

International

People smugglers reap billions selling 'big American dream'

Multibillion-dollar trafficking business dominated by the drug cartels

MEXICO CITY: The tide of migrants sweeping across Mexico to the US border is not just a humanitarian crisis—it is also a highly organized, multibillion-dollar trafficking business dominated by the drug cartels. Fleeing poverty, 35-year-old Honduran migrant Juan Macias paid around \$7,000 in March to a smuggling network, borrowing the money from his relatives.

Macias said that he dealt with eight different traffickers during the journey he made with around 30 other migrants. "They work through organizations. They're called guides. Then the cartels are on the border," Macias told AFP at a shelter in Mexico's border city Ciudad Juarez after he was deported from the United States.

Each trafficker gave him a code to pass on to the next smuggler along the chain. "We were identified by the code when we arrived at the place," said Macias, whose name AFP has changed to protect his identity. "They don't say anything, just 'follow me,'" he added. A 2018 report from the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime estimated the annual revenue generated by smuggling migrants overland to North America to be up to \$4.2 billion, out of a global total of \$7.0 billion.

Like other forms of organized crime, it is usually controlled by Mexico's powerful drug cartels, although the first link in the chain may be a neighbor of the migrants, who are mostly Central Americans.

Surge in arrivals

Even the anti-immigration stance of former US president Donald Trump failed to stop the human tide, which has only increased since his successor Joe Biden took office vowing fairer treatment of migrants. The traffickers "found an opportunity in Joe Biden's political discourse to start pulling in more people," said Oscar Hernandez, a researcher at Mexico's Colegio de la Frontera Norte. A warning from Biden's administration for undocumented migrants not to come because they run the risk of "becoming victims of crime and



LA JOYA, Texas: An immigrant child glances back towards Mexico after crossing the border into the United States in La Joya, Texas. — AFP

human smugglers" appears to have been largely ignored. In March, around 172,000 undocumented migrants were detained crossing the US border with Mexico, a 71 percent increase in just one month and the highest level in 15 years, the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reported.

The number of unaccompanied children detained doubled to 18,890 from February to March, according to the CBP. They arrive at the border after a long and often dangerous journey across Mexico by bus, truck, freight train or even on foot. The human flow was originally controlled by Mexicans linked to a program that allowed them to work in the United States between 1942 and 1964. Over the years, criminal gangs moved in, taking control of a chain starting with the touts who

find the migrants in their home country, to the person who brings the ladder so people can climb over the US border fence.

The migrants are identified by bracelets showing their names and categorizing them as "deliveries" or "arrivals." "They put them on you before you get to the river (along the Mexican-US border), and after you cross you have to take it off," said a 24-year-old Honduran migrant who asked not to be named.

The Mexican cartels gradually became more involved in people smuggling after then-president Felipe Calderon unleashed the military in the war on drugs in 2006. "It's a business and, as such, works by supply and demand," said Javier Urbano, an academic at Mexico's Ibero-American University. —AFP

"They are against the state and mobilized against what they call a health dictatorship," the prosecutor said, adding that for them "children in care are unfairly taken from their parents".

'A huge relief'

After the kidnapping, three of the men and her mother walked over the French-Swiss border, taking turns with the child. Then a man nicknamed Romeo picked up Mia and her mother in a Porsche and drove them to a Swiss hotel. They then spent a night with a woman who was a "sympathizer of the movement" before arriving in Sainte-Croix. Five people linked to the kidnapping, aged 23 to 60, were arrested in France from Wednesday to Friday.

Mia is safe and in good health, and a psychologist and social worker would take care of her before she is handed back to her grandmother, the prosecutor said. But with the story becoming big news in France, intense media pressure meant they would not immediately be reunited in Poulteries, investigators said. The mother Lola Montemaggi did not resist arrest when Swiss investigators arrived at the abandoned factory in two vans, though Mia screamed, witnesses told an AFP photographer.

Montemaggi was taken into Swiss police custody and was expected to soon be the subject of a European arrest warrant for her extradition to France. Nearly 200 police officers were mobilized in the search effort. For her paternal grandparents, her rescue "is a huge relief", they said through their lawyer. "It is the end of nights of anguish and fear for the life of our little girl, in particular because of the extremist commitments of the kidnappers," they added. —AFP

Kidnapped French girl, 8, rescued in Switzerland

NANCY: An eight-year-old girl was rescued in Switzerland on Sunday, five days after being kidnapped from her grandmother's French home in a "military" style operation with the alleged involvement of her mother. After a massive search, investigators found the girl, Mia, and her mother Lola Montemaggi in a squat inside an abandoned factory in the Swiss municipality of Sainte-Croix, French prosecutors said.

