

JOURNALISM MATTERS: REPORTING FOR A BETTER WORLD



Journalism Matters

Journalism shapes societies, uncovers the truth, and gives voice to those who would otherwise remain unheard.

This annual publication of the Fetisov Journalism Awards celebrates outstanding reporting from around the world and explores the stories, ideas, and people advancing investigative journalism, human rights, environmental reporting, and peace journalism.

More than a collection of award-winning work, this volume is a tribute to the journalists whose courage, integrity, and dedication strengthen public understanding and help build a better world.

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FETISOV
JOURNALISM
AWARDS

JOURNALISM THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

2025 STORIES

2026 FJA Book

Editor: Aidan White, Honorary Advisor and General Director
of the FJA. President of the Ethical Journalism Network.

Compiled by:
Eva Merkacheva, Nadezda Azhgikhina

Design:
Maria Kristal

Proof-reading:
Natalia Ivanova

Fondation Caritative Fetisov
(Fetisov Charitable Foundation)
Address c/o Sanctuary Fiduciary Services SA,
11 Rue du Rhône, 1204 Geneva, Switzerland

President and Board Member: Miriam Levy Turner

FETISOV JOURNALISM AWARDS

Contacts:
Website: <https://fjawards.com/>
Twitter: @fjawards
Facebook: facebook.com/fjawards/
YouTube: FJA Youtube channel

Emails:
info@fjawards.com
Enquiries regarding participation in the contest
contact@fjawards.com
General enquiries (including partnership and sponsorship)

Fetisov Journalism Awards

2025 STORIES

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INTRODUCTION



By
**Aidan
White**

Journalism provides hope for a better world

The world may be moving through dark times, but the Fetisov Journalism Awards are a timely reminder that journalism is a beacon of hope.

In this, the seventh year of our Awards, the FJA once again highlights how independent and courageous journalists are making a difference in a world where corruption, injustice, and disinformation are shredding public confidence in democracy.

The scale of the threats facing societies across the globe was highlighted early in 2026 when the press freedom monitoring group Reporters Without Borders reported that more than half of the world's countries face difficult conditions for press freedom. In many countries, journalism has been criminalised by authoritarian states and incompetent political powers.

Given the added threats of predatory economic actors and under-regulated online platforms, times have never been so hard for journalism and news media.

But as our awards this year illustrate, exposing corruption and injustice, and holding power to account, can lead to meaningful change.

The work of our winners keeps a focus on the need to protect human rights and safeguard fundamental freedoms, even as opportunistic politicians and a billionaire-class of corporate leaders extend the gulf between rich and poor, undermining both democracy and the rule of law.



Our winners, through their brilliant and stylish reporting, demonstrate how war is waged, how conflict can be so easily ignored and why peacemaking and truth-telling has to continue after the guns have stopped firing in order to create meaningful and durable resolution of conflict.

Since we launched in 2019, the FJA has put a spotlight on radical and cutting-edge reporting with impact: laws have been changed, institutions have been reformed, and injustices have been remedied.

Our winners shine a light on our mission to promote better understanding worldwide of the climate emergency, the yearning for peace in the midst of conflict, the need to protect civil liberties and the value to humanity of investigative, fact-based reporting.

All of them illuminate truths we need to know about the world around us.

In his opening address, the FJA founder Gleb Fetisov told guests that the peace-making potential of journalism is needed more than ever when telling the simplest of truths has become perilous.

In recent years reporters and camera staff have been targeted and killed, whether reporting from the frontline of catastrophic wars or exposing corruption and exploitation of vulnerable communities in endangered regions of the world.

Since 2019, the Fetisov Journalism Awards have recognized outstanding journalism from more than 145 countries

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The threats to the environment – and how they can be resolved – the ordeal of injustice and the exploitation of the world's most vulnerable groups also featured in a celebration of the world's best reporting on issues that cannot be ignored, or trivialized, or sensationalized.

This year, on 22 April 2026, our presentation ceremony was held in Cyprus, at a time when this small island nation – itself divided more than 50 years ago in a regional conflict – was punching above its political weight, taking on the Presidency and leadership of the European Union.

In Cyprus, we also held a meeting of our experts, jury and international journalism leaders to discuss current challenges in news journalism, and we launched a new chapter in the development of the FJA – the launch of the Fetisov Academy.

This network of FJA alumni, brings together the hundreds of winners and shortlisted journalists who have been recognized since our launch. In fact, since our launch, the FJA has received more than 2000 entries from 137 countries.

This year alone we received more than 400 entries, further evidence that public interest journalism is in good health despite the continuing threats facing news media from industry turbulence, physical threats to media staff, and the challenge of adjusting to new ways of working in the online age.

Our work continues to be guided by the oversight of high-level professionals from all parts of the world, who make up our panel of experts and jury. The FJA Expert Coun-



cil and our Jury Panel once again report a steady and unmistakable increase in the quality of entries. There is more fresh examples of cross-border collaboration.

This year our shortlist is made up of 33 entries from 19 countries: Netherlands, France, Qatar, Indonesia, UK, USA, India, Finland, Mexico, Italy, Canada, Germany, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, China, Nigeria, Cameroon, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This year's shortlist was selected in four categories and chosen after thorough evaluation by the FJA Expert Council. In the second stage of the process our Jury Panel completed the arduous task of choosing the final winners who share a prize fund of 520,000 CHF (more than \$635,000), with each of the four top prize winners receiving 100,000 CHF (around \$120,000).

These rewards are substantial, but they recognize the difference that this type of journalism makes in our troubled times. More importantly, our winners are enriched by the respect of their peers and are remembered for their contribution to forging a safer, gentler and more respectful world for all of us.

FOUNDER'S
SPEECH



Only the word of truth has the power to reverse the drama of the entire world

Founder Gleb Fetisov.
Speech given at the 2026 FJA
Awards Ceremony

Dear friends and colleagues,
our award includes nominations in four categories. All of them are important. But given the times we are living in, today I would like to place special emphasis on one of them – the award for contribution to peace.

Three thousand three hundred years ago, the legendary “Battle of a Thousand Chariots” took place. It was the culmination of a long war between Egypt and the Hittites – two superpowers of their time dividing spheres of influence. Both sides suffered enormous losses. There was no victor, and in the end, inscribed in cuneiform on clay tablets, the first peace treaty in history was signed. It was called the “Eternal Treaty of Peace and Brotherhood.” And those peoples believed that there would be no more wars.

Since then, thousands of wars have been fought and thousands of peace treaties have been signed. Yet humanity once again stands on the brink of war – a global one, and potentially the most destructive of all.

Everything is painfully reminiscent of the eve of previous world wars.

We hear the rhetoric of paranoid politicians speaking of enemies and malicious intent where none exists. Conflicts are once again emerging, organised along familiar lines, surrounded by the same alliances, all rattling their weapons.

No election campaign includes a promise to wage war – because no nation would grant such a mandate. And yet, the

world is governed by the selfishness and greed of elites, whose unspoken motto seems to be: “Plunder while the fire burns.”

The eternal thirst to conquer, driven by the endless struggle for resources and dominance, always gives rise to those who want more than anyone else.

The duty of journalism is to prevent maniacal politicians and their hidden puppet masters from crossing the threshold into war.

The suffering of the victims of war does not divide along nationality, skin colour, or religion. Blood has only one colour.

Franklin Roosevelt once said: “Wherever peace is broken anywhere in the world, it threatens peace everywhere else.”

This idea resonates with all our nominations – for example, when we speak about journalism’s role in protecting the environment. Our planet has only one set of lungs. If forests are destroyed in the Amazon or on Sumatra, the threat of lung disease extends to all humanity.

As described by the well-known “butterfly effect,” the flap of a butterfly’s wings on the shores of Thailand can cause a tornado in Texas. However, in the famous laboratories of Los Alamos, it has been discovered that in quantum systems the butterfly effect may not always apply – some changes can be reversed.

The community of truthful journalism is precisely such a unique system within society – one capable of reversing the unfolding drama of our world, at a moment when its very existence is under threat.

Your voice matters.

The peace achieved with your help will make all sides winners – and abolish defeat itself.

Not long ago, Pope Leo XIV addressed journalists and said: “I urge you never to sell your power.” He quoted the philosopher Hannah Arendt: “The ideal subject of totalitarianism is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction, between true and false, no longer exists.”

Your mission is to ensure that people clearly see that distinction – and to help each individual build their own life strategy based on reliable information.

The unification of millions of such individual strategies into a shared pursuit of truth and justice is the most important path toward peace and a stable future for our planet.

I believe you will not sell your power.

And together, we will walk this path.

Thank you for your work – and for your courage.

The unification of millions of such individual strategies into a shared pursuit of truth and justice is the most important path toward **peace and a stable future for our planet.**

EXPERT COUNCIL 2025

Aleksandr Zukerman
Editor and Producer, NEWS Tallinn
[Estonia](#)

Andreas Harsono
Indonesia Researcher Human Rights Watch,
[Indonesia](#)

Anna del Freo
Journalist, Il Sole 24 Ore
Member of FNSI Executive Board
[Italy](#)

Babita Basnet
Editor, Ghatana Ra Bichar
Executive Director, Media Advocacy Group,
[Nepal](#)

Baris Altintas
Co-Founder and Co-Director
Media and Law Studies Association
[Turkey](#)

Brent Edwards
Political Editor, NBR, NZ Representative on the
MEAA Media Safety & Solidarity Fund
[New Zealand](#)

Cherian George
Professor of Media Studies
Hong Kong Baptist University's School of
Communication
[Hong Kong](#)

Christos Christofides
Member of the Gender Council, IFJ, Member of
the Cyprus Journalism Ethics Committee
[Cyprus](#)

Diatou Cissi
Journalist, Former Editor-in-Chief, National
Television, Former Vice-President, IFJ,
[Senegal](#)

Daniela Pinheiro
Journalist, Author, Former Editor-in-Chief, Epoca
Magazine
[Brazil/Portugal](#)

David Dembélé
Investigative Journalist
Founder, Malian Network of Investigative
Journalists
[Mali](#)

Diego Cabot
Deputy Editor-in-Chief, La Nación
Investigative Journalist, King of Spain Press
Prize & FJA
[Argentina](#)

Dilrukshi Handunnetti
Sri Lanka Editor, Mongabay Co-founder, Center
for Investigative Reporting (CIR)
[Sri Lanka](#)

Emma Clark
Deputy Bureau Chief of Afghanistan and
Pakistan, Agence France-Presse (AFP)
[Pakistan](#)

Gabriel Baglo
Journalist, Expert, Trainer & Consultant in Media
Development and Communication
[Senegal](#)

Ivana Dragičević
Editor-at-large at N1 Television, Exclusive CNN
Affiliate for the Adria-Balkans Region
[Croatia](#)

Joan Chirwa
Founder, Free Press Initiative Zambia, Southern
Africa Correspondent, Committee to Protect
Journalists
[Zambia](#)

Kunda Dixit, Editor and Publisher, Nepali Times
Co-Publisher, Himalmedia
[Nepal](#)

EXPERT COUNCIL 2025

Ljiljana Zurovac, Independent Media Expert
Former Executive Director, Press Council in BiH
[Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)

Madeline Di Nonno, President & CEO, Geena
Davis Institute, Executive Producer, Media &
Inclusion Advocate
[United States](#)

Naranjargal Khashkhuu, Honorary Professor,
University of Arts and Culture of Mongolia
Co-Founder and President, GIC
[Mongolia](#)

Nikolay Uskov, Editorial Director, Forbes Russia
Former Editor-in-Chief, Forbes Russia, Former
Editor, Men's Health, GQ, Snob
[Russia](#)

Oliver Money-Kyrle
Media Freedom Consultant & Journalist, Former
Director, Global Programmes, IFJ; Former Head
of Europe Programme, IPI
[United Kingdom](#)

Raffaella Chiodo Karpinsky
Journalist, Human Rights Activist, Coordinator
and Researcher, UISP; Board Chair, FARE
[Italy](#)

Remzi Lani
Executive Director, Albanian Media Institute,
Member of the Board, WAN-IFRA
[Albania](#)

Salla Nazarenko
Journalist, Author, Chair of Transparency
International
[Finland](#)

Seamus Martin
Retired International Editor and Foreign
Correspondent, The Irish Times
[Ireland](#)

Sevda Alankus
Dean, Faculty of Communication, Yasar
University, Education Advisor, ICN
[Turkey](#)

Stuart Laidlaw
Journalist, Editor, Former National
Representative, Communications, UNIFOR
[Canada](#)

Svetlana Pasti
Journalist, Researcher and Consultant
Docent of Journalism at Tampere University
[Finland](#)

Teresa Carreras
Journalist & Coordinator, GAMAG Europe
Professor of Journalism, Former Editor-in-Chief
& Brussels Correspondent, TVE Catalonia
[Spain](#)

Vanina Berghella
Regional Director for Latin America & the
Caribbean, International Fund for Public Interest
Media
[Argentina](#)

Xhelal Neziri
President of BIRC Institute, Investigative Editor
of SCOOP-Macedonia
[North Macedonia](#)

Yana Israelyan
Journalist, Editor
Expert of Media Literacy
[Georgia](#)

Yusuf Jameel
Journalist, Columnist, Kashmir Correspondent,
The Asian Age and Deccan Chronicle
[India](#)

JURY 2025



Ricardo Gutierrez
General Secretary
European Federation of Journalists (EFJ)
[Belgium](#)



Julianne Schultz
Professor Emeritus, Media and Culture
Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research
[Australia](#)



Kaarle Nordenstreng
Professor Emeritus of Journalism and Mass
Communication, University of Tampere
[Finland](#)



Milica Pesic
Executive Director, Media Diversity Institute
(MDI), Journalist (BBC, Radio Free Europe,
TV Serbia), Media Diversity & Misinformation
Specialist
[UK](#)

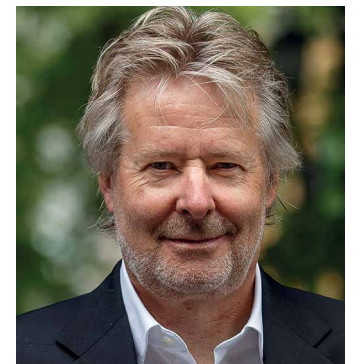
Pravit Rojanaphruk
Journalist and Press Freedom Advocate
Columnist and Senior Staff Writer, Khaosod
English
[Thailand](#)



Tony Sadownichik
Board Chair, World Heritage International
Former Board Chair, Markets For Change;
Former Head of Research, Greenpeace
International
[Canada](#)



Torry Pedersen
Special Advisor of Schibsted Group
Former CEO/Editor-in-Chief of VG, Norway;
Member of WAN-IFRA Expert Panel
[Norway](#)



Zaffar Abbas
Editor, Dawn, Former BBC Correspondent
Chairman, Editors for Safety
[Pakistan](#)



Eva Merkacheva
Journalist, Author, Human Rights Activist
[Russia](#)



The 2025 Fetisov Awards

winners of the Journalism



Outstanding Contribution to **Peace**

THE 2025 WINNERS



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The Forgotten

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Tom Parry, United Kingdom

**An invisible threat lurking in the water is slowly
destroying these women's lives.**

VIEW
FROM
THE JURY

Solidarity in journalism is what matters in age of digital news



FJA jury member

Eva Merkacheva

on how awards help build

consensus around professional

values in the age of digital journalism

With the digitalization of information, the social role of news media and solidarity among journalists is coming under strain. It is affecting how journalists understand their professional responsibility.

The new phase of development of journalism, which is linked to the evolution of information technologies, has led to rethinking the role of journalism in society and has also left its mark on the state of the professional journalism.

During this transformation the question of preserving journalists' professional identity has become especially pressing, something that is taken up in the epilogue to this book.

Looking at contemporary practices of journalistic self-regulation, there are grounds to argue that the notion of public interest journalism, founded as a profession with heightened social responsibility, remains at the heart of our historically formed understanding of journalistic duty.

Our ethics dictate a journalist's professional relationships. These are obligations that reflect the specific nature of journalism's role in society as a distinct social institution.

Professional cooperation among journalists guarantees and preserves our core values. These are institutionally grounded, through press councils and professional awards, and in the exercise of ethical work, all of which contributes to the promotion of journalism as a public good.

Journalism awards are an important mechanism of self-regulation. They are examples of professional coopera-

*The challenges
journalism faces in this
age of socio-political
and technological
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thinking and research**
into the theory of self-
regulation in journalism.*

tion among journalists, raising the status of the profession, highlighting new possibilities for the development of modern news reporting, and playing a crucial role in building a culture of professionalism in journalism globally.

Journalism prizes, such as the Fetisov Journalism Awards, preserve the profession's key principles, the ethical values that have emerged in the course of journalism's historical development. These include accuracy, truthfulness, the separation of fact from opinion, and attribution of sources. Professional awards are a vital way to unite journalists at the national and international levels on the basis of a shared commitment to these ethical norms.

The challenges journalism faces in this age of socio-political and technological change require fresh thinking and research into the theory of self-regulation in journalism.

At the same time further research is needed into how journalism awards can improve and reinforce professional standards in our work amidst the technological transformation of newsrooms.

One important sign of vitality in journalism is how journalists maintain professional solidarity and cooperation, particularly as an effective means of preserving independence and resisting external influence from various actors within the information field.

There is much to be optimistic about. The effectiveness of journalism as an institution is secure thanks to its ability to sustain solidarity among journalists and by its cooperation with representatives of new media and the media audience.

This is crucial for the future and is not guaranteed, but it will be achieved by building consensus among journalists and all participants in the information-and-communication process.

**The challenges
journalism** faces
in this age
of socio-political
and technological
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into the theory
of self-regulation
in journalism.

Nomination

Outstanding
Contribution
to Peace





Conflict reporting is not just about coverage from the battlefield. When people go to war it creates long-lasting wounds, painful memories and bitterness between communities that may take generations to heal.

This year's 10 shortlisted entries in the category for Journalism as an Outstanding Contribution to Peace show just how building the conditions for peace is a never-ending struggle.

Creating the conditions for the rule of law and an environment where people can live together in a shared and respectful space, requires a profound reconciliation with the past, a need for remorse and forgiveness in equal measure, and the eradication of all lingering forms of discrimination. In particular, the state needs to be cleansed of all forms of institutional bias and discrimination to ensure minority rights are protected.

Two entries highlighted the plight of women in conflict, one on the struggle for justice for victims of sexual crimes and a second on the women who was seduced by terrorist ideology. Another looks at women who have suffered in Sudan. Three stories, from Lebanon, Syria and Cameroon, focus on the ordeal of picking up the pieces after the war is ended. Yet another from Nigeria exposes a horrifying cover-up of civilian casualties.

All the stories show how building peace is an endeavour which can be strengthened through positive and constructive journalism. The three worthy winners selected by the judges demonstrate perfectly the value of careful and sensitive reporting in finding ways to heal divisions and the power of humanity to overcome the pain of loss.

But the most powerful entry, which focuses on Sudan in Africa, and a second story from Cameroon, carry with them a message to news media and policymakers alike, that journalists and news media must never ignore their responsibility to tell the whole story and never to ignore suffering in faraway places.



Wolfgang Bauer,
Germany

Wolfgang Bauer was born in Hamburg in 1970. University of Tübingen: Islamic studies followed by geography and history.

Started his career as Freelance journalist in 1994.

Learned writing at daily Schwäbisches Tagblatt and since 2000 reporter for various magazines like National Geographic and Stern. Specialized on long-read-features.

Covered conflicts in Africa and the middle east for 25 years and since 2011 has been a reporter for the Editor in Chief of Die Zeit.



FIRST
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WINNER

The Forgotten

Don't look away: journalists must tell every story

In this moving acceptance speech FJA winner Wolfgang Bauer challenged journalists not to ignore the suffering of people in the world's forgotten wars

I thank the jury for having the courage not to look away from the horrors that have occurred and continue to occur in Sudan.

That's just how it is in our media business: we're spending attention less and less.

We'd rather stay in our offices and do our research over the phone. Less and less often, we go out to the people, out to the villages where the future is decided.

We are increasingly trapped in the algorithm of editorial systems. Which topics got the most clicks, which topics led to subscriptions?

The world of events and international connections has become so vast, but the world of commercial journalism has become so small – and is growing ever smaller. We tend to report on mental health, partnerships, income, how to make money, and Trump-Boy.

We report less and less on the unexpected, the new, and the complex.

And that is why we almost never report on the bloodiest conflict of our time: the war in Sudan. I have reported on so many conflicts around the world, but rarely have I been so lost for words as during these two weeks in the hospital of Al-Naw in Omdurman, part of Sudan's capital.

At that time, more than a year ago, Al-Naw was the only hospital in Sudan's capital that still had the capacity to perform major operations. It was the last resort for tens of thousands of people. Their last hope.

A hope that would prove futile for so many.

The dying in this hospital, surrounded on three sides by the front line and exposed to rocket fire almost daily, was overwhelming. I believed, I know death.

It is a constant companion in my work – but this death was new to me. So much death in such a small space. And so few people here in Europe who care about this suffering.

During our research, we – the photographer Johanna Maria Fritz and I – were the only foreign journalists in this large, wounded, bleeding country.

No one knows the exact number of victims of this war; no one counts the dead, the injured, the raped.

No one is paying attention anymore

Or have we ever paid attention? For the leaders of the fighting factions, war has long been a better business than peace. The major powers, America and Europa, have turned away and left Sudan to the claws and power appetite of unleashed regional powers.

If it is true that the future is being written in Africa, then it will be a very bleak future.

Because it is not only Sudan that is bleeding, but also Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. The state architecture of an entire region is disintegrating.

If we do not care about the suffering of others, the pain of Muna Majek, the pain of Hassan al-Tahan, of Seinab Issa, of Nada Abdulgassim, then we should at least care about our own pain.

We don't feel it yet. This nightmare still seems far away. But our neighbours' nightmare could soon be ours.

That is why I ask everyone, not to turn away!

There is so much suffering in this world. It is hard to bear. Many look away. I understand that. But I cannot. I am afraid to look away. I am afraid of losing parts of my humanity. I am afraid to loose the reason, I breathe, the reason I eat, the reason I think.

I have so many people to thank. First and foremost, our friend and translator Ismail Al Sheiki, the photographer Johanna Maria Fritz and her patience, my editorial team, who have the commercial madness to send reporters to countries like Sudan.

And I thank all the doctors, nurses and volunteers at Al-Naw Hospital for what they do every single day, also tonight, which will be another night when people die in Al Naw.

The dying in this hospital, surrounded on three sides by the front line and exposed to rocket fire almost daily, was overwhelming.

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in Africa, then it will be a very bleak future.
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Editor's Note

Wolfgang Bauer's extraordinary report shines a light on the horrors that surround the civil war in Sudan. It is, he says, the world's forgotten conflict in which 150,000 people have died, famine has ravaged the population and around 12 million people have fled their homes. There has never been a war like it, but it rarely makes headlines outside the region. According to the United Nations it is "the largest humanitarian catastrophe ever documented."

Bauer tells the story in a stylish act of vivid truth-telling. He demands that the world wake up and take notice: the tragedy of Sudan cannot be ignored any longer. He reinforced this message in moving testimony during the award-ceremony.

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Introduction

In order to stop wars, we need to show how absurd terrible wars are. One of the most terrible wars on this planet is also one of the most forgotten one: the war in Sudan. and that's no coincidence. this feature tries to change it: look at it, read it, talk about it.

**Almost half of Sudan's
population, more than
25 million people,
are starving.
Eleven million people have
been displaced.**

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By Wolfgang
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The
Forgotten

Published in "ZEIT Magazin"

The Forgotten

The room at the end of the corridor, which doctors and nurses avoid and warn each other about, has no number and only one hospital bed. Lying on it is a woman named Muna Majek. She is thin and emaciated. She has been dozing almost motionless for the last few hours. Now she begins to whimper softly. 'Doctor, stop!' she whispers as the doctor approaches her and carefully touches her leg. She pulls the blanket tightly around herself, clinging to it.

She whimpers louder, screams, arches her upper body, roars, throws her head back, and screams as loud as she can. Pain.

There are so many words for it, and yet language cannot describe it. Muna's roar fills the corridor, echoing through the floors above and below her, into the corridors and courtyards of the hospital in Khartoum, once Sudan's proud capital and now nothing but rubble and ruins. War has been raging for almost two years in this country that has never been short of wars. But unlike any war before it, this war has devastated Sudan. Two generals are fighting for power. The ethnic groups of two parts of the country are fighting for dominance. Those from the west are fighting those from the east and north. The front line runs right through the streets of the capital.

The UN speaks of the 'greatest humanitarian catastrophe ever documented'. Almost half of Sudan's population, more than 25 million people, are starving. Eleven million people have been displaced. Over 150,000 Sudanese are believed to have been killed so far, but only rough estimates are available. The world is not interested. Too many crises are happening at the same time.

The UN Security Council is content with issuing weak appeals. No one is helping, and there are only a few international aid organisations. Hardly anyone is reporting on the situation. It took us, a reporter and a photographer from Die Zeit, five days to get here. We are staying in Sudan for three weeks. During this time, we are the only foreign journalists in the country.

We travel via Ethiopia to Port Sudan, then two days through the desert. At the end of the long journey, smoke rises before us from the dust of the wasteland, the smoke of the capital, the smoke of burning houses, the smoke of violence; it hangs black over the city.

Day 1

Muna's screams fade to a whimper.

The doctor, young, fresh out of medical school, inexperienced but fearless, pulls his hand out of her wound. A month ago, she was hit by shrapnel just below her left knee. It broke her lower leg. The doctors put her knee in a cast, but the wound underneath became infected. The wound grew almost unstopably, as if flesh were eating flesh. Half of her lower leg and part of her thigh have already been consumed. Strands of tendons and muscle fibres lie exposed. Muna's leg looks like a body model from an anatomy class.

The doctor kneels in front of her bed to change her bandage, scraping away dead tissue until he reaches red flesh beneath the greenish flesh. Blood runs onto the mattress, dripping onto the floor, which is still brown from the dried blood of the last few days. Under the pressure of his hand, a piece of bone comes loose, as big as a thumb, black and dead; it falls onto the tiles with a clacking sound. 'I can't take it much longer,' says Regina Daniel Kiir, who stands next to Muna during the procedure, who has been at her side every day, who has moved into her hospital room, an energetic, plump woman. She runs a small tea stand on the street.

She has been caring for the injured woman for weeks, having met her shortly before at her stall. She helps her because they both belong to the Nuba people, but above all because she simply feels compassion. 'Will she lose her leg?' she asks the doctor before he leaves the room. 'We'll save it,' he says.

The hospital is like an island of order in a devastated city that once had a population of more than six million. House-to-house fighting has wiped out entire neighbourhoods. Streets are swathes of rubble. High-rise buildings are burnt-out concrete skeletons. Arbitrariness and anarchy reign. Many thieves wear uniforms. In the third year of war, there is little hope left in the city, with one exception: this hospital. Before the war, Al-Nao was one of 54 hospitals and designed to serve the neighbourhood. But now it is the only one in the city that is even halfway functional.

Founded in 1972 by a wealthy textile merchant, it has 193 beds. A long main building with two floors. A hall for the ambulance service. A warehouse. In the middle of the courtyard is a low building with two operating theatres. Surrounded by a wall. Three access roads guarded by armed police.

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Lined with dozens of rickshaws and minibuses, their drivers waiting patiently to transport the living or, often enough, the dead. During his lunch break, the director opens the window of his office and looks out over the crowd at the grey-blue sky. He pulls a chair up to the window. Lights a cigarette. Then remains bent forward for a long time. Dr. Dschamal al-Tajeb al-Obeid. This is how he always does it. Break after break. The window sill is black with ash. The 55-year-old, who studied in Russia and Egypt, runs a hospital with no budget. The military government is broke and spends almost all its income on the war.

There is often no running water in the hospital because the well pump is broken. Often there is no diesel for the emergency generator. Al-Nao has a small oxygen production facility, donated by Saudi Arabia, but the oxygen is not enough. Sometimes the oxygen runs out during operations. 'Today is a quiet day.' Dschamal takes a drag on his cigarette.

The hospital is surrounded on three sides by the front line. It is frequently targeted by artillery fire. The geography of violence in Khartoum is complicated: The Omdurman district, where Al-Nao is located, is controlled by fighters of the regular Sudanese army under Lieutenant General Al-Burhan.

Two kilometres away, on the other side of the Nile, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have captured the Bahri district. They also control Khartoum, the neighbourhood that gives the whole city its name. This is where the presidential palace and most of the ministries are located. The RSF control the west, south and east; only the north is free, and the militia almost overran it as well. The RSF is the result of decades of tyranny in Sudan. It began as a militia of Arab nomadic tribes, feared for its raids against black African tribes in the famine-stricken province of Darfur. Former dictator Omar al-Bashir built it into a rapid reaction force loyal only to him.

Their leader, a former camel trader, is now said to be the richest man in Sudan: Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemeti, or 'Little Mohammed'. The dictator rewarded him with gold mines and sent RSF troops as mercenaries to the civil wars in Yemen and Libya. Hemeti became richer and richer and overthrew his mentor.

In a pact with the army leadership around Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah Abdelrahman Al-Burhan, he staged a coup during the 2019 revolution, had the old head of state arrested, but the pact with Al-Burhan also fell apart – in the early hours of 15 April 2023, the RSF attacked army bases in Khartoum to seize power completely. Director Jamal's break is over, and he crushes his cigarette butt, like the many before it, on the ledge. He is reluctant to talk about the crisis in the country. He

is tired. He would much rather talk about poetry, the books by Arab writers he admires. Poetry. Beauty. But he has to go; he has four operations to perform today.

Room 7

Seinab Issa Schuaiib laughs, and I laugh with her. She is lying on her back, her right arm broken, a piece of shrapnel in her chest, her hands burned. She explains her recipes to me, the translator does his best, but I find it difficult to follow the many steps involved in the preparation. Seinab, 48, used to make a living baking and selling Sudanese desserts. A week ago, a rocket hit the street in front of her house. We talk about fatajer – pastries that she used to fill with spinach or meat. She got up at six o'clock every day to make them. Her husband left her six years ago, and since then she has been living alone with her son Khalid. He was also injured by the grenade. He is ten years old.

When war came to the city, she decided to switch to making Balah Scham sweets. They are very sweet, very sticky pastries. It's more profitable now, she says from her hospital bed. The chocolate bars from the factories that children used to love to snack on are no longer available. The war destroyed the factories.

She uses her time in hospital to think up new recipes. When she gets home, she wants to try them out. The doctors don't want to operate to remove the splinter yet, she says. She doesn't quite understand why. The appointment is scheduled for next week. 'Where is your son?' I ask. 'Yes, where is my son?' Seinab asks her aunt, who is sitting on the edge of the bed. Until now, the family had kept the truth from her. They wanted to spare her. 'He didn't survive,' says the aunt who is looking after her in the hospital. It slips out. 'I didn't know,' whispers Seinab. Her gaze becomes empty; she stares at the ceiling.

Day 2

The artillery battles in Khartoum begin early in the morning between five and six.

We, the reporters, photographer and translator, have taken up quarters in an abandoned house near the hospital. The walls shake from the tremors. The army and the RSF are firing at each other across the Nile.

Room 0

A swarm of flies surrounds Muna in the unnumbered room. The woman, who is in danger of losing her leg, is having her bandages changed again this morning. 'She needs new rolls of gauze,' the doctor tells Regina. 'I don't have any money,' she complains. She doesn't even have enough money to buy food for herself and her friend. Sometimes the nurses give her something. Regina hoards canisters of water under the bed because there is often none left in the hospital. A teapot warmer with smoldering incense stands on the floor.

It is supposed to cover the stench of dead flesh and is good against the many flies. 'We'll give the leg another week,' says the doctor. In the corridor outside Muna's room, two secret service agents stop us. There are three secret services in Al-Nao. They monitor us and each other. A legacy of the surveillance state of the last dictator. 'What are you doing here?' they ask. We show them our permit, which has been signed by three ministries. In Khartoum, we obtained permission from the military spokesman. We are accompanied by one of his representatives. But the community services are still suspicious. This morning, there is a pickup truck in the courtyard with a corpse in the back. The body is wrapped in a sheet, almost looking like a larva.

'That's Seinab,' says a man who approaches us and introduces himself as her brother. Seinab, the cook with whom we laughed the night before. She collapsed and died on her way from the toilet to her room during the night. The news of her son's death had broken her. The doctors are at a loss. Are we partly to blame for her death? Should I have refrained from asking that one question about her son? The relatives reassure us. We calm down, but we remain stunned

by her death. It is the first time we have encountered death in Al-Nao – many more deaths will follow. The pickup truck drives through the gate and the family invites us to accompany them to the funeral.

We turn onto the streets of Omdurman, which are lined with bullet-riddled buildings and the wrecks of burnt-out vehicles. A city, desolate and empty, a wasteland of rubble and stone. In the dust, a single beam of neon light shines. Al-Wadi Street, where life has tentatively returned, with restaurants and shops open. A brief flash of normality, then back to wasteland of ruins and dust. A large crowd has gathered in front of Seinab's brother's house. The few who still live here gather to honour Seinab. The women wash the dead woman in the house, covering all her orifices with white cloth so that no fluid or fibre from her body is lost on the way to the cemetery – that would reduce Seinab's chances of entering paradise. The women clamp fragrant wood between their fingers and toes. Then the body, wrapped in cloth, is carried out, where the community of men takes over.

Nearby, machine guns begin to fire. The Nile, only a few hundred metres away, a frighteningly narrow trickle at this point, marks the front line. The men seem unfazed. No one ducks, seeks shelter, no one seems nervous. Everyday life in Khartoum. Seinab's house is right next door. A tiny structure made of cement blocks, one room with two beds, a pantry where ingredients and spices still stand. 'The boy didn't stand a chance,' says a neighbour about Seinab's son, who died in the rocket attack. 'His intestines were hanging out.' Seinab finds her final resting place in the car park of a police station. The cemetery is too close to the front line.

Dozens of arms gently lower the body into the ground. They seal the grave with concrete slabs to prevent dogs from eating the body. They then pile sand and stones on top. A small boy steps out of the rows of men who have gathered to pray, tears in his eyes. He is holding an empty candy tin, which he places on Seinab's neighbour's grave. It is her son's grave. 'I was his friend,' says the boy.

Room 20

He was handsome and bright, a heartthrob with wild curls. The whole neighbourhood loved him. 'I must still have a photo somewhere,' says his mother, sitting at the head of the bed. She searches her phone but finds nothing. A rattle reaches her ears. 'What's wrong, my son?' she whispers, bending down towards him. His hands and feet are tied to the bed frame with gauze bandages.

Seinab collapsed and died on her way from the toilet to her room during the night. The news of her son's death had broken her.

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There he lies, her son, Mohammed Arief, 16 years old, his skull completely bald. There is a large hole in his face. His mouth is a funnel. His left cheek is missing, as are parts of his upper jaw. A poorly transplanted piece of skin hangs like a rag under his right eye. His eyes wander aimlessly. The 16-year-old is virtually blind. 'I want to walk, Mum!' His voice is distorted by his injuries, reduced to a half-whisper. A month and a half ago, he left early in the morning to go to work, taking a minibus to the market. There he sold clothes. The shrapnel from the shell hit him in the face and blew off three toes on his left foot. 'God loves your son,' the surgeon told her, his mother recounts.

When Mohammed, whom everyone calls Hamoody, arrived at the hospital, few believed he would survive. He writhes angrily in his bed, trying to tear himself free from his restraints. He has already undergone four operations. Because the shrapnel destroyed his palate, he has lost the ability to swallow. He is fed through a feeding tube, a tube that the doctors cut through his abdominal wall. 'Shh,' says his uncle, who spends day and night with him. 'I'll give you something to eat.' First, he squirts ten millilitres of water into the tube to clean it, then a large syringe filled with a paste made from cornflour, then some more water to prevent the tube from sticking. He has to do this every four hours, even at night. 'Shh,' he whispers reassuringly. 'Shh.'

*He is holding an empty
candy tin, which he
places on Seinab's
neighbour's grave.
It is her son's grave.
'I was his friend,' says
the boy.*

Day 3

**The hospital was in no
man's land for a long time.
Sometimes the RSF
controlled the
neighbourhood, sometimes
the army units loyal
to Lieutenant General
Al-Burhan**

At the beginning of the war, an RSF victory seemed only a matter of time. The army lost city after city and almost lost the entire capital. Although it had the numerical advantage with an estimated 200,000 soldiers – twice as many as the RSF – the RSF were more battle-hardened. The army had more tanks and artillery, but it lacked combat-ready fighters.

In their desperation, the generals did what is often done in Sudan, with disastrous consequences: they opened their arsenals and armed the tribes. Thus reinforced, Al-Burhan's troops

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have been advancing again since spring 2024. Now, however, the war between the two generals threatens to break up into many smaller wars. Militia is fighting militia. Never has this already complex conflict been so confusing. There is still no end in sight to the killing. Sudan is rich in gold. Gold finances the military, and gold also finances the RSF fighters. Each party has its own mines. Gold is in demand worldwide, and prices are reaching record highs.

Gold is Sudan's curse. Emergency room A long trail of blood leads into the emergency room this morning. Two men lie on the floor with their upper bodies naked. Doctors and nurses in white coats bend over them, inserting needles into veins, bandaging wounds, trying to stop the bleeding. Gunshot wounds. The cycle of steel and flesh: when the shooting starts in the city, the emergency room remains quiet at first. After a delay, usually half an hour, it fills with the wounded. They arrive in waves, in private cars, on trucks, on donkey carts, in groups whose size is determined by the range of the bullets. There is blood everywhere, splattered across the tiles, on the walls, sometimes even on the ceiling. Then the room empties again and the blood is wiped up by cleaners with brown rags until the shooting starts again and another wave of blood floods the emergency room.

Dr. Mohammed Mussa, a surgeon, 30 years old, is the doctor on duty today. Everyone calls him Dr. China because he studied there for several years. Most of the doctors who used to work at Al-Nao, the experienced ones, the specialists who could afford to flee abroad, disappeared in the first days of the war – only Dr. China remained, the only surgeon at the time. He is friendly and attentive, yet highly focused, able to shut out the world around him at the drop of a hat.

He rushes around, constantly on the move, sweating like a wrestler, his forehead beaded with sweat, running from one wounded person to the next. A bullet through the shoulder. Shrapnel in the thigh. A man who has been shot in the head. The bullet is lodged in his skull. He sits on his bed and stares blankly into the room. Dr China also looks helpless. They need a neurologist to remove the bullet, but they don't have one. It is often unclear who shot whom. The doctors know that it is better not to ask too many questions. Again and again, arguments break out in the emergency room, Dr China complains. Soldiers in shock attack doctors. They threaten them with their weapons. Recently, one of them almost detonated a hand grenade.

Wounded RSF fighters lie next to wounded soldiers who were shooting at each other just moments before. Members of criminal clans lie next to members of rival groups after shootouts, thieves find themselves next to those they have robbed.

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A bullet through
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Shrapnel in the thigh.*

Those who wanted to steal lie bleeding next to those they attacked and who fought back, all united in pain, the great equaliser of all human beings. In the courtyard A group of women have been camping out for days under the balconies of an outbuilding, where they are somewhat protected from the sun. They have rolled out mats and refuse to leave.

'The director says we have to leave,' one of them complains. Both the director and the women have their reasons. Dschamal, the director, is rightly concerned that the hospital grounds will be overrun by desperate people. The women, however, do not know where to go. One of them, Farida, was injured in the leg by a drone ten months ago. Her shinbone is broken, has been operated on several times incorrectly and is not healing properly. She says she needs an orthopaedic splint to be able to walk again. She is accompanied by her mother and two sisters. Next to them, three younger women have spread out their mats. They are waiting for their sister to be discharged from the maternity clinic. She gave birth to her child but is now suffering from unexplained postpartum hemorrhaging.

A mother and daughter are camped out on a third mat, with a one-year-old girl in the middle. The little girl suffers

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from a bone disease. Her right leg is broken. It was operated on, but the wound has become infected. Her arms and legs are swollen. She is covered with a swarm of biting mosquitoes, and ants are crawling over her. Almost half of the Sudanese have lost their homes and been displaced, many of them several times. Their lives are a series of displacements.

The women in the hospital courtyard come from Darfur in the west and the Nuba Mountains in the far south, provinces on the fringes of Sudan. The rulers of Khartoum have been using violence to Arabise these provinces since the 1970s. Now the provinces are turning their violence back on Khartoum. 'Where are we supposed to go?' asks the woman whose bones refuse to heal. They are fleeing the war, which is driving them forward. The war forced them into a refugee camp, but that was captured by the RSF. They fled again. They built shelters out of bushes and cardboard boxes, where they lived with their children in the open field before they had to flee again, here. If the director forced them to go back, they would have to cross a river valley controlled by a gang. 'They rob you,' says the woman. 'They kidnap you. They rape you. We don't want to go back.'

Day 4

The next morning, the phone and internet are down – Omdurman is virtually cut off from the outside world

People are puzzling over the reasons. 'Maintenance work on the antennas' is the official statement from the military. 'They want to suppress bad news,' speculates one of the nurses. During the night, the RSF allegedly attacked a nearby military airport with a swarm of drones. Hangars and aircraft were destroyed. With the internet down, economic life also collapses. Almost all payments in Sudan, whether to street vendors or taxi drivers, are made via smartphone. Since very few people here have savings beyond a day's wages, there is great unrest in the city.

Room 20

'Mum, come,' calls Hamoody, the boy with no face. He bangs his hand on the bed frame. 'What is it, my son?' says his mother. 'Do you want me to hold your hand?' She, who has hardly slept tonight either, smiles and places a hand on his chest. She massages his head and whispers suras that are supposed to aid healing. During the night, Hamoody pulled out his stomach tube, and his uncle has reattached it as best he can. They are waiting for a doctor to sew it back onto his abdominal wall. 'Praise be to Allah, Lord of the worlds, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful, the Sovereign on the Day of Judgment, you alone we serve, you alone we pray for help.' 'I can't hear anything!' wails Hamoody. 'Come closer!' He begins to cry. 'I can't hear anything. I can't hear anything at all!' He sobs. His mother presses her lips close to his ear, continues whispering the suras, massages him, and eventually he calms down, becoming completely still, until all that can be heard is his mother's soft, melodious voice and the babble of voices outside in the corridor.

In the next room, two young sisters sit at the bedside of their brother, who has been in a coma for a month. A soldier hit him on the head with the butt of his rifle during an argument. Others rumour that he was tortured. Both the military and the RSF are accused of serious human rights violations. The sisters, one veiled in a niqab, the other unveiled, sit on two chairs, morning, noon and evening, and watch their



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brother. They look at him and look at him and look at him. Operating theatre One more cigarette, the director takes a deep breath, says he knows it's not healthy, of course, crushes the butt on the window sill and returns to his operating theatre. 'Come with me,' he says to me.

A 75-year-old man is lying on the table. He slipped at home on his way to the toilet and broke his hip. Dschamal wants to insert an artificial joint. The man is lying on his side, sedated, his head hidden behind a blue curtain. As if he wants to rise proudly into the air like an eagle, the director spreads his arms; from behind, a technician places the surgical gown over him. Dschamal opens the hip with a scalpel, making a 30centimetre incision. An assistant doctor cauterises the severed veins to prevent bleeding. Jamal's scalpel cuts through yellow tissue, then orange, then red, and finally the hip bone shines white beneath his blade.

'It's fine,' says the director, looking around in confusion. 'Did we open the right hip?' So the old man, even though he was not shot, also becomes a victim of this war. 'What does the Xray show?' asks Jamal.

As the hospital has virtually no budget, it cannot afford X-ray films, so the doctors photograph the X-ray monitor with their mobile phones. They make their diagnoses based on the mobile phone images. But in this case, they forgot to note which side of the body is affected. The director steps behind the curtain to the old man's head and shakes him out of the anesthetic. "Uncle! Uncle! Is it your left or right leg?" 'The right one,' he eventually mumbles.

The equipment at Al-Nao is appalling. Every vet in Germany has better equipment. The only CT scanner is broken. The room where the machine used to stand is now used by the secret service as a detention cell. The nearest magnetic resonance imaging scanner is 90 kilometres away. According to Dschamal, there are only three of them in the whole of Sudan. Dschamal sews the hip back together, turns the man onto his other side. He cuts again, punches out the broken hip socket and replaces it with a cheap Chinese metal product. 'That's what people here can afford.' Just before he is about to close the wound, a fly appears in the operating theatre. The technicians frantically try to catch it until the director kills it on the surgical drape covering the patient.

During the night, we hear repeated gunshots in our accommodation. 'Thieves,' says our translator. They are waging their own war after dark.

They made music,
publicly discussed
the atrocities of the
regime and succeeded
in getting a civilian
government installed
– until the tent camp
went up in flames
and machine-gun fire
after a few months.
Hundreds died.

Day 5

Early in the morning, grenades explode in a side street near the hospital grounds

Fortunately, no one is injured. The pharmacy, which is run by activists at the hospital and is usually crowded with dozens of people, remains closed this morning. 'The risk is too great,' says Momen Ahmed Abbas Mohammed, 30, his glasses crooked and broken. He sits behind the distribution grille through which he usually hands out free medicine. In 2019, he was one of the leaders of the revolution.

At that time, a nation seemed to be on the move. In front of the military headquarters, Momen and his supporters erected a colourful tent city that stretched for kilometres. They celebrated their new freedom. Artists who had lived underground for a long time performed to the applause of the masses. They made music, publicly discussed the atrocities of the regime and succeeded in getting a civilian government installed – until the tent camp went up in flames and machine-gun fire after a few months. Hundreds died. The army and the RSF, now bit-

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According
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TO PEACE

By Wolfgang
Bauer

The
Forgotten

ter enemies, fired on the demonstrators together. In 2021, they united to overthrow the remnants of the civilian government. Momen, a small business owner with a leather workshop, was wounded in the arm by a bullet. Many activists fled abroad, but Momen remained.

The Al-Nao staff fled when the war began, but Momen and his group decided to continue running the hospital on their own. For months, they were the ones who stitched wounds, even though they had never learned how, operated the X-ray machine, managed the files and dispensed medication. With the advance of the army, the bureaucracy of the old system returned, along with its secret services. 'They see us volunteers as a threat,' says Momen. The Ministry of Health has tried several times to get rid of them. They were arrested and beaten by the secret service. But surprisingly, they are now protected by the military, says Momen. The commanders have realised that without the volunteers, many soldiers would have died from their injuries.

There is now a kind of truce between them. Every day, patients and their relatives queue up in front of their small improvised pharmacy. According to doctors, 70 per cent of the sick cannot afford medication. Momen's volunteers take care of plaster casts, buy medicines from commercial pharmacies in the city, often on credit. They are in debt to all the pharmacies, says Momen. They look after patients who have been admitted without relatives and help in the emergency room when the staff there is overwhelmed. One of them, only 20 years old, was killed a few weeks ago when a ricocheting bullet pierced the roof of their makeshift pharmacy – yet Director Dschamal hardly ever mentions the help provided by the volunteers.

Room 20

'Can you feel my hand?' asks the woman, a visitor, leaning down towards Hamoody. She is one of his closest friends, the owner of a small coffee stand. 'It's me, Hadil,' she says. 'Do you recognise me?' 'Hadil,' he repeats weakly. Tears well up in her eyes. 'You have to stay strong. Strengthen your faith.' He holds her hand tightly. When she is back in the hallway, she bursts into tears. Hamoody's mother catches her. It is the first time his friend has seen his devastated face. The two women hold each other tightly for a long time. In the next room, two sisters sit at the bedside of their brother, who is in a persistent vegetative state. They are sitting exactly as they were when I visited a few days ago, leaning forward in the same way. They stare at his bare chest. It rises and falls regularly. The sisters turn to me and smile.

Day 6

When a bullet enters the human body, doctors have several options

That's what Dr. China, alias Dr. Mohammed Mussa, tells us the next morning. He stands in the large operating theatre in front of his team of anesthetists, surgical nurses and radiologists. In the middle of the room lies a 15-year-old boy who was shot in the shoulder two weeks ago. 'It's often better to leave the bullet in the body,' says Dr China. 'The tissue forms a capsule around the foreign body, so there's no damage.'

Only in cases where the bullet restricts or endangers the patient does it need to be removed. The triage of war surgeons. The boy lying on the operating table is petite and delicate. If the bullet remained in his shoulder, says Dr. China, the shoulder would destroy itself as the bullet rubbed constantly against muscles and bones. Dr. China cuts, initially only a few centimetres, and holds the open flesh open with metal clamps. Dr China cuts towards the bullet, repeatedly looking at the X-ray image on his mobile phone. He reaches for the bullet with a pair of scissors, but it is not where it should be. He orders another X-ray. The bullet has moved in the tissue under the pressure of his hand. He cuts, but it slips away again. Another X-ray.

The next two and a half hours pass in this manner. A small incision becomes a wider tear, then a blood-filled crater so large that it almost engulfs the entire shoulder. The bullet threatens to break into the boy's chest, so an older surgeon, a specialist who has only recently returned to Sudan, intervenes. He takes the instruments from Dr. China's hands, feels for the bullet with surgical scissors, closes his eyes, feels, feels, waits, soon drenched in sweat, feels, feels, then opens his eyes and triumphantly holds up the bullet. The bullet from a Kalashnikov. A tiny piece of brass-coloured metal. 'If we had a CT scanner,' he says, 'the operation would have taken only fifteen minutes.'

Room 7

On the bed that was recently the bed of Seinab, the deceased confectioner, a two-year-old boy is crying. He has a tube in his nose and a tube in his abdomen. Shrapnel from a grenade pierced his intestines in six places, and he was operated on by Dr China weeks ago. But then a bloody fluid flowed from his bottom, his father and mother say. Both are sleeping

He takes the instruments, feels for the bullet with surgical scissors, closes his eyes, feels, feels, waits, soon drenched in sweat, feels, feels, then opens his eyes and triumphantly holds up the bullet.

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*'That leg will kill her,'
he says. 'She has no
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family. Amputation.'
The leg is to be
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on mats in the corridor outside the room, pale and exhausted. Dr China operated on the child again; he had overlooked a hole in the intestine, the seventh. Now they hope.

Room 0

The leg is better, says Regina, pressing on her friend Muna's swollen thigh. Above the open knee, it is as thick as a truck tyre. 'It's gotten thinner,' she says nonetheless. The sobbing of two women can be heard from the next room. 'Died,' says Regina dryly. The neighbour. She had talked to her until late into the night. Massaged her hand. She had severe breathing problems and had been coughing heavily for days. Tuberculosis, say the doctors. The truth is that Muna and Regina have been sent to the tuberculosis ward by the director.

Doctors and patients in the main ward could no longer stand the stench of her wound. Regina watches over her friend with hawk-like eyes. She complains about the inexperience of the doctors, their ignorance, and fends off young nurses who want to insert IVs into Muna but can't find any veins, repeatedly plunging their needles into Muna, this person who is now almost nothing but skin and tendons. 'You have to eat something,' Regina says to Muna, who is completely hidden under her blanket. 'At least a little bit of porridge. Otherwise I'll leave. I'll leave. Eat.' 'Nurse,' says Muna, 'give me another blanket. I'm freezing.' Regina strokes her head tenderly. The war has unleashed epidemics. Tuberculosis is rampant, as is cholera. The generals are reluctant to talk about it. They want to avoid panic.

The Ministry of Health has forbidden us from visiting the cholera ward, which consists of several tents in the courtyard – for our own safety, they say. Added to this is dengue fever, which is transmitted by a type of mosquito. It used to be confined to the south, but is now spreading along the entire length of the Nile. It is attracted by rubbish, and rubbish is everywhere in Khartoum, lying in every open space; sometimes it is set on fire, and white clouds of smoke hang over the city's spew.

Day 7

Room 20

There is not much room for compassion in Al-Nao

It can hardly be otherwise. In the coming months, Sudan faces one of the worst famines in recent human history. That's what the UN says. Some patients who want to leave the hospital have to stay because they cannot pay the treatment costs – such as a group of mothers who have just given birth by caesarean section. Anyone who cannot show the guards at the gates that they have paid their bills is not allowed to pass. Others who should really stay are forced to leave so that their beds can be freed up for even worse cases – such as Hamoody's. They have dressed the boy in his Sunday best: a neatly ironed shirt and his best trousers. 'We are now in God's hands,' says his uncle, crying. The doctors have told them they have to leave the hospital today.

A cousin who lives in Omdurman has offered to take the boy in. The uncle, who has been caring for Hamoody practically full-time for the past few weeks, packs the most essential medicines. The list is long: Two bottles of saline solution. A bottle of povidone-iodine for disinfecting. Half a pack of paracetamol, painkillers, a bottle of Lacalut, a mouthwash solution, a full bottle of Klys for rectal use, a laxative. A bottle of eye drops to be administered every eight hours, Otriven for the nose, also every eight hours, Phenergan to relax the muscles, the sedative Haloperidol and three types of antibiotics. In addition, several items for caring for the feeding tube. Friends and neighbours are helping to raise the money. Will they be able to manage on their own? The uncle looks sceptical.

On the way to a rickshaw outside, supported by two men, Hamoody is about to lose consciousness. The suffering that the hospital attracts is then spread throughout the city. Al-Nao discharges people without legs, who later linger in dark shacks, people without arms, who will be dependent on begging in the future, disturbed people, so many disturbed people, people with perforated bladders and intestines who remain incontinent and are shunned by everyone because they stink. It discharges the deaf, the blind and those who are mute for the rest of their lives, people who are consumed by unbridled aggression, the raped women, the raped men, the torn apart, those who will never heal inside.

From this hospital, the suffering spreads to the huts of the city. It accumulates in this city, day after day, like poison that permeates everything living. 'No one helps us,' Director Dschamal complains in his office. The volunteers around Momen accuse the administration of charging the sick too much, the equivalent of 15 euros per bed per day, but how, asks Dschamal, are they supposed

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Our last day at the hospital. The military authorities are urging us to leave. Dr. Dschamal once again recommends his favourite author, At-Tayyib Salih, and reiterates how urgently the clinic needs a CT scanner.

to survive without it? There is not a single international aid organisation in Al-Nao.

Only MSF, Médecins Sans Frontières, which, however, limits itself to providing classic emergency medical care and paying the wages of the emergency room staff. Early every evening, the junior doctors come to the director's office with their mobile phones at the ready and a list of all the patients. Jamal assesses each case, criticises or confirms treatment proposals, writes his comments on the list in red pen, crosses things out or makes little ticks. Today, the case of Muna, the woman from the room without a number, is also on the list. 'That leg will kill her,' he says. 'She has no money. She has no family. Amputation.' The leg is to be amputated the next morning.

Day 8

The next morning, Muna's room is empty. The room has been cleaned. There is nothing left to remind us of her; it is as if she had never been here. She died the night before. Room 7 The little boy whose intestines were riddled with shrapnel can already walk a little again. He wobbles uncertainly down the corridor. His father holds him by the arms. Tomorrow they want to try eating for the first time. Father and son walk up and down the corridor, past a woman lying lethargically on the floor. 'I can't take the shelling anymore,' she says quietly. All morning, grenades have been hitting the area. She is caring for her injured son in the hospital.

Her sister wanted to bring food to the hospital this morning.

She lives only two streets away. 'She was just about to leave when a grenade exploded in front of her house.' She wasn't injured, at least not outwardly. But she had to vomit and now everything is blurry. She couldn't move, she said on the phone. Now her sister isn't answering anymore. 'My dear sister,' she says. Wherever we reporters appear in the corridors, crowds of people gather around us, mostly women, so we can only move forward slowly. Hands reach out to us. Hands that seek our hands, that reach out to touch us.

The women want to talk, slip us notes, show us doctors' reports, cry, smile apologetically, call out desperately, don't want to let us go, fix us with their gaze, so unyielding as if they want to pin us down with their eyes. The doctors around Dr China work in the emergency room as if in a trance. They bandage, disinfect, stop blood loss, stabilise circulation. So many injured people. A dead soldier lies in front of the lift door for hours. Relatives of the dead break down, sisters and mothers collapse, tear their hair out, writhe on the floor screaming, while other injured people around them gasp for breath, fighting for their lives. 'My heart is burning!' cries one woman whose brother has died. She lies on the floor, contorting herself so much that the back of her head almost touches her legs.

Day 9

Overnight, the pounding of artillery grows even louder. We have slept little in our accommodation. Towards morning, we hear machine gun fire nearby. The hissing of rocket launchers mounted on pick-up trucks. Somewhere in the streets around us, a battle is raging. Presumably, the army is attacking RSF positions on the other side of the Nile. But we don't know. No one we call knows or wants to know. The RSF troops may also be attacking. They have surrounded Omdurman on three sides. We consider fleeing the city, but then the fighting subsides again.

Our last day at the hospital. The military authorities are urging us to leave. Dr. Dschamal once again recommends his favourite author, At-Tayyib Salih, and reiterates how urgently the clinic needs a CT scanner. The boy with the perforated intestine is suffering from cramps again. The two sisters, who sit day and night at their brother's bedside, staring at him constantly, one in a niqab, the other without, are still keeping watch. Their brother is still in a coma. 'He's getting better,' says one of the sisters. 'He's moving his eyes a little more than he was a few days ago.' Dozens of women's arms stretch through the bars behind which Momen, the revolutionary, sits.

They hand in prescriptions. The pharmacy is a tiny room, more of a hut than a building, crammed with boxes of medicines and gauze. 'Our revolution will continue,' says Momen. 'When the RSF are defeated, we will take on the military.' The generals must



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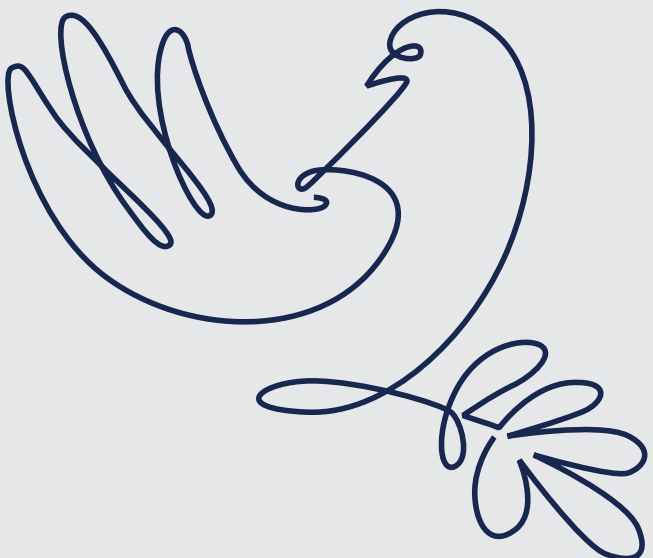
hand over power to the people. It will be a long road. Perhaps, he says, he will not live to see it. But then his children will. 'Giving up is a luxury we cannot afford.' He is convinced that renewal will begin in places like this pharmacy. From here, they will heal the entire country. Muna's grave is on the outskirts of the city. It is marked by two hollow concrete blocks. One is placed at the foot of the grave, the other at the head.

