



Vatican's delicate Chinese mission runs into trouble

## Puigdemont or plan B? Catalan separatists divided

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MEXICO CITY: Personnel of the Fumigation and Avian Control company release a Harris's hawk (Aguililla de Harris in Spanish) (Parabuteo-unicinctus) for it to patrol the runways and air space over Mexico City's Benito Juarez International Airport. —AFP

# Raptors guard Mexico City's airport

## Falcons deployed to prevent 'bird strikes'

MEXICO CITY: Far from the crowds of passengers, lines and passport control, Madison spreads his wings on the side of a runway at Mexico City's international airport, the busiest in Latin America. He is one of several peregrine falcons deployed to prevent "bird strikes" a hazardous collision between birds and planes that can have dangerous and even catastrophic consequences. In 2009, for instance, a US Airways jet had to set down on the Hudson River in New York after a flock of birds took out its engines. In January this year, a Mexico-bound KLM flight made an emergency landing after hitting birds on take-off in the Netherlands. "It's dangerous. Birds don't mix with planes. They can hit a turbine," Oscar Chavez, a 26-year-old who is one of the biologists handling the falcons said. Each day, Madison and another peregrine falcon named Ilse are on duty at the airport, which sees 44 million passengers pass through it each year. "The other birds realize a predator is around and they disappear," said Nayely Flores, who is in charge of animals at the terminal. Getting Madison ready requires a daily procedure that Chavez said was like a ritual: attaching a tracking tag to his leg while dangling quail meat to distract him.

rents while scanning below for targets. These days, however, the days in Mexico's capital are cooler, limiting his forays. Still, the goal is being met and no other birds are spotted in the vicinity.



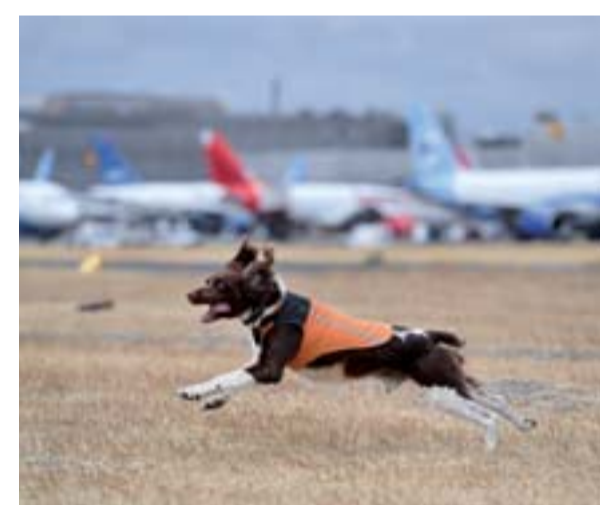
### Collision between birds and planes can be dangerous

Swallows, kestrels and kites are among the species of bird that Madison and Ilse like to hunt. Before 2014, airport authorities used raptors to swoop down and kill their prey as a way of keeping the runways clear. But now, the falcons are trained to fly

and keep the other birds away by their threatening silhouette in the sky. That way, biologists avoid protected species being ripped apart by the falcons' beaks and claws. "If that ever happened, we could get fined" by environmental agencies, Flores said. The new method also has an advantage in that the falcons are not gorging on prey, which would result in them becoming too satiated to want to fly aloft again.

#### Other birds of prey

Peregrine falcons are not the only birds of prey deployed at the airport. A blue-gray aplomado falcon called Panchito and three Harris's hawks also fly as sentinels over the tarmac. One of the hawks is named Loca-crazy in English—because of her aggressive nature. Because they fly low, these carnivorous birds can be used close to boarding halls where there are more plane movements. But there are other, less spectacular animals at work, too. The team of biologists can also call on dogs trained to chase birds away from the ground between runways. And insect populations in the area are kept in check through chemical products, robbing the nuisance birds of a source of food. At the end of the day, the animals—feathered and furred—are ushered into a hangar next to the airport for a night's rest. In the meantime the buzzing facility nearby keeps on with its frenetic activity. —AFP



MEXICO CITY: A dog trained by personnel of the Fumigation and Avian Control company runs to scare birds at Benito Juarez International Airport in Mexico City. —AFP

#### No kills

Depending on the weather, Madison can soar aloft for two hours at a time. Like all raptors, he likes to float in warm air cur-

## Amsterdam community reels as beloved son shot dead

THE HAGUE: An Amsterdam working-class area is in mourning after a teenager known for his volunteer work was shot dead in "cold blood", the latest victim of street violence in the soft-drug tolerant city. More than 1,000 people packed Amsterdam's Nasr Mosque for the funeral of 17-year-old Mohammed Bouchikhi on Wednesday with mourners spilling into the streets, praying in driving rain. It was shortly after 7:00pm last Friday, that two masked gunmen burst through the doors at a community centre in the Wittenburg neighborhood, where Bouchikhi was giving children as young as six a cooking lesson. Armed with at least one automatic rifle, the men fired some 10 shots at a man later identified only as "Gianni L." in an apparent assassination bid.

