

Anatomy of a rescue on the world's deadliest migration route

On Friday, the Alan Kurdi ship pulled 32 Libyans from a small boat in the Mediterranean

Fri, Dec 27, 2019

SALLY HAYDEN

The alarm sounded shortly after midnight on Friday. Bleary-eyed volunteers and crew stumbled up to the mess room for a briefing. There was a boat, the ship's head of mission, Rene Stein, told them. It was about 1.8 nautical miles ahead. Everyone had to be ready.

On the monkey deck, the highest point on which you can safely stand on the ship, the volunteer on watch duty could spy a light in the distance. It flashed across the Mediterranean Sea, bright, blinking once or twice before stopping. After a pause, it shone again and again, a sign of life under a smattering of stars. He peered through his binoculars, trying to make out the people on board.

Then, he heard them shouting.

As the Alan Kurdi rescue ship sailed closer, the captain lit up the vessel to show he had received the message from those in need. Two lifeboats were deployed, with volunteer drivers at the helm.

Once on board, the man clung his baby to him, breathing deeply and then letting out a cry. He began to vomit

The first began to circle the 8m-long boat, while one crew member asked for information about who was on board. Five women, one of them pregnant, came the answer. There were 10 children, the youngest six months old.

A rescue operation is both fast and slow. It felt fast because everyone's adrenaline was pumping, but slow because they knew it was important to do everything calmly. Panic costs lives, they had been warned during training.

Paralysed by shock

The first lifeboat came back with four children, a woman and a man. The children were toddlers. They were lifted onto the Alan Kurdi's deck, some crying, some with faces paralysed by shock. Once on board, the man clung his baby to him, breathing deeply and then letting out a cry. He began to vomit.



Crew of the Alan Kurdi practise rescue simulations in the search-and-rescue zone off the Libyan coast, in the Mediterranean Sea, on December 26th.

Photograph: Sally Hayden

The lifeboat went back several times, taking children, women and then the men, who stumbled as they were helped up a ladder and down wooden steps.

“Thank you, thank you,” whispered one woman, wearing skinny jeans and a headscarf. “No problem,” replied one of the rescue crew.

To avoid it being reused by human smugglers and any accompanying accusations that the Alan Kurdi’s crew had collaborated with them, the boat they had travelled in was then destroyed. It went up in flames before the last lifeboat was hoisted on deck, and the Alan Kurdi began to speed away from the Libyan coast. All of the 32 people brought on board were Libyans. They said they set sail from Tripoli hours before, and were escaping the war. In April, eastern general Khalifa Haftar ordered his self-styled Libyan National Army to advance on the north African capital. In the eight months since, more than 2,000 people have been killed in fighting and roughly 150,000 displaced.

In a statement last week, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said air strikes are the leading cause of civilian casualties, “accounting for 182 deaths and 212 injuries, followed by ground fighting, improvised explosive devices, abductions and killings”.



The Alan Kurdi rescue ship enters the search-and-rescue zone, off the Libyan coast, on December 26th. Photograph: Sally Hayden

Libya is a transit country for refugees fleeing dictatorships and wars across Africa and the Middle East, but, increasingly, Libyans are also escaping themselves. The condition of the fibreglass boat – which had two engines – indicated the people on it either paid more money or were better respected by smugglers, in comparison to sub-Saharan Africans, who are usually crammed into rubber boats, sometimes with faulty engines. The Libyans on board had food supplies for two days, a satellite phone and a GPS. They were able to call for help once they reached international waters, increasing their chances of survival. “Rubber boats are difficult because nothing reflects the colour. Wooden boats are better but they’re rather rare,” Stein, the ship’s head of mission, had warned the volunteer crew in advance. Fibreglass was rarer still.



The Alan Kurdi rescue ship on the morning of Christmas Day, right before departing port at Mazaro del Vallo, Sicily. Photograph: Sally Hayden

Caring for the people

“People were calm, in a very stable condition,” said Stefan Schultz, a paramedic on one of the Alan Kurdi’s lifeboats, who stayed up all night caring for the people rescued.

“I’m tired, really tired,” he said, on Friday morning. “I can’t really describe that feeling. The whole process was okay. We trained for this scenario and for that reason it worked quite well.”