Regina has coated the stone at the head with clay so she can find the grave again. They had to interrupt the funeral twice because rockets landed nearby. Muna was not buried in a cemetery either, but at the side of a road. Piles of stones line the road. Every day, small trucks stop, unload bodies and race away again. Regina stands in front of the grave and prays. She coughs and spits white phlegm. Perhaps, she thinks, she caught tuberculosis from the woman in the neighbouring room.

On the same day, we leave the once proud capital of Sudan, which not long ago wanted to emulate Dubai, the hope of a nation, and drive back into the desert from whence we came, towards the Red Sea, and soon there is nothing left of Khartoum to be seen. In the rear-view mirror, the city has become one with the dust and sand.



The article can be found [here](#)



During our ten-day stay at Al-Nao Hospital, the following people died:

Seinab Issa Schuaiib, 48, Muna Majek, 41, Rahma Omar Sulaiman, 70, Sana Muntaha Mohammed, 65, Issam Kamar al-Saman, 68, Haidar Adib Kauthar, 28, Mussaab Abdulraham al-Saied, 36, Hassan al-Tahan, 64, Dschamal al-Din, 80, Aischa Ismael, 78, Massaher Hilma Ibrahim, 27, Dahab Ali, 35, Seinab Sulaiman Mohammed, 70, Abdo al-Nur, 70, Aadam Mahdi al-Fatah, 59, Aische Ibrahim Salem, 77, Kureische Ahmad, 82, Issam Chaled, 60, Saeid Ali, 68, Saeid Fadel, 60, Seinab Mudi Sulaiman, 20, Samiha al-Tajeb, 65, Abir Muchtar, 20, Amina Saad Hamad, 55, Raman Urabi, 22, Abdallah Mohammed al-Rahman, 70, Hadschar Saleh, 65, Moammar Louai, 5, Mohammed Saleh, 55, Aischa Ali, 45, Mustafa al-Mak, 50, Issam Babaker, 60, Mussa Mussa, 70, Auadt Abdallah, 45, Abdulrahman al-Said, 36, Moka Nasser al-Thaher, 31, Aischa Mohammed, 13, Seinab Lamis Saad, 41, Mohammed al-Nahas, 27, Abdul Madschid, 37, Hassan al-Nakib, 30, Sumaja al-Tayeb, 65, Ahmed Sad Hamad, 55, Jibril Abdallah, 75, Nadija Kerosaman, 32, Nada Abdulgassim, 22, Nisrin Abdulsala, 52 days old.



Ali Al Ibrahim,
United Kingdom



SECOND
PRIZE
WINNER

Ali Al Ibrahim is an award-winning investigative journalist, media entrepreneur, and founder of SIRAJ, a unit for investigative journalism.

With more than a decade of experience, he has led and contributed to major cross-border investigations on corruption, human rights abuses, financial crime, and abuse of power, collaborating with international organizations and media outlets including OCCRP, The Guardian, BBC, Lighthouse Reports, and ICIJ.

His work has received several prestigious awards. Ali is currently pursuing a PhD in Artificial Intelligence at UK, focusing on ethics, transparency, and AI applications for large-scale analysis.

Unburying Syria's Disappeared: Truth as the Road to Peace



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OUTSTANDING
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TO PEACE

By Ali Al
Ibrahim

Unburying
Syria's
Disappeared

Editor's Note

Ali Al Ibrahim's investigation underlines how in order to make peace we have to first tell the truth about war. This forensic reporting from post-conflict Syria reveals how prisons, military hospitals and mass graves were systematically used to erase human lives. The report gives voice to a lost community who disappeared in the conflict – the victims of appalling atrocities. Based on the moving testimony of survivors and using official records, the report reinforces the call for a registry of the disappeared. It also demonstrates how diligent, sensitive journalism can contribute to building a sustainable peace.

Published in "In Depth Reports (IDR)"

Unburying Syria's Disappeared: Truth as the Road to Peace

This investigation documents, for the first time with unprecedented access, the full machinery of Syria's detention system after the fall of the Assad regime. Based on more than 200 survivor testimonies, cross-referenced with UN Commission of Inquiry records, satellite imagery, leaked archives, and direct field investigations, it reveals how prisons, military hospitals, and mass graves were systematically used to enforce disappearance and erase human lives.

The investigation not only uncovers past crimes but directly contributes to peace-building: by safeguarding evidence, amplifying families' voices, and supporting Syrian and international initiatives to establish a registry of the disappeared. Its findings have already informed advocacy efforts by civil society and transitional justice experts working to prevent the repetition of such atrocities. By transforming testimonies and forensic evidence into a public record, this work shows how journalism serves as an act of prevention and a foundation for sustainable peace.

In December 2024, the fall of Syria's regime unlocked the gates of Sednaya and other notorious detention centers, exposing the machinery of disappearance that defined five decades of authoritarian rule. This investigation reconstructs how the former government operated a nationwide archipelago of prisons and intelligence branches where torture, starvation, and executions were not isolated abuses but state policy. The investigation shows that Syria now faces a historic choice: to preserve and protect the evidence of detention crimes as the foundation of justice and reconciliation, or to let silence erase history and sow the seeds of renewed violence.

On a freezing morning in December, Mariam Al Rami (49 years) clutched a faded photograph of her son at the gates of Sednaya prison. Her hands trembled as she held the picture close to her chest of a boy of nineteen in his graduation suit, smiling awkwardly into the camera. It was the last image she had of him before security men came to their house in Homs one night in 2013 and took him away. For more than a decade she searched: bribes to officers, endless queues outside mil-

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Inside these sites, I documented burned files and rooms still marked by instruments of torture.

itary courts, whispered promises from intermediaries who claimed they could deliver news in exchange for cash. Each time the answer was the same: "He is not here."

When the regime fell and Sednaya's iron doors swung open, she believed the waiting was finally over. She traveled to Damascus with her husband, clutching bags of food and blankets, preparing to welcome her son back into life. But when the prisoners stumbled out skeletal men with hollow eyes, some carried by their cellmates he was not among them.

"I thought I would see him walk through those doors," she told me, her voice breaking. "Instead, I saw other people's sons. Not mine. Now I know he is in the ground somewhere. But I don't know where."

Around her, hundreds of families combed through piles of discarded documents strewn across the prison floor. Mothers and fathers bent over pages, searching for names scribbled in ink or stamped with numbers. Some cried out when they recognized handwriting or initials. Others fell silent, clutching fragments of paper as if they were relics.

For Mariam, the photograph in her hand remained all she had. At dawn on December 8, 2024, the iron gates of Sednaya prison creaked open. From the hilltop fortress once synonymous with secrecy and fear, gaunt figures stumbled into the cold air, blinking against a freedom they had long believed impossible. Families crowded outside detention centers across Syria, clutching photos and lists of names, praying for a glimpse of loved ones lost to the labyrinth of the security state. Some were reunited after years of silence. For tens of thousands of others, the wait ended only in despair: the doors opened, but no familiar face emerged.

In the weeks that followed, the ruins of Syria's detention empire began to surface. Burnt documents inintelligence offices, bodies unearthed in mass graves outside Damascus, and the testimonies of survivors finally willing to speak without fear of reprisal offered fragments of a system deliberately engineered to crush dissent and erase human beings without trace.

This investigation draws on those fragments thousands of pages of newly accessed records, the UN Commission of Inquiry's most extensive findings, satellite evidence, and exclusive survivor interviews to reconstruct how the detention archipelago functioned as both a tool of repression and a driver of war. But this story is not just about the past. With archives, graves,

and survivor memories now precariously exposed. Syria faces a stark choice: allow evidence to decay and history to be re-written by those who profit from silence, or protect, document, and confront the truth as the foundation of any durable peace.

Between December 2024 and March 2025, over 200 survivor and family testimonies were gathered through structured, trauma-informed interviews.

Each account was systematically cross-referenced with the UN Commission of Inquiry's database of more than 2,000 witness statements, as well as with records recovered from abandoned intelligence branches. To verify the existence and scale of mass graves, high-resolution satellite imagery from commercial providers was analyzed and compared against survivor timelines. Excavation patterns at Najha and Qutayfa matched witness accounts of clandestine burials, findings that were further confirmed by independent geospatial experts.

On December 9, 2024, I conducted direct field visits to Sednaya Prison and several deserted intelligence compounds around Damascus. Inside these sites, I documented burned files, graffiti etched by detainees, and rooms still marked by instruments of torture. These physical traces provided rare material evidence that was matched against survivor testimonies and archival records. Leaked administrative documents including intake logs, transfer lists, and falsified death certificates were subjected to metadata authentication and compared with survivor narratives to reconstruct chains of detention and disappearance.

In parallel, open-source photographs and videos from newly accessible detention centres were analyzed using forensic visual verification techniques to confirm authenticity and provenance.

Saydnaya was for decades administered by the Syrian military police and military intelligence, with construction beginning in the early 1980s. The first detainees arrived at the 1.4 sq km facility in 1987 – 16 years into the rule of President Hafeez al-Assad, Bashar's father.

Once fully operational the prison contained two main detention facilities. The White Building was, according to rights groups, mainly built to hold military officers and troops suspected of being disloyal to the regime. It was an L-shaped complex in the south-east of the sprawling complex. The Red Building – the main prison – was for opponents of the regime, initially comprising those suspected of membership of Islamist groups. This wing was noted for its distinctive Y-shape, with three straight corridors spreading out from a central hub.

Throughout Syria's war, which began in 2011, security forc-

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Ibrahim

es held hundreds of thousands of people in detention camps where international human rights organisations said abuses were rampant. Families were often told nothing of the fate of their loved ones. As rebels seized one city after another in a blistering eight-day campaign, prisons were often among their first objectives. The most notorious prisons in and around Damascus itself were finally opened on the uprising's final night and the early hours of Sunday. Outside the building itself a hulking, brutalist cube in dilapidated off-white crowds of mostly men gathered, some of them shouting to ask whether anyone had seen their sons, brothers or uncles believed detained by the regime. One of these men, a self-appointed organizer, called out names from a filthy document apparently recovered from one of the administrative rooms.

These documents littered the floor, a concern for international legal scholars who have stressed the importance of maintaining these records for use as evidence of these crimes. Throughout the decades of the Assads' rule, resistance of any kind was brutally quashed, and offenders were detained and tortured in a network of dozens of facilities across the country. Sednaya was the most infamous. Built in the late eighties, on a barren limestone hilltop 40 minutes from downtown Damascus, it acquired such a fearsome reputation that many Syrians refused to utter its name. In the first days of the war, I visited the hills nearby and spotted the complex.

As the war intensified, the prison became even more terrible. When Sednaya was liberated, some of those freed had been there for decades. One inmate had reportedly been imprisoned since 1981; he entered as a young man of 27 and emerged, at 70. The Human Rights Data Analysis Group, based in San Francisco, has counted at least 17,723 people killed in Syrian custody from 2011 to 2015 around 300 every week almost certainly a vast undercount, it says.

For the family members who have come to Sednaya after enduring years with no news about their fathers, brothers, sons, and nephews any bit of evidence stirs a despairing hope, which shows plainly in their body language and on their faces. The crowd that gathered around the Turks shovelling at the floor resembled relatives of people buried in earthquakes; they watched avidly, helplessly, for any indication of life. Other visitors wandered through cellblocks, some stooping to examine the documents on prison stationery that lay everywhere.

Al-Assad fled Syria as rebels swept into the capital, bringing to an end five decades of brutal rule by him and his father over a country ravaged by one of the deadliest wars of the century.

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights database, at least 181,312 individuals, including 5,332 children and

9,201 women (adult females), remain forcibly disappeared in Syria between March 2011 and April 2025. Of these, 160,123 individuals, including 3,736 children and 8,014 women (adult females), are in detention centers

Once fully operational the prison contained two main detention facilities. The White Building was, according to rights groups, mainly built to hold military officers and troops suspected of being disloyal to the regime. It was an L-shaped complex in the south-east of the sprawling complex.

The Red Building – the main prison – was for opponents of the regime, initially comprising those suspected of membership of Islamist groups. This wing was noted for its distinctive Y-shape, with three straight corridors spreading out from a central hub.

Inside the Archipelago

When Syrians spoke of al-far' "the branch" they didn't need to specify which. Everyone knew it meant one of the sprawling network of intelligence directorates and their secret prisons that became the black spine of the state. Each arrest was an entry ticket into a labyrinth without exits: men and women shuffled between basements, courtyards, and corridors where the law never applied.

At the top of this machinery stood the four intelligence services: Military Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, General Intelligence, and Political Security. Around them orbited dozens of detention facilities, field courts, and military hospitals. This overlapping structure was intentional. A detainee could vanish in Branch 235 ("Palestine"), resurface months later in Sednaya, and disappear again after a mock trial that lasted less than five minutes.

"They wanted you lost on the web," said Khaled, a 29-year-old teacher from Dar'a who was released in December. "Every time my family asked about me, they got a different answer. Sometimes I was in Branch 215, sometimes I had already died. The truth was, I was being moved back and forth like a file in a drawer."

The Branches of Fear

- Branch 215 (Raids Branch): Known for mass intake after neighborhood sweeps in Damascus. Survivors describe rooms so crowded that "people slept in shifts, standing with their backs against each other."
- Branch 227: Oversaw arrests in the capital's suburbs. Torture survivors say the walls were blackened with soot from burned bodies and papers destroyed before in-

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By Ali Al
Ibrahim

Unburying
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investigators arrived in January 2025.

- Branch 235 ("Palestine" Branch): Among the deadliest. Witnesses told investigators that corpses would be piled in hallways until trucks from nearby military hospitals hauled them away at night.
- Sednaya Military Prison: The final station for many. Survivors recall executions by hanging, carried out weekly, often after detainees were marched through sham "field courts" without defense or evidence.

At the center of Syria's detention machine stood the National Security Office (Maktab al-Amn al-Qawmi), a shadowy body that linked the sprawling network of intelligence branches directly to the presidency. Testimonies and UN Commission findings show that the Office was not merely coordinating but actively directing arrests, interrogations, and transfers. Orders flowed downward from the President's inner circle through the National Security Office into the Military Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, General Intelligence, and Political Security branches. This vertical chain of command ensured that what happened in the basements of Branch 215 or inside the execution chambers of Sednaya was never the work of "rogue officers," but part of a state policy sanctioned at the highest level. By embedding the machinery of repression within a centralized office tied to the presidency, the regime institutionalized disappearance and torture as tools of governance, binding every arm of the security apparatus into a single web of impunity.

Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, Chair of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria, told InDepthReports: "These crimes were not the work of a few officers. They were state policy, coordinated across agencies. If Syria ignores this legacy, impunity will simply plant the seeds of future violence."

In the Commission's dataset, 26% of interviewees reported experiencing enforced disappearance; 30% were tortured; and nearly one in three lost a relative to in-custody death. These were not isolated abuses but systematic policies.

"Every four days a prisoner would die," said one survivor from Branch 235. "We learned to stop asking the guards for medicine. Their answer was always the same: 'Tell us when he is dead.'"

The Machinery of Death

The machinery of death did not end inside the cells. Once prisoners succumbed to torture, starvation, or disease, their bodies were transferred to military hospitals such as Mezzeh 601 and Tishreen. These institutions, ostensibly places of healing, became cogs in the state's apparatus of disappearance. Doctors and clerks issued falsified death certificates, citing

causes like "heart failure" or "respiratory arrest," while the real injuries—shattered bones, burns, mutilation—were erased from the record.

One former hospital employee who fled Syria recalled: "The orders were clear: we did not see individuals, only numbers. Bodies arrived by the truckload, tagged with digits, stamped with paperwork, and moved on to mass graves. We were told never to write the truth."

By channeling corpses through hospitals, the regime gave its killing machinery a bureaucratic façade. Families who pressed for answers often received official papers confirming a "natural death," a cruel deception designed to deny both justice and mourning. This systematic use of hospitals to launder the evidence of mass killings underscores how deep the architecture of disappearance reached—bridging prisons, courts, and medical institutions under one state policy of erasure.

Detainee transfers often ended at military hospitals like Mezzeh 601 or Tishreen, where death was formalized with falsified certificates. From there, refrigerated trucks carried bodies to mass graves in Najha and Qutayfa. Satellite images later confirmed soil disturbances consistent with large-scale burials during peak killing years, especially between 2012 and 2018.

One former intelligence officer, now in hiding, testified in a European court that he helped supervise burials in Najha: "Hundreds of bodies arrived at once. We dug trenches at night. No names, no records just numbers."

The Human Cost

Behind every statistic lies a body, a name, a family. For survivors, release did not end the nightmare it simply moved it outside the prison walls.

Torture as Routine

The lexicon of torture in Syria became infamous even beyond its borders:

- Al-Shabeh: prisoners suspended by their wrists for hours, shoulders dislocating under their own weight.
- The Dulab: shoved into a car tire, limbs twisted unnaturally, beaten with sticks and cables.
- The German Chair: a metal device bending the spine backward until vertebrae cracked.
- Bisat al-Rih ("Flying Carpet"): a hinged board where victims were strapped and bent until ribs or bones snapped.

"They made me sit in the German chair for 40 minutes," recalled Mahmoud, a former university student. "I heard my



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By **Ali Al
Ibrahim**

Unburying Syria's Disappeared

back break. They laughed and said: 'Now you are taller.' I have not been able to walk straight since."

Sexual violence was another weapon, wielded not just against women but against men and boys. Survivors told of rape, mutilation, forced nudity, and humiliation designed to erase dignity.

Hunger and Filth

Food was weaponized. Former detainees described a diet of spoiled jam crawling with insects, bread too hard to chew, and sometimes only two olives per day.

"We swallowed the pits to trick our stomachs," said Samer, who spent nine months in Branch 248. "In my cell, people fought over potato skins."

Disease was rampant. With no medical care, wounds festered, infections spread, and the weak were left to die. Corpses sometimes remained in cells for days.

Families in Perpetual Limbo

While survivors carry physical scars, families of the disappeared live in limbo. Mothers and fathers waited outside prisons year after year, clutching bribes and paperwork, always told their sons were "not here."

Um Rami, a mother from Homs, still waits: "When Sednaya opened in December, I thought I would see my boy. Instead, other people came out. Not him. Now I know he is on the ground, but I don't know where."

The Commission estimates 34,000 deaths in custody since 2011. But the real number may be higher; tens of thousands more remain unaccounted for.

The Graves of Silence

The prisons were not the final destination. Death inside the branches triggered a macabre chain of logistics designed to erase evidence while preserving control.

From Cell to Hospital

When detainees died under torture, starvation, or disease, their bodies were not returned to families. Instead, trucks ferried them to military hospitals such as Mezzeh 601, Tishreen,

and Harasta 600. There, doctors and clerks became cogs in the machinery of disappearance.

- Death certificates were issued with falsified causes "heart failure," "respiratory arrest," or "sudden illness."
- Bodies were stripped of names, tagged with numbers, and loaded again for their final journey.

"We were told not to look at the faces," testified a former hospital worker who later fled Syria. "The orders were clear: process, stamp, and move on. They were not people, just numbers."

Najha: The Valley of the Disappeared

South of Damascus, in the dusty outskirts of Najha, mass graves began to expand in 2011. Former intelligence officers told investigators that trenches were dug at night. Refrigerated trucks arrived from hospitals, unloading hundreds of bodies at a time. Satellite images from 2011–2013 reveal significant earth disturbances, consistent with the burials described by witnesses.

Lynn Welchman an expert in international law, stressed: *"Every mass grave is not just a site of mourning; it is a crime scene. If properly preserved, it can one day deliver answers to families and evidence for justice."*

Families were later told, quietly, that "their sons" were buried there. No graves marked, no remains returned.

Qutayfa: Hidden Under the Pines

North of Damascus, the Qutayfa military zone, controlled by the 3rd Division, became another silent cemetery. Bodies from Sednaya and hospitals were delivered under cover of darkness. UN satellite analysis showed fresh excavation between 2014 and 2019. Former insiders estimate thousands lie beneath the soil.

"We buried them in layers," said one ex-officer who testified in a European court. "Hundreds at a time. Sometimes more."

Numbers Without Names

The UN Commission estimates tens of thousands buried in Najha and Qutayfa alone. But these are only two known sites. Families suspect dozens of other hidden burial grounds across Syria, from Aleppo to Homs. For survivors, this absence of graves is a second cruelty. Um Khaled, who lost two sons, told InDepthReports: *"They say the dead are at peace. But how can I have peace when my boys are in the dirt without names, without prayers, without me knowing where?"*

to be continued...



The full article can be found [here](#):





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Emin Dizdarevic Tahmiscija, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Emin Dizdarevic Tahmiscija is a reporter with the BIRN (Balkan Investigative Reporters Network) Detektor team.

Since January 2015 has worked as a court monitor reporting on war crime trials for Justice Report.

She graduated in Journalism from the University of Sarajevo and received her master's degree at the Faculty of Political Sciences.

She won the first Srdjan Aleksić award in 2020 for her work on the challenges of marginalized groups in Bosnia as well as recognition from UNICEF for the promotion and protection of children's rights in BiH.

In 2019, she was shortlisted for an FJA award for a series on war crimes and transitional justice.



Focus
on War Crimes
Verdicts Leaves
Victims Feeling
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& Bosnia Spent
Millions
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Monuments
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2026 FJA Book

Editor's Note

The war in Bosnia ended decades ago, but the fight for justice continues. These reports analyse in detail the impact of war crime trials and the continuing demand for accountability. This journalism goes beyond the dry analysis of legal actions and the well-meaning aspirations of international peacemakers and looks at the human consequences of efforts to make a lasting and durable peace. It is work that poses a hard question – has justice been truly served or is perpetuation of division and the neglect of minority communities a continuing and unacceptable reality?

Introduction

The two analyses, “Bosnia Spent Millions on War Monuments in Bosnia During Decade Lost for Reparations” and “Focus on War Crimes Verdicts Leaves Victims Feeling Disappointed,” reveal with uncompromising depth, the narrow focus on the lived reality of victims, and the multifaceted treatment of transitional justice in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The text's strength lies in its blend of quantitative data with poignant victim narratives—such as the marginalized experience of families denied the right to memorialize their loved ones

Both works transcend surface-level reporting by analyzing whether war crime trials and reparations genuinely advance justice, contribute to recovery, and foster reconciliation for survivors. The first analysis on war crimes prosecutions meticulously documents victims' experiences with judicial processes—including direct testimonies—while exploring whether the system delivered genuine justice or left survivors further disenfranchised.

It breaks new ground by unpacking retroactive application of law, judicial fragmentation (breaking-up indictments), the prosecution of sexual violence, inconsistent damages awarded in rape cases, and disciplinary action against judicial actors, all supported by comprehensive expert commentary and timelines. The inclusion of international judge Joanna Korner's analysis and other legal experts provides valuable context on procedural and systemic barriers that perpetuate victim disappointment and hinder effective accountability.

The second analysis offers an incisive critique of Bosnia's approach to reparation and memorialization, questioning the actual impact of budgetary expenditures on monuments vis-a-vis real systemic change for war victims and their families. By leveraging detailed financial figures and case studies, it challenges whether millions spent fostered meaningful transitional justice or instead perpetuated division and neglect of minority communities.

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Tahmiscija**
**Focus on
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Disappointed**

Published in www.detektor.ba

Focus on War Crimes Verdicts Leaves Victims Feeling Disappointed

Since the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, more than 1,100 people have been convicted of war crimes. Trials have been the main focus of the authorities' transitional justice efforts. But prosecutors' refusal to systematically indict high-ranking suspects, the fragmentation of complex investigations, slow trials, the lack of a strategic approach, politicisation and a lack of support for witnesses have resulted in disappointment for surviving victims and their families.

There seemed to be nothing special happening that day in April 2017 at the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Dozens of defendants, witnesses, lawyers, legal associates and several journalists found their way to the courtroom, where a number of war crimes trials were taking place. However, that day was supremely important for one of the witnesses who told her story in court.

"I will never forget that. That courtroom looked so huge to me," the witness recalled, adding that, in the courtroom, she saw the man who had killed her father in a small eastern Bosnian town for the first time after 25 years.

It was also the first time that she publicly spoke in the courtroom about having been raped. She stood up in the courtroom without claiming anonymity. Unlike many witnesses who are given pseudonyms, such as the letters A or B, she decided to reveal her identity when she faced the people she had accused. Today, she regrets having decided to do so. For the purposes of this article, she has decided to be known as Witness A.

"I entered the room and then they started fighting with me, because I was the key witness. One of them needed a defence, the other one needed a conviction. I was somewhere in between.

Some people **burst into the house**. They cursed our mother, telling us to get out and then they started shooting at random. My father, uncle and neighbour **were killed** there.

Everyone was trying to prove themselves, and I was the only one there who needed justice," she recalled. She entered the courtroom timid and unprepared. But she managed to speak about everything that happened on June 19, 1992, a day that had marked her life forever.

"Some people burst into the house. They cursed our mother, telling us to get out and then they started shooting at random. My father, uncle and neighbour were killed there. They took us away. They took us to a detention camp," she said, adding that her father's remains were burned, so she has never found them.

She was 30 at the time and she knew one of the perpetrators of her father's murder. She recognised him in the courtroom too. Months after her testimony, the Court of Bosnia and

Herzegovina handed down a second-instance verdict, sentencing him to ten years in prison. He was convicted, among other things, of the murder of the witness's father.

"You settle for crumbs. Justice is a great injustice. It can be like that," Witness A said.

She is one of several thousand witnesses who testified before courts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and whose statements were necessary to secure convictions for war crimes for about 1,100 people.

In early 2024, Bosnia and Herzegovina is at a turning point in terms of the prosecution of war crimes, given that it is just starting a two-year period which the Council of Ministers has given to the State Prosecution and Court to finally complete the processing of most complex cases, after all the previous judicial deadlines were not met.

Detektor has comprehensively analysed everything that has been done so far in terms of the prosecution of war crimes, and looked at the dissatisfaction that still exists among victims, despite numerous convictions, due to the politicisation of

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**Focus on
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Disappointed

"I thought of it as a debt I owed to my father, so one day I just knocked at the court's door, introduced myself and, since I knew the protagonists of the incident, I said I wanted to report a murder".

judiciary and the premature departure from the Bosnian State Court of international judges. Their dissatisfaction is even greater given the fact that complex investigations are being fragmented, that many suspects have avoided justice owing to inadequate regional cooperation, and also because there is no realistic assessment of how all the outstanding war crimes cases will be completed.

Retroactive application of the law

In July 2013, the European Court for Human Rights accepted appeals filed by Abduladhim Maktouf and Goran Damjanovic, establishing that the Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina from 2003 had been misapplied in their case. The verdict stated that the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina had violated their rights, given that they could have received lower penalties had the previous Criminal Code of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, SFRJ, been applied in their cases.

Several months after this decision, the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina adopted appeals filed by ten war crime convicts, setting aside the judgments under which they received between 14 and 33 years in prison. These cases were referred back for review, after which the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina released the convicted defendants and then gave them lower sentences. The number of convicted defendants whose appeals were upheld later increased.

Shortly afterwards, international institutions reacted, expressing concern about the release of people convicted of war crimes and genocide. The Constitutional Court also responded to their release, explaining that it had not decided whether the

proceedings should be held again in full due to the misapplication of the law or whether people given long-term prison sentences should be released while serving their sentences.

One of the convicted defendants who was released in February 2014 was Novak Djukic, who used the opportunity to make himself unavailable to Bosnia and Herzegovina judiciary. Djukic's sentence was reduced by five years from the judgment convicting him according to the Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2010, so he eventually received 20 years in prison for the crime at Tuzlanska Kapija through the application of the old SFRJ law.

As a result of these decisions, a person convicted of genocide may receive a maximum penalty of 20 years, while if the person is convicted of crimes against humanity, a lesser crime, they may receive up to 45 years. The law of the SFRY provides for a lesser punishment for genocide compared to the Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Seeking justice for father's murder Right after the end of the war, Witness A decided she would be the one to seek justice for her father's murder and for what she had been through. She went to report the case.

"I thought of it as a debt I owed to my father, so one day I just knocked at the court's door, introduced myself and, since I knew the protagonists of the incident, I said I wanted to report a murder," she said. She said that her agony began at exactly that moment because the authorities did not do their job.

After having been rejected by the local court, she sought the assistance of a lawyer, who wrote a criminal complaint. A long time passed, she said, before she received an invitation to give a statement. In the beginning, the process was difficult.

She recalled calling the prosecutor who first worked on her case, who told her: "What are you calling for, why are you calling? Don't call me and disturb me anymore."

As determined in Hague Tribunal's verdicts, during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina about 100,000 people were killed and 2.2 million people were forced from their homes. The number of war crimes has never been determined, but according to estimates, there were tens of thousands of cases reported.

During the conflict, almost all sides in the war had their own 'institutes' or 'commissions' dealing with the collection of data about war crimes that had been committed. Nevertheless, during and just after the war, suspects in a very small proportion of these cases were prosecuted.

Over the nearly ten-year period from the end of the war

In early 2024, Bosnia and Herzegovina is at a turning point in terms of the prosecution of war crimes, given that it is just starting a two-year period which the Council of Ministers has given to the State Prosecution and Court to finally complete the processing of most complex cases, after all the previous judicial deadlines were not met.

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in December 1995 to the end of 2004, when the State Court started processing its first cases, only 50 people were convicted in 41 cases. Those cases were conducted before local courts and involved exclusively lower-ranking perpetrators.

"In that period, people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also the international public, focused on the Hague Tribunal. There existed the expectation that justice would be done in The Hague, so those first cases processed in Bosnia and Herzegovina went under the radar and the judiciary in Bosnia and Herzegovina was apparently reluctant to deal with cases seriously," recalled Lejla Gacanica, a legal expert following transitional justice processes.

The pursuit of justice is the only part of transitional justice that has received the continuous, substantive support of the international community, said Gacanica, starting back in 2000, when the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina imposed laws to establish the Court and Prosecution at the state level.

In their initial stages, the Bosnian Court and Prosecution had a hybrid character, with a number of international judges and prosecutors working for them. Prosecutors from the US, Britain and other countries handled the first indictments for the Srebrenica genocide and other mass crimes. A large number of them had previous experience of working for the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague, and the Hague Tribunal transferred to Bosnia more than ten cases that were ready for indictment.

The trial chambers consisted of two foreign judges and one local judge, while the appeal chambers were exclusively international. Over time, the number of local judges increased until the chambers were purely domestic in first-instance proceedings.

Meddzida Kreso, the president of the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina from its establishment throughout the period in which international judges were working there, said in 2012 that the Bosnian state judiciary owed the introduction of high standards largely to their international colleagues.

"This court and our local judges are privileged to have had international judges in their ranks. That privilege primarily refers to their contribution to the strengthening of the rule of law and the introduction of international norms and standards in war crimes trials, because they brought those high standards... I cannot generalise and say they were all good and they all contributed equally, just as not all domestic judges have the same capacities," she said.

An analysis carried out by Detektor in 2012 showed that some international prosecutors did not file a single indictment for the whole duration of their mandate. There were also less-

An analysis carried out by Detektor in 2012 showed that some international prosecutors did **not file a single indictment** for the whole duration of their mandate.

experienced prosecutors among them. The former chief of the Department for War Crimes, David Schwendiman, used his last day at the Prosecution of Bosnia and Herzegovina to publish decisions on the suspension of two investigations for crimes against the Serb population in Konjic and Tuzla.

Schwendiman told Detektor after having left Bosnia and Herzegovina that the international judicial officials were "driven away", and warned this would have implications for the processing of war crimes.

According to Schwendiman, he never doubted the quality or knowledge of domestic prosecutors, provided they were ensured good-quality working conditions and administrative support. *"The problem is that those conditions and administration are currently questionable in Bosnia and Herzegovina," he said.*

International judges and prosecutors only worked at full capacity at the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina for a few years. By 2008, the country's Serb-dominated entity Republika Srpska started to exert pressure to remove them. By 2010, only a few of them remained in office, and the last ones completed their mandates in late 2012.

Several protests were organised against the departure of international staff, and the then president of the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina and chief prosecutor Milorad Barasin said publicly that it would cause immeasurable consequences for their work.

"I remember us protesting. I know now, as I knew back then, that their departure was premature. Now we are living with the consequences," said Murat Tahirovic, president of the Association of Victims and Witnesses of Genocide.

to be continued...

The full article can be found [here](#):



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Dana Hourany, Lebanon
**Stolen by a Map: The Haunting
History of Lebanon's Lost Villages**

Introduction

Dana's story on Lebanon's lost villages illuminates and memorializes the historic connection between southern Lebanon and northern Palestine, a region cleaved apart by a colonial border 76 years ago. Through archival research and interviews with survivors of the Nakba and their descendants, Dana traces the story of a people and a land that were once one, and asks the critical question of how families heal from their perpetrator's ongoing aggression in the region.

Today, as southern Lebanon experiences a forceful new wave of Israeli occupation, and its residents again attempt to rebuild what they've lost, the story of Lebanon's seven lost villages is immensely pertinent — both as a testimony and as a warning

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By
Dana
Hourany

Stolen
by a Map:
The Haunting
History
of Lebanon's
Lost Villages

Published in "Lebanon The Public Source"

Stolen by a Map: The Haunting History of Lebanon's Lost Villages

This Long Read is largely grounded in oral history practices, relying primarily on the individual and collective recollections of those we interviewed over several months. While the narrative and personal stories are based on our participants' memories, all historical background, context, and supplemental information have been researched and verified for accuracy.

FEAR had already gripped their hearts. For the past month, ever since news of massacres in nearby villages began to spread, the residents of Tarbikha had been sleeping outside in a field. Fatima Hourani's husband, Deeb, and the other men took turns guarding the village at night. Nothing could have prepared them for what came next. Fatima was outside when she saw armed men racing down the hill toward her village. They arrived in tanks, carried rifles, and wore British uniforms with dome-shaped helmets. Their complexions ranged from very pale to deeply tanned.

She didn't know who they were — only that they were terrifying. She stood frozen in place until her sister-in-law abruptly yanked her back to reality.

"People are fleeing," her sister-in-law snapped. "And you want to stand there and watch?"

At 94, Fatima still vividly remembers the chaos: people scrambling in all directions, her in-laws frantically packing their belongings, her mother-in-law slipping property deeds into her bag, and her father-in-law handing her a stack of plates to balance on her head. Nine months pregnant, she struggled under the heavy load. Luckily, her family made it out before the militia-men reached their house. By the time they arrived at the village center, she says, residents were already fleeing.

"Some took the house keys with them; we didn't even bother to lock up," she told The Public Source. "Even the chickens were

running out of fear." She paused, a flicker of pain crossing her eyes as she glanced at the wall. "Why do you bring back these painful memories?" she asked, her voice trembling.

The soldiers Fatima saw were members of the Haganah terrorist militia, named after the Hebrew word for "defense." The Haganah was one of the main Zionist paramilitary organizations responsible for the Nakba, the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. After May 1948, it became central to the nascent state's official army. The militia-turned-army entered Tarbikha at the end of that year, forcing its residents to flee on foot, and leaving the village desolate and barren.

Fatima Hourani, 94, bedridden due to a back injury. Always nearby, at her bedside, are prayer beads, and her wallet and phone. She lives alone in a two-bedroom apartment in Sur, and her daughter passes by her every now and then. Despite being very sick that day, Fatima recounted the harrowing details of her time in Tarbikha, and how the village was destroyed by the Haganah terrorist militia in 1948.

It took almost a full day for Fatima and her family to reach the nearest safe haven: a simple stretch of green known as Khamlet Wardeh. Soon after, a friend of her husband's invited them to stay in the nearby Lebanese village of Aita al-Chaab. From there, their journey took them through different villages in southern Lebanon: Aita, Yater, Haddatha, Maarake, and eventually to Abu al-Aswad, near Adloun, just south of Saida.

The Houranis went from being farmers on their own land, in Tarbikha, to laborers on someone else's farm. The landowners they worked for treated the Houranis well, allowing the family to set up and live out of a tent on their land. But rebuilding their lives from scratch while raising 10 children proved to be a daunting challenge. "I would often see my father sitting under a tree, tears in his eyes, reminiscing about the old days in Tarbikha and all that we've lost," Fatima's son, Mahmoud Hourani, told The Public Source.

Tarbikha shared the fate of much of historic Palestine: Zionist militias expelled the Indigenous population to make way for a settler-colonial ethno-state, built on systematic colonial atrocities and dispossession — structures of violence that persist to this day. But Tarbikha and six of its neighboring villages — Abil al-Qamh, Hunin, Nabi Yusha, Qadas, Salha, al-Malikiyya — are central to a distinct chapter in the ongoing history of settler colonialism, imperialism, and mass displacement. The story of Lebanon's "Seven Lost Villages," located in the ambiguous region between northern Palestine and southern Lebanon, underscores the arbitrary power of lines drawn on a map. Its origins trace back to the aftermath of World War I, when the French and British colonial mandates delineated the borders of Lebanon and Palestine against the interests of the native populations.

The Haganah was one of the main Zionist paramilitary organizations responsible for the Nakba, the ethnic cleansing of Palestine.

After May 1948, it became central to the nascent state's official army.

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OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION TO PEACE

By
**Dana
Hourany**

Stolen by a Map: The Haunting History of Lebanon's Lost Villages

Before the Franco-British demarcations, these villages were part of the tapestry of small communities and farms across what is now southern Lebanon and occupied northern Palestine. After the early 1920s, when the new borders placed hem on the British side of the line, residents of these villages continued their lives much as they had before, but were now living under British Mandate Palestine. During the Nakba, however, Zionist militias like the Haganah began ethnically cleansing these and other villages across the region. Forced to seek refuge at the nearest safe haven, the original residents of these seven villages fled to their relatives, friends, and former neighbors in what was by then Lebanon.

Confronted with the harsh reality of being unable to return home, they began rebuilding their shattered lives, despite limited resources, the pain of displacement, and a prolonged struggle to secure Lebanese citizenship — a right the Lebanese government denied them for years. Today, Israeli settlements occupy the lands where the original seven villages once stood, and — as a testament to the occupation's longstanding attempts to falsify and erase history — the villages' Arabic names were replaced with Hebrew ones. The Arab villages of Abil al-Qamh, Hunin, Nabi Yusha, Qadas, Tarbikha shared the fate of much of historic Palestine: Zionist militias expelled the Indigenous population to make way for a settler-colonial ethno-state, built on systematic colonial atrocities and dispossession — structures of violence that persist to this day.

Salha, al-Malikiyya, and Tarbikha were renamed Yuval, Margaliot, Ramot Naftali, Yiftah, Yir'on and Avivim, Malkia, and Shomera respectively. Settlers who occupied Tarbikha remodeled some of the houses they stole; others, like in Qadas, completely destroyed the homes. They turned historical sites into tourist attractions and farms like the Hourani's into agricultural plains. The occupying forces built military bases on some of this land, like in al-Malikiyya, with prime views into southern

Lebanon — all part of the ongoing effort to further encroach on the region.

History of Colonial Greed

During the Ottoman era, from 1516 to 1918, there were no defined borders separating Palestine from Lebanon. The villages of southern Lebanon, including the seven mentioned in this article, were part of a larger region known as "Jabal Amel." Following the defeat of the Ottomans in World War I.

France and the United Kingdom seized control of the eastern Mediterranean as mandatory powers. In 1916, British dip-

lomat Mark Sykes and French diplomat François Georges-Picot drafted a secret agreement on borders and designation of political control in service of their countries' imperial interests in what would eventually become known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement. This accord laid the foundation for the borders that would shape the modern states of Palestine and Lebanon and much of the Middle East. A year later, on 2 November 2 1917, British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour sent a letter to British Zionist leader Lionel Walter Rothschild, expressing support for "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." The declaration encouraged the Zionist movement to push British authorities for more land — including the British annexation of parts of southern Lebanon.

The Zionists fought against the original borders proposed by the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which placed Lebanon's southern boundary 24 kilometers north of Haifa, extending to Lake Tiberias. In 1919, four Zionist organizations wrote to the post-World War I Paris Peace Conference, advocating for Palestine's northern border to extend from Saida to Qa-raoun. The organizations wanted complete control over the Litani river, some 29 kilometers further north of the Sykes-Picot demarcation. Although France remained adamant about retaining the Litani within Lebanese territory, leading Zionist organizations urged the British to apply more pressure on the French.

On September 1, 1920, France's High Commissioner of the Levant Henri Gouraud declared the creation of Greater Lebanon within its "natural borders," including the villages of Jabal Amel. The final demarcation of the southern border was deferred to a future international agreement between France and Britain, the first version of which came in December of that year.

In December 1920, the Franco-British Paulet-Newcombe Commission started negotiations to finalize the border between British Mandate Palestine and French Mandate Lebanon. By the time negotiations were over, Palestine's northern boundary was demarcated from Ras al-Naqoura to Metulla. Lebanon had lost between 30 and 40 villages; estimates vary since many consisted of open farmlands, fields, and small clusters of houses. The most notable among these are the seven villages that are now commonly referred to as the "Seven Lost Villages," according to Amine Hotait, a senior officer at the Military Academy who verified the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000 as head of the Lebanese Border Demarcation Committee.

France and Britain signed the Paulet-Newcombe Agreement in 1923, completing the legalities by 1926. France, however, had conducted a population census in Lebanon in 1921, prior to the conclusion of the Paulet-Newcombe Commission's work, and had already granted Lebanese citizenship to the inhabitants of the annexed villages. Just five years later, the residents of

By the time negotiations were over, Palestine's northern boundary was demarcated from Ras al-Naqoura to Metulla.

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OUTSTANDING
CONTRIBUTION
TO PEACE

By
Dana
Hourany

Stolen
by a Map:
The Haunting
History
of Lebanon's
Lost Villages

these villages lost their Lebanese citizenship, an administrative formality that would alter the course of their lives. They hadn't moved; the borders had shifted beneath their feet — eventually stripping them from the land they called home. Now living under the British Mandate, they were reclassified as Palestinian citizens.

A Secret Accord

In 1915, as World War I was raging, and the Ottoman Empire was collapsing, the Entente Powers (led by Britain, France, and Russia) began secretly negotiating the future borders of the Middle East. Palestine, 1881

The red line, below, is the initial Sykes-Picot border between the British- and French-controlled areas. (The dotted line represents a later proposal, called the Millerand Line, made in 1920.)

Shifting Lines

When the British and French governments finished their final negotiations, the borders had been redrawn yet again. The Paulet-Newcombe Agreement removed dozens of villages — and thousands of people — from French Mandate Lebanon and put them in British Mandate Palestine. The British and French approved the new borders on March 7, 1923, and took over their Mandatory territories on September 29 of that year. Overnight, villagers who had gone to sleep in French Mandate Lebanon woke up in British Mandate Palestine.

A quarter-century later, most of these villages would be ethnically cleansed in the 1948 Nakba, or catastrophe — a series of massacres and mass displacements, carried out by Zionist militias, in the war to seize historic Palestine for the modern-day state of Israel.

The militiamen pressed Salami to summon the villagers immediately, claiming they would provide them with new identification cards. Salami instructed the town criers to climb up the mosque's minaret and ask the villagers to gather in the square outside the mosque. Witnesses later recalled seeing two Israeli soldiers sitting outside a house, casually drinking coffee as the villagers assembled. When some 105 villagers finally gathered outside Salha's mosque, they found themselves encircled by 10 armored vehicles mounted with heavy machine guns. A commanding officer, addressing the crowd in Arabic, issued an ultimatum, threatening to shoot them if they refused to surrender their weapons. After a few words exchanged in Hebrew with his

troops, the officer signaled, and they unleashed a barrage of fire on the villagers.

"Some narrowly escaped by crawling on the ground, hiding, and then managing to run when the militia left," Talal told The Public Source. The victims included women, men, children, and the elderly. It is said that residents three kilometers away, in the village of Yaroun, heard the screams echoing from Salha. They hurried to transport the wounded to hospitals in nearby villages. The Salha Massacre would mark the first Israeli massacre of Lebanese citizens.

"Foreigners" In Their Own Land Once in Lebanon, the residents of the seven villages suddenly found themselves classified as Palestinian refugees. Mahmoud Hourani recalls his father, Deeb, mentioning a small minority who obtained Lebanese citizenship "if they had their Lebanese IDs given by the French Mandate and 100 lira."

"I used to tease my dad, saying he missed out on citizenship because he had the paper but not the money!" Mahmoud said, laughing. Without citizenship, they faced many restrictions. To this day, Palestinian refugees have limited rights in Lebanon and are barred from working in 39 syndicated professions, including law, engineering, medicine, and the military, as well as from owning property. For decades, they have been forced to rely on services such as healthcare and education from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), a UN body set up specifically to provide aid to the hundreds of thousands rendered stateless during the Nakba. Hourani also recalled the strict curfew imposed on Palestinians in 1969, which required him to obtain a permit just to leave the house and go to school.

Mahmoud, like other residents of the seven villages, tried to reclaim the Lebanese citizenship that had been granted and later stripped away from them on a whim by the colonial powers and their ever-shifting maps. "I spent a lot of money hiring lawyers to try to regain citizenship," he said, "but always hit a dead end." In 1994, then-President Elias Hrawi signed naturalization decree No. 5247 that notably allowed residents of the seven villages, among others, to gain citizenship. The decree, however, excluded hundreds of others, sometimes from the same family, leaving many stateless to this day. Mahmoud and his family were among those included in the decree. "But the decree counted us as foreigners just now receiving Lebanese citizenship," he said, "not original inhabitants regaining our birthright."

to be continued...

"Some narrowly escaped by crawling on the ground, hiding, and then managing to run when the militia left," Talal told The Public Source.

The victims included women, men, children, and the elderly.

The full article can be found [here](#):



Akua Nalova, Cameroon
Series on the conflict in Cameroon's English-speaking regions

Introduction

The ongoing conflict in Cameroon's English-speaking regions, rooted in colonial history and exacerbated by government policies, has resulted in significant loss of life and displacement. Initially sparked by the government's imposition of French-speaking teachers and lawyers in 2016, peaceful protests escalated into a full-blown separatist movement, resulting in over 6,000 deaths and vast displacement. Both sides, government forces and separatists, have committed atrocities, leading to daily tit-for-tat killings and severe humanitarian crises.

*In 2016, peaceful protests escalated into a full-blown separatist movement, resulting in **over 6,000 deaths** and vast displacement.*

The separatist movement, seeking independence for Ambazonia, faces a military response from the francophone-dominated government. Despite attempts at dialogue, including international mediation efforts, the conflict remains unresolved, with both sides entrenched in their positions.

The humanitarian impact is severe, with thousands displaced and in need of aid. The international community's response has been limited, partly due to geopolitical interests. The conflict is characterized by reciprocal violence and a lack of effective peace negotiations. In the conflict-ridden

They explore the roots of the conflict, stemming from historical grievances and marginalization of Anglophone Cameroonians by the Francophone-dominated government.

regions, healthcare workers like Marguerite and Victory face immense challenges in providing antiretroviral therapy to HIV patients. The ongoing civil war exacerbates the stigma and logistical difficulties in accessing treatment.

Despite progress in reducing HIV prevalence, the instability threatens public health efforts. In the face of the unrest, young spoken-word artists use poetry to process trauma and advocate for dialogue, wielding verses as weapons against violence, channeling their pain into powerful performances that advocate for peace.

These poets navigate a dangerous terrain where expressing their views can invite retaliation from both government forces and separatists. Despite these challenges, they remain committed to their approach – their ultimate goal being healing, calling for peace, dialogue, and a future where all people – regardless of their political leaning – can coexist peacefully. The public response to their poetry has been overwhelmingly positive.

These articles delve into the ongoing conflict in Cameroon's English-speaking regions, highlighting the personal tragedies and broader socio-political dynamics. They explore the roots of the conflict, stemming from historical grievances and marginalization of Anglophone Cameroonians by the Francophone-dominated government. The narrative includes personal accounts of loss and trauma, the motivations and actions of separatist fighters, and the government's military response. The articles underscore the humanitarian toll and the complex interplay of local and international factors influencing the conflict's trajectory.

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STORIES

OUTSTANDING
CONTRIBUTION
TO PEACE

By
Akua Nalova

**Series
on the
conflict
in
Cameroon's
English-
speaking
regions**

Published in "Human Angle, Africa Is A Country, Planeto Futuro, The Guardian, The Associated Press, Okay Africa"

Series on the conflict in Cameroon's English-speaking regions

Two peace plants sprouting on rusty-red soil are what help Morine Ngum today to locate the grave of her late husband, Calistus Nche. The grave behind their uncompleted mud house in the Mokwebu neighbourhood of Bamenda, the capital of Cameroon's embattled North West region, is covered in small bunches of protruding grass and dried banana leaves.

Nche was shot at End-of-Tar, Longla Street, in Bamenda in 2022 while fighting soldiers of Cameroon's Francophone-dominated government. In 2018, at 28, he gave up driving to join the Anglophone 'struggle'. "I didn't want him to join the struggle, but he forcefully did after separatist fighters threatened to kill him and his entire family if he didn't join them," 30-year-old Ngum says, her voice breaking.

"He keeps appearing to me in a dream, crying, apologising and stating that he joined the struggle for our own sake. My last daughter, who was so attached to him, is often sick and would wake up at night shouting: 'Daddy, please take me along with you,'" the mother of three said ruefully, referring to her six-year-old daughter. Ngum is still struggling to keep her fashion design business to make ends meet.

A few miles away, Sonita Kum, another widow, mourns her 34-year-old husband, Nelson Afuh — a prison guard killed in an ambush in the remote Nso area of the region on April 12, 2022. Afuh is an Anglophone Cameroonian by birth, like Nche, but was targeted for being a member of the Cameroon military sent by Francophone President Paul Biya to quash the Anglophone secessionist revolt.

"I felt like my world had collapsed around me when my husband died," she recalls with bitterness in her voice. "I could barely recognise his legs in the coffin, the rest of his body having been shattered. Life is just meaningless without him," the 34-year-old mother of three said. Notwithstanding her pain,

Kum still feels her husband died for a "just" cause. Jobless since her husband's passing, she plans to start a business to help her take care of her kids. A spouse of another Cameroonian soldier brutally killed on August 31, 2023, in Bamenda, was too upset to speak.

Since 2016, violence has torn through Cameroon's two Anglophone North West and South West regions after the government imposed French-speaking teachers and lawyers on Anglophone schools and courts. Peaceful protests were met with military force and the arrest and detention of the leaders. Events then spiralled out of control, and a separatist movement emerged, calling for the independence of the territory, which Anglophone activists have styled "Ambazonia".

The war has left more than 6,000 people dead, at least a million others displaced, while more than 80,000 have fled to neighbouring Nigeria, according to the International Crisis Group. Hundreds of thousands of children have been deprived of schooling as a result of the violence, especially under a school ban imposed by separatist forces who reject the education system run by the government in Yaounde, which they consider an annexation power. Meanwhile, the local economy is in free fall.

Notwithstanding the tragedy of the deaths of combatants like Afuh and Nche in the protracted armed conflict, others have not been discouraged from pursuing the war. In the mountainous Menchum area of northwestern Cameroon — noted for its undulating rolling hills and open-shrubby savanna — 'General Stone' commands some 78 separatist fighters. Before talking to me on the phone via an intermediary, the soft-spoken rebel makes a point to inquire if I am not a spy of the Cameroon government. Still not convinced with my answer, Gen. Stone — whose name he says translates 'invincibility' — finally vents the spleen that prompted him to abandon farming to join the 'struggle'.

"The Francophone government has enslaved us for too long: we have many university graduates roaming the streets; people spend up to six years to obtain simple ID cards; elections are around the corner but we already know who will win... we are fighting for our rights." He said he has repeatedly turned down requests from his family to put down his weapon. He expresses readiness to die a 'martyr' like some 30 fighters under his command. Life in the bush, Gen. Stone explains, is challenging — sometimes necessitating the use of natural herbs to treat wounds, as was the case when a bullet ripped into his toe. Each day in the bush starts with a prayer, followed by breakfast, after which a plan to target their enemies is rolled out.

"Our objective is always to kill as many Cameroonian soldiers as possible," Gen. Stone said, not bothering to mask his

"I felt like my world had collapsed around me when my husband died," she recalls with bitterness in her voice.

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intentions. "I have the means to do that. We have enough ammunition sent in from abroad. Countless numbers have already been killed. They don't see us as humans. Likewise, we don't see them as one." Gen. Stone is married and a father of nine. He creates time every month to be with his children. He also claims the military "constantly" harasses his family because of his activities. "I know we will defeat them militarily one day," he says. "Once that is done, Ambazonia will be a paradise."

Alabukam is another separatist-prone area on the outskirts of Bamenda in northwestern Cameroon, where 27-year-old farmer-cum self-styled 'Mission Commander' nicknamed 'Striker', calls the shots. Like 'Gen. Stone', 'Commander' Striker – claiming his name represents 'toughness' – justifies his rebellion on several factors: Francophones "manipulate" the brains of Anglophones; Francophones squeeze their regions "dry" economically; and Francophones deprive them of "lucrative jobs". He is cagey about giving details on their modus operandi, claiming it constitutes a "military secret". He also claims to have resisted calls from his family to surrender. He is willing to die for the Anglophone cause.

"What we want is separation and nothing else," he says in a telephone chat. "We trap Cameroonian soldiers with the bombs which we fabricate. Countless of them have been killed," Striker said, nonetheless admitting a number of his peers have died in the process. "We blocked the road in Mbengwi for two good years... We also chased the military from their base at Commercial Avenue in Bamenda. We have enough ammunition, some of which we seized from the soldiers. We will never surrender."

While the separatist fighters feel that the balance of the eight-year war is currently tilted in their favour, Cameroonian soldiers at the war front think otherwise. One of them, speaking on condition of anonymity because he is not authorised to speak, insists the army has a "significant edge" over the separatist fighters. The staff sergeant has fought and survived battles in Bamenda and the volatile Bamessing and Balikumbat areas in the North West region. He is an Anglophone Cameroonian who remorsefully acknowledges that he's fighting against his brothers and sisters but maintains, "The army is there to do the job; that's all."

"The army enjoys the collaboration of the population to put out the separatist fighters," the non-commissioned officer said. He confirms that the war in Cameroon's two predominantly Anglophone regions is real, and characterised by "violence, insecurity and killings." "The only sensible solution to this conflict is dialogue. Violence can never satisfy nor benefit either side," he said.

Another member of the Cameroonian military serving in

the relatively peaceful Tiko area in the South West region – after fighting fierce battles in Batibo, Mamfe, Bamenda and Buea – claims government soldiers have often overpowered the separatist fighters in their many confrontations. "The separatist fighters are poorly trained," he says. "For us [Anglophone] soldiers, we don't consider it a war but rather a misunderstanding between brothers. We try to make separatist fighters understand that we are one." He claims many separatist fighters have surrendered and considers it a sign of the military's "overwhelming victory" in the war. "I advise them to give up fighting so that together, we can build a better Cameroon nation."

The omnipresence of the rebels

Amid the snow-capped peaks and perfect drizzling rain of early Aug. 13, I begin my tour of the Tshuobuh neighbourhood of Bamenda. As I walk carefully among the paths of this squalid neighbourhood, two motorbikes honk past at breakneck speed, releasing trails of exhaust. "Those are the boys [separatist fighters]," Josiah, a pseudonym I'm using for my guide, whispers. "They are just from buying cannabis. They are heading to the bush to consume it. They do that often."

Tshuobuh is a typical village, with a fresh breeze blowing across the many fruit trees. Later, as I sit in a shop bar waiting for a source, a six-foot-tall boyish-looking man with a goatee beard takes a seat directly opposite. "That is a fighter," Josiah tells me in the local dialect. The 'soldier', as separatist armed men are known in the local parlance here, is wearing a rocket science casual double-pocket checked shirt and a black face cap. He wears an earring on the left ear, two black beads and a chain bracelet on his left wrist. A black earpiece, intertwining with the rope of the small brown bag he carries, hangs around his neck.

Feeling relaxed, the fighter intermittently sipped from a bottled water cooler. He sociably interjects clever remarks in the ensuing discussions. At intervals, the fighter manipulates his phone and places it back on a bible that lies on the table. But he remains vigilant, repeatedly looking at the horizon as if on the lookout for the enemy. "They have a lot of intelligence," Josiah tells me. "When you see them in settings like these, know that they have stationed spies in strategic locations to alert them of the army's presence." He said the fighters move about freely in the neighbourhoods, streets, and city centre – strangely under the nose of their enemy: government soldiers. "We know them." Locals say most youths joined the war out of frustration and desperation to flee the grinding maw of their everyday lives.

"The army enjoys the collaboration of the population to put out the separatist fighters," the non-commissioned officer said.

He confirms that the war in Cameroon's two predominantly Anglophone regions is real, and characterised by "violence, insecurity and killings."

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Some rent bikes intending to pay back within a specified period – usually six months. But in most cases, they fail to honour their part of the bargain due to the economic hardship in the region. They end up picking up arms and joining the 'struggle'. From Tshuobuh to the Bamenda city centre, shuttered shops and closed cafes are a reminder of the city's once lively past. One thing appears obvious everyone is suspicious of everyone else. No one seems to trust anyone.

Cars gallop on the potholes that have become a trademark of Bamenda – a symptom of the economic inequality Anglophone activists accuse the Yaounde regime of. But motorbikes remain the main medium of transportation. In late May, authorities imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew on motorbikes to curb rising insecurity in the city, under the notion that motorbikes facilitate movement for armed separatists. In response, Anglophone rebels ordered cab drivers to change the colour of their vehicles from yellow to white and blue – a symbol of the flag of their secessionist revolt. Drivers who fail to comply have had their vehicles burnt down.

Conflict with colonial roots

The conflict in Cameroon's two Anglophone regions stems from the country's colonial past: first colonised by Germany (1884-1916), the country was later split between France and Britain after the German defeat during World War I. French Cameroon gained independence in 1960, joined by English-speaking Cameroon through a federation a year later after a vote in a UN-organised plebiscite. The French-speaking section constitutes about 80 per cent, while the English-speaking section constitutes about 20 per cent, both in terms of territory and population. However, a controversial referendum in 1972 repealed the country's federal structure, which guaranteed rights and secured the distinct educational, judicial, and political systems of the minority Anglophone section.

