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Human Trafficking Remains a Major Problem in Mexico

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Human trafficking, as the modern version of slavery is known, is growing rapidly in Mexico, although authorities and experts do not have exact numbers and can only provide estimates. According to one expert, Mario Luis Fuentes Alcalá at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), tens of thousands of Mexicans have become victims of trafficking (SourceMex, Aug. 5, 2015).

“There is no overall figure of the potential number of victims of trafficking,” said Fuentes Alcalá, coordinator of the Cátedra Extraordinaria Trata de Personas (Chair on Human Trafficking) at UNAM. “The estimates range from 20,000 to 300,000 in the Mexican case, and globally, the UN estimates into the millions.” A large percentage of the victims are women and girls, who are forced into prostitution.

Studies from UNAM, the Mexican government, and the UN suggest that human trafficking is a very lucrative economic activity for criminal organizations in Mexico and overseas, providing the third largest source of their income after the sale of drugs and the sale of weapons. At the global level, human trafficking represents an annual US$32 billion to US$36 billion business, according to the Vienna Forum to Fight Human Trafficking. There are no reliable statistics on the value of the illegal activity in Mexico, but one estimate puts the earnings from human traffickers at US$2 billion annually.

One-third of victims are minors

Mexico’s semi-autonomous statistics institute (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, INEGI) recently estimated that almost one-third of the victims of human trafficking in Mexico are between the ages of 5 and 17 and as many as 70% of the victims are migrants and people of indigenous origin who are exploited to conduct jobs that threaten their safety, health or dignity.

“In the universe of potential victims of human trafficking, the groups and individuals with the highest risk are those who suffer exclusion and discrimination, and who live in conditions of systematic socioeconomic vulnerability,” said the online news site La Silla Rota, citing a UN report entitled Diagnóstico Nacional sobre la Situación de Trata de Personas en México (National Diagnosis for the Human Trafficking Situation in Mexico). “A special cause of concern is the case of indigenous girls and women through the country, but particularly in the southeast, where opportunities for employment and access to education are scarce. This, in fact is a problem for the entire female population in our country.”

Another major source of concern are cultural practices that promote the sale and exploitation of women, since this contributes to their vulnerability and the growth of human trafficking, according to the UN report.

While women and girls are the primary victims of sexual exploitation, the study noted that boys are also vulnerable to human-trafficking activity for sexual purposes. However, boys and young men who are victims of human trafficking are more often used for forced labor, said the UN study.
The recruitment of potential victims of trafficking has moved to the internet. A recent report from international agencies noted that Mexico now ranks second in the world in the number of victims who are recruited via social media.

The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Mexican agency that works with UNESCO (Comisión Mexicana de Cooperación con la UNESCO) are working to develop an outreach program to help reduce the vulnerability of children and youth to human trafficking. “This something we have to eradicate, working together with the children,” said José Luis Alcántara, an official who works with those programs. He added that the program takes a practical approach, putting into effect programs that already exist on paper in Mexico but are never implemented.

Another problem for authorities is that many crimes related to human trafficking go unreported. “As the vulnerability of people, poverty, inequality, discrimination, lack of access to justice increases, this further increases the threats to our country,” Fuentes Alcalá said. “Only one in every 10 crimes is reported. There’s a huge degree of impunity, and I maintain that the greatest problem in trafficking offenses is impunity.”

A related concern is that complaints are not taken seriously. According to the UN, which reviewed statistics between 2009 and 2011, Mexican authorities only investigated 629 cases during that period, and one-third of those investigations were conducted by the federal government.

**No help for victims**

Another deficiency in Mexico is the lack of programs to help victims who have been rescued from situations of human trafficking.

“Reintegration efforts, which should be a fundamental objective when rescuing victims, are totally inadequate,” Fuentes Alcalá said. “As noted in the latest global report from the State Department of the United States, Mexico’s efforts to address human trafficking are insufficient.”

Fuentes Alcalá is leading an effort to encourage President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration and the Congress to implement measures that decrease inequality and violence against women (SourceMex, May 11, 2016).