If you have only a 30 per cent chance you don’t leave your country. You don’t go on water unless you’re desperate

More than 19,000 people have died since 2014 trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. The route from Libya is the deadliest migration route in the world. Charity rescue ships such as the Alan Kurdi have been accused of acting as a “pull factor” for refugees and migrants, with critics saying rescues encourage more people to risk their lives by paying smugglers to go to sea, though the Alan Kurdi’s captain Uwe Doll rejects this interpretation.



Children rescued from a wooden boat off the Libyan coast in the early hours of Friday, December 27th. Photograph: Sally Hayden



Children rescued from a wooden boat off the Libyan coast in the early hours of Friday, December 27th. Photograph: Sally Hayden

“They want to escape,” he said. “They know the chance, the risk of dying during this escape with small boats like these and they know that we [the charity rescue boats] only rescue 30 per cent of the refugees that are in this area. If you have

only a 30 per cent chance you don't leave your country. You don't go on water unless you're desperate."

For his part, Doll said rescuing people has made him experience emotions he's never had before in his life.

"It makes me sometimes a little bit sad and also it makes me happy. We can help them, I never had this feeling before."



A Christmas tree light in the window of the Alan Kurdi rescue vessel.

Photograph: Sally Hayden

THE 21ST-CENTURY SLAVE TRADE

Before African migrants reach the Mediterranean, many are housed by people smugglers in secret locations in Libya, where they endure torture, rape and kidnap. These are their stories



Sally Hayden

First came the smell and the low sound of moaning, then the sight of hundreds of wasted people, and finally the realisation that he wasn't going anywhere fast. Aaron had entered the smuggler's warehouse.

Roughly 900 men, women and children were packed together – Somalis, Eritreans and Ethiopians. There were three toilets. "You sleep overcrowded, it didn't have the capacity to hold that amount of people," he recalls. "The temperature is very high; you have to suffocate. You drink water from the toilets and wash from the toilets. There are people dying because of starvation."

The teenager was just 17 when he escaped compulsory, unending military service in Eritrea – one of the world's most isolated dictatorships – and daringly made his way to Sudanese capital Khartoum. In Sudan, an Islamic country at the time still ruled by wanted war criminal Omar al-Bashir, older refugees whispered about their children being kidnapped or stolen.

In reality, many young people were convinced to leave the country on a "go now, pay later" scheme – with payments seemingly reserved until they saw results. A smuggler told Aaron he could be across the Mediterranean Sea within days and his new life in Europe would begin.

"We were misled intentionally," Aaron says. Even crossing the Sahara Desert to leave Sudan took weeks. But Libya was where the real suffering started. In the smuggler's warehouse, where he stayed between June 2017 and May 2018, Aaron was told he owed €10,000 – much more than he expected.

This was Bani Walid, a Libyan town migrants call the "ghost city" because of the number of people who disappear without trace: stored like cargo in compounds, starved, sometimes tortured to death. Aaron experienced "beating, starving, insanity and many stuff, just like all the other detainees. There were people dying in the warehouse. There were women being taken from the warehouse to [the smuggler's] private house," he remembered.

His smuggler was Kidane Zekarias Habtemariam, a vicious man of Eritrean descent and one of the world's most wanted traffickers until he was arrested in Ethiopia last month. Habtemariam was taking women to rape them, Aaron says – something other interviewees corroborate.

Once a day, detainees would be taken to the front of the warehouse, joining a queue to ring their families. There was no time for niceties; just moments to beg for ransom payments. The calls were monitored by fellow migrants: collaborators who brutalised others to save themselves.

Parents and siblings on the other end of the phone line grasped for information. "You're not allowed to have a phone call more than two minutes," Aaron explains. "You have to call [your family], you have to tell [them] the price, and you give them the phone number or the address of the person who would receive the money."

Sometimes, refugees and migrants were tortured while on the phone. "They don't have to beat a lot but a few severely," says Aaron, who describes Habtemariam "displaying" grievously injured people to show others what could happen if they didn't pay up quickly.

Habtemariam carried out the attacks himself. "One guy was beaten with electricity wires. [Habtemariam] beat him to the point that he was at the verge of death. He beat him with his own hands. Fortunately he survived."

