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A young boy works 12-hour days packing mud bricks in Liberia.

Economic Crisis Worsens Human Trafficking Problem

By Naira Ruiz
WI Contributing Writer

The global economic crisis has made people more vulnerable to human trafficking, according to the ninth annual Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP) released by the State Department on Tue., June 16.

Ambassador Luis CdeBaca, the director of the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, called the report a "global snapshot of the modern slavery problem." He added that, "poor people are more likely to be fooled by traffickers offering the lure of a better life."

Included in the report are harrowing tales of the victims. They include stories such as an Indian couple who were bonded laborers at a rice mill for more than 30 years and the story of a woman trafficked from Nigeria through Ghana to Italy, where she was forced to have sex with more than 25 men a day.

Human trafficking is the fastest growing criminal industry in the world and its victims are forced into labor or sexual exploitation. In the TIP report, countries that don't comply with minimum standards to combat human trafficking receive a Tier 3 ranking and may be subject to U.S. sanctions.

Of the seven countries that were demoted to Tier 3 this year, six were from Africa: Chad, Eritrea, Mauritania, Niger, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe. Ambas-

sador CdeBaca said the problem may be due to fact that these countries "have a historical slavery problem."

"Trafficking is a crime of opportunity driven by greed," Pamela Livingston, the International Justice Mission's Vice President of Communications, said.

Ambassador Mark P. Lagon, executive director of the Polaris Project, an anti-trafficking organization, said that human trafficking is able to flourish when there is high profit and low risk.

To coincide with the TIP report, the Justice Department released its own report on human trafficking in the U.S. and issued recommendations on how to fight it. Currently, the U.S. is not ranked in the TIP report, but Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, said next year's report will also assess the U.S.

"I believe when you shine a bright light you need to shine it on everyone," Clinton said.

A common misconception is that human trafficking victims are only foreign nationals. According to the TIP report, an unknown number of American citizens and legal residents are trafficked within the U.S.

"We need to look out both for foreign nationals and U.S. citizens," Lagon said.

Another misconception is that a person is not considered a victim if they give initial consent, previously worked the sex industry under difficult conditions, or if they are being paid.

Sex trafficking comprises a significant portion of overall human trafficking and young people are particularly vulnerable. According to UNICEF, as many as two million children are subjected to prostitution.

"Customers always want a young person," Sandra Hunicutt, executive director of Captive Daughters, an anti-trafficking group based in California, said.

Passing anti-trafficking laws isn't enough for countries to adequately combat the problem, "Passing laws is the easier part. Implementation is the rub," Lagon said.

Front-line law enforcement officials, (police, labor inspectors, immigration, and border guards), are also important. A UN report on human trafficking said front-line law enforcement plays "the single most critical role in identifying trafficked persons and perpetrators, ensuring victim safety, and referring victims to appropriate support services."

People can help by calling the National Human Trafficking Resource Center hotline if they have a tip- 1-888-3737-888.

Lagon suggested that referring to human trafficking as slavery might be one simple step toward raising the public's awareness about the problem.

"Human trafficking is a jargon term, [but] it's a contemporary term for slavery," Lagon said.

"A teen who is pimped or an adult farmer forced into labor is a slave." WI

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