Simon Munzu, retired Chair of the Coalition of Cameroon Federalist Groups and Activists (CCFGA) Steering Committee and former United Nations Assistant Secretary-General, identifies two main factors at the origin of the present conflict. The first is the "programmatic domination, marginalisation, assimilation, and takeover" of Anglophone Cameroon by successive Francophone-led regimes in Yaounde. "The second is the excessive concentration of governmental power, authority, and resources at the centre," he says. "Only federalism can address both of these root causes and pave the way to a durable peace and normalcy in all the ten regions of Cameroon. Neither a decentralised unitary state nor the breakaway of parts of Cameroon can adequately address these root causes."



In the heat of the conflict, the government of Cameroon launched some initiatives aimed at ending the fighting. For a month in 2019, the warring parties participated in negotiations known as the Major National Dialogue. But those negotiations, which didn't involve critical leaders of the Anglophone revolt, eventually fell apart.

Then, in September 2022, Cameroonian President Paul Biya halted a Swiss-led peace dialogue. In another effort toward ending the conflict, Canada led secret "pre-talks" to initiate a formal dialogue. But three days later, Cameroon's government brushed aside Canada's efforts, denying that it had asked a foreign party to resolve the conflict.

"All those measures have failed because the government is acting in bad faith," says Munzu. "It refuses to acknowledge the exact nature of the Anglophone problem. It, therefore, refuses to adopt real solutions that could resolve the problem and end the crisis. The measures it has taken so far are purely cosmetic."

Chris W J Roberts, a political scientist at the University of Calgary, Canada, describes the Major National Dialogue as a "stage-managed" event designed more for international consumption than directed towards solving Cameroon's long-standing, deep political problems. Earlier in 2019, the government faced more international scrutiny and more determined non-state armed groups' activity against security forces.

"The Major National Dialogue and the government's earlier tacit agreement for a Swiss-led process reduced international pressure, but key factions within the Cameroon government had no intention of letting the Swiss-led process ever produce direct negotiations with those desiring an independent state," Roberts told me in an email. "The Cameroon government has not faced any significant international pressure to take any peace process seriously, nor did it face any consequences for embarrassing Canada and turning its back on the only good faith effort to engineer progress towards peace."

That process is not completely dead, however, but since early 2023, more divisions have opened up among the multitude of Ambazonian or British Southern Cameroon groups, given the January 2023 setback," he said. Roberts believes the Cameroonian government wants to hold off any serious international engagement while pursuing a "hammer-and-lies" (military force and disinformation) strategy to exhaust Anglophones rather than submit to political reform. "And each atrocity supports the government's strategy even if [non-state armed groups] are not directly responsible," he said.

to be continued...

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"It refuses to acknowledge the exact nature of the Anglophone problem.

It, therefore, refuses to adopt real solutions that could resolve the problem and end the crisis.

The measures it has taken so far are purely cosmetic."

The full article can be found [here](#):



Ibrahim Adeyemi, Nigeria

Series:

Terror From The Trolls (I):

The Keyboard Warriors Fueling

Plateau's Ethno-Religious Crisis (II):

The Ethnic Divide, Revenge Killings Behind Nigeria's Christmas Massacre or articles

Introduction

This is a two-part series on how foreign and local mercenaries manipulated the 2023 Christmas massacre in Plateau state to fit into their biases and covert agenda.

The massacre of a family in a satellite village in Plateau State escalated into a full-blown ethnoreligious war, thanks to online disinformation mercenaries, religious conspiracy theorists, and local and international bodies with ethnic or religious affiliations.

The story shows how online trolls can practically endanger human lives, inflaming a major humanitarian crisis in the north-central region at the time. Turning the internet space into a battlefield, different propagandists used the tragic event as a pawn for hateful campaigns, cyber threats and bullying, spreading coordinated lies and disinformation.

The consequence of these online trolls was the killing of over 200 civilians and the displacement of thousands of people, including women and children, in the Bokokos, Mangu and Barkin Ladi areas of Plateau. I spent 11 days in Plateau state, travelling through volatile routes to unearth the truth, amid high waves of disinformation triggering mass murder and displacement in the name of religion and ethnicity.

The first part analyses thousands of posts on Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms, using open-source tools and traditional journalism methods to uncover the individuals, groups, and associations behind the deadly propaganda campaigns. My investigation established that people, especially the attackers, were triggered to kill their neighbours following what they consumed online about the massacre.

In the second part of the investigation the focus is on showcasing the human cost of the war and setting the record straight. After interviewing dozens of locals, including people who confessed to having participated in the ethnic or religious gore, I uncovered the actual cause of the Christmas massacre, vividly contrasting what was reported by many local and foreign mainstream media.

However, this investigation provides clarity or light amid darkness over the Christmas massacre, after months of a thriving disinformation spree on the internet. Several accounts promoting covert disinformation and hate speech to encourage and fuel violence were removed on Facebook and Twitter after this investigation. The report sparked conversations on the internet from major civic space actors in Nigeria, with many commending the journalist's courage to go the extra mile in unravelling the truth.

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trolls was the killing
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OUTSTANDING
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TO PEACE

By
Ibrahim
Adeyemi

Terror From
The Trolls

Published in "HumAngle Media Limited"

Terror From The Trolls (I): The Keyboard Warriors Fueling Plateau's Ethno-Religious Crisis. Terror From The Trolls (II): The Ethnic Divide, Revenge Killings Behind Nigeria's Christmas Massacre

Terror From The Trolls I

Analysing hundreds of posts on X and Facebook, HumAngle established how different people and groups pushed narratives around the massacre to suit their biases and ended up inflaming the deadly crisis.

Something horrible happened in Kambar Pelli, a village on the shore of the Bokkos area in Plateau State, North Central Nigeria. It was a dark, cosy evening, and the clocks were striking at 9 p.m. Yohana had dozed off deeply into a nightmare outside his mud house. His community was rag-

ing in his dream, and everyone was running.

It was barely 48 hours until Christmas; the spirit of the season abounded, and children were turned to bed early so they could prepare for Christmas Eve activities. Yohana exhausted himself prepping his family for the celebration until he dozed off. Agonising wails from one of his neighbours suddenly woke him up.

A family compound was on fire; fatal bullets pierced through doors and windows, bludgeoning lives out of the occupants. The attackers spoke Fulfulde as they barked orders, suggesting they were of Fulani extraction. Yohana said the target was Panmun Isa, a successful local farmer in Bokkos. His entire family of 12 paid for his "sin". Four neighbours trying to rescue the family also paid with their lives, making the total casualties 16 at the time.

In a matter of minutes, the raiders disappeared into the woods, but the agony they left lingered. The family was hurriedly buried in a shallow grave behind the building that once housed them. Their memories are held to the walls through framed, fading images. But all of them, Panmun, his wife, Namban, and their four children — Makroghop, Tapji, Jiret and Precious — are gone forever. His elder brother, wife, and children — Besan, Gifty, Katbam and Shalom — were also not spared.

The gory night raid still haunts Yohana in his dreams. As a village chief with strong ties to the target of the attack, he knows where Panmun got it wrong with the assailants. He was feuding with some herders in Bidel, a small village in the neighbouring Mangu axis.

In the Bokkos and Mangu areas of the state, communal clashes are spurred by many circumstances, including feuds over access to grazing lands between the Fulani pastoralists and the natives, who are mostly farmers. In this case, the natives involved are the Mwaghavuls, a local tribe with dominance in Mangu, Barkin Ladi, and parts of the Bokkos local government areas.

"Panmun was farming in a village called Bidel where Fulani settlers have land disputes with the natives," Yohana narrated to HumAngle. "His farm is one of the disputed expanse of land. When they had issues over there, the Bidel people threatened to sack the Fulani and eventually did, after which violence erupted."

Panmun had often returned from the farm with his face scrunched up, lamenting bitterly about a land dispute involving him and the Fulanis in Mangu. Yohana and about a dozen residents HumAngle interviewed in Kambar Pelli accused the Fulanis of attacking Panmun's family "for participating in their displacement from Bidel".

A family compound was on fire; fatal bullets pierced through doors and windows, bludgeoning lives out of the occupants.

The attackers spoke Fulfulde as they barked orders, suggesting they were of Fulani extraction.

Yohana said the target was Panmun Isa, a successful local farmer in Bokkos.

His entire family of 12 paid for his "sin".

Four neighbours trying to rescue the family also paid with their lives, making the total casualties 16 at the time.

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OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION TO PEACE

By
**Ibrahim
Adeyemi**

Terror From The Trolls

The villagers also accused the Fulani herders of habitually plotting guerrilla attacks against farmers, who quarrelled with them or dragged them to the police for invading their farms with cattle grazing.

“Because they know him well, they decided to attack his home. That is why they only stopped at his house, killed him and his family and left,” Yohana added.

‘Bad news travels faster than bullets’

The news travelled around the towns and villages of Bokkos that “the Fulanis have killed Mwaghavul men again”. The timing of this incident seems enraging, prompting a wave of deadly reprisals.

In Plateau, a volatile state, Christians and Muslims are often at war. An interreligious crisis could happen at the slightest trigger. The causes of the earliest forms of violence in the state are well documented. In one narrative, a Christian lady had tried to cross a mosque’s barricade during Friday prayers. The other narrative is that a Muslim politician was appointed the state’s local coordinator for a Federal Poverty Alleviation Programme. Religion and ethnicity seem to overlap in this state: The Hausa/Fulani are easily identified as Muslims, while the natives are predominantly Christians.

Early morning on Dec. 24, 2023, the violence had escalated into a blood-for-blood duel. Native Mwaghavul people were enraged that their kin were killed a few days before Christmas. They began to attack and displace Fulani settlements. The vengeful killings continued on both sides, spilling beyond the corridors of Bokkos. The crisis would not stop, spiralling into Christmas day with a cocktail of carnage.

Later, the Mwaghavul people colluded with other natives, such as the Ron and the Berom, to fight against the Fulani pastoralists, allegedly causing mayhem across Mangu, Bokkos, and Barkin Ladi. In most cases, the Fulani residents in these areas fought back, also targeting the homes and properties of the natives.

Although there was a brief lull towards the evening on Christmas day, the violence flared up again, thanks to online information manipulators who built up tension with posts appealing to religious sentiments. Social media posts from both sides were used to manipulate emotions, inflaming the crisis and portraying the violence as a jihadist attack against the Christian population.



Analysing hundreds of posts on X (Twitter) and Facebook, HumAngle established how different people, groups and bodies pushed narratives around the massacre to suit their biases and ideologies. Notable amplifiers of disinformation around the Christmas massacres are religious conspiracy theorists, local and international religious organisations, social media influencers, community journalists, and unsuspecting individuals who refused to check the truthfulness of a claim before propagating it.

“While we can’t throw away everything posted on social media, people used these tragic events to promote their ideologies and interests because it is bad news,” said Samuel Amuna, a humanitarian worker documenting the crisis. “As you know, bad news travels faster than bullets, escalating the violence.”

Footage, fire and fear

From Dec. 25, horrifying videos and pictures purportedly emanating from the Plateau killing field circulated on social media. Alarming rhetorics, insinuations and misleading images were used to anchor the narrative that government-backed Islamist fighters were on a mission to wipe out Christians in the state.

One video shows the lifeless bodies of women and children on a field that has splashes of blood. A baby strapped at the back of her dead mother wails bitterly for help. Another dead woman covered with blood and dust lays on her baby, who had also died gruesomely. The 1:37 footage takes one on an emotional journey to the scene of the attack, which many social media influencers claimed was Plateau.

One of the posters, an influencer with over 80,000 followers, claimed Christians were being killed every year in this manner and suggested that children and women were treated worse than animals in Plateau. The video got over 40,000 views and more than 800 reposts on his X page alone.

We used InVID, a video verification tool, to break the clip into keyframes and subject them to Google reverse image searches. The result shows that the video existed on the internet before the killings began in Plateau on Dec. 23.

An X user had posted the same video on Dec. 16, 2023, a week before the massacre occurred in Kambar Pelli, claiming the footage showed Wagner soldiers killing unarmed civilians in Burkina Faso. Although it is unclear if it was recorded in the country as claimed, the clip seems to have a reputation for manipulating narratives in conflict zones because it tends to stir up emotions — as seen here and here.

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While a massacre truly happened in many communities in the north-central state, the most provocative images trending at the time were old and had nothing to do with the violence that struck. Some of the photos were recycled to frame the incident as a jihadist war against unarmed Christians.

One post shared between Dec. 25 and 27 by influencers with thousands of followers used a Boko Haram attack video to portray that jihadi fighters shouted “Allahu Akbar” (praise God) after razing down Christian communities in the remote areas of Plateau, courtesy of a successful Christmas massacre. Other old incendiary photos – such as this – were reshared multiple times with firebug innuendoes suggesting the destruction of churches and killings of Christian worshipers.

Some videos of people hospitalised, displaced, or dying – as seen here and here – were published with accurate narratives of what transpired in the rural communities of Bokkos and Mangu. However, they were not as widely accepted as the misleading ones.

Behold the fox of hoaxes

Amid the wildfire of disinformation campaigns and hate speeches, a wave of media framing by foreign influence operators set in, overwhelming the space with enraging narratives. On Dec. 30, a troubling story spread a fresh trove of fear on social media with this damning headline: World looks other way as Christians ‘killed for sport by jihadists’ in Nigeria. Fox News, an American-based channel which published the story, seemed to have fed the thirst for validation for claims that foreign-linked jihadists were at play in Plateau during the Christmas attack.

Thousands of X and Facebook users fell for the clickbait accompanied by a recorded television programme version of the story claiming that a Christian is killed at least every two hours in Nigeria. Blemishing facts with forged anecdotes, the story re-echoed the theory that Nigeria is the deadliest country to be a Christian in the world, as promulgated in a report by the International Christian Concern. The journalist would later author another inciting report in April this year about Christians facing a deadly crisis in Africa, stressing that “nine out of 10 Christians killed for their faith in 2023 were in Nigeria”.

Paul Tilsley, the Fox News South African-based reporter who authored the story, failed to quote any primary, authoritative source to capture what had happened accurately. Instead, he quoted two American critics with strong affiliations with international Christian organisations, including Johnnie Moore, the president of the Congress of Christian Leaders and co-author of The Next Jihad.

“Not a day goes by when Christians are not terrorised in western Africa in the most grotesque ways imaginable,” Moore claimed. “Christians are killed for sport, especially Christian children. For every massacre which you hear about, there are probably ten others which happened in the shadows. The death tolls are routinely in the hundreds.”

The story had over 1.7 million views, thousands of comments and reposts on X, and more than 6,000 interactions on Facebook. When HumAngle checked the Fox News report’s backlink profile, we found that hundreds of websites had either republished the story with a different headline or copied it word for word, amplifying the seeming information manipulation.

With millions of social media followers and a sizable audience, many other US-based media, such as the New York Post and the Washington Times, amplified the conspiracy theory with no evidence to back their claims. Nigerian news platforms and internet forums with large audiences – such as Nairaland and Sahara Reporters – also republished the article for millions of followers without independent verification.

Fox News curiously relied upon questionable data about the killing of Christians in Nigeria to drive its narrative about the massacre that happened. Intersociety, a Catholic-inspired think tank based in southeastern Nigeria, claimed that more than 52,000 Christians “have been butchered or hacked to death for being Christians” since 2009 in Nigeria. Its report also claimed that “18,000 churches and 2,200 Christian schools” were attacked in 14 years.

The author of these reports, Emeka Umeagbalasi, a criminologist and researcher, released a similar report some years back, claiming that from 2009 to 2020, 32,000 Christian lives had been lost: 15,000 deaths caused by herders and 16,800 by Boko Haram and ISWAP. HumAngle had, however, found the report inaccurate and inconsistent with more reliable datasets.

Similar flaws can be found in the fresh report released amid the fury over the killings in Plateau, which alarmingly claimed: “Jihadist genocide of Christians bloodiest in 2023”. The report failed to provide empirical evidence to back all its claims. HumAngle reviewed all the 40 news stories cited in the report as references to check how they arrived at their result. We observed a consistent misreporting of stories around the farmer-herder clashes and violent attacks by rural terrorists – otherwise known as bandits.

to be continued...

Thousands of X and Facebook users fell for the clickbait accompanied by a recorded television programme version of the story claiming that a Christian is killed at least every two hours in Nigeria.

Blemishing facts with forged anecdotes, the story re-echoed the theory that Nigeria is the deadliest country to be a Christian in the world

The full article can be found [here](#):



Neha Wadekar, Zoe Flood, USA

The Long Road to Justice for Sexual War Crimes

Introduction

Since conflict erupted in Sudan in April 2023, thousands of women and girls from the Massalit community have fled to eastern Chad after surviving mass rape and sexual torture by RSF fighters—violence used deliberately as a weapon of war. But the news media have largely failed to lift up the voices of survivors.

This journalism is one of the few international reports to document this crisis directly through survivors' voices, offering both a record of atrocities committed and a path forward grounded in dignity, resilience, and justice. This report shines a light not only on the scale of theatrocities, but also on a quiet, grassroots movement toward healing and justice led by survivors themselves.

At the center is Zahra Khamis, a trained social worker who became a refugee after losing her father and 17-year-old son during their escape to Chad.

At the center is Zahra Khamis, a trained social worker who became a refugee after losing her father and 17-year-old son during their escape to Chad. Despite her own trauma, Zahra now travels between refugee camps offering psychosocial support to survivors and connecting them to medical care. She also works alongside Sudanese lawyers in exile to document testi-

monies for potential future war crimes prosecutions—building a living archive of evidence and hope.

By amplifying Zahra's work, the story highlights nonviolent, community-led efforts to pursue peace through accountability. It also investigates the broader history of prosecuting sexual violence as a war crime, offering a frank assessment of the international system's weaknesses and outlining how future efforts can better hold perpetrators to account. This honest analysis adds depth and urgency to the reporting, making clear that lasting peace requires not only recognition but reform.

The piece prompted real-world responses, with senior officials from the International Criminal Court praising its clarity and care.

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**The Long
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Justice for
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Crimes**

Published in “The Fuller Project, Foreign Policy US”

The Long Road to Justice for Sexual War Crimes

ADRÉ, Chad—When the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) entered El Geneina, the capital of the Sudanese state of West Darfur, Sadia Adams’s* two brothers knew they had to hide. RSF fighters were systematically exterminating men from the Masalit ethnic group, and their best chance of survival was to disappear and reemerge once fighters from the rogue paramilitary force had departed.

“They found [my brothers] in different rooms,” Sadia said, speaking in a small makeshift shelter in the Adré refugee settlement in neighboring Chad. “They were pulled from underneath the bed. After one was shot, the other one was running for safety.” Her brother bolted out the front door and was shot in the street. Despite being warned not to leave the home, Sadia ran after him. Six men, some with their faces covered, grabbed Sadia, dragged her into a nearby home, and raped her.

“I wasn’t even conscious. And I was bleeding,” said Sadia, the mother of five young boys. Sadia was still in pain when she and her family reached Adré. There, she heard about a woman named Zahra Khamis. Zahra was known in the refugee community for running a women’s center, where she provided support for sexual violence survivors like Sadia. She was also collecting their stories—each one was a piece of evidence.

Sexual violence has become a long-standing hallmark of conflict in Sudan—during the 2003- 2005 Darfur genocide, a fighting force called the Janjaweed, a precursor to the RSF, was accused of perpetrating widespread, ethnically motivated sexual violence against women from non-Arab communities. Today, non-Arab Sudanese women and girls, particularly those from the Masalit ethnic group, face the same terrors as their mothers and grandmothers before them.

Beyond Sudan, the rape of civilian women is an abiding feature throughout the history of conflict. Yet, despite widespread recognition today of sexual violence as an intentional tactic of war, justice for survivors remains an elusive concept. With the establishment of special UN tribunals in the 1990s and the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2002, sexual violence is now a crime that can be investigated and prosecuted in the global space. But in practice, perpetrators are rarely prose-

cuted, much less convicted. “In a relatively short period of time, international justice has come a really long way. The fact that people demand justice, expect justice, and are aware of this issue ... is a really positive development overall,” said Sara Darehshori, a lawyer with decades of experience handling international sexual violence cases. “[What’s] horrible is that it’s still going on to such a wide extent, and that the prospect of justice is not a deterrent.” Darehshori hopes this is slowly changing—all eyes in this space are on the trial of Ali Muhammad Ali Abd-Al-Rahman, a senior Janjaweed commander. Closing arguments in his case concluded in December last year, and a judgment is expected soon. If found guilty, he would become the first person to be convicted by the ICC of crimes, including sexual violence, in Darfur.

Surrounded by a circle of refugee women at her new home in Adré, Zahra leans forward to serve each one a cup of steaming hot chai from her precious golden tea set. It was one of only a few things she managed to save during her escape from Sudan. During the journey, Zahra’s father and 17-year-old son Farhar Rahman Abdallah were shot and killed. Tears stream down Zahra’s cheeks as she runs her fingers over a photograph on her phone of a sweet-faced young boy dressed in all-white traditional garb, looking into the camera with a shy smile.

Zahra is the type of woman who can’t sit still for long. Despite losing her son, her father, her community, and her home, she channeled her grief into a keen sense of purpose. She conducted outreach in the refugee camps, sending messages on the radio and via social media and establishing a gender-based violence hotline. As her reputation spread, more women and girls sought her out, and she set up a women’s center.

The women encircling Zahra sob in solidarity. All of them have stories of trauma and loss to share. Some also carry stories of brutal sexual violence. Zahra identifies a young woman standing nearby, carrying a plump infant cooing in her arms. That child was born from rape, Zahra explains.

Since April 2023, Sudan’s army has been battling the RSF, which was once its own paramilitary fighting wing, for control of the country. **The violence has killed up to 150,000 people by some estimates, injured tens of thousands more, and displaced more than 14 million Sudanese both within and beyond the country.** And in the midst of the fighting, perpetrators from both sides of the conflict have been engaged in systemic acts of sexual violence that the head of a United Nations fact-finding mission recently described as “staggering” in scale, likely amounting to a war crime and a crime against humanity.

Women and girls have been raped mostly by the RSF and

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allied militia groups, but also by Sudanese army soldiers. Some have died as a result. Others were so brutally gang raped over multiple days that they sustained internal injuries. Some will never be able to have children again. Others are now carrying the children of their rapists. The impediments to investigating rape during conflict are significant, and they can obstruct successful prosecutions in both local and international courts. For most survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in Sudan, justice remains elusive.

In Sudan, sexual violence survivors have little chance of accessing health care and psychosocial support. Both sides in the conflict have blocked aid for months, and parts of the country are now experiencing famine. Floods have wiped out shelters and brought disease. Hospitals have been bombed and looted. The situation is only slightly better for those who escape. More than 765,000 Sudanese have fled to Chad, already one of the world's poorest countries, since fighting broke out.

Adré was once home to just 40,000 people. Today, more than five times as many people are camped out awaiting services and support. The town has little formal infrastructure, and aid agencies are overwhelmed and can barely keep up with the numbers of new arrivals. And with competing crises in Ukraine, Gaza, and elsewhere, Sudan is fighting for recognition and money from the international community. Instead, community members like Zahra play an outsized role in providing support for survivors. She helps women find family members who became separated on the journey to Chad; has a team of social workers who provide mental health support; and connects women like Sadia to the global nonprofit Médecins Sans Frontières, one of the only health care organizations providing services to refugees in Adré.

But some of Zahra's most important work is done in collaboration with a 41-year-old human rights lawyer named Khalid Abduljalil Ismail Sulemane. A refugee himself, Sulemane escaped Sudan after the RSF started murdering prominent lawyers, including four of his friends. Today in Chad, Sulemane works with Zahra to document the stories of rape survivors in detail, creating a record that could someday be used by international lawyers to prosecute perpetrators.

"We forward the cases to lawyers working with the ICC. That's what we did in the [genocide] in 2003," Sulemane said. Documentation like this then forms the basis of cases brought forward by lawyers like Darehshori. "That is really helpful," Darehshori said. "It provides information that this was widespread and systematic. People's memories aren't necessarily great, so it's a good road map for people to find witnesses. It's a good way to show consistency later on if the person is ever called to testify."

Lawyers like Darehshori are building on more than a cen-

tury of efforts to hold perpetrators of sexual violence during conflict to account. An early mention of accountability for war-time rape can be found in the Lieber Code, which was published in 1863 during the American Civil War and explicitly named rape as an act punishable by death. The 1907 Hague Conventions, some of the first multilateral treaties to codify the laws of war, did not use the word rape, but prohibited attacks on "family honour and rights," a phrase interpreted to reference sexual violence.

The Nuremberg and Tokyo tribunals dealt with the atrocities of World War II and included evidence of rape and sexual violence in broader prosecutions for crimes against humanity and war crimes. The Fourth Geneva Convention, adopted in 1949 to govern the protection of civilians in war, explicitly protected women from "rape, enforced prostitution and any form of indecent assault."

In the 1990s, the UN established special tribunals to deal with atrocities—including widespread sexual violence—in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. The Yugoslavia tribunal was among the first international war crimes trials involving explicit charges of sexual violence. In 1993, the team of international medical experts dispatched to investigate those crimes found evidence that rape had been used as an ethnic-cleansing instrument and that people in power had made no efforts to prevent those abuses.

This is widely regarded as a significant milestone in the fight for justice for sexual violence survivors. In September 1998, the tribunal established in Rwanda found former Mayor Jean-Paul Akayesu guilty of nine counts of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. The groundbreaking verdict marked "the first time an international court ... punished sexual violence in a civil war; and the first time that rape was found to be an act of genocide to destroy a group."

In 2002, the Rome Statute treaty created the ICC, which originally established three core international crimes—genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes—that were exempt from any statute of limitations. Within the ICC, rape generally falls under crimes against humanity and war crimes. The tribunals and the creation of the ICC helped transform how the world perceived crimes of sexual violence committed during conflict. The era of 24-7 cable news meant that conflicts in the Balkans were widely broadcast to a global audience. The changing media landscape brought increased attention to crimes of sexual violence committed during conflict, said Patricia Viseur Sellers, the former special advisor for slavery crimes, and the former special advisor for gender to the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court.

Changing attitudes toward sexual assault globally also

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played a major role, said Sellers, who played a key role in the Yugoslavia and Rwanda tribunals. "During the past 20 and 30 years, there had been more national prosecutions of sexual violence," Sellers said. "Rape shield laws from the US were lifted in the '70s and '80s. There was a change in certain quarters about women, feminism, and that rape was sexual violence, and there were no more jokes about 'relax and enjoy.'" As attitudes about sexual violence changed domestically, views on rape committed during wartime changed globally as well. "[It] went from being viewed as just something that was an unfortunate part of war to being something that is definitely viewed as a tactic of war," Darehshori said, adding that today's investigators are better trained to recognize signs of abuse and conduct trauma-informed interviews.

But investigating rape and sexual violence is a Herculean task littered with obstacles. During an ongoing conflict with hostile parties, it's difficult for international investigators to gain access to an area to conduct interviews and collect evidence. Even if they do get access, they then need to gain the trust of the communities in order to encourage women and girls to come forward and share their stories. Even if they manage to gain that trust, most survivors are unable to identify the perpetrators by name. And then, of course, there's rarely physical evidence that can prove that a rapist committed the crime.

Then comes the challenge of arrest warrants. After gathering evidence and identifying a suspect, the ICC prosecutor can request ICC judges to issue either a summons to appear, in which the suspect appears voluntarily, or an arrest warrant. Because there is no global police force to enforce the warrants, the ICC relies on countries to make arrests and transfer suspects to the Hague.

This can prove problematic in cases like that of Omar al-Bashir, Sudan's longtime dictator who presided over the first genocide in Sudan and who has been charged with counts of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, including rape. Even after Bashir was ousted by the military in 2019 and placed under arrest, he was not extradited. He is still at large today.

Over the past few decades, survivors and experts have increasingly called for sexual violence to be prioritized when it comes to accountability for violations of international humanitarian law, explained Belkis Wille, an associate director in the Crisis, Conflict and Arms Division at Human Rights Watch. **"Yet, despite these efforts, we still see a failure across almost all contexts of conflict to take seriously, investigate seriously, and adequately prosecute these crimes,"** she added.

There are other options beyond the ICC, Sellers said. During peacetime, international crimes in countries with appropriate penal codes can be tried in national courts. Another

"During the past 20 and 30 years, there had been more national prosecutions of sexual violence," Sellers said. There was a change in certain quarters about women, feminism, and that rape was sexual violence.

er option is "universal jurisdiction," which allows states or international organizations to prosecute individuals for serious crimes against international law, regardless of where the crime occurred or where the accused is from or currently lives.

A third pathway for justice can occur when countries or regions agree to set up ad hoc tribunals to prosecute crimes. Efforts are already underway for this type of national justice in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Guatemala, and Colombia. Sellers believes this approach needs to be developed further because the ICC doesn't have jurisdiction everywhere and only takes a small number of cases.

There have already been calls for an international tribunal on Sudan, similar to those in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia. In the meantime, civil society actors and activists like Zahra and Sulemane are working relentlessly to gather and preserve evidence to bring forward legal cases in the future, if possible. While the task feels thankless, there are some green shoots on the horizon. In September, the UN's fact-finding mission recommended the deployment of an independent and impartial force with a mandate to protect civilians in Sudan. It also called for the expansion of the jurisdiction of the ICC to cover the entire territory of Sudan and the establishment of a separate international judicial mechanism to work with the ICC, as well as a truth commission and a victim support and reparations office.

In the meantime, Zahra continues her work to heal survivors and help them move forward with their new lives in Chad.



The full article can
be found [here](#):



Nurudeen Akewushola, Nigeria
Airstrike cover-up: Katsina
government helped Nigerian
Air Force conceal civilian deaths

Introduction

This work is submitted because it involved extraordinary courage, commitment, and journalistic rigor. The writer entered a conflict zone just few days after the several bombs were dropped on the village by the military, risking personal safety to verify claims dismissed or ignored by most media outlets.

The reporter spent days in affected communities and hospitals, speaking directly to survivors and reviewing medical records to build an evidence-based account of what truly happened. This work had measurable, real-world impact.

Following its publication, several major media outlets that had uncritically repeated the government's false narrative quietly retracted their stories. More importantly, the investigation exposed a coordinated disinformation campaign between the military and state government — a deeply troubling tactic used to cover up civilian deaths and shield those in power from accountability.

Beyond individual corrections, the story served a vital public interest function. It confronted official falsehoods, restored the truth about innocent victims, and brought national attention to a recurring pattern of military airstrikes followed by cover-ups.

It generated important conversations about civilian safety, government transparency, and the role of the media in conflict reporting. I also deserve recognition for the innovative way I presented the findings. Using data and infographics, I not only identified the victims but also illustrated the broader pattern of these attacks and the systemic efforts to erase their consequences.

At a time when truth is under siege and public trust in information is fragile, this work reaffirmed the power of fact-based journalism to defend the voiceless, uncover state-sanctioned deceit, and push for justice in even the most difficult circumstances.

Published in "International Centre for Investigative Reporting"

Airstrike cover-up:
Katsina government
helped Nigerian
Air Force conceal
civilian deaths

On November 20, 2024, the Nigerian Air force (NAF) launched an airstrike that resulted in civilian casualties and left many injured in Shawu village, Ruwan Godiya district, Faskari Local Government of Katsina State. The narrative advanced by the state government was that the airstrike 'precisely' targeted and eliminated terrorists in the community. This investigation by The ICIR, however, reveals that while the NAF denied any civilian casualties, the victims of the military action were civilians, including women and young children.

The early dawn light enveloped Shawu village, as villagers prepared to head to their farmlands. The air buzzed with the chirping of birds and the quiet footsteps of residents returning from the mosque after early morning prayer. But, the serenity was abruptly shattered when three aircraft appeared in the sky, hovering ominously. Moments later, they unleashed bombs, followed by a relentless spray of bullets that thrust the community into a state of destruction and sent residents scampering for safety, villagers who spoke with The ICIR noted.

On that tragic morning, Isah and his heavily pregnant wife, Hafsat had barely woken up when they were jolted by the wailing of residents. "I thought it was bandits as usual," Isah said, his voice trembling. "But when I saw the aircraft, I knew it was something else." Amid the carnage, Hafsat was hit by three bullets. One tore through her leg, another pierced through her belly, destroying her seven months pregnancy even as a third bullet lodged in her chest, slicing through her armpit. Isah said he knelt on the dusty ground, his hands trembling as he lifted his wife's bullet-ridden body from the ground while he made frantic efforts to save her.

Isah eventually took her to the community hospital, but he was told that her injuries were beyond what the facility could handle. She was referred to another hospital in Funtua, a nearby area, where doctors closed her exposed intestines and later

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Nurudeen
Akewushola



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Airstrike cover-up: Katsina government helped Nigerian Air Force conceal civilian deaths

transferred her to Katsina, the state's capital. "She fought for her life because the pain was unbearable," Isah recalled, adding, "She doesn't deserve this because she is an obedient and kind-hearted woman who always stood by me and cared for our children."

The couple buried their unborn child at the Federal Medical Centre in Katsina. Isah, now with five children to care for, has spent over N500,000 on medical bills, a sum that wiped out the family's savings and harvest meant for the next farming season.

"We are farmers. That's all we know. But now, we have nothing left," he said while expressing bitterness towards the government, which he believes has abandoned them. "They keep lying, saying they killed terrorists. But they shot my wife and others who were innocent. Why can't they come to the hospitals and see the truth?"

In a statement released after the incident, the Katsina State Government expressed their excitement over the operation and described it as a "highly successful airstrike operation that decisively targeted a known bandit enclave." The statement also claimed that the operation orchestrated by NAF's "FARAUTAR MUJIYA" was precise and significantly degraded criminal elements' operational capacity in the region.

Before conducting this investigation, The ICIR contacted NAF's Director of Public Relations and Information (DOPRI), Olusola Akinboyewa and he also stated that the "airstrike was on target and executed based on extensive surveillance." However, when we probed further, we found out that the claim was an outright falsehood. The ICIR visited the community and gathered, through interviews with dozens of residents, that the terrorists had evacuated the community before the operation.

Residents said it was as if they knew the attack was going to happen. Findings showed that contrary to the falsehood spread by the state government and NAF, the main casualties of this airstrike were unarmed residents including children and women. Residents confirmed that five locals died from the airstrike while 19 others sustained injuries. The villagers identified the five civilian victims who died as Abasya Gambo, Maryam Mukhtar, Hadiza Alhassan, Rafia Audu and Amina Kurma.

List of victims of NAF airstrike on Shawu village, Ruwan Godiya district, Faskari Local Government of Katsina State Authorities have launched multiple offensives into the enclaves of armed gangs also known as bandits and introduced measures, such as designating them as terrorists, to enforce stiffer sanctions and put an end to their operations.

For over a decade, bandits have terrorised many states

in northwestern Nigeria sacking villages, sexually assaulting women, imposing levies on communities, killing locals, and running a multi-million-dollar kidnap-for-ransom enterprise to sustain their operations.

Since their activities escalated in 2010, more than 13,000 people have been killed. The crisis has also displaced over 600,000 people across Kaduna, Kebbi, Sokoto, Zamfara and Katsina where the airstrike occurred.

The state alone recorded over 300 armed attacks in 2024 resulting in more than 1,000 deaths which is higher than what was recorded in previous years according to the data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) Project. The terrorists who operate from different camps, wield considerable influence in some rural areas, and even run parallel governments, forcing helpless locals to live at the mercy of their harsh laws.

However, in an attempt to eliminate the problem, the Nigerian Armed Forces including NAF, charged with the mandate of protecting citizens have killed countless innocent people and devised misleading press statements and social media narratives to cover up these operational errors.

Trails of blood and destruction

Umar Saheed suffered the most devastating tragedy of his life from the airstrike. His 8-year-old granddaughter, Maryam Mukhtar, died instantly after she was shot from the air. But that was only the beginning of his sorrow. Soon after, Umar's daughter, Abassyia who gave birth to Maryam also passed away in the evening after frantic efforts to save her proved abortive. This tragedy left him to grapple with the heavy weight of two profound losses.

"Maryam was a cheerful girl, full of energy — always running all over the place," Umar recalled, his voice breaking. "She was so young, just eight years old. After she died, her mother, who was kind and loving, passed away too."

Aisha Buhari: Her hand was hit by a bullet while her child was also hit. Apart from the injuries they suffered from the attack, she is now displaced and homeless. The attack also left his other relatives who he named Zulai, Suwaiba, Umma, and Halima injured. "We just woke up to see a plane, and then everything changed," Umar recalled. "We lost our homes, and our loved ones, and many were injured. Since then, life has become unbearable."

The state alone recorded over 300 armed attacks in 2024 resulting in more than 1,000 deaths which is higher than what was recorded in previous years according to the data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) Project.



SHORT- LISTED STORIES

OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION TO PEACE

By
**Nurudeen
Akewushola**

**Airstrike
cover-up:
Katsina
government
helped
Nigerian
Air Force
conceal
civilian
deaths**

The road to recovery remains agonisingly slow for Umar. In the weeks following the airstrike, he found himself engulfed in unbearable grief, often sitting alone under the tree staring at the sky. Some nights, he would cry until his body ached, pleading with God for relief from the weight of his losses. Seated on the mat in front of her new settlement, Aisha Buhari's face bore the marks of sorrow and dashed hope as she cradled her child in her arms. She recounted the tragedy, still fresh in her memory, as though it had happened only moments ago.

She remembered that the plane appeared from the east when she and others were still inside their homes, preparing to start the day. As it drew closer, fear gripped the villagers, and they began praying. Moments later, the shooting began from the air and the community was engulfed by sand and dust.

"We ran out of our house as it crumbled. Our belongings were all gone. We couldn't even save anything," Aisha recalled as she held her child close. Her hand was hit by a bullet while her child was also hit. Apart from the injuries they suffered from the attack, she is now displaced and homeless. Hadiza Dini had a similar ordeal. She and her daughter were hit in their legs during the explosion. She recalled being at home moving around the room when the earth-shattering roar of the aircraft emerged.

With her child clutched to her arms, she barely had time to react. The plane had come out of nowhere, and within seconds, it was hovering dangerously close, dropping bombs that would change everything. "It was as if time stood still. We saw the plane coming from the east, and then it released the bomb. The force knocked us all back. My body went cold, weak... I didn't even realise my child was hit until later."

"I didn't know what to do. The plane was so close. Then, the dust and sand rose up, covering everything. I was holding my child, and we just ran to hide behind the trees, hoping we wouldn't be seen."

Nigerian military's disinformation strategy

Civilian deaths from military airstrikes in Nigeria's conflict zones have become a tragic pattern. Under the guise of targeting armed groups operating in ungoverned areas, countless Nigerians seeking safety from violence have instead fallen victims to the very forces meant to protect them. This is a blatant violation of international humanitarian laws.

Human Rights Watch (HRW), a prominent international rights organisation called out the Nigerian military for these blunders, urging it to accept responsibility and compensate

the victims. "The military must provide full accountability for its actions, as well as adequate compensation and support to meet the needs of affected families," said Anietie Ewang, HRW's Africa researcher. **SBM Intelligence, a Nigerian research organisation that focuses on crisis and conflict issues, documented an increase in erroneous airstrikes by the Nigerian air force since 2017, when an airstrike hit a displacement camp in Rann, Borno State killing over 70 people.** The persistent aerial attacks over the years have left over 500 civilians dead and hundreds injured, violating international humanitarian laws designed to protect non-combatants during armed conflict.

Despite public outrage and repeated calls for justice, the authorities have shown little commitment to addressing these incidents. In October 2022, the Nigerian Air Force announced an investigation into accidental airstrikes, but no findings have been released. This lack of transparency and accountability defines the military's response which has left victims and their families without answers or redress.

While charged with combating terrorism, the actions of the Nigerian military have fostered widespread public distrust. Instead of acknowledging errors, they often employ disinformation to control the narrative. Through official communication channels, they disseminate misleading accounts that obscure their mistakes.

This disinformation campaign systematically conceals atrocities committed during counterterrorism operations, thwarting efforts to secure justice for affected communities. Women, children, and unarmed civilians have borne the brunt of these abuses, with many villages rendered desolate in the aftermath.

In several cases, the military fabricates victories over terrorists to mask egregious human rights violations. This calculated misinformation undermines public trust and obstructs critical efforts to reform military operations and minimise civilian harm. The ICIR contacted the Commissioner for Internal Security and Home Affairs, Nazir Mua'zu, who had signed the state's government press release. However, after hearing the questions posed by this reporter, he denied owning the contact, ended the call, and blocked the reporter.

Despite this, the reporter verified through Open Source Intelligence that he is, in fact, the owner of the contact. When contacted, the director of Media to the state governor, Maiwada Dan Malam replied by saying the press release was "self-explanatory and there was nothing more to add."

to be continued...

The persistent aerial attacks over the years have left over 500 civilians dead and hundreds injured, violating international humanitarian laws designed to protect non-combatants during armed conflict.

The full article can be found [here](#):



Salma Abdulaziz Bashir, Sudan Forgotten and sentenced to die: Sudan's women caught between war

Introduction

Fifteen Sudanese women, some as young as 18, others in their 70, face execution by military courts operating in areas controlled by the Sudanese Armed Forces. Legal experts and human rights defenders have described the proceedings as a dangerous abuse of power.

The women were arrested while fleeing areas under the control of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). They were later charged with espionage and collaboration — often without credible evidence, and sometimes based only on a phone contact or a social media post. They were tried in makeshift courts inside military compounds in cities such as Atbara, Port Sudan, and Kassala.

They were denied legal representation, transparency, and the right to appeal. The journalist conducted interviews with the detainees' relatives, friends, lawyers, and activists following the case. She obtained legal documents related to the trials, along with voice messages from the women themselves. Testimonies indicate that these proceedings function less as legal trials and more as instruments of intimidation — in a war where civilian women form an invisible frontline. In the absence of international oversight, and amid mounting calls to investigate rights violations, these women remain silenced, awaiting execution in makeshift cells.

"We are forgotten," one of them said. This investigation was published as part of the Women and Corruption project, with support from the Global Fund for Women. It was also published in collaboration with our partners at Al-Tageer newspaper in Sudan and was republished at least 15 times within the country. The investigation was widely circulated among lawyers, journalists, and human rights defenders, and it has even been discussed in courtrooms.

Published in "<https://womenwhowonthewar.net/>"

Forgotten and sentenced to die: Sudan's women caught between war

In a faint voice, fearing Detection, The Hanged death row inmate Najat Ali (pseudonym) sent from inside her prison a short voice message via the WhatsApp application to the stomach of the investigation, not exceeding two seconds, followed by a writer: "I was unjustly imprisoned, I had to work in harsh war conditions to support my brothers, my sick mother and.."But she could not complete her speech, as the prison guard accompanying her, like her shadow, approached her, even if she wanted to go to the bathroom, since a court in the river Nile state controlled by the Sudanese army sentenced her to death, on charges of communicating with the "Rapid Support forces".

The investigation team documented the stories of 15 women, aged between 18 and 70, who escaped from the Rapid Support Hell in search of a safe haven, found themselves detained in prisons, convicted of sentences up to the death penalty, some of them were acquitted after months of suffering spent behind bars, while others are still awaiting their fate.

Courts in the states controlled by the Sudanese army in each of the cities (Atbara, Kassala, Port Sudan, Damer, man-aqil, Omdurman) issued death sentences by hanging to death against women, because of finding (videos, photos, prescription, or comments on social media platforms) after being searched by soldiers checkpoints scattered along the roads Or arrested them for various reasons. All of these sentences come under Articles 50-51-26 of the Sudanese criminal code of 1991, amid lawyers questioning the validity and impartiality of these trials.

Al-Durr, 24, who works as a "medical laboratory technician", was imprisoned on May 13, 2024, when she was trying to flee with her family from the ad Babiker area in the East Nile locality in the northeast of the capital Khartoum, parts of

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which are under the control of the “Rapid Support forces” to the city of Atbara in the Nile River State, which is under the control of the army Sudanese, fleeing from the violations of irregular forces.

When the family arrived in the city of Damer, they were searched with her family, Aldar's brother says: “they emptied all our bags and searched them thoroughly to find a prescription medicine in the handbag that Aldar was carrying, and “shot” they said they found it inside the suitcase of her little sister Maryam, Aldar told them that she did not know anything about the shot, and that she was working in a medical laboratory, in the east of the Nile, and that the prescription of the drug belonged to someone who asked her to hand it over to another, and when she did not find it she put it in her bag and forgot over time. But they accused her of collaborating with the “Rapid Support forces”, and she was deported to the police station in the city of Atbara, where she was detained for 26 days before being transferred to the women's prison and sentenced to death.

Fatima Mohamed, Al-Dor's mother, says: “my sons and I left our house in the (Ezbet Tayba Al-ahmida) area of Khartoum Bahri to my relatives' house in the east of the Nile a month after the outbreak of the war when the Rapid Support Personnel began to storm the houses “ We stayed there for months, but they were accusing the young people who refused to work with them of working for the army, so I decided to leave hammam and his sisters for fear of being targeted,”he said.

Sentenced to death twice

The indictments against Dr. Hamdoun are (prescription) and (shot) only, and the prescription does not contain her name, and it is free of any date, and it is also titled with a letterhead written on it (commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces) indicating that it dates back to a period before the war.

On August 11, 2024, the General Court issued a death sentence by hanging against al-der Hamdoun for violating Article 51 of the Sudanese criminal code of 1991, based on the above-mentioned evidence. This verdict was appealed to the three-judge “Court of Appeal”, each of whom gave his opinion.

The recent decision of the “court of Appeal “ came to return the case file to the general court to file appropriate charges, which this time were charged with violating Articles 50/51/26. After several hearings, the General Court for the second time issued a death sentence by hanging against her. For the second time, Dr Hamdoun is also waiting for the decision of the court of Appeal, which has not yet been issued.

On what grounds was Alder sentenced to death

Article (50) of the Sudanese criminal code of 1991-Amendment 2020-as described on the copy published in the official gazette of the government of Sudan No.1904 dated July 13, concerns the undermining of the constitutional order, and states that “whoever commits any act with the intention of undermining the constitutional order of the country or with the intention of endangering its independence or unity, shall be punished by death Or life imprisonment or imprisonment for a lesser term with the possibility of confiscating all his money”.

As for Article (51”, it relates to inciting war against the state, and states that “ he is considered a perpetrator of the crime of inciting war against the state and is punishable by death, life imprisonment or imprisonment for a shorter term, with the possibility of confiscating all his funds from:

- (A) he provokes war against the state militarily by collecting personnel, training them, collecting weapons or materiel, or The perpetrator does so or endorses it in any way , or
- (B) to serve in the military or civil service of any state at war with the Sudan or to engage in any other business or transaction with it or its agents; or
- (C) in the Sudan, without the permission of the state, collects and prepares soldiers for the invasion of a foreign state or carries out hostile action against a foreign state that would expose the country to the risk of war, or
- (D) sabotages, damages or disrupts any weapons, supplies, missions, ships, aircraft, means of transportation, communication, public buildings or tools of public utilities such as electricity, water or others with the intention of damaging the country's war Center .

Article (26) concerns aiding and abetting, and stipulates : (anyone who assists in committing any act that constitutes a crime with the intention of facilitating its occurrence, the provisions of Article(25) on incitement shall apply to him, and shall be punished with the penalty prescribed for the instigator, as the case may be).

“All the death sentences issued recently are arbitrary and not based on logical grounds, and if the judge who issued them had applied the principle of fair trial, he would have deleted the communications,”said the expert in international law and Human Rights Al-Mu'izz Hazrat.

He added that the judicial and parliamentary authority in Sudan has become a “claw cat” to implement the directives of

They accused her of collaborating with the “Rapid Support forces”, and she was deported to the police station in the city of Atbara, where she was detained for 26 days before being transferred to the women's prison and sentenced to death.

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the political authority, pointing out that such trials send negative messages that there is no fair and impartial judiciary in Sudan, he also said: "a woman cannot be tried by death for having photos or a conversation on her phone only.

He also revealed that some of the accused were prevented from meeting with their lawyers, and lawyers who tried to defend some of the accused were arrested.

The actions of the Sudanese authorities, including death sentences, arrests and searches without the permission of the public prosecution, prolonged detention without charge, or filing reports based on insufficient evidence that do not comply with the texts of the articles addressed to them, violate a number of international laws and charters signed or ratified by Sudan, including Articles 6.(1, 6 .(2),9.(1), 10.(1) of the International Covenant on civil and political rights, Articles (6), 7 (1. D), 7 (2), and(26) of the African Charter on human and peoples ' rights (Banjul charter).

16 women faced execution!

Ghufran Osman, 21, has completed her seventh month in a women's prison in Kassala State in eastern Sudan, away from her three-year-old daughter mustabeen, awaiting the decision of the court of Appeal after the general court sentenced her to death by hanging because of her mercy on a commander of the Rapid Support forces accused of collaborating with her.

Ghofran was arrested, on the evening of the eighth of July 2024, after raiding her house, and taking her to the headquarters of the special forces in Halfa city, and there an officer took out of his phone a "screenshot" of a comment that he said belonged to her and she had mercy on the Rapid Support commander Ali Yacoub, then began interrogating her for many hours and deporting her to the so-called "security cell" in Halfa city Laziness.

After 49 days of detention inside the cell, she was transferred to the headquarters of the Central Bureau of Investigation in a single cell, to be transferred to the women's prison in the city of Kassala, to begin the trial hearings listening to witnesses, including an engineer affiliated with the information prosecution in the city of Kassala, who denied that the screenshot showing mercy to the Rapid Support commander On November 11, 2024, the Criminal Court in Kassala city issued a death sentence by hanging against her under Articles 50/51 of the Sudanese criminal code.

The court justified its death sentence, endorsing the forgiveness of the "Rapid Support forces "based on the very" screenshot" and some comments on social media platforms.

According to her lawyer, who continued: "these justifications do not amount to a death sentence, the judge committed a serious legal error, and we are waiting for the decision of the court of Appeal, which has not been issued yet".

On January 28, 2025, Ghufran Othman was deported from Kassala prison, where she had been detained for almost four months, to Port Sudan prison, the temporary administrative capital.

A member of the Executive Office of the emergency lawyer, Rahab Al-Mubarak, says that 16 death sentences were issued against women in the states of (Red Sea, north, Kassala, Gedaref, White Nile, Nile River, manakel, Jazira state, and Karri north of Omdurman, Khartoum state), explaining that dozens of women in the city of Damazin, Blue Nile state are facing similar sentences, while others are still under arrest Awaiting trial.

Al-Mubarak added that the security cell in the city of Damazin – Blue Nile State arrested five women on the second of January 2025 and were threatened with ten years in prison if they did not admit their cooperation with the "Rapid Support forces", and revealed that prisons and detention centers in the city of Damazin are full of women and the security authorities of the Red Cross organization refused to visit the arrested women.

Lawyer Iqbal Mohammed Ali believes that the number of disappeared women has increased recently due to the illegal detention practiced by the security authorities in Sudan, saying: "some of the forcibly disappeared women are arrested, detained and tried to death with such materials based on insufficient evidence that does not rise to the level of conviction.

The murder of the son and the death sentence of the mother

On the second morning of September 2023, a warplane dropped an explosive barrel on a field where children were playing in the area (kalakla wad Al-AQLI) east of the capital Khartoum, killing several children, including a 14-year-old child, the son of Mrs. Aisha Mohammed (pseudonym) 32 years, with his friend. Aisha remembers that day and says:"I went out and found the remains of the bodies scattered on the ground, there was no whole body, they were all torn, here is a palm, there is a scalp, and at a distance of a part of a foot, even the trees surrounding the square burned and charred.

to be continued...

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Aisha remembers that day and says: "I went out and found the remains of the bodies scattered on the ground, there was no whole body, they were all torn, here is a palm, there is a scalp, and at a distance of a part of a foot, even the trees surrounding the square burned and charred."

The full article can be found [here](#):



Raquel Carvalho, Hong Kong **She Regrets Her Past With ISIS.** **Now She's Reclaiming Her Future**

Introduction

As thousands of women and children languish in camps in Syria, this feature tells the story of Mawar, an Indonesian woman who joined the Islamic State with her children, only to escape disillusioned but determined to rebuild her life back home.

With rare access, the article captures the human cost of extremism. In a media landscape saturated with stories of violence, this reportage distinguishes itself by focusing on the quiet, often invisible process of peacebuilding. It humanises a woman who returned from the so-called Islamic State in Syria – neither victim nor villain, but someone navigating the complex aftermath of radicalisation with remorse and perseverance. The piece not only amplifies a rarely heard voice, but also places this Indonesian woman's experience within the global context of deradicalization and post-conflict recovery.

In war reporting, women are often portrayed as either victims or passive bystanders. Instead, this story challenges pre-conceived notions of female agency, guilt, motherhood, and redemption. The article also reveals the Indonesian government's secret plans to repatriate 39 women and children from camps in Syria, a ground-breaking initiative delayed by the fall of the Assad regime. While many stories focus on Syria, Iraq, or Western repatriation debates, this one turns the lens on Southeast Asia, a region often left out of global narratives about terrorism and peacebuilding.

As some Western countries are refusing to take back their citizens, the feature shows how Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, is setting regional and global precedents for repatriation and deradicalization. This story confronts readers with hard questions – the kind that shift public discourse and reshape policymaking. "Your in-depth reporting sheds light on the complex realities of radicalization, social media's role in extremism, and the resilience of women like Mawar seeking a better future," said Jasmin Nario-Galace, senior program director of the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders.

One reader from the UK said the story enhanced her understanding of British women who had joined ISIS and the despair of those who have been left stateless. Another from Aus-

tralia described it as "a universal story of redemption." Yoomi Jun, communications and advocacy analyst at UN Women, said "this piece is a call to realize the dangers that people face when joining extremists due to misinformation."

Multiple ongoing conflicts and the recent freeze on US foreign aid have only heightened its urgency. This story doesn't just report on conflict, it highlights the slow work of social healing – analyzing policy failures, the damaging impact of sensationalist media coverage, and potential solutions. While adding pressure on governments, it also serves as a case study for both legal advocates and NGOs to challenge less inclusive approaches worldwide.

**Since conflict erupted in Sudan in
April 2023,
thousands of women and girls
from the Massalit community
have fled to eastern Chad
after surviving mass rape
and sexual torture by RSF
fighters—violence used
deliberately as a weapon of war.**

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OUTSTANDING
CONTRIBUTION
TO PEACE

**Raquel
Carvalho**

**She Regrets
Her Past
With ISIS.
Now She's
Reclaiming
Her Future**

Published in "TIME Global"

She Regrets Her Past With ISIS. Now She's Reclaiming Her Future

Clad in a flowery hijab of pastel and dark hues, Mawar, 49, sorts packages of homemade fried chips into paper boxes before storing freshly squeezed bitter melon juice in the freezer. Her youngest son, a barefoot 10-year-old sporting a Spanish national soccer team t-shirt, darts in and out of the tiled porch of their food shop. Outside, where lush palm leaves droop over parked motorbikes, he chuckles with his friends as four of them huddle around an iPad, eyes fixed on the glowing screen. They seem to lead ordinary, unremarkable lives—yet, beneath the surface lies a hidden history their neighbors don't know.

Budi hasn't told any of his friends in the neighborhood or at school that he has been to Turkey and Syria. That's a secret his mother has kept from most people, and even he, though unaware of the full implications, understands that revealing this information could have dire consequences for his family. (Mawar and Budi are pseudonyms granted for security concerns.)

Mawar and her three sons left Indonesia for Syria in mid-2015 and stayed there for nearly two years. That was a time when the Islamic State militant group—also known as ISIS—had declared its "caliphate" in large parts of Iraq and Syria, attracting tens of thousands of fighters and supporters from around the world.

Fast forward a decade, the extremist group no longer controls any land and most of its prominent leaders have died. But thousands of alleged former fighters, women, and children have lingered in Syria's Al Hol and Roj camps since the fall of the self-proclaimed "caliphate" in 2019.

Rights organizations have called on countries around the world to repatriate their nationals, but some governments fear a public backlash and potential security threats from individuals radicalized by ISIS—a group that, at its peak, beheaded civilians and enslaved thousands of women and, although significantly weakened, has continued to recruit

members and recently claimed responsibility for deadly attacks in countries such as Russia and Mozambique.

As Indonesian authorities are expected to undertake the first ever large-scale repatriation of women and children from camps in Syria this year, TIME spoke with Mawar, whose life was upended by ISIS, about the challenges of returning to her home country and what it means to be granted a second chance. "I thought it would be easy to live there [in Syria], that everything was guaranteed, like education, health," Mawar said in an exclusive interview, recalling the days when she first started reading about the "caliphate" declaration on her mobile phone.

"My extended family also shared posts directly with me that showed life in Syria... So I got motivated." Mawar, whose parents were farmers, believed ISIS offered a better future for her three sons, now aged between 10 and 25 years old. She imagined a land for the "chosen ones"—"a peaceful place."

Soon, Mawar was on a plane from Jakarta to Istanbul, along with several family members. A three-hour journey on foot across the Syrian border in the summer of 2015 led them into the hands of Islamic State militants, who drove the group to Raqqa, once described as the "caliphate's capital."

But it didn't take long before Mawar's dreams of greater equality were shattered. She said her male and female relatives were separated. Her children were denied the opportunity to attend school. Except for occasional trips to the market to buy groceries, Mawar's sons spent most of their time within the confines of a sparsely furnished third-floor flat, which only had electricity for about an hour a day. The house, with its drab, grime-covered walls and mattresses strewn across the floor for about 10 women and children to sleep on, became their entire world.

"It was not what I expected at all," said Mawar, a woman with a round face and delicate features. The apparent monotony of their daily lives was only interrupted by loud sounds piercing through the walls. "I saw no war directly between ISIS and other groups, but there were many explosions," Mawar recalled. The image of a wailing baby, spared from the bombing that claimed his parents in the apartment across the street, continues to haunt her. "I also got really traumatized by the way I was walking to the market and there would be bombs falling in front and behind me," Mawar said, her hands and arms tracing wide arcs in the air as if to encompass the chaos she witnessed.

Reeling with a profound sense of disappointment, Mawar said her family sent a letter to the ISIS militants ruling the city protesting against the living conditions and even requested an audience with the de facto government established by the extremist group. As a result, they faced police harassment. About six months after arriving in Syria, she and her family started looking for ways to es-

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cape. They tried twice without success. Only on their third attempt did a smuggler facilitate her family's departure, which included 17 people in total. He charged them over US\$4,000—about four times the Indonesian annual minimum wage in 2017.

