

## International

# People smugglers use TikTok to promote their services

## In Mexico, 'digital service companies are obliged to hand over information when there's a crime'

**MEXICO:** A photo posted to TikTok shows a group of people dressed in camouflage, hoping to blend into the shadowy vegetation dotting the nighttime landscape of the Mexican desert. The picture was not uploaded by social media influencers on an adventurous vacation—it's an advertisement by people smugglers.

Technology-savvy criminals using the popular video-sharing app are posing a growing challenge to Mexican and US authorities fighting a regional migration crisis. "Departing this weekend. People from Mexico interested in crossing to the United States, leave your messages," the TikTok post said.

Another account offering to smuggle irregular migrants through the violence-wracked Mexican border state of Tamaulipas shows a photo of minors in an inflatable boat on a river. "We also make crossings with children and family," it said.

An AFP investigation found dozens of similar accounts around the region, including in Guatemala, Colombia and Ecuador. And using the hashtag #pollero—a slang term for a people smuggler—one account offered "safe work" for drivers in the southwestern US state of Arizona for payment of up to \$15,000. "If you have a car and want to make easy money, write to me," said a message in English.

The advertising violates TikTok's official rules, which prohibit the "promotion and facilitation of criminal activities." "Maintaining the safety of our community is a responsibility we take very seriously," a spokesman for the app told AFP. "We do not tolerate content that promotes human exploitation, including human trafficking," he added.

According to TikTok, in the third quarter of 2022 the firm removed 82 percent of the videos linked to criminal practices on its own initiative. Seeking to fend off calls for the app to be banned in the United States as long as it remains a Chinese company, Tik-

Tok chief executive Shou Zi Chew was due to testify before US lawmakers on Thursday.

He would deny that the app has, or would ever, share data with the Chinese government, according to his prepared remarks made available by the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

### Cyber police patrols

In Mexico, authorities have formed specialized cells to counter the threat posed by people smugglers on social media. In a room full of computers in Mexico City, dozens of experts from the government's Criminal Investigation Agency have been monitoring social media accounts since 2017. A board lists people of interest and their online activities. The unit has been involved in around 300 human trafficking investigations, said Rolando Rosas, head of the communications center at the Federal Ministerial Police, part of the Attorney General's Office.

In Mexico, "digital service companies are obliged to hand over information when there's a crime," he said, welcoming the good cooperation with social media platforms. The unit's head, Benjamin Oviedo, said that his team intervenes, for example, when payment to a trafficker is agreed on or made through the internet.

But the advertisements are not always real. "Many of the things that we find can sometimes be a fraud," said Rosas. According to a report published by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in February, TikTok is used by people smugglers as a way to promote successful cases of irregular crossings. It warned that the crime opened the door to others, such as the sexual exploitation of minors.

The organization surveyed more than 500 migrants in transit, of whom nearly two-thirds said they had accessed a smartphone and the internet during the trip. Transporting migrants by road, often in



WASHINGTON: People gather for a press conference about their opposition to a TikTok ban on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC on March 22, 2023. — AFP

vans or crammed into the back of trucks, sometimes without ventilation, is one of the quickest but most dangerous methods used by people smugglers.

More than 7,600 migrants have died or disappeared in transit in the Americas since 2014, according to the IOM. Of those, nearly 1,000 were the result of vehicle accidents or linked to hazardous transport, the United Nations agency says.

TikTok is also used by migrants to share advice with each other on how to survive the treacherous journey to the United States. Andrea, 25, and her friend Beatriz, 29, who left Venezuela in October,

used the app to find recommendations on traveling through danger zones such as the Darien Gap, an inhospitable jungle area straddling the Colombian-Panamanian border.

Now in Mexico, Andrea, who did not want to give her full name, pulled out her cellphone to show the profile of a young woman who has managed to reach the United States and put together a travel blog.

She gives recommendations of what to pack and which medicines to carry—advice that is sometimes, but not always, useful, Beatriz said. "Everyone's experience is very personal," she added. — AFP

## Inter-American court hears first abortion case

**SAN JOSE:** The Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) on Wednesday held its first day of testimony in a landmark abortion rights case as women called for "justice" outside the Costa Rica-based tribunal. A woman identified only as "Beatriz" is symbolically squaring off at the IACHR against the Central American country of El Salvador, which enforces an absolute ban on the procedure.

The country is accused of alleged human rights violations and torture after Beatriz was forced to carry a non-viable fetus for nearly three months despite a risk to her health.

Protesters had appeared outside the court building in San Jose at dawn to follow the hearing live on a big screen sporting purple accessories -- the symbolic color of the fight for gender equality.

They waved banners stating: "This fight is for Beatriz and for everyone," and asserting the case could "change the future of women in Latin America."

Across the street, about two dozen anti-abortion demonstrators also gathered, praying silently. The case comes as some Latin American countries are taking cautious steps towards easing abortion restrictions, even as the United States -- which has signed but not ratified the IACHR founding convention -- sees several states rolling back access.