In time, Aaron came to feel the people in the warehouse were no longer human. They were more like "a herd of animals after you slaughter them and want to sell them".

Aaron's story is not unique. It's one of dozens I've heard during face-to-face or phone interviews with refugees and migrants across Europe, as well as in Rwanda, Sudan, Niger, Tunisia, and even through messages from inside smugglers' warehouses in Libya.

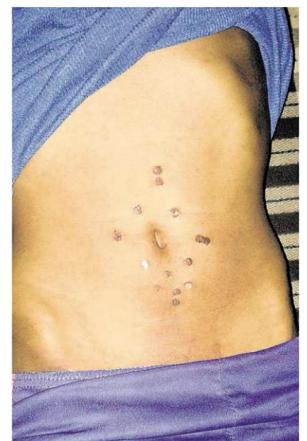
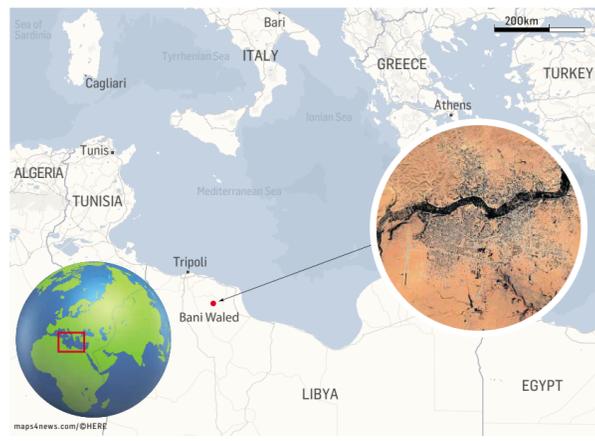
All of them asked to remain anonymous or have their names changed because of fears about their safety, but they have spoken because they want the world to recognise what has happened to them.

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In 2011, Libya was thrown into turmoil when the Arab Spring led to the ousting and killing of long-ruling dictator Muammar Gaddafi. The north African country of roughly six million people has always been a key launching pad for boats heading for Europe, something Gaddafi exploited for his own advantage, even telling European leaders the continent would turn "black" if they didn't support him.

After Gaddafi's fall, chaos meant smugglers could operate with impunity, devising increasingly violent ways to make their operations lucrative. Well-documented evidence shows collusion with Libyan authorities, which remain weak and, in Tripoli, get their power from disparate militias vying for territory and wealth.

For the past year, there has been war in the capital city, and at the time of writing, there have been 20 coronavirus cases in Libya, though a curfew and restrictions on movement are already in place. If it spreads, it could have a devastating effect on the country as a whole, already wracked by political and civil unrest. Migrants are among the most vulnerable, given many



have tuberculosis and other health problems from time spent locked up.

In 2017, Fatou Bensouda, the chief prosecutor at the International Criminal Court, called Libya "a marketplace for the trafficking of human beings". That same year, CNN journalists went undercover and filmed migrants being auctioned as slaves for as little as \$400. While the video shocked audiences across the world, these reports were not new and have not ended.

Refugees and migrants continue to flee wars, dictatorships, corruption and crushing poverty across Africa. Those I've spoken to say they grew used to being called "abeed" in Libya, which translates as "slave".

When people are desperate they'll take any chance, effectively turning themselves over to a system where they are bought and sold in a kind of 21st-century kind of slave trade. In Libya, the buying and selling of people isn't hidden. Much of it plays out for anyone to see online. Now, victims say it is finally time for a reckoning.

In March, a number of human smugglers were arrested in Ethiopia and Sudan, according to police sources, local and international reports. Two of those apprehended are particularly infamous: Tewelde Giotom, an Eritrean nicknamed "Walid" who is known for raping a huge number of female captives, and Habtemariam, Aaron's smuggler and another Eritrean, who was reportedly on Interpol's "wanted" list (an Interpol spokesperson would not confirm this, saying they do not comment on individual cases).

Activists and victims are hoping prosecutions in Africa can be more successful than the last European attempt to bring a smuggler to justice. In 2016, Eritrean carpenter, Medhanie Tesfamariam Behre, was arrested in Sudan, extradited to Italy, and jailed for three years in what was later proven to be a case of mistaken identity. Last year, Behre was granted asylum in Italy.