After dodging gunfire, Mawar said they walked in pitch darkness to a border camp between Syria and Iraq. The Indonesian embassy in Iraq eventually assisted with their repatriation. Mawar said she could only breathe a sigh of relief when she was sitting on the plane from Bagdad, via Doha, to Jakarta. "I was very happy with teary eyes," she said. "At the same time, I started thinking about what would happen when we arrived in Indonesia." The world's most populous Muslim-majority nation is believed to have seen more of its citizens join the Islamic State than all other Southeast Asian countries combined. **According to authorities, from 2013 to 2017, over 2,150 Indonesians traveled to Syria and Iraq. Research by the Institute for Policy.**

Analysis of Conflict, an independent think tank, showed that some left to fight against the now-deposed Bashar al-Assad's regime, while an idealized Islamic life under the "caliphate" declared in June 2014 attracted many families. Some were deported before they could reach their final destination, others killed in the war, others died of disease and even starvation. Hundreds have been kept in detention following the jihadist group's territorial defeat in 2019.

In May, a National Counter Terrorism Agency (BNPT) official said, according to local media, that at least 375 Indonesians had been identified as in need of repatriation in the Al Hol and Roj camps—most of them women and children. Mawar is grateful she was given the chance to return home and avoid the dire conditions of the camps. Looking back, she insists that she was deceived, describing herself and her children as victims. "I wanted to go to Syria because of all the propaganda, but what I found was something very different," she said, as her voice sharpened. "It feels like it was a scam to me. The movement is a scam. I thought I was joining a great empire, but it was a big lie and a mistake." Mawar argued that the extremist group cannot be confused with her religion: "ISIS is not Islam and Islam is not ISIS."

After returning to Indonesia, Mawar went through a government-run rehabilitation program for several weeks. She now hopes others are also able to find a new path. In a December press conference, the head of the BNPT, Eddy Hartono, said that Indonesia has undertaken efforts to bring home some of its citizens detained in Syrian camps. "We have agreed to repatriate them, prioritizing women and children," he said.

Hartono said that there were standard procedures in place and that a few families had previously been taken to a rehabilitation center in Sentul, West Java, where they were

According to an unpublished NGO report seen exclusively by TIME, **39 Indonesian women and children** were expected to return to Indonesia.

psychologically assessed, before being moved to centers managed by the Ministry of Social Affairs, and eventually reintegrated into local communities.

According to an unpublished NGO report seen exclusively by TIME, 39 Indonesian women and children were expected to return to Indonesia in January, in what would be the first large-scale repatriation of Indonesian nationals from camps in Syria. The group, which was vetted by Indonesian authorities, included 16 adult women and 23 minors, some of whom were born in Syria. But recent events in the Middle East have complicated the government's repatriation plans.

Noor Huda Ismail, founder of the Institute for International Peace Building in Indonesia, said that bringing more women and children from Syria should only be a matter of time, noting it was a priority for Prabowo Subianto, President of the world's third-largest democracy since October.

However, there have been delays following the collapse of Assad's regime in December. "Initially, Jakarta was going to work with Damascus, but with the change in leadership we don't know what may happen," Ismail said.

A Jakarta-based BNPT official told TIME that, as of early January, Indonesian authorities were trying to find a safe route for the women and children waiting to be repatriated. "Considering what is happening in Syria, we are still planning the best and safest way to bring our citizens," he said. The same official said construction of a new national center for deradicalization had just started last month in Jakarta.

In the wake of the Syrian government overthrow, clashes have intensified between Turkish-backed rebel groups and the US-backed Kurdish forces guarding the detention facilities in northeastern Syria, where foreign nationals affiliated with ISIS have been kept. "It's a time when everybody's life is in danger, especially given the uncertainty in the northeast," said Sidney Jones, senior adviser to the Jakarta-based Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict. "But even if it's more important than ever to try and bring people home, it's also more difficult than ever." According to an Amnesty International report released in April, about 11,500 men, 14,500 women, and 30,000 children were held in at least 27

SHORT- LISTED STORIES

OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION TO PEACE

Raquel Carvalho

She Regrets Her Past With ISIS. Now She's Reclaiming Her Future

detention facilities and two camps in Syria. The rights group has called on nations to repatriate their citizens, arguing that detainees from over 70 countries have endured inhumane conditions, including torture and gender-based violence. Experts said that women seeking to leave the camps have reported facing threats and aggression from pro-ISIS individuals.

Although many governments have been reluctant to take them back, some have increased their efforts. At the end of last month, Iraq announced that it had repatriated 360 nationals from the Al Hol camp.

The Trump administration's recent freeze on US foreign-aid has heightened both the challenge and urgency, causing concerns among humanitarian workers who fear the camps' conditions may deteriorate. Some also worry about ISIS attacks on the camps and even potential internal riots due to food shortages, which could be exploited by the extremist group. Adlini Sjah, an associate research fellow at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, said that "after years of preparation," Indonesia currently has a more "favourable environment" domestically to receive returnees, including a "sympathetic political climate" and increased "readiness." Although it's impossible to eliminate all the risks associated with repatriating former ISIS supporters, she said that the country has built up sufficient "experience" as well as "resources."

Sjah also agrees with the prioritization of women, children, and teenagers—before they are further exposed to radicalization and groomed to carry out attacks.

Jones noted that the rehabilitation and reintegration of Indonesians coming not only from Syria, but also from conflicts in Afghanistan and the Philippines in recent years have been "very successful." In an effort to counter violent extremism, the Indonesian government has supported programs that provide former militants with vocational skills and employment opportunities.

The security analyst said those who have been selected to return to Indonesia would not be on the list if the government wasn't convinced they are willing to make a better life for themselves. Provided they are indeed able to reach their home country, Jones said, "I think they are going to be fine."

But simply getting home doesn't mean returnees won't face further challenges. Determined to achieve financial independence, Mawar set up her own food vendor business. "I started from zero and with no knowledge... My chips were quite oily initially," she laughed, recalling her early experiments with spinach, bitter melon, and sambal.

In 2018, Mawar moved with her children to a neighborhood in West Java, where they didn't know anyone. Now, she has two big freezers and a fully equipped kitchen where she crafts and pack-

ages about 300 bags of her signature chips each month. The beige walls of her shop are adorned with four golden frames showcasing her entrepreneurial certificates. Despite struggling financially, she is proud of being able to pay for both her shop and the house next door. In the neighborhood, Mawar is known for selling chips and little else. "Only the local government in the village knows my past," she said, while sitting on a long dark wooden bench in her shop. Mawar still takes precautions, such as avoiding being photographed because she fears it might draw unwanted attention from her neighbors or others who may harass her family.

She is also wary of speaking with journalists. "Some stories have described us as sexual slaves or children of terrorists," she said, speaking of the portrayal of returnees more broadly in both local and international media.

Leonie Jackson, assistant professor of international relations at Northumbria University in England, who analyzed 365 newspaper articles, concluded that media representations of women and girls who joined the extremist group in Syria had contributed to "the mood of indifference among policy-makers to the fate of British [ISIS] fighters and their families following the fall of the caliphate."

Aware of discrimination faced by other returnees both in schools and workplaces, Mawar instructed her sons to "hold back" this part of their history. Her children, however, could hardly be happier about being back in Indonesia: "They much prefer it here," Mawar said.

She hopes that the children of returnees and deportees will be able to grow up free from the stigma associated with terrorism. "The public needs to understand this issue better... it makes me feel sad to think that my family and other families may not have the same opportunities." Ismail, whose organization is launching several outreach activities this year, agreed that "the government has an important role in connecting different resources, but at the end of the day it is about the community and family."

Unlike other extremist movements, he said, ISIS put a lot of effort into radicalizing women, who were often groomed via social media. The terrorism expert said the turmoil in the Middle East, including the Israel-Hamas war and the Syrian leadership changes, could be a "catalyst" for radicalization. "I am not sure if radicalization is the right word. But there could be a rising desire for solidarity and belonging, particularly among the youth," he said, noting that specific religious narratives and a lack of geopolitical understanding may amplify this risk. "And, of course, we cannot forget the role of technology with social media, AI, and deepfakes," Ismail said.

to be continued...

According to an Amnesty International report released in April, about 11,500 men, 14,500 women, and 30,000 children were held in 27 detention facilities and two camps in Syria.

The full article can be found [here](#):



Nomination

Contribution **to Civil Rights**



CONTRIBUTION TO CIVIL RIGHTS



The first 25 years of the 21st Century have seen an age of political populism, the fragmentation of society and an increasing disregard for civil liberties. The structures for protecting the rights of citizens have never been more fragile.

Increasingly, it is left to watchdog journalism to intervene to raise the alarm when civil rights are threatened and when democracy itself comes under fire.

The six shortlisted entries in this category showcase examples of quality journalism that protects the rights of minorities and gives voice to vulnerable groups who are the first to suffer when rights are abused or neglected.

The judges were able to distinguish three outstanding winners for this category, but the quality of all the entries provided them with a challenging test. There were, for example, chilling reports on the harrowing murder of a young girl from a targeted minority in India, the sex abuse by people who are supposed to keep communities safe, and an indigenous community caught up in the supply chain problems of a major global corporation.

The role of government in protection of our rights must never be forgotten, and one story highlights the consequences of state failure to protect our children, the most vulnerable of all to rights abuse. This story of illegal adoption exposes scandalous state indifference.

Journalism like this, which reinforces calls for governments to take remedial action, illustrates well how the news media can throw a protective cloak around the human rights landscape on which people depend.



Pierre Leibovici France

Pierre Leibovici is a French journalist working for the investigative journalism platform Disclose which he joined in 2022.

Previously he worked as a journalist for the local investigative media outlet Mediacités.

At Disclose, he coordinates environmental investigations and impact strategy.



FIRST
PRIZE
WINNER

Decathlon profits from Uyghur forced labour in China/ Decathlon, the hard labour textile factory in Bangladesh

FIRST
PRIZE
WINNER

CONTRIBUTION
TO CIVIL
RIGHTS

By Pierre
Leibovici

Unburying
Decathlon
profits
from Uyghur
forced labour
in China /
Decathlon,
the hard
labour
textile
factory

Editor's Note

Behind the glitz and glamour of international fashion is often a grubby story of profiteering and exploitation. No one knows that better than journalist Pierre Francois Leibovic who devoted more than a year working on this impressive expose. He reveals how the French sportswear firm Decathlon sold clothes produced by forced labour in China and from clandestine factories in Bangladesh.

The report led to immediate changes – the company cut ties with a major supplier in China and tightened controls over its supply chain. It is an outstanding example of how public-interest journalism makes a difference when it speaks truth to power.

Introduction

This two-part investigation, which took over a year to complete and is based on previously unpublished confidential documents, reveals the human cost of fast fashion in a way that has never been done before. It reveals how a multinational sportswear company manages to offer unbeatable prices by using suppliers that employ forced labour in China or clandestine factories in Bangladesh. Following the publication of the investigation, Decathlon announced that it was severing ties with a major supplier in China and tightening controls on its supply chain.

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Published in Disclose France

Decathlon profits from Uyghur forced labour in China

A 12-year-old girl, workers from the Uyghur minority forced to make clothes, etc.: one of Decathlon's main suppliers relies on a network of forced labour in China, as revealed by Disclose in partnership with Cash Investigation. The French brand's clothing also contains cotton from the Xinjiang region which is under international sanctions.

"I'm here to give a hand." Smiling coyly, the girl will not be diverted from her task. Her tiny fingers are doing up a Decathlon navy blue polo shirt under the vigilant gaze of her mother, who sits a few metres away at a sewing machine. "I'm 12," the girl replies when asked how old she is. She looks particularly small as the huge production lines of the factory where she works illegally are almost empty.

We are meeting in the summer of 2024 during a hidden-camera visit to the premises of Yanggu Jifa, the main employer in Sanzhiwang, a village in Shandong province, eastern China. The factory is the property of the Jifa group. Most people have not heard of it, yet it is Decathlon's second largest textile manufacturer in China. A fact that the French sports multinational kept secret until an internal source at Decathlon shared a sensitive business file with Disclose: the list of its subcontractors around the world. In the document, Jifa is referenced as one of the French brand's "key account suppliers": Decathlon bought 43 millions euros' worth of clothes from Jifa in 2022 alone.

In the document, Decathlon also assesses the risk of child labour at its suppliers. At Jifa, the risk is deemed to be low: B, on a scale of A (very good) to E (very bad). The same scale is used to assess the risk of forced labour.

Decathlon's supplier is in fact directly involved in a system of modern slavery in China, as revealed by Disclose in partnership with Cash Investigation, after a year-long investigation into the brand's supply chain. Uyghur women are the main victims of this traffic in human beings. They are members of a predominantly Muslim ethnic group violently suppressed by Beijing. The workers are forcibly enrolled to make t-shirts, shorts and other items of clothing likely to end up in Decathlon's 1 700 or so shops around the world.

Under the pretext of fighting terrorism, the Chinese authori-

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ties have implemented since 2017 a mass detention policy against Muslim ethnic minorities who live mostly in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, in the West of the country. The armed forces have captured and locked up in camps more than a million people, mostly Uyghurs, according to the UN, which speaks of “possible crimes against humanity”. The survivors who managed to escape China tell of torture, rape and forced sterilisation. The camps were replaced in 2020 with government schemes aiming to get Uyghurs to work under coercion in the industrial or agricultural sectors. The aim is to sever cultural and social ties within families and to quell any attempt to rebel. Decathlon’s supplier, Jifa, has been taking an active part in this policy.

Made with Flourish

In southwest Xinjiang, the Yengisar industrial park was built over a few months. Austere, cube-shaped buildings stand next to factories subsidised by the Chinese authorities, including Xinjiang Xirong Clothing, a Jifa subsidiary until 2023 and specialising in sports items. Its two European customers were Decathlon and Orsay, a German brand that once belonged to the Mulliez family, who owns the French multinational. Decathlon has given the company two “certifications for its human resources policy and the quality of its products,” as reported in 2021 by the Xinjiang Textile Industry Association. Yet Xirong is far from being your average factory.

“Anyone who refuses to work risks imprisonment”

As early as 2018, “the Jifa factory in Yengisar heeded the call of the Communist Party Central Committee and took many measures to absorb locals, teach them the language and turn them into workers,” a local media outlet reported. In practical terms, Chinese officials visit the homes of Uyghur farmers and exert pressure to convince them to travel to industrial areas, far away from their families. “For individuals from the Uyghur region, the constant threat of internment makes refusing the state-sponsored work placement impossible [...] and thus anyone who refuses to work or attempts to walk away from their job, risks internment or imprisonment,” according to a report published in 2023 by Britain’s Sheffield Hallam University, which specialises in the study of repression of ethnic minorities in China. According to a 2021 report by Chinese national radio, the Xirong site “absorbed surplus rural workers – more than 1,000 of them”. Decathlon’s partner seems to be a role model for Beijing’s policy in the region.



Recruiting Uyghurs has a major advantage for Jifa’s subsidiary. Like all other textile factories in the Yengisar industrial complex, Xirong has received funds from the local government to “train ethnic minorities from Xinjiang”. More than 29 million yuans (3.8 million euros) of public funds were allocated to the company when it was launched, Disclose has worked out from the press in China. The subsidies are welcome by a company for which “cost pressure has always been a worry”. A concern shared by its client, Decathlon, as shown by a confidential document seen by Disclose. It is a partnership agreement template that the former CEO of the company, Matthieu Leclercq, asks major suppliers to sign. It reads that “the continuous cost and price reductions are a must because ‘we make sports accessible to all’ through our low-priced sporting goods”.

In order to further reduce its manufacturing costs and satisfy its French client, the Jifa factory has also taken advantage of young, cheap workers: Uyghur adolescents who arrive straight from what the Chinese authorities describe as a “vocational training centre” in Yengisar, less than one kilometre from Xirong’s workshops. Patimai Baiheti started working for the company when she was 16. She was profiled in a propaganda article published in 2019. With a “huge grin on her face,” the teenager said that she had “come to the factory for a work placement when [she] was a second-year student at the vocational school in Yengisar”. The article specified that Xirong had recruited “more than 400 employees” like her.

“It is a form of brainwashing”

Adrian Zenz, anthropologist

The reality is that the so-called “vocational school” in Yengisar looks more like a prison than a school. Five of its buildings were in fact used as an internment camp for Uyghurs between 2018 and 2021. The high walls and barbed wire around them have been dismantled and the buildings are now part of the training centre, as shown by satellite images analysed by Disclose.

Satellite images of the vocational training compound in Yengisar in October 2017, May 2018 and July 2024. The Uyghur internment camp referenced by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute is in the top left-hand corner of the picture dated May 2018. Images: Google Earth Although the purpose of the centre has changed, it is still synonymous with oppression. In enrolment instructions for the 2023-2024 school year, the vocational school in Yengisar enthused about introducing a “military-style environment”. Videos published on Douyin, TikTok’s Chinese version, show Uyghur students bursting into patriotic songs. They wear uniforms, with their fists tight against their faces. Once they are on a work placement, students take intensive Mandarin

Under the pretext of fighting terrorism, the Chinese authorities have implemented since 2017 a mass detention policy against Muslim ethnic minorities who live mostly in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, in the West of the country.



FIRST PRIZE WINNER

CONTRIBUTION TO CIVIL RIGHTS

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and Chinese culture classes “in their free time,” as reported by a local newspaper. “These vocational training schools particularly target young Uyghurs for indoctrination and cultural assimilation,” says German anthropologist Adrian Zenz, an expert on forced labour. “And this is a form of brainwashing.”

Contacted by Disclose, the French brand confirms that “Qingdao Jifa Group is currently listed as a direct supplier to Decathlon”. But the company denies any links with the group’s subsidiary in western China: “Xinjiang Xirong Clothing Company has never been a Decathlon supplier”. No further explanation is given. The same silence applies to the factory’s links with the Yengisar vocational high school. Decathlon refers to its code of conduct and says it “firmly condemns all forms of forced labor”.

Yet its supply chain in China gives rise to more suspicions of modern slavery. Other farmers from Xinjiang are not “absorbed” to get them to work in the local factory but are transferred to Shandong, across the country. Once again, Decathlon’s partner, Jifa, is directly involved.

Transfer of Uyghurs across China

With their heads down and expressionless faces, a dozen Uyghur apprentices are waiting on a red carpet rolled out on the sports ground of the vocational school in Yengisar. Behind them, a fluttering banner can be seen announcing a ceremony to “celebrate their departure”. **The local newspaper reported in March 2019 that they were part of a group of 28 young women sent for a “work placement” at the headquarters of the Jifa group in Qingdao, the capital of Shandong, 4,000 kilometres away.**

Their journey was funded by the Chinese authorities as part of “industrial aid to Xinjiang”. But rather than “aid,” this was a transfer of Uyghurs in a bid to make up for a shortfall in cheap workforce in Shandong, where Jifa owns some twenty factories. This practice feeds the “Sinicisation” conducted by Beijing in Xinjiang, as confirmed by a report by Chinese researchers inadvertently disseminated in 2019: “Helping them to get rid of poverty is the most basic and important approach, especially through labour transfer. This not only reduces Uyghur population density in Xinjiang but is also an important method to reform, meld and assimilate Uyghurs,” the persecuted minority.

Two Jifa factories working for Decathlon in Shandong are believed to take advantage of the population transfers from Xinjiang, the investigation by Disclose and Cash Investigation reveals. One is situated in the village of Liudi, west of the province. The

second is none other than the Sanzhiwang factory, a few kilometres away, where we met a 12-year-old girl fussing over a Decathlon polo shirt, although the minimum working age in China is 16.

Kalenji t-shirts, Domyos trousers, Kipsta jerseys, etc.: videos published by employees of the two factories on the Chinese version of TikTok show workers handling the products of the French manufacturer. Amid comments on “heavy work” and “overtime,” one of the videos stands out. It is a guided tour of the workshops in Sanzhiwang by a Jifa employee. Facing the camera, she calls out to her community: “People from Xinjiang and North Korea, you are welcome to work here... There are all kinds of subsidies from the Chinese government.” A translation confirmed to Disclose and Cash Investigation by three translators.*

In other words, Jifa enjoys financial support from the authorities to bring workers from places where the central governments, Beijing and Pyongyang respectively, repress their people. This is incontrovertible evidence of forced labour, says anthropologist Adrian Zenz. “If a company receives subsidies for employing ethnic minorities from Xinjiang, it means that they’re participating in a form of an official government labour transfer programme. It means that there is a very high systematic risk of state-imposed forced labour if you participate in it.” The same risk lurks in the last link in Decathlon’s production chain in China: cotton farming.

Xinjiang Cotton

During Cash Investigation’s hidden-camera visit to the factory in Liudi, a Jifa manager revealed some crucial information as she walked past rolls of fabric. She said that the cotton used by Decathlon “may come from Xinjiang”. But cotton growing in the region is marked by serious risks of forced labour. According to several international reports and investigations, more than half a million Uyghurs are believed to have been forced, in 2020, to pick and process cotton, a raw material that is essential to the Chinese textile market. Cotton growing represents 90% of national production. In 2023, the authorities in Xinjiang still called for the “Uyghur surplus labourers” scheme to be “expanded” so as to direct them to cotton fields.

to be continued...



Under the pretext
of fighting
terrorism,
the Chinese
authorities have
implemented since
2017
a mass detention
policy against
Muslim ethnic
minorities
who live mostly
in the Xinjiang
Uyghur
Autonomous
Region,
in the West
of the country.

The full report can be
seen [here](#)





SECOND
PRIZE
WINNER



Viriya Paramita Singgih Indonesia

Viriya P. Singgih is a Jakarta-based journalist with more than 12 years of reporting experience. He has worked for English daily The Jakarta Post, American newswire Bloomberg, British news outlet BBC, and investigative platform Project Multatuli, covering energy, mining, macroeconomics, and politics, among others.

As a Chevening awardee, he graduated from City, University of London, with an MA in Interactive Journalism in 2023.

The fate
of the
Indigenous
O'Hongana
Manyawa
around
Tesla's
supply
chain
on
Halmahera

SECOND
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CONTRIBUTION
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RIGHTS

By Viriya
Paramita
Singgih

The fate
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Editor's Note

In a global economy access to scarce resources can have a dramatic impact on people's lives. Viriya Paramita Singgih has produced one example – the threat to an ancient indigenous community in Indonesia who live on land rich in nickel. They have lived there for centuries, yet authorities misunderstand, criminalize, and push them out of their ancestral homes.

This persecution has intensified as nickel production increases but, says Singgih, their plight has been noticed by Tesla, one of the world's a leading car manufacturers and a nickel consumer, which is now paying closer attention to their plight.

Introduction

This in-depth piece reveals how Indonesia's nickel boom—framed as part of the “green” EV-battery industry—has led to the criminalization and displacement of the Indigenous O'Hongana Manyawa from their ancestral forests on Halmahera Island. The article shows why Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) is not a box-ticking exercise but a legal and moral threshold.

It traces accountability across the global supply chain, linking mine sites, smelters, and major companies' policies, so readers can see who benefits and who bears the risk. The result is a rigorously sourced story that amplifies the voices of a marginalized community and presses companies and authorities to align practice with promise.

**The article shows why Free, Prior
and Informed Consent (FPIC)
is not a box-ticking exercise
but a legal and moral threshold.**

Published in BBC News Indonesia's website

The fate of the Indigenous O'Hongana Manyawa around Tesla's supply chain on Halmahera

The Tobelo Dalam or O'Hongana Manyawa people have lived on Halmahera for centuries, yet authorities still misunderstand, criminalize, and push them out of their ancestral homes.

This persecution has intensified as “nickel fever” sweeps the island. Why is Tesla now paying closer attention to their plight?

Police woke and arrested Bokum and Nuhu at 2 a.m.

That night, March 1, 2015, the two men stayed at Oti Maling's home in Woejerana Village, Central Halmahera. Maling's house wasn't far from the Ake Jira forest, where Bokum and Nuhu lived.

The authorities arrested them for allegedly killing two residents of Waci Village, East Halmahera, on July 8, 2014. The victims were Masud Watoa and his seven-year-old son, Marlan. When the killings happened, Masud, Marlan, and four companions had spent five days searching for agarwood in the Waci forest, according to an investigative report by the Commission for the Disappeared and Victims of Violence (KontraS) published in October 2023.

At around 12:30 p.m., the group encountered six individuals they believed were Tobelo Dalam community members. Two of these people, as explained in the KontraS report, carried arrows and machetes.

The hunters immediately ran to the Waci river and tried to cross it. Young Marlan stumbled and fell before they could reach safety. Two of the six strangers hacked the boy repeatedly until he died, the witnesses said.

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It was too late when Masud realized his son had fallen behind. He ran back toward the attackers, grabbed his son's body, and tried to escape. But three arrows struck Masud in the chest, right leg, and right buttock. He fell. Witnesses said two attackers took turns hacking him until he died. Then they fled. Four agarwood harvesters managed to escape unharmed, including Abutalib Bakir, who immediately reported the attack to the East Halmahera Police.

Police investigated the murders for six months without finding any trace of the perpetrators. But pressure mounted from the victims' family and Waci Village residents, who demanded justice.

News of the tragedy spread across social media. Photos of Tobelo Dalam people circulated widely, including those scholars had taken for research. The faces of Bokum and Nuhu appeared in some of these photos.

Police matched faces in the photos to Bakir's description of the perpetrators: men with thick mustaches and beards, pronounced sideburns, hair tied back and unkempt. Officers showed Bakir several photos of Bokum and Nuhu. He identified them as the killers. The police then arrested them.

"The survivor provided the murderers' physical features that were very general [throughout the Tobelo Dalam community]," KontraS stated in its report. "The legal counsel found it suspicious that the victim could immediately recognize Bokum and Nuhu from police photos, while four other attackers remained unidentified."

KontraS found several other problems. Witnesses said they actually saw both men in and around the Ake Jira forest during the days before and after the Waci forest murder.

The Ake Jira forest lies dozens of kilometers from the Waci forest. And so, KontraS and the Indigenous Peoples Alliance of the Archipelago (AMAN) argued it was impossible for Bokum and Nuhu to have been at the Waci site when the killings occurred.

Munadi Kilkoda, the head of AMAN North Maluku in 2015, said Bokum and Nuhu would have had to walk through the territories of several other Tobelo Dalam groups to reach the Waci forest. But the Tobelo Dalam people, also known as O'Hongana Manyawa or "people who live in the forest", rarely enter other groups' forest territories without permission.

Syaiful Madjid, a researcher on the Tobelo Dalam and an expert witness at the trial, said these indigenous people kill only when someone breaks their social rules.

The Tobelo Dalam people, also known as O'Hongana Manyawa or "people who live in the forest", rarely enter other groups' forest territories without permission.

"Two main reasons drive them to kill: if other indigenous community groups enter their forest territory, and if someone steals a wife from another indigenous community," KontraS stated, quoting an interview with Madjid.

Even when the Tobelo Dalam people kill, Madjid said, they typically tend the body until someone comes to retrieve it—a sharp contrast to the Waci forest case, where the victims were hacked to death and left behind.

AMAN and the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) highlighted these problems and urged the authorities to release Bokum and Nuhu from detention, but to no avail.

"The arrests followed proper procedures," said Hendri Badar, then head of public relations for the North Maluku Police, around a week after the arrests. The court ultimately found Bokum and Nuhu guilty and sentenced them to 15 years in prison.

Five years into their imprisonment, Nuhu died from untreated back pain. Meanwhile, authorities released Bokum on Jan. 24, 2022, after he had served roughly half his sentence.

Accompanied by Madjid, the researcher, Bokum returned to the Ake Jira forest, searching for the family he had left behind seven years earlier.

Bokum then discovered that nickel mining companies had consumed parts of his ancestral forest territory as "nickel fever" had swept Halmahera.

Halmahera's nickel chronicle

In October 1996, a 30-year-old Australian geologist arrived by helicopter on Halmahera, altering the island's course forever.

Strand Minerals, a subsidiary of Canada-based Weda Bay Minerals, had dispatched the geologist to assess the island's nickel potential.

SECOND PRIZE WINNER

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The work demanded extraordinary efforts. He was often forced to navigate mountainous terrain without established trails, hauling equipment and supplies through unexplored territory.

Dense forest blanketed the region, harboring diverse species of snakes, spiders, and birds— alongside the Tobelo Dalam people, who had roamed these lands nomadically for centuries.

"We are at the edge of the world here, on the border of Asia, with one foot in Melanesia," said Eramet SA, a French mining company that now holds a 43% interest in Strand Minerals, in an article titled "The success story of Weda Bay Nickel".

In the article, Eramet chronicled Strand Minerals' discovery of what they called "world-class nickel deposits" across Halmahera. *"Starting in the 16th century, and for 200 years thereafter, the region highly attracted the attention of European powers for its spices, which sold for more money than gold, before it fell into obscurity," Eramet wrote about Halmahera. "The upcoming exploration phase will put the spotlight back on this corner of the world."*

Initial exploration validated their optimism. Several areas across Halmahera revealed abundant nickel resources: 90 million dry tons of indicated and recorded deposits.

This discovery led to the formation of PT Weda Bay Nickel (WBN), with Strand Minerals controlling 90% of shares and state-owned PT Aneka Tambang (Antam) holding the remaining 10%. WBN signed a 7th Generation Contract of Work with the Indonesian government in early 1998, securing a 30-year permit to extract nickel from 120,500 hectares of land spanning Central and East Halmahera.

Subsequent negotiations between WBN and the government reduced the company's concession to 45,065 hectares. Yet it remains Halmahera's largest nickel concession and Indonesia's second-largest.

By January 2019, WBN's Halmahera concession contained 634.9 million tons of nickel ore resources. Halmahera Island, located within North Maluku Province in the broader Maluku Islands region, is indeed one of Indonesia's primary sources of nickel. Official data showed that Indonesia had 3.6 billion tons of measured nickel ore resources and 1.64 billion tons of proven reserves as of 2022. Sulawesi Island contributed 56.8% of these proven reserves, while the Maluku Islands provided 42.4%.

As of 2023, there were 373 nickel mining concessions with "clean and clear" or CnC status issued by the government, covering a total area of 960,117

hectares. The provinces of South, Southeast, and Central Sulawesi host 309 of these concessions, spanning 691,930 hectares. North Maluku has 59 concessions and Maluku has one, together covering 231,486 hectares.

WBN signed its Contract of Work in early 1998, but nickel mining in North Maluku, particularly on Halmahera Island, only accelerated in the past five years.

Political instability, shifting government policies, and plummeting global nickel prices delayed the mining boom for decades.

In May 1998, just months after WBN and the government signed the contract, authoritarian President Suharto resigned. B.J. Habibie assumed the presidency until October 1999. Habibie enacted Law No. 41 of 1999 on Forestry, which banned open-pit mining in protected forest areas.

The law threatened WBN's operations because its concession included the 35,155-hectare Ake Kobe protected forest. The company halted exploration in 2001.

WBN joined 11 other affected mining companies in lobbying the government for an exemption, arguing their permits predated the law. The government agreed. WBN then resumed operations in Central and East Halmahera's forests, including in protected areas that the Sawai and Tobelo Dalam indigenous communities had inhabited for generations. In May 2006, French company Eramet acquired Weda Bay Minerals, gaining complete control of Strand Minerals, which owned 90% of WBN. WBN then conducted its initial feasibility study from September 2007 to March 2009 and obtained environmental impact assessment (AMDAL) documents in June 2009.

The Non-Judicial Human Rights Redress Mechanisms Project, however, found it likely that procedural flaws existed in the AMDAL process. WBN invited representatives of the Sawai indigenous community to a public consultation, but the company provided them with hundreds of pages of documents to review just moments before the meeting began.

"Village representatives didn't know the mining concession would block residents' access to their agricultural land in the protected forest area," according to a September 2013 report by the Non-Judicial Human Rights Redress Mechanisms Project. "[One] village head said he would never have approved the AMDAL if he had known residents would lose land they had cultivated for generations."

to be continued...

Official data showed that Indonesia had 3.6 billion tons of measured nickel ore resources and 1.64 billion tons of proven reserves as of 2022. Sulawesi Island contributed 56.8% of these proven reserves, while the Maluku Islands provided 42.4%.

The full report can be seen [here](#)





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**Salahelden
Ibrahim Ali moursi laban**
United Kingdom

Salahelden Ibrahim Ali moursi laban
*is an Egyptian journalist working
for The Independentarabia*

The Dark World of Illegal Adoption in Egypt

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By
**Salahelden
Ibrahim
Ali Moursi
Laban**

The Dark World of Illegal Adoption in Egypt

Editor's Note

This moving report investigates the inhumanity of child trafficking in Egypt. The system operates through illicit networks that promote the illegal sale of children under the guise of "adoption." This is a scandal that exploits the desperation of people who yearn for a child and those who are ready to trade their children for cash. The report highlights how online networks turn children into a commodity who can be bought and sold. It is a heart-breaking story, revealing the exploitation of people's emotions and the destruction of the lives of the most vulnerable in the community.

Introduction

This investigation is an exemplar of journalism that plays a social role to uncover injustice and threats to society that are hidden, which is particularly important when concerns the fate and identity of children.

It reveals a hidden network in Egypt where brokers arranged illegal deals on social media to manipulate the identities of newborns and to trade in the cruel practice of child trafficking. Babies were promised to people even before they were born, and their papers were forged using fraudulent documents.

Some of these cases involved couples struggling with infertility who wanted to register the children as their own, while others pointed to smuggling networks moving infants across borders by taking advantage of legal loopholes.

The investigation showed how terms like adoption, which carry legal and emotional weight in other parts of the world, were intentionally misused online to hide illegal activity and it exposed how brokers and complicit officials took advantage of flaws in Egypt's civil registration system to create false identities.

The impact was immediate. The Facebook pages identified in the story were shut down, and two months later, the issue was raised in the Egyptian Parliament through a formal inquiry. This story goes beyond child trafficking. It reveals how the language of adoption, often associated with care and protection, was manipulated to justify identity fraud.

The investigation uncovered a system where children were not sold openly, but given new lives on paper through forged birth certificates and fabricated motherhoods. This is a story about lost origins, legal silence, and the misuse of a word that should represent safety and belonging. Stories like this deserve to be part of a wider the global conversation on ethics, identity, and the inhumanity involved in unregulated adoption.

Published in Independent Arabia, Egypt

The Dark World of Illegal Adoption in Egypt

Ten days left until birth. I guarantee you three things: you'll get the baby, register them in your name, and have the mother's consent. I won't charge more than 20,000 pounds."

With these words, Raheem made his direct offer in a closed Facebook group in Egypt, promoting an illegal adoption deal that would allow the transfer of a newborn and their legal identity to a buyer— for a price.

What Raheem and other brokers do on social media platforms is criminalized under Egyptian law, including the Anti-Human Trafficking Law No. 64 of 2010, the Penal Code, and the Child Law No. 12 of 1996, which explicitly prohibits adoption and forbids assigning a child to anyone other than their biological parents.

In this investigative report, Independent Arabia uncovers illicit networks run by online brokers who facilitate child trafficking under the guise of adoption, banned under national law. These networks exploit legal loopholes and use deceptive tactics to turn children into commodities—bought and sold outside official channels. In some cases, these operations include attempts to smuggle children to countries where adoption is permitted, by manipulating their legal identities.

Adoption Brokers

Our investigation led us to a closed Facebook group with a misleading name: "Adopting Orphaned Children and Supporting Pregnant Women." The group, established in mid-2024, had attracted more than 5,000 members.

Within the group, members were openly exchanging detailed information about children offered for sale—such as gender, skin tone, and age. Among them was Raheem, who introduced himself as a broker acting on behalf of a pregnant woman looking to give up her newborn. He invited interested parties to message him privately. Once we did, he surprised us with an offer: "The baby is a boy, and the mother is ready to give him up as soon as he's born to whoever wants to adopt him."

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Sabry Osman, director of the Child Rescue Hotline at Egypt's National Council for Childhood and Motherhood, told Independent Arabia: "Some families turn to these pages in search of a way to register children under their own names, which is illegal. The official body responsible for this issue is the Ministry of Social Solidarity, which follows a foster care system and does not recognize adoption."

Screenshots documented by Independent Arabia from closed online groups revealing the illicit sale of children in Egypt.

Egypt's Child Rescue Hotline, operated by the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood, was established in June 2005 to monitor violations against children.

Osman explains: "We mostly respond to reports. In the past four years, the sale of children online has increased significantly. In 2024 alone, we identified 24 active pages engaged in these prohibited activities."

Egypt is home to 39.5 million children, according to the latest data from the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS)—the highest figure in the Arab world. According to a statement made by Minister of Social Solidarity Nevine El-Kabbaj in August 2023, the number of orphans is estimated at 1.4 million, with only 3% having lost both parents. These children, along with those of unknown parentage, are eligible for foster care—but not adoption, which would alter their legal lineage.

While Egyptian authorities have not released official statistics on child exploitation through social media, Osman acknowledges: "There are many real cases of children being sold online. But most of the cases we've documented are scams, in which brokers exploit couples struggling with infertility and defraud them for money."

The Child-Selling Mafia

Raheem promised that "the mother will never come back to claim the child." He assured us, "If she needed to see him again, she wouldn't be giving him up in the first place." When asked about the cost of his brokerage, he responded evasively: "Honestly, I don't know... but she's giving you her soul—a piece of herself."

Eventually, he quoted a fee: "I charge between 15,000 and 20,000 pounds." Then came the next step: "Delivery will take place in Alexandria on the day of birth."

He ended the conversation with a push to close the deal:

"Alright, let's agree now—lots of people are messaging me asking for the baby."

Earlier this year, a major uproar broke out in Egypt after activists circulated Facebook posts, visible to the public, offering babies for sale. The posts received thousands of interactions. In response, the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood filed a report with the Public Prosecution, calling for an investigation and accountability.

A few days later, the Ministry of Interior announced that it had identified nine social media pages promoting the "adoption" of orphaned children. In a statement, the ministry said most of these pages were scams run by individuals exploiting the public's interest in adoption. It confirmed that those responsible had been arrested.

Our investigation on Facebook led us to a page specifically dedicated to providing reporting channels for users who encounter content related to human trafficking activities in several countries, including Egypt.

Independent Arabia spoke with Rami El-Gebaly, the founder of the Missing Children Initiative, which is responsible for responding to such complaints on Meta platforms. El-Gebaly told Independent Arabia, "We've been monitoring all pages promoting these activities for nearly three years. We coordinate with the Ministry of Interior, the Public Prosecution, and the Child Rescue Hotline to combat them. We have successfully recovered a large number of children and prevented their sale online."

When asked why such content isn't automatically removed, he explained, "Brokers use terms like 'adoption,' which is legal in countries like the United States. This makes violations harder to detect. Because adoption is banned in Egypt, some people turn to the internet.

However, IT consultant Rami El-Meligy disagrees. He argues that communication between Egyptian authorities and social media platforms is "insufficient, with clear shortcomings in how these platforms are engaged." He believes "there is no alternative to compelling platforms to provide effective tools to combat such crimes."

Similarly, IT expert Mohamed El-Harithi stresses that tracking these accounts is "like fighting windmills. Once a page is taken down, another quickly pops up." He finds it baffling that "Facebook has sophisticated tools to monitor user behavior, yet groups promoting child trafficking continue to operate without decisive intervention."

The surge in online baby listings began in 2018, when ac-

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tivists circulated screenshots of children being offered for sale on a website called Souq Al-Arab, created in the Netherlands. The site featured a section titled “Children & Infants,” where ads detailed the children’s ages, prices, appearance, skin tone, and gender. Although the site was created abroad, it featured Egyptian children. Some listings reached up to 200,000 Egyptian pounds. The incident sparked outrage and eventually led to the amendment of Article 290 of Egypt’s Penal Code, upgrading the penalty for child abduction to life imprisonment.

Human Trafficking

Independent Arabia also contacted another broker active on Facebook who claimed he was merely acting on behalf of the child’s father, “who is in severe financial distress.” Speaking in a tone that seemed rehearsed, the man—who identified himself as Nabil—said: “Honestly, I feel ashamed to talk about something like this, but the father just can’t speak. God knows his situation.”

According to Nabil, the reason behind the offer was the father’s crippling debt—amounting to 350,000 pounds. After paying off a portion, he still owed 180,000 pounds and saw no option other than “giving up” his daughter. “The girl is living in terrible conditions with him,” Nabil added, “and she needs someone to adopt her.”

Ahmed Meseilhi, head of the Children’s Defense Network at the Egyptian Bar Association and an expert in human trafficking law, affirms that offering children for sale on social media platforms constitutes a criminal offense under Law No. 64 of 2010. “The penalty starts at 10 years in prison simply for attempting the sale, regardless of whether the transaction is completed,” he said.

Excerpt from a conversation between an Independent Arabia editor and adoption brokers Moushilhi explains the legal position of these activities, stating, “Cases that involve scams for financial gain without the presence of actual children fall under the crime of fraud, according to Article 336 of the Egyptian Penal Code, which carries a maximum sentence of three years in prison.”

Meanwhile, Nahal Fahmy, a UN advisor on combating human trafficking, noted that “crimes committed online are classified as cybercrimes, yet Egypt does not currently have a specific law criminalizing them. However, the newly adopted UN Convention on Cybercrime will allow for the enforcement of national laws once ratified by Egypt. Until then, perpetrators are prosecuted for fraud if they claim to have children when they do not.”

A review by Independent Arabia of common search engine results revealed a range of deceptive practices that ultimately result in child sales. These include forging birth notifications, exploiting social media platforms to facilitate child abandonment, and attempts to smuggle children to countries where adoption is legal—particularly the United States.

Most Arab countries prohibit adoption in accordance with Islamic Sharia, which forbids altering a child’s lineage. Instead, they employ a system of “kafala,” which allows for the care of children of unknown parentage without granting them the caregiver’s surname. Tunisia is the only Arab country that permits full legal adoption under its 1958 law. In Lebanon, adoption is restricted to Christian denominations under their respective personal status laws, while Islamic sects adhere strictly to the kafala system.

Al-Jabali, who monitors these activities on Meta platforms in Egypt, believes that Facebook cannot stop these practices. In his view, the solution must come from within, through stricter laws that block the pathways used by child traffickers. He points to the ease with which people can manipulate birth registrations, noting that buyers can coordinate with under-regulated clinics to obtain a birth notification under any name. He suggests directly linking hospitals to the civil registry and limiting the issuance of birth notifications to authorized government employees to close this loophole for good.

When asked why she didn’t approach the Ministry of Social Solidarity to formally foster a child instead of turning to the internet, Amina made her motives clear. She said she wanted to register the baby girl under her husband’s name and refused to go through official procedures, which don’t allow that and are, in her view, overly complex and unreliable. Amina claimed to be a doctor and said she could “easily” issue a birth notification to attribute the child of her choosing to her husband.

Independent Arabia spoke with a staff member responsible for registering newborns at a public hospital in Egypt. Speaking on condition of anonymity, he explained: “The registration process is based on the physician’s report confirming that the birth took place under their supervision— whether in a public hospital or a private clinic. The medical report is the basis for establishing the child’s identity. If the report is falsified, the responsibility does not fall on us.”

According to the official, “There’s a loophole that allows people to purchase such reports from either private or public hospitals to falsely register a child. Our job is to verify that the document appears legitimate, then proceed with registration.

to be continued...

Crimes committed online are classified as cybercrimes, yet Egypt does not currently have a specific law criminalizing them. However, the newly adopted UN Convention on Cybercrime will allow for the enforcement of national laws once ratified by Egypt.

The full report can be seen [here](#)



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Published in "The New Humanitarian"

Barbara Debout, France

Peacekeeper sex abuse rife in Central African Republic as survivors stay silent

Introduction

In October 2024, The New Humanitarian (TNH) published an in-depth investigation exposing the scale of sexual abuse committed by UN peacekeepers against Central African women and girls,

many of whom remain silenced by fear, stigma, and the power imbalance inherent in the mission that was meant to protect them. The investigation followed up on earlier TNH exposés from 2018 and 2019, showing how systems that were supposed to protect survivors are still failing.

It centres on first-hand testimonies from 19 survivors of abuse by members of the UN's MINUSCA mission in the Central African Republic. Survivors described rape, exploitation, and abandonment, and the investigation revealed how the very mechanisms of redress had failed them – leaving victims unsupported, their rights denied, and impunity entrenched. The investigation sparked immediate and broad impact.

MINUSCA issued an official communiqué that sought to discredit the reporting: "We note with regret that the articles, for which we provided detailed information, mention contingents that were never deployed in the localities where the alleged incidents are said to have taken place."

At the same time, the mission reiterated its official line: "MINUSCA reaffirms that all sexual exploitation and abuse are unacceptable, and that multi-faceted assistance to identified victims, in respect of their dignity, remains the priority of the Mission."

Placed against the detailed testimonies of survivors, these statements illustrate the gulf between institutional rhetoric and lived reality. Survivors described being left without support, while the UN insisted it was providing multi-faceted assistance and applying a "zero tolerance" policy.

The investigation also reached global audiences. It was co-published in Le Monde and further amplified by outlets across Africa and beyond, including L'Humanité, Burkina24, Dakaractu, Senego, LeFaso, DW, Focus on Africa, Bamada, Vanguard and more.

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This ensured survivors' voices reached audiences far beyond the Central African Republic, positioning their testimonies at the centre of global debate. Following the publication of the story, in September 2025, an independent audit delivered a damning verdict on UN support for survivors of peacekeeper abuse in CAR, echoing the systemic failures laid bare by the investigation. Civil society leaders and practitioners have underscored its importance: the CHS Alliance's Manager of complaints, Investigations, and Survivor Support cited the work, while sector voices such as Neesha Fakir praised the investigation for exposing "one of the most shameful chapters of peacekeeping."

Barbara Debout's interview on TV5 Monde Afrique further extended the platform for survivors' testimonies. By combining survivor-centred reporting, cross-border syndication, and demonstrable institutional consequences, The New Humanitarian's investigation exemplifies journalism in service of civil rights: holding international power to account, amplifying the silenced, and forcing change in systems that failed them.

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Peacekeeper sex abuse rife in Central African Republic as survivors stay silent

Women and girls in the Central African Republic are continuing to have their lives ruined by sexual abuse and exploitation committed by UN peacekeepers, and many are not reporting cases to the mission on the ground because they fear reprisals, don't know who to contact, or lack faith that action will be taken.

At a glance: Reporting gaps and continued abuse

- Peacekeeper sex abuse is rife despite prevention efforts from MINUSCA.
- Women said they aren't reporting their cases to MINUSCA because they fear reprisals,
- don't know who to contact, or lack faith that action will be taken.
- Some local NGOs that support survivors said they are also not reporting cases to MINUSCA.
- Investigations into past allegations involving hundreds of survivors have not been resolved.
- Assistance to survivors – from member states and the UN – remains limited.

A public UN database has recorded allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation against over 730 peacekeepers working for the UN mission in CAR (known by its acronym MINUSCA) since 2015, yet The New Humanitarian spoke to 19 women who have not reported abuse as well as civil society groups that said they are also not sharing claims despite recording a "constant" flow of

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new cases.

"If I haven't gone to see MINUSCA, it is because I don't know who to turn to, but also because I am afraid," said Jeanne, a fruit and vegetable vendor who said she was raped by a Rwandan peacekeeper last year. "They say that their peacekeepers have come from their country to protect us, only to rape us, so what can we do?"*

MINUSCA deployed to CAR in 2014 when an alliance of rebels called the Séléka ousted then-president François Bozizé, triggering widespread communal violence. Though the mission is credited for saving lives, its blue helmets have committed egregious cases of sex abuse that have destroyed lives and severely tarnished the mission's reputation.

In one case, dozens of women and girls came forward accusing Burundian and Gabonese peacekeepers of abuse and exploitation in a rural town. On another occasion, the UN was accused of failing to take action and stop the abuse of children by primarily French peacekeepers in 2013 and 2014, in the capital, Bangui.

Past investigations in 2018 and 2019 by The New Humanitarian showed how survivors of peacekeeper abuse in CAR received limited assistance from MINUSCA and partner organisations, and were let down by investigations that took too long and often discounted and discredited survivor testimonies.

The New Humanitarian's latest reporting – carried out in 2023 and 2024 and involving interviews with 19 survivors and half a dozen organisations and lawyers that support women – shows the devastating and enduring impact that abuse can have, and further underscores how the UN's "zero tolerance" policy for abuse and exploitation has failed to eliminate the problem.

The investigation revealed a lack of awareness among survivors of the channels that they can use to report cases, such as a toll-free telephone line, which means the scale of abuse and exploitation is likely to be significantly higher than has been officially documented by MINUSCA.

The investigation also found strained relations between MINUSCA and some local NGOs and lawyers that support survivors. They said they have stopped reporting cases to the mission because of past inaction, or criticised the fact that perpetrators are under the legal jurisdiction of their home countries, which have a patchy record on conducting timely investigations and taking appropriate disciplinary measures.

Malick Karomschi, the president of the Muslim Organisation for Innovation in Central African Republic, an NGO that is well known among survivors and has a large network across the coun-



try, said he has **registered 313 cases involving MINUSCA since 2014 – 307 peacekeepers and six civilian staff – but has only referred 43 to the mission because of past experiences where he said cases weren't properly investigated.**

In an interview last year, Karomschi said cases of abuse are "constant even in Bangui", and that many women choose not to report to the mission. "The victims think it is pointless when they talk to each other about it, and what can I tell them? It is not as if I can prove to them that MINUSCA can help."

Christian Saunders, the special coordinator on improving the UN's response to sexual exploitation and abuse, said that upwards of 90 percent of all sexual abuse and exploitation cases go unreported globally, and that peacekeeping missions are no exception. Saunders said MINUSCA has done a lot to improve awareness of how to report abuse but will "up our game" given the issues raised by The New Humanitarian.

MINUSCA declined a request for an interview with its top official, Valentine Rugwabiza, and instead sent answers via an unnamed spokesperson. The spokesperson said the mission has put "a lot of effort" into raising awareness of reporting and building trust with communities, and is committed to providing survivors with medical, psychological, and legal assistance, among other forms of support.

"The risk of misconduct remains high in MINUSCA, in part because of an environment compounded by many vulnerabilities, including poverty, illiteracy, varying levels of access to information and the normalisation of sexual and gender-based violence as well as limited access and a lack of basic public infrastructures, services, and institutions in certain areas," the spokesperson said.

Women and girls face multiple struggles in CAR, where high levels of humanitarian need – nearly half the population needs assistance and one in five are displaced – have left many vulnerable to gendered violence and exploitation by peacekeepers and other armed forces, whether that's government soldiers, mercenaries, or rebels.

The humanitarian need is linked to war and a neglectful government, though the crisis has deeper roots: For over 200 years, CAR was the site of migration and displacement linked to slave raiding by nearby sultanates, and to the brutal French colonial period during which half the population perished.

Of the 19 women interviewed, 10 said they were raped by peacekeepers between 2022 and 2023 – accounts corroborated by local NGO workers and through medical records – while others reported attacks from 2014 onwards. Women described cases of gang rape and in-

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cidents where peacekeepers threatened their lives if they did not comply. The allegations involved at least 36 peacekeepers.

Most of the alleged assaults were committed in provincial towns, though several happened in Bangui, where MINUSCA is headquartered. Several women cited perpetrators from Burundi, Cameroon, and Mauritania, which have been accused of sexual abuse in CAR on many occasions yet continue to contribute to the mission.

The women all described having their lives upended, with many forced to abandon their towns and livelihoods because of fear and community stigma. Some said they caught sexually transmitted diseases from abusers, while others said they had peacekeeper-fathered children who they have had to support alone.

Twenty-year-old Louna said she and her sister, who sold porridge on the streets of the northern town of Kaga-Bandoro, were gang raped in 2022 by six Burundian peacekeepers who said they were in her neighbourhood searching for a rebel. She said they identified the men by patches on their clothing.

"They broke into our house while my older sister and I were sleeping," Louna said. "I screamed so much that they held me by the throat to stop me from making any more noise." Louna said she was stigmatised by her neighbours after the attack and left for Bangui, where she is now struggling to support herself and her child.

Jeanne, the fruit and vegetable seller, said she was raped by a Rwandan peacekeeper who invited her to his Bangui base last year to calculate how much money he owed her after buying produce. "He told me: 'You are not going out today. You are coming with me.' He put a grenade on the table before saying: 'It's either sex or death,'" Jeanne said.

After returning home, Jeanne said she told her sister what had just happened. It didn't take long for the news to then spread, and she felt stigmatised. "These days, my neighbours insult me," she said. "I don't sell as much as I used to, and I don't dare to sell to the peacekeepers anymore, so it is becoming financially hard."

Twenty-eight-year-old Grace, who is from the northern town of Paoua, said she was offered a drink in her neighbourhood by four Rwandan soldiers on Valentine's Day last year. Ten minutes after taking the drink, she said she started feeling dizzy and blacked out. She said she then woke up three hours later with semen between her legs.

Grace's ordeal continued as her husband accused her of provoking the situation, and her neighbours called her the "wife of Rwandans". Unable to bear the abuse, Grace said she left Paoua

An analysis carried out by Detektor in 2012 showed that some international prosecutors did **not file a single indictment** for the whole duration of their mandate.

with her two children and joined her grandmother in Bangui. "They say [the peacekeepers are] there to protect us, but you can see what they're doing," Grace said. "I lost everything and fled with my children, while they are left in peace."

The New Humanitarian also interviewed two women who said they were raped by Rwandan troops in Ndassima, a gold mining area where MINUSCA does not have a base. It is likely the soldiers were deployed through a separate bilateral partnership – whereby Rwanda supports CAR's government in exchange for mining concessions and land – and the cases are not therefore included in the 19 cited in this story.

The number of accusations against Rwanda – three women alleged abuse by six peacekeepers in addition to the two involving bilateral troops – dents Kigali's reputation for having disciplined troops, and underscores the partial picture provided by the UN database, which has recorded only two allegations involving Rwanda, despite it being the main provider of blue helmets in CAR.

The MINUSCA spokesperson said the mission has "a comprehensive strategy" to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse by its personnel. They said military contingents are regularly trained on prohibitions; commanders conduct surprise roll calls and have introduced checkpoints to limit opportunities for misconduct; and camps are laid out to mitigate risks, with attention given to water points, entry gates, and living conditions. Why survivors don't report abuse: "They threatened me with death if I spoke"

To help women report abuse, the MINUSCA spokesperson said the mission has set up local prevention and response committees composed of over 1,200 community members and leaders in 42 localities where peacekeepers operate. The committees work with the mission "to raise awareness on the issue and on how to report, and help facilitate victims' referral for assistance", the spokesperson said.

to be continued...

The full report can be seen [here](#)



Published in "Al Jazeera"

**Ross Higgins, Connor Plunkett,
Beau Donelly, George Katz,
Kolina Koltai, Galen Reich
(all Bellingcat),
in collaboration with TjekDet,
Politiken and the Canadian
Broadcasting Corporation
Netherlands**
**Unmasking MrDeepFakes: Canadian
Pharmacist Linked to World's Most
Notorious Deepfake Porn Site**

Introduction

This joint investigation by Bellingcat and its publishing partners TjekDet, Politiken, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation revealed, for the first time, the identity of a key figure behind the world's largest deepfake porn website. Deepfake pornography – where artificial intelligence is used to superimpose a person's face into explicit content without their consent – disproportionately targets, victimises and harms women and girls.

Launched in 2018, MrDeepFakes hosted almost 70,000 explicit and sometimes violent videos, and received millions of hits every month from around the world. In the background, on private forums, an active community of more than 650,000 members shared tips on how to create this explicit content (which is increasingly being used against private individuals) and traded in non-consensual deepfake images and videos.

This months-long open source investigation, published in May 2025, unmasked David Do: a Canadian pharmacist who has been living a double life as a key administrator of MrDeepFakes. Researchers cross-referenced data from massive credential leaks and identified a series of burner email accounts, repeated usernames, unique passwords and IP addresses that showed a more than decade-long digital trail linking Do to the website.

The investigators revealed that Do has had a long-standing interest in creating and distributing adult content and was a prominent member of MrDeepFakes' online community. The reports also shed light on the efforts he has taken to obfuscate his identity, make use of a private corporate structure, and process payments through the controversial site. Just prior to publication and approaching David Do for his response to this report - MrDeepFakes was finally shut down.

Following publication, Do was removed from his position as a hospital pharmacist in Toronto. Separately, the Ontario College of Pharmacists is looking into the matter. A Danish MP has since called for Do's extradition and further developments are expected.

Bellingcat is an independent collective of researchers, investigators and citizen journalists brought together by a passion for open source research. Founded in 2014, it has pioneered the use of open source research methods to investigate a variety of subjects in the public interest, including stories that traditional media outlets may overlook. Bellingcat's ongoing mission is to use and share its investigation methods, and do so in a way that is transparent.

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Danish newspaper
Politiken,
and the Canadian
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(CBC).**

Unmasking MrDeepFakes: Canadian Pharmacist Linked to World’s Most Notorious Deepfake Porn Site

MrDeepFakes billed itself as the “largest and most user-friendly” platform for celebrity deepfake pornography. The website, which was visited millions of times every month, hosted almost 70,000 explicit and sometimes violent videos, which had collectively been viewed more than 2.2 billion times. They show mostly famous women whose faces have been inserted into hardcore porn with artificial intelligence – and without their consent. In the background, an active community of more than 650,000 members shared tips on how to generate this content, commissioned custom deepfakes, and posted misogynistic and derogatory comments about their victims.

The homepage of MrDeepFakes, the most notorious marketplace in the deepfake porn economy. For years, the website has been shrouded in secrecy, existing in a legal grey area and concealing the identity of those who control it. Until now. Bellingcat, in collaboration with Danish outlets Tjekdet, Politiken and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), has conducted an investigation to reveal the identity of a key administrator behind MrDeepFakes.

Canadian pharmacist David Do, whose name never appeared on the MrDeepFakes website, has had a central role in its operations. Source: Instagram and Facebook (Bellingcat has not named these accounts and/or authors of the images to protect their identities)

David Do is a 36-year-old Canadian pharmacist who, based on open source information, lives an unassuming and respectable life in the suburbs outside of Toronto. Photos and

videos posted online show him with family, friends and colleagues. The university graduate has a well-paying job in a public hospital and drives a new Tesla.

But Do has been living a double life: in secret, he is the most prominent figure identified to have had control over the administration of MrDeepFakes. He was also an influential member of its growing online community, producing his own deepfake porn and assisting users who want to make their own. Online posts show Do is a technically minded individual with a long-standing interest in creating and distributing adult content, and provide an insight into efforts to obfuscate his identity.