The 28-year-old mother was arrested along with five men accused of helping her. All five have been charged for the abduction of a minor, and four of them are being held in custody, said the prosecutor's office in Nancy, northeastern France. Three of the men posed as child welfare officials—even using forged identifications—to convince Mia's maternal grandmother to hand her over at their home in the village of Poulteries near France's border with Switzerland on Tuesday. No violence was used in the abduction, but the public prosecutor of Nancy, Francois Perain, said it was like a "military operation," with the "extremely well-prepared" kidnappers even giving it a code name: "Operation Lima." They had walkie-talkies, camping gear, fake license plates, and a budget of 3,000 euros to cover expenses, the prosecutor said. The kidnappers were not known to police but were described as part of the same "community of ideas".



A general view of a closed down factory housing a "self-managed community" in Sainte-Croix, Switzerland, where Mia Montemaggi, an 8-year-old girl kidnapped on April 13 in the French Vosges was found with her mother.

Five hurt in rocket attack on Iraq base hosting Americans

SAMARRA, Iraq: Five rockets targeted an Iraqi airbase hosting US soldiers Sunday, wounding two foreign contractors and three Iraqi soldiers, in the latest attack coinciding with tensions between Baghdad's allies Tehran and Washington. Two of the rockets fired at Balad airbase, north of Baghdad, crashed into a dormitory and a canteen of US company Sallyport, a security source told AFP.

Two foreign contractors and three Iraqi soldiers were wounded, the source added. There was no immediate claim of responsibility, but the United States routinely blames Iran-linked Iraqi factions for such attacks on its troops and diplomats. F-16 fighters are stationed at the Balad airbase, and several maintenance companies are present there, employing Iraqi and foreign staff.

There have been around 20 bomb or rocket attacks

against American interests, including bases hosting US soldiers, since US President Joe Biden took office in January. Dozens of others took place from the autumn of 2019 under the administration of Donald Trump. Two Americans and an Iraqi civilian have been killed in such attacks since late 2019.

An Iraqi civilian working for a firm maintaining US fighter jets for the Iraq airforce was also wounded in one attack. The Balad base was also targeted earlier this month, without causing any casualties.

The attacks are sometimes claimed by shadowy Shiite armed groups aligned with Iran who are demanding the Biden administration set a pullout date for Iraq as it has for Afghanistan. On Wednesday, an explosives-packed drone slammed into Iraq's Arbil airport in the first reported use of such a weapon against a base used by US-led coalition troops in the country, officials said.

There were no casualties in the strike on the capital of northern Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region, although it did cause damage to a building in the military part of the airport. In February, more than a dozen rockets targeted the military complex inside the same airport, killing an Iraqi civilian and a foreign contractor working with US-led troops. —AFP

News in brief

Elephants kill rhino poacher in SA

JOHANNESBURG: Breeding elephants trampled a suspected rhino poacher to death at the weekend in South Africa's famed Kruger National Park, an official said yesterday. Rangers on routine patrol spotted three poachers who ran into the elephant herd while trying to flee. The rangers later discovered a "badly trampled" man who had succumbed to his injuries, according to South African National Parks (SANParks) spokesman Isaac Phaahla. Another man was also attacked but managed to flee, while a third was in custody. The rangers recovered a rifle and an axe, Phaahla said. — AFP

COVID alert in Vanuatu

PORT VILA, Vanuatu: Vanuatu slapped travel restrictions on its most populous island yesterday after tests confirmed a body that washed ashore on the largely coronavirus-free Pacific nation was infected with COVID-19. Government sources said the deceased was a Filipino sailor whose vessel had left Port Vila a day before his body was found washed up near a village about five kilometers (3.1 miles) outside the city on Sunday 11 April. The man's crewmates and police officers who retrieved the body had all tested negative for the virus, said the sources, who wished to remain anonymous as they were not authorized to discuss the matter. — AFP

Malawi president fires minister

LILONGWE, Malawi: Malawi President Lazarus Chakwera on Sunday fired Labor Minister Ken Kandodo for diverting \$800 worth of COVID-19 funds to pay for a government trip, part of a wider embezzlement scandal. In a televised address to the nation, Chakwera said the minister was named in an audit report as having listed the funds in his allowances for the travel to South Africa. "I have dropped him from my cabinet accordingly. Even though the minister has since returned the money, his usage of the funds means that the money was unavailable for its intended purpose when it was needed most," Chakwera said. — AFP