Some former victims gleefully shared news of the recent arrests widely on social media, but many were also concerned. "It's very difficult to speak about Walid," said one former captive. "He is the devil."

"They were the most brutal of all smugglers," said another victim. "Walid was taking every beautiful girl by force and Kidane was known for beating people like animals." He worried the pair would manage to escape. "They can pay plenty of money as [a] bribe to be freed as they are in Africa. You know money is the solution for any problem in Africa." When asked what punishment he'd like to see him get, the victim, who is still in Libya, said he wants them drowned. "Many lives passed due to them and many have suffered in Libya for more than three years, so my idea is after three years punishment they have to be thrown into the Mediterranean Sea. These kind of human beings should totally disappear from the Earth and should not be buried after death if everyone is going [to] live in

peace."

"What's the value of a person? You don't think of that. You're hearing their voices," mused Meron Estefanos, an activist and journalist based in Sweden. "You know they're suffering, these people, they're asking you to help them."

Estefanos first began getting anguished calls in 2011, from Eritreans in Egypt's Sinai desert. They were being tortured and asked for up to \$40,000 (€36,800) to be released. Over five years, Estefanos estimates one billion dollars was paid in ransoms by friends, family members, and supporters from the Eritrean diaspora to secure releases there.

Since Libya became a more common migration route, she thinks the money paid to smugglers could be approaching the same figures. "[Captives] are being extorted again and again so that makes it the same," she said.

Estefanos has paid and crowdfunded ransom payments herself. Originally, she tried contacting human rights groups, UN agencies, celebrities and anyone else she could think of to rescue captives, but slowly she realised change wasn't going to come. "We are black people," she says. "The world doesn't care. We always say paying ransom is not good. But hey, if your brother or your sister was in that situation, if your child was in that situation, which parent is going to say I'm not going to pay?"

Eritreans in particular have a culture of helping, she says, though she worries each payment increases the price. "People, when they feel hopeless and they don't know what to do, it gives you kind of a peace of mind that you contributed 100 dollars to save one life."

In the coming years, as migration routes shift again, Estefanos expects the same patterns of captivity and ransom to begin in other countries. "The smugglers are smart so wherever there are a lot of refugees there will be a lot of smugglers," she says. "Migration never really stops to be honest."

Asked if this is a slave trade, Estefanos doesn't pause. "Of course it is."

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In Libya's Bani Walid, refugees describe washing once a week, with five people showering together. They get two meals a day of something plain, and two chances to drink water. "If you don't pay money quickly you are beaten every day," said an Eritrean.

No one knows how many captives have died. In 2018, an Médecins Sans Frontières staff member spoke of the demand for body bags in Bani Walid – up to 50 a week for just one camp. "They call our parents to pay or kill us. That is ransom," says Hani, a Somali in his early 20s. "They say if you are not paying we will kill or cut his body by dividing the whole body by pieces. Like a horror movie."

“They get two meals a day of something plain, and two chances to drink water. If you don't pay money quickly you are beaten every day”

A 2019 report by the Women's Refugee Commission found that sexual violence against both genders in Libya is also widespread. Male refugees said they had been both raped and forced to have sex with other detainees while smugglers watch. I've heard reports of smugglers in Libya raping women on camera, then threatening to post the videos online if the women ever speak out.

Even when you pay up, you are likely to be sold on to another smuggling gang. In one incident, hundreds of refugees and migrants were even exchanged after their smuggler lost a gambling bet.

A Sudanese man, speaking from a Tripoli detention centre, says detainees' families raised as much as \$35,000 in various instalments, and a Somali woman with him paid \$60,000 in total. Everyone in detention with him paid at least \$3,000, he says.

For families, finding out what was happening was a shock. In April 2019, Hani got a call from his brother, who said he was being held in an underground "prison" in Bani Walid. There were 95 others with him, including women.

"They are burning them," Hani said at the time. "There are no windows and air. They burn them with [dripping hot] plastic bags on their bodies. He told me he can't tell me the smuggler's name because the smuggler was with him when he needed to call me or my mum."

