

African women 'married' in scam

CAPE TOWN, South Africa (AP) - Fatima and Zain have been dating for a year and often joke about marriage. But it was no laughing matter when the Department of Home Affairs told the couple that Fatima had already been married for two years — to a man she had never met.

Fatima, 28, is one of some 3,400 people who in the last three years have been married without their knowledge in scams that involve corrupt government officials and foreigners seeking permanent residency.

The problem appears to be getting worse — since August, about 800 women have discovered they are victims of the fraud. Police say it is a cheap way for foreigners to avoid new immigration laws that make it tougher to stay in the country.

"On paper I'm supposed to be married to a Nigerian man whose name I don't know," said the softspoken Fatima, whose last name was being withheld to protect her privacy. She discovered her false marriage in September after checking a special government website set up to help women check their marital status.

"We were fooling around in the office and a colleague joked that I should check ... you never think it can happen to you. I was completely stunned. Even your name can be stolen these days," she said.

According to the false marriage certificate, she was married on May 16, 2002.

"I wasn't even in Cape Town at the time of the wedding," Fatima said. "The whole mess has made me more careful with my personal details."

Mary Martins-Engelbrecht, a spokeswoman for the South African Police Service, said police are investigating and expect to make more arrests soon. Already several Home Affairs officials have been detained for allegedly taking bribes to arrange bogus marriages.

Home Affairs spokesman Leslie Mashokwe said the department takes the matter seriously, but only a few annulments had been finalized.

"Once the police can confirm that the details like witnesses to the marriage are false, then we officially expunge the records of that union," Mashokwe said. The process is completed at no cost to Fatima and scam victims like her.

Officials in the department have access to birth, death and marriage details. They have only to select an identity number from a single woman of the appropriate age.

Many of the foreigners are already married in other countries. South Africa is one of few countries that doesn't require verification of marital status before allowing couples to wed.

In September, three Egyptians were arrested on allegations they paid three women \$23 a month to remain married to them in fake unions.

Last week, a Pakistani man was arrested after paying a woman \$15 a month to be his bogus wife. He will appear in court on fraud charges.

At the August launch of an awareness campaign called "Check Your Status," Home Affairs Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula shouldered some of the blame.

"It is our view that (the) government needed to take a more active role in identifying and assisting the victims, most of whom have been failed by the weaknesses in our own system," she said.

She said the department is hoping amendments to immigration laws will lead to fewer bogus weddings. Foreign spouses of South Africans now must wait five years for work and permanent residency permits, whereas before they received them immediately.

So far, more than 17,000 women have checked their marital status with the Home Affairs or on the government website.

"When I get married one day I don't want any horrible surprises like this again," Fatima said.

Official: EU will help rebuild Somalia

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia (AP) - The European Union will help rebuild conflict-ravaged Somalia, but the cost is not clear, the EU's foreign policy chief said Saturday.

Immediate priorities are getting a government in place and disarming armed groups so that Somalia can stabilize, said EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana after meeting Somalia's new President Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa.

Yusuf was sworn in on Oct. 14 at a ceremony attended by 10 African leaders after a 275-member transitional parliament elected him in Nairobi, in neighboring Kenya, because of insecurity in Somalia.

"The country has suffered a lot and it is time to reconstruct the country and reconcile the country," Solana told journalists while on a two-day trip to Ethiopia.

Solana said that while providing security in Somalia should remain the task of Africans, the EU was willing to continue support and training in technical areas.

"We will be able to help, but the ownership of this belongs to the Africans," he said.

At a meeting Saturday with the chairman of the African Union's Commission, Alpha Oumar Konare, Yusuf

asked for 20,000 peacekeepers from the 53-nation AU, said Adam Thiam, a spokesman for Konare.

The AU's Peace and Security Council will meet with Yusuf on Monday to discuss the details of a peacekeeping mission, Thiam said.

The Horn of Africa country has been divided into fiefdoms ruled by rival warlords since 1991, when long-

time dictator Mohamed Siad Barre was ousted.

Somalia's conflict has left more than 500,000 people dead, 2 million driven from their homes and 1.5 million refugees in neighboring countries. The new government has no civil service, treasury or even buildings to meet in.

Solana said he had no idea what the cost of rebuilding Somalia would be, and said

that Yusuf had no concrete plans for reconstruction.

The United Nations has estimated that at least \$5 billion will be needed to rebuild Somalia in the long term.

Solana said a donors conference on Somalia will take place on Oct. 28 in Stockholm, Sweden.

Yusuf still has to name a prime minister, who in turn will name a Cabinet.

Press group objects to U.S. restrictions on journalists

ANTIGUA, Guatemala (AP) - The Inter-American Press Association criticized the U.S. government on Sunday for placing restrictions on foreign journalists' travels and for recent court rulings ordering reporters to reveal secret sources.

The Miami-based umbrella group of nearly all the newspapers in the Americas issued its remarks during an annual review of press freedoms.

Rafael Bonilla of the Dominican Republic and chairman of the Committee on Freedom of the Press noted a "disquieting wave of physical, economic and legal attacks against the media and journalists," including slayings of those collecting the news in Mexico, Brazil, Paraguay, Venezuela, Colombia, the Dominican Republic and Peru.

Bonilla said the July 16 ruling by the State Department that requires foreign reporters to leave the country to renew their visas is "a violation of freedom of the press."

Most countries do not have such a re-

quirement.

"Court orders infringing on the confidentiality of journalists' sources also represent a serious risk to freedom of the press in the United States," Bonilla said in the report submitted to the organization.

"More than once, judges have declared journalists in contempt and jailed those who have declined to reveal their sources. The IAPA has vigorously protested each incident."

The report said unfair restriction of and attacks on the press continue "often under the indifferent nose of governments."

In Cuba, the report said, "some 30 journalists remain in prison for attempting to freely exercise their right to inform and be informed." Among those behind bars is Raul Rivero, a member of the IAPA board of directors.

The association also noted positive developments, including freedom of information laws passed in Mexico, Panama, Ecuador and the Dominican Republic, among others.

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