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Agency Issues Report on Human Trafficking

<http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/national/AP-Human-Trafficking.html>

WASHINGTON (AP) – As many as 17,500 people each year are brought to the United States by human traffickers who trap them in slavery-like conditions for forced sex, sweatshop labor and domestic servitude, the Justice Department reported Tuesday.

“In the United States, where slavery was outlawed nationally more than 130 years ago, this tragic phenomenon should no longer exist. Yet it does,” the Justice Department said in a report to Congress.

In separate testimony on Capitol Hill, a top Homeland Security Department official estimated that human smuggling and trafficking generate some \$9.5 billion worldwide each year for criminal organizations that also deal in illicit drugs, weapons and money laundering.

“These untraced profits feed organized crime activities,” John Torres, of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, told a House Judiciary subcommittee on immigration.

Torres also said that terrorists could use the same smuggling networks “to gain entry to the United States to carry out their own destructive schemes.”

A law passed by Congress in 2000 created a range of new crimes prosecutors could use to bring charges against human traffickers. Using that law, the Justice