Far away in Hargeisa, Somaliland, Aaden got a similar call the next month. His brother needed cash. "We send that time near to €15,000," he recalls. "A lot of money. [After that], he said to send again €16,000. My brother is still in an underground detention centre. No one knows the place."

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In some ways, social media has made things easier for refugees and migrants. Facebook and WhatsApp in particular are used to raise ransoms. I've seen dozens of posts, some as recently as the last few months, where photos of captives in Libya are posted online along with a phone number anyone can send money to.

One, last November, which showed a picture of young man with a price of \$12,000 dollars, was shared more than 780 times. A WhatsApp audio message from Bani Walid, sent around last year, asked for a \$17,500 payment for each of a group of 150 Somalis. Sometimes, audio messages are recorded by the smugglers themselves.

Mothers of captives have set up WhatsApp groups to share information. In one case, each mother contributed \$10 towards the release of a Somali boy who had no parents.

"You see that always, mothers begging, my son is in Libya and I don't have the money to pay [for] him," says Estefanos. "I used to save it, take a picture, but it's become our new normal; it's almost every day."

When asked about the posts on its site, a Facebook spokesperson responds: "We do not allow content or behaviour on Facebook or Instagram that may lead to human exploitation. Our policies are developed in consultation with expert organisations, including the UN, and do not allow people to post content or accounts related to human trafficking. . . . We will continue to work with law enforcement, expert organisations and industry to prevent this behaviour on our platforms."

Offline, where the smugglers store their profits is a long-pondered question. Sudan, Switzerland, and Dubai are all locations victims suggested – with one saying his smuggler owned a gold shop in the UAE. Payments have been made to accounts in Khartoum or Dubai, though usually through untraceable "hawala" money-broking methods.

"For the smugglers who have gone this far, killed too many people, raped too many women, where can they go?" asks one teenager who recently passed through Libya. "All of this, it is blood money."

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Life after smuggling offers little reprieve for many victims. Over the past two years, hundreds of people, many emaciated or too sick to attempt the journey across the Mediterranean Sea, have been delivered directly from Bani Walid to government-associated detention centres in Tripoli. In one centre, more than a dozen women and girls showed up pregnant from the same smuggler – some paid high prices for abortion pills while still incarcerated. The latest survivor to die was a teenager released from Bani Walid last month, according to other refugees in Tripoli. "He was totally crushed," said one.

Even when survivors go to sea, they're unlikely to make it to Europe. Boats used to be wooden; now they're unseaworthy rubber dinghies. And the European Union encourages the Libyan coastguard to intercept and bring escapees back to Libya.

As happened to many others, Aaron was sold between smugglers, even after raising the money that was demanded through frantic efforts by his family in Eritrea and relatives abroad. When he eventually reached the Libyan coast, he was abandoned on the shore and quickly caught by Libyan authorities, who locked him up.

Now 21, Aaron is in Tunisia living a half-life, unable to claim proper asylum rights and enduring increasing hostility from locals.

"The time is wasted, the money is wasted. . . . We're here in Tunisia, still we're struggling with the migration journey," he says, anger in his voice. "Probably [Habtemariam] will be detained and the detention he will have will be just like the house that we are living in here. Whether he is punished or not he will be safe now. . . . His punishment is not enough punishment for me."

■ **Top:** An Eritrean teenager in a dormitory for unaccompanied minors in Shagarab refugee camp, eastern Sudan, in 2017. Many Eritreans stop here before travelling on towards Libya. **Above:** African migrants prepare food at a safe house in the 'ghost city' of Bani Walid, on the edge of the desert 170km southeast of the Libyan capital Tripoli. **Left:** A victim of smugglers displays injuries he received while he was held captive.

PHOTOGRAPHS: SALLY HAYDEN PHOTOGRAPH: MAHMUD TURKIA/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Coronavirus crisis

Trump considers disbanding taskforce

Pence says other agencies could take on work as Fauci's House testimony blocked

SUZANNE LYNCH
Washington Correspondent

The White House is considering disbanding its coronavirus taskforce, vice-president Mike Pence said yesterday, as the death toll from Covid-19 in the United States approached 70,000.

