



Feature on  
human trafficking



Escaping forced labour at home in Myanmar, these workers look to commercial fishing in a neighbouring country as a way to a better life. They are prey to unscrupulous traffickers

Photo: Kay Chernush for the U.S. State Department

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Human trafficking is a crime against humanity. Virtually every country in the world is affected by trafficking for sexual exploitation or forced labour. Reliable global data are limited but the number of victims is believed to be reaching epidemic proportions. The international response is, at best, uneven. Reported victims are mainly women and children.

The challenges for all countries, rich and poor, are to target the criminals who exploit desperate people and to protect trafficking victims.

UNODC offers practical help to all countries, not only by helping to draft laws and create comprehensive national anti-trafficking strategies but also assisting with resources to implement them. Countries receive

specialized assistance, including the development of local capacity and expertise, as well as practical tools to encourage cross-border cooperation in investigations and prosecutions.

The adoption in 2000 by the United Nations General Assembly of the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking In Persons, Especially Women and Children* marked a significant milestone in international efforts to stop the trade in people.

As custodian of the Protocol, UNODC addresses human trafficking issues through its Global Programme against Trafficking in Human Beings. By the end of 2006, 117 States had signed the Protocol and 111 countries had ratified it.

A leader of a community vigilance group and her daughter on India's border with Nepal



But translating the Protocol into reality remains problematic. Very few criminals are convicted and most victims are probably never identified or assisted.

The following is an overview of UNODC's work in the human trafficking field, with real-life stories to illustrate the complexity of the issues.

## Prevention

**Boi Ngoc** is a young woman living in a remote farming village in South-East Asia. She has a child, but lives in a hostile family environment, with little means of securing any income. Desperate to support her child independently, she contacts a woman recommended by a relative, who says she can arrange a job as a waitress in a neighbouring country.

Burim is a young Eastern European boy staying in an asylum seekers' camp in a foreign country. He and his brother have been separated from their family for several years. As asylum seekers they have no right to work in their host country but need money for clothing and other essential items. Their status and prospects are likely to remain uncertain for many years. A man approaches Burim and offers him and his brother the chance to start a new life.

People like Boi Ngoc and Burim are seeking better lives and are therefore vulnerable to manipulation by traffickers. UNODC's research shows that victims are often duped by a recruiter who is a relative, a supposed friend or seems like someone they can trust. Traffickers and victims often share the same nationality. In some parts of the world, female traffickers are selected to recruit women.

UNODC helps to make people like Boi Ngoc and Burim aware of the risks by making video and radio spots (public service announcements), which are broadcast in numerous languages throughout the world. It also runs campaigns with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), distributing written information and contacting actual and potential victims.

In December, UNODC Colombia received a *UN21 Commendation* for its anti-human trafficking activities,

which included helping Colombian television to produce a prime-time television soap opera about human trafficking. Aired nightly to millions of viewers, the series exposed common traffickers' ruses, such as Internet scams, and explained where victims could seek help.

## Vulnerable communities

Community-led activities are an important prevention tool. The porous border between India and Nepal, for example, is an area of heavy cross-border human trafficking. In 2006, UNODC supported NGO initiatives, such as the Community Vigilance project led by local leaders and women's groups, which has mobilized thousands of villagers to detect and prevent trafficking.

In 2006, UNODC provided funding for NGOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia to run trafficking prevention campaigns among asylum-seekers, a particularly vulnerable group. Counselling was provided to young people like Burim to make them aware of the risks and where they can seek help.

## Conflict zones

Sometimes the threat of trafficking can emerge very suddenly. In mid-2006, during the armed conflict in Lebanon, UNODC became aware that traffickers were targeting some of the 300,000 domestic workers from Ethiopia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka who were left behind when their foreign employers were evacuated. Having abruptly lost their livelihoods and official resident status, the workers quickly became vulnerable. As embassies struggled to assist their nationals, trafficking gangs offered alternative options. UNODC set up an emergency information campaign within days: it produced 12,000 pages of information in various languages, including the number of a telephone hotline run by the NGO Caritas Migrant for assistance and support. The materials were distributed in shelters, embassies, churches, shops and markets.

## Research

UNODC's prevention work includes raising awareness among policy-makers, law-enforcement bodies and civil society. In April, UNODC published the report *Trafficking In Persons: Global Patterns* that identified 127 countries of origin, 98 transit countries and 137 destination countries. The sensitive nature of the issue



Many of the children who sell fruit in the streets of Nigeria are trafficking victims

and the lack of systematic action on trafficking worldwide make information collection a challenge, reflecting the unwillingness of some countries to acknowledge that the problem affects them. The absence of reliable global data, in turn, makes it more difficult for Governments and international organizations to fight trafficking effectively. The UNODC report was a first attempt to get a clearer picture of the problem. It highlighted the complex nature of trafficking, such as women committing trafficking offences against other women, and identified national and regional characteristics of offenders, victims and exploitation. The report listed States on a scale from “very low” to “very high” as countries of origin, transit and destination.

## Protection

Police and criminal justice staff need standard working procedures to guarantee the physical safety of victims, protect their privacy and make it safe for them to testify against their abusers. These issues are part of UNODC’s human trafficking training for police, prosecutors and judges. Guidelines on witness protection are in the pipeline for 2007.

## Tools

In October, UNODC launched a *Toolkit to Combat Trafficking in Persons* to provide practical help to

**Alexandru**, a 24-year-old Eastern European, went to a Western European country for seasonal work but was paid almost nothing and lived in a shack with no electricity or running water. After Alexandru complained, his boss beat him up and left him in a critical condition. When he was found, police placed him in custody as an illegal immigrant. They said he refused to cooperate by refusing to sign the papers required, though with both arms in a cast, he was physically unable to. Alexandru was immediately deported.