We identified Do by cross-referencing data from massive credential leaks, which are publicly available via breach databases. A series of burner emails, IP addresses, repeated usernames, and a unique password reveal a more than decade-long digital trail that allowed researchers to link him to MrDeepFakes. Bellingcat, Tjekdet, Politiken and CBC have sent Do multiple requests for comment since late March but did not receive a response as of publication. Last month, the CBC hand-delivered correspondence to Do setting out the findings of this investigation, but he declined to comment.

Shortly after, Do’s Facebook page and the social media accounts of some family members were deleted. Do then travelled to Portugal with his family, according to reviews posted on Airbnb. MrDeepFakes was shut down on May 4 after Do was informed that he would be identified. The website’s removal came a week after the US Congress passed the Take it Down Act, which criminalises the distribution of non-consensual deepfake porn. Source: MrDeepFakes

On Sunday, the MrDeepFakes site was shut down. “A critical service provider has terminated service permanently,” a notice on the platform says. “We will not be relaunching. Any website claiming this is fake.” CBC approached David Do again on Monday but he refused to answer questions about his involvement with MrDeepFakes. “I don’t want to be recorded please,” he said. “I have to go. I’m busy right now.”

MrDeepFakes was billed as the “largest and most user-friendly” site for celebrity deepfakes.

Update: David Do is on leave from his position as a hospital pharmacist, his employer confirmed on May 13, while an internal investigation is underway. Separately, the Ontario College of Pharmacists has said it is “taking immediate steps to look into this matter further and determine the necessary actions we need to take to protect the public”.

SHORT- LISTED STORIES

CONTRIBUTION TO CIVIL RIGHTS

This article

is the result

of a collaboration

with TjekDet,

Politiken,

and CBC.

Unmasking MrDeepFakes: Canadian Pharmacist Linked to World's Most Notorious Deepfake Porn Site

What is Deepfake Porn?

Deepfake pornography is the use of artificial intelligence to create non-consensual, sexually explicit images and videos. Research shows that 99 per cent of victims are women.

Actress Jenna Ortega, singer Taylor Swift and politician Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez are among some of the high-profile victims whose faces have been superimposed into hardcore pornographic content. But the technology is also being used on people who are not in the public eye.

A 2024 survey found that at least one in nine high school students knew of someone who had used AI technology to make deepfake pornography of a classmate and The New York Times has reported that schools across the US were dealing with incidents of teenagers making deepfakes of their female classmates.

Adam Dodge, from EndTAB (End Technology-Enabled Abuse), said it was becoming easier to weaponise technology against victims. "In the early days, even though AI created this opportunity for people with little-to-no technical skill to create these videos, you still needed computing power, time, source material and some expertise. And now you need very little of those things," he said.

"It is literally point-and-click violence against women. Some of these apps only require one photo of the target, and you, on the app, literally use your finger to drag the woman's face into a video and then just release it and AI does the rest, editing that victim into the photo. And then you press play and it now appears that the victim from the photo is engaging in sex acts."

Dodge said the MrDeepFakes site had grown since 2008 and added features that were typically used by regular businesses to promote an air of legitimacy. "It's incredible and I'm incredulous that the site has been allowed to survive this long," he told Bellingcat.

"This is sexual violence, and it's as harmful as any other form of sexual violence in our opinion. I've talked to mental health professionals who work with rape and trauma survivors, and they analogise it to a woman who is sexually assaulted while unconscious or drugged, and it's filmed, and then they have to watch it later."

"They have no memory of this happening to them. But the simple act of watching it is deeply traumatic and that's what this technology manufactures. And the permanency and the public nature of it are the two, I would argue, most powerfully traumatic things that victims often experience."

Governments around the world are scrambling to tackle the scourge of deepfake pornography, which continues to flood the internet as technology advances. In Canada, the distribution of non-consensual intimate images is illegal, but this is not widely applied to deepfakes. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney pledged to pass a law criminalising the production and distribution of non-consensual deepfakes during his federal election campaign.

In the US, legislation varies by state, with about half having laws against deepfake pornography. The US Congress last month passed the Take it Down Act, which criminalises the distribution of non-consensual deepfake pornography at the federal level. President Donald Trump is expected to sign the bill into law.

The EU does not have specific laws prohibiting deepfakes but has announced plans to call on member states to criminalise the "non-consensual sharing of intimate images", including deepfakes. Member states will not enact these laws until 2027. In the UK, it is already an offence to share non-consensual sexually explicit deepfakes, and the government has announced its intention to criminalise the creation of these images. Australia passed new laws to combat sexually explicit deepfakes last year. 'Fake It Till You Make It'

The identity of the person or people in control of MrDeepFakes has been the subject of media interest since the website emerged in the wake of a ban on the "deepfakes" Reddit community in early 2018. But the porn site's hosting providers have bounced around the globe and premium memberships can be bought with cryptocurrency, which have made it virtually impossible to trace ownership.

Adam Dodge, the founder of EndTAB (End Technology-Enabled Abuse), said MrDeepFakes was an "early adopter" of deepfake technology that targets women. He said it had evolved from a video sharing platform to a training ground and marketplace for creating and trading in AI-powered sexual abuse material of both celebrities and private individuals. "Our digital world is really good at empowering people who want to do harm by allowing them to remain anonymous while simultaneously making it almost impossible for victims to unmask them," he said.

In January, Bellingcat, in collaboration with the German YouTube channel STRG_F, examined the companies behind two apps used for creating deepfakes that it advertised prominently on its homepage.

For this investigation, researchers conducted a forensic analysis of the forums on MrDeepFakes' website. The forums are a virtual marketplace where members commission deepfakes and trade tips on making videos with the same technol-

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ogy that is used for creating revenge porn. Videos posted to the tube site are described strictly as “celebrity content”, but forum posts included “nudified” images of private individuals. Forum members referred to victims as “bitches” and “sluts”, and some argued that the women’s behaviour invited the distribution of sexual content featuring them. Users who requested deepfakes of their “wife” or “partner” were directed to message creators privately and communicate on other platforms, such as Telegram.

A search of the forums returned two accounts for MrDeepFakes “staff members”. One joined in March 2019 and is also listed as a “moderator”. The other joined in February 2018 and is also listed as an “administrator” (two additional administrator accounts, created in 2018 and 2021, were not listed as staff members, and one now-defunct account previously tagged as staff and moderator was created in the year after the site was set up).

Therefore, the focus of this investigation was the oldest account in the forums, with a user ID of “1” in the source code, which was also the only profile found to hold the joint titles of staff member and administrator. The long-time handle used by this account was “dpfks”. Researchers began by analysing the profile.

The dpfks bio contained little identifying information, but an archive from 2021 shows the account had posted 161 videos which had amassed more than five million views. It earned the badge of “Verified Video Creator”. Forum posts document dpfks’ involvement as a creator and leader in the community. Archives show dpfks posted an in-depth guide to using software that creates deepfake porn, published website rules and content guidelines, advertised for volunteers to work as moderators, and gave technical advice to users. Dpfks’ posts carried the tagline: “Fake it till you make it.”

In a 2019 archive, in replies to users on the site’s chatbox, dpfks said they were “dedicated” to improving the platform. **“There is a reason why we are the biggest deepfake site. I care about the community and teaching others.** I don’t think other site owners care enough to make their own deepfakes, and keep uptodate [sic] with it. My first few deepfakes were s**t too, the more you make, the better you get.” David Do’s Links to MrDeepFakes.

Legitimate online platforms take measures to protect users’ personal information but data breaches are common and can affect anyone, from the average user to senior US government officials. In this case, data breaches allowed researchers to link email accounts that had been reused across porn sites, warez (pirated content) forums and server admin platforms to a key operator of MrDeepFakes.

Archives show dpfks posted an in-depth guide to using software that creates deepfake porn, published website rules and content guidelines, advertised for volunteers to work as moderators, and gave technical advice to users.

Central to the findings was one email account – dpfks-com@gmail.com – that was used in the “Contact Us” link on the footer of MrDeepFakes’ official forums in archives from 2019 and 2020.

Using breached data, researchers linked this Gmail address to the alias “AznRico”. This alias appears to consist of a known abbreviation for “Asian” and the Spanish word for “rich” (or sometimes “sexy”). The inclusion of “Azn” suggested the user was of Asian descent, which was confirmed through further research. On one site, a forum post shows that AznRico posted about their “adult tube site”, which is a shorthand for a porn video website.

The AznRico alias was frequently associated with a personal Hotmail address in David Do’s full name, which appeared in leaks alongside this username 22 times. Researchers also uncovered a cryptocurrency trading account for AznRico that later changed its username to “duydaiddo”.

The analysis showed that the MrDeepFakes Gmail address was used to register a profile on a separate porn website. This profile used a unique 11-character password which was also used across other accounts, including a profile on the Ashley Madison dating website that was registered with Do’s personal Hotmail address. **A search of the unique password in breach databases returned 17 results linked to other email addresses that included Do’s full name.**

Further searches of Do’s Hotmail account led to more leaks that displayed his date of birth. The Hotmail account was also linked to a residential address in Ontario, which public records show is the location of a house owned by Do’s parents. This email was also used to register a Yelp account for a user named “David D” who lives in the Greater Toronto Area.

to be continued...

The full report can be seen [here](#)



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Yashraj Sharma, Qatar

**Does a Dalit's life have no value?':
The murder of a teenage girl in India**

Introduction

This compelling report documents the rape and murder of a Dalit teenager in India, exposing not only the brutality of the crime but also the systemic discrimination that denies justice to marginalized communities.

By centering the voices of the victim's family, particularly the mother's plea that "we are being treated like criminals", the story highlights an entrenched bias that leaves the Dalit people devalued in the eyes of institutions that are meant to protect them.

Despite decades of struggle and activism, hundreds of millions of Dalits in India still face daily persecution. Beyond storytelling, the piece has had tangible impact. Activists and lawyers have used details from the reporting to push for justice with local authorities, and legal teams have relied on the investigation to strengthen their case against the primary defendant.

Importantly, the article was published at a moment when national attention was fixed on another high-profile case in India, ensuring that this family's story was not erased or ignored. In doing so, it elevated an otherwise overlooked struggle into the public sphere, amplifying calls for accountability and systemic change.

As the victim's mother said, "My daughter was raped and murdered – but who cares about giving justice to a poor Dalit like me? But we are not the last Dalits in this country, and this story will keep on repeating."

Through meticulous reporting and narrative power, this work defends the civil rights of one of India's most vulnerable communities, while underscoring the urgent need for justice and dignity for all. It is a supreme example of journalism as a public good showing that truth-telling with humanity and respect will always make for a better world.

Published in Al Jazeera

**Does a Dalit's life
have no value?':
The murder
of a teenage girl
in India**

Does a Dalit's life have no value?': The murder of a teenage girl in India. Family members of the 14-year-old say she was raped and murdered. As they seek justice, social tensions erupt in their village.

Muzaffarpur, India – As protesters took to the streets of Kolkata to demand justice for a trainee doctor who was raped and murdered on August 9, 55-year-old Nirali Kumari* gasped for breath in her small wooden hut 480km (300 miles) away. She hadn't left her home – or even her bed – since the body of her 14-year-old daughter was found on the morning of August 12 – naked, bloodied and with her hands and legs tied.

Kumari says "six men wielding knives" entered her home on the night of August 11. "[They] threatened us and kidnapped my daughter. She was sleeping right here, with her elder sister," she adds, before breaking down.

When Al Jazeera first met Kumari, she was so overwhelmed by grief that she had not eaten in the five days since her daughter's body had been discovered. Her wrist was bloodied and bandaged from the cannula feeding her fluids. She fainted from time to time in the suffocating heat of her hut, even as a relative waved a handheld fan over her.

Kumari's daughter's body was found in a paddy field near her home in the area of Paroo in Muzaffarpur district, Bihar, one of India's most populous states.

The murder of the teenager – who belonged to the Dalit community, the least privileged in India's complex caste hierarchy, a position that has enabled its persecution for centuries – has put the entire village on edge.

Kumari's family lives in a village in Paroo, located nearly 80km (50 miles) from the state capital, Patna. The village is

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home to fewer than 5,000 people and is surrounded by vast paddy fields. Colourful cement houses belonging to the dominant Yadav community, an estimated 4,500 people, sit on either side of the potholed, date tree-lined main road that runs through the village. Towards the end of the road, 18 grass and bamboo huts house the local Dalit community, which numbers about 80.

A historical system of feudal rule is still a lived reality for millions of people in Bihar, and Paroo is no exception. Across the state, Dalit families depend on dominant caste land lords to earn a living by working on their land for a daily wage. Land-owning families of ten lend money at high interest rates, which can trap families in debt.

In the past, there have been moments of friction between the communities. Last year, during Holi, the Hindu festival of colours, Dalit children crossed over to the "Yadav side" of the village while playing with coloured powders, causing arguments between the communities. The police had to intervene to prevent an escalation, a Dalit resident tells Al Jazeera.

The primary defendant in the murder case, Sanjay Rai, 42, belongs to the Yadav community and is an influential landlord. The men who abducted the girl were masked, but the family identified Rai by his voice and build. The defendant is well-known in the village.

Local media first reported that Kumari's daughter was gang-raped and murdered after witness accounts and the family reporting the crime to the Paroo police.

Indian law prohibits revealing the identities of victims and their families in sexual violence cases. However, at a news conference on August 19, the police announced they were ruling out rape based on the findings of the postmortem report and the investigation. They also shared that they had arrested Rai and four men from the Dalit community for murder and conspiracy to murder.

The girl's killing and the authorities' handling of the case have sparked tension in the village. Dalit and human rights activists, including some from Paroo, decry the implication of Dalit men, seeing it as the result of pressure and influence from members of the dominant caste to conceal the attackers' identities and silence their community.

They see the girl's murder as a clear example of a crime inflicted by the dominant caste on the Dalit community and the case as one resulting from systemic caste oppression.

"Dominant castes have long used [violence, especially] sexual violence, as a tool of oppression. They see themselves

as powerful because of their social identity," says Manjula Pradeep, director of campaigns at the Dalit Human Rights Defenders Network (DHRDN). "Their perception depends on the subjugation of rights of the people from the lower castes."

The girl's schoolbag lay on a wooden bed, and her school dress hung from a plastic hook on the wall. Her elder sister stared at the bag while their mother wailed in the room filled with visitors. Kumari says her daughter was innocent and sincere. "Just another child," she says.

"She was beautiful like a flower but also a straight talker," Kumari recalls, referring to how her daughter would speak up when she felt she needed to. "She was the child who kept this family together. From my medicines to managing our meals, she was young but could do it all."

The ninth-grade student wanted to complete her high school education, but she often struggled to find time to attend school while helping her parents, both daily-wage labourers, by working in the rice fields and doing chores at home. Not everyone in the village knew the girl before her killing. But Suraj*, a neighbour of the family who requested his name be changed, fearing repercussions from dominant caste villagers, says Rai has a reputation as "a womaniser". Rai had been fixated on the teenager and had pressured her to marry him, the victim's relatives tell Al Jazeera. "He offered us a tractor and some money," Kumari explains.

When the girl refused, he harassed the family on the phone.

"I was scared and thought the only way to save my daughter was to marry her off silently," Kumari says. Even though the legal age for a bride in India is 18, she says she had no choice but to marry her to someone else, a man in his early 20s. The teenager was set to be married in a nearby village on August 19.

Kumari wailed loudly before fainting again. After a relative splashed her with water, she gasped back to consciousness and broke down.

Sanjay Kumar, 28, navigated the vast maze of the village's paddy fields under the scorching sun. As he neared where the teenager's body was found, he grew distressed, speaking falteringly. He was one of two people who picked up the girl's body on August 12 in the presence of police officials. He had been working in a paddy field when he heard the shouts and cries of the people who first spotted the body.

"Everyone was terrified just by the sight of the body. I cannot even describe that feeling," he recalls. He lives about 80 metres (nearly 90 yards) from the girl's hut and was shocked

The girl's killing and the authorities' handling of the case have sparked tension in the village.

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By
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when he recognised her face. Then he removed his gamcha, a type of long scarf, to cover her body.

Scratching his shaved head, Kumar says: "Her hands and legs were tied, and she had grave injury marks on her scalp and lower neck." These injuries were corroborated in the postmortem report shared by police officials with Al Jazeera. As he lifted the body, Kumar says, he was drenched in blood from the girl's head and pelvic area. Pelvic injuries were not mentioned in the report.

As a Dalit working as a labourer in Paroo's paddy fields, Kumar says he has spent his life facing "exploitation" by dominant castes, but this "horrifying incident" has left him jolted. "Dalits are the easiest target for these men," he says as his eyes well with tears.

The news that a body had been discovered spread quickly that morning. Kumari had rushed to the field, fearing the worst. The family was not allowed near the girl's body. All they could see was her face as the police whisked her body away.

In the hours that followed, members of the family had to stand up to local Yadav leaders – who they say pushed for a quick cremation – so they could to register a case with the police and get the investigation started. Family members say they were able to halt the cremation until later that afternoon after the postmortem had been carried out.

Rushing the cremation of a reported rape and murder victim could be an attempt to destroy "the most important evidence", Shama Sinha, a lawyer who has represented victims of sexual violence in court, including Dalit women, tells Al Jazeera.

According to a DHRDN study, crimes against Dalits, including murder, rose by 177.6 percent over the three decades from 1991 to 2021.

Annual data from India's National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) shows there has been a 50 percent increase in murders of Dalits from 651 to 975 from 2012 to 2022, the latest year for which data are available. Bihar has been the second most affected state.

The Indian government does not maintain separate data for crimes against Dalit women and girls such as murder, gang rape and rape with murder. However, NCRB data show a 169 percent increase in reported rapes of Dalit women nationally from 2012 (when there were 1,576 cases) to 2022 (when there were 4,241 cases). An average of 10 Dalit women and girls are reported raped every day.

Pradeep of the DHRDN, a lawyer with more than 30 years

of experience navigating cases of violence against women, believes the increase in reported rape partly reflects the growing social mobility of Dalit women.

"The subcastes within Dalits who have been able to climb the economic ladder and assert their rights are also increasingly able to register a complaint," she says. Even then, she says, the numbers are a "vast undercount".

Dalit families' economic reliance on landlords "prevents a lot of complaints", Pradeep says. She says crimes against Dalits are often rendered "invisible" due to the community's disadvantaged social standing.

Sinha, who has spent more than two decades travelling across rural Bihar to run camps to raise awareness about legal rights, agrees. Fear of retribution is a major factor in low reporting of crimes, she says, "because the next day, these families still have to live in the same village and face the same social dynamics".

For Dalit women who experience gender discrimination on top of the economic and caste prejudice endured by Dalits, reporting is an even greater challenge. "The literacy rate is low – 57 percent for Dalit women – and even though there are strong laws in place, there is no awareness and more importantly no agency for [Dalit] women to report [cases] and seek justice," Sinha says. "Wives still call husbands 'maalik'," which is Hindi for "owner".

This disparity or invisibility extends to representation in media, Pradeep says. "Dalits do not get the same kind of reporting from the media, which could enable social mobilisation."

The rape and murder of the 31-year-old trainee doctor in Kolkata, a major city in eastern India, prompted nationwide protests and outrage with medical workers in several parts of the country, including Bihar, walking out of hospitals in protest.

There was far less outrage over the murder of the school-girl in Paroo although Dalit and women's rights activists organised protest marches in Bihar.

"Dalit families are left all alone in these times," Pradeep points out.

On August 19, Rakesh Kumar, the Muzaffarpur district police chief, said at the news conference that police had arrested Rai that morning from a nearby village as well as the four Dalit men.

to be continued...

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The full report can be seen [here](#)

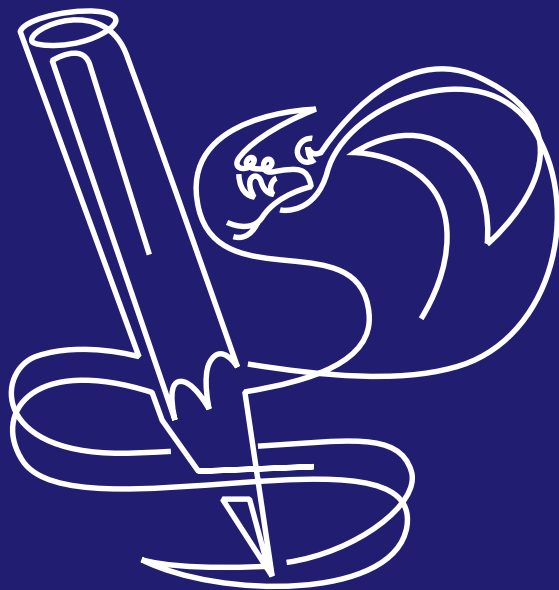


Nomination

Outstanding **Investigative** **Reporting**



THE INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER



The investigative reporter is a frontline warrior for public interest journalism and the people's right to know. But investigating powerful people and institutions and holding them to account has never been more difficult, particularly at a time when more and more countries are criminalizing acts of journalism that threaten political and corporate centres of power.

Even in democratic countries journalists who ask tough questions run the risk of losing their job or in some extreme cases face prosecution. That is why this category of the Fetisov Journalism Awards remains central to the mission of journalism.

This year's entries provide much evidence that even in the most difficult circumstances journalists are refusing to be bullied into silence and are doing their job fearlessly.

Investigative journalism, which often takes weeks and months of painstaking research, is often catastrophically under-funded and depends increasingly on the commitment and goodwill of dedicated reporters and editors. The future of journalism depends increasingly on being able to sustain the news outlets and the freelance workforce, often working in precarious working conditions, to keep the ethical flame of "fourth estate" journalism alive.

Our entries covered an extraordinary range: from a series uncovering the tragedy and ordeal of the most vulnerable in society who are victims of modern slavery and child trafficking in India to a flawed system of law enforcement in the heart of the world's richest society that has failed women who are victims of violent abuse.

Other entries put a focus on health care, or the lack of it, in the case of people who are victims of a global organ trafficking network, while another story exposed the secret and unacceptable relations between nursing homes and hospitals that put patients at risk. And, at a time when the world has witnessed the horrors of warfare unseen for generations, courageous journalism has risen to the challenge of telling hard truths about the Middle East conflict that have polarised and divided communities at home and abroad.

All of the shortlisted stories reveal the importance of investigative journalism in exposing facts and telling stories that people in power would prefer remain untold. Our jury took on the task of selecting winners. It was not easy, but the evidence of diligent research, fact-based narratives and courage in the face of loud and threatening voices saw three worthy winners. Their defiance and resilience and the impact of their story-telling are models of investigative reporting.



Yuval Abraham,
Israel-Palestine

Yuval Abraham is a journalist and filmmaker, who together with Basel Adra, Rachel Szor and Hamdan Ballal created the film No Other Land which has won many prestigious awards, including first prize in the Berlinale and an Oscar for best documentary at the Academy Awards. Abraham has developed a rich body of investigative work which has affected the discourse around Israeli warfare internationally.



FIRST
PRIZE
WINNER

**Bomb the area, gas
the tunnels: Israel's
unbridled war on
Gaza's underground;
'Order from Amazon':
How tech giants are
storing mass data
for Israel's war;
Leaked documents
expose deep ties
between Israeli army
and Microsoft**

FIRST
PRIZE
WINNER

THE
INVESTIGATIVE
REPORTER

Editor's Note

In recent years there has been no greater challenge to war reporting journalists than trying to cover the conflict in Gaza where a scores of journalists have been killed (some targeted according to human rights groups) and where international journalists have been barred from the area, but that did not deter our first prize-winner, the Israeli journalist Yuval Abraham, a pre-eminent investigative reporter and an Oscar-winning film-maker.

His courageous and ground-breaking stories, which were unanimously recognised by the FJA jury, focus on the human consequences of the war in Gaza. At a time when media scrutiny of the conflict was severely restricted, his reports reveal how Palestinian civilians were the victims of reckless use of devastating weapons of war. He also exposed the complicity of big tech companies Microsoft and Amazon in what many have called genocidal violence.

These stories show the power of investigative journalism and the different aspects of the potential to create change in the world by empowering people to defend human rights.

The series has also led to more heart searching both inside the country and internationally over Israel's controversial actions in Gaza.

Introduction

Between June 1 2024 and May 31, 2025 +972 Magazine and Local Call published three ground-breaking investigations which created ripples of dissent pushing for more accountability of stakeholders.

In August 2024 we published an investigation showing the complicity of Amazon in the genocidal attack on Gaza. This investigation also showed the previous unrevealed connections between Microsoft and the Israeli Military. In January 2025 we published an investigation which shifted the focus to Microsoft.

This investigation led to dramatic consequences, showing the power of investigative journalism. Sixty investors holding \$80 million in shares have demanded an independent review of the company's human rights safeguards, which is currently being carried out.

Meanwhile, employee dissent has coalesced into the "No Azure for Apartheid" movement, calling against the use of advanced technologies in genocide. This movement has staged

large protest events, with workers disrupting major events to demand an end to ties with the Israeli military, even at the cost of their jobs.

We published another follow up for the piece, also with the Guardian, revealing that Israel's Unit 8200 has partnered with Microsoft to store and analyse millions of phone calls by Palestinians (in Gaza and the West Bank) in Microsoft's Azure cloud platform, in a system operational since 2022.

This mass surveillance tool enables retrospective access to everyday conversations — not just of identified suspects — and has reportedly been used to inform military targeting decisions.

Another investigation published in this period revealed that Israel has been using large bunker-buster bombs not only to collapse tunnels but also to release lethal gases like carbon monoxide underground, employing these asphyxiating by-products deliberately when locations of Hamas operatives are vague.

The strategy has resulted in heavy civilian deaths—whole residential blocks have been destroyed, hostages have died via suffocation, and many strikes were approved even when the presence of non-combatants was likely but not certain. This investigation joins previous work which exposed the lies behind Israel's official statement which claim that the military offensive on Gaza is aimed to return the Israeli hostages.

These revelations show that in fact, the tactic of the Israeli offensive endangers civilians, including the hostages themselves, and has in fact led to killing them. These stories show the power of investigative journalism and the different aspects of the potential to create change in the world by empowering people to defend human rights.

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FIRST
PRIZE
WINNER

THE
INVESTIGATIVE
REPORTER

Published in 972 Magazine and Local Call

Bomb the area, gas the tunnels.

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The Israeli army intensively bombarded residential areas in Gaza when it lacked intelligence on the exact location of Hamas commanders hiding underground, and intentionally weaponized toxic byproducts of bombs to suffocate militants in their tunnels, an investigation by +972 Magazine and Local Call can reveal.

The investigation, based on conversations with 15 Israeli Military Intelligence and Shin Bet officers who have been involved in tunnel-targeting operations since October 7, exposes how this strategy aimed to compensate for the army's inability to pinpoint targets in Hamas' subterranean tunnel network. When targeting senior commanders in the group, the Israeli military authorized the killing of "triple-digit numbers" of Palestinian civilians as "collateral damage," and maintained close real-time coordination with U.S. officials regarding the expected casualty figures.

Some of these strikes, which were the deadliest in the war and often used American bombs, are known to have killed Israeli hostages despite concerns raised ahead of time by military officers.

Moreover, the lack of precise intelligence meant that in at least three major strikes, the army dropped several 2,000-pound bunker-buster bombs that killed scores of civilians — part of a strategy known as "tiling" — without succeeding in killing the intended target.

"Pinpointing a target inside a tunnel is hard, so you attack a [wide] radius," a Military Intelligence source told +972 and Local Call. Given that the army would have only a vague approximation of the target's location, the source explained, this radius would be as large as "tens and sometimes hundreds of meters," meaning these bomb-

ing operations collapsed multiple apartment buildings on their occupants without warning. "Suddenly you see how someone in the IDF really behaves when given the opportunity to wipe out an entire residential block — and they do it," the source added.

The investigation also reveals how Israel has known for years that the use of bunker-buster bombs releases the lethal gas carbon monoxide as a byproduct, which can kill people inside a tunnel through asphyxiation even at a distance of hundreds of meters from the strike location.

After discovering this by chance in 2017, the army first tested it as a strategy in Gaza in 2021, and employed it in its efforts to kill Hamas commanders after October 7. This way, the army could attack targets without knowing their precise location, and without having to rely on direct hits.

Brig. Gen. (res.) Guy Hazoot, the only source willing to be named, told +972 and Local Call. "[We realized] we could effectively target anyone underground using the Air Force's bunker-buster bombs, which, even if they don't destroy the tunnel, release gases that kill anyone inside. The tunnel then becomes a death trap."

In January 2024, a spokesperson for the Israeli army told +972 and Local Call in response to a previous investigation that it "has never used and does not currently use byproducts of bombd employment to harm its targets, and there is no such 'technique' in the IDF." Yet our new investigation reveals that the Air Force conducted physio-chemical research on the effect of the gas in enclosed spaces, and the military has deliberated over the method's ethical implications.

Three Israeli hostages — Nik Beizer, Ron Sherman, and Elia Toledano — were definitively killed by asphyxiation as a result of a Nov. 10, 2023, bombing that targeted Ahmed Ghandour, a Hamas brigade commander in northern Gaza. The army told their families that, at the time of the bombing, it was unaware that hostages were being held near Ghandour. However, three sources with knowledge of the strike, which was led by the Shin Bet, told +972 and Local Call there was "ambiguous" intelligence indicating that hostages might be in the vicinity, yet the attack was still authorized.

According to six sources, this was not an isolated case but one of "dozens" of Israeli airstrikes that likely endangered or killed hostages. They described how the military command greenlighted attacks on the homes of suspected kidnappers and the tunnels from which senior Hamas figures were directing the fighting.

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By Yuval
Abraham

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While attacks were aborted when there was specific, definitive intelligence indicating the presence of a hostage, the army routinely authorized strikes when the intelligence picture was murky and there was a “general” likelihood that hostages were present in the vicinity of a target.

“Mistakes definitely happened, and we bombed hostages,” one intelligence source said. Israel’s efforts to maximize the chances of killing senior militants hiding underground also included attempts to crush parts of a tunnel network and trap the targets inside. Sources described incidents where vehicles fleeing an attack site were bombed without specific intelligence about who was inside, based on the assumption that a senior Hamas figure might be trying to escape.

“The entire region felt and heard the explosions,” Abdel Hadi Okal, a Palestinian journalist from Jabalia who witnessed several major Israeli bombing operations — which Palestinians often refer to as “fire belts” — during the early weeks of the war, told +972 and Local Call. “Entire residential blocks were targeted with heavy missiles, causing buildings to collapse and fall on top of each other. Ambulances and Civil Defense vehicles were unable to contend with the scale of the bombardment, so people had to use their hands and some light equipment to pull bodies from under the rubble of houses. There was no possibility for anyone to survive.”



Part 1: The gas effect
A surprise discovery

The gas effect was discovered unintentionally in October 2017. At the time, Brig. Gen. (res.) Guy Hazoot led a division in the Southern Command. He recounted the sequence of events to +972 and Local Call, corroborated by three other military sources.

According to Hazoot, the then-IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot was abroad and had tasked his deputy, Aviv Kochavi, with addressing a pressing issue: Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) had dug a tunnel underneath the fence that encages the Gaza Strip, reaching about two kilometers from Kibbutz Kissufim. Kochavi ordered the Air Force to bomb the tunnel with a bunker-buster bomb but instructed them to avoid killing more than five PIJ operatives to prevent unnecessary escalation in Gaza.

Then, something unexpected happened. **“Even though we fired the bombs on [the Israeli side] of the border, everyone in the tunnel [inside Gaza] died,”** Hazoot explained. “Another 12 PIJ rescue personnel entered after the explosion and also died from suffocation. Even those with masks died.” This was the “breakthrough moment,” Hazoot said, when it became clear that bunker-buster bombs detonated in tunnels dispersed carbon monoxide gas as a byproduct, which remained in the tunnel for days.

Carbon monoxide, known as the “silent killer,” is colorless, odorless, and tasteless, and is particularly lethal to humans. Annually, approximately 30,000 people die from inhaling it due to faulty heaters, engines, and furnaces in enclosed spaces with low oxygen levels.

The Air Force subsequently conducted a physio-chemical study on the effect of the gas in confined spaces, which found that it was difficult to predict the precise radius of its lethal spread.

“There are probabilities,” a source in the Air Force explained to +972 and Local Call. “It’s not binary, where everyone within this radius dies and beyond it no one does. There’s a radius of high probability, medium probability, and low probability of dying from the gas.”

Security sources noted that using bunker-buster bombs that release gas underground as a byproduct overcame the challenge of having to pinpoint a target’s exact location inside a tunnel. But it also presented a dilemma. “It was made clear

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Security sources noted that using bunker-buster bombs that release gas underground as a byproduct overcame the challenge of having to pinpoint a target's exact location inside a tunnel. But it also presented a dilemma. "It was made clear to us how sensitive this issue is, the very fact that this effect exists," the Air Force source said. A source who participated in a discussion about the use of the technique in 2021, led by the then-chief of the army's Southern Command, Eliezer Toledano, explained: "Everyone took it very seriously in the discussion, the fact that gas is what kills. They feared it would cause significant damage to [Israel's] image."

Military officials emphasized to +972 and Local Call that

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the intent was to use the chemical byproduct solely to kill Hamas operatives "who intended to fight the IDF." Hazoot, along with other security sources, also stressed that the bombs themselves are "conventional weapons," as the gases are a byproduct of standard bombs, not chemical or biological warheads. **"The gases have nowhere to escape," Hazoot said. "They stay underground, and people suffocate. It's a conventional weapon, only its effect underground is different. The bombs become more lethal."**

However, Michael Sfard, an Israeli human rights lawyer and expert in international law, told +972 and Local Call: "Even if the bombs releasing the gas are conventional and the gas is only a byproduct, the deliberate use of this 'side effect' as a method of warfare violates prohibitions outlined in the laws of armed conflict. The use of toxic or asphyxiating gas in combat contravenes the provisions of the Chemical Weapons Convention and longstanding international declarations predating it, and is classified under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court as a war crime."

Sarah Harrison, a senior analyst at the International Crisis Group and a former Pentagon lawyer who advised U.S. armed forces, affirmed that the intentional use of carbon monoxide as a weapon is illegal under customary international law. While bunker-buster bombs are not outlawed per se, "if the intent is to only use the conventional weapon as a device to transport what is otherwise a chemical weapon, then that would be, in my opinion, an illegal use," she told +972 and Local Call. "There are lots of lawful weapons you can use unlawfully."

In response to our inquiry, a spokesperson for the Israeli army again denied that it uses this technique to kill Hamas leaders, calling the allegation "baseless."

The gases have nowhere to escape," Hazoot said. "They stay underground, and people suffocate. It's a conventional weapon, only its effect underground is different. The bombs become more lethal."

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The attack on Hamas' tunnel network in the Rimal neighborhood of Gaza City collapsed several residential buildings, killing 44 civilians.

Creating death traps Hazoot and other sources revealed that Israel's first attempt to employ bunker-buster bombs to cause mass fatalities among militants through gas-induced asphyxiation was in "Operation Lightning Strike," the massive bombing of Hamas' tunnel network during the broader "Operation Guardian of the Walls" in May 2021.

Ahead of that operation, a source from the Israeli Air Force explained, professional ranks in the Air Force raised concerns that the extensive use of bunker-buster bombs to detonate underground could cause entire buildings above ground to collapse, endangering large numbers of civilians. **"There was an effort to convey to the command level that this operation was risky, that buildings might collapse, and that we didn't fully understand what might happen," the source said. "But they went ahead with it anyway."**

These predictions materialized during the operation on May 16, 2021. The attack on Hamas' tunnel network in the Rimal neighborhood of Gaza City collapsed several residential buildings, killing 44 civilians.

Hazoot explained that during "Guardian of the Walls," the army aimed to mislead Hamas into believing that Israeli troops were about to invade Gaza, prompting its operatives to retreat into the tunnels. In the attack to follow, he told the Israeli newspaper Israel Hayom in an interview last year, the army expected to kill "between 500 and 800 operatives" through asphyxiation upon dropping "460 bunker-buster bombs on them simultaneously."

The deception failed: Hamas operatives did not enter the tunnels. Yet the bombardment proceeded regardless. The sources stated that these attacks shocked some within the Air

Force and Southern Command, as they felt the actions lacked military logic once it became evident that Hamas operatives were not retreating to the tunnels — foreshadowing some of the army's modes of operation since October 7. "At a certain point, [the army] realized Hamas had figured out the strategy. And they said, 'Well, let's just blow everything up and create destruction,'" a military source claimed. "There was no rational decision-making. It didn't feel like there was a purpose. It felt like an attempt to display power."

According to Hazoot, Hamas soon caught on. "Hamas learned lessons from 'Guardian of the Walls,'" he explained. "They purchased 1,300 blast doors and distributed them throughout the tunnels. They created multiple ventilation shafts to disperse the gases and also implemented new tunnel-digging techniques involving twists and turns" — techniques which, according to Hazoot, helped to trap gas and prevent it from spreading further.

Indeed, a Hamas spokesperson confirmed to +972 and Local Call: "Al-Qassam Brigades took measures to protect its elements in the tunnels from the gases that the Israeli army was sending during its strikes."

An intelligence source involved in Israeli military activity in both Gaza and Lebanon told +972 and Local Call that the understanding within the security establishment is that Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah likely also died from asphyxiation — though in Lebanon gas was not weaponized as a deliberate assassination method, as it was in Gaza.

"With Nasrallah, dozens of bombs were dropped, and the IDF hoped one of them would detonate and directly kill him in the bunker," the source said. "In Gaza, on the other hand, when attacking a tunnel, you don't know exactly where the senior figure is located. So you attack several areas of the tunnel, creating the potential that he will die from asphyxiation."

The army's deliberate use of gas-induced asphyxiation as an assassination technique in Gaza was also highlighted by Nir Dvori, a military analyst for Israel's Channel 12, in his account of the bombing that killed senior Hamas militant Marwan Issa in Nuseirat refugee camp in March 2024. "The Air Force used bunker-buster bombs and especially heavy explosives to strike the underground compound," Dvori wrote, citing military sources. "The reason for the heavy bombardment and secondary explosions was to ensure that anyone not killed by the blast itself or the tunnel collapse would die from asphyxiation or inhalation of hazardous substances."

to be continued...

The full reports can be seen [here](#)





**Gina Barton,
Nick Penzenstadler,
Tricia Nadolny, Jayme Fraser,
USA**

Doug Caruso, the Managing Editor of USA
*Today gives the background to this extraordinary
investigation*



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**Untested:
America's rape
kit backlog
was a national
scandal.**

**A decade later,
problems persist**

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Editor's Note

Second prize goes to a team of journalists working for USA Today who exposed how a programme worth hundreds of millions of dollars utterly failed the victims of rape in the United States. Their detailed analysis reveals a mix of incompetence and neglect in the law enforcement and investigation process that undermined a national programme aiming to give justice to the victims of sexual violence. Their work with detailed research, testimony and factual evidence had an immediate impact. It prompted a response from the White House and promises of change and more funding from government. Just as importantly, it produced heartfelt thanks from survivors whose plight and suffering was finally given the attention it deserves.

In Untested, USA TODAY staff writers exposed a lack of accountability in a grant program that so far has doled out nearly \$350 million in taxpayer dollars to agencies that have seen few convictions and left thousands of leads ignored.

Introduction

Doug Caruso, the Managing Editor of USA Today gives the background to this extraordinary investigation:

In Texas, a man's DNA linked him to two different rapes. He was never arrested. In Wisconsin, prosecutors didn't charge a man whose DNA tied him to a gang rape. Within two years, he was accused of molesting two children. And in Michigan, police failed to act quickly on a DNA match in a cold case, leaving the perpetrator free to victimize six more women.

The police agencies tasked with investigating these assaults had been awarded millions of dollars by the Sexual Assault Kit Initiative, a federal grant program intended to deal with the countless untested rape kits that had piled up nationwide for decades. Other agencies that received grants not only failed to charge suspects – they didn't test thousands of old kits at all.

In Untested, USA TODAY staff writers Tricia L. Nadolny, Nick Penzenstadler, Jayme Fraser and Gina Barton not only told the stories of women whose cases were mishandled, they exposed a lack of accountability in a grant program that so far has doled out nearly \$350 million in taxpayer dollars to agencies that have seen few convictions and left thousands of leads ignored.

When officials at the U.S. Department of Justice rolled out the grant program in 2015, they promised it would hold rapists accountable, make communities safer and provide answers for victims. It fell short on every count – but you'd never know it from looking at their data. After obtaining that data via a public records request, reporters discovered it to be riddled with errors, misleading figures and blank fields. Officials were over counting convictions on their website by 20% until USA TODAY pointed out a discrepancy.

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Published in USA TODAY

Untested: America's rape kit backlog was a national scandal

On summer nights a year apart, two women left bars in downtown Austin, Texas. Before they could get home safely, both were raped. One knew her rapist. He was an acquaintance, she said, who saw she was intoxicated and offered her a ride on the handlebars of his bicycle before sexually assaulting her as she drifted in and out of consciousness. The other did not. She told police she was attacked by strangers who pinned down her arms and legs while one of them raped her. Neither investigation led to an arrest.

With untested rape kits piling up across the country, the Department of Justice wanted action – and convictions. Years later, a USA TODAY investigation finds, many of the same problems remain.

Years later in 2021, Austin police received a significant new lead: DNA found on one woman's jeans matched DNA from a swab of the other's neck. It suggested that the two women had been attacked by the same man – a serial rapist. This is the kind of breakthrough officials across the country hoped for when they pledged to test sexual assault evidence that had been neglected for years in law enforcement storage rooms. Since 2015, the U.S. Department of Justice has given out nearly \$350 million in grants to 90 local and state agencies through the National Sexual Assault Kit Initiative. Officials promised the money would put rapists behind bars and give victims long-awaited answers.

Instead, a USA TODAY investigation found, cases hit the same roadblocks they did when victims first came forward: kits left untested, haphazard or cursory reviews by police and prosecutors, and a reluctance to inform people about what happened to evidence collected from their own bodies. By the Justice Department's count, the program has led to 100,000 kits being tested and 1,500 convictions so far – nearly half from two agencies, while others have seen meager results.

In Charlotte, North Carolina, a backlog of about 2,300 kits has netted 14 convictions. In Mobile, Alabama, a backlog of about 1,100 kits has led to convictions of eight men. In Austin, officials faced a backlog of more than 4,400 kits. They have secured just one conviction. After the two Austin cases matched through DNA, a detective reviewed the files. Police said they contacted the woman who had reported being raped by a stranger, but she did not want to speak with them, and her investigation was again closed. Officials did not tell her that the man linked to her kit could be a serial rapist.

On the other case, police botched their new review and did nothing. Krystal Allison, the woman who made that report, did not learn that the acquaintance she accused of rape had been linked to another reported sexual assault until USA TODAY contacted her this summer. "That seriously sent chills down my spine," Allison said, her voice shaky. "Nobody has reached out to me at all. I know nothing of it."

Years ago, after a night out drinking, Krystal Allison woke up in a man's apartment. She walked straight to a hospital for a rape kit, but after the police investi- gated, they did not make an arrest. Today, living in Washington, she draws emotional support from her dog, Lyra. Abigail Dollins / USA TODAY

America's untested rape kits piled up across the country over the course of decades. Boxes about the size of a hardcover book each held evidence of a reported sexual assault – dried swabs of saliva and semen and blood, strands of hair, debris scraped from under fingernails. Each was collected from a person, most of them women and girls, during an hourslong exam. And each was shelved without being processed for DNA. The evidence crowded storerooms, tangible proof of law enforcement's failure to support victims and hold rapists accountable.

Testing the kits was supposed to be the first step in righting that wrong. In some places that received federal grants, not even that happened. At least a dozen grant recipients carved out exceptions to testing, leaving kits unprocessed for a second time. In one California county, officials boasted they had cleared their backlog, but only after deeming more than half of their kits ineligible for testing.

In many cases, officials have done little beyond sending the kits to a lab, reviewing the results and again closing the files. In Maryland, according to a state report, some law enforcement agencies have shown "significant reluctance" to reopen investigations and have even stated outright that they are disregarding DNA matches.

What's more, some officials all but abandoned the idea of providing victims answers about what happened to their rape

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*Two sites – prosecutors' offices in Cleveland and Detroit – stood out, with more than 600 convictions combined. The remaining 12 reported 123 convictions, fewer than **one for every 175 kits sent for testing.***

kits or apologies for how long testing took. One Kansas police agency has tried to reach just 17 victims from roughly 1,100 sexual assault kits. An official there said there are instances where DNA testing has identified the names of suspects for the first time but the victims have not been told, because officials don't think their cases can be prosecuted.

Noël Busch-Armendariz, a University of Texas at Austin professor and researcher who has interviewed women with backlogged kits, said it is disheartening that victims – yet again – have been overlooked. "Survivors of sexual assault mostly feel betrayed by the silence around what happened to them," she said. Officials from the Department of Justice who oversee the Sexual Assault Kit Initiative declined to be interviewed.

In a written statement, spokeswoman Katherine Brown said the program has been instrumental in helping agencies across the country process untested kits, although she also noted that local laws and regulations can influence what happens next. Angela Williamson, who has led the federal program since its inception, acknowledged in a separate statement that local success will vary based on the level of commitment.

But Williamson said the program has contributed to a "critical cultural shift" around the importance of testing sexual assault evidence. In addition to seeking justice in backlogged cases, the initiative aims to overhaul how the criminal justice system responds to sexual assault. Grantees have also used their funding to improve DNA collection and its use, train police and prosecutors and modernize how survivors and their families are treated.

Williamson said it is too early to gauge the program's success by the number of rapists who have been convicted be-

cause it can take years for cases to move from testing to potential conviction. Agency officials said DNA matches also can pop up long after a kit is tested as more profiles are uploaded to the federal database of DNA samples.

Williamson made a similar argument – that it's too soon to judge the results – when The Atlantic highlighted the program's paltry outcomes five years ago.

Yet the program's data tracking is so poor that in some places, the federal government has no idea how many rapists were convicted – and likely never will.

Federal performance data is riddled with errors, misleading figures and blank fields, and officials were overcounting convictions on their website by 20% until after USA TODAY pointed out a discrepancy. At least 10 grant sites told USA TODAY they have not been reliably tracking key metrics such as the number of victims contacted or convictions won. A 2022 audit by the agency's Office of the Inspector General found grant staff at the Department of Justice failed to identify "problematic and struggling grantees" and that three of five sites reviewed couldn't provide documents confirming the numbers they reported to the government.

Given the shortcomings of the federal data, USA TODAY contacted grant sites that received funding from fiscal year 2015 to 2022 to confirm key numbers, such as kits sent for testing, cases charged and victims contacted. Reporters then focused on 14 with the most complete data that were funded in the program's early years, giving them the most time to test, investigate and prosecute.

Two sites – prosecutors' offices in Cleveland and Detroit – stood out, with more than 600 convictions combined. The remaining 12 reported 123 convictions, fewer than one for every 175 kits sent for testing. If they had been as successful as Cleveland at investigating and prosecuting cases, USA TODAY estimated they together would have secured at least 1,450 more convictions.

Nearly a decade ago, the USA TODAY Network conducted what was then the most detailed nationwide inventory of untested rape kits.

Reporters tallied at least 70,000 kits across more than 1,000 agencies, a shocking number that accounted for only a fraction of the nation's police departments.

Following up on that work, USA TODAY reporters spent the past year and a half investigating the Sexual Assault Kit Initiative, including interviews and correspondence with more

The program has contributed to a "critical cultural shift" around the importance of testing sexual assault evidence.

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than 150 law enforcement officials, advocates, victims and others connected to backlog-clearing projects.

Reporters also filed more than 250 public records requests, reviewed police reports from more than 350 cases with backlogged kits and asked 10 experts familiar with investigating and prosecuting sexual assault to review a selection of cases.

Often, at the center of such cases were women who were particularly vulnerable to predators. They were sleeping on the streets, battling addiction, facing mental health challenges or simply drinking with friends. Some faced law enforcement skepticism from the minute they called for help, such as one Florida woman referred to by a sheriff's deputy as a "potential victim" 45 times in a 40-line incident report.

A portion of an incident report from the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office that uses the term "potential victim." Provided by Jacksonville Sheriff's Office; USA TODAY photo illustration

Most knew the men they said attacked them. Investigations often reached a stalemate at "he said, she said" – with one party saying the sex was consensual, the other saying it was rape and investigators doing little or no work to determine the truth.

While the Sexual Assault Kit Initiative is meant to challenge the misconceptions about victims that have long plagued the criminal justice system, those biases remain.

A Florida prosecutor rejected a case after a kit was tested by noting the victim's use of pain medication had impacted her "cognitive abilities." A Minnesota police department decided to not test a kit because the juvenile victim had been "uncooperative" with their prior investigation, though records show the girl told police she feared she had been raped while passed out at a party and asked: "What if it was my fault?" A Wisconsin detective took no steps to reinvestigate a rape and noted that the suspect had claimed the sex was consensual, even though the same man had been convicted of raping someone else.

Ashley Nix is a sex crimes prosecutor in Tulsa, Oklahoma, whose office has filed charges in numerous cases from the city's backlog. One victim was a sex worker.

Another died in the 12 years since she reported being assaulted, leaving Nix to prosecute the case without her testimony. A third woman – in a case Nix's predecessor first rejected – was living with an intellectual disability.

"These excuses about messy cases and messy victims ... it's BS," Nix said. "This is what predators do. They pick targets

That report would ultimately doom her chance at justice – because the officer wrote that Allison and the man had had "voluntary sex."

that people won't believe."

Ashley Nix, a prosecutor in the Tulsa County District Attorney's Office, has brought charges on cases from the city's rape kit backlog. Bryan Terry / USA TODAY

Krystal Allison, the woman who told Austin police that she had been raped by an acquaintance, said he knew full well that she was too intoxicated to fight back. She had become separated from a girlfriend on Austin's bustling Sixth Street when the man stopped and offered her help. From there, her memories are fractured: falling off the handlebars of his bicycle, being in a bed, trying to push him off as he raped her.

In the morning, Allison said, she realized she was at the man's apartment, and his roommate told her she had been carried up the stairs the night before. She left, walked straight to a hospital, had a sexual assault exam completed and made a police report. That report would ultimately doom her chance at justice – because the officer wrote that Allison and the man had had "voluntary sex."

Years later, when the sexual assault kit was tested – and matched to another reported rape – that errant idea became canon, repeated over and over. If anyone had read Allison's file more closely, they would have found numerous indications that what she reported was not voluntary, but rape.

In an interview with USA TODAY last month, Austin police officials acknowledged they made mistakes on Allison's case, ones too late to rectify even if they wanted to. The statute of limitations to bring charges closed last year.

Sgt. Patrick Stewart is one of several people at the police agency who reviewed the case and decided Allison did not need to be contacted. "Unfortunately, we dropped the ball on that one," he said.

USA TODAY does not identify victims of sexual assault without their permission. Allison and several other women agreed to the usage of their names and photographs.

to be continued...



The full article can be found [here](#):





Mariel Mueller,
Germany



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Kidneys for cash: Inside a global organ trafficking network

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THE
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By
Mariel
Mueller

Kidneys for cash: Inside a global organ trafficking network

Editor's Note

There is no better way to illustrate the horrific gulf between rich and poor in the world today than to highlight the desperate measures people will take to lift themselves out of poverty and how that desperation can be used for exploitation of vulnerable people. This story exposes the ruthless and horrifying business of illegal trading in human organs exploits vulnerable people in both rich and poor countries.

This report explores how an international network linking Germany and Kenya profited from the desperation of people – those seeking life-saving transplants and young donors driven by poverty to sell their organs. As a result of Mariel Mueller's work, illegal and unethical organ trading has ground to a halt in one corner of the world, and fresh debate has been raised on how to eliminate this appalling practice.

Introduction

This report is the result of a months-long collaborative investigation conducted by German media outlets Der Spiegel, ZDF, and DW, who together traced the paths of organ sellers and buyers, analysed documents, spoke with whistle-blowers and medical professionals, and uncovered how an international network – spanning from a hospital in Kenya to a shadowy agency that attracted organ recipients from Germany – exploited vulnerable people at both ends: The young, desperate for money, and the old, desperate for a life-saving organ.

The authors say: "In response to our report, Kenya's Health Minister ordered an audit into the Mediheal Hospital and seven other transplant facilities across Kenya. Maryline Limo, vice president of Mediheal Group of Hospitals, told Kenyan media that all transplants carried out are legal; that Mediheal is not involved in sourcing the donors, and that there is no financial incentive for the donors.

Kenya's Health Minister Aden Duale told reporters that kidney transplant services have been suspended at Mediheal Hospital.

A new committee of investigation has been established to probe all kidney transplant services done at Mediheal over the last five years, he said.

The Kenyan government on April 18 released a statement saying that President William Ruto had "suspended with immediate effect, Dr Swarup Mishra as chair of the Kenya BioVax Institute." The statement said the suspension "shall remain in force pending the outcome of investigations into serious allegations of unethical and illegal activities involving kidney transplant procedures at Mediheal Hospital and Fertility Centre in Eldoret."

Published in DW.com

Kidneys for cash: Inside a global organ trafficking network

Twenty-two-year-old Amon Kipruto Mely thought that by selling his kidney, he would start a new, better life. Life in a village in western Kenya, had been hard for him after the COVID pandemic. He's been struggling to find a steady income, moving from one job to the next – at a car dealer, a construction site and elsewhere.

Then, one day, a friend told him about a quick and easy way to earn \$6,000 (€5,300). "He told me selling my kidney would be a good deal," said Amon. It sounded like a stroke of fortune, but it led him into a dark network of exploitation, desperation and regret.

This report is the result of a months-long collaborative investigation conducted by German media outlets Der Spiegel, ZDF, and DW, who together traced the paths of organ sellers and buyers, analyzed documents, spoke with whistleblowers and medical professionals, and uncovered how an international network – spanning from a hospital in Kenya to a shadowy agency that attracted organ recipients from Germany – exploited vulnerable people at both ends: The young, desperate for money, and the old, desperate for a life-saving organ.

Amon Kipruto Mely was introduced to a middleman who organised transport to Mediheal Hospital in the city of Eldoret, western Kenya. There, Amon says he was received by Indian doctors who handed him documents in English, a language he didn't understand.

A syndicate preying on vulnerabilities of the young and poor

He was not informed of any health risks, he said. "They did not explain anything to me. The one who had taken me pointed

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By
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at people around us and said: Look, they all donated, and they are even going back to work.”

After the operation, he was only paid \$4,000 instead of the promised \$6,000. From it, he bought a phone and a car that quickly broke down. Soon after, his health worsened. He became dizzy and weak and eventually fainted at home. At the hospital, his mother, Leah Metto, was shocked to learn that her son had sold his kidney. “They are making money through young children like Amon,” she said.

Amon’s story appears to be one of many. Willis Okumu, a Nairobi-based researcher of organized crime at the Institute of Security Studies in Africa, has spoken with several young men who told him they had sold their kidneys in the town of Oyugis, 180 kilometers (112 miles) southwest of Eldoret. “For a fact, this is organized crime,” he said. Okumu estimates that up to a hundred young men in Oyugis alone may have sold their kidneys, many of whom suffer from health issues, as well as depression and psychological trauma. “I don’t think they’re going to reach 60,” added Okumu, whose own work on the issue was published in January year on Enact, a project implemented by Interpol.

DW spoke to four young men in Oyugis who say they sold their kidneys for as little as \$2,000. They recounted how, after their surgery at Mediheal Hospital in Eldoret, brokers asked them to recruit new donors for a \$400 commission each.

Donor turned recruiter: A chain of exploitation

“There’s a legal gray area that this syndicate is exploiting,” Okumu explained. “There’s no law that prevents you from actually donating your kidney for money and you cannot be prosecuted for that,” he said, referring to information he received from the transnational organized crime unit at the Kenyan police.

What is allowed, according to Kenyan law, are organ donations to relatives or for altruistic reasons.

Speaking to DW on the condition of anonymity, a former long-time Mediheal Hospital employee revealed that the buying and selling of transplants started many years ago. Initially, recipients came from Somalia and donors from Kenya. But then, in 2022, recipients started to come from Israel and, as of 2024, from Germany. The donors for these well-paying customers are flown in from countries including Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan or Pakistan.

The source said that donors were asked to sign documents

DW spoke to four young men in Oyugis who say they sold their kidneys for as little as \$2,000. They recounted how, after their surgery at Mediheal Hospital in Eldoret, brokers asked them to recruit new donors for a \$400 commission each.

stating they were relatives to recipients they never met and consenting to a kidney removal without being informed about potential health risks while some of them were not even old enough. “Because of the language barrier, they just sign,” the former employee said.

Shift to a more lucrative market: Israel and Germany among target countries

Ever since the switch from Somali recipients to Israelis and Germans, business has been booming, he added, with each recipient paying up to \$200,000 for a kidney — a figure corroborated by multiple sources. The former hospital employee told DW that an agency called “MedLead” was in charge of acquiring international donors and recipients.

On its website, MedLead claims to provide kidney donations within 30 days that are “according to organ donation law” and that the donors are promised to be “100% altruistic.” On its Facebook page there are testimonial videos of people thanking MedLead for its help getting them a new kidney in Eldoret, Kenya.

The most recent video on the site shows Sabine Fischer-Kugler, a 57-year-old woman from Gunzenhausen, Germany, who has been suffering from a kidney disease for 40 years. After a first replacement kidney stopped working, she was desperate to find a second one. But the waiting list for a new kidney in Germany is long; it can take eight to ten years. In Germany, only kidneys of deceased people who explicitly agreed to organ donation may be used for transplants, and there are not enough donors for the more than 10,000 people awaiting a kidney.

Update 1:
In response to our report, Kenya’s Health Minister ordered an audit into the Mediheal Hospital and seven other transplant facilities across Kenya.

Maryline Limo, vice president of Mediheal Group of Hospitals, told Kenyan media that all transplants carried out are legal; that Mediheal is not involved in sourcing the donors, and that there is no financial incentive for the donors.

Update 2:
As a result of our reporting, Kenya’s Health Minister Aden Duale told reporters on Thursday that kidney transplant services have been suspended at Mediheal Hospital. A new committee of investigation has been established to probe all kidney transplant services done at Mediheal over the last five years, he said.

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Shortage of organ donations at home fuel desperation to look abroad

Sabine Fischer-Kugler only met her donor briefly, she said — a 24-year-old man from Azerbaijan. The contract claimed he was not being paid, though Fischer-Kugler said she paid between \$100,000 and \$200,000 to MedLead. “Maybe I’m a bit selfish because I wanted this kidney, and most importantly, the contract looked all right. But it’s clear. The operation isn’t as clean as it looks.”

Under German law, paying for an organ is illegal, and offenders can face up to five years in prison.