Mr Pence told reporters that the taskforce, which is headed by top immunologists Deborah Birx and Anthony Fauci, could be wound down by the end of this month or early next month.

"We have slowed the spread, we have flattened the curve," he said, adding that the work of the taskforce could be transferred to other federal agencies. He said the decision was "a reflection of the tremendous progress we've made as a country".

Election

The taskforce has been at the centre of the administration's approach to the pandemic, which has left tens of thousands dead and 30 million people without work.

The development came as Mr Trump blocked Dr Fauci from testifying before the House of Representatives, accusing Democrats of wanting his administration to "fail" in its approach to the pandemic.

Speaking as he left Washington for Arizona, Mr Trump said that Democrats "should be ashamed because they don't want us to succeed. They want us to fail so they can win an election, which they're not going to win".

He said the Democratic-controlled House was "a bunch of Trump-haters. They, frankly, want our situation to be unsuccessful, which means death".

Dr Fauci is expected to testify before a committee in the Republican-controlled Senate next week. All requests for members of the coronavirus taskforce to testify before Congress will have to be approved by the new White House chief of staff, Mark Meadows, the administration has said.

The president was speaking as a new poll found that most Americans oppose the reopen-

ing of businesses that were shut due to the pandemic, despite several states lifting lockdown measures in recent days. The University of Maryland-Washington Post poll found that 78 per cent of people said they would not dine in a restaurant, while 67 per cent would be uncomfortable shopping in a retail outlet.

The president has been encouraging states to reopen, even though he has said the decision rests with governors.

Speaking before he boarded Air Force One, Mr Trump also dismissed projections by the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention and other government agencies that the US death toll could reach 3,000 a day by June 1st, noting that these figures did not take into account "mitigation" strategies already adopted.

Asked about the internal report which was circulated within his administration, Mr Trump replied: "Our country wants to open... our country has to open. We have the greatest country in the world. Two months ago I created, with a lot of good people... the greatest economy in history, the greatest employment numbers, the greatest success in history. And then one day, we had to close it down. We're going to beat those numbers, and I'm going to beat them soon."

Mourning advert

Mr Trump also hit out at the founders of a new conservative committee opposed to his presidency known as "The Lincoln Project".

The group, which counts among its members prominent lawyer George Conway, husband of Trump adviser Kellyanne Conway, launched a TV advert titled Mourning in America, which recounts the administration's failures in handling the pandemic.

"I would have them change the name to the 'Losers Project'. Because if you take a look... every one of them, I either defeated or they lost by themselves. It's a group of major losers. They're Republican losers."



■ Clockwise from main: women walk home before the 7pm curfew in Gulu; a government-organised coronavirus taskforce meeting; and Akello Madelena (72), Adok Joska (76) and Lalam Elvera (80). Below: Khalid Mahmoud. PHOTOGRAPHS: SALLY HAYDEN



President reads out lists of donors on TV as many of Uganda's poor fear starvation



Sally Hayden
in Gulu, Uganda

Museveni has said all food donations must go through government

Khalid Mahmoud was at home when police and local authorities arrived to arrest him. "You are being arrested for committing attempted murder," he remembers one man telling him. "You are distributing food."

Mahmoud's five children watched as the slim, polite 39-year-old had his hands tied together. They were all crying when he was hauled away and pushed into a pick-up truck.

His pregnant wife, her baby overdue, looked on in despair. He would spend the night in a cell.

The civil servant, who works in northern Uganda's Gulu Uni-

versity, had pooled money with two friends as coronavirus-related restrictions began to come into force. They spent the equivalent of €2,400 on 250kg of maize flour and 200kg of beans, which he hoped to give out to 100 of his neighbourhood's poorest families. He chose those headed by orphans, widows, the elderly and disabled – the most vulnerable in what was to become Uganda's lockdown.

But Mahmoud fell prey to what critics call the Ugandan government's latest crackdown on opposition.

On March 30th, as President Yoweri Museveni announced he was suspending transport, closing non-food markets and non-essential service providers, and shutting down the means many had of making a living, he also put a halt on charity, announcing that food donations must be routed through government-associated taskforces.

Goodwill

While Museveni said this was to stop crowds gathering and disease spreading, critics say he is trying to prevent anyone else garnering goodwill before next year's presidential election, with human rights groups even accusing security forces of torturing an opposition politician



who tried to help the poor.