**Juana**, a South American woman, was trafficked to North America and sexually exploited. With a poor family to support, she initially consented. Arrested and deported as an illegal alien, she received no assistance from her Government, NGOs or the local community. But her family’s predicament did not improve and soon afterwards Juana agreed to be re-trafficked in the hope of earning much-needed money.

Governments, policy-makers, police, NGOs and others to enable them to tackle human trafficking more effectively.

The *Toolkit* includes checklists to help identify trafficking victims as well as guidance on interviewing victims and victim protection. Other tools help police to undertake cross-border investigations and advise Government officials on how to ensure the safe repatriation of victims. These and many other current “best practices” are available for immediate use and adaptation worldwide.

## Identification

In many countries there is a lack of awareness of the fact that someone like Alexandru could be a victim and not an offender. Trafficking victims also commonly blame themselves for what has happened to them, which can stop them from seeking help. Without identification and recognition as victims of crime, they can unjustly suffer prosecution because of their irregular status.

Victim identification checklists and techniques, such as those outlined in UNODC’s *Toolkit to Combat Trafficking in Persons*, are crucial for rescuing individuals and making sure they are not re-victimized.

## Referral

A “rescuer” must know how to refer victims to experts, whether in official bodies or NGOs, for appropriate support. In 2003, UNODC helped to set up one of the first victim referral mechanisms in the Czech Republic, which led to a national strategy for combating trafficking in persons in that country. UNODC has helped to introduce such systems in the Philippines and in Poland. In late 2006, work started on similar services in Moldova and the Slovak Republic. The purpose of such systems is to ensure that a trafficking victim, like Alexandru, is identified as such, that support is available to them and that those who come into contact with the victim act in an appropriate way.

## Partnerships

Under a major global programme, largely completed in 2006, UNODC funded support projects for victims of trafficking run by 19 NGOs in India, Indonesia, Mexico, Moldova, Pakistan, South Africa, Thailand, Uganda and

Ukraine. The programme offered emotional and practical support, including health care, legal aid, psychological assistance and referrals. More than 280 victims have been repatriated from India to Nepal alone.

## Reintegration

Victims need assistance that extends beyond the end of their exploitation and any criminal prosecution. Vocational training can reduce the risk of their being sucked into exploitative situations again. In 2006, companies in the Philippines joined the fight against re-victimization by participating in the Corporate Apprenticeship programme, a joint initiative between UNODC and the Department for Social Welfare and Development. Under the scheme, trafficking victims are accepted as apprentices for six months to a year and given on-the-job training in factories, the hospitality trade and other businesses.

## Prosecution

**In late 2005**, a police officer in a major European city noticed a young boy begging at the entrance of a large shop. The police officer tried unsuccessfully to communicate with the boy. All he would say was, “I’m a tourist, and I’m waiting for my father”. The police officer decided to take the boy to a police station. There, the boy produced a bad copy of a foreign passport. With the help of a translator, a trained police interviewer established that the boy, named Krasimir, was living in the city with a “friend” and that his family was still in his home country. Based on this information, specialist investigators were tipped off. Three more boys were found and the “friend” was arrested. Interviews took place before an investigative judge and a defence lawyer so that the boys did not have to go to court. The interviews revealed that the boys had been forced into begging by the adult “friend.” Two months later, the case went to court and the trafficker was sent to prison.

Much of UNODC’s work centres on strengthening national criminal justice systems. UNODC’s goal is to see a greater number of convictions achieved globally. This means not only that human trafficking must be a criminal offence in the country where an act of traf-

ficking is detected, but also that the law must be enforced.

As in the case of Krasimir, successful convictions depend on the police and others making the right decisions. This can only happen if they have the knowledge and capacity to respond to human trafficking. Things can also go wrong: in some countries, for example, prosecutions are brought but the police fail to protect the identity of witnesses or prevent intimidation of victims and court officials by defendants. In other cases, traffickers get a lighter sentence because of their youth.

To try to prevent this happening, UNODC helps countries to develop effective law enforcement and criminal justice institutions.

UNODC has helped to develop legislation in many countries. Many human trafficking laws are limited in

Participant in the first national conference on human trafficking, 11-15 December, Laos



their application to the sexual exploitation of women and girls. That means they provide no assistance to people like Krasimir or, for example, to women trafficked to work in domestic servitude or sweatshops. Without specialized human trafficking laws, victims are subjected to greater uncertainties while traffickers benefit from reduced risks and penalties.

In 2006, UNODC offered Armenia, Lebanon and South Africa assistance in drafting anti-human trafficking legislation. Criminal justice officials from Burkina Faso, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Togo and Ukraine received specialized training. UNODC assisted NATO in training its senior officials to combat trafficking in persons. Three computer-based training modules to combat human trafficking were finalized in Thailand. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) publication, *Training Manual on Trafficking in Persons*, containing an action plan for West and Central African countries, was launched in 2006.

UNODC also trained police, border guards, prosecutors, judges and NGO staff in many countries, including Burkina Faso, Finland, Ghana, Laos, Moldova, Nigeria, South Africa, Ukraine and Viet Nam.

Viet Nam has one of the highest conviction rates for traffickers in the world, thanks in large part to training by UNODC. More than 110 people have been convicted of human trafficking offences. Following a UNODC cross-border cooperation workshop, the police in China and Viet Nam rescued dozens of female victims trafficked for forced marriages. More than 50 trafficking rings were disrupted by late 2006.

*United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking In Persons, Especially Women and Children*

- Provides the first internationally agreed definition of trafficking in persons;
- Requires countries to criminalize trafficking in persons;
- Provides a framework for assisting and protecting victims;
- Requires cooperation within and between countries.