

## **“Denial and Neglect Undermine the Fight against Human Trafficking”, says UNODC Director**

NEW YORK, 12 February 2009 (UNODC). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) today issued a *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons*. Based on data gathered from 155 countries, it offers the first global assessment of the scope of human trafficking and what is being done to fight it. It includes: an overview of trafficking patterns; legal steps taken in response; and country-specific information on reported cases of trafficking in persons, victims, and prosecutions. “Public opinion is waking up to the reality of modern slavery”, said the Executive Director of UNODC, Antonio Maria Costa. “But many governments are still in denial. There is even neglect when it comes to either reporting on, or prosecuting cases of human trafficking”.

### **Not enough convictions or information**

The number of convictions for human trafficking is increasing, especially in a handful of countries. Yet most countries’ conviction rates rarely exceed 1.5 per 100,000 people. This is even below the level normally recorded for rare crimes (like kidnapping in Western Europe), and proportionately much lower than the estimated number of victims. “Many criminal justice systems belittle the seriousness of this crime”, said Mr. Costa. Indeed, as of 2007/08, two out of every five countries covered by the UNODC Report had not recorded a single conviction. “Either these countries are blind to the problem, or they are ill-equipped to deal with it, or both”, said the head of UNODC. “Furthermore, some countries – including a few very big ones – do not even inform us about the problem in their midst. Either they are too disorganized to collect the information, or they are unwilling to share it – perhaps out of embarrassment”, said Mr. Costa.

### **Women trafficking women**

According to the Report, the most common form of human trafficking (79%) is sexual exploitation, although this may be an optical illusion. The victims of sexual exploitation are predominantly women and girls. Surprisingly, in 30% of the countries which provided information on the gender of traffickers, women make up the largest proportion of traffickers. Indeed, female offenders have a more prominent role in trafficking in persons than in any other crime. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, females account for more than 60% of convictions for trafficking in persons. “In these regions, women trafficking women is the norm”, said Mr. Costa. “It is shocking that former victims become traffickers”, said the head of UNODC. “We need to understand the psychological, financial, and coercive reasons why women recruit other women into slavery”.

### **Forced labour: under-reported and growing**

The second most common form of human trafficking is forced labour (18%), but this may be a misrepresentation. Forced labour is less frequently detected and reported than trafficking for sexual exploitation. One reason is that sexual exploitation is highly visible in cities or along highways while forced labour is hidden. “We only see the monster’s tail”, said Mr. Costa. “How many hundreds of thousands of victims are slaving away in sweat shops, fields, mines, factories,

or trapped in domestic servitude? Their numbers will surely swell as the economic crisis deepens the pool of potential victims and increases demand for cheap goods and services”, said the UN’s chief crime fighter.

### **Exploiting innocence: child victims**

Worldwide, almost 20% of all trafficking victims are children. However, in some parts of Africa and the Mekong region, children are the majority (up to 100% in parts of West Africa). Children’s nimble fingers are exploited to untangle fishing nets, sew luxury goods, or pick cocoa. Their innocence is abused for begging, or exploited for sex as prostitutes, paedophilia, or child pornography. Others are sold as child brides or camel jockeys. Children are also enslaved in war zones, for example in parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America: “boys who learn to kill before they can read; girls coerced into sex slavery before they become women”, said Mr. Costa. “Cultural attitudes and gender discrimination are as much to blame as poverty”, said the head of UNODC. “The exploitation of children is the most dramatic aspect of a crime that shames us all”.

### **Criminals prey on their own kin**

Although trafficking seems to imply people moving across continents, most exploitation takes place close to home. Data show intra-regional and domestic trafficking are the major forms of trafficking in persons. There are also notable cases of long-distance trafficking. Europe is the destination for victims from the widest range of origins, while victims from Asia are trafficked to the widest range of destinations. However, a large proportion of the traffickers detected were nationals of the countries where the trafficking took place. “Criminals prey on their own kin, something even animals don’t do”, said Mr. Costa.

### **Urgent action to enforce the law**

The United Nations Protocol against Trafficking in Persons – the foremost international agreement in this area – entered into force in 2003. The Report shows that in the past few years the number of Member States seriously implementing the Protocol has more than doubled (from 54 to 125 out of the 155 States covered). However, there are still many countries – particularly in Africa – that lack the necessary legal instruments or the will to do so. “There are strong international agreements to ensure that people’s lives are not for sale”, said Mr. Costa. “I urge governments to enforce them”.

### **Fighting the problem blindfolded**

“This Report increases our understanding of modern slave markets, yet it also exposes our ignorance”, said Mr. Costa. “We have a big picture, but it is impressionistic and lacks depth. We fear the problem is getting worse, but we can not prove it for lack of data, and many governments are obstructing”, he admitted. The head of UNODC therefore called on governments and social scientists to improve information-gathering and -sharing on human trafficking.

“We should, but we are not able to segment today’s slave markets into their components (demand, supply, trafficking, and related prices). We must, but cannot catalogue (for lack of data) different types of slavery: exploitation through child-begging in Europe is different from what goes on in a brothel, or on a street corner in Australia. Preventive measures must also be adapted to take into account that an Asian father sells his under-age daughter under circumstances different from what forces an African teen-ager into a rag-tag army of killers, or what pushes an

illegal immigrant into a sweat shop in the Americas. Measures to rescue victims and punish criminals must vary accordingly”, said Mr. Costa. “If we do not overcome this knowledge crisis we will be fighting the problem blindfolded”, he warned.

Most of all, he called on governments, the private sector, and the public at large to step up the fight against trafficking in persons. “It’s sick that we should even need to write a Report about slavery in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. More must be done to reduce the vulnerability of victims, increase the risks to traffickers, and lower demand for the goods and services of modern-day slaves”, said Mr. Costa.

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