In spite of its intervention, government food distributions have barely stretched outside the capital, Kampala, while four senior government officials given the job of buying supplies were arrested for falsely inflating prices.

A regular meeting of Gulu's coronavirus taskforce sees more than 100 people sitting under a mango tree – hospital representatives, MPs, charity workers and civil servants among them.

Attendees will read out lists of donations, from vehicles and food to cash. Big contributions are applauded, but it is unclear where they are going.

Only 500 families in one par-

ish were given a small amount of beans and maize this week, one month after the lockdown came into force.

In Pece Pawel, a parish about 10 minutes' drive out of the small city, some of the women Mahmoud was supposed to help gather to tell their stories.

Adok Joska, a 76-year-old in a faded leopard-print dress, takes care of three young children whose parents died. "These days life is too hard," she says. "In lockdown we're facing famine. I can eat only once a day, sometimes only porridge. There's nothing we can do but request our government to support us."

Beside her sits Akello Madelena, a 72-year-old in a rose-pink T-shirt spotted with holes, who minds five children. She used to sell charcoal but that activity is banned under the lockdown. "We're picking the roots and leaves [from plants]; we cut them into pieces and make a soup," she says.

Videos shared on social media show women begging for food in Kampala. One removes her clothes and rolls on the floor. "My children, they're going to die with hunger," she cries.

Millions watch as, in his televised speeches, the president praises those who make big donations, sometimes spending

20 minutes reading lists of them aloud.

Meanwhile, many of Uganda's poor fear starvation.

In a national address on April 28th, Museveni said work had been delayed after parliament allocated 10 billion Ugandan shillings (€2.4 million) to be distributed among MPs to raise awareness about Covid-19, a move the opposition condemned as corruption.

'Bribe'

Museveni later called on parliamentarians to give the money to their local taskforces, saying it had been "bad planning" and "reprehensible" to take it for themselves.

Opposition leader and popstar Robert Kyagulanyi, also known as Bobi Wine, protested against the allocation, calling it a "bribe".

"Wrong and immoral," Kyagulanyi tweeted. "I've returned this money and will not partake in a fraud so vile."

On April 19th, opposition MP Francis Zaake was arrested and allegedly tortured for trying to hand out food.

Witnesses who saw him three days later told Human Rights Watch he was unable to walk and appeared to have been severely beaten. The government did not reply to a request for comment.

"I feel that there is this mentality that is if it's not the [ruling] National Resistance Movement that is doing something then nobody else should do it... even if people are to die, let them die," says Mahmoud.

"And definitely this is not correct. They are taking every donation as being political, which is not the case."

Mahmoud was released after being forced to pay 500,000 Ugandan shillings (€120) in what he was told were costs associated with his arrest. When he asked what would happen to the food, which had also been seized, security officers said his only option was to give it to the government taskforce, who would distribute it without his involvement and without telling him who had received it. Mahmoud told security he would keep it for himself instead.

Once back home, Mahmoud resumed his mission, giving bags of maize and beans to some of the families he had previously planned to help.

"I didn't see anyone. I did it successfully. I did it quietly," he says the day after he had finished, sounding triumphant. "You can risk your life, you can risk any problem as long as you know you are doing the right thing."

China accuses Pompeo of 'spitting poison'

Chinese state media has criticised US secretary of state Michael Pompeo, calling him "evil" and a liar, as Beijing sought to hit back at recent allegations from the US without prompting a confrontation with president Donald Trump.

State media published a series of commentaries lashing out at Mr Pompeo after he said there was "enormous evidence" that the coronavirus outbreak sprang from a high-security virology lab in the central Chinese city of Wuhan. The official Xinhua News Agency said the top US diplomat was speaking "nonsense", while a news-

caster from China Central Television read a commentary accusing him of "spitting poison".

"US secretary of state Pompeo picked up his own lies in an interview with the media," newscaster Li Zimeng said. "If the cheating behaviours from evil politicians like Pompeo continue, the US's 'Make America Great Again' could become merely a joke."

While the coverage included some of China's harshest critiques of a Trump administration official since the height of the trade war last year, state media continued to steer clear of direct attacks on Mr Trump.

