

UK textiles under scrutiny over sweatshop claims

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Interior minister Priti Patel on Monday condemned a "modern-day scourge" in the UK textile sector, after reports that thousands of people were working in modern slavery.

The textile sector has come under scrutiny, particularly in Leicester, central England, after a coronavirus flare-up that forced the city into lockdown two weeks ago.

Factories that continued to operate at full capacity at the height of the outbreak were blamed for the surge in cases, although public health bodies said no single source was responsible.

But the spotlight on the city threw up fresh questions about unscrupulous practices and exploitation of garment factory workers, including low wages and poor conditions.

In parliament, Patel was urged to do more to eradicate the "clear evidence of modern [slavery](#) in plain sight" at garment factories.

She said she "completely agreed" with the description of them as "a modern-day scourge when it comes to exploitation", and called for better enforcement of existing legislation.

Campaigners have in recent weeks highlighted pressures on workers to stay on the job at textile factories in Leicester despite the outbreak, and wages well below the national minimum of £8.72 an hour.

Andrew Bridgen, from Prime Minister Boris Johnson's ruling Conservative party, estimated that the city's garment factories could count up to 10,000 victims of modern slavery.

The MP, whose constituency is five miles (eight kilometres) from Leicester, said he had been told wages could be as low as £2.00 (\$2.50, 2.20 euros) per hour.

Those affected were a "mixture of local people and immigrant workers", and some were in the country illegally, making them ripe for exploitation, he told AFP, citing whistleblowers.

Patel's department, the Home Office, said it took allegations of modern slavery "extremely seriously" and was determined to bring the people responsible to book.

"The National Crime Agency and others are looking into the appalling allegations about sweatshops in Leicester and the home secretary has been clear that anyone profiting from slave labour will have nowhere to hide," a spokesman said.

Anti-Slavery, a pressure group, said more than 10,000 people were referred to the UK authorities last year as victims of [modern slavery](#) but the real number was likely to be higher.

Leicester, which has one of the country's most diverse populations, is thought to be home to at least 1,000 garment factories, supplying many leading clothing brands.

Shares in one of them, clothing group Boohoo, slumped last week on the back of allegations about exploitation, and has launched a review of its UK supply chain.

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