

PAKISTAN DRUG TRADE BLIGHTS 'LAND OF THE PURE'

KARACHI: Between two trucks on an abandoned, garbage-strewn railway, teenagers openly shoot up drugs as children pass by on their way to school—a daily scene in Karachi, where heroin is undermining Pakistan's efforts to combat the spread of HIV. "You can find any drug you want in Karachi," said Shahzad Ali, his left hand swollen by repeated injections, one of tens of thousands in the city of 20 million lured to cheap Afghan heroin.

Like others, he stumbles around on the old railway line in the district of Musa Colony, where young people shoot up near mounds of smouldering garbage into which scavengers dig for anything that might be consumed or resold. Pakistan has an estimated one million heroin users, half of whom use needles.

There are fears that the country's addiction is set to deepen, with neighboring Afghanistan's opium production hitting a record of 5,500 tons this year—even before the withdrawal of NATO forces in 2014. A former male prostitute and heroin addict, NGO worker Mohammad Imran knows all too well the ravages of the drug. "Because I belonged to this environment not so long ago, I can feel their feelings, their problems and everything else very clearly," he said. He witnessed first-hand the rise of heroin in disadvantaged neighborhoods, where a shot can be bought for as little as a few

European cents—a fraction of the cost in the West.

He distributes new needles to addicts from his mobile clinic. "I can understand exactly what someone needs and I can provide them a good service at the right moment." Despite using for twenty years as a sex worker, Imran escaped HIV infection and AIDS. Tarak Abbas was not so lucky. Diagnosed two years ago, his cheeks hollowed by years of drug abuse, he is now trapped, homeless on the streets of Karachi. "Whenever young kids come to me I tell them: 'Look at me, no one cares about me now,'" he said. "The people who used to think I was a good man, they don't even want to sit with me now, just because of AIDS."

He blames heroin for his problems. "There are many diseases you can catch and you are cut off from your loved ones. Your life is destroyed and you will lose respect." Tarek is not alone. In Pakistan-known as "The Land of the Pure"—almost 30 percent of those who inject heroin are HIV positive, one of the highest rates in the world and up from 11 percent in 2005. NGOs are attempting to stem a HIV crisis by distributing clean needles in the slums of Karachi. "At first people said we were promoting drugs, but they have since realized that heroin addicts always find a way to get a fix," said Dr Maria Atif.

"It's booming. You know it is increas-

ing every day because there are a number of social factors that are propelling people toward this menace. And despite all the efforts claimed by government, it is easily available here." Afghanistan produces 90 per cent of the world's heroin, with almost half of its production channeled through Pakistan on its way to Europe or Asia, hidden in containers shipped from Karachi, a sprawling port on the Arabian Sea. But the drug doesn't just pass cleanly through Pakistan. It picks up addicts along the way.

"Pakistan is a transit hub, but has also become a consumer," said Cesar Guedes, head of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in Pakistan. "Part of this drug stays in the country not because it is a profitable market... but because traffickers pay in cash and in kind, creating a local market." Karachi has in recent years seen a new crossover between the Afghan heroin destined for Europe and Asia and imported South American cocaine, fuelling speculation of collaborations between Latin American cartels and Pakistani drug lords or the Taliban, who are partly funded by the traffic. "There are no boundaries, there is no nation, there is no religion, it is about money. They have joined hands to get more money," said Akbar Khan Hoti, chief of the drug unit at the Ministry of Interior. Local customs at the port of



KARACHI: A Pakistani drug addict self-injects heroin along a street in Karachi. —AFP

Karachi have only one sniffer dog, according to internal sources, and lack the ability to scrutinize the contents of the 3,000 containers that are scanned daily.

With one gram costing the equivalent of one month's minimum wage, cocaine unlike heroin is inaccessible to the poor majority of Pakistan. It is becoming more

trendy among those who can afford it, however. Since the beginning of the year, "more than a ton of cocaine" has been seized at the port, said Hoti. "Cocaine is definitely fashionable, especially among young people seeking to escape," said Hussain, a young executive who returned to live in Pakistan after studying overseas. "There is nothing else to do." —AFP



NEW YORK: A group supporting domestic workers rights demonstrate across the street from the Indian Consulate General in New York. —AFP

DIPLOMAT ROW OVERLOOKS THE INDIAN MAIDS' PLIGHT

MUMBAI: Americans were shocked at the alleged \$3.31-per-hour wage paid to an Indian diplomat's housekeeper in a case that has sparked global outrage. But to Rupa Thakur, who does the same job in Mumbai, it sounded like a small fortune. The mother-of-three works 13 hours a day, six days a week for a family in the suburbs of India's financial capital, taking home 8,000 rupees (\$130) a month—or about 38 US cents an hour. "Life is tough," said Thakur, 39, who moved to the city from Nepal as an uneducated girl to find work.

"After daily expenses and paying my children's school and college fees, I can save only around 2,000 rupees. With everything getting costlier every day, it is difficult for people like us." India erupted in fury last week over America's strip-search and arrest of an Indian diplomat accused of underpaying her housekeeper. But the story of the maid herself has received far less attention back home. Domestic service is a prominent feature of life in urban India, with a maid seen as a stamp of middle-class membership. Many of those who can afford it also have drivers, cooks and nannies.