The court's decision to hear the case "strongly indicates... that the denial of any health service, including those that are controversial such as abortion, is a human rights violation," said Maria Antonieta Alcalde of the Ipas reproductive rights NGO, which is among the plaintiffs. Beatriz died in a traffic accident in 2017 after the case was filed. Her family decided to take the case forward anyway.

"What we really want is for other women not



SAN SALVADOR: Women gather at the Faculty of Jurisprudence of the University of El Salvador to tune in to the live broadcast from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in Costa Rica of the public hearing in the case of Beatriz and Others v. El Salvador, in San Salvador. — AFP

to suffer what my sister had to go through," Beatriz's 30-year-old brother, using the pseudonym Humberto, told AFP.

### 'A form of torture'

In El Salvador, abortion has been prohibited since 1998 under penalty of eight years in prison. Courts frequently find women guilty of the crime of aggravated homicide instead, imposing sentences that can go up to 50 years.

Beatriz suffered from an auto-immune disease when she fell pregnant for the second time in 2013 at age 20, after already going through a previous complicated birth. After the fetus was found to be unviable due to a severe developmental defect, a medical board determined "it was necessary to perform an abortion at that moment (12 weeks of pregnancy) to prevent her health from being damaged or she could possibly die," Beatriz's doctor, Guillermo Antonio Ortiz, told AFP.

An appeal to the country's Constitutional Court

more of the Quran, reflecting on its implications, learning about its verses, and attempting to comprehend God's intended message. All these combined puts forth a Muslim who is able to restrain himself, be aware of the weight of their words and actions upon all kinds of beings, and be weary of losing all the hard work they have put in.

As a result, Ramadan ends with graduating a person whose character, habits, and relationships are significantly improved. Lastly, fasting Ramadan is not designed to torment people. Soon after dusk, Muslims are allowed to satiate their natural desires: to have food and to enjoy intimacy with their spouses. Furthermore, once thirty days pass, Muslims have a grand celebration, known as Eid Al Fitr, where they buy new clothes and visit each other.

Charity is paid so that everyone, no matter their financial status, can enjoy Eid, and thus you can be sure that at the end of Ramadan, 1.8 billion human beings are happily clothed, fed, and content, in a beautiful representation of The Musketeer's motto, "all for Here lies the symbolism of it all, self-restraint is greatly rewarded, be that in the simple delicious meal after a long day of fasting or in entering Paradise after conforming to God's commands. Now, I ask you this, isn't it time to get your fast on?"

(Courtesy of the TIES Center: The TIES Center is one of the projects of Kuwait Society for Cultural Dialogue, and is the social and educational hub for English speaking expats in Kuwait and aims at empowering Kuwait's expats through social and educational services that promote a positive and productive role in society. It also facilitates opportunities for intra- and interfaith interactions that promote social solidarity. For more information, you can contact TIES at Tel: 25231015/6; Hotline: 94079777; e-mail: info@tiescenter.net.)

for an abortion was denied despite the non-viability of the fetus. Eighty-one days later she went into premature labor, and after doctors performed a cesarean section, the baby died five hours later.

"I think we made her suffer a lot and I think I have a responsibility to the mom and to the family," said Ortiz, who testified in court. Gisela de Leon of the Center for Justice and International Law (Cejil), a rights NGO also among the plaintiffs, said the state had "violated (Beatriz's) rights to life and personal integrity" by forcing her to carry the fetus knowing it could not survive.

"We are claiming that the suffering to which she was subjected, knowing that her right to life was at risk, is a form of torture," said De Leon. Humberto said his sister was a victim of a poor, marginalized upbringing which causes "such situations happening to women because they do not have access to a system that guarantees reproductive health."

In Latin America, elective abortion is legal in Argentina, Colombia, Cuba, Uruguay, and some states in Mexico. In several countries it is allowed in certain circumstances, such as rape or health risks, while outright bans apply also in Honduras, Nicaragua, Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

Several states in the United States have banned or curtailed abortion access since a Supreme Court ruling last June overturned the landmark Roe v. Wade decision that had long protected abortion rights.

"Beatriz's situation is typical because it represents thousands of women... whose right to make decisions about their lives is not respected," protester Carla Ansolini, 36, who had traveled to Costa Rica from Brazil, told AFP.

In El Salvador, around 100 women followed the trail by video link from inside the auditorium at the University of El Salvador, most of whom wore green T-shirts bearing the words: "Beatriz wanted to live and be happy." The IACHR will hear testimony from relatives of Beatriz and doctors who treated her. The case will be heard over two days, with judgment expected in about six months. — AFP

## First 3D-printed rocket lifts off but...

Continued from Page 1

Terran 1 was not carrying a payload for its first flight, but the rocket will eventually be capable of putting up to 2,755 pounds into low Earth orbit. The rocket is 110 feet tall with a diameter of 7.5 feet. Eighty-five percent of its mass is 3D-printed with metal alloys, including the nine Aeon 1 engines used in its first stage and the one Aeon Vacuum engine employed in the second. It is the largest ever 3D-printed object and was made using the world's largest 3D metal printers, according to the Long Beach-based company.