The man behind MedLead is an Israeli citizen called Robert Shpolanski who, according to a 2016 indictment by the Tel Aviv Magistrate Court, has been accused of having performed “a large number of illegal kidney transplants” in Sri Lanka, Turkey, the Philippines and Thailand, together with a man called Boris Wolfman who allegedly headed the criminal network. Wolfman was accused of already having been involved in illegal transplantation activities elsewhere.

‘It’s a little fishy. You’re not supposed to pay but you pay’

Shpolanski denies any connection with Wolfman. In an email to Der Spiegel, ZDF and DW, MedLead stated that it has no involvement in locating donors, that all donors are 100% altruistic and that MedLead has been operating transparently and in full compliance with the law since its foundation.

The investigative team went undercover in Eka Hotel in Eldoret, just a kilometer from Mediheal Hospital, to speak with foreign patients awaiting transplants. Some are visibly frail, traveling with family members. One Russian woman, who was waiting for kidney surgery for her husband, said, “Nobody gives their kidney for free.” A 72-year-old Israeli man undergoing dialysis at Mediheal hospital said, “It’s a little fishy. You’re not supposed to pay but you pay. The story is that it’s an old cousin of mine that somehow came to be

in East Africa at the same time as me.” At his age he would have no chance of receiving a kidney in Israel, he said.

Back in Nairobi, Dr. Jonathan Wala, head of the Kenya Renal Association, has treated several patients who returned with post-surgical complications. “We have reports of Israeli patients who come back with severe infections, some with kidneys that have basically died.” His colleagues rang the alarm to Kenyan authorities about unethical transplants taking place at Mediheal Hospital.

Multi-million dollar business protected from ‘the top’

In 2023, Kenya’s health ministry commissioned an investigation into Mediheal Hospital and found that donors and recipients were often not related. Some high-risk transplants were conducted, such as on cancer patients or the extremely elderly. Almost all procedures were paid in cash. The report recommended that “the allegation of organ trafficking must be investigated by relevant authorities.” Despite these alarming findings, the report was never made public, and no action was taken.

A local private investigator in Eldoret, who has tracked the illegal transplant trade, said at least two other hospitals are also involved. But, he said, if he investigated these cases, “my life would be in danger.” “There are very powerful people who may be involved.” Does it go up to the top of government? “Yeah.”

The founder and chairman of the Mediheal Group is Swarup Mishra. The Indian native is a former MP and is said to have good relations with Kenyan President William Ruto. Despite persistent organ trafficking accusations, the president appointed him chairman of the state-owned Kenya BioVax Vaccine Institute last November, a role that allows Mishra to represent Kenya as a contact person for the World Health Organization and foreign government officials. Mishra did not respond to repeated interview requests and left a list of questions unanswered.

Meanwhile, Amon and others like him struggle to survive with one kidney, their health compromised and their hopes crushed: “If I could go back in time, I would have not accepted my kidney being removed. I hate myself for it.”

to be continued...

Update 3:

The Kenyan government on April 18 released a statement saying that President William Ruto had “suspended with immediate effect, Dr Swarup Mishra as chair of the Kenya BioVax Institute.” The statement said the suspension “shall remain in force pending the outcome of investigations into serious allegations of unethical and illegal activities involving kidney transplant procedures at Mediheal Hospital and Fertility Centre in Eldoret.”

The article can be found [here](#):



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Published in "The Guardian"

George Joseph, USA

Revealed: UnitedHealth secretly paid nursing homes to reduce hospital transfers

Introduction

This story describes how a major US company, UnitedHealth Group, the largest American healthcare corporation, secretly paid nursing homes bonuses to help cut hospital transfers for sick residents as part of cost-cutting that saved the company millions, but at times put residents at risk.

Those secret bonuses were paid out as part of a program that stations the company's own medical teams in nursing homes and pushes them to cut care expenses for residents covered by the insurance giant. In several cases nursing home residents who needed hospital care under the program failed to receive it. At least one lived with permanent brain damage following his delayed transfer, according to a confidential nursing home incident log, recordings and photo evidence.

"No one is truly investigating when a patient suffers harm. Absolutely no one," said one current UnitedHealth nurse practitioner who recently filed a congressional complaint about the nursing home program. "These incidents are hidden, downplayed and minimized. The sense is: 'Well, they're medically frail, and no one lives for ever.'"

The investigation, published by The Guardian, is based on thousands of confidential corporate and patient records obtained through sources, public records requests and court files, and includes interviews with more than 20 current and former UnitedHealth and nursing home employees.

By

George
Joseph

Revealed: UnitedHealth secretly paid nursing homes to reduce hospital transfers

UnitedHealth Group, the nation's largest healthcare conglomerate, has secretly paid nursing homes thousands in bonuses to help slash hospital transfers for ailing residents – part of a series of cost-cutting tactics that has saved the company millions, but at times risked residents' health, a Guardian investigation has found.

Those secret bonuses have been paid out as part of a UnitedHealth program that stations the company's own medical teams in nursing homes and pushes them to cut care expenses for residents covered by the insurance giant.

In several cases identified by the Guardian, nursing home residents who needed immediate hospital care under the program failed to receive it, after interventions from UnitedHealth staffers. At least one lived with permanent brain damage following his delayed transfer, according to a confidential nursing home incident log, recordings and photo evidence.

"No one is truly investigating when a patient suffers harm. Absolutely no one," said one current UnitedHealth nurse practitioner who recently filed a congressional complaint about the nursing home program. "These incidents are hidden, downplayed and minimized. The sense is: 'Well, they're medically frail, and no one lives forever.'"

The Guardian's investigation is based on thousands of confidential corporate and patient records obtained through sources, public records requests and court files, interviews with more than 20 current and former UnitedHealth and nursing home employees, and two whistleblower declarations submitted to Congress this month through the non-profit legal group Whistleblower Aid.

The documents and sources provide a never-before-seen window into the company's successful effort to insert itself into the day-to-day operations of nearly **2,000 nursing homes** in small towns and urban commercial strips across the nation – an approach which has helped UnitedHealth secure a vast stream of federal dollars from Medicare Advantage plans that cover **more than 55,000 long-term nursing home residents**.

The documents and sources provide a never-before-seen window into the company's successful effort to insert itself into the day-to-day operations of nearly 2,000 nursing homes in small towns and urban commercial strips across the nation – an approach which has helped UnitedHealth secure a vast stream of federal dollars from Medicare Advantage plans that cover more than 55,000 long-term nursing home residents.

UnitedHealth said the suggestion that its employees have prevented hospital transfers "is verifiably false". It said its bonus payments to nursing homes help prevent unnecessary hospitalizations that are costly and dangerous to patients and that its partnerships with nursing homes improve health outcomes.

Under Medicare Advantage, insurers collect lump sums from the federal government to cover seniors' care. But the less insurers spend on care, the more they have for potential profit – an opportunity that UnitedHealth higher-ups have systematically sought to exploit when it comes to long-term nursing home residents.

To reduce residents' hospital visits, UnitedHealth has offered nursing homes an array of financial sweeteners that sounded more like they came from stockbrokers than medical professionals.

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THE INVESTIGATIVE REPORTER

By
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Over the past seven years, the company has shelled out “Premium Dividend” and “Shared Savings” payments that boosted nursing homes’ bottom lines. Through its “Quality and Shared Risk” program, UnitedHealth offered an even bigger cut to nursing homes that drove down medical spending, but threatened to claw back money from those that didn’t, according to former employees and internal corporate documents.

One term that UnitedHealth executives obsessed over was “admits per thousand” – APK for short. It was a measure of the rate that nursing homes sent their residents to the hospital. Under the “Premium Dividend” program, a low APK qualified a nursing home for the various bonus payments the insurer offered. A high APK meant that a nursing home received nothing.

“APK drove everything,” said one former national UnitedHealth executive who worked on the initiative with nursing homes in more than two dozen states and spoke about the confidential contracts on the condition of anonymity. “You gain profitability by denying care, and when profitability suffers for the shareholders, that’s when people get crazy and do things that are not appropriate.”

The revelations came at a time of crisis for UnitedHealth, which became the subject of public outrage after December’s fatal shooting of Brian Thompson, a top executive at the company, and the arrest of a suspect named Luigi Mangione.

The killing reignited concerns over the healthcare giant’s Medicare windfalls and denials of care to patients. But a full accounting of UnitedHealth’s cost-cutting push inside nursing homes has not previously surfaced amid government and media investigations into the company’s conduct.

Cost-cutting tactics

The secret bonuses were just one of many maneuvers UnitedHealth devised to track and cut expenses in its nursing home initiative.

Internal emails show, for example, that UnitedHealth supervisors gave their teams “budgets” showing how many hospital admissions they had “left” to use up on nursing home patients.

Two current and three former UnitedHealth nurse practitioners told the Guardian that UnitedHealth managers pressed nurse practitioners to persuade Medicare Advantage members to change their “code status” to DNR even

when patients had clearly expressed a desire that all available treatments be used to keep them alive.

The company denied that it had prevented hospital transfers or inappropriately pushed patients to change their code status to DNR.

The program’s cost-cutting schemes were only possible because of the sprawling nature of UnitedHealth, a \$300bn-plus conglomerate which has grown into one of the world’s biggest companies thanks to its relentless efforts to embed itself into nearly every corner of the healthcare industry. UnitedHealth’s insurance arm covers millions more Medicare Advantage seniors than any of its rivals, and another subsidiary, Optum, employs or affiliates with tens of thousands of doctors and nurse practitioners.

When nursing homes under the bonus program allowed medical teams from one UnitedHealth subsidiary to work in their facilities, they allowed the corporate giant to influence critical healthcare decisions for residents, which had a direct impact on the insurance side of its business.

US justice depart

The Guardian’s reporting also found that the program offered nursing homes even larger sums for every senior enrolled in the insurer’s offerings for long-term nursing home residents, which are called “Institutional Special Needs Plans”. In some cases, these payments incentivized nursing homes to leak confidential resident records to UnitedHealth sales teams so they could directly solicit elderly residents and their families, according to a whistleblower lawsuit currently being fought in federal court in Georgia as well as internal nursing home records and interviews with more than a dozen current and former nursing home employees and UnitedHealth salespeople.

One former UnitedHealth employee in Georgia admitted to the Guardian that she got nursing home staff to leak her confidential resident records then backdated permission-to-contact forms to circumvent federal rules meant to protect seniors from aggressive sales pitches. The employee was fired after failing to meet her sales quota, according to a former colleague.

After one nursing home near Savannah, Georgia, disclosed confidential patient records to UnitedHealth, families complained that their loved ones had been shifted on to the company’s Medicare Advantage plan even though they lacked the cognitive ability to make such decisions, according to a former UnitedHealth executive, federal court filings

Two current and three former UnitedHealth nurse practitioners told the Guardian that UnitedHealth managers pressed nurse practitioners to persuade Medicare Advantage members to change their “code status” to DNR even when patients had clearly expressed a desire that all available treatments be used to keep them alive.

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in Georgia and leaked patient files reviewed by the Guardian.

All told, the various payments that came with increasing UnitedHealth enrollments and minimizing medical expenses could add up to hundreds of thousands of dollars annually for a typical midsize nursing home, sources said.

But the nursing home residents, who had signed up for UnitedHealth's Medicare Advantage program and whose federal dollars were financing the program, did not know about the confidential incentive payments and anti-hospitalization tactics affecting their care.

UnitedHealth declined to answer questions about how much it has paid out to nursing homes through the secret contract clauses. The company said its payments incentivize high-quality outcomes for residents and reward efforts that lead to improved care.

Maxwell Ollivant, a former UnitedHealth nurse practitioner, filed a congressional declaration with help from Whistleblower Aid, asking the federal government to hold the healthcare giant accountable.

In an interview with the Guardian – his first-ever public comment on the nursing home initiative – Ollivant urged lawmakers to make sure that UnitedHealth was “not skimping out on care” and that patients were not “signing up for a service and not receiving the service when the time comes”.

Ollivant previously filed a lawsuit in federal court in Washington State accusing UnitedHealth of withholding necessary services to nursing home residents, making their requests for Medicare payments violations of the federal False Claims Act. In 2023, the nurse practitioner dropped the suit after the Department of Justice declined to intervene. His congressional declaration provides new details of his experience.

In a statement, UnitedHealth said Ollivant “lacks both the necessary data and expertise” to assess the effectiveness of its programs. “The US Department of Justice investigated these allegations, interviewed witnesses, and obtained thousands of documents that demonstrated the significant factual inaccuracies in the allegations,” the company said. “After reviewing all the evidence during its multi-year investigation, the Department of Justice declined to pursue the matter.”

UnitedHealth pitches its nursing home initiative as a positive for long-term residents. It provides them access to UnitedHealth nurse practitioners via in-person visits as well

as to remote medical professionals who provide guidance to facility nurses at night and on weekends.

This “enhanced care coordination”, as the company puts it, is supposed to help reduce unnecessary hospitalizations, which are costly for UnitedHealth and can expose patients to additional complications.

In several cases identified by the Guardian, the company's insertion of itself into nursing home emergency protocols helped delay or avert transfers for patients who could have benefited from immediate hospital care.

View image in fullscreen

In one incident from 2019, a remote UnitedHealth medical provider working for the program received a report shortly after midnight about a nursing home resident in Renton, Washington, who was slurring her words and unable to move her arm – textbook stroke symptoms.

In stroke cases, every minute counts. When blood flow to the brain is blocked or interrupted, brain cells quickly die. The sooner patients get to the hospital, the better the chance doctors have to prevent long-term neurological damage.

In this case, the nurse at her nursing home reported to UnitedHealth that it looked like a stroke, according to an incident log. But instead of greenlighting an immediate hospitalization for a possible stroke, the remote UnitedHealth employee suggested the resident might be suffering from a less serious condition called a transient ischemic attack (TIA), a temporary loss of brain function caused by blood flow blockage.

The remote employee then advised the nurse to run a blood test and update the company again in four hours, confidential UnitedHealth records show.

The patient's independent primary care doctor told the Guardian she was never informed of this failure to transfer her patient.

“I would have wanted them to contact me right away so that I could have made a decision,” she said, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive patient matters. “The time frame matters.”

to be continued...

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The full article can be found [here](#):



Vijay Pal Dudi, India Bhaskar's big expose on child trafficking

Introduction

For a month and a half, a Bhaskar reporter investigated an infant trafficking network from Udaipur to Delhi where traffickers have been buying babies from tribal families and selling them on selling them to childless couples. The investigation revealed how the delivery of new-born children was being arranged in the regions of Delhi, Hyderabad, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh.

The reporter, after gaining an understanding of the racket's modus operandi, contacted a Delhi-based trafficker pretending he was interested in buying a child. The trafficker was selling a 25-day-old baby. The deal was finalized when Udaipur middlemen brought the baby for the reporter to see in person when the reporter was allowed to see and cradle the baby.

The final investigation reveals how in just one year, more than 20 infants were sold from Udaipur district—primarily from Falasiya, Bagpura, Jhadol, and Kotda. The middlemen exploit connections with IVF centres and hospitals to accost desperate childless couples with offers for new-born babies. The investigation has led to a follow up and crackdown on the trade.

Published in "Dainik Bhaskar" newspaper

Expose on child trafficking: New-borns bought and sold from tribal couples

(Udaipur, July 9, 2024) **F**or a month and a half, a Bhaskar reporter investigated an infant trafficking network from Udaipur to Delhi. Traffickers are buying babies from tribal families for ₹20,000–₹40,000 and selling them to childless couples for up to ₹8 lakh. Deliveries of new-borns are being arranged in Delhi, Hyderabad, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh.

In just one year, over 20 infants were sold from Udaipur district—primarily from Falasiya, Bagpura, Jhadol, and Kotda. The middlemen exploit connections with IVF centres and hospitals to accost desperate childless couples with offers for new-born babies. The reporter demanded to see the child before making payment. Initially, Manoj asked for ₹50,000 to show the baby but finally settled for ₹20,000.

A woman Rajkumari met the reporter at a hotel in Udaipur. After gaining trust, another trafficker Tanu and a woman brought the baby to Gulab Bagh for display. They said, "We'll also get a health check-up done. If there are issues or if you don't like the child, we'll replace it." The reporter transferred ₹20,000 via Google Pay to two YES Bank accounts in Dwarka, New Delhi, whose details were shared by trafficker Manoj. Then Rajkumari brought the baby for the Bhaskar reporter to see in person in Udaipur.

Legally, even with mutual consent, no one can keep another's child. According to Section 370 IPC, both buyer and seller are criminally liable - punishable by imprisonment from 10 years up to life. Legal adoption requires registration with the Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA), and approvals from district-level authorities and child welfare committees, making it a long and complex process – Expert BK Gupta, Convenor, Child Protection Organization, Rajasthan.

Families with 6–8 children selling babies due to poverty; deals made during pregnancy Babulal Kharadi, a resident of Bijli (Bagpura), and his wife Narmada sold their 15-day-old son

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THE
INVESTIGATIVE
REPORTER

By
Vijay
Pal Dudi

Bhaskar's big
expose
on child
trafficking

to middleman Bhairulal for ₹40,000. Narmada revealed that they already have three sons and two daughters. The deal for the third son was finalized while she was still pregnant—on the condition that if the child turned out to be a boy, he would be sold. Narmada said they sold the baby because they already had three sons, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to manage household expenses.

The middleman lured them with the promise of money. "With ₹40,000, we can buy rations and essentials for several days," she said. Bhairulal bought Narmada's son and then, along with women traffickers Radha Sahu and Rajkumari, sold the baby to another trafficker Suman. Suman handed the baby over to Jyoti, who took the child to Ahmedabad. This is not just Narmada's story.

The same story plays out in nearly every tribal household in Jhadol, Kotda, Panarwa, Falasiya, and Bagpura, where poverty is endemic. In the tribal regions of Udaipur division, middlemen have established such a strong network that the moment a baby is born in any home, they get the tip-off immediately. Families here typically have 6 to 8 children, and financial hardship is so severe that even feeding them two meals a day is a struggle. Taking advantage of this, traffickers buy babies and later sell them at exorbitant price to childless couples. The Bhaskar reporter reached out to such families whose babies had been bought and resold by the traffickers. In last year alone, over 20 new-borns have been sold in cities like Delhi, Hyderabad, and parts of Gujarat.

Prabhulal, a resident of Upali Sigri, sold his six-day-old son to middleman Bhairulal for just ₹7,000 to meet daily expenses. Prabhulal said Bhairulal pressured him to sell, saying, "You already have so many children. What will you do with another? At least you'll get some money for expenses." The child hadn't even been named yet. Bhairulal took the baby and sold him to middleman Rajkumari. Rajkumari then sold the baby to Shahina, who was assisted by Kajal in transporting the baby to Delhi.

Dhanraj and his wife Warki Meena, residents of Balvi, Baroliya, sold their 10-day-old son to middleman Bhairulal for just ₹5,000 and a promise to help build a proper house. Dhanraj said, "Bhairu told us we already have too many children, selling one won't make a difference." He kept following up every day until they agreed. Bhairulal sold the child to Radha Sahu and middleman Rajkumari for ₹60,000. Radha Sahu later sold the baby to a Jain couple from Hubli, Karnataka, for ₹2,00,000. She also sold another baby to Shahina in Hyderabad. Dhanraj currently has three sons and a daughter.

Mukesh Damor, a resident of Balvi, Baroliya in Udaipur district, sold his 10-day-old daughter Divya to a middleman.

Dhanraj and his wife Warki Meena, residents of Balvi, Baroliya, sold their 10-day-old son to middleman Bhairulal for just ₹5,000 and a promise to help build a proper house. Dhanraj said, "Bhairu told us we already have too many children, selling one won't make a difference."

However, the deal didn't work out, and the baby was returned. The child was initially bought by Bhairulal and sold to Rajkumari, who tried to strike a deal with Kajal. When it failed, the baby was sent back to Bhairulal, who then returned her to the parents. The father didn't disclose the exact amount, but confirmed the sale and return of the baby, even showing her to the reporter. Mukesh has six children.

Pannalal and his wife Ramila Devi, residents of Neelaghar Fala village in Upali Sigri, Udaipur district, sold their seven-day-old daughter to a middleman for ₹20,000. Pannalal's elder daughter said they sold her youngest sister because their mother was ill, and they didn't have money for treatment. The family has six children. Both parents work in Udaipur as labourers. Bhairulal sold the baby to Rajkumari, who then sold her through Suman to Jyoti Ben. Jyoti took the child and sold her somewhere in Gujarat.

The Rajasthan State Human Rights Commission demanded reports from the Home ACS and DGP after Bhaskar's expose. Justice Ramchandra Singh Jhala instructed them to investigate and explain how local intelligence, anti-human trafficking units, and police missed such blatant trafficking. The commission asked for action against negligent officers and details of steps taken in the past year to curb such crimes.

As a result of these investigations by Bhaskar the Government and Udaipur district judiciary took action against this practice.

The full article can be found [here](#):



Nomination

Excellence
in

**Environmental
Journalism**



EXCELLENCE
IN
ENVIRONMENTAL
JOURNALISM



The challenge of environmental journalism is to provide fact-based information that will help people better understand the facts and disregard the fiction about climate change, global warming and the reckless human activity that endangers the world we live in.

This year's 12 shortlisted entries in this category illustrate the gravity of the problems we face and focus not so much on projections of a bleak future, but on how communities are suffering in the here-and-now.

The winners were picked from a terrific group of entries, all of them shining a light on the gravest crises facing humankind. Interestingly, there is less spotlight on threats to the Amazon or other rain forests. But the range of stories covered provides a reflection on the threats posed by pollution and the increasingly scarce supply of water; on communities whose livelihoods are threatened by mafia activity in the wood industry; on threats to wildlife; and the scandal of corporations who are trying to dodge their responsibility to clean up the environmental mess created by toxic industrial activity.

This year's entries provide compelling evidence of how people and communities are under threat, exposing the responsibility of governments to act and the need for corporate power to be restrained but, as one winner from Canada indicates, there is also a big contribution that can be made by people in the comfort of their own homes. In the end, saving the planet needs everyone to pitch in, and this journalism shows how they can do it.



Stéphane Horel, France

Stéphane Horel is an award-winning investigative journalist at Le Monde, specializing in corporate harm, toxic industries and scientific disinformation.

She coordinated the cross-border interdisciplinary investigations Forever Lobbying Project (2025) and Forever Pollution Project (2023), exposing improper corporate lobbying winning the European Science journalist of the year award in 2024.

A passionate practitioner of cross-border journalism, she suffered intimidation during this time. In June 2026 the FJA joined other media support groups calling on French police to act over harassment – thefts of equipment and attempted break-ins at her home – which she says are linked to these investigations.



FIRST
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Forever Lobbying Project: PFAS

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By Stéphane
Horel

Forever
Lobbying
Project:
PFAS

Editor's Note

This is an example of collaborative and public interest journalism par excellence. Stéphane Horel and 46 colleagues, supported by an international team of academics and lawyers, have analysed more than 14,000 unpublished documents and exposed how powerful industries launched a campaign, laced with disinformation, to block European laws over environmental pollution. At stake is a potential bill of more than two trillion euro to clean up pollution from toxic compounds which could affect the health of almost everyone on the planet. If the corporations have their way the cash will have to be paid by ordinary citizens.

Introduction

The Forever Lobbying Project <https://foreverpollution.eu/lobbying/> was a cross-border, collaborative and interdisciplinary investigation coordinated by the French newspaper Le Monde and carried out in 2024. It involved 46 journalists with the support of 18 international academics and lawyers in Zurich, Stockholm, Toronto, Rotterdam and elsewhere, from the field of environmental chemistry to criminology in various disciplines.

Since January 2025, we have published 145 articles, podcasts and TV documentaries. The Project Revealed – live and in real time – the coordinated lobbying and disinformation campaign by powerful industries to block proposed European Union legislation aimed at controlling what scientists have called “the greatest pollution threat of the 21st Century”, and to shift the burden of environmental pollution onto society.

These are PFAS, or “forever chemicals”: toxic compounds linked to cancers and a dozen other serious diseases, contaminating our drinking water, food, soils, sea foam, rain and the blood of almost every human on the planet.

Toxic Docs database at Columbia University, New York, and City University of New York



*If corporate lobbying succeeds and emissions remain unrestricted, the cost of cleanup could reach more than **€2 trillion** across the UK and Europe over a **20-year period**.*

For the first time, our team also calculated the staggering costs of cleanup in Europe. If corporate lobbying succeeds and emissions remain unrestricted, the cost of cleanup could reach more than €2 trillion across the UK and Europe over a 20-year period. Over 14,000 unpublished documents on PFAS were collected through freedom of information requests filed in 16 European countries (and 15 languages), and are now available to the public in the Industry Documents Library at the University of California, San Francisco, home of the famous “Tobacco Papers”

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INVESTIGATION | As Europe begins to realize the scale of its poisoning by these toxic and ultra-resistant chemical substances produced by industry, Le Monde and 29 media partners have, for the first time, calculated the price of decontamination.

Since the 1940s, the industrial tap has been pouring hazardous chemical substances into Europe, spreading them into every nook and cranny of the environment. While their scientific name-per- and polyfluoroalkylated substances (PFAS) - is not very evocative, their nickname speaks for itself: "forever chemicals." The exceptional chemical properties of PFAS - non-stick, water-repellent, stain-resistant, etc. - that make them highly popular with manufacturers also prevent their natural degradation. Remarkably mobile and long-lasting, PFAS accumulate everywhere: in water, soil, waste... and living beings too.

Yet their elimination is a public health priority. The concentration of PFAS in the environment makes them a danger to living organisms: cancers, infertility, toxicity to the kidney, liver and immune system - the list of illnesses linked to exposure to PFAS is constantly growing.

But the task Europe has to undertake to destroy them is colossal. The continent alone is home to at least 23,000 polluted sites and almost as many highly suspect sites, identified in 2023 in a collaborative investigation conducted by Le Monde and 17 media partners (Forever Pollution Project).

The question on the lips of all those aware of this major environmental crisis and looking for solutions is: How much will it cost? For the first time, Le Monde and its partners in the Forever Lobbying Project, the second part of the investigation published in 2023, have arrived at an estimate of the price of pollution clean-up: between €95 billion and €2 trillion over 20 years. The upper range is most likely the most realistic. This remarkable estimated sum includes neither the impact of PFAS on our healthcare systems nor the myriad negative externalities too difficult to quantify.

An unprecedented collaborative investigation on 'forever chemicals'

The Forever Lobbying Project is a collaborative investigation into the true cost of PFAS pollution in Europe and into industrials' lobbying and disinformation campaigns to avoid their banning.

Coordinated by Le Monde, the investigation involves 46 journalists and 29 media partners in 16 countries: RTBF and De Tijd (Belgium); Denik Referendum (Czech Republic); Investigative Reporting

An unprecedented figure

To arrive at this unprecedented figure - until now, only very partial calculations existed in the academic literature - the project's journalists combined the scant scientific and economic information available with local data collected from pioneers in pollution control. The long-term effort was the result of a collaboration with remediation experts Ali Ling (University of St. Thomas, Minnesota) and Hans Peter Arp (Norwegian University of Science and Technology).

First, the minimum estimate: €95 billion over 20 years, that is, in an unrealistic scenario where all PFAS emissions cease tomorrow and the requirements set by law remain unchanged. The aim would be to treat only the highest-priority sites - landfills, highly contaminated soils and a few drinking water production units - concentrating on the elimination of PFAS that are currently regulated, in particular the "long-chain" substances (6 to 14 carbon atoms) historically used by industry.

However, other "forever chemicals" are now attracting the attention of the authorities: short and ultrashort-chain PFAS. Gradually introduced onto the market by manufacturers to anticipate regulations and lawsuits since the early 2000s, these "emerging" PFAS are excellent fugitives. They evade all traditional treatment systems, even more so than long-chain PFAS.

The most devious member of the family is the smallest: "trifluoroacetic acid" (TFA). Its nickname: "the ultimate PFAS." Derived from the degradation of pesticides, refrigerant gases or even other PFAS, long a blind spot in monitoring campaigns, TFA is causing growing concern.

Firstly, because of the "unprecedented" increase in its concentration in the environment: The tiniest PFAS "has become, by far, the most abundant and the most widespread," describes environmental chemist Arp, who labeled it, along with his colleagues, a "planetary boundary threat." The work of the World Health Organization to determine health limit values, scheduled for publication in 2026, should steer regulators.



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The scale of the task

Tackling TFA and other emerging PFAS, by setting an authorized limit value in water, would require Europe to deploy far greater decontamination resources than those already envisaged for so-called "historic" PFAS. According to our calculations, the bill would rise to €2 trillion over 20 years. And even then, this €100 billion a year, which represents more than half the European Union's annual budget, will have to be paid out "in perpetuity, (...) at least as long as PFAS are not subject to a generalized restriction, at which point their concentrations would start to fall if we actively treat them," explained Arp, coordinator of the European ZeroPM research project.

To understand the extent of these challenges, it's necessary to trace the PFAS contamination cycle back to its source.

Synthesized from the 1940s onward, PFAS have all the makings of miracle compounds: Non-stick and heat-resistant, they can be used to produce excellent hydrophobic or stain-resistant coatings, from Teflon frying pans to water-repellent Gore-Tex jackets. The main sources of PFAS emissions are the factories that produce them and/or use them in their industrial processes.

PFAS have been detected in the blood or organisms of virtually all living creatures, including humans, otters, polar bears, fish, livestock and plants. They contaminate the entire food chain. If they are not retained upstream by specialized equipment, these pollutants concentrate in key sites of treatment and sanitation systems, such as landfills, wastewater treatment plants and drinking water production plants.

Without the specific - costly and energy-intensive - equipment to destroy them, these channels in turn release PFAS into the environment. All the elements of a contamination cycle are present here.

Beyond the costs involved, decontamination poses a huge technological and logistical challenge for society. In countries like the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden and Norway, the first projects are underway. But in the absence of a coordinated European plan, each country improvises its own recommendations or simply ignores the problem.

"A crazy thing," "completely mad": On the front line, local public services and water and waste treatment companies interviewed by Le Monde were stunned by the scale of the task.

The minimum estimate: €95 billion over 20 years, that is, in an unrealistic scenario where all PFAS emissions cease tomorrow and the requirements set by law remain unchanged

In drinking water treatment plants, the elimination of PFAS requires specific processes. Activated carbon, already used in some water treatment plants, "is an effective solution for 'historical' PFAS and some of the short chains," explained Ling, the environmental engineer. "But it needs to be purged and changed very frequently. This is generally not done in plants already equipped with such filters to treat other micropollutants," such as pesticides.

Above all, the tiny TFA and its ultra-short chain ignore activated carbon

Only reverse osmosis, a radical filtration technique that consumes a lot of water and energy, is capable of isolating it - at costs that are prohibitive for most modest structures, particularly small and medium-sized communities. If regulations were to require TFA to be limited to 100 or even 500 nanograms per liter of water, "water suppliers would take the necessary measures but it would mean the end of the drinking water sector as we know it," argued Oliver Loebel, secretary general of EurEau, the European organization representing water service providers, from municipal authorities to firms like Veolia and Suez. "At this point, wanting to remove all the TFA from drinking water would be like wanting to remove salt from the oceans," added Arp.

With its high-performance filtration project, launched back in 2015 to combat micropollutants, the waterworks authority for the Paris region, the Syndicat des Eaux d'Ile-de-France (SEDIF), is providing a first demonstration. To integrate reverse osmosis into its treatment processes by 2032, it will need to build a dedicated high-voltage line, the cost of which will account for 20% of the total budget for the project, estimated at €1 billion.

Although effective, reverse osmosis also leaves behind a large volume of PFAS-concentrated liquid, which plants don't know what to do with. "Today, most plants discharge these concentrates into rivers or oceans," lamented Arp. "It's costly but essential to destroy retained PFAS, rather than releasing them into the environment, where they will become a problem again," argued Ling, who has carried out a cost and technology assessment of PFAS pollution clean-up for the state of Minnesota.

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EXCELLENCE IN ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM

By Stéphane Horel Forever Lobbying Project: PFAS

The most sought-after property of PFAS - their extreme resistance - also turns out to be their biggest drawback when it comes to destroying them. To date, only incinerators are capable of doing this on a large scale. Provided they "reach temperatures in excess of 1,050 or even 1,100°C," explained Dorte Herzke, a scientist at the Norwegian Institute for Air Research. Conventional incinerators, which process household waste or a portion of sewage sludge, are incapable of producing such heat. They cannot therefore "guarantee complete [destruction] of all PFAS," concludes a recent study by the French National Institute for Industrial Environment and Risks. Worse still, temperatures too low in these incinerators displace the problem, degrading long-chain PFAS into shorter-chain chemical agents.

To avoid these undesirable effects and find treatment methods that demand less money and energy, research is bubbling over. "Some techniques are showing promising results," said Ling, citing, for example, supercritical water oxidation (subjected to very high temperature and pressure). However, it will be several years before the infrastructure can be deployed on a sufficiently large scale.

Another pollution vector could increase the need for incineration, and therefore the costs too: sludge. The biosolids from certain urban wastewater treatment plants contain high concentrations of PFAS. Yet these low-cost fertilizers have long since found an outlet in our fields. In the United States and Switzerland, fertilization with sewage sludge is suspected of having contaminated hectares of farmland as well as the livestock on it. According to our calculations, burning this sludge instead of spreading it would cost Europe at the very least €20 billion a year, not counting the losses to the agricultural sector.

Investing strategically

At the end of the chain, wastewater treatment plants are also overburdened with liquid waste, which requires several purification stages before reaching the PFAS. "TFA treatment is not really an option at these sites, as it is too costly," said Ling. The least financially prohibitive techniques would eliminate the long-chain PFAS but only part of the short-chain PFAS. Their implementation in Europe's largest wastewater treatment plants would require at least €45 billion per year.

These staggering sums call for choices to be made. For PFAS already dispersed in the environment, Ling believes it will be necessary to "concentrate our limited funds on sites presenting real risks to human health." Our analyses show that the treatment of landfill leachate, which is highly concentrated in PFAS, is a strategic investment from both an economic and environmental point of view: 1 kg of PFAS can be eliminated for

€1 million, compared with around €10 million for wastewater treatment plant effluent.

Another priority is to clean up the most contaminated soils. According to Arp's calculations, it will cost at least €3 billion a year to clean up even a very small selection of around 1,800 priority sites in Europe (including airports, military bases, and factories using or emitting PFAS), in the least costly scenario. Another billion will be needed for manufacturers of PFAS-coated wrapping products associated, known for industrial waste spreading. In Rastatt, in the state of Baden-Württemberg, Germany, tonnes of PFAS-steeped compost from paper products have contaminated hundreds of hectares of land and water resources.

"It's best to clean up or contain the soil as quickly as possible, before PFAS spreads to all water resources," insisted Arp. Sometimes, however, it's already too late. In the Netherlands, near the town of Utrecht, PFAS scattered in the soil near a former barracks contaminated a water table.

The authorities will spend 10 years and €22 million cleaning up the soil and groundwater to prevent the plume of pollutants from reaching drinking water wells.

Polluter pays, the possibility for reparation

To which address should the bill for this unprecedented clean-up operation in Europe be sent? "If the polluter pays principle is not applied, the financial burden of the additional drinking water treatment required will be passed on to the consumer," warned Loebel of EurEau. In the absence of any contribution from the firms responsible for pollution, each European household would have to pay €450 a year to clean up the TFA in their immediate environment, according to our estimates. There are significant local variations, depending on the extent of the damage - far from always being identified.

In Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Sweden and even France, legal actions against polluters are multiplying. Utilities are demanding reimbursement of sanitation costs and citizens' collectives are claiming damages. But these lawsuits will take years to reach their conclusion: The guilty companies are sometimes difficult to identify or have left the country - like Miteni, which closed its plant in Trissino, Italy, to reopen in India.

to be continued...



And the full text
of the articles are
[available at:](#)





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Vince Beiser,
Canada

Vince Beiser is an award-winning journalist and author who has reported from more than over 100 countries.

He has exposed conditions in California's harshest prisons, trained with US Army soldiers, ridden with the first responders to natural disasters, and hunted down other stories from around the world for major publications.

*His latest book, *Power Metal: The Race for the Resources That Will Shape the Future* investigates how the materials we need for digital technology and renewable energy are causing environmental havoc and political upheaval.*

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EXCELLENCE
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By Vince
Beiser

Editor's Note

Recycling of electronic waste can help solve the climate crisis, but it comes at a price says Vince Beiser. His report, based on visits to scrapyards and garbage dumps as well as numerous interviews with experts, shines a light on the challenges of the energy transition. Without recycling, he warns, there will be more mining and yet more pollution. It's not just an issue about science and money. There are also human costs. Recycling may not be a silver bullet, he concludes, but his story helps us all better understand why we need a sustainable future.

Introduction

This 6,000-word feature explores the complicated potential, and perils, of electronic waste recycling as a means to help solve the climate crisis and is based on my reporting from Lagos, Nigeria, where Beiser visited scrapyards, garbage dumps and electronic street markets, as well as in-depth research and interviews with industry experts, academics, and others.

It shines a light on the hard environmental trade-offs implicit in the energy transition, scientific successes and limitations, and the ways our lifestyle choices factor into this complex system. Worldwide, only about 22 percent of e-waste is collected and recycled. The rest is dumped, burned, or forgotten.

All told, that adds up to over \$60 billion in recoverable metals like copper, cobalt and lithium going to waste each year—metals desperately needed for everything from EV batteries, wind turbines, and solar panels to smartphones and laptops. Without more recycling, the “clean” energy transition will continue to drive more mining, with all the pollution and devastation that comes with it. Developing countries offer surprising lessons.

In Nigeria, for example, thousands of people make a living mining those discarded devices for the critical metals that are essential to both our digital lives and the clean energy transition. In Lagos, he spent time with young e-waste scrappers scavenging for parts in a sprawling open-air computer market. They sell those finds to a local entrepreneur who has built a thriving business exporting digital detritus, rich in metals, to buyers in China and Europe.

Nigeria's informal recycling sector recycles up to 75 percent of its e-waste—a far higher rate than in the US, where fewer than one in six phones is recycled. But this ef-

ficiency comes at serious costs to local people and their environment. In Lagos' Katangua dumpsite, where barefoot children scurry over towering trash piles, Beiser watched workers burning plastic off wires to recover copper and smelting aluminum in open-air furnaces, spewing toxic fumes into the air.

There are cleaner alternatives. But they also face obstacles. Companies like the Dutch startup Closing the Loop offer safer and more environmentally sound e-waste recycling. However, it turns out that clean recycling is expensive, difficult to scale, and bedevilled by practical issues like exploding used lithium batteries. The bottom line: Recycling is not a silver bullet. There is no single, simple solution to the problem of where to get the critical metals required for the energy transition.

To build a truly sustainable future, we need to think beyond merely replacing fossil fuels with renewables. We need to reshape our relationship to energy and natural resources altogether. Much has been written about the environmental impacts of e-waste recycling in developing countries like Nigeria, but the other side of the story—the unexpected lessons that recyclers in the developing world hold for those of us in richer countries—are far less known. This piece highlights a range of ways in which, as individuals or as entire countries, we can work toward a more sustainable future. The piece was reprinted in *Wired* and *Canada's National Observer*.

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A \$60 billion-a-year Climate Solution is Sitting in Our Junk Drawers

I meet Baba Anwar in a crowded, chaotic market in the city of Lagos, Nigeria. He claims he's in his early 20s, but he looks 15 or 16. Maybe all of 5 feet tall, he's wearing plastic flip-flops, shorts, and a filthy "Surf Los Angeles" T-shirt and clutching a printed circuit board from a laptop computer, which he says he found in a trash bin. That's Anwar's job, scrounging for discarded electronics in Ikeja Computer Village, one of the world's biggest and most hectic marketplaces for used, repaired, and refurbished electronic products.

The market fills blocks and blocks of narrow streets, all swarming with people jostling for access to hundreds of tiny stalls and storefronts offering to sell, repair, or accessorize digital machinery—laptops, printers, cellphones, hard drives, wireless routers, and every variety of adapter and cable needed to run them. The cacophony of a thousand open-air negotiations is underlaid with the rumbling of diesel generators, the smell of their exhaust mixing with the aroma of fried foods hawked by sidewalk vendors. Determined motorcyclists and women in brightly colored dresses carrying trays of little buns on their heads thread their way through the crowds.

It's no place for an in-depth conversation, but with the help of my translator, local journalist Bukola Adebayo, I gather that Anwar arrived here about a year before from his deeply impoverished home state of Kano. "No money at home," he explains. In Lagos, a pandemoniac megalopolis of more than 15 million, he shares a room with a couple of friends from home, also e-waste scrappers. On a good day, he says, he can make as much as 10,000 naira—about \$22 at the time of my visit.

Thousands of Nigerians make a meager living recycling e-waste, a broad category that can consist of just about any discarded item with a plug or a battery. This includes the computers, phones, game controllers, and other digital devices that we use and ditch in ever-growing volumes. The world generates more than 68 million tons of e-waste every year, according to the UN, enough to fill a convoy of trucks stretching right around the equator. By 2030, the total is projected to reach 75 million tons.

Only 22 percent of that e-waste is collected and recycled, the UN estimates. The rest is dumped, burned, or forgotten—particularly in rich countries, where most people have no convenient way to get rid of their old Samsung Galaxy phones, Xbox controllers, and myriad other gadgets.

Indeed, every year, humanity is wasting more than \$60 billion worth of so-called critical metals—the ones we need not only for electronics, but also for the hardware of renewable energy, from electric vehicle (EV) batteries to wind turbines.

A \$60 Billion-a-Year Climate Solution Is Sitting in Our Junk Drawers Millions of Americans, like me, spend their workdays on pursuits that lack any physical manifestation beyond the occasional hard-copy book or memo or report. It's easy to forget that all these livelihoods rely on machines. And that those machines rely on metals torn from the Earth.

Consider your smartphone. Depending on the model, it can contain up to two-thirds of the elements in the periodic table, including dozens of metals. Some are familiar, like the gold and tin in its circuitry and the nickel in its microphone. Others less so: Tiny flecks of indium make the screen sensitive to the touch of a finger. Europium enhances the colors. Neodymium, dysprosium, and terbium are used to build the tiny mechanism that makes your phone vibrate.

Your phone's battery contains cobalt, lithium, and nickel. Ditto the ones that power your rechargeable drill, Roomba, and electric toothbrush—not to mention our latest modes of transportation, ranging from plug-in scooters and e-bikes to EVs. A Tesla Model S has as much lithium as up to 10,000 smartphones.

The millions of electric cars and trucks hitting the planet's roads every year don't spew pollutants directly, but they've got a monstrous appetite for electricity, nearly two-thirds of which still comes from burning fossil fuels—about one-third from coal. Harvesting more of our energy from sunlight and wind, as crucial as that is, entails its own Faustian bargain. Capturing, transmitting, storing, and using that cleaner power requires vast numbers of new machines: wind turbines, solar panels, switching stations, power lines, and batteries large and small.

You see where this is going. Our clean energy future, this global drive to save humanity from the ever-worsening ravages of global warming, depends on critical metals. And we'll be needing more.

A lot more.

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In all of human history, we have extracted some 700 million tons of copper from the Earth. To meet our clean energy goals, we'll have to mine as much again in 20-odd years. By 2050, the International Energy Agency estimates, global demand for cobalt for EVs alone will soar to five times what it was in 2022. Demand for nickel will be 10 times higher. Lithium, 15 times. "The prospect of a rapid increase in demand for critical minerals—well above anything seen previously in most cases—raises huge questions about the availability and reliability of supply," the agency warns.

Metals are natural products, but the Earth does not relinquish them willingly. Mining conglomerates rip up forests and grasslands and deserts, blasting apart the underlying rock and soil and hauling out the remains. The ore is processed, smelted, and refined using gargantuan, energy-guzzling, pollution-spewing machines and oceans of chemicals. "Mining done wrong can A \$60 Billion-a-Year Climate Solution Is Sitting in Our Junk Drawers leave centuries of harm," says Aimee Boulanger, head of the Initiative for Responsible Mining Assurance, which works with companies to develop more sustainable extraction practices.

The harm is staggering. Metal mining is America's leading toxic polluter. It has sullied the watersheds of almost half of the rivers in the American West. Chemical leaks and mining runoff foul air and water. The mines also generate mountains of hazardous waste, stored behind dams that have a terrifying tendency to fail. Torrents of poisonous sludge pouring through collapsed tailings dams have contaminated waterways in Brazil, Canada, and elsewhere and killed hundreds of people—in addition to the hundreds, possibly thousands, of miners who die in workplace accidents each year.

To get what they're after, mining companies devour natural resources on an epic scale. **They dig up some 250 tons of ore and waste rock to get just 1 ton of nickel.** For copper, the ratio is double that. Just to obtain the metals inside your 4.5-ounce iPhone, 75 pounds of ore had to be pulled up, crushed, and smelted, releasing up to 100 pounds of carbon dioxide. Mining firms also suck up massive quantities of water and deploy fleets of drill rigs, trucks, diggers, and other heavy machinery that collectively belch out up to 7 percent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions.

These operations are not popular with the neighbors.irate locals and Indigenous communities at this moment are fighting proposed critical-metal mines across the United States, in addition to Brazil, Canada, the Philippines, Serbia, and many other countries. At least 320 anti-mining activists have been killed worldwide since 2012—and they are just the ones we know about.

All this said ... I was surprised to learn that the mining industry no longer gets away—not easily, anyway—with much of the nasty behavior it has been known for. Some collateral dam-

*Every year, humanity is wasting more than **\$60 billion worth** of so-called critical metals—the ones we need not only for electronics, but also for the hardware of renewable energy, from electric vehicle (EV) batteries to wind turbines.*

age is inevitable, but a growing awareness of the industry's history of human rights abuses and dirty environmental practices—as well as public pressure on consumer-facing companies like Apple and Tesla to clean up their supply chains—has made for some real improvements in how big mining firms operate.

Yet even these beneficial developments come with an asterisk: In the 1950s, it took three or four years to bring a new copper mine online in the United States. Now the average wind-up is 16 years. "The long lead times for new mining projects pose a serious challenge to scaling up production fast enough to meet growing mineral demand for clean energy technologies," the International Energy Agency warned in 2022.

If this demand can't be met, the agency added, nations will fail "to achieve the goals in the Paris Agreement," the 2016 UN treaty aimed at limiting global warming to 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels (and from which President-elect Donald Trump has vowed to withdraw—again—during his second term). And then we're really in trouble.

A \$60 Billion-a-Year Climate Solution Is Sitting in Our Junk Drawers It's a vexing conundrum. In my reporting, I have talked to a wide range of people who are deeply and justifiably concerned about the threats our new mining frenzy will pose to the environment.

While acknowledging their fears, I would always ask, "Yes, but what's the alternative?" Their answer, almost always, was, "Recycling!"

That may sound straightforward. It isn't. Metal recycling is a completely different proposition from recycling the paper and glass we toss into our home bins for pickup. It turns out that retrieving valuable raw materials sustainably from electronic products—toasters, iPhones, power cables—is a fiendishly complex endeavor, requiring many steps carried out in many places.

Manufacturing those products required a multistep international supply chain. Recycling them requires a reverse supply chain almost as complicated. Part of the problem is that our devices typically contain only a small amount of any given metal.

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A \$60 Billion-a-Year Climate Solution Is Sit- ting in Our Junk Drawers. *It's a vexing conundrum*

In developing countries, though, there are lots of people willing to put in the time and effort required to recover that little bit of value—an estimated tens of thousands of e-waste scavengers in Nigeria alone. Some go door to door with pushcarts, offering to take or even buy unwanted electronics. Others, like Anwar, work the secondhand markets, buying bits of broken gear from small businesses or rescuing them from the trash. Many scavengers earn less than the international poverty wage of about \$2.15 per day.

I ask Anwar where he's planning to take his circuit board. "To TJ," he replies, as if I'd asked him what color the sky is. TJ is Tijjani Abubakar, an entrepreneur who has built a thriving business turning unwanted electronics into cash. His third-floor office, in a dingy concrete building across a roaring four-lane road from the Ikeja market, is a charnel house of dead mobile phones. At one end of the long, crowded room, two skinny young men with screwdrivers pull phone after phone from a sack and crack them like walnuts. Their practiced fingers pull out the green printed circuit boards and toss them with a clatter onto a growing heap at their feet.

Thousands of such boards gleam flatly under the glaring LED ceiling lights. More young men sit around on plastic stools sorting them into piles and pulling aside those with the most valuable chips. The air is thick with sweat despite the open windows.

At a scuffed wooden desk sits Abubakar himself—a big man with a steady demeanor, lordly in an embroidered brown caftan, red cap, and crisp beard. I await an audience as he fields calls and messages on three different phones and a laptop while negotiating a deal with a couple of visiting traders over an unlabeled bottle of something.

Abubakar, who looks to be in his mid-40s, has been in the trade nearly 20 years. He, too, hails from Kano, where his father sold clothes—"not a rich man," he tells me in his even baritone. He earned a business degree from a local university and made his way to Lagos, where a friend A \$60 Billion-a-Year Climate Solution Is Sitting in Our Junk Drawers introduced him to the e-waste business. "We started small, small, small, small," he says. But getting a foothold was easier then. Scrap was cheap, even free, because few people were willing to pay for it. Then, as the trade mushroomed, deep-pocketed foreign buyers—from India, Lebanon, and, above all, China—began flocking to Nigeria in search of deals.

"Now everybody knows the prices," Abubakar says. But his business has flourished. He exports several shipping containers full of e-waste every month to buyers in China and Europe. He's grown wealthy enough to donate textbooks, meals, and cows

to families back in Kano. Dead cellphones converted into education and food. Trash into possibilities.

Abubakar handles all manner of e-waste, but the phones are his specialty. There is just shy of one mobile account for every one of Nigeria's 220 million people. "What do I see here?" he asks, indicating his roomful of workers. "I don't know whether any of these people have a computer.

But I know all of them have a phone." And all of those phones will one day wear out, malfunction, or get tossed by someone eager for a newer model. In 2022, an estimated 5.3 billion mobile phones were discarded worldwide. If you put them end to end, they'd reach almost to the moon and back.

Abubakar deploys a vast network of buyers and pickers to source spent phones from Nigeria and neighboring countries, and occasionally as far away as France. They arrive by truck, train, and in sacks carried by people like Anwar. These precisely engineered products were manufactured in sophisticated, high-tech factories under ultra-clean conditions. Here, they are eviscerated by hand on a grimy concrete pad.

Abubakar estimates he has about 5,000 workers bringing in millions of phones each year. When I express polite skepticism, he rises and gestures for me to follow. A door in the back of the office leads into a warren of rooms filled either with enormous sacks stuffed with phones, people cracking and sorting phones, or bales of circuit boards ready for shipping.

The most desirable components are those circuit boards, etched with copper and often precious metals, including gold, that carry signals among the soldered-on chips and capacitors. The chips are removed for assessment. If they still work, they can be sold for use in refurbished phones.

Abubakar shows me a lunch bag-sized sack of Android chips with serial numbers so tiny I can barely make them out. "This bag is worth around \$35,000," he says. A sack of phone cameras—consisting of the lens you see from the outside attached to a strip of metal foil on the inside—is also valuable. Abubakar trains security cameras on his workers to discourage pilfering. He fired someone the week before for stealing chips, he tells me.

None of the phones were made in Nigeria, and their remains won't stay here either. Extracting the metals therein requires sophisticated and expensive equipment that no facility in Africa has, so Abubakar sells to recyclers in China and Western Europe that do.

to be continued...

In developing countries, though, there are lots of people willing to put in the time and effort required to recover that little bit of value—an estimated tens of thousands of e-waste scavengers in Nigeria alone. Some go door to door with pushcarts, offering to take or even buy unwanted electronics.

The full article can be found [here](#):





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Oliver Laughland, Sara Sneath, Will Craft USA

Oliver Laughland is the Guardian's southern bureau chief and investigations correspondent based in New Orleans.

He leads enterprise coverage of the US south with a focus on environmental justice, criminal justice and civil rights.

He has won numerous national journalism awards in the US, UK and Australia including three Edward R Murrow Awards, two Amnesty International human rights awards and the Scripps Howard award.

He was profiled in the Emmy-nominated HBO documentary 'Endangered', which examined press freedom threats in the US, Mexico and Brazil.

Sara Sneath is a climate reporter investigating the fossil fuel as a journalist-in-residence with the University of Miami's Climate Accountability Lab.

She served in the US Marine Corps and used her Post-9/11 GI Bill to pay for college, where she earned degrees in journalism and sociology.

She writes about communities on the frontlines of climate change, offshore drilling and oil and gas industry disinformation.

She was a member of the team that won the Society of Environmental Journalists' Kevin Carmody Award for Outstanding Investigative Reporting in 2020.

The huge US Toxic fire shrouded in secrecy: 'I taste oil in my mouth.'

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**Oliver
Laughland,
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**The huge US
Toxic fire
shrouded
in secrecy:
'I taste oil
in my mouth.'
Guardian
investigation
fuels class
action
lawsuit
against petro
giant**

Editor's Note

Recycling of electronic waste can help solve the climate crisis, but it comes at a price says Vince Beiser. His report, based on visits to scrapyards and garbage dumps as well as numerous interviews with experts, shines a light on the challenges of the energy transition. Without recycling, he warns, there will be more mining and yet more pollution. It's not just an issue about science and money. There are also human costs. Recycling may not be a silver bullet, he concludes, but his story helps us all better understand why we need a sustainable future.

Introduction

When a sprawling oil refinery in the heart of Louisiana's "Cancer Alley" region caught fire in August 2023, state and corporate officials reassured the public with a common refrain: there were "no offsite impacts" detected. But a nine-month investigation by the Guardian and the multi-disciplinary research group Forensic Architecture revealed an entirely different story. This huge accident at the Marathon petroleum facility – one of the largest oil refineries in the world – had caused significant harm, hidden from public sight, in one of the most polluted communities in the United States.

On the basis of dozens of witness interviews, company and government documents, alongside satellite imagery and 3D particle simulations, this reporting revealed how dangerous concentrations of known carcinogens such as benzene lingered in the air long after evacuation orders were lifted, leading to reports from many residents of severe health consequences.

The reporting found the disaster had lasted over four days and was one of the largest accidental releases of hazardous chemicals ever recorded by the federal government. A picture also emerged of a lackluster response by local emergency management, prompting allegations of negligence.

The investigation combined traditional shoe leather reporting with globally pioneering spatial and fluid dynamics analysis, open source research, and 3D modeling to produce a minute by minute written narrative of the leak and resulting fire. In consultation with mechanical engineering experts at Imperial College, London, we also produced a simulation of the smoke and chemical plume caused by the waxing and waning fire on the ground, drawing from detailed and dynamic meteorological data.

The reporting and interactive reconstruction relied heavily on dozens of documents including company memos, state police reports, internal emails, medical records, and hundreds of 911 calls, all obtained by public records requests. It also leaned on in-depth interviews with residents living in close proximity to the refinery,

and their personal photographs and videos, which were geo-located and incorporated into our simulation and timelines. The reporting had an instant impact. The US Environmental Protection Agency launched a Clean Air Act compliance investigation into the oil giant's handling of the fire and other recent accidents after we sent the agency a series of questions outlining our findings. A class action lawsuit involving thousands of impacted residents also draws extensively from our reporting. The plaintiffs cited this work and analysis – and the records it revealed – throughout their amended complaint.

The new complaint in US District Court in eastern Louisiana said: "Plaintiffs only recently learned that Marathon 'shrouded in secrecy' the August 25, 2023, chemical release and fire at the Refinery, as investigative journalists uncovered and reported to the public for the first time on September 9, 2024, the affirmative steps that Marathon took to "minimiz[e] the episode in its reporting to both federal and state governments."

Lawyers for the plaintiffs said they believe the suit will result in further transparency for community and potential protocol changes for future accidents. The investigation not only uncovered significant discrepancies in Marathon's reporting of the accident to both federal and state authorities; it revealed a delayed and insufficient response by emergency managers, followed by a premature lifting of the local evacuation order, encouraging many to return home before it was safe. And it placed this large incident, part of a long history of hazardous accidents in the "Cancer Alley" region, within a political context where the future of environmental regulation hung in the balance as a presidential election rapidly approached.

The Guardian's sustained reporting in the "Cancer Alley" region, which began in 2019, has reached global environmental justice audiences. It has been cited in federal civil rights complaints in the US, in applications made to the United Nations, featured in prominent documentary films. It has been named by Greenpeace as some of the best environmental journalism in the world, and won a number of prominent national and international reporting awards.

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Published in "The Guardian" (in partnership with Forensic Architecture)

The huge US Toxic fire shrouded in secrecy

Louisianans say a major accident at a sprawling Marathon refinery caused health issues. The company insists there were 'no offsite impacts'

At 8.04am on 25 August last year, Darnell Alboudoor watched a plume of black smoke blanketing the sky and rolling in the direction of her family home.

A stench like burning oil filled the air on that piping hot summer morning, as Alboudoor, 54, looked in the direction of the sprawling petroleum refinery, which sat a few hundred feet from her back yard. She called 911.

"I'm just wondering what's going on over there," she told the operator. "Nobody tells us nothing."

"They're handling it," the operator responded. "Nothing to worry about." There was no need to evacuate, Alboudoor was told, as she expressed her concerns over the fumes.

"I just want to know why we weren't aware of this," Alboudoor said. "Why are we just finding out about it now?"

Unbeknown to Alboudoor and the thousands of other south-east Louisiana residents who lived next door, the facility had been leaking for more than 13 hours. A storage tank containing at least 26,000 barrels of the flammable hydrocarbon naphtha had been on fire for about an hour and a half.

Twenty-six minutes before Alboudoor's 911 call, a state environment official had recorded an alarmingly high reading of toxic air pollutants at a location on the plant's fence line. But there had been no alert. No blaring sirens. No word from local emergency responders.

It was an example, residents and experts say, of the embedded culture of secrecy surrounding the hundreds of chemical plants and refineries that dominate the heavily polluted region between New Orleans and Baton Rouge known as "Cancer Alley".

The facility, operated by the oil giant Marathon Petroleum, is

the third largest refinery in the US, strategically situated near the Gulf of Mexico and along the banks of the Mississippi River. Its importance to the multibillion-dollar corporation, and purportedly to Louisiana's economy, has largely overpowered the concerns of the communities that sit a stone's throw from its stacks.

Residents of these lower-income, historically Black neighborhoods have been caught in the middle of a political tug-of-war. The Biden-Harris administration has sought tougher enforcement in the region, while the state, under the leadership of Donald Trump's far-right allies, has pushed back in favor of industry – making the outcome of the 2024 presidential race all the more important to people who live in the Marathon fenceline communities of Garyville, Lions and Reserve.

