

Despite years of crackdowns, sweatshops continue to thrive

by Paul Pringle
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LOS ANGELES — The clothes may be labeled "Made in the U.S.A.," but the people who sew them earn as little as eight cents to hem a cuff, six cents to stitch a zipper.

It doesn't add up to much after a long day's drudgery. Many of Los Angeles' 140,000 garment workers earn less than minimum wage, never mind the law. As for health insurance, overtime pay, and other benefits — well, they're a dream that rarely comes true.

"I see the clothes in the store windows with high prices, and it's not right," said Hilda Guerrero, 26, who makes \$3.75 an hour for piecework — all those cuffs and zippers — at a downtown garment factory. California's minimum wage is \$5.75. "It's hard what we do. A hard life."

Fashion-obsessed Los Angeles leads the nation in apparel manufacturing. It is also the country's sweatshop capital. The region may be enjoying an economic boom, but the Angelenos whose toil helps dress America have been left far behind.

Sweatshops continue to thrive despite years of government crackdowns, industry pledges to closely monitor manufacturers and subcontractors, and mounting protests by union activists and campus organizations.

"When you hear about sweatshops, you think of the most egregious examples in Indonesia and China," said Nikki Bas, program coordinator for Oakland-based Sweatshop Watch, a coalition of labor, civil-rights, and student groups. "People would be outraged to learn about the conditions here in the United States," Bas said.

Federal and state officials estimate that Los Angeles sweatshops employ tens of thousands of workers. Sweatshops also flourish in New York and San Francisco and are found in smaller numbers in Dallas, Chicago, and the Southeast, the officials say.

Most of the workers are undocumented immigrants exploited by fly-by-night companies, according to the U.S. Labor Department. The government defines a sweatshop as a factory that flouts wage laws and subjects employees to squalid, unhealthy,

and sometimes life-threatening working conditions.

Representatives of California's \$30 billion fashion industry acknowledge that "bandit" factories abound in Los Angeles. But they say well-established manufacturing contractors and retailers have nothing to do with sweatshops, though the Labor Department has repeatedly linked big clothing outlets to the garment underground.

The industry representatives contend that sweatshops survive because of failed immigration policies, the North American Free Trade Agreement, and consumer demand for the inexpensive clothes.

Ilse Metchek, executive director of the California Fashion Association, said she would be delighted if shoppers insisted on buying — and paying more for — "sweat-free" clothes. She isn't holding her breath, however.

"Does the consumer really care about anything except price?" Metchek said. "The consumer doesn't care."

Guerrero is a consumer herself, but she can't even afford the clothes she sews and trims. A Mexican who crossed the border illegally, she has worked in the downtown fashion district for three years. In a good week, she grosses \$180 for 48 hours of stitching and cutting. She receives no benefits.

"Sometimes we have to work until ten at night because the owner wants to finish an order," Guerrero said in Spanish, her weary eyes belying a game smile. She was collecting her two daughters at a charity day-care center on Skid Row, where wild-

haired panhandlers peered through the windows. "We never get paid for the extra work."

Guerrero's husband sews at another downtown factory. They live in a single-room apartment one floor above her workplace, in a sooty brick building near sidewalks that reek of urine. They share a bathroom and



A building in downtown Los Angeles, California, houses garment factories on floor after floor. Many of the workers earn less than minimum wage and have no benefits.

kitchen with three other families.

"I expected to find a better house and a better job," said Guerrero, the smile fading. She added that her lack of English and a green card has made it impossible to climb the employment ladder. "I keep hoping, though."

She pulled a pair of trimming scissors from her jeans pocket, displaying them as she might a stone removed from her shoe. "My fingers hurt all day," she said.

Her story is common. A 1998 Labor Department study determined that 61 percent of Los Angeles garment factories violated wage laws. The department's 40 investigators in Los Angeles raid and fine roughly 200 sweatshops a year.

"It doesn't seem to change the sweatshops' behavior," said Gerald

Hall, the department's deputy regional administrator for the Western states.

Hall said the federal government would have to field hundreds of investigators to make a sizable dent in the sweatshops. Even then, he added, enforcement measures would be hampered by silence in the factory.

her into the bowels of the nastiest sweatshops.

"I saw women bent over, no ventilation, dirty floors, darkened rooms, piles of clothes," she recalled. "Workers eating with rats and cockroaches at their feet."

A recent visit to a dozen downtown factories found no vermin, but the

scenes were grim. In one building on Hill Street, dimly lit corridors led to rooms packed with sewing tables. The floors were peeling and the walls stained. Bleachy odors seeped from a bathroom down the hall. Two of the five toilets were blocked.

The workers, mostly Latino and Asian immigrants, were jackknifed over the buzzing machines. Their hands moved as if driven by gears. There was barely a murmur of conversation. Plowing through the heaps of fabric required nonstop hustle.

Attempts to interview several of the factory owners who lease space at the building were unsuccessful. They either declined to answer questions or did not return telephone calls. Others had unlisted numbers.

Government investigators have uncovered far worse conditions than those on Hill Street, and the problem is not limited to Los Angeles. The San Francisco area is home to about 400 sweatshops, federal officials say. In New York, a Labor Department survey concluded that three-quarters of the city's 3,000 garment factories broke wage laws last year.