Relativity's goal is to produce a rocket that is 95 percent 3D-printed. Terran 1 is powered by engines using liquid oxygen and liquid natural gas—the "propellants of the future," capable of eventually fueling a voyage to Mars, Relativity says. SpaceX's Starship and Vulcan rockets being developed by United Launch Alliance use the same fuel. Relativity is also building a larger rocket, the Terran R, capable of putting a payload of 44,000 pounds into low Earth orbit. The first launch of a Terran R, which is designed to be fully reusable, is scheduled for next year.

A satellite operator can wait for years for a spot on an Arianespace or SpaceX rocket, and Relativity Space hopes to accelerate the timeline with its 3D-printed rockets. Relativity said its 3D-printed versions use 100 times fewer parts than traditional rockets and can be built from raw materials in just 60 days. Relativity has signed commercial launch contracts worth \$1.65 billion, mostly for the Terran R, according to CEO Tim Ellis, who co-founded the company in 2015 — AFP

## Red carpet threat for King Charles visit to France

**PARIS:** French public sector trade unionists have warned they will not provide red carpets during the visit of Britain's King Charles III to Paris next week, but non-striking workers are expected to roll them out. The CGT union representing staff at the National Furniture service, which is responsible for manufacturing and maintaining red carpets among other items, said Wednesday they would strike during the sovereign's trip to France from Sunday. The union said its members would no longer provide "furnishings, red carpets or flag services."

"We're aware that the king of England will be welcomed in France this weekend and our services will be required," a statement said, adding that the visit would take place "without us". "We ask our managers to point out to the ministry of culture that any request for furnishings will be seen immediately by workers as a provocation," the statement added. But a spokesman for the National Furniture service told AFP that only 24 members of staff were on strike on Thursday out of 420. "The red carpet has been delivered and the trade unions have assured us that they will not block the work of non-striking staff," Loic Turpin said.

Charles III and his wife Queen Consort Camilla are expected to arrive in France on Sunday for their first official trip abroad since Charles ascended to the throne last September. But the country is in the grip of fierce protests and strikes over President Emmanuel Macron's pensions reform, meaning the king's schedule is still being worked out. Officials on both sides are concerned that protesters will use the occasion to publicise their fight against Macron's bid to increase the retirement age to 64 from 62 at present. But in London, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's spokesman told reporters Downing Street was "not aware of any plans to change the plan" concerning the king's visit. — AFP

### NEWS IN BRIEF

#### UK parliament bans TikTok

**LONDON:** Britain's parliament Thursday joined the government in banning TikTok, depriving lawmakers of access to the Chinese-owned video app via its internet network. The announcement came as TikTok's chief executive Shou Zi Chew appeared before a hostile US Congress over its alleged ties to the communist government in Beijing. The app "will be blocked from all parliamentary devices and the wider parliamentary network", the House of Commons and House of Lords said, adding: "Cyber security is a top priority for parliament." Individual lawmakers who are dedicated users of TikTok, such as Energy Security Secretary Grant Shapps, will still be able to use the app on their own phones, but not when connected via parliament's own WiFi network. — AFP

#### Zionists kill Palestinian

**TULKARM:** Zionist forces shot dead a Palestinian man Thursday, the Palestinian health ministry said, the first killing in the occupied West Bank during Ramadan as the army said it targeted an armed suspect. Amir Imad Abu Khadija, 25, was killed by "the occupation bullets during their aggression on Tulkarm," the ministry said in a statement. He was shot in the head and lower limbs, the statement added. — AFP

## It is not about...

Continued from Page 1

fasting. Parents and care givers encourage the children to fast for periods of time that are appropriate to their age and stamina by preparing gifts or celebrating. Ramadan also allows Muslims to empathize with those suffering from famine, thirst, and poverty which ensues a magnanimous spree of charity. Undoubtedly, spirituality levels skyrocket during this holy month and Muslims are even more drawn to experience and apply the six mainstays of belief which are the belief in God, judgment day, God's angels, His messengers, His books, and in predestination. Muslims see Ramadan as the golden opportunity to consolidate these mainstays.

You can see that translated in how they comply to the commands of God whom they do not see. You can also observe in how they internalize accountability which results in the augmented fear of the day of judgment. A fear that springs from the knowledge that they will be responsible for every word and action, and that nobody will intercede nor bear the consequences of their actions except themselves.

It may sound distressing, but the reality is that God has bestowed upon human beings the freedom to choose between good and evil and He has supplied them with the means and the capability of following through with their choice. For that reason, it is only natural that they bear the consequences of their decisions. This is where Ramadan comes into play, Muslims start to double down on monitoring their actions in want of more reward from God. They try their best to avoid major and minor sins alike in hopes of accumulating as much rewards as possible during that short period of time.

During this holy month, Muslims also tend to read