Marathon and local government officials have maintained that "no offsite impacts" were detected during the entire four-day episode, citing company, state and third-party air monitoring.

But interviews and a review of an array of records by the Guardian in collaboration with the multidisciplinary research group Forensic Architecture – including air-monitoring data, police reports, 911 calls, videos and photographs captured by residents, satellite imagery, 3D simulations, medical records and internal emails – have raised significant doubts about official and company claims. They also reveal how the petroleum giant may have minimized the episode in its reporting to both federal and state governments.

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) data indicates that the leak and the fire, which blazed over three days, produced one of the largest accidental releases of flammable chemicals since 1994, when the agency began monitoring such hazardous facility incidents across the US.

Eleven of the 17 residents interviewed in Garyville, Lions and Reserve told the Guardian they experienced symptoms associated with chemical exposure, including breathing problems, migraines, burning eyes and sore throats. Some sought medical attention and one later became critically ill, linking his symptoms to the fire.

The St John parish government did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Marathon did not respond to a series of detailed questions, but said in a statement that it operated its facilities "with the highest commitment to the safety and health of our workers and the community". The company said this included working with and notifying "regulatory authorities and other stakeholders during and after an incident with integrity".

Forty-five minutes after Alboudoor's 911 call, a second

Unbeknown to Alboudoor and the thousands of other south-east Louisiana residents who lived next door, the facility had been leaking for more than 13 hours.

A storage tank containing at least 26,000 barrels of the flammable hydrocarbon naphtha had been on fire for about an hour and a half.

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storage tank containing 40,000 barrels of diesel would also be up in flames. A National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration satellite captured images of the smoke cloud from space. Emergency-response officials continued to tell concerned residents that all was under control, according to a review of 175 emergency calls made during the fire and released under a public records request.

The principal at a nearby high school called in at 8.19am: "I'm trying to find out if it will affect our school in any way."

"We're not hearing anything about it being a threat to anyone," the dispatcher replied.

A resident in Garyville called at 9.49am: "So the Marathon plant on fire is not a threat to nobody or what?"

"No, ma'am," the operator responded.

Residents would not be instructed to evacuate until later that morning – 16 hours after the refinery first reported the leak.

Andrew Sterling, 74, remembered his childhood in Garyville, a few decades before the oil and chemical plants arrived. Then, the 3,500-acre plot on which Marathon currently stands was covered by sugar cane fields on the grounds of the old plantation named San Francisco. Sterling would go hunting and crawfishing with his father on the land.

The Marathon refinery came online in 1977. It later became one of the company's most valuable assets, with a capacity to process more than half a million barrels of crude oil a day – a key contributor to Marathon's status as the largest refiner in the country with a net income of \$9.7bn last year alone. It was the last large petroleum refinery constructed in the US.

It has also left many residents concerned about the fumes and stench that emanate from across the fence line. The communities of Garyville and Lions are exposed to more toxic pollution, released by Marathon and the many other industrial plants in the area, than 99% of the US, according to a Guardian analysis of three decades of chemical-release data that the EPA requires industrial facilities to report.

Sterling, who worked as a contractor at the facility for more than a decade until 2004, was diagnosed with cancer in 2012, and he blames his illness on the toxins he was exposed to during his employment, and his lifelong status as a fenceline resident.

On the first day of the fire, he awoke at around 9am and walked out to his front porch.

"It was black," he said of the sky.
"Everything was black."

He retreated inside, but within a few hours the smell of burning oil had made its way into his home, via the air conditioning that was turned on out of necessity. By 10am the outside temperature had already reached 92F (33C) – it was a summer of record-breaking heat and wildfires throughout Louisiana. His eyes began to burn, he recalled. He started coughing.

Still, no instructions from local authorities or the parish president, who, under the parish's emergency operations plan – which was released to the Guardian under a public records request – holds "overall responsibility for the protection of the health, safety and welfare of residents" during an emergency.

Two blocks east, Sterling's longtime friend Warren Glass Jr, 73, who has emphysema, recalled taking puffs on his inhaler and a portable oxygen machine he kept indoors. He started coughing and described a greasy feeling on his skin. The fire reminded him of his military service. "I thought I was back in Vietnam, in the combat zone," he said. "The smell. The sky, lighting up."

At 10.30am, the parish had finally announced a two-mile evacuation order as the fire blazed.

"We are being assured that all of the impacts are contained to the Marathon site at this time," said the St John parish president, Jaclyn Hotard, addressing reporters at a news conference. She described the move as "a precautionary measure".

The parish had opened two evacuation centers at nearby schools, and provided a number for residents to call for transportation.

But the message did not filter down to many of the roughly 2,100 residents in the evacuation zone.

At 10.57am, one of Sterling's neighbors, Rhonda Ray, was driving home from work at a nearby restaurant. Her eyes had begun to itch and she felt a growing panic as she thought about what might happen next.

Ray did not have the money to put more fuel in her car so she could evacuate. Glass owned no car at all. Both felt they had no option but to stay put. Ray shut herself indoors and drew the blinds, watching updates on the local news. Fumes began to creep into her home.

"I'm a pretty strong person," she recalled. "I probably just tried not to think about them."

Ovidio Martinez and his partner, Annette Chelette, returned to their home at around 4pm – surprised to see a towering fire with a thick black plume still raging about 1,000ft from their back yard..



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News of the order did not reach other residents in Garyville for about another hour, when police trucks rolled down the street blaring orders to evacuate.

Sterling and his wife, Annette, left after hearing them, just before noon. His migraines grew more intense and he continued coughing, he said.

At 11.44am, around the time the couple evacuated, a 911 caller across the river in the town of Edgard – outside the evacuation zone – also reported problems.

"I'm having trouble with breathing," she told the dispatcher as she coughed into the phone and experienced nausea. "I taste oil in my mouth." An ambulance was dispatched.

A 3D simulation of the fire's smoke plume – created by Forensic Architecture in collaboration with mechanical engineering experts at Imperial College London – used computational fluid dynamics, a digital model of fluid movement, along with data from a local weather station and images shot by local media and citizens, to show the plume's growth and movement. The model suggests the plume from the Marathon fire grew to over a mile high (2km tall) and drifted in different directions throughout the first day.

At around the time the 911 caller in Edgard reported the taste of oil, the plume had begun a full 360-degree rotation, extending over the river and towards the town.

Sterling would also seek medical help the following day as his symptoms persisted, records show.

The parish hospital where both Sterling and the 911 caller in Edgard received treatment saw 18 patients in relation to the fire. All were discharged, a spokesperson said. Another area hospital run by Ochsner, the state's largest medical provider, treated 11 patients. A spokesperson could provide no further details, citing patient privacy. A spokesperson for the

Acadian ambulance service said several firefighters were treated on site for "heat-related issues".

Nonetheless, Marathon and local government officials maintained that all impacts from the fire were contained within the refinery's perimeter. In an accident report to the EPA, the company declared the event led to evacuations of 2,800 people but no known hospitalizations or medical treatments.

Sterling continued to worry about what he had inhaled and what he had seen. He believed it was the largest accident

he had ever witnessed at the petroleum refinery nextdoor but there was no immediate way to know.

"They treat us Black folks like shit," he said. "They don't hire us, but we have to inhale all their shit."

Despite the scale of the fire, the evacuation order issued by local officials lasted less than four hours.

Two schools that later evacuated had been allowed to start their classes as the chemical fire raged. A veterans home about one mile west had begun emptying its residents, but emails show the effort was halted at about 1.37pm and residents were rerouted home.

By 2.15pm on 25 August, emails show, Marathon had briefed the state's emergency response coordinator that one tank fire had been fully extinguished and they expected the second "very small fire" to be extinguished within 30 minutes.

"All clear," the official wrote to the Louisiana's office of homeland security – based on Marathon's briefing.

Ovidio Martinez and his partner, Annette Chelette, returned to their home at around 4pm – surprised to see a towering fire with a thick black plume still raging about 1,000ft from their back yard.

The couple live in Lions, a once-thriving township that has dwindled to a sliver of land hemmed in between Marathon to the west and a large grain elevator operated by the global food giant Cargill to the east.

The community diminished to just four households around 2010, after Marathon completed a \$3.9bn expansion plan that almost doubled the refinery's capacity. The oil giant has gradually bought residents out of their land as the facility expanded.

Martinez, who has proudly lived in Lions since 1974 and refused to take a buyout, had evacuated with his partner and their four-month-old great-granddaughter early in the morning, but said they were told by authorities it was safe to return. *"I didn't feel safe," Martinez recalled. "We took a chance coming back."*

By that afternoon, local and refinery firefighters had already used thousands of gallons of C6 suppressant foam, according to a state police report. The foam contains PFAS "forever chemicals" and is being phased out in states like California due to long-term health and contamination concerns.

to be continued...

Ovidio Martinez and his partner, Annette Chelette, returned to their home at around 4pm – surprised to see a towering fire with a thick black plume still raging about 1,000ft from their back yard..

The full article can be found [here](#):



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**Alejandro Melgoza Rocha,
Omar Sánchez de Tagle, Mexico**
The wood mafia in the Mayan jungle

Introduction

This investigation focused on timber trafficking in the second most important jungle corridor in Latin America, shared by Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize.

Mexico is the country that has invested the least in the protection of this biological corridor, home to endangered species like the jaguar. This report arises from earlier work exposing timber trafficking in the Mayan Rainforest. At that time, park rangers mentioned that seizure records were not systematic and that timber was constantly disappearing from the authorities' institutional yards, either through alleged theft by officials or forcibly recovered by organized crime.

This idea was left unresolved and unproven. Between 2023 and 2024, in the N+Focus investigative journalism demonstrated the amount of wood that had disappeared from the authorities' institutional yards, the modus operandi for its disappearance, and the structure that was operating the wood trafficking in the area.

In this context, the investigation was conducted over a period of one year and two months using a methodology used in judicial and environmental settings. In addition to traditional reporting, 185 information requests were made through the National Transparency Platform to dozens of public institutions.

The fieldwork then presented other challenges: a reporter had to travel 580 kilometers over 22 days within the Mayan Jungle, through roads and biosphere reserves commonly occupied by organized crime groups that smuggle drugs, people, and natural resources illegally. Reporting within the Mayan Jungle involved the use of bulletproof vests, instruments, and tools, as well as a security protocol to guarantee human safety.

This was an uncontrolled space, and therefore, the possibility of encountering organized crime members was high. The investigation showed that the Mexican government "lost" 92 percent of the timber seized at official environmental authority facilities (432,000 tons), and that this timber allegedly returned via an illegal route; all of this between 2001 and 2023; and it also demonstrated that the criminal timber trafficking network in southeastern Mexico consisted of more than 40 links to illegally traffic timber through customs.

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By
**Alejandro
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**The wood
mafia
in the Mayan
jungle**

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**580 kilometers over
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crime groups that
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and natural resources
illegally.*

Following publication, just two days later, federal environmental authorities launched a national strategy in November 2024 with operations deployed in all 32 states to secure sawmills, seize illegal timber, and issue arrest warrants against alleged criminals linked to timber trafficking.

Over these 13 years, and especially with this investigation, it has become clear that the legal implications in courts and government offices that are the way to impact the system and its criminal and corrupt networks. It's not enough to report on the ground; it's enough to report on both sides, with a fair balance.

The coverage here focused on timber trafficking in Latin America's second-most important jungle corridor, shared by Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize. Mexico is the country that has invested the least in protecting this biological corridor, home to endangered species like the jaguar.

The coverage was conducted over a period of one year and two months using a methodology that included judicial and environmental bodies. In addition to traditional reporting, 185 information requests were made through the National Trans-

parency Platform to dozens of public institutions. 3.

The coverage showed that the Mexican government lost 92 percent of the timber seized at official environmental authority facilities (432,000 tons), and that this timber was allegedly returned through an illegal route; all of this occurred between 2001 and 2023.

The coverage also illustrated how the criminal timber trafficking network in southeastern Mexico consisted of more than 40 links to illegally traffic timber through customs, including exporting companies, timber suppliers, administrators, invoice renters, transport facilitators, customs officers, and phytosanitary inspectors.

The reporting involved a 580-kilometer journey over 22 days within the Mayan Jungle, through roads and biosphere reserves commonly occupied by organized crime groups that smuggle drugs, people, and natural resources illegally. This reporting within the Mayan Jungle required the N+Focus team to use bulletproof vests, implement instruments and tools, and follow a security protocol to ensure human safety. This was an uncontrolled area, and therefore, there was a high possibility of encountering organized crime members.

The coverage showed that the Mexican government lost 92 % of the timber seized at official environmental authority facilities (432,000 t)

The coverage also illustrated how the criminal timber trafficking network in southeastern Mexico consisted of more than 40 links to illegally traffic timber through customs, including exporting companies, timber suppliers, administrators, invoice renters, transport facilitators, customs officers, and phytosanitary inspectors.

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**The wood
mafia
in the Mayan
jungle**

Published in "N+Focus" (Vix I Televisa-Univision)

The wood mafia in the Mayan jungle

The international trafficking of precious wood has put the Mayan Jungle reserve, a biological corridor in Mexico, Guatemala and Belize, in check. The network has operated in total impunity

Every summer, when the dry season takes over the Mayan Jungle and produces a sensation similar to that of a sauna, Milton Balseca crosses on horseback the stream that divides his town of Guatemala with the community of El Desengaño, located in the municipality of Candelaria, Campeche, in the pores of the border.

He is happy because during that season of the year he replaces the planting of beans with illegal logging, which leaves him money for the rest of the year and thus support his family. "Agriculture, you know, you have to throw the leather in the sun. And trees never fail us. When they ask you for the wood, you take it out and give it over and there is the money," he says.

Milton is a logger who has traveled the jungle for a decade. That's why he knows the ins and outs of the forest to find woods coveted by the black market. According to their calculations, in a good week they extract three thousand feet of wood - each one costs between 15 and 25 pesos, depending on the species. That is, a group of loggers, which normally is made up of 8 people, make profits of between 6 and 9,000 pesos for each. "We are very aware that trees can be 100 or 200 years old, and may God forgive us, but what we want is money," recognizes the thirty-year-old in a reckless tone while his horse gallops at the passage of the blows on an afternoon of September 18, 2023. Milton is one more inhabitant of the generations that have lived from wood. The looting began in these lands with the chicleros peasants and carpenters in the 19th century. Then, in 1963, there was an attempt to revive the economy when northern entrepreneurs moved more than 500 workers to Candelaria to modernize the region. They called it the "promised land," but nothing changed.

From the seventies and eighties, the timber mafia was born that took advantage of its proximity to Calakmul and Balamkú, natural areas that are home to expensive species in the world. "People began to classify the species between tropical, hard and precious, and it was a good activity that left money," says an ejidatario who treasures the ciricote trees in the courtyard of his house for when the times of skinny cows come.

Woods have been demanded according to the fashions of

the automotive, nautical, real estate and interior industries; for example, three decades ago the most requested was mahogany, but now what is asked are woods from the Mayan Jungle such as granadillo, ciricote, machiche and tzalam, for their shades and solidity. Since Mexico's trees were not enough to meet the illegal demand, the loggers searched for new areas in Guatemala and Belize for four years.

The loggers are just the first problem in that illegal business. In the chain he is followed by ejidatarios, forest concessionaires and timber entrepreneurs - dedicated to processing and logistics - who disguise illegal species through facade documents. Despite this, many of those woods were confiscated by the authorities, but in the end recovered by organized crime through theft or threats; through lawyers who take advantage of the legal gaps of the authority; and alleged institutional deviations. These reports of illegal logging reached the Guatemalan and Belizean park rangers, who doubled the patrols; in contrast, the Mexican administration reduced budgets for inspection and surveillance: the operations in Calakmul decreased by 70 percent with respect to the administration of the period 2012-2018.

Since then, Milton and other loggers are not afraid of authority. When they confiscate their wood, he and his colleagues almost always threaten environmental officials to return the product; or they assault the courtyards where they have it sheltered. "We know the mountain more than the law," he says.

Today this criminal network has penetrated with a sophisticated scheme: the mafia can legally or illegally recover the woods that have been confiscated and secured by the authorities. **That has caused thousands of tons of wood to be lost from the courtyards of federal and local institutions in all regions of the country, equivalent to more than 22,000 containers between 2001 and 2023, according to research conducted by N+Focus for a year and two months.**

The documents of the governments of Guatemala and Mexico, as well as testimonies compiled and about twenty days of reporting through 580 kilometers next to park rangers on the border of the Mayan Forest, reveal official and unofficial reports of robberies, favorable judgments, diversions and a network allegedly headed by four leaders of the Mayan Forest wood trafficking, until now untouchable by the authority.

The criminal cell is made up of loggers, transporters, dealers, businessmen and customs officials in Veracruz, Colima and Yucatan, according to an intelligence report from the Mexican army. Tactical follow-ups indicate that this organization exports illegal wood with facade permits through the triangulation of containers via Mexico, Thailand and China. With

These reports of illegal logging reached the Guatemalan and Belizean park rangers, who doubled the patrols; in contrast, the Mexican administration reduced budgets for inspection and surveillance: the operations in Calakmul decreased by 70 percent with respect to the administration of the period 2012-2018.

SHORT- LISTED STORIES

EXCELLENCE IN ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM

By
**Alejandro
Melgoza
Rocha,
Omar
Sánchez
de Tagle**

The wood mafia in the Mayan jungle

this preliminary information to combat international timber trafficking, the intelligence tables convened by the Mexican government started in 2019, calculated that for every 9 million cubic meters of wood that are legally sold to the market, approximately 16 million also come out illegally, according to army minutes. Today there is no achievement.

One of the main institutions that participated was the Federal Prosecutor's Office for Environmental Protection (Pro-fepa), in charge of the then prosecutor Blanca Alicia Mendoza, whose administration left the network untouchable; even in the minutes, Mendoza disdained the Mayan Forest, despite the fact that it is the second largest tropical forest in America, which it shares with Guatemala and Belize; instead it prioritized forests that are not biosphere reserves. Nor was there progress in the agreement signed in June 2022 to establish a pilot plan with mechanisms to allocate confiscated timber.

Asked about it, Semarnat did not clarify the figures of the final destinations of confiscated and insured timber. He limited himself to explaining through a questionnaire that "although the information on the destination of the insured wood is not systematized as a whole (...) the guidelines for the final destination of the confiscated goods are established." They have been dragging this problem since 2000 when the Superior Audit of the Federation (ASF) made recommendations on the subject.

In the Mayan Jungle there are dozens of park rangers fighting the mafia in a region whose deforestation amounts to 97,000 hectares of primary forest in Campeche during the last four years, according to data from Global Forest Watch. The park rangers of Belize and those of Guatemala, under the deployment of the elite team "Genesis", are two stoppers resisting the pressure of the Mexican loggers, and have managed to keep them at a line, according to their reports. "The loggers had respect for us and were left preying on the side of Balamkú and Calakmul," says Francisco Asturias, director of the group "Génesis", which was born in El Petén, Guatemala, and who sought the collaboration of the Guatemalan army in 2018 when this network wanted to take over that side of the corridor.

Ghost confiscations

The Mayan Jungle is a trinational corridor in which jaguars and tapirs migrate in zigzags throughout the area. Like wildlife routes, poachers and poachers are recorded by camera traps. The men appear with shotguns in hand. In these places are the biosphere reserves of Calakmul and Balamkú, which measure about 723,000 hectares and are considered the second largest extension of tropical forests in all of America. Localities with

a "high" degree of marginalization have been founded in their surroundings, according to last year's annual report of the Ministry of Welfare; in Candelaria they suffer from 31 percent extreme poverty. The Desengaño, belonging to that municipality, is considered by Genesis reports as a center of storage and operation of the mafia. Operations have been carried out there, according to the local Prosecutor's Office. "What is done is to submit for review," explains Renato Sales, former prosecutor of Campeche (2021-2024), about the surveillance they maintain in Escárcega, Candelaria, Calakmul, Xpujil and others.

Candelaria is characterized by the business of hydrocarbon, drug and wood trafficking, according to army reports derived from the Guacamaya Leaks filtration. Although the timber mafia operates separately: it is a niche specialized in sawing trees more than 20 meters high. In that area there are two alleged leaders known as "El Chino Ham" and "Abdul", according to the military reports of the First Environmental Protection Company, in Calakmul. The structures at its service - according to Genesis - are made up of peoples who protect themselves...

As loggers know they go unpunished, Mexican park rangers take precautions. "We continually make stops to listen to noises that are not typical of the area: chainsaws, machetes, maybe a gunshot," explains Florentino Pérez as he tours the jungle in Calakmul, where he is assigned, without weapons, or a bulletproof vest and the engine of his ATV overheated due to the lack of resources at his station.

At the Calakmul and Balamkú stations, Campeche, there are wooden logs seized without surveillance. These woods, which by regulation should be guarded in the facilities of Profepa and the Attorney General's Office (FGR), are dispersed in other institutions and abandoned in the homes of offenders due to lack of conditioned spaces, which has led to a lack of control and surveillance, causing loss throughout the country.

Profepa has registered files for seizures and seizures that account for 787 thousand cubic meters of irregular and illegal wood between 2001 and 2023 throughout the Mexican Republic. Of all these woods, 92 percent were not reported through the five legal channels to which they must be channeled; That is, the authority lost track of them, as established by an N+Focus investigation through a cross-referencing of more than 80 requests for information made to Profepa, FGR, Conanp, National Guard, National Customs Agency (Anam), Armed Forces and state prosecutors' offices. Added to the seizures and seizures are the more than 11,000 vehicles and 13,000 tools that the loggers occupy, and whose legal destination is unknown.

The states with the greatest reservations are Morelos, Tlaxcala, Campeche, Tabasco, State of Mexico and the Metropolitan

At the Calakmul and Balamkú stations, Campeche, there are wooden logs seized without surveillance.

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Zone. Meanwhile, those with zero records are those of Zacatecas, Tamaulipas, Sinaloa, Sonora, Jalisco, Guanajuato and Coahuila, most of these entities with high crime rates. "Many times they leave the wood with the offender due to lack of space and trailers," says a senior Profepa official. The inventories of seized wood that the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources (Semarnat) would have to possess by law do not exist, according to a response through transparency. The Secretariat did not respond to any questions in the questionnaire sent.

Theft or diversion

In August 2021, a group of loggers entered the Balamkú station, located about 60 kilometers from Calakmul, to steal precious woods that had been confiscated from them. It was a night when there were no park rangers or nightstands. Some 18 logs of nava, granadillo, tzalam and ciricote - according to Obdulio García, whose name was invented to protect his identity - were stolen from the Balamkú facilities run by the then local Environment Secretariat, which in 2023 became part of the federation as part of a decree.

"They easily went in and took her out. They made a hole in the nursery. It was never thoroughly investigated," accuses the former environmental official, who specifies that the seizures gradually disappear. "The wood stays and in some way it commits itself to you. "That wood begins to go missing, and it is reported." Once the thefts were completed, says Obdulio, the ministerial authority appears to accuse the park rangers. "The same law says: 'Hey, we want you to sign the documents for the wood that was reported as a safeguard.' But for this they had already been lost," he explains.

In Campeche, for example, Profepa has records for 11,266 cubic meters seized and insured. The documents obtained via the Transparency Law indicate that the destination of 75 percent of that wood is unknown.

This modus operandi of organized crime is reproduced at the national level. Currently, between 2009 and 2023, the legal fate of the wood is only known in 8 percent of the seizure files. The legal channels were those of donation, destruction, return, transfer and safeguarding, as established in article 174 of the General Law of Ecological Balance. 0.5 percent was donated to institutions, the majority to the army and navy, as well as other institutions and associations; 2 percent was returned to individuals who took refuge; and 5 percent are under protection; Of the latter, several are found in the courtyards of Profepa, federal and state prosecutor's offices, customs facilities and town halls.

Profepa pointed out that "the insured wood is under a pre-

*The Tlaxcala delegation responded that more than **100 tons of wood had been "stolen"** from the facilities, for which they reported on July 27, 2023. The door and bars were "violated" on three occasions to steal wood between July and October 2023.*

cautionary measure within an open administrative procedure, so it is not susceptible to final destination." However, Profepa fails to explain that once a procedure is resolved, the insurance must be safeguarded or released, based on Profepa's guidelines on Insured and/or Seized Assets, which do not subject the delegates to scrutiny.

That 8 percent is partially verified by Profepa. N+Focus chose two of the delegations with the greatest protections in the country -Valle de México and Tlaxcala- to carry out a public consultation and verify the existence of the seizures. Profepa requested an extension to organize the visits, but access was not authorized. The Tlaxcala delegation responded that more than 100 tons of wood had been "stolen" from the facilities, for which they reported on July 27, 2023. The door and bars were "violated" on three occasions to steal wood between July and October 2023.

These are woods that were allegedly stolen through a legal donation procedure to another country. "These are the documents that prove the donation of various protected species that were apparently sent to India," explains a request for information about this file that is part of a preliminary investigation in which no criminal action was declared through official letter 552/2024.

"An institutional deviation without a doubt," accuses a former Profepa official. Although all of this appears in requests for information, Semarnat responded to express questions in a questionnaire sent that "no theft of wood was reported or reported in the Profepa warehouse," nor were any donations.

According to the minutes, none of the donations were made outside the country. Between 2012 and 2023, the legal deputy attorney general Profepa Tlaxcala authorized this delivery of wood to the local Welfare Secretariat; and this institution today does not have documentation of them despite being the donee. More irregularities like this were reflected in the surveillance of the winery. It was run by José Antonio Merchant Barranco, owner of Comercialización y Consultoría Mecer, a company whose tenders have been for cleaning services, mostly to the Tlaxcalteca Welfare Secretariat, although its corporate purpose is the sale of medicines.

The full report can be seen [here](#)



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Anna Heikkinen, Finland
**‘The last drops of our water’:
how a mine left some
of Peru’s poorest high and dry**
Introduction

This report delivers an in-depth, cross-border investigation into the hidden environmental costs of the green transition. The story follows the global supply chain of zinc—one of the essential minerals for green transition technologies—from the mines of Peru to a major refinery in Finland.

The findings reveal that zinc mining in Peru causes devastating environmental damage and poses serious risks to the health of local communities. Yet, while the European Union and the mineral industry highlight the role of zinc in combating the climate crisis, no effective measures exist to control or mitigate the destructive impact of its extraction.

Before publication, the authors faced direct pressure from the London Metal Exchange, which attempted to dissuade them from publishing its statements.

Following publication, the Peruvian zinc giant Antamina threatened both our team and The Guardian with legal action. These responses underscore the power of this investigation and the uncomfortable truths it exposed about the global mineral industry.

Published in “The Guardian”

‘The last drops of our water’: how a mine left some of Peru’s poorest high and dry

A chilly breeze passes along the shore of Lake Contonga, 4,400 metres up in the Peruvian Andes. Julio Rimac Damian, from the nearby village of Challhuayaco, points to the mud under his feet. “All this used to be covered with water,” he says.

A canal running from the lake that is supposed to carry water to lowland villages has also run dry. Damian says the water began to disappear two years ago when a mining company started exploratory drilling in Peru’s highlands. “This is a tragedy for us,” Damian says. “We depend on these waters.”

Behind Lake Contonga lies one of the biggest zinc mines in the world: Antamina. The open-pit mine, which also produces copper, silver, lead and molybdenum, is operated by a multinational corporation owned by the huge mining companies BHP Billiton, Glencore and Teck Resources as well as the Japanese conglomerate Mitsubishi. Glencore, a key shareholder based in Switzerland, plays a dominant role in global mineral markets, while BHP is the world’s biggest miner. Antamina has been given the go-ahead by the Peruvian government to expand zinc extraction in the area, even though the Andean mountain ranges are classified as extremely vulnerable to the climate crisis by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

More than half of Peru’s glaciers have melted over the past 50 years due to global heating. Meltwater from the glaciers is the main water source for the people of the Andes, but is already in short supply. Since 2014, Peru’s zinc production has increased and the value of exports has risen by nearly 60 per cent, according to the ministry of energy and mines. The country has the world’s fourth-largest zinc reserves, traditionally exploited for the automotive and construction industries.

However, the new zinc boom is fuelled by the surge in

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demand for green energy technology. Zinc is used to produce batteries, solar panels and windmills as it protects them from corrosion. Demand for it has recently soared, especially in the wind energy sector.

According to the International Energy Agency, the green transition is driving "unprecedented growth" in the minerals market. Although zinc is not yet at the top of the market, it is expected to see one of the biggest rises among green minerals. In 2022, the market price of zinc hit historic highs – \$4,500 a tonne (£3,650).

The World Bank considers zinc to be one of the most important minerals for climate action and predicts demand will increase by 200 percent by 2050. Sabina Grund, at the International Zinc Association (IZA), says: "The future of the zinc industry in the green transition looks very bright. In Europe, we expect a significant increase in zinc demand."

Peru is the world's second-largest producer of unrefined zinc after China. In 2023, most of Peru's zinc was exported to China, the US, South Korea and Spain.

In 2023, the Antamina mine, partly owned by Glencore, produced almost 36 percent of Peru's zinc, according to Peruvian customs records. Much of Europe's zinc is refined at three large smelters: the Glencore-owned Asturiana de Zinc smelter in northern Spain, Nyrstar in Belgium and the Swedish-owned Boliden Kokkola in Finland.

Peruvian zinc imported to Europe to produce low-carbon technology is mined in areas already vulnerable to the climate crisis. In October 2023, the Peruvian congress declared a state of emergency due to drought linked to the El Niño weather fluctuation. The situation was particularly bad in the Andes, where zinc mining is concentrated. Studies show that mining can exacerbate the climate crisis in glacial areas, as dust pollution can accelerate the melting of glaciers by absorbing more heat. In Chile, mining-waste ponds and road construction have exacerbated the shrinking of glaciers.

The industry also uses large amounts of water and experts say mining poses the greatest risk in areas with the least water, including Peru. "In the case of Antamina, the concession has been established in such a risk zone, as it is surrounded by key water reserves," says Karem Luque, a Peruvian biologist specialising in human and environmental health. "Water supplies are heavily affected already in the exploration stage. Drilling holes of 100-150 metres in the ground interrupts the natural courses of water that feed principal rivers."

The zinc-mining industry could reduce its environmental impact by increasing recycling, say experts. Only 29 per-

cent of the world's zinc is recycled, due to inadequate recovery systems because of a lack of economic incentives. Mining has caused other kinds of environmental damage and pollution elsewhere in Peru. "We are talking about chronic exposure of local people to different kinds of contaminants and toxic substances through air, soil and water," Luque says.

Evidence of contamination can also be found at the Antamina zinc mine. Between 2008 and 2023, the company was sanctioned over 67 environmental incidents. These included exceeding permitted limits for pollution and failing to prevent leaks from wastewater ponds.

Antamina says the company has identified the problems to avoid further environmental impacts from the mine. "None of the water bodies in the San Marcos district will be affected," the company's representative says. The Peruvian authorities have classified San Marcos as a high-risk area due to its high concentration of heavy metals. Even though it is the district surrounding Antamina, the source of the heavy metals is defined as "unknown". In January 2024, a health and environmental emergency was declared across the region and several other districts. Residents say that last year the health authorities measured concentrations of heavy metal in water sources near the mine. The results have not yet been published.

Arsenic is a highly toxic heavy metal released into the environment as a by-product of zinc extraction; exposure to high levels in water can cause cancer and other diseases. Antamina has also been questioned by the Áncash regional health authorities about allegations made by the environmental organisation Natura and residents of Huarmey about the high levels of arsenic among people living in the port, where the company stores zinc before export. The company says the presence of heavy metals "is not related to their operative processes".

The Guardian has seen the results of urine analyses of 100 residents living near the port carried out in 2023; only two of them were within permitted levels. Several samples taken from children had arsenic levels at 10 to 15 times above the permitted limits.

The exact sources of contamination are "not known". In September 2024, the Áncash regional government put forward a plan to find the sources of high levels of heavy metals, especially arsenic. Luque says transporting zinc to the port and storage facilities are probable sources of arsenic, as pollution builds up in the air and soil. Antamina's representative says these results "alone are not sufficient to identify the nature of exposure or the source" of arsenic, adding that their copper and zinc concentrates arrive at Huarmey port "through a hermetic underground pipeline and its conditions are monitored in real time". Peru's Environmental Assessment and Oversight

Peruvian zinc imported to Europe to produce low-carbon technology is mined in areas already vulnerable to the climate crisis.

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Agency (OEFA) did not respond to requests for comment about how it monitors heavy metal levels in the Huarney port area.

Last year, the EU's corporate sustainability due diligence directive was adopted but the bloc has no binding mechanisms to hold companies accountable for the environmental impacts of zinc production. Emily Iona Stewart, who heads EU relations over transition minerals at the environmental advocacy group Global Witness, says: "The current regulations are broad and only apply to the largest companies. They also do not pressure companies to make changes downstream in the production chain."

Stewart says the directive needs significant advancements to genuinely improve transparency and environmental practices in supply chains. Currently, responsible zinc production falls under a voluntary scheme run by the London Metal Exchange (LME) and the Zinc Mark, issued by Copper Mark.

Being listed as an LME brand requires companies to follow a responsible sourcing policy, which includes implementing the OECD due diligence guidance. Nicole Hanson, head of sustainability at the exchange, says: "The LME's ultimate action ... is to suspend or de-list the brand from our approved brands list." She adds: "We did have to take this action this year for many of our brands."

The European smelters Asturiana de Zinc and Boliden Kokkola, which imported Peruvian zinc in 2023, belong to the LME brand list. The list only covers smelters and refiners of zinc metal; companies extracting zinc ore or manufacturing finished zinc products are not subject to similar control. Nyrstar said it had "solid policies and due-diligence practices in place" as part of "actively pursuing" LME's responsible sourcing practices and had been awarded the Zinc Mark for four of its six zinc smelters. Mitsubishi said Antamina met international and local standards, "considers coexistence with the local environment and communities as one of its top management priorities" and addressed issues in a timely manner.

The Guardian asked nine key European green technology manufacturer about the origin of the zinc they use in production. Only three companies replied, but they refused to comment on the origin of their zinc.

In the Andean highlands, the morning sun is reflected in a green sign that stands out in the landscape. "Antamina mining area: no trespassing or animal grazing," it reads. Julio Rimac Damian says he does not oppose mining but is disappointed by how the company treats local people and the environment. "The company just says to us that the lake is drying because of climate change," he says.

Elva Cotrina Espinoza, a smallholder from Challhuayaco,

*In the department of Áncash, where the Antamina mine is located, the poverty rate reached **25 percent in 2023, a 16 percent** rise on the year before, and nearly **68,000 people** in the region live in extreme poverty. Many local residents are aware that Glencore made **\$4.3bn profit** for its shareholders that year.*

shares the same view. "It is becoming increasingly difficult to earn a living from agriculture Fertiliser prices are sky-high and there is hardly enough water," she says. "We wish the company would at least give us some economic support. There is a desperate need for an irrigation canal, but the company never shows up here."

In the department of Áncash, where the Antamina mine is located, the poverty rate reached 25 percent in 2023, a 16 percent rise on the year before, and nearly 68,000 people in the region live in extreme poverty. Many local residents are aware that Glencore made \$4.3bn profit for its shareholders that year.

"The mining profit does not end up with the communities," says Damian. "Instead, the company wants to take out the last drops of our water." This article was amended on 21 February 2025. An earlier version stated that the Zinc Mark assuring responsible production was issued by the IZA.

*In fact it is issued by the Copper Mark.
This story was produced with assistance from Journalismfund Europe*

The full report can be seen [here](#)



Isabelle Groc, Canada
**The Magic in the Mud:
Sandpipers' Migration Superfood**

Introduction

This feature story is valuable not only for its scientific significance, but also because mudflat ecosystems are increasingly threatened worldwide. Despite their ecological value, these habitats remain largely misunderstood and commonly viewed as wastelands that can be destroyed.

The protection of these ecosystems worldwide is not only critical to the survival of migrating shorebirds, but also highlights the broader ecological and human health value of marine fatty acids. Indeed, the benefits of fatty acids produced in the biofilm of mudflats are not just for birds, but pass through the food chain to the entire ecosystem, supporting many iconic species like killer whales, fish, and ultimately humans. Like shorebirds, we consume fatty acids to gain energy, boost our immune system and stay healthy.

The story draws on in-depth research, interviews with scientists, and ecological traditional knowledge, complemented by video and photography. While the Roberts Bank mudflat — a globally recognized Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA) currently threatened by a Port development project — is the focal point, the feature underscores the global importance of mudflat ecosystems for people and biodiversity.

The story has led to increased public awareness of the ecological value of these vulnerable habitats, shifting perceptions of mudflats from “wastelands” to critical components of coastal ecosystems. Readers have gained a deeper understanding of the nutritional importance of fatty acid-rich biofilm for wildlife and people, the drivers behind drastic shorebird population declines, and the interconnectedness between habitat destruction, biodiversity loss and the climate crisis.

As the sentinels of mudflats, shorebirds demonstrate the interlinked emergencies of climate change and biodiversity loss that threaten the well-being of current and future generations and make the case for better integrating nature into our response to the climate crisis.

Published in “Canadian Geographic”

**‘The Magic in the
Mud: Sandpipers’
Migration Superfood**

An invisible fuel draws thousands of tiny migrating shorebirds to the Roberts Bank mudflats each year. Now, we’re in danger of losing it forever.

It’s sunrise in mid-April on the edge of the mudflats. Armed with a spotting scope, an intensely focused man is scanning, counting. He visits the same place almost every day at this time of the year, guided by tide tables.

To most, the intertidal mudflats of Roberts Bank look like a vast, flat, barren expanse of mud. About 35 kilometres south of downtown Vancouver, the raw, rarely visited landscape would feel almost completely isolated, if not for the rail yards and the Port of Vancouver bordering the mudflats on the horizon.

But to biologist Scott Flemming, it’s more than just mud. Every spring, the mire freshly exposed by the retreating tide comes alive with a multitude of tiny, hungry visitors making high-pitched calls that mix with the sounds of the industrial activity and the wind: sandpipers.

“When I come out here, my goal is to survey the flocks that are using the whole mudflat. But I will zoom in every now and then on one specific bird and just watch that individual and think that this bird is now going to fly up to the Arctic and find a nest site,” says Flemming, who works with the Canadian Wildlife Service of Environment and Climate Change Canada. Western sandpipers migrate thousands of kilometres north along the Pacific coast from their overwintering areas as far south as Peru to their breeding grounds in Alaska. These shorebirds, weighing no more than 35 grams, stop at just a handful of places along the North American Pacific Flyway to refuel. Roberts Bank is one of these stopover sites, on the Fraser River estuary in British Columbia. A top biodiversity hotspot in Canada, it’s globally classified as an Important Bird Area.

But in 2023, the future of the mudflats was thrown into question. Despite years of protest from scientists, conservationists and community groups, the federal government conditionally approved a proposal by the Vancouver Fraser Port Authority to build a second container ship terminal at Roberts Bank, expand the existing road and rail causeway to the Delta-

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port and Westshore terminals and scoop out a deeper tug boat terminal to handle the additional shipping traffic. The added 2.4 million twenty-foot equivalent units of containers per year will nearly double the port's container capacity. On top of that, construction of the terminal would require filling in 177 hectares of intertidal mudflats at Roberts Bank, and Environment and Climate Change Canada has predicted the expansion will indirectly affect up to 558 hectares of mudflats — a habitat vital for the survival of not only sandpipers but Pacific dunlin, Pacific salmon and southern resident orcas as well.

If the Roberts Bank mudflats are disrupted to the level scientists fear, it's unlikely many of these diminutive shore-birds will fulfil their Arctic destiny. Between 42 and 64 per cent of the entire species relies on Roberts Bank to rest and refuel, and it's estimated that almost every western sandpiper will use the site at least once in its lifespan.

A further question lingers: why here? While the sandpipers undoubtedly need a rest stop on their northern odyssey, they have thousands of kilometres of coastline to choose from — and other mudflats, too. Perhaps there is more to this vast, brown wasteland than meets the eye?

AT THE MIGRATION'S PEAK in late April, Flemming counts around 120,000 to 150,000 western sandpipers in a day. "It's quite busy when you're trying to count them. You've got to move fast," says Mark Drever, a research scientist with Environment and Climate Change Canada who is also involved in the surveys. "One day, you come back to do your count, and they are not here anymore. I always wish them well in the Stikine River estuary in southwest Alaska, more than 850 kilometres away. Roberts Bank is one of the best and last major stopover spots on the Pacific Flyway because, on the way north, there aren't many large estuaries. **A study of radio-tagged western sandpipers showed that, on average, it took 7.7 days for the birds to travel 3,250 kilometres between San Francisco Bay — one of their major stopover sites — and the Copper River delta in Alaska, the last stop before the breeding grounds. One bird flew the distance in less than 42 hours, or about 1,850 kilometres per day.**

For a long time, scientists assumed without debate that the sandpipers with an inquisitive streak began to closely observe western sandpipers while they were feeding. Robert Elner grew up by the sea in England, developed an interest in marine biology as a child and pursued a PhD in crab feeding behaviour. It was their similarity to crabs that first drew him to sandpipers. *"It immediately struck me that they looked like crabs scurrying up and down the mudflat,"* says Elner, now a scientist emeritus with Environment and Climate Change Canada and adjunct professor at Simon Fraser University.



The fact that there were so many birds in what looked like a desolate wasteland intrigued Elner. "How many people go out onto a mudflat for a recreational stroll in the evening? It's smelly, you get stuck, you fall over. It's nothing like walking in a tropical forest or a rocky seashore." To tackle this enigma, Elner ventured out on the mud. "Learning to walk on mud was almost an acrobatic these long flights and tell them 'Good stopped at Roberts Bank to refuel on luck, little buddies.'"

By mid-May, the sandpipers have all left to their next major stopover, worms and other small marine invertebrates. That changed when, more than 30 years ago, a mud aficionado experience," he recalls, with the lingering excitement of a pioneer that stepped on faraway land.

Even though mudflats are one of Earth's oldest and largest coastal ecosystems, few have studied them, largely because they are difficult to work in. "Mud is almost unknowable. If it was a rocky shore, we could walk out there, pick up mussels and dig clams. But here we have something that is deep and complex," Elner explains. "It's like being an explorer: you are finding life in a wasteland." Following Elner as he effortlessly navigates the mud with his hip boots feels worthy of an Olympic discipline. The terrain is uneven, unpredictable, deceptive, hard in some spots and soft in others, always challenging. Meanwhile, Elner displays a sense of excitement unabated in the last 30 years. "Here, we are surrounded by 70,000 western sandpipers. You are joining these birds in this intense migration. You are stepping into their universe," he says. "It's powerful. It is a natural drug. That thrill never leaves you."

With a spatula, Elner scrapes the surface and reveals black, sulphursmelling mud. "It's black because there is no oxygen. There is not much that can live in that."

Elner notes the absence of the invertebrates that the sandpipers were reputed to be eating. Yet the birds are constantly pecking at the mud surface. They seem to be voraciously feeding on... nothing? In the mid-1990s, Elner examined the stomachs of a few dead sandpipers. He found only sand particles and liquid. Curious, he shipped a few frozen sandpiper heads to a colleague in Nantes, France, who had a powerful electron microscope to more closely examine the birds' bills and mouthparts. It turned out that the sandpipers have unusually hairy tongues, and the electron micro-graphs also revealed microcosmic plants called diatoms on the long, fine bristles of the birds' tongues. "That was the eureka moment," Elner says. When he realized that their tongues were like specialized tooth brushes, he knew they would offer no real advantage in feeding on invertebrates; instead, the sandpipers were using their tongues to scrape biofilm off the surface of the mud. It was biofilm — a thin, sticky layer of microbes, organic

"Here, we are surrounded by 70,000 western sandpipers.

You are joining these birds in this intense migration.

You are stepping into their universe," he says.

"It's powerful.

It is a natural drug. That thrill never leaves you."

SHORT- LISTED STORIES

EXCELLENCE IN ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM

By
**Isabelle
Groc**

The Magic in the Mud: Sandpipers’ Migration Superfood



matter and sediment bound together by diatom- and bacteria-secreted mucus — that was somehow fuelling the birds on their epic adventures. Until then, the only creatures that were known to eat biofilm were marine invertebrates and fish.

Elner and his colleagues figured out that the sandpipers use the bio-film as a special energy drink to power their extreme migration, just like marathon runners. The birds were not loading up on just any mud slime but specifically targeting bio-film containing a high concentration of omega-3 fatty acids, generated by the diatoms.

Those high-nutrient fatty acids — especially two called eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) — offer many benefits to the birds, boosting their immunity and reducing inflammation. These essential nutrients also tweak the birds’ flight muscles, transform-ing them into endurance muscles that can get them to Alaska with enough energy left over to breed. “It enables the birds to be better flyers and to be more efficient on their migration,” explains Patricia Baird, a seabird ecologist who discovered the unique role of diatoms in the production of omega-3 fatty acids.

Experiments with flying western sandpipers in a wind tunnel showed that birds fed food rich in fatty acids increased their flying efficiency by about 12 per cent. “These flights can be likened to a trip to the moon.

You need enough fuel and life support to get there,” says Christopher Guglielmo, a biologist who ran the experiments in the wind tunnel at Western University’s Advanced Facility for Avian Research. “If you think of shorebirds as little rocket ships, they have to budget everything out along the whole trip to make it successfully.” The sandpipers are so dependent on the biofilm at Roberts Bank that it accounts for 45 to 5¢ per cent of the mass in their diet and half their daily energy budget. Without it, many birds would not make it to their final destination, as the nutrients cannot be obtained from any other available food. “It’s the magic carpet that enables them to fly,” says Elner.

Since the first observations of bio-film grazing by western sandpipers, it’s been found that biofilm feeds at least 21 other species of shorebirds at estuarine stopover sites. Perhaps more importantly, the story of western sandpipers at Roberts Bank has shed a new light on the ecological value of a largely misunderstood ecosystem.

Compared with more charismatic habitat types like eelgrass or salt marsh, western science generally sees intertidal mud as a purposeless wasteland. Globally, mudflat ecosystems decreased 16 per cent in certain areas between 1¢84 and 2016, largely due to degradation from coastal development, pollution and disturbances from marine traffic.

Meanwhile, a study of 28 shorebird species in North America revealed that between 1¢80 and 201¢, more than half of the surveyed species lost more than half of their populations.

Jim Johnson, a biologist who studies migratory shorebird species in Alaska’s breeding grounds, says habitat loss is a driving force in shorebird declines. “The most devastating part of these declines is what’s happening in the non-breeding areas where these birds are migrating and wintering.”

Linking the global loss of critical mudflats and the demise of migrating shorebirds is a logical connection to make, and possibly a sign of wider issues to come. “Birds are great harbingers of what’s happening in systems,” Elner says. At Roberts Bank, the fatty acids produced in mudflats are also important to invertebrates, salmon and the endangered southern resident orcas that depend on them and, ultimately, human health. “The birds have told us this, and if they had not been there, no one would have figured out that biofilm production is critical.”

It’s therefore ironic that as scientists are learning about the global importance of mudflats, the site where it all began is now threatened by the port development. Proponents of the project, however, downplay adverse effects — and point to the huge economic potential of the development. Alex Munro, senior communications advisor, issues management and media relations at the Vancouver Fraser Port Authority, said in a written statement to Canadian Geographic that the project will deliver critical capacity and resilience to support Canada’s trade needs. He said it will create tens of thousands of supply chain jobs, support an estimated \$100 billion in Canadian trade per year, and deliver hundreds of millions of dollars in tax revenues and billions of dollars in Canadian GDP during operation. At a time when Canada’s economy is struggling, many see the benefits as enticing — especially when, according to Munro’s statement, the project is advancing “in a way that protects the environment,” and is “not expected to have adverse effects on biofilm and western sandpipers.”

But not everybody agrees. A coalition of environmental groups in British Columbia has filed an application for a judicial review in the Federal Court, challenging the federal government’s decision to approve the Roberts Bank Terminal 2 Project and arguing it is contrary to the Species at Risk Act.

And, in a review of the project, Environment and Climate Change Canada found that in addition to the direct loss of mudflats, the impacts on biofilm would be permanent, irreversible and unmitigable, with species-level consequences for western sandpipers. There would also be no way to recreate the rich biofilm habitat.

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This is because the invisible processes at work in the mudflats of Roberts Bank are influenced by complex physical and chemical interactions. Spring is a time of rapid change over the mudflats, with more sunlight, rising temperatures and lowest tides that occur during daylight hours. Photosynthetic activity increases and diatoms grow rapidly. At the same time, the Fraser River's pulse of fresh water from the snow meltfuelled spring freshet changes the salinity of the mud, causing a stress response in the diatoms that stimulate them to produce omega-3 fatty acids, the birds' superfood. The freshwater "shocks the diatoms," Elner says. The magic in this delicate natural cycle is this is all perfectly timed with the arrival of the western sandpipers on their spring migration.

But this magic does not happen everywhere. "Not all mudflats are the same. Some are heavily used by birds and others are not," Drever says. Drever and his team found that abundances of western sandpipers and dunlin were up to 100 times higher at Brunswick Point on Roberts Bank than at another mudflat at Iona Beach, which is next to the Vancouver International Airport and a sewage treatment plant and has two jetties.

Nutrient content in intertidal biofilm was also measured to be 1.4 to 3.8 times higher. Artificial structures like the jetties and causeways near Iona were found to disrupt freshwater flow and the availability of biofilm. "Those mudflats are still mudflats, but they don't provide the biofilm that the birds need to refuel," Elner says. This makes Roberts Bank the sole remaining large bank in the Fraser River estuary where these natural conditions are still intact. This explains why the port expansion project is so concerning. It is predicted that the development will restrain the Fraser River's outflow and remove the salinity trigger for high fatty acid production by diatoms. The sandpipers would lose access to the essential nutrients from the biofilm and likely become endangered within 30 years, with cascading effects on the entire ecosystem.

With the loss of Roberts Bank in the chain of migratory stopover sites, the sandpipers would need to fly at least an additional 250 kilometres from the Grays Harbor stopover in Washington state directly to the Stikine River Estuary in Alaska, a distance of about 1,200 kilometres. "It is like taking a rung out of the ladder," Elner says. "Fewer and fewer birds are going to make it." Like other shorebirds, western sandpipers are already in trouble due to climate change and habitat loss and degradation. The Canadian Wildlife Service's spring shorebird survey conducted by Flemming at Roberts Bank has shown that over the last 30 years, the number of western sandpipers using the stopover site has declined by 54 per cent and counting. "It's telling us how much our environment is changing," Flemming says.

The port expansion is not yet a certainty, though, and the federal government has subjected

the project to 370 legally binding conditions to protect the environment, wild-life and land use activities of Coast Salish First Nations.

Some First Nations governments are against the project while others are provisionally for it. Tsawwassen First Nation, separated from the port by a few short kilometres of mudflats and water, signed a relationship agreement with the Vancouver Fraser Port Authority in 2021. In June 2023, sxwamisaat (Chief Laura Cassidy) said the Nation has provided consent for the project but is not advocating for it. But for Steven Stark, Tsawwassen First Nation band member and crab fisherman, the Tsawwassen way of life is "just not going to be the same." "I still have unanswered questions about health concerns, noise pollution, air pollution, light pollution, which are all going to affect the migrating birds that come in and out of the region. Where do they go and where do the crabbers go?"

Among the 370 conditions, the Port of Vancouver is required to monitor the impact of port activities on biofilm over a minimum of three years through the appointment of an independent committee of scientists. If the biofilm is found to be compromised, the federal government will require the port to enact measures that could include the redesign or removal of the infrastructure.

Amid this ongoing David and Goliath drama of microscopic diatoms, tiny shorebirds and a mega-port development, Elner, Baird and colleagues are working to further build the case for protecting the sandpipers' critical food source. "Science has got a very limited time to bring home the answers," Elner says. Their research includes experiments to understand if the shorebirds locate nutritious patches of biofilm on Roberts Bank by smell. For Baird, not enough is known to let the mudflats be developed. "Why risk it?" she says. "If you don't preserve Roberts Bank, it's gone. You can't bring it back."

On the birds' breeding grounds in Alaska, Johnson is collecting sand-piper eggs as part of a study on whether the fatty acids they ingest at stopover mudflats play a role in chick growth. Proving that biofilm is also an essential component of the birds' ability to reproduce will heighten the importance of conserving sites like Roberts Bank, he says.

Meanwhile, Elner continues to visit Roberts Bank every spring, on a constant mission to convert visitors to the magic he finds in the mud. He evokes *The Secret Garden*, Frances Hodgson Burnett's 1911 children's novel in which a young girl discovers a garden locked up in the grounds of her uncle's manor in the Yorkshire countryside. The garden becomes a catalyst for healing the characters in the book. The story resonates with Elner — the mud his secret garden, the sandpipers its fleeting visitors. "It's brilliant, it's productive, and it's beautiful," he says. "Everybody I have taken here, they really start to smile."

The port expansion is not yet a certainty, though, and the federal government has subjected the project to 370 legally binding conditions to protect the environment, wild-life and land use activities of Coast Salish First Nations.

The full report can be seen [here](#)



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Jacob Daniel Judah, United Kingdom
**The Alaskan island on the front lines
of the Arctic scramble**

Introduction

Little Diomedede, in the Bering Strait, is the most remote village in America. It is only three miles from Russia and its Inuit inhabitants have watched the frozen frontline between the superpowers for 70 years. But now, as the Arctic melts Little Diomedede is being abandoned to its fate. Frigates and fighters shoot past on their way northwards. Homes are buckling. Hunters are struggling to survive. This is what the new Arctic looks like to those that live there.

This is a story of concern, not just for the communities affected but for all who cares about climate change and the future of the planet.

Published in "Atmos"

**The Alaskan island
on the front lines
of the Arctic
scramble**

The Inuit on Little Diomedede are watched over by Russian soldiers. But that's not their biggest problem in these icy badlands

Edward Soolook is a 58-year-old man with chipped front teeth and a pencil-thin moustache who lives in the most remote place in America. A self-proclaimed alcoholic who often sleeps in, he reckons he has suffered from PTSD ever since he came home from the war in Iraq. He has a bad back, suffers from recurring nightmares about World War III and keeps an arsenal of rifles hanging in the entrance to his tiny wooden cabin, which he uses to hunt walruses, seals and polar bears.

Edward is also the first line of defence against the Russians. Along with 67 other Inupiat Inuit, he keeps watch over the back door to America from Little Diomedede, a desolate Alaskan island that rises out of the mists in the middle of the Bering Strait. Little Diomedede is only two and a half miles from Big Diomedede, its equally craggy, windswept sister - which is part of Russia. They are so close that during the winter it is possible to walk across the frozen waterway between them in less than half an hour. But nobody from Little Diomedede ever does; the Russian soldiers posted on Big Diomedede are always watching. They fire flares and rifles, and threaten to unleash attack dogs when people stray across the border.

"We watch them, they watch us," Edward told me when I visited Little Diomedede last September. It was late afternoon by the time he grabbed his binoculars, put on fatigues and tumbled into the cold northern sunlight. Across the water, on Big Diomedede, we could see a white observation hut clinging precipitously to the cliffs and an antenna peeping above the ridgeline. Edward regularly sees Russian soldiers, ships and helicopters on manoeuvres there. He sends whatever intelligence he gathers over Facebook Messenger to a military officer in Anchorage. "Keep watch, that's the mission," Edward said. "We're the eyes and ears for the nation."

Little Diomedede, which was sold by the Russians to America along with the rest of Alaska in 1867, has been the American sentinel on the Bering Strait ever since the cold war. Climate change is now giving its residents new reasons to stay alert. Across the Arctic there are vast quantities of energy, minerals and fish that

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The Alaskan island on the front lines of the Arctic cramble

were once considered locked away by ice. As it melts, the region is opening up to sailors, speculators and predatory superpowers. A new Great Game is afoot.

Russia, China and America are all jostling to ensure that they are best placed to take advantage of the newly accessible Arctic. The Russians have redeployed troops to some 50 Soviet-era outposts in the area and built airfields, radar stations and ports to keep watch over their thawing northern frontier. Increasingly, they work with ships and fighters from China, whose financial support has added fuel to Russia's Arctic ambitions. Meanwhile, America has begun to turn Alaska into a northern fortress, by modernising local military infrastructure and bolstering the Arctic Angels, an infantry and paratrooper division. President Donald Trump speaks - with the same bombast that once ushered Alaska into America - of creating a new Arctic empire that would include Greenland (which is currently an autonomous Danish territory).

But while the world's superpowers scramble for military advantage and resources in the Arctic, the people who live on Little Diomedede feel abandoned. Life there is remote, difficult and increasingly bleak. Many islanders feel that though they have done their duty for America by keeping an eye on the Russians, the government isn't providing them with the help they need - money, jobs and better links to the mainland - to survive the effects of climate change. Little Diomedede's population, which for generations fed itself with locally caught seals and walruses, has shrunk by more than half in 30 years as worsening weather and thinning ice make hunting dangerous. Those who remain are living in small homes which could collapse at any moment as the permafrost beneath them melts and buckles. Many families have fallen apart under the pressure; alcoholism and domestic violence are not uncommon.

"Nobody don't care about no Diomedede," muttered Otto Soolook, a bald 53-year-old walrus-ivory carver who had been scrambling to prevent his home from collapsing ever since it buckled two weeks beforehand. (Soolook is one of only a handful of last names in use on this closely knit island, where everyone is related in some way.) Otto's bare arms drooped by his side as he sat on an upturned bucket, looking resigned. It felt like nature was conspiring against Little Diomedede. "Something's wrong with this place," he said. "It is possessed. We don't get walrus and seals like we used to. That is climate change. It all starts right here, it feel like." Twenty years ago, Otto's five-man hunting crew would catch up to 30 walruses a year. Last year, he saw only one seal swimming outside his home all month.

Otto looked wistfully through his grimy windowpane towards Big Diomedede. There were richer hunting grounds there, he told me, just out of reach. The international dateline runs between the islands - another arbitrary border separating them. Big Diomedede, he joked, is "tomorrow". And because he'll never be able to go there, "tomorrow never comes." He

has to rely on food packages from the mainland to get by.

For centuries, people from Little Diomedede used to go back and forth across the Bering Strait to visit the inhabitants of the two villages on Big Diomedede. They were all Inupiat, an indigenous group whose communities extend across western and northern Alaska. Those living on the Diomededes considered themselves one people on two islands.

