

International

Lawmakers tackle sexual harassment in Congress

US Congressional leaders call for harassment training

WASHINGTON: Leading lawmakers are calling for mandatory training and other steps to prevent sexual harassment in Congress as the national spotlight on gender hostility in the workplace falls on Capitol Hill. The calls from House Speaker Paul Ryan and others follow a series of news reports about women staffers and lawmakers experiencing harassment and sexual advances on the job. The Associated Press reported Friday on the experiences of one current and three former female lawmakers, who said they had fended off unwanted advances, sexual comments and, in one case, physical contact from a male colleague in Congress.

The issue was already in the national spotlight because of the sex assault allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein and a growing list of bold-face names in entertainment and the media. On Friday, Ryan sent lawmakers a letter urging them to undergo sexual harassment training and make it mandatory for their staffs. "Any form of harassment has no place in this institution. Each of us has a responsibility to ensure a workplace that is free from discrimination, harassment, and retaliation," wrote Ryan, R-Wis. "We can and should lead by example."

House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi called for passage of Democratic-sponsored legislation that would require anti-harassment training, enhance anti-retaliation protections for staffers who report harassment, and streamline dispute resolution. The recent focus on the issue has made clear that Congress' tendency to self-police has resulted in lax rules, a patchwork of policies that vary from one office to another, and a complaints clearinghouse lodged in an Office of Compliance that requires a lengthy counseling and mediation period - and that many staffers have not even heard of.

Pelosi said all that needs to change. "I think we are at a tipping point in our country," the California Democrat said. "For a long time the Congress was a place where every congressional office had its own rules. ... The system needs to be changed." The House Administration Committee, which oversees the operations of the House, also announced plans to convene a hearing Nov. 14 focused on training, policies and mechanisms in place to guard against and report sexual harassment.

In the Senate, New York Democrat Kirsten Gillibrand, who went public several years ago with accounts of inappropriate comments from male senators, also announced legislation on the issue. Gillibrand's bill would streamline the reporting process within the Office of Compliance, remove the current mediation requirement and give interns the same resources as full-time staff. "Congress should never be above the law or play by their own set of rules. The current process has little accountability and even less sensitivity to victims of sexual harassment," Gillibrand said.

GOP Rep Mary Bono told AP she once confronted a male colleague on the floor of the House

after he made repeated suggestive comments, including telling her he'd thought about her in the shower. The behavior stopped, but the lawmaker remains in the House, she said. Rep Linda Sanchez described being propositioned repeatedly in years past by one lawmaker who still serves, and ogled and groped by a second who's since left the House. Former Rep Hilda Solis disclosed repeated come-ons from a lawmaker, but declined to go into detail, while former Sen Barbara Boxer described a years-ago incident at a hearing where a lawmaker made a sexually suggestive comment about her from the dais that the committee chairman seconded.



WASHINGTON: Chairman of House Ways and Means Committee Rep Kevin Brady (R-TX) (2nd left) shares a moment with Speaker of the House Rep Paul Ryan (R-WI) and other lawmakers during a news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. —AFP

The female lawmakers declined to identify the men they were talking about, and did not report the incidents, with a couple of them noting it was not clear where they would have lodged such a complaint. On Friday, additional female lawmakers offered public comments on the situations that can result in an environment that is only 20 percent women and still beholden in some ways to out-of-date traditions.

Rep Cheri Bustos, D-Ill., said she has asked friends and colleagues in the House whether they knew of any woman who had advanced in their careers without being

sexually harassed. "Without exception, they don't know of anybody," Bustos said. "We are all talking about it because it's rampant. It's absolutely rampant." As to whether she herself had been harassed by any fellow member, Bustos said: "It depends on how you want to define harassment." "How I've chosen to handle it is I just sort of dismiss it and I don't give it another thought," Bustos said. "I hope what happens out of all of this news coverage is it changes some people's behavior as far as comments they make, or if it's worse than that, I hope something good comes out of it." —AP



Spotlight on gender hostility in workplace

News in brief

Malnourished or obese

LONDON: Almost every country in the world now has serious nutrition problems, either due to over-eating leading to obesity or a lack of food leading to under-nutrition, according to a major study published yesterday. Researchers behind the Global Nutrition Report, which looked at 140 countries, said the problems were "putting the brakes on human development as a whole" and called for a critical change in the response to this global health threat. The report found that while malnutrition rates are falling globally, their rate of decrease is not fast enough to meet the internationally agreed Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) to end all forms of malnutrition by 2030.

AI 'boy' gets residency

TOKYO: An AI character was made an official resident of a busy central Tokyo district yesterday, with the virtual newcomer resembling a chatty seven-year-old boy. The boy named "Shibuya Mirai" does not exist physically, but he can have text conversations with humans on the widely used LINE messaging app. Tokyo's Shibuya Ward, an area popular with fashion-conscious young people, has given the character his own special residence certificate. This makes him Japan's first, and maybe the world's first, artificial intelligence bot to be granted a place on a real-life local registry. Mirai, whose name means "future" in Japanese, is supposed to be a first grader at an elementary school.

10-year-old released

HOUSTON: US authorities on Friday released a 10-year-old immigrant girl with cerebral palsy who had been detained by border agents after surgery because she is in the US without legal permission. The ACLU and US Rep Joaquin Castro said that Rosa Maria Hernandez was returned Friday afternoon to her family. Her parents brought her into the US from Mexico in 2007, when she was a toddler, and they live in the Texas border city of Laredo. A cousin who is an American citizen took Rosa Maria from Laredo to a children's hospital in Corpus Christi on Oct 24, where she was scheduled to have emergency gallbladder surgery. To get to Corpus Christi, about 150 miles away, she had to pass through an interior checkpoint in South Texas operated by the Border Patrol.

Monsoon rains kill 12

NEW DELHI: Thousands of people took refuge in relief camps as torrential monsoon rains flooded parts of southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, killing at least 12 people this week, the government said yesterday. Schools in Chennai, the state capital, and other coastal towns have been closed with the weather office warning of intermittent heavy rains this weekend. A government statement said over 10,000 people were living in 105 state-run relief camps as rains flooded low-lying areas in Chennai and its suburbs on Thursday and Friday. The northeast monsoon season in the region set in on Oct 27 and is expected to last until early December.

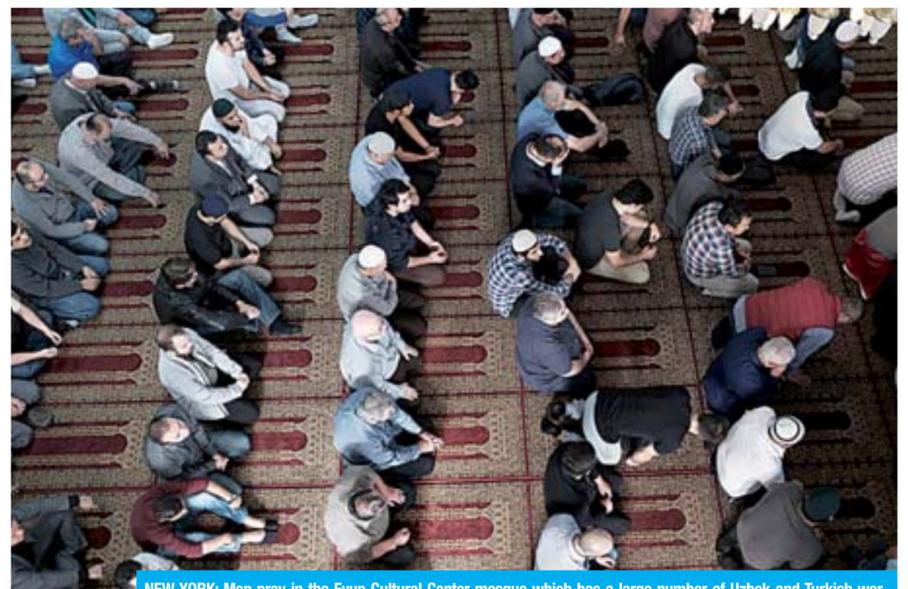
Central Asia terror suspects, attackers radicalized abroad

BISHKEK: When Sayfullo Saipov used a truck to mow people down on a New York street, ultimately killing eight according to terror charges, he guaranteed his former homeland Uzbekistan would receive the worst kind of headlines. People from ex-Soviet Central Asia have been at the heart of high-profile attacks this year in the United States, Russia, Sweden and Turkey. Yet Saipov, according to official accounts, came into contact with radical Islamic ideologies not in the country of his birth, but in the one he adopted seven years ago: the US.

Saipov moved to America in 2010 under a visa program-President Donald Trump's response to Tuesday's attack was to announce tougher vetting for immigrants. "Most of these attackers come from rather secular backgrounds and tend to radicalize in their country of destination rather than origin," said Yan Matusевич, research officer at the Vienna-headquartered International Centre for Migration Policy Development. Thousands of former residents of the region's five countries known as the "stans" - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have joined the ranks of the Islamic State group in Syria and Iraq since 2011. However incidents involving violent extremism at home have been relatively rare.

Global form of radicalization

But if one single theme does link the Central Asia-born assailants of very different backgrounds accused of attacks this year in New York, Istanbul, Saint Petersburg and Stockholm, it is migration. Uzbek national Abdulgadir Masharipov, who killed 39 people in a January 1 attack on a nightclub in Istanbul had lived and trained as a militant in



NEW YORK: Men pray in the Eyup Cultural Center mosque which has a large number of Uzbek and Turkish worshippers from the Brighton Beach section of Brooklyn in New York City. —AFP

Afghanistan and Pakistan, according to Turkish authorities. Another Uzbek, Rakhmat Akilov, who ploughed a truck into a crowd of pedestrians in Stockholm in April, killing five, was a failed asylum seeker reportedly at risk of deportation.

Akbarjon Djaliyov, identified as the 22-year-old bomber behind the Saint Petersburg metro blast in April that killed 16 people including himself was born in Kyrgyzstan but left for Russia with his family aged 17. While the series of

attacks appear to form a "Central Asian pattern" Matusевич argues they are part of "a broader, more global form of radicalisation" and the attackers' "actual life situations were quite diverse". Saipov worked as an Uber driver in New Jersey. Uzbekistan's government has said that there was nothing to indicate he was an extremist before leaving. Saipov was described by his former neighbors in the capital Tashkent "in very positive terms", said the government's statement on Wednesday. —AFP

Bloodshed in South African province as ANC tensions rise

DURBAN: In the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal, local politics is a deadly game, with at least 40 people killed in politically motivated shootings since last year. A battle for control is raging ahead of a conference of the African National Congress to choose a new leader when President Jacob Zuma steps down as ANC chief in December. Violence has spread across the province on the country's east coast, but much of the killing can be traced back to hitmen hired from the notorious Glebelands complex of hostels in the provincial capital Durban.

The 71 lawless hostel blocks-originally built to house migrant workers are home to about 20,000 people, often crowded into decrepit accommodation, sleeping more than 30 to an apartment and sharing a single toilet. "Hitmen here are being used by the politicians," one Glebelands resident, a father of five dressed in a grey tracksuit and sitting under a bullet-scarred shelter said.

"It looks like we have no government. We have been forgotten," said the 48-year-old man, adding that giving his name would put his life in danger. Vanessa Burger, a community rights activist who works with Glebelands victims' families, has kept a detailed log of each killing by hitmen living in or hired from the hostels. Burger's log now stands at 93 dead since 2014, with many of the victims linked to politics through factional fighting, tit-for-tat revenge killings

and criminal associates. But there have been few arrests. The low number fuels allegations that murders are sanctioned by some parts of local ANC branches and ignored by the police.

"If you are using hitmen from a specific area to take out rivals... that must have political support, otherwise they would have been removed a long time ago," said Burger. "It needs political will to change the situation and I don't see that happening in the near future." After sitting for a year, a judicial inquiry into the killings was due to complete its hearings last month, but has asked for more time to gather evidence. "We have to extend until March next year because it's only now that the commission is gaining momentum," said Solo Mdledle, secretary of the Moerane Commission.

Culture of violence

KwaZulu-Natal is the ANC's heartland. Whoever controls the province could determine the party's next leader from December. In the run-up to the party conference, few weeks go by without an ANC provincial official or elected councilor being murdered in the struggle for power, jobs, money and lucrative government contracts. The victims are gunned down in their cars, shot dead outside their homes or killed at public events, but the police and authorities seem helpless. When former ANC Youth League secretary-general Sindiiso Magaqa died in September after being shot 15 times in an ambush in July, his family laid the blame squarely with the party. "We love [the ANC] but when they do this we are scared... Everything points to December," Magaqa's uncle said at his funeral.

The culture of violence in KwaZulu-Natal was graphically demonstrated recently by an internet video of two bodyguards of an ANC regional secretary bragging they were

about to kill someone. "That dog is going to die today," one said as they sat in a car and cocked their pistols and an assault rifle. KwaZulu-Natal is not new to political unrest. It endured the worst of the violence in the final days of apartheid as the ANC fought against another black party, the Inkatha Freedom Party. Zuma, who was born in KwaZulu-Natal, will remain in office after giving up the party chief post in December, but the new ANC leader will have a strong chance of succeeding him as president in 2019 elections.

'Shockingly commonplace'

The province is seen as divided among supporters of Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa, Zuma's ex-wife Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma and Zweli Mkhize, the party's treasurer. Speaking in the small town of Harding, where four government officials have recently been murdered, Dlamini-Zuma told AFP that the killings must stop. "We cannot continue with this kind of culture. Killing is a crime... so we cannot tolerate it," she said after addressing party supporters. Graca Machel, widow of former ANC leader Nelson Mandela, has also voiced disgust at the bloodshed, saying political assassinations were "shockingly commonplace".

"Death threats is a completely normal mechanism for enforcing political control in that part of the country," said Richard Pithouse, a professor at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. The country's Police Minister Fikile Mbalula recently said he was "very much confident that we will make major breakthroughs in relation to the killings". But many analysts and activists worry that the violence points to a volatile general election in 2019. The ANC provincial leadership, which admits that corruption and the battle for local positions are fuelling the assassinations, have vowed to stamp out the killings. —AFP