided handsome returns for the wealthy - prices have doubled since 2008. The city became notorious for selling parking space-sized "micro-flats" for around HK\$2.85 million (\$360,000). The only time prices dipped was during a brief period in 2015-16 when moves to discourage mainland buyers snapping up multiple properties coincided with a brief stock market plunge. But it didn't last long. RICS senior economist Sean Ellison said the current drop looks more long term

as the trade war bites. "This time feels different because there's multiple catalysts," he told AFP.

Bubble concerns

So is the world's least affordable property market headed for a crash? UBS ranked Hong Kong at the top of its league table for being the most overpriced and most at risk of a bubble. The September report said a "skilled worker" needed 22 years of income to afford a 60-sq-m flat, up from 12 years a decade ago, with salaries staying largely the same since 2008. But many analysts are wary of predicting a burst bubble because of Hong Kong's unique situation - the densely populated city of seven million has a massive housing shortage, which means huge demand.

"You would need a pretty strong exogenous shock to the market to really send it lower," said Ellison, who predicts a less dramatic five percent fall in prices over the next year. Historical examples he gives that have sent the market plunging are the 1997 Asian financial crash and the 2003 SARS outbreak. One potential alarm bell is if Washington and Beijing fail to make a breakthrough in their trade talks by their March deadline - triggering a massive increase in tariffs from the Trump administration. "The knock-on effects there could be significant," he warned. Many sellers are now adopting a wait and see approach. "I'm still quite uncertain and worried," said Bonnie Chan, who has her 450 sq ft flat on the market for HK\$8.5 million (\$1 million) - down from its highest valuation of HK\$9 million. "I've listed my flat for sale, but I still haven't made up my mind to sell it." — AFP

Romeo and Juliet: Last hopes to save Bolivia frog



Juliet, a Sehuencas water frog rediscovered in the wild in Bolivia, is seen during her quarantine as she acclimates to her new environment at the Museo de Historia Natural Alcide d'Orbigny in Cochabamba, Bolivia. — AFP

Almost a year after conservationists sent out a plea to help save a species of Bolivian aquatic frog by finding a mate for the last remaining member, Romeo, his very own Juliet has been tracked down deep inside a cloud forest. Not only did the wildlife conservation team return with a potential mate for Romeo, who had been 10 years a bachelor, but also another four members of the Sehuencas water frog species, boosting hopes to save the tiny amphibians from extinction.

After previous failed expeditions to the same area over the last decade, a joint expedition between Global Wildlife Conservation (GWC) and the Alcide d'Orbigny Natural History museum finally scored a success in the Bolivian wilderness. And the good news came about after securing funding following a Valentine's Day appeal last year to help find Romeo his Juliet.

"It is an incredible feeling to know that thanks to everyone who believes in true love and donated for Valentine's Day last year, we have already found a mate for Romeo and can establish a conservation breeding program with more than a single pair," said Teresa Camacho, the museum's chief of herpetology and the expedition leader. Romeo had been found in that same cloud forest a decade ago and it was feared that he was the last survivor in his species. With a lifespan of 15 years, time was running out to find Romeo a mate to ensure the survival of the species, although the frog himself never gave up hope, continuing to call out for a mate during his 10 years in captivity.

'Now the real work begins'

In a statement, GWC said "the bachelor's luck is about to change drastically". "Now the real work begins: We know how to successfully care for this species in captivity, but now we will learn about its reproduction, while also getting back into the field to better understand if any more frogs may be left

and if so, how many, where they are, and more about the threats they face," added Camacho. "With this knowledge we can develop strategies to mitigate the threats to the species' habitat, while working on a long-term plan to return Romeo's future babies to their wild home, preventing the extinction of the Sehuencas water frog."

The group of frogs has been placed in quarantine at the museum's K'ayra Center for Research and Conservation of Threatened Amphibians of Bolivia to help them acclimate to an environment that replicates the conditions they would face in the wild. "They will also be treated for the deadly infectious disease chytridiomycosis, which is partly responsible for the steep decline of this species and other amphibians in streams where they were once found," said GWC. Only then will Romeo meet his Juliet.

The priority now is to ensure that Juliet, who measures 55 mm, makes a good impression on her beau, who is brown with dark spots and slightly larger at 62 mm. "We want to ensure the perfect conditions for his blind date," an excited Camacho told AFP. "To reproduce natural conditions, we've been taking temperature and water quality measurements from the sampled streams to reproduce them in the breeding environments." Reproduction is the primary goal, but Camacho says the team is in no hurry. "We hope it will be love at first sight, but if that doesn't happen, we'll eat ice cream, watch 'The Notebook,' and try again!" Either way, the conservationists couldn't simply sit back and do nothing, said GWC's Central America and Tropical Andes coordinator Chris Jordan. — AFP

Pressure mounts on ICC after Gbagbo blow

As prosecutors failed to land the scalp of yet another former national leader accused of crimes against humanity, the question echoed in the hallways of the International Criminal Court: is it fit for purpose? The acquittal on Tuesday of former Ivory Coast president Laurent Gbagbo over post-electoral violence that killed 3,000 people was the latest in a series of blows for beleaguered ICC prosecutors. The court in The Hague was set up in 2002 to try the world's worst crimes, after years when the only route to justice for atrocities in countries like Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia was separate tribunals.

Hamstrung from the start by the refusal of the United States and Russia to join, the court has since faced criticism for the fact that it has mainly taken on cases from poorer African nations. But the biggest challenge to the court comes from apparent overreach - trying and failing to add top level leaders like Gbagbo to its trophy cabinet. "It compromises the faith in the ability of the Prosecution to bring cases against the most responsible in atrocity contexts and to satisfy expectations of victims and survivors," Carsten Stahn, professor of international criminal law at Leiden University, told AFP.

Last year, former DR Congo warlord and ex-vice president Jean-Pierre Bemba was acquitted on appeal for crimes allegedly committed by his militia in the Central African Republic in 2002-2003. Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta also saw charges of crimes against humanity over electoral bloodshed dropped by the ICC's prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, in 2014. The spotlight

particularly falls on Gambia's Bensouda as the Gbagbo trial was the first real fruit of her own work at the ICC since taking over from previous prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo. "Kenyatta and Bemba were warning shots. Gbagbo confirms the picture," added Stahn. "A clear lesson from these experiences is that there is a need for more thorough investigations leading to a sequence of cases per situation. Going immediately after high-ranking officials creates a strong risk of losing cases."

'Serious questions'

The court has had more success targeting lower level war crimes suspects such as Congolese rebel warlords Thomas Lubanga and Germain Katanga, and Malian jihadist Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi, found guilty of attacks on Timbuktu's fabled shrines. But Mark Kersten of the University of Toronto said the Gbagbo case would leave "serious questions about the ability of the ICC to successfully target and prosecute state actors."

"No single case will make or break the ICC or the prosecutor's office," he said, adding however that "the prosecutor's office needs to convince the Court's constituencies - especially victims, survivors, and states - that their personal, financial, and political investments into the ICC are worth it." Marta Bo, an international law researcher at the Hague-based Asser Institute warns "one should refrain from basing an opinion about the Court based only on this one decision."

Perhaps the only bright spot in the Gbagbo debacle was that it would undermine one abiding public conception about the ICC, analysts said. "One positive that the prosecutor may be able to take from this is that it undermines the notion that the ICC unfairly targets ousted African leaders," said Kersten. Stahn agreed that "the decision makes it harder to claim that the ICC is biased against Africa. It is demonstration of the application of high fairness standards towards the defendants." — AFP