LONG HOURS, LITTLE CASH

Such workers often start as young women or girls, like Thakur, who travel from rural areas to try to make a living and support their families, but who often end up working too many hours for too little cash, activists say. While New York rigidly enforces laws to ensure even the lowliest employees get no less than \$7.25 an hour, such legislation is almost entirely absent for Indian domestic workers.

"They need some kind of standardized wage practice in force," said Mumbai social worker Avisha Kulkarni, who campaigns on the issue. There are also frequent reports of domestic servants being abused by their wealthy employers. In November, a New Delhi court ordered an Indian lawmaker and his wife to be held in police custody for allegedly torturing to death a maid at their home.

The case came soon after a teenage maid was rescued from another upscale

Delhi home by police and social rights campaigners, who said she had been slashed with knives and mauled by dogs. The Global Slavery Index, released in October, found an estimated 13.95 million people in India are victims of forced labor-making up almost half of the world's slave population. Domestic service is a key area of concern. "The central government has completely ignored the conditions of domestic workers," said Anannya Bhattacharjee, executive council member of the New Trade Union Initiative, who is based in northern Haryana state.

"It's part of Indian feudal tradition. There's always talk of domestic workers being part of the family but they want to be treated as workers," she said. But there are also signs of change within the industry. While demand remains high, Kulkarni said fewer women were willing to serve as live-in maids for one household, preferring to work at a number of homes and charge per task, such as cleaning utensils or washing clothes. "The standard and cost of living has gone up," Kulkarni said, adding that many maids had high aspirations for their children and wanted them well-educated.

THEY TREAT US RUDELY

This was the case for Pushpa Khude, another housekeeper in Mumbai, who financed her two children's college education and whose son is now a bank manager. Khude, 45, cleans and cooks in several households and takes home 24,000 rupees (\$385) a month—a relatively high sum for her job in India—after starting work at the age of six watering plants for a Bollywood actor.

Nowadays she only works for expatriates, with no desire to take on Indian employers. "I'm Indian, but I'm disappointed because other Indians aren't giving us (maids) respect or any responsibility," she said. "They treat us so rudely and they don't trust us or give us holiday." US attorney Preet Bharara, the prosecutor who spearheaded Khobragade's arrest proceedings, wondered why there was little concern in India for the maid and her family. —AFP

LOST IN MELILLA: SYRIAN REFUGEES IN DESPAIR; EUROPE CLOSSES DOOR

REFUGEES FIND EUROPEAN DREAMS THWARTED IN ENCLAVE

MELILLA: Yahya Khedr has travelled for more than two years, through five countries and with six forged passports to get his family from the war-ravaged Syrian city of Homs to Europe. But now that his wife and five children have reached Melilla, a small Spanish enclave on Morocco's Mediterranean coast, their chance of a European life seems as remote as ever. "People make it to Melilla hoping to find Europe," said Khedr, who before his country's war owned a successful European truck-parts import business. "But here, it's an open-air jail."

Armed guards and razor wire lining the 12-km frontier around the town have long discouraged Africans fleeing poverty and conflict from seeing Melilla as a gateway to Europe, 180 km away across open water. But desperation has driven hundred of Syrians like Khedr to brave long journeys - and Moroccan crime gangs that prey on migrants - to fetch up at the gates, turning the port town of 80,000 into a new pressure point for waves of destitute people struggling to reach the safety and prosperity of Europe.

As the United Nations marked International Migrants Day on Wednesday, drawing attention to governments' obligations toward people on the move, European Union leaders were preparing for a summit in Brussels on Thursday and Friday that is likely to approve tougher ways to keep immigrants out. That will disappoint Spain, Italy and Greece, whose hope of persuading northern neighbours to share the burden of taking in those fleeing across the Mediterranean have been undermined by hostility among voters feeling the pinch of austerity policies.

Before an EU summit in October more than 360 people drowned within sight of Lampedusa, an Italian island off Tunisia that has long been a magnet for migrants. But talks on a more coordinated, EU-wide solution have made little progress. "There is no masterplan. It is an international problem that should be dealt with at a European level but there is a lack of will," said Ana Terron, an adviser to the EU home affairs commissioner and a former Spanish immigration minister.

Spain says that in the first half of this year it took in some 3,000 illegal migrants, twice the number in the first half of 2012. Most came via Melilla and its other main African enclave, Ceuta, where detention centers send asylum-seekers over to the Spanish mainland once they become too overcrowded. About 2,300 have made it into Melilla so far this year.



MADRID: An image grab shows two groups of would-be immigrants walking in single file from Gurugu on the border between Morocco and the Spanish territory of Melilla during the night. —AFP

The EU found over 72,000 people entering the bloc illegally last year, including a fivefold rise in Syrians, to 8,000.

SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

People fleeing conflict in the Middle East have long taken northern routes through Turkey, Greece and the Balkans in the hope of making it to richer states like Germany, Sweden or Britain. But tighter policing, especially around Greece and Italy, has driven more to head along more southerly routes. This month, 74 Syrians were detained in Lisbon after flying in on fake passports from Guinea-Bissau, Morocco and elsewhere. Others push along the North African coast, through Libya and Algeria to Morocco and, they hope, into Melilla and Ceuta.

"Immigration is like water. It always seeks a way to flow," says Jose Palazon, a Melilla teacher who heads Prodein, an organization that helps immigrants, especially the children who hide around the town's docks in the hope of sneaking aboard ferries and other ships heading for mainland Spain. "If you close all waterways, the level goes up, like on a dam. Until it spills over," Palazon said, likening that to the way migrants who camp out in the woods and hills around Melilla periodically try to rush the security fence to get inside.

While the likes of Yahya Khedr managed to sneak his family into the town, and so to its hostel for

refugees, by using fake passports, hundreds of less well-off people, mostly Africans from south of the Sahara, camp outside, looking for a chance. "In our countries, we live with less than one dollar a day," said Serge, 30, from Cameroon, who has been surviving on the hillside outside Melilla for months. "Africa needs to be fixed if the immigration is to slow down. If nothing is done, it will only increase."

Spain, where more than one worker in four is out of a job, has responded by reinforcing Melilla's 6-metre (20-foot) border fence with razor wire. That drew criticism from human rights groups when migrants trying to climb over it were left slashed and hanging on the barrier. The Spanish government representative in Melilla, Abdelmalik El Barkani, defended the measures as necessary and noted that few refugees wanted to register for asylum in the enclave, preferring to count on a transfer to mainland Europe. Madrid has also stepped up cooperation with Moroccan police in the hope they can prevent people approaching the border.

FORGED PASSPORTS, FAKE TEARS

Yahya Khedr is despairing of ever getting there, however. Three years ago, Khedr, now 43, was living well from his business importing European truck parts to Syria. He would spend several months a year in Murcia, in southern Spain, where he

also owned a bar and ran his trading business. He travelled elsewhere in Europe, too, taking his family to Disneyland in Paris or visiting a daughter who lives in Italy.

Now, much of his home city of Homs is rubble. Some of the first bombing of the civil war in 2011 destroyed his house and Khedr joined a Syrian refugee exodus now 2.3 million strong. Holding a Spanish residence permit for himself only, he and the family fled and drove via Lebanon, Egypt, Libya and Algeria to Morocco. There he bought forged Moroccan passports for his wife and children to get them into Melilla in mid-October under Spanish rules that allow entry to Moroccans living nearby. Typically, Syrian refugees say, Moroccan gangs charge \$1,500 or more for a passport. Khedr did not say what he paid. His family now live with about 900 other migrants in the low-rise compound that forms Melilla's immigration holding centre - designed to house little more than half that number. He himself saves money by living for \$12 a day in a hotel in the nearby Moroccan town of Nador. Using his Spanish permit, he is able to travel every week to visit his family in Melilla. With no sign of being allowed to cross over to the Spanish mainland, however, Khedr now wonders whether he might even start heading back home: "It's a catastrophe," he said. "The Europeans say they're weeping for Syria but it's all fake." —Reuters

THE KINDEST CUT: MALAYSIAN CHARITY STYLES THE HOMELESS

KUALA LUMPUR: Homeless Kuala Lumpur resident Indera Abha struggles to eke out a meager existence by selling salvaged recyclables, so personal-appearance concerns understandably take a back seat. But a Malaysian charity that offers free haircuts along with meals helps him to salvage some pride as well. "I like to get my hair cut. I feel good, and it is free," Indera, 49, said with a smile missing several teeth, as strands of his thin black hair floated to the ground around him.

Wielding the scissors is stylist Azmina Burhan, who runs her own salon but volunteers with the Pertiwi Soup Kitchen to provide for an often-overlooked homeless need. "To me, how people look is very important. You want to look good every day when you wake up, no matter

how rich you are, how poor you are," said the bubbly 26-year-old. Azmina joined the charity shortly after its establishment in 2010, helping to give out food and water several times a week.

But after encountering hundreds of homeless who couldn't afford proper cuts, she started bringing along her scissors, apron and a small stool about once every other month. Each time, she now gives up to 30 haircuts, and growing. "After you finish getting a haircut you look good, you feel good, and you have that self-confidence in you," she said, adding that a cleaned-up appearance could help people to secure jobs. For Azmina, the task can mean handling dirty, matted hair. The worst, she said, was a man who slept on the streets and hadn't washed his hair for months, leaving her hands

blackened with dust.

'NOW I FEEL GOOD'

But she has never turned anyone away and said the image of smelly, lice-infested homeless is false and is the sort of stereotype that her haircuts are aimed at eliminating. In fact, her "customers" can be quite trendy, especially younger ones, and common requests include British football star David Beckham's hairstyles and the longer fringes favored by Korean and Japanese pop icons. Malaysian living standards have vaulted steadily upward thanks to decades of strong economic growth, but Southeast Asia's third-largest economy is not immune to privation, and income disparity has widened. —AFP