In 1948, as the cold war ramped up, the Soviets suddenly closed the border with America. They arrested two boatloads of men from Little Diomedede who had gone to see friends, families and lovers on Big Diomedede. The Inupiat of Big Diomedede were then deported and dispersed throughout the scattered villages of the nearby Soviet mainland, and the island became a military outpost whose men were tasked with protecting Russia's far east from the Americans.

Over the next 40 years only sporadic contact took place across this "ice curtain". Some winters, when the sea was frozen, men would walk from one of the villages on the Siberian mainland and stand at the international dateline to trade cigarettes, sweets and stories with those who had walked from Little Diomedede.

Robert Soolook, the mayor and postmaster of Little Diomedede, went to Russia in 1989, as part of a perestroika-era project that aimed to strengthen ties between Alaska and eastern Russia. As part of the expedition, he skied and dogsledded across hundreds of miles to reach 16 villages on the Soviet coast. He hoped to identify those who had been deported from Big Diomedede. In the first 13 villages, he had no luck, until one day, in the 14th, a man introduced himself as his great-uncle. "I had some emotions there for a while," Robert said. "The way he treated me was the way I would have wanted to be treated."

There were a handful of visits back and forth during the 1990s, as Washington's relations with Moscow normalised; they continued even after Russia invaded eastern Ukraine in 2014, which caused America to retaliate with sanctions. Many on Little Diomedede keep in touch with their Russian cousins on Facebook. They comment on each others' posts when someone snags a walrus, and exchange messages about raising children, hunting techniques and traditional songs. But after the full-scale war in Ukraine started in 2022, people lost hope of ever visiting again. "We can't cross that border over there, and they can't cross over here again," said Edward, who had a portrait of a Russian relative hanging on his wall. "The ice curtain is back."

The Bering Strait is also becoming one of the most strategically important shipping bottlenecks in the world. Tankers and cargo ships are increasingly squeezing through this narrow chokepoint to venture towards northern gasfields; it's also an essential leg of the Northern Sea Route, which the Russians hope could eventually

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Some winters, when the sea was frozen, men would walk from one of the villages on the Siberian mainland and stand at the international dateline to trade cigarettes, sweets and stories with those who had walked from Little Diomedede.

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**The Alaskan
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compete with the Suez Canal as one of the world's most important shipping lanes. There are already three times more ships passing through the strait than there were in 2008. The province of Chukotka in Russia's far east has seen investments quadruple in recent years as plans for ports and infrastructure projects take shape.

The Russians have been keen to advertise their presence. I was told that from Little Diomedé you can see and hear their bombers and fighter jets; their flotillas conduct regular exercises in the Bering and Chukchi Seas. One afternoon, I saw this maritime prowess for myself. Two teenagers led me along the precipitous pathway that led into the mists at the very top of Little Diomedé. From there I could see the peaks of Siberia lit up by copper-coloured sunlight. There were three ships, at least two of them tankers, hugging the Russian mainland and heading northwards.

"Everything is gonna come right past us. We're right on the highway bottleneck where we see everything," Kevin Ozenna, a 32-year-old father of two boys, told me. He has thought about trying to trade with passing vessels, like his ancestors did - perhaps trading a polar bear rug to a visiting Coast Guard vessel in exchange for a walrus skin. He has considered motoring out and holding up a sign asking if the Russians on Big Diomedé wanted to shoot together, though he would probably risk being shot if he did.

Nobody quite knows how many Russians are based on Big Diomedé today. (There are online groups for soldiers who have been stationed there, where they annually complain that Russian television has forgotten that they are actually the first Russians to welcome the new year.) It has been years since they caught or detained anyone crossing over from America, but they have tried. Kevin told me that eight or nine years ago three Russians had appeared on Little Diomedé and offered him \$800 to sail them to Russia. They said Moscow had given them permission to try to swim across the dateline, a feat that had been first performed by an American swimmer during the cold war. Kevin agreed to take them, hanging a Russian flag from his boat. By the time they grounded on the beach of Big Diomedé, flares were flying and soldiers and dogs were running down from the ridgeline. Kevin grabbed a rock as a souvenir and steered home with Russian vessels tailing him, even across the border.

Any detente between Russia and America is unlikely to quell the paranoia that pervades Little Diomedé. Some islanders, including Kevin's youngest son, have been learning Russian, in case Russia should ever try to seize it. I was berated one afternoon by a man who overheard me and Edward trying to listen to Russian music over an ancient radio receiver. "Are you here trying to communicate with the Russians?" he asked me. "I will report you to the military and tell them that there is a spy here."

For the moment the only Russians to have invaded Little Diomedé are the guard dogs who have broken free of the base on the

*Little Diomedé doesn't have the deep-water access needed for a major port and the features that make for a good harbour; it doesn't have sophisticated communication networks or sufficient land to build additional infrastructure on. It is too remote, **too small, and too forgotten.***

far side of Big Diomedé and run across the ice. One was shot, I was told - its body was hidden for fear of an international incident.

Little Diomedé doesn't have the deep-water access needed for a major port and the features that make for a good harbour; it doesn't have sophisticated communication networks or sufficient land to build additional infrastructure on; drinking water, natural resources, and imported goods are in short supply. It is too remote, too small, and too forgotten.

During my eight days on the island, I was ground down by the isolation and depression I found around me. I was put up in the library of the schoolhouse, where I slept under the watchful eyes of George W. Bush, whose image stared down at me from the cover of a children's biography. I spent the evenings by myself, cooking ramen (I had been asked to bring my own food, not to impinge on the islanders' limited supplies). Next door to the kitchen was a gym, where playing kids shrieked into the night. Above their heads hung a mural, showing two hands reaching between Big and Little Diomedé. "Friends", it read, in both Russian and English.

There are some two dozen children on Little Diomedé. Most were eager to speak with someone from abroad. Because I am British and have round glasses, some of the older ones teased that I looked like Harry Potter. It went beyond a joke: one evening a boy walked into the kitchen, and after checking that we were alone, asked me a question that broke my heart: "Harry Potter, could you please make my life better?" he asked shyly. He ran off before I could think of something to say.

to be continued...

The full report can be seen [here](#)



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EXCELLENCE
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Oliver Milman, USA

**“ This used to be a beautiful place”:
how the US became the world’s
biggest fossil fuel state**

Introduction

This story led a major Guardian effort to examine the major drivers of the climate crisis and interrogate what a ‘petro-state’ means in today’s world. Encompassing reporting from Louisiana’s coast and how it has become a ‘sacrifice zone’ for the booming oil and gas industry, the story explains how the US became the world’s giant in oil and gas production, eclipsing the countries usually referred to as petrostates and helping fuel climate change around the world and the ruination of communities at home.

The story was published at a pivotal time as discussion over the export of liquified gas to Europe and the upcoming US presidential election was peaking. It helped reframe these key issues in a global context and provide a way for readers around the world to grasp what is happening in the US as it continues to push fossil fuels upon a rapidly heating planet.

**It’s a whole new framework through
which to promote ethical principles.**

**This story has a clear impact and
serves the public interest: it was
discussed in a worldwide WWF
webinar training for environmental
justice players, and it is therefore now
helping environmental organizations
around the world use this new legal
framework in cases of environmental
crime they’re facing too.**

Published in The Guardian

This used to be a beautiful place’: how the US became the world’s biggest fossil fuel state

To witness how the United States has become the world’s unchallenged oil and gas behemoth is to contemplate the scene from John Allaire’s home, situated on a small spit of coastal land on the fraying, pancake-flat western flank of Louisiana.

Allaire’s looming neighbor, barely a mile east across a ship channel that has been pushed into the Gulf of Mexico, is a hulking liquified natural gas (or LNG) plant, served by leviathan ships shuttling its chilled cargo overseas. Another such terminal lies a few miles to the west, yet another to the north. The theme continues even in Allaire’s seaward vista – alongside a boneyard of old oil rigs, a new floating offshore LNG platform is in the works.

“I’m pretty much surrounded,” said Allaire, a retired oil industry engineer who has a trailer, a couple of friendly dogs, and a patch of marshland and beach in Cameron parish. Yet another gas export plant is planned just a few hundred yards from Allaire’s property, while his existing imposing neighbor, which Allaire compares to Las Vegas due to its incandescent flaring of gas into the night’s sky, is on track to expand to become one of the largest such facilities in the world.

“We don’t really have a Gulf coast in the US,” said Allaire. “We have the east coast, the west coast and the carbon coast. This is simply a sacrifice zone for the oil and gas industry.”

The rise of the US as the world’s oil and gas powerhouse has come at an astonishing pace. Within just the last decade, Congress lifted a ban on exporting crude oil and the US became one of the world’s leading oil exporters, el-

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**This used
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bowing aside classic petrostates like the UAE and Kuwait. In that timeframe, US exports of gas, frozen to liquid form and shipped, also started in earnest and last year America became the world's leader.

"To go from zero to billions of barrels is just stunning," said David Dismukes, an energy expert at Louisiana State University. "It can be hard to comprehend."

The US has become a petrostate and is still, even under President Biden, permitting new drilling John Sterman of MIT

Domestic oil and gas production, turbocharged by the advance of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, has rocketed. No country in history has extracted as much oil as the US has in each of the past six years, with a fifth of all oil drilled in 2023 being American flavored. US gas production also tops the global charts, having surged 50% in the past decade. Every hour of every day, on average, around 1m barrels of oil and 2m tons of gas are sucked up from oil and gas fields from Texas to Appalachia to Alaska.

The US's hydrocarbon dominance, coming as experts have warned there can be no new fossil fuel projects if the world is to avoid climate breakdown, challenges conventional assumptions about what makes a "petrostate". While the vast, diverse US economy doesn't hinge upon oil and gas like Libya's and Kuwait's economies do, some regions have become hooked on industry incomes, research shows.

"The US has become a petrostate and is still, even under President Biden, permitting new drilling," said John Sterman, a climate policy expert at MIT.

Nationally, though, it's been a mostly unheralded ascension. "I bet if you asked 10 people in the US which country was the world's biggest oil producer, most would say Saudi Arabia," said Dismukes. "That narrative is so imprinted now. I'm not sure many would even mention the US."

Yet it is wealthy countries such as the US that have spearheaded oil and gas expansions in recent years even as they vowed to restrain dangerous global heating, data shared with the Guardian has shown. Without the US, global gas production would have actually declined over the past two years.

"The United States can't preach temperance from a barstool," said Ed Markey, the Democratic senator and proponent of the Green New Deal. "We can't tell other countries to reduce greenhouse gases as we export oil and gas to them."

When the crude oil export ban was lifted, the US prioritized big oil over the planet Senator Ed Markey

"When the crude oil export ban was lifted, over my opposition, the US prioritized big oil over the planet. Everything I warned in 2015 has come true and it will only get worse as the years go by and oil companies rush fossil fuels to the highest bidders."

That such a boom has occurred during Joe Biden's presidency is not only inconvenient for Biden, who has called the climate crisis an "existential threat" and offered a now-broken promise of "no more drilling on federal lands, period", but also Donald Trump, who has pledged to "drill, baby, drill" if he returns to the White House and has lambasted Biden, falsely, for supposedly shutting down US energy production.

It's therefore not politically expedient for either Democrats or Republicans to fully extol how the US has become the world's leading oil and gas dealer, even as processing plants, pipelines and shipping terminals are unfurled at a galloping pace along the Gulf coast. US gas export capacity has tripled since 2018 and will double again in the next three years, with a pause placed by Biden on new gas export licenses tossed aside by a Trump-appointed judge this month.

The center of this frenzy of activity is a slice of the Gulf coast barely 50 miles (80km) long on either side of the Louisiana and Texas border. This small stretch, rapidly chewed away by some of the fastest rising seas in the world, has 11 LNG plants at various stages of operation and construction that, at capacity, will export more gas than Australia and Qatar, the next two largest LNG exporters after the US, combined.

Heralded by the gas industry and even the Biden administration as a way to bolster European allies roiled by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, or to help wean Asian countries off dirtier coal, LNG has its own, huge, climate cost. Drilling, transporting, cooling, shipping and then ultimately burning this gas expels so much methane, a potent greenhouse gas, that the planet-heating emissions of all 18 current and proposed US export projects could equal the entire current carbon pollution of Europe.

Venture Global, an oil and gas operator, is at the vanguard, welcomed by the state with tax breaks and responsible for the Calcasieu Pass facility near Allaire's property in Cameron, which started operation in 2022 but, according to green groups, already has more than 2,000 violations of its air quality permits through the release of nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxide, particulate matter and other pollutants.

Nationally, though, it's been a mostly unheralded ascension.

"I bet if you asked 10 people in the US which country was the world's biggest oil producer, most would say Saudi Arabia," said Dismukes.

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**This used
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biggest
fossil fuel
state**

A planned \$10bn extension, called Calcasieu Pass 2, or CP2, would shift about 20m tons of LNG at capacity, single-handedly boosting US gas exports by a fifth and causing planet-heating pollution equal to 46 coal-fired power plants. Venture Global has hired two lobbying firms, one headed by former Biden aide Chris Putala, to tout the jobs and investment flowing from the project, but this has not stemmed a furious backlash from environmental groups that have labeled it “climate vandalism”.

There are fears of mounting localized impacts, too, with poorer communities and people of color long bearing the brunt of industrial pollution along the Gulf coast. “Approving CP2 would be signing our death certificate,” said Roishetta Ozane, head of an environmental justice organization in nearby Lake Charles. “Our air smells like rotten eggs, our water is polluted, our children are sick, our family members are dying of cancer. We can’t take any more – enough is enough.”

Ozane’s family has twice been displaced by hurricanes, which are being made fiercer by rising global temperatures. Others here, too, have suffered anguish from both the climate crisis and its cause – Travis Dardar, a shrimper, had to flee his home in low-lying Isle de Jean Charles, Louisiana, because sea level rise was swamping it, only to end up trying to ply the fisheries off Cameron, a place that became a global LNG industry hotspot.

“This used to be a beautiful place, but all the docks are now gone, the shrimp and crab have been poisoned and killed by all the dredging,” Dardar said. “What sustained us for generations has gone; it’s like an alien invasion. CP2 will be the nail in the coffin, it will finish everything off. But we are going to keep fighting it.”

Dardar, Ozane and Allaire are part of a loose-knit coalition trying to halt the stampede of gas, with Allaire acting as a sort of frontline general, his trailer festooned with maps, photos and documents of the industry’s ills, a truck with a sticker reading “Stop LNG!” sitting outside. This coalition has traveled to protests in New York City and Washington DC, filed complaints, implored the Biden administration to do more. The actor Jane Fonda – “a hugger”, according to Allaire – has visited in support.

“I’ve been a huge pain in the backside for them,” said Allaire of Venture Global and Commonwealth, the company that wants to build the latest gas plant next door. He estimates his complaints have cost the developer millions of dollars to remedy the dumping of sludgy waste and to preserve local sand dunes.

Still, the weight of power firmly remains with the industry. In June, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, which has never denied a permit to a major gas project, approved CP2, despite one of the body’s three commissioners objecting **that it will cause “particularly disturbing” levels of air pollution to the surrounding community.** CP2 will go ahead should it get an export license, and Trump has said, if elected, he will provide a rubber stamp “on day one”.

Just a few hundred people remain in the town of Cameron itself, a once bustling community of several thousand that was ravaged by a parade of hurricanes, most recently Hurricane Laura in 2020.

There’s little evidence this is a region with billions of dollars of investment gushing into it, with a single food truck serving a desolate town center of tumbledown homes. Some local parks and fishing spots have been swallowed up by the gas industry. Nearby, a couple of steel-hulled boats, swept far ashore like toys by Hurricane Rita in 2005, lie rusting in the sun.

It’s uncertain that all of the proposed new plants will go ahead, locking in decades of further fossil fuel use, but that’s mostly because the markets are already shifting – Europe needs less gas than was previously thought and there’s evidence that even a global glut of gas won’t displace much coal in China.

“If the projects are left stranded because the world changes – well, that happens, much like what happened with the whaling industry,” said Dismukes. “But if you kill these projects, what happens then? You have people working for six-figure salaries in the industry – who else will pay them that, Uber?”

“It’s not like Microsoft and Dell are going to suddenly come in. There is no new thing, there is no plan in Louisiana. That’s the sad thing.”

to be continued...

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Ruchi Kumar, India
**The Forced Sterilization of India's
Sugarcane Farmworkers**

Introduction

This story is an investigation into the conditions of female farm labourers in India's sugar belt in the state of Maharashtra who are being forced to undergo hysterectomies through a combination of medical misinformation and economic pressure to secure more work. This problem is further aggravated by the climate change.

For the article Ruchi Kumar travelled to seven villages across the district of Beed in Maharashtra (which is the largest sugarcane producer in India, which in turn was the largest sugarcane producer globally), where he found dozens of cases of young female labourers who had undergone a surgery to remove their wombs.

The problem is worsened by climate-induced droughts, and Beed is one of the highest drought prone regions, and increasing heat. Despite challenging conditions, there is pressure to continue to expanding sugarcane production due to rising global demand, sometimes at the cost of women's health and wellbeing.

Published in "Atmos"

The Forced Sterilization of India's Sugarcane Farmworkers

In early 2021, Bhanubai Madhulkar Shinde went to a local clinic in her village in Beed, a small district in western India, with complaints of heavy menstrual bleeding. "There was lots of pain during the monthly cycle. It was extremely painful, and [I] would bleed heavily for days," she said.

After an initial diagnosis, Shinde—only 32 at the time—was informed her uterus was "damaged" and that she might need to undergo a hysterectomy to resolve her ailment. Medical professionals warned her family that forgoing the surgery could prove lethal. "They told us that if she didn't remove her uterus now, she would catch cancer," said her husband, Madhulkar Shinde.

As Shinde mulled over the life-altering decision, the nurses at the clinic argued that the operation would not only "cure" her pains, but also release her from the "monthly problem" women face, allowing her to work longer hours in the fields alongside her husband.

"They told me, You already have two children. What do you need your uterus for now?" Shinde recalled. Although she wanted more kids, Shinde consented to the surgery because she feared death.

Shinde is among the thousands of women farm workers in Maharashtra, a drought-prone agrarian state, who over the past decade were persuaded into undergoing hysterectomies after receiving questionable advice from medical professionals, family members, and even employers.

Surveys commissioned by local NGOs in 2018 and confirmed by a government committee investigation in 2019 found that the rate of hysterectomies among women from Beed was 36%— 14 times higher than the national average of 3%.

Atmos interviewed nearly three dozen women from across five villages in Beed who had their uteruses removed in the last decade. In one of the villages, every family interviewed had at

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The Forced Sterilization of India's Sugarcane Farmworkers

least two women who had a hysterectomy in the last five years. In most Beed towns and villages it was one woman per household.

The women interviewed had approached doctors for various gynecological ailments ranging from uterine cysts and irregular periods to urinary tract infections, among other issues. All were advised the surgery as a one-stop solution to their problems.

While many women no longer had their medical documents, Atmos was able to verify several of their medical histories leading to the surgeries. For instance, the official diagnosis on Shinde's "operation card" issued during her treatment showed she had a uterine cyst. But nearly every one of the women interviewed said they were told that they could "catch cancer" if they didn't remove their uteruses.

The motive? The women are being exploited for labor.

The region is known for sugarcane production—a physically demanding business. Workers toil for hours in the outdoors heaving heavy bundles of crops. Menstruation and pregnancies make work more challenging and at times impossible, so the contractors who supply farm owners with laborers encourage hysterectomies, offer loans to pay for them, bury these women in debt, and then force them to work to pay it off. Medical doctors, who think these women can't afford prolonged medical care, do the same to secure that substantial payment. Now, as the demand for sugar rises and climate change makes those working conditions even more extreme, these malicious labor practices could become even more widespread.

The rise and cost of maharashtra's sugarcane

India has long been one of the largest sugar producers in the world, often sharing the top space with Brazil, and Maharashtra is one of its biggest sugar-producing regions. As one of the largest sugar consumers, about 90% of the produce is used domestically. However, a significant portion —nearly 4 million metric tons per year—is exported, with United States companies among the top clients.

Each year, about 1.5 million migrant workers come to sugarcane-producing regions in Maharashtra seeking work. However, a lack of protection mechanisms has allowed exploitative labor practices to run rampant. Those concerns were formally confirmed by a 2019 report from a government-appointed committee in Maharashtra.

The committee investigated the claims that women were being forced or coerced into getting hysterectomies, often under false medical pretexts. They found over 13,500 cases of hysterectomies conducted in the last decade among 80,000 women surveyed. Activists believe the actual numbers could be significantly higher.

Sugarcane harvesting can be a labor-intensive job, especially for women who are required to gather together and lift large stacks of cane and load them onto the trucks and tractors, explained Trupti Malti, a researcher and social activist at Makaam Network, an NGO working on labor rights in the region.

"On any given day, these women make bundles of sugarcane, weighing up to 50 kilograms at a time, carry them on their heads, and climb up the stairs to load them onto a truck," she said. "It puts severe pressure on their bodies, and it isn't unusual for them to suffer from aches and pains."

The migrant nature of the work adds to their woes. India's sugarcane workers typically travel hundreds of miles for work. "This is a community that travels across the region for labor-heavy work. It is important for them to remain fit," added Dr. Abhijeet More, a medical doctor and health activist from Maharashtra who has been advocating for better rights for migrant laborers in the state. "If someone falls sick, gets... cancer, then that family loses a working hand. Their income is lost." It's no surprise, More added, that women seeking reprieve from chronic ailments can be easily coerced or intimidated into consenting to these surgeries.

"Women are expected to work even when pregnant," Malti said. "They are not provided with food or housing or any health or hygiene facilities. They carry food rations with them when they migrate for work, and live in tents in very unhygienic conditions. Much of the money they receive is spent on survival during this period."

"For most men, they get drunk at the end of the work day and pass out—alcoholism is another problem—but for women, they have to not only care for the family and children, but do so without access to proper hygiene, toilets, or even water," said Bhau Ahir, a social worker who works on health care research. "Menstrual management is a challenge, as most women use unwashed pieces of cloth that can cause infections and other diseases that result in diseases and pain."

Shinde confirmed, adding that frequent ailments and even regular menstruations were more than just about physical discomfort; they cost women working days. Missing or incomplete days of work can result in docking of payment, which is paid in advance and the family is expected to work off the debt on the fields.

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The Forced Sterilization of India's Sugarcane Farmworkers

"We are expected to work for 14 hours, even when we are sick, and even on our monthly periods," Shinde shared.

All this is for meager compensation: A couple receives a lump sum of just 100,000 to 150,000 rupees (about \$1,200 to \$1,600) for the entire harvesting season, which lasts for four months from December to March.

Worst of all, Malti said, is that women in these communities "don't have much agency over their bodies" and are rarely the decision-makers.

"It is their husbands or even the in-laws who depend on her for this income," she said, adding that the demands of the sugarcane industry factor heavily in a decision on the reproductive rights of the sugarcane farm laborers.

Climate change is worsening exploitative labor practices

Harvesting sugarcane becomes more demanding as temperatures rise and global precipitation patterns shift. This region of Maharashtra is known for droughts, which reduce sugarcane productivity. The area is also prone to extreme heat. As sugarcane grows less abundantly—and what remains becomes more physically taxing to harvest—exploitative labor practices are likely to proliferate.

"Droughts are becoming more and more intense and prolonged, and for countries like India and Bangladesh with large agrarian societies, it is upending farming and production," said Dr. Shouro Dasgupta, an environmental economist at Università Ca' Foscari Venezia in Italy who studies the link between climate change and labor in South Asia.

Yet, despite the droughts, sugar production over the years has largely remained unchanged, if not increased. Indian sugar production from 2023 to 2024 reached 34 million metric tons—even though 2023 marked the country's driest August in more than a century. What scarce water India got was earmarked for irrigation over public consumption. Why? Because sugar translates to profits.

Putting profits over people, even during dangerous droughts and heat, has exposed farmworkers to an array of exploitative practices. In a recent paper on the subject, Dasgupta documented a 25% decline in high-exposure labor such as agriculture and construction due to increasing heat. "Outdoor workers, particularly agricultural workers, are increasingly

complaining of symptoms such as heat rashes, heat cramps, dehydration, weakness, reduced cognitive functions, and dizziness," Dasgupta said. "In the worst-case scenario, they can develop cardiovascular and respiratory issues as well." In 2022, Maharashtra saw nearly 800 cases of heat-related illnesses and 18 deaths caused by heat stroke.

"This further reduces their productivity and the number of hours they can work, which leaves them vulnerable to exploitation from employers," Dasgupta added. "For women, the numbers and risks are higher. Women are not only more vulnerable due to heat stress at work, which puts their physical and mental health at a higher risk compared to men, but also to exploitation. Workers' rights need to be looked at with the climate lens." Indeed, a study published in 2021 suggested climate change increases the risk of forced labor and modern slavery around the world.

In India, that could mean more women being tricked into hysterectomies and forced into debt bondage against their will.

The bodily toll of hysterectomies

Families in which women have already had children are often convinced that the uterus is a vestigial organ that can be disposed of. That's far from the case, said Dr. Ganesh Tondge, head of the gynecology department at the Civil Hospital in Ambajogai. "It serves a larger function than just childbirth, and removing it triggers surgical menopause, which can reduce the overall life expectancy of the woman," he said.

"When ovaries don't have a target organ, the estrogen production in the body is reduced, and the woman will start to age sooner," Tondge explained. He said doctors at public hospitals strongly advise against hysterectomies for women under 40.

Women who undergo hysterectomies are also advised hormone replacement therapies, Tondge said. However, few actually receive such aftercare.

Tondge's hospital came under fire when activists raised concerns over the high number of hysterectomies in the district. Since recommendations were issued in the 2019 committee report, however, "guidelines have been established that make it compulsory for even private clinics to seek approvals from the public hospitals before conducting any hysterectomies in the state," Tondge said.

to be continued...



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In 2022, Maharashtra saw nearly 800 cases of heat-related illnesses and 18 deaths caused by heat stroke.

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Sofia Quaglia, Italy
Operation Atacama:
The \$1m cactus heist that led
to a smuggler's downfall

Introduction

This investigation looks into illicit botanical trade and covers crime with some exotic storylines and charismatic characters, but it is also a story about climate change, the biodiversity crisis, and an environmental justice first.

This story brings new, fresh insight to light for the public because this is one of the very first cases where nature reparations are assigned to a criminal in court—nature acting as a plaintiff, and us paying reparations for the damage we make to our world—so it provides readers with a new framework to understand environmental crime.

It's a whole new framework through which to promote ethical principles. This story has a clear impact and serves the public interest: it was discussed in a worldwide WWF webinar training for environmental justice players, and it is therefore now helping environmental organizations around the world use this new legal framework in cases of environmental crime they're facing too.

This was a challenging story to report, and is marked by its transparency through first-person storytelling in parts of the article.

It was reported in three languages—Italian, English, and Spanish and involved interviews with scientists and advocates as well as laypeople in the community, the police force and lawyers in the case. There is even an interview with the smuggler himself, even if he didn't want to talk.

To ensure that the information is fact-based and reliable, as well as engaging, hours were spent on the phone with colonels and lawyers in Italy and to ensure that the people most affected by the crime were heard—those who call the Atacama desert their home—there was a 14-hour drive deep into the Atacama desert in Chile with volunteer environmentalists, learning about their land and the rare cacti featured in the story.

Published in BBC.com

Operation Atacama:
The \$1m cactus
heist that led to a
smuggler's downfall

After thousands of rare Chilean cacti were found in the house of an Italian collector, a years-long trial slowly unravelled how they got there – and is setting a precedent for dealing with crimes of this kind. At first sight, orange and off-white shards of rocks surrounded by dust and dirt are all you can see for thousands of desolate kilometres in the Atacama Desert of Chile.

This is one of the driest places on Earth. Looking around, it feels impossible that any speck of life could survive. But reaching out of nooks in the cracked crust along the desert's coast, there lie thousands of Copiapoa cacti. A cactus group made up of more than 30 species, Copiapoa are found only in Chile. They grow a mere centimetre each year in scorching, breathtaking desert conditions by absorbing the local evening fog, known as camanchaca.

These rare, aubergine-shaped succulents exemplify life's ability to adapt to extremes – one of the traits that has made them highly sought after by plant collectors. They've also just been at the heart of a landmark trial over an international cactus heist that might revolutionise how biodiversity crimes are dealt with the world over. These were incredible plants, they were ancient plants, hundreds of years old... They were perfect – Andrea Cattabriga

Ranging from dark grey to blueish-green, and from the size of a coin to that of a small car, Copiapoa have thick dark spines along their geometrical ridges. Their fluffy friars head flowers white, yellow and sometimes orange once a year. While they might look unassuming at first, their beauty, resilience and rarity have certainly not been lost on Andrea Piombetti.

A well-known personality in the Italian plant world, Piombetti has been cactus collector and trader for decades and is said to take great pride in his unique knowledge of the realm. His Facebook profile picture is a rugged backpack sitting on top of a cluster of cacti in the field. His WhatsApp status reads: «The King of the Cactus Pirates». He's been spotted clad in a jacket with «The King of Chile» printed on its back.

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When called on his mobile number for this story, though, he refused to comment and hung up without saying a word. His lawyers were also contacted, but refused to comment.

In 2013, customs at Milano Malpensa Airport intercepted an unusual shipment of 143 cactus plants with visibly suspicious forged phytosanitary documents directed straight to his house in Senigallia, Ancona. Upon further inspection, police found even more boxes of cacti at his home and the home of a friend in a town nearby.

The team's botany expert was able to rapidly identify the cacti were Copiapoa, many of older than Piombetti himself. Soil forensics soon found they had been illicitly extirpated from their natural habitat in Chile and had no business in this man's home. Police issued an internal police warning across Europe about the discovery and the Italian government initiated prosecution. The case's statute of limitations, however, expired before the case verdict.

The case was dropped, and Lt Col Simone Cecchini, chief of the trade of endangered species unit of the local police force, believed any illicit trading had ceased. But when Cecchini returned to Piombetti's home again in February 2020, after receiving a complaint the collector had allegedly snuck out a rare sapling from a local nursery owned by botanist Andrea Cattabriga, Piombetti was resistant to letting the police into his home. He barricaded himself for about 10 minutes, says Cecchini.

Police did not find the rare sapling there, but once they gained entry what they found started a «much more interesting» case, says Cecchini. More than 1,000 Copiapoa cacti sat on Piombetti's veranda and in another locked room that he initially told police he'd lost the key for, together with other rare cacti. «It was by chance,» says Cecchini of the discovery. Piombetti also said he'd lost his passport, but police soon found it had been slid on top of his wardrobe. «He'd maybe thrown it there in a rush,» says Cecchini. The document confirmed he'd visited Chile five times between 2016 and 2019.

Records found on his laptop and mobile helped police identify a close local accomplice, Mattia Crescentini, as well as a network of 10 other illegal plant traders and 10 regular buyers. The plants were usually sold online through specialised auction websites and bought by people with private ornamental collections all over the world. Crescentini posted his cactus on an Instagram account called Cactus_Italy. A Japanese buyer who works in the fashion industry, for instance, had been sending Piombetti sums of €2,500 (£2,100/\$2,600) each month. Piombetti was also buying plants himself for hundreds

of dollars. The stolen plants discovered on that day were valued by the police at higher than €1m (£800,000/\$1.1m).

Pictures of the crime scene were sent for plant identification – including to Cattabriga, who is local cactus expert. «These were incredible plants, they were ancient plants, hundreds of years old,» says Cattabriga. Piombetti is known for having a keen, selective eye for high-quality specimens and precise collective methods, Cattabriga says. «They were perfect.»

Forensic botanists from the botanical garden of Milan ran soil analyses to confirm that about 1,000 Copiapoa plants had been illicitly extracted straight from the Atacama Desert, and several hundred smaller, juvenile plants had been grown and propagated from seeds collected during those extirpation stints.

While seed collecting in the wild is not illegal in Chile, removing and exporting plants without proper documentation is. In Italy, importing plants into the country without documentation is illegal, while Copiapoa are also protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (Cites).

The cacti had been shipped from Chile to Greece and Romania, then to Italy. Another seizure in November 2020 found more illegally traded cacti from the United States, Mexico and Argentina.

The case was dubbed Operation Atacama and has become known as one of the largest illegal cactus operations to date in Europe. As a result, the Italian government initiated a new prosecution against Piombetti and his accomplice in 2020 for breaking the Cites convention. The ensuing five-year trial, which ended in January 2025, resulted in many firsts in the history of biodiversity crimes.

For one, after being seized by the police, about 840 of the stolen Copiapoa were sent back to Chile. «This is biodiversity patrimony, and it should go back to Chile. It wasn't even a question for me what should have been done with the plants,» says Barbara Goettsch, co-chair of the IUCN SSC Cactus and Succulent Plants Specialist Group.

She helped design a protocol for the plants to be safely repatriated, quarantined and safeguarded. «I don't know of any other case where plants have been sent back to their country,» says Goettsch. «I think it was definitely a success.» The cacti are now in an Atacama Desert greenhouse managed by the National Forest Corporation of Chile (Conaf), although some local reports suggest some of the plants may have gone missing. Conaf did not respond to a request for comment about their status, and said it could not grant the BBC access to the greenhouse until April 2025.

The court recognised that Piombetti's crime wasn't just against the law; it was against nature. The cactus conservation organisation *Associazione per la Biodiversità e la sua Conservazione (ABC)*, founded by Cattabriga, was included in the case as an affected civil party. Piombetti and his accomplice now have to pay an additional €20,000 (£17,000/\$21,000) in civil remedies to ABC as reparations for the damage done to their conservation work.

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EXCELLENCE IN ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM

By
**Sofia
Quaglia**

Operation Atacama: The \$1m cactus heist that led to a smuggler's downfall

Despite their extreme resilience – having survived trips to the other side of the world and back – the confiscated plants will never truly return home. They cannot be reintroduced into the wild as there are no records of which areas they came from in the first place. They will likely be used for genetic and botanical research and propagation experiments. In the meantime, Goettsch's team has developed the nation's first Copiapoa conservation action plan to strategise future safeguarding efforts in the wild, set for official publication in March 2025.

After hours of walking in the Atacama Desert, it becomes almost difficult to breathe. Yet Mauricio Gonzalez and Rodrigo Castillo, two middle-aged men each with a slight limp in their walk, are climbing the huge desert hills questing for their beloved Copiapoa. "This one is maybe 100 years old," Gonzalez says, pointing at a girthy cactus leaning crooked to the left, sprouting out of a crack in the chapped land.

Gonzalez and Castillo are part of the Caminantes del Desierto (desert walkers) a group of volunteer educators who spread awareness of desert flora and fauna in the Chilean region of Antofagasta. Copiapoa is one of their favourite cacti to encounter. "They've evolved over years and years and years to adapt to this territory," says Gonzalez, the president of the group.

Piombetti is far from the only cactus connoisseur with an interest in these rare succulents. The Caminantes say many less-experienced locals get contracted online by international collectors and get sent to rob the Copiapoa in bulk. They can end up eradicating any and all plants they find along the way, often leaving some uprooted ones on the path behind them. At least three or four times a year, the Caminantes find some of their favourite trails have been wiped out completely. Whenever they post a picture from one of their walks, they field hundreds of ill-intentioned messages on social media.

"There are trends, this year Copiapoa atacamensis is the most fashionable," says Gonzalez, whose usual trail includes sightings of the species atacamensis, cineria and the rarer solaris. "We see it very clearly, once somebody has it, everybody else wants to have it too. Sometimes the volunteers hide their favourite plants under rock slates to conceal them from potential poachers. Since the cacti tend to have highly localised endemisms with small populations found only in specific sites, poachers can wipe out a whole species with a couple of flicks of a chisel, they say.

For biodiversity experts, though, the court case also produced another ground-breaking outcome. The court recognised that Piombetti's crime wasn't just against the law; it was against nature. The cactus conservation organisation Associazione per la Biodiversità e la sua Conservazione (ABC), founded by Cattabriga, was included in the case as an affected civil party. Pi-

ombetti and his accomplice now have to pay an additional €20,000 (£17,000/\$21,000) in civil remedies to ABC as reparations for the damage done to their conservation work. The funds will be directly invested into cacti research, awareness and conservation, according to Cattabriga.

Too often nature itself doesn't get any justice in crimes against biodiversity, says Jacob Phelps, a lecturer in tropical environmental change and policy at Lancaster University and co-founder of the biodiversity law organisation Conservation-Litigation.org, which consulted on the case. The case sets a precedent to create a system of retribution for the harm caused to the environment, he says.

Some similar verdicts have been reached in the past. For instance, in 2019 a French national park received compensation for ecological harm caused by fish poachers, and in 2021 an Indonesian environmental non-profit sued a local zoo for keeping protected species at its zoo without legal permission. «But they are rare,» says Phelps.

There is an under-explored option to have biodiversity organisations «act like the Lorax and speak for the trees», says Phelps, who wrote a paper describing these legal frameworks in the journal Conservation Letters. «These types of legal provisions exist in loads of countries, but they've never been used, or if they've been used, they've been used erratically... This case is really important because it shows us that we can do this.»

In an effort to replicate such success, Phelps's team already has similar cases under development at various stages in Uganda, the Philippines and Indonesia. «It's slow to convince the government to have the courage to use this,» says Phelps. «But we think of this as a new wave of green litigation.»

But Gonzalez and Castillo, as they patrol the desert as volunteer custodians of the Copiapoa, are hesitant about its future. «I don't believe in fairytales,» says Gonzalez, lighting himself another cigarette halfway through the trek. «I tell it how it is.»

While the volunteers hope the trial's outcome can help raise awareness of the dangers of wildlife poaching, they know the verdict is far from a silver bullet. During our afternoon trip in the desert, we only meet four other cars. Anybody could hop out of their vehicle and slice up millions of years of species evolution, adaptation and resilience. They'd go unnoticed. And droughts will continue to shrink up the plants from their insides no matter how many times the Caminantes walk out into the open desert with their watering cans.

to be continued...

The cacti had been shipped from Chile to Greece and Romania, then to Italy. Another seizure in November 2020 found more illegally traded cacti from the United States, Mexico and Argentina. The case was dubbed Operation Atacama and has become known as one of the largest illegal cactus operations to date in Europe.

The full report can be seen [here](#)



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Tom Parry, United Kingdom
**An invisible threat lurking
in the water is slowly destroying these
women's lives**

Introduction

This in-depth reportage from the vulnerable coastal delta of southern Bangladesh draws attention to an invasive and pernicious aspect of climate change. During a lengthy visit to the region, Tom Parry investigated reports of how increased salinity in the water has negatively affected women's reproductive health.

By speaking directly with women who have been impacted he was able to explain how those who spend many hours in estuarine waters which now have a higher concentration of salt are suffering more frequently from miscarriages, as well as severe health conditions such as uterine prolapse.

These effects are less dramatic than, for example, the heightened ferocity of cyclones in Bangladesh, but are causing immense suffering for many women in the country, whose plight is deserving of being highlighted. This work marked one of the first occasions that the health impact of rising salinity has been covered in such depth in a major media title.

Published in "Daily Telegraph"

**An invisible threat
lurking in the water
is slowly destroying
these women's lives**

The Bay of Bengal has always been the source of her community's needs. Fish caught in villagers' nets provide sustenance and an income to Gift this article free buy vegetables, flour and rice. Its water is what they drink, bathe in and cook with. Every routine act depends on the river.

For Rupa, however, the water no longer feels like a benign presence. The 24-year-old suffered a miscarriage earlier this year, triggered, doctors told her, by the increased level of salt in the river in which she spends so much time. She is not alone. Along the river, one of more than 700 tributaries and channels which converge in the swampy mangrove forests of Bangladesh's coastal delta, doctors have observed an uptick in female reproductive health problems.

According to research published by the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research Bangladesh (ICDDR), women living within 12 miles of the country's coastline are 1.3 times more likely to miscarry than women who live inland. This year, researchers from the University of Dhaka, in collaboration with the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), found an unusually high prevalence of pre-eclampsia and high blood pressure among pregnant women in the region.

Their findings reflected concerns expressed in a separate 2011 paper supported by Imperial College London that "increasing salt intake during the dry season might contribute to the seasonal pattern of hypertension in pregnancy in coastal Bangladesh, and the problem may be exacerbated by future

sea-level rise and environmental change".

As far back as 2008, researchers from the Department of Epidemiology and Public Health at Imperial College London wrote a letter to The Lancet warning that increasing salinity is a "threat to the wellbeing of communities who live in coastal areas of this low-lying nation". Two of the signatories, Aneire Khan and Paolo Vineis, are now working with Prof Chris Millett, head of the NIHR Centre for non-communicable diseases

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**By
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at Imperial, to research the best solutions to reduce salt intake from saline water and its adverse effects in Bangladesh.

With the salt concentration in Bangladesh's rivers increasing year on year, the odds for women like Rupa are getting worse. Average daily salt intake is now more than three times World Health Organization.

Local evidence suggests that higher water salinity is also linked to a spike in the prevalence of uterine prolapse among Bangladeshi women, which can lead to cancer if untreated. At just two metres above sea level, the entire south of Bangladesh is uniquely prone to higher tides, floods and cyclones.

Compounded by less predictable but more intense rainfall during monsoon seasons, the low-lying terrain cannot resist the ingress of salt water further inland. Fresh water levels are falling in rivers that are being steadily eroded by the more erratic weather. The irrepressible advance of salt water is aggravated further by large dams built further upstream, including in India. In the dry season between December and May saltier water, which easily breaches sand-banked dams and embankments during the more volatile months, lingers in the dug-out ponds on which most families rely. Temperatures are rising, causing more water to evaporate, and therefore increasing the concentration of salt.

There are attractive stretches of water everywhere you look in southern Bangladesh, but heightened salinity is penetrating every flood defence. River salinity has risen by more than 45 per cent in the last 70 years. "Normally, if you eat too much salt, your body reacts to it and detects these differences in intra and extracellular pressure," says Dr Pauline Scheelbeek, Associate Professor and Co-Director of Townsley/The Telegraph the MSc in Climate Change & Planetary Health at LSHTM, who has worked for many years in Bangladesh.

"So, the kidneys, for example, shed more of that salt through your urine. But if you're chronically exposed like the women I met in coastal Bangladesh, your body cannot work that fast, so you keep having problems.

"For pregnant women this is extremely dangerous as it substantially increases adverse outcomes, including maternal and neonatal mortality. Obviously, climate change is increasing the frequency and severity of the problem."

I meet Rupa, 24, in the Hindu-minority community of Chila Bazar. It is dusk, a busy time on the river, with fishing boats coming back to anchor for the night or setting out. Despite the recent prevalence of miscarriage, talking about experiencing one remains taboo. Rupa speaks only when the other village women gathered under an empty market stall are out of ear-



shot. "I found out that I had lost my baby about four months into my pregnancy," she whispers. "It was the winter, when the water was extremely salty. You could taste it. I had been bathing in the water every day for many months." "One day as I was coming out of the water, I realised something was wrong. I felt an intense pain in my lower abdomen. It was agonising.

A few days later, the doctor confirmed I had had a late miscarriage. **"The doctor told me that the main factor behind my miscarriage is that there was so much salt in the water." "I feel very traumatised by it," she admits. "Now I don't feel confident that I will be able to conceive again."**

Like many women in the riverbank villages that dot the waterways of the densely populated nation, Rupa retrieves her drinking water from the river with a large pot.

Women eke out a living by fishing, which involves wading chest-deep in the river – the Rupsa-Pasur, a distributary of the Ganges – for several hours before daybreak, and then again later in the day. Going out on the boats is strictly men's work. Boys join crews when they are still young.

Rupa's friends tell me their settlement, which juts into the waterway, is completely submerged during the monsoon. They explain that before drinking the river water they boil it or add filtration tablets. This removes harmful bacteria but this does not diminish the excessively high salt content.

In the village of Jaymanirhat, a bumpy hour from Bangladesh's main seaport Mongla in a battery-powered rickshaw, doctors have told fisherwomen that high salinity is exacerbating existing health issues. Stage three or four uterine prolapse has become a commonplace condition among them.

In many cases this has led to cervical cancer due to the unaffordable cost and complicated transport logistics of hysterectomy surgery in a government-run hospital. Yet because fishing is their sole source of income, they have no choice but to continue pacing through the river shallows, fully clothed. Dragging their handmade wooden-framed nets behind them, they go back and forth in a dreary loop like prisoners in the exercise yard.

The salinity is not only affecting their health, but also having a marked effect on fish stocks, which they claim have reduced by two thirds in the last 20 years. As fish become scarcer, going deeper into Salinity is having a marked effect on fish stocks.

Mother-of-four Farida Begum, 40, who gave birth to her first child when she was 15, tells me that she has been fishing in the river for 20 years,

With the salt concentration in Bangladesh's rivers increasing year on year, the odds for women like Rupa are getting worse.

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and living with a stage three prolapsed uterus for at least the last five.

The last time Farida was examined, the visiting nurse confirmed that she requires a hysterectomy. Her condition, which the nurse said was exacerbated by the ingestion of saline water, causes continual pain in her abdomen and lower back, unrelenting constipation and excruciating itching.

Farida tells me the operation costs the equivalent of 600 times the daily income she makes from going fishing twice a day. "We talk all the time about the water getting saltier and the problems we are all suffering," says Farida. "For my older sister, the prolapse has become malignant, which will lead to cancer.

"In a way I'm fortunate because I have seen what has happened to her, so I can try to do something about it, but I don't know where we will get the money. If it gets complicated it will cost even more." "My children have all left, so there is just me and my husband," acknowledges Farida, "We have just about enough to live on, but not enough for treatment."

I watch as the women crouch on the muddy, weed-strewn beach after emerging from the river to inspect their paltry catch. They sift through the contents of their nets, using a shell to separate seaweed and dirt in a plastic bowl, and then fastidiously remove the minnows left behind to be sold on to fish farms. The drudgery of a progressively more demoralising ritual becomes commensurately inescapable, and more physically damaging, with each passing day. Deflated by the paucity of fish, they walk back across sterile sands to their homes, with the ungainly rectangular nets draped awkwardly over their shoulders.

Ferida Begum, 50, is now back wading in the river after having a hysterectomy operation six months ago. For Ferida, a widow, there was no alternative to surgery as the pain became so unbearable that she couldn't walk. She took out a loan to pay, which she will be paying back for many years.

The lingering presence of saline water on the women's clothing means they can never properly clean it off their bodies. Others I talk to complain that stomach ulcers and diarrhoea have become much more common. Dermatitis too is more prevalent than Salinisation left Urmila Biswas, 43 with a fungal skin infection on her neck

Dr Afsana Naima Hasan, resident medical officer at a Mongla state hospital, says constant contact with saline water is affecting the reproductive systems of many female patients. "Most of the cases I see relate to gynaecological abnormality," she says. "It is much more noticeable with women because they spend more time in direct contact with the water than men.

"It can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease, scarring of the ovary, and also miscarriage. It constricts the Fallopian Tube, which can cause problems with getting pregnant. If they are not treated quickly, it can very easily become severe," she adds. "This happens to many of the women who depend on fishing."

According to Dr Afsana, doctors in the coastal areas of Bangladesh are noticing the highest incidence of urinary tract infections in winter, when local people are consuming saltier water due to lack of rainfall. "The number of cases in this area is really worrying," the doctor continues. "I am seeing more patients with these problems than before. All doctors in the region are experiencing this. It is affecting women of all ages, from puberty to those reaching the menopause. Of course, this is difficult to measure, but there is no doubt these problems are coming up more regularly."

"They are drinking water which they should not be drinking," says local health worker Khalilur Rahman. "I have been shocked that there are so many women suffering these problems. As the summers seem to be getting hotter every year here, there will be less and less water that is safe to drink."

Most people in southern Bangladesh live in huts made of metal sheets and bamboo poles which are regularly swept away in floods or cyclones. They borrow money from loan sharks to buy materials when their shacks are washed away, so are trapped in a cycle of cyclone debt. Saving for medical treatment is therefore unrealistic. In the unregulated slum settlement of Banishanta, the occupants of huts perched on wooden stilts over tidal mudflats can point to where they used to live, now permanently absorbed by the river.

Forced out of fishing by rising salinity, Parul Biswas, 48, explains how she attempted to fashion a new income by opening a small grocery store, but lost everything in the last big cyclone. The encroaching river has forced Parul and her husband Barum to move four times.

Neighbour Banani Sardar, 30, has cervical dysplasia, a precancerous condition of the uterus when abnormal cells are present. Banani, a fisherwoman for eight years, is under doctor's orders not to go in the river.

Even during the dry season these women are cut off from major transport networks, relying on rickshaws and wooden dinghies with outboard motors that operate as ferries.

to be continued...

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The full report can be seen [here](#)



Epilogue

Seven years of the FJA: The Antidote to a Shrinking Newsroom

VIEW
FROM
THE JURY

FJA Jury member **Pravit Rojanaphruk** reflects on the judging of a prize that sees public interest journalism through a global lens.



As traditional newsrooms continue to downsize globally, depth is quickly becoming a hardly affordable luxury. When commercial metrics dictate editorial budgets, time-consuming investigative pieces are usually the first to be cut. In this climate, the Fetisov Journalism Awards – now marking its seventh year – acts as more than just a ceremony; it functions as a critical lifeline for global public-interest reporting.

With a total prize pool of 520,000 Swiss francs (CHF), including a massive 100,000 CHF first prize across each of the four unique categories, the FJA is easily the most financially significant journalism award in the world. But as the awards grow in prestige, they also expose a deep structural tension in modern media: the widening resource gap between Western legacy giants and independent, non-Western journalists.

The 2026 shortlist – featuring 33 entries from 19 countries selected from nearly 500 global submissions – perfectly illustrates two opposing forces shaping international journalism today. On one side, there is an undeniable trend of well-funded legacy media organizations from developed, English-speaking countries dominating the shortlists. These organizations possess the financial capital to dedicate months of cross-border research to a single story. On the other hand, the industry is witnessing a profound rise in grassroots collaboration. Smaller, independent media outlets and freelance

The 2026 shortlist – featuring **33** entries from **19** countries selected from nearly **500** global submissions – perfectly illustrates two opposing forces shaping international journalism today.

The 2026 shortlist – featuring **33 entries** from **19 countries** selected from nearly **500** global submissions

journalists – some without regular employment – are pooling resources within and even across the national borders to produce extraordinary work.

As a member of the nine-person pro-bono grand jury, navigating this landscape requires active, conscious recalibration. Evaluating submissions fairly means keeping specific structural handicaps in mind:

The English Handicap: Because English remains the global lingua franca, stories written in other languages must be translated. Juries must look past the polished syntax of native English writers to evaluate the core bravery and impact of the reporting itself.

The AI Translation Double-Edge: The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence allows foreign-language entries to be translated into English within seconds. However, this introduces a new challenge for future panels: distinguishing between AI used as a translation tool versus AI used to lead or even fabricate the voice and narrative of the journalism itself.

The Resource Deficit: Independent journalists from developing nations often work without institutional legal backing, institutional safety nets, or the luxury of open timelines.

Built into the FJA process is a commitment to journalism as a global public good and respect for that value across the globe in all its diverse and inspiring dimensions. The FJA's integrity depends entirely on a highly distributed, decentralized and independent evaluation process. At the foundation is the Council of Experts – a 35-strong pro-bono body hailing from over two dozen diverse nations, including Albania, Argentina, Georgia, Mongolia, Nepal, Zambia, and Sri Lanka. These experts filter hundreds of valid submissions down to the final shortlist completely independently.

This global outlook ensures that the awards' four distinct categories receive equal weight, honoring the multi-faceted nature of public service journalism:

Outstanding Investigative Reporting in exposing institutional corruption, financial crimes, and systemic injustice, and beyond.

Excellence in Environmental Journalism is about uncovering corporate accountability failures and environmental threats.

Contribution to Civil Rights shifts focus to marginalized communities and systemic human rights abuses.

Outstanding Contribution to Peace is about refusing to

*Like an aged whisky, **7 years** is a decent age although normally a decent dram of scotch whisky starts at 12, single malt or not.*

turn a blind eye to active, overlooked global conflicts and more.

For this year's award ceremony, I was requested to announce and hand out the three awards for the winners for outstanding contribution to peace and I noted how important peace is, and cannot be taken for granted, in this volatile world.

Those behind the Fetisov Journalism Awards had the foresight to recognise peace as one of the four categories deserving annual recognition and it couldn't have been more apt and relevant today as we hope for the press to not turn a blind eye to the wars in parts of the world at present.

Then there is Mr Gleb Fetisov, the man who most generously committed himself to creating and funding the eponymous awards. My impression is that Mr Fetisov is rather reserved but each year, during the award ceremony, he would go up on the stage, be it in Dubai, Istanbul or Limassol, to deliver a short speech emphasising the importance of journalism to a free and democratic world.

This year he said: "Real, truthful journalism is a life-giving drug and antidote to destructive viruses which destroy basic human values. The antibodies of journalism are based on real facts, on facts checking, as creative thinking, that protect us all and our environment from fake news and fake ideas."

Like an aged whisky, 7 years is a decent age although normally a decent dram of scotch whisky starts at 12, single malt or not. That day will certainly come as the awards attracts more quality submissions through words of mouth as it obtain more cache.

The on-going project that is the Fetisov Journalism Awards also cannot be made possible without the hard working team led by Aiden White, honorary advisor to the awards.

For four years now, I have the privilege and honour to play a small part on the growth of Fetisov Journalism Awards and see it grows in terms of its reputation and contributions to very able journalists from around the globe and I have no doubt that the awards will age well in the many years ahead and serve a small but not so insignificant role in keeping the light of quality journalism around the world alive and alight.

Trust matters as journalism fights for its online future

In recent years the talk in news media has been all about new players in journalism and the impact of artificial intelligence in the newsroom. Two recent reports indicate trends in the news industry that will have an impact on the future of journalism and very little of it appears to be good news.

The Reuters Institute Digital News Report for 2026, for example, points to the impact of political, economic, and technological turbulence on journalism across the globe.

This report says people are increasingly using artificial intelligence to get their news and information. As the world changes, news media report compete for a share of the four to five hours each day that people devote to their smartphones. This provides new opportunities, but also has risks.

There is also increasing concern about the lack of trust in news, the spread of disinformation and the wider influence of technology platforms on our lives.

For the first time social media and video networks are more popular than both TV and traditional news websites. People online like to watch rather than read the news. They are turning to a new range of sources and voices online that are credible and innovative. Mainstream news organisations have on average seen video consumption on their own sites and apps falling as a result.

In particular, television news is in decline, as viewers turn to TikTok and Instagram which are the fastest growing video-led networks together with YouTube. Facebook remains the biggest platform overall for news consumption.

Most worryingly, trust in news has fallen in a majority of markets resulting in a drop overall to the lowest level the Reuters researchers have seen in more than ten years. Some of this worldwide drop in trust reflects wider anxieties beyond the news industry – trust in institutions and leaders is

widely declining, and journalism is also often under direct attack from high-profile politicians.

Nevertheless, despite fragmenting and polarised opinions there is still hope says the report. People still seem to care about the quality of news and journalism. Trust in the most widely used individual news brands is holding up better than trust in news overall.

A second report comes from the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, which in June 2026 published the Media Pluralism Monitor 2026, a comprehensive assessment of risks to media pluralism and press freedom in the European Union.

Again the story is bad news. The report highlights weak business models, a lack of protection against legal intimidation practices, and market concentration, all of which are challenging the resilience of media pluralism in Europe.

It also reveals that the working conditions of journalists, in terms of salaries and social security schemes, are deteriorating in a third of European countries. And all of this despite the entry into force of the European Media Freedom Act, a ground-breaking piece of legislation designed to reinforce and strengthen journalism in Europe.

The indicator relating to journalists' working conditions shows that "the number of employed journalists continues to decline – albeit at a slower pace than before – working conditions of freelancers remain poor, and the business models of news media are increasingly vulnerable to the digital transformation."

The President of the European Federation of Journalists Maja Sever accused the European Union, national governments, and the media industry of not taking the necessary measures to protect media workers. She said: "It is time to take seriously the dangerous deterioration in our working conditions and the threat this poses to democracy".

Our winners, through their brilliant and stylish reporting, demonstrate how war is waged, how conflict can be so easily ignored and why peacemaking and truth-telling has to continue after the guns have stopped firing in order to create meaningful and durable resolution of conflict.

Epilogue

News organisations aim to save money by using AI to gather, edit and publish information at the expense of jobs for journalists.

And it's not just wages and conditions that are defining the hazardous news environment; the growth of unregulated use of artificial intelligence in journalism continues to worry people in news media. News organisations aim to save money by using AI to gather, edit and publish information at the expense of jobs for journalists.

The latest reports show that more than a quarter of consumers globally get some news from news-focused individual creators or influencers, and almost half get some news from creators of any type. It appears that the reading public increasingly thinks that creators are more entertaining, easier to understand, and more relatable than traditional news outlets, but they also think creators are less trustworthy. Most people who get news from creators use them alongside traditional media – not instead of it.

In response to all of this, the Ethical Journalism Network, which is a supporter of the FJA, is calling for more action to promote ethical news making at all levels of media as a way of rebuilding public trust in journalism. In particular, the EJN says priority should be given to the recruitment and professionalization of new players in journalism.

As so-called influencer journalists, streamers and online content providers take their place in the information landscape the question arises – who is a journalist and how can these new suppliers of information be trusted? Most of these writers regard their work as a form of journalism, but they don't regard themselves as journalists in a traditional sense.

Journalists usually define themselves through their education (journalism school) or their employment (a news media company) or their membership of a professional group (trade union or association with access to a press card).

However, the new online community of streamers and influencers is made up of people with their own brand of personal and commercially-driven information with no attachment to professional networks.

Many journalists' associations and unions are finding the best answer is to recruit them into membership and make them accountable to the codes of conducts and ethical standards that traditional journalists respect.

This approach is being pioneered in European unions of journalists, particularly in the Netherlands and Denmark and was the subject of a resolution adopted by the European Federation of Journalists at its annual meeting in Ankara in June 2026.

"It is time to take seriously the dangerous deterioration in our working conditions and the threat this poses to democracy"

The President of the European Federation of Journalists Maja Sever

At the same time the EJN argues for the rigorous applications of ethical standards in the use of artificial intelligence. They promote the use of hybrid systems – artificial intelligence monitored and guided by the social intelligence of human beings – as a key to defending standards and moral values in journalism.

The message is clear: the coming years will see further dramatic changes, but attachment to the core values of journalism – fact-based news, impartiality, editorial independence, humanity in reporting and transparency across the news landscape – can ensure that journalism will preserve its social role as a cornerstone of democracy.

European Media Freedom Act, can be read [here](#)



Media Pluralism Monitor 2026,, can be read [here](#)



The Reuters Institute Digital News Report for 2026 [here](#)