The same strategy allowed Chinese president Xi Jinping to satisfy nationalistic outrage at home throughout the trade war, without prompting the US president to counterpunch.

Chinese officials have instead focused their response on their biggest critics within the Trump administration, including Mr Pompeo and White House trade adviser Peter Navarro.

The US president personally seeks to blame China for the pandemic. In recent days, Mr Trump has accused Beijing of deliberately mishandling the outbreak that has killed more

than 4,600 Chinese citizens to damage him politically and promised a "conclusive" report on the virus's origins.

Fire

"My opinion is they made a mistake. They tried to cover it. They tried to put it out, just like a fire," Mr Trump told Fox News on Sunday.

Although the Wuhan Institute of Virology was studying bat-borne coronaviruses like the one that causes Covid-19 at the time of the first known outbreak nearby, there has so far been no evidence showing it possessed the previously un-

known strain.

Yuan Zhiming, director of the facility's high-security Wuhan National Biosafety Laboratory, said last month that "there is absolutely no way that the virus originated from our institute".

The closest China has come to criticising Mr Trump directly in recent days was a foreign ministry statement attacking "certain US politicians". Such officials "have attempted to shift their own responsibility for their poor handling of the epidemic to others", foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang told reporters. – Bloomberg

Billions could face Sahara-like heat, warns study

KEVIN O'SULLIVAN
Environment and Science Editor

More than three billion people will be living in places with "near unlivable" temperatures by 2070, according to a major study of global heating trends.

Unless greenhouse gas emissions generated by human activity fall, large numbers of people will experience average temperatures across a year hotter than 29 degrees. Less than 1 per cent of the Earth's surface now endures temperatures averaging 29 degrees.

That heat compares with the narrow 11 to 15-degree range that has supported civilisation, including food and livestock production, over the past 6,000 years, according to the research published in the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

The researchers used data from UN population projec-

tions and a 3-degree warming scenario based on the expected global rise in temperature.

A number of studies have previously found that even with countries keeping to Paris climate-agreement targets, the world is currently on course for at least a 3-degree rise.

According to the latest study by scientists based in the UK, Denmark, the US and China, human populations are concentrated into narrow climate bands, with most people living in places where the average temperature is between 11 and 15 degrees. A smaller number of people live in areas with an average temperature of 20 to 25.

As much as one third of the world's population will, however, be exposed to Sahara-like heat within half a century if emissions continue to rise at the pace of recent years, they conclude. The "narrow climate niche" that has supported

human society would shift more over the next 50 years than it has in the preceding six millennia, they predict.

"Absent climate mitigation or migration, a substantial part of humanity will be exposed to mean annual temperatures warmer than nearly anywhere today," they add.

29

By 2070, large numbers could face average temperatures hotter than this figure

Dr Xu Chi, of Nanjing University, told the Sydney Morning Herald: "We were frankly blown away by our own initial results. As our findings were so striking, we took an extra year to carefully check all assumptions and computations. "Clearly, we will need a glob-

al approach to safeguard our children against the potentially enormous social tensions the projected change could invoke."

Upheavals

Among the most exposed nations will be India – where many people live in "already hot places" – with as many as 1.2 billion people likely to be forced to move if population and warming trends continue.

For Nigeria, the number exposed could be 485 million, he confirmed – the scenario used projected the total populations in India and Nigeria to reach 2.2 billion and 600 million respectively.

While the research extends current population and emissions trends into the future, it excludes impacts from the coronavirus pandemic, and accepts precipitation impacts would be inevitable.

Compared with pre-industrial-era conditions, temperatures globally will be about 3 degrees hotter by 2070. But as land warms faster than the oceans, the rise for people on average will be about 7.5 degrees, the researchers note.

Should the world adopt strong emissions reductions, however, it would "substantially reduce the geographical shift in the niche of humans, and would reduce the theoretically needed movement to about 1.5 billion people", they add.

The researchers note upheavals among populations – and the ecosystems that support them – could happen well before 2070, with consequences for climate-driven migration.

"Migration inevitably causes tension, even now when a relatively modest number of about 250 million people live outside their countries of birth," they point out.

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