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## México State Gubernatorial Campaign Shines the Spotlight on Human Trafficking

by Carlos Navarro

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Human trafficking has become such a serious problem in Mexico that the issue came to the forefront during the current political campaign in México state. Activist Rosi Orozco led the effort to enlist the candidates for the gubernatorial seat in one of Mexico's largest states to sign a pledge to fight human trafficking.

The México state election is scheduled for June 4. Recent polls show a tight race between Alfredo del Mazo of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and Delfina Gómez of the center-left Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena). Juan Zepeda of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), also a center-left party, and Josefina Vázquez Mota of the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) are lagging slightly behind. All four candidates, plus Óscar González of the Partido del Trabajo (PT), have committed to fight human trafficking.

Orozco, whose organization, Unidos Contra la Trata (United Against Trafficking), has been fighting human trafficking for years, made sure that the issue became part of the campaign discussion because the problem is prevalent in México state, which is the home of some of the criminal organizations engaged in the activity.

According to Orozco, state and federal authorities—with assistance from her organization—have made progress in the fight. México is the only state to establish shelters to treat and support the victims of human trafficking. In recent months, 161 victims have been rescued, and most were taken to three shelters in the state, she said.

Orozco is also working at the federal level, joining forces with members of a special committee in the Chamber of Deputies, the Comisión Especial Contra la Trata de Personas. Deputy Julieta Fernández Márquez, who chairs the committee, recently raised concerns that the problem is worsening in Mexico, with 60,000 people, mostly women and children, falling victims to human trafficking each year.

According to the 2016 Global Slavery Index published by the human rights group Walk Free Foundation, almost 380,000 individuals are believed to be enslaved in Mexico. Three-quarters of the victims are believed to be women and girls who are being sexually exploited.

The survey noted that many of the victims start out as under-age brides who are then forced into prostitution by their husbands. Many of the victims end up in the sex industry along the US-Mexico border, said the study, which was based on interviews with 603 women involved in the sex trade in Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez.

In 2012, the Mexican Congress approved a strict law to discourage human trafficking, establishing sentences as long as 30 years for people convicted of the crime ([SourceMex, March 28, 2012](#)). However, the law lacks a mechanism to expand the regulatory framework to all states in the country ([SourceMex, Aug. 24, 2016](#)).

According to Fernández Márquez, who is a member of the PRI, only a handful of states have statutes to fight human trafficking. Those include México, Puebla, Mexico City, Tlaxcala, and Chiapas. The lack of national enforcement means that perpetrators can get away with the crime without consequences, she said.

### *Seeking a stronger national law*

Fernández Márquez said her committee is contemplating changes to the national law that would establish sanctions for clients of prostitutes. "This is something that is already done in some developed countries," she said.

Human trafficking is believed to be the fastest-growing criminal industry in Mexico, with criminal organizations increasingly becoming involved in the illicit activity. According to an investigation from the federal unit in charge of organized crime (Subprocuraduría Especializada en Investigación de Delincuencia Organizada, SEIDO), groups involved in human trafficking are cooperating with one another rather than engaging in bloody battles for territory, which is the case with activities like the drug trade and fuel theft.

A study conducted by SEIDO's specialized unit against human trafficking (Unidad Especializada en Investigación de Tráfico de Menores, Personas, y Órganos) in cooperation with the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) revealed that local politicians and law-enforcement agents are complicit in human trafficking because they protect the criminal organizations, or at least look the other way, while women and young girls are kidnapped for the sex trade.

This level of collusion has complicated efforts to eradicate human trafficking, Fernández Márquez said. She noted that organizations with significant economic power have "infiltrated the police forces and local governments, using blackmail, threats, and other tricks, which have prevented efforts to combat this crime in an effective manner."

### *Collusion among criminals*

The SEIDO-UNODC study discovered that criminal organizations have started to form alliances in 17 states to coordinate human-trafficking operations. The list includes regional groups like Los Rojos, Guerreros Unidos, and Los Ardillos, as well as organizations with a broader national profile like the Zetas, the Gulf cartel and the *Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG).

Some of the drug cartels have established a working relationship with groups dedicated specifically to human trafficking. These groups, based in the central states of Puebla and Tlaxcala, are in charge of moving the victims to different points near the US-Mexico border. The groups go by the names of Los Carreto, Los Granados, Los Rojos, and Los Pepsis.

"The organizations dedicated to human trafficking in Tlaxcala are working directly with the drug-trafficking gangs in Sonora, Guerrero, Chiapas, Baja California, Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, Quintana Roo, Jalisco, Puebla, México state, Morelos, Guanajuato, Veracruz, Querétaro, Zacatecas, Nuevo León, and Mexico City," according to a report in the daily newspaper *Excélsior*.

These agreements among the criminal organizations have created new routes or corridors to transfer both the victims and drugs through the country," said *Excélsior*. What is even more remarkable, according to the report, is that cartels that are otherwise hostile to one another are allowing

members of rival groups to transit freely through their territory when human-trafficking activities are involved.

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