In Dallas, the ranks of sweatshops have always been comparatively thin, and they have declined by half — to

about 150 — since the mid-1990s, said Bruce Cranford, a Labor Department supervisor in the city. Most employ five to 10 workers, Cranford said.

The reduction in Dallas sweatshops is thought to be partly due to the 1994 adoption of NAFTA. Industry analysts say the treaty's easing of trade restrictions has made it tougher for many U.S. garment factories to compete with Latin American companies.

That is the situation in Los Angeles, which has witnessed a slow exodus of factories to Mexico, said Metchek of the fashion association. She asserted that NAFTA and Los Angeles' huge population of job-hungry undocumented immigrants have forced sweatshops and mainstream manufacturers alike to bid low for contracts and keep salaries down.

"Cheap labor is being sought after by everyone," she said.

Metchek also accused the Labor Department of exaggerating the extent of wage violations. She said legitimate manufacturers and retailers scrupulously vet subcontractors for law breaking.

Federal officials agree that the industry has expanded its self-policing initiatives. But they say much more needs to be done. "Some of the monitoring I've seen is pretty good, and some is pretty bad," Hall said.

Early in the Clinton Administration, the Labor Department began turning up the heat by publicizing the names of retailers that bought from sweatshops. In September, the government collected \$247,000 in back wages from a Los Angeles factory whose manufacturing contractor supplied clothes to Eddie Bauer, North Face, Reebok, Jones New York, and Gap. Representatives for the factory, Emeraldtex Inc., could not be reached for comment.

To increase pressure on retailers, the Labor Department intends to step up seizures of garment shipments from sweatshops and their contractors, said John Fraser, a deputy administrator for the department in Washington.

A new state law also provides a mechanism to impose penalties on manufacturers and retailers that contract, directly or indirectly, with illicit factories. It is the strictest statute of its kind.

Pope's trip to Holy Land spotlights tensions among major religions

by Nomi Morris
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JERUSALEM — Pope John Paul II's pilgrimage to the Holy Land next week threatens to expose tensions among Christians, Jews, and Muslims in this region as each group competes for his attention.

"Everybody's going to try to trump the other. Everybody wants their picture with the pope," said Father Michael McGarry, rector of the Tantur Ecumenical Institute near Bethlehem.

The Vatican is trying to avoid political minefields during the pope's visit, after his apology Sunday, March 5, for the sins of the Roman Catholic Church against Jews, Muslims, women, and native peoples. The pope's visit is being described as a personal pilgrimage and his meetings with Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat are being called "courtesy calls."

"It's not an accident that this apology comes this week, before the Holy Land visit," said Father Jerry Murphy-O'Connor, who teaches at the Dominican *Ecole Biblique* in East Jerusalem. "It's not just the Jews of Europe, it's the Indians of South America. The church was a teaching institution and its teaching was often defective."

Father Murphy and other Catholics here note that the church long ago abandoned its conversion efforts in the Holy Land, mindful of the pain it caused Jews, Muslims, and non-Catholic Christians. Only 2 percent of the Holy Land's population is Christian, and of those only half recognize the Vatican as their religious authority.

But the pope's visit is already fueling controversy. Jerusalem's Mayor Ehud Olmert has complained that he was not invited to accompany the pope and Jerusalem's Mufti, or Muslim religious authority, to Muslim holy sites on Temple Mount, known

by Muslims as Haram al Sharif. Olmert says the lack of an invitation is a slight to Israel's sovereignty over all of Jerusalem.

Israel's political leadership is also worried that the Palestinian Authority will use the pope's visits to

bish won't be cleared by next week.

Although it may be billed as a private visit, an event that is attracting 2,000 journalists and 50,000 pilgrims is anything but. An estimated 2 billion people are expected to tune in to live television coverage March 24 of

spired persecution of Muslims and Jews, from the Crusades to the Spanish Inquisition to the Holocaust.

In 1986, the pope made a historic visit to a Rome synagogue. On Sunday, he apologized for all the sins of the Catholic Church over the past two millennia.

"For the pope this is not easy. We have to change 2000 years of history," said McGarry. "There is still anti-Semitism and contempt. But the ship has left port. We have benefited from a pope that has kept Christian-Jewish relations front and center."

Despite religious and political sensitivities, the Vatican and the Israeli government are eager to showcase the papal pilgrimage as a historic moment of reconciliation between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people.

"It's clear this is his dream, to celebrate the millennium here," said McGarry. "He's been talking about it since 1994."

John Paul will meet with Chief Rabbi Meir Lau in the Chief Rabbinate in Jerusalem — a first for the Vatican, which established relations with Israel in 1993. The pope and Lau both grew up in wartime Poland. Their meeting is in contrast to the last papal pilgrimage here in 1964, when Pope Paul VI refused to set foot on the Jewish side of Jerusalem and the chief rabbis refused to meet him elsewhere.