Fire rages on foothills of Table Mountain

JOHANNESBURG: At least one firefighter has been injured as emergency services fight to contain a fire that broke out Sunday in the foothills of Cape Town's landmark Table Mountain, city authorities said. The blaze, which has already destroyed a restaurant alongside a statue of British colonial icon Cecil Rhodes, AFP journalists reported from the scene. As strong winds fanned the blaze, hundreds of University of Cape Town students had to flee their dormitories on foot along the main road as their library burned. Cape Town's mayor Dan Plato said at least one firefighter was being treated for burns in hospital. — AFP

Pope concern over Ukraine build-up

VATICAN CITY: Pope Francis expressed concern Sunday over the escalation of military activity in eastern Ukraine and called for measures to restore trust in the region. His comments came after Ukraine and several western powers warned Russia about what they say is a massing of tens of thousands of forces on the border with Ukraine. Clashes along the border, which had nearly ceased after a cease-fire reached last summer, have recently resumed. Pope Francis spoke after the Angelus prayer in Saint Peter's Square. — AFP

Fiji cities go into lockdown

SUVA: Fiji ordered two of its largest cities into lockdown yesterday after the Pacific island nation recorded its first case of COVID-19 community transmission in 12 months. Health authorities said the case was a 53 year-old woman who was a close contact of a soldier who contracted the virus at a quarantine facility in Nadi. "To aid rapid contact tracing and reduce the likelihood of further transmission, we are announcing a lockdown of the greater Nadi and Lautoka area, starting from 4 am this morning," the health department said in a statement. — AFP



ISLAMABAD: Traders shout slogans as they take part in a protest at a closed market area during a nationwide strike called by various groups to show solidarity with the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) party after TLP's leader was detained following his calls for the expulsion of the French ambassador, in Islamabad yesterday. — AFP

Pakistan radical group releases 11 police hostages

LAHORE: Eleven Pakistani police officers seized by supporters of a radical group campaigning to get the French ambassador expelled have been released, officials said yesterday. The officers were grabbed and taken as hostages during the latest violent clashes between police and Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) protesters in Lahore. A video circulating on social media, confirmed by a police source, showed some of them bloodied and bruised, with bandages around their heads. Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed said early yesterday that "11 policemen who were made hostages" had been released after talks with the TLP, which the government banned last week after effectively labelling it a terrorist organization.

"Negotiations have been started with TLP; the first round completed successfully," said Rashid in a video on Twitter. Lahore police confirmed the release of the hostages, adding that one of the group was a ranger from the country's paramilitary force. The officers had been held at a TLP mosque stronghold in Lahore, which is now packed with supporters and surrounded by police. Rioting has rocked the country for the past week since the leader of the TLP was detained in Lahore after calling for a march on the capital to evict the French ambassador. The protests have paralyzed cities and led to the deaths of six policemen.

TLP leaders say several of the party's supporters have also been killed and many wounded in clashes. Solidarity strike -Calls for a nationwide strike in solidarity with the TLP has been widely supported by mainstream religious groups. Yesterday, shops and markets in Lahore and Karachi were closed and some transport services halted. —AFP

New crunch talks over Merkel succession

BERLIN: Germany's conservatives will hold crunch talks on a bitter battle to succeed Angela Merkel at upcoming elections, with the leader of the chancellor's party warning against a polarizing campaign as experienced by the United States. "I have called the party board to discussions at 6pm (1600 GMT) today... and will make a proposal as to how we can solve this issue quickly," said Armin Laschet, the embattled leader of Merkel's CDU party.

Laschet, who is state premier of Germany's most

populous state North Rhine-Westphalia, has been locked in a power struggle against his Bavarian challenger Markus Soeder, leader of the CSU party, over who will lead the conservatives into general elections on September 26. Divisions in the conservative camp were further underlined yesterday as the Greens — who are polling second behind the CDU-CSU — announced co-chair Annalena Baerbock as their candidate at a slick press event with no signs of strife within the center-left party.

Congratulating Baerbock on the nomination, Laschet promised a "fair election campaign" and urged parties to be "respectful" of each other in a veiled warning to Soeder. "We know from the USA what it means to have polarised election campaigns, and we know how long it took and is taking a new president to once again reconcile the country," he said, in an apparent reference to President Joe Biden. —AFP