

Tracking the Traffickers Despite Laws Modern Day Slavery Persists

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WASHINGTON (CNS) -- Human trafficking has long posed difficulties for U.S. law enforcement officials and lawmakers alike as they struggle to put an end to what is considered modern-day slavery.

Despite growing awareness and new legislative efforts to prevent human trafficking overseas and impose stricter sentences on trafficking kingpins, the business of making money from exploiting human labor has become a favorite pursuit of increasingly sophisticated criminal networks.

Trafficking in people is the fastest growing source of profit for criminal enterprises worldwide, according to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center, which offers a storehouse of information as well as a hot line for victims at (888) 373-7888.

In the U.S., the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 was the first federal law to protect victims of trafficking and to prosecute their traffickers.

Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., a long-time advocate for trafficking victims, said the law has undergone three updates, the most recent in December, in an attempt to deal with the ever-changing practices of traffickers.

"The bill focuses on prevention and prosecution of the traffickers," Smith told Catholic News Service. "And there was a sea change, treating women (who are trafficked) as a victim. It provides asylum for the women."

Despite the reauthorization, Smith is eyeing new legislation to restrict Americans from participating in the growing sex tourism industry. He said he would like to see stricter sanctions for people convicted of traveling overseas to places such as Cambodia and Romania to abuse children.

"My dream is a world where you've got tough trafficking laws," he said. "It's the secrecy that allows these people to do these terrible deeds to women and young children."

The most recent reauthorization, passed in December 2008, was the most substantial yet and better ensures the protection of trafficking victims, said Sara Feldman, a policy adviser for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The law expands protections for family members, including children, of adult victims of trafficking, provides for stronger protections of workers in abusive situations, and compels the consulates of foreign governments to provide adequate information to foreign workers regarding their rights, the law and resources for help.

The law also calls for enhanced screening at border crossings, especially along the U.S.-Mexican border, to identify child trafficking victims more readily, an important concern of the USCCB, Feldman told CNS.

Even with the law and tighter border screening, 14,500 to 17,500 foreign nationals are trafficked into the U.S. annually, according to the State Department. Such numbers pose immense difficulties for law enforcement officials. That's where cooperation from the public comes into play, said Renee Huffman, anti-trafficking manager at Ayuda Inc., an organization in Washington that aids trafficking victims.

To help raise awareness about trafficking, educational efforts aimed at the general public have been undertaken. One such effort is a coordinated campaign throughout September by the District of Columbia Human Trafficking Task Force. A month of activities is aimed not just at the general public but trafficking victims themselves, encouraging them to seek help to escape their abusive situations.

Huffman said such efforts have been aided by pop singer Ricky Martin, who has established a foundation to fight child trafficking.

A nationwide toll-free hot line for victims and information on trafficking also has been established by Martin's foundation, Ayuda and the Inter-American Development Bank. Aimed at Hispanics, the campaign promoting the hot line is called Llama y Vive, Spanish for Call and Live. The hot line number is (888) NO-TRATA or (888) 668-7282.

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