Fuentes Alcalá and other officials at UNAM have called for further changes to the national legislation to prevent human trafficking (Ley General para Prevenir, Sancionar, y Erradicar los Delitos en Materia de Trata de Personas y para la Protección y Asistencia a las Víctimas de estos Delitos). The law was last reformed in 2014, and UNAM is pushing for a mechanism that would expand the regulatory framework to all states in the country (SourceMex, March 28, 2012).

“Mexico’s efforts to prevent, sanction, and eradicate human trafficking are entirely insufficient, and the proof is that several states have not synchronized their laws with the federal law to address this crime,” said the online news site Ciudadanía Express. “[As a result], the punishment against the violators of this law is dramatically low, and there is no money to address the problem.”

The Comisión Unidos Vs. Trata, an organization that fights to end human trafficking in Mexico, said 22 states have failed to take the actions necessary to harmonize their state laws with the 2014 law. The organization, using data from the UN, acknowledged that 18 of those 22 states have passed legislation to address human trafficking in some form, but the laws are generally weak and unenforceable. Four states—Baja California Sur, Zacatecas, Chihuahua, and Campeche—have no
laws to prevent and punish human trafficking, the organization said. Conversely, the states of Baja California, Chiapas, Coahuila, México, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Puebla, Veracruz, and Quintana Roo, as well as Mexico City, have harmonized their laws with the federal initiative and are in a stronger position to fight human trafficking, it said.

There appears to be some movement on the issue in Congress. In August, the Comisión Permanente, a committee composed of representatives of the major political parties from both houses of Congress, approved a resolution to urge federal, state, and municipal authorities to develop some sort of coordination in their efforts to fight human trafficking. Each level of government, according to its faculties, is urged to combat and take steps to reduce and sanction human trafficking, particularly in cases involving sexual exploitation and forced labor. The resolution also urged greater support and compensation for victims.

According to Rosi Orozco, president of the Comisión Unidos Vs. Trata, criminal organizations are using four common routes to move victims of human trafficking to specific locations. One of the most used routes takes the victims to Cancún for prostitution activities from the states of Campeche, Veracruz, and Tamaulipas. Another well-used route follows the western coast of Mexico, moving victims to Tijuana via Puerto Vallarta, Mazatlán, Culiacán, Los Mochis, and Nogales. Many of the victims who are taken to Tijuana are then transported to the US via San Diego. Other border cities, while not on one of the four major routes, are also considered destinations for human trafficking because they are transfer points of victims to the US. They include Ciudad Juárez, Nuevo Laredo, and Matamoros, sources said.

A third route takes victims to the resort city of Acapulco and the port of Lázaro Cárdenas in Michoacán state from the cities of Tapachula and Tuxtla Gutiérrez in Chiapas state. The final cluster for human traffickers is located in the center of the country and includes Mexico City, Puebla, and Tlaxcala.

**Tlaxcala, a hub of activity**

According to Orozco, Tlaxcala has become a major operational location of criminal organizations involved in human trafficking. “There are 47 different bands operating in that state, particularly in the city of Tenancingo,” said Orozco, who noted that there are 19,000 people involved in the business of human trafficking in that city and nearby communities. The bands in Tenancingo apparently have strong ties to human-trafficking operations in New York City.

Acoxotla del Monte is another community in Tlaxcala that is involved in human trafficking on a large scale, with most of its links to criminal organizations in Houston, Orozco said.

Critics say criminals are able to operate so easily in states like Tlaxcala, despite numerous complaints from citizens, because of a lack of action on the part of state authorities.

“A report from the federal prosecutor’s office on human trafficking (Fiscalía Especial para los Delitos de Violencia contra las Mujeres y Trata de Personas, FEVIMTRA), indicates that 20 minors disappeared in Tlaxcala between May 2012 and December 2014. Of this total, 14 were girls and six were boys. Only the boys were located,” said the online news site Animal Político.

UNAM experts suggest a partial solution to the problem would be to increase the budget of the federal special prosecutor in charge of human trafficking.
“The prosecutor’s office has 97 million pesos (US$5.2 million). While it is true that, from 2012 onwards, there have been marginal budget increases, they remain insufficient because FEVIMTRA has very few specialized government ministries [to provide support] and few long-term investigations, and this process of weak institutional justice is reproduced in the 32 states,” Fuentes Alcalá said.

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