John Paul also will visit the Western Wall, Judaism's holiest site, and Yad Vashem, the national Holocaust museum, where he will meet 30 Israeli Jews from his hometown who survived the war. He is trying to organize an interfaith meeting of top Jewish, Christian, and Muslim clerics — a rarity in the region.

His visit comes as the country is on high alert for a terrorist attack. John Paul's visit will involve the largest security operation the Jewish state has ever mounted, far exceeding the arrangements for the December 1998 visit of President Clinton.

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Bethlehem, the Dehaishe refugee camp, and the Muslim-controlled Temple Mount as a platform to press Palestinian claims to statehood, control of disputed Jerusalem, and the right of return of millions of Palestinian refugees.

Many rabbis in Israel have objected to the pope's Saturday program, saying it will cause Jews to desecrate the Sabbath, even though the Vatican made a point of scheduling the Mass in Nazareth, an Arab town populated by Christians and Muslims.

Some Israelis have even taken offense at the Vatican's request that ambulances traveling with the pope be stripped of the Star of David insignia, the local equivalent of the Red Cross. A plain ambulance is the usual procedure for papal visits around the world.

Environmentalists have gotten into the act, too, protesting the clearing of a nature park for parking lots and a huge stage for the youth mass. In Nazareth, a municipal garbage strike has suddenly taken on international implications, for fear the piles of rub-

a youth Mass for 100,000 on the Mount of Beatitudes by the Sea of Galilee.

Israel's foreign ministry has assigned 88 information officers to the visit, and has a senior diplomat on call 24 hours a day to handle sensitive issue that might arise.

Palestinians are elated about the pope's visit, and a Gallup poll earlier this month showed that nearly 60 percent of Israelis also see it in a positive light.

Still, the poll showed that only 44 percent of Jews are aware that the Vatican officially overturned anti-Jewish teachings as early as 1965 and only 35 percent know the pope apologized in 1998 for the complicity of Catholics in the Holocaust.

"There is generally abysmal ignorance among Israelis and world Jewry about Christianity and this pope," said Ron Kronish, director of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel, which commissioned the poll.

In fact, this pope has gone further than any other to mend relations strained by centuries of church-in-

Key reformer seriously wounded by gunmen in Iran

by Drusilla Menaker
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CAIRO, Egypt — A key strategist behind Iran's democracy movement was shot and seriously wounded Sunday by two men on a motorcycle in central Tehran.

Saeed Hajjarian, credited with putting together the February election campaign that led to reform candidates taking control of the parliament, was shot in the face at close range. He was under intensive care at a Tehran hospital with a bullet lodged in the back of his neck.

Hajjarian has been an important adviser to Iranian President Mohammed Khatemi, whose upset election in 1997 set off a reform movement that has challenged the hold on power of hard-line clerics.

Hajjarian is also a Tehran City Council member and editor of a new independent newspaper that has examined human rights abuses with unprecedented frankness and implicated rogue intelligence agents and politicians in the killings of dissidents.

On the eve of the Feb. 18 elections, Hajjarian spoke enthusiastically of the voter-powered change under way in Iran. Rejecting anti-Western rhetoric, he described poring over American political science reviews to better understand the mechanics of electioneering, coalition building, and opinion polling.

"I read books because we don't have this experience in Iran," he said in an interview.

But he said his country's democracy had to be "localized," noting conservatives' allegations that the reformers' exuberant rallies violated social codes against young men and women dancing together.

"These are things you don't have to consider elsewhere," he said. Hajjarian, 46, also correctly predicted that an outpouring of support in the elections for Khatemi's allies would wrest a two-thirds majority from the conservatives, and he looked forward

to a parliament that would endorse free speech, a liberalized election law, and other reforms leading to "the consolidation of democracy."

President Khatemi, who was touring a province Sunday, condemned the attack by "enemies of freedom" who "have no place among the people."

No one claimed responsibility for the 8:35 a.m. attack outside the City Council offices. Witnesses said that a powerful motorcycle, the type used by the security forces and police, pulled up and that one of the two helmeted men aboard got off, pointed a handgun at Hajjarian, and fired two shots, one of which hit him.

"Everyone is in shock," said Shirzad Bozoigimehr, editor of the *Iran News*, an English-language daily. But he added that rumors of death threats against reformers were circulating in the wake of the hard-liners' dramatic election defeat. "We all expected something," he said.

Government ministers and other activists came to Hajjarian's bedside at a central Tehran hospital. Hundreds of Iranians, some holding the front-page headline from his newspaper reading "Hajjarian Terrorized," stood outside, some praying.

A command center was established to coordinate the manhunt. Checkpoints were set up around the capital, and other prominent reformers were given extra protection, something Hajjarian had refused, according to security officials quoted by the Iranian news agency. A meeting of the Supreme National Security Council was called.

No public protest was reported, and pro-Khatemi officials cautioned that the attempted assassination was likely an attempt to create a destabilizing sense of crisis in Iran. Student demonstrations last August, apparently provoked when thugs invaded university dormitories, were quelled by warnings that they could generate a backlash from hard-liners with allies within the security forces.

The death-squad murders of five writers in late 1998 is one of the grievances most frequently mentioned by Iranians. Khatemi has made reining in the security forces under "the rule of law" as one of his main missions.