

Modern Forms of Slavery

The Plague of Human Trafficking

By Father John Flynn, L.C.ROME, JUN. 20, 2010 (Zenit.org).- The fervor of millions of fans around the world, glued to their television screens as they follow the World Cup is matched by concern that the event will propitiate an increase in human trafficking.

Cardinal Wilfrid Fox Napier, the archbishop of Durban in South Africa, mentioned this to Zenit in an interview published May 5. He said that there were signs that organized crime rings were smuggling people to provide sexual services during the event.

Coincidentally, just after the start of the World Cup, the U.S. Department of State released its Trafficking in Persons Report 2010. It's the tenth anniversary of these reports that track the human trafficking trade. A fact sheet accompanying the report admitted that the push against human trafficking is still in the initial stages. Many countries are still learning about it and exploring ways to deal with it effectively, it noted.

Although much media attention is focused on trafficking for sexual ends, the State Department pointed out that more people are trafficked for forced labor than for commercial sex. Even so, traffickers often do use sexual violence as a way to coerce women in their work in fields or factories.

Some of the main findings of the 2010 report are the following:

- 12.3 million adults and children are in forced labor, bonded labor, and forced prostitution around the world, with 56% of these victims being women and girls.
- The value for traffickers of this trade is estimated at \$32 billion annually.
- The prevalence of trafficking victims in the world is calculated to be at the level of 1.8 per 1,000 inhabitants. This varies by region with it reaching 3 per 1,000 in Asia and the Pacific.
- There were 4,166 successful trafficking prosecutions in 2009, a 40% increase over 2008.
- There are still 62 countries that have yet to convict a trafficker under laws in compliance with the Palermo Protocol (a document adopted by the United Nations on human trafficking).
- No less than 104 countries are without laws, policies, or regulations to prevent victims' deportation.

Protocol

The report explained that the Palermo Protocol was the first time an international instrument existed on the issue of human trafficking. It called for an approach based on a "3P" paradigm: prevention, prosecution, and victim protection. It is not sufficient to prosecute traffickers, the report stated, if there is no assistance to the survivors and steps taken to ensure that no one else is victimized.

Trafficking can take many forms, the report commented. At times it can involve deceiving and kidnapping of unwitting victims, but often it involves coercing and exploiting people who initially entered a particular form of service voluntarily or migrated willingly.

The State Department cited recent studies that show the majority of human trafficking in the world takes the form of forced labor. According to estimates by the International Labor Organization, for every trafficking victim subjected to forced prostitution, nine people are forced to work. Often this practice is facilitated by circumstances of high rates of unemployment, poverty, discrimination and corruption.

One type of forced labor is through the use of a bond, or debt. This occurs when traffickers or recruiters used by them exploit an initial debt the worker assumed as part of the terms of employment. This can also be inter-generational. In South Asia it is estimated that there are millions of trafficking victims working to pay off their ancestors' debts, according to the report.

Involuntary domestic servitude, forced child labor, child soldiers, and child sex trafficking are some of the other main forms of trafficking in persons.

The wide range of the forms of trafficking mean that this matter is not only a human rights issue, but it can also be viewed as related to fundamental issues of civil liberties, the State Department noted.

Not a priority

In spite of the seriousness of this problem the report lamented the small number of prosecutions. The report affirmed that while trafficking in persons is a crime akin to murder, rape and kidnapping, the number of prosecutions each year is "dismally low" in comparison to the scope of the problem. With only a bit over 4,000 prosecutions last year this is a sign that the injustices committed are not viewed as a priority by authorities, the report accused.

Too often the victims of trafficking are seen as society's throwaways, not important enough to be a matter for concern. Even where action is taken it is frequently limited to punishing the perpetrators, without offering assistance to the victims beyond ensuring their testimony to help obtain a conviction. In fact, the report commented, if the victims are in the country illegally they are often interned and forcibly repatriated to their country of origin.

Such a response, the report observed, may be in the self-interest of governments by ridding themselves of potential burdens, but it does little to help the victims. For a start it impedes efforts to help them overcome the traumas suffered during their period of enforced labor.

Then, sending victims back home to the country of origin, often without informing them of what other options exist, not only exposes them to possible trauma associated with being identified as a trafficking victim, but it also simply returns them to the same conditions and pressures that contributed to their initial trafficking experience.

Given the problems in dealing successfully with trafficking the report recommended greater cooperation between authorities. This includes cooperation both between governments and with non-governmental organizations.

As well, specialized task forces should be set up, and protocols need to be established with business associations to assist in ensuring that the supply chains of commerce are freed from the use of slave labor.

The report also advocated using means such as consumer spending and corporate investment as means to put pressure on traffickers. If both consumers and investors demand greater transparency and accountability then it will be harder for the modern slave traders to make money.

Wider context

One of the more interesting points made by the report is the need to view the problem of trafficking in persons in a wider context. For example, the State Department observed that the problem of corruption of public officials is a major impediment in dealing with issue.

Indexes that rank countries on civil liberties and corruption show that governments that rate poorly on the matter of trafficking also have low ranks on corruption and civil liberties.

Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travelers, addressed the participants at the Vienna Forum to Fight Human Trafficking, held Feb 13-15, 2008, about the problem of human trafficking.

He clearly stated that "trafficking in human beings is a dreadful offence against human dignity."

Easy solutions do not exist, Archbishop Marchetto admitted. What is needed, nevertheless, is a solution not only punishes those involved in organizing this trafficking, but also acts in the best interests of the victims.

He encouraged all efforts to deal with such criminal activities and to protect the victims of human trafficking. But he also pointed out that it is necessary to deal with the demand side of this exploitation.

While attention is normally focused on the criminals and victims the point raised by Archbishop Marchetto is worth reflecting on. If we want the products and services we purchase to come from ethically correct sources then as consumers then we also have a part to play in ensuring that this comes about.