The gunmen fled, leaving behind a wounded Gianni L. and an injured woman. But caught in the crossfire was Bouchikhi, shot in the lower spine and left arm, said his uncle, Najem Oulad Ali. He died shortly afterwards in front of the shocked children at the centre within walking distance of the red light district, where legal prostitution and cannabis shops daily draw thousands of curious tourists. "They shot him down in cold blood. It's incomprehensible," an emotional Oulad Ali told AFP, at the funeral.

#### Gun violence

Security has been beefed up in the area by Amsterdam police, who have launched a massive probe into the shooting. But they cautioned it was too early to link the latest murder to earlier incidents involving Amsterdam's so-called "Mocro-mafia" gang wars. "At this stage it would be dangerous to speculate and we're not going to," Amsterdam police spokesman Leo Dortland said. Far from tourists' eyes, the Dutch capital has witnessed several assassinations in recent years as rival gangs vie for control of the lucrative drug trade. The most gruesome was in 2016 when the severed head of a known gang member was found outside a shisha lounge.

The gangs consist mainly of Dutch citizens of Moroccan or Surinamese descent. Wittenburg residents do not believe the latest shooting was linked to gang wars. Instead they think it was a street feud which took a violent turn, possibly over drugs or money. But the shooting has raised red-flags over how easily weapons—including AK-47 assault rifles—are available, media reports said. "The fact that Mohammed's murderers could walk into a community centre full of children and open fire with an automatic rifle is of huge concern to us," Bouchikhi's relative Oulad Ali said. —AFP

## 'Tenancingo', the Mexico sex slavery capital

TENANCINGO: "Tenancingo" means "the walled city" in the Nahuatl language, and it lives up to its name: Mexico's sex slavery capital is not a place that welcomes scrutiny from outsiders. Take for example the city's radio frequency jammer, which ensures that prying eyes—police or journalists, for example—cannot fly drones over certain neighborhoods to take aerial images. Trying to get information on the ground is even more hazardous. Plainclothes police who escorted AFP journalists on a recent trip to the central city's red-light district recommended staying in the car and driving without stopping, fearful that local lookouts would ring the church bells—the signal to lynch intruders. Last year, Interpol deployed 50 agents backed by 250 Mexican soldiers to arrest just three pimps in the city.

The cinderblock houses that line the main street stand in contrast with the luxurious and colorful four-storey homes that are the symbols of the city's booming sex trafficking industry. Police say traffickers use the mansions to flaunt their power and lure vulnerable young women into their clutches. The pimps beat and torture the women to force them into prostitution, sometimes in Tenancingo or the surrounding area, sometimes as far away as the United States or even New Zealand. "They take them north and sneak them across the border," said Juana Camila Bautista, a Mexico City prosecutor who specializes in sex trafficking cases.

#### 'Like a princess'

Karla Jacinto, a 25-year-old Mexican woman, was forced into prostitution at the



MEXICO CITY: A sex worker stands on a street at La Merced neighborhood, in downtown Mexico City. The most powerful pimps of Mexico have virtually built walls around Tenancingo, the city where according to authorities, most of them were born. —AFP

age of 12. Her nightmare began when a young man approached her in the subway in Mexico City, which sits about two hours' drive northeast of Tenancingo. She was an emotionally fragile adolescent who liked skating and hip-hop and was anxious to escape an abusive mother who sometimes kicked her out of the house.

The young man claimed to share a similar story, gave her a candy, and paid her compliments she says felt like "the most sincere and honest" she had ever heard. After asking her to marry him, he took her to Tlaxcala, another sex-trafficking hotspot near Tenancingo. For three months he treated her "like a princess," she says: driving her around in a luxury car, inviting her to palatial homes, celebrating the fact that they would be "family" once they married.

Then one day it came crashing down. Her "boyfriend" forced her into prostitution, beating her and threatening to kill her. The

first day, she had sex with more than 30 clients, she says. "I screamed at them to stop. I closed my eyes," she said. That was her life for the next four years. If she failed to meet her daily quota, her boyfriend-turned-pimp beat her or burned her with an iron, nearly killing her three different times, she says. After managing to escape, she now tours the country speaking to groups of schoolgirls on the danger of sex slavery.

#### 'Worthless'

"Young, vulnerable women hungry for affection" make the easiest prey for traffickers, says Mario Hidalgo, 39, who targeted just such victims for a decade as a pimp. Hidalgo started in the trade as a 17-year-old cleaning used condoms from the rooms where his bosses forced their prostitutes to have sex with clients. Two years later he was promoted to luring in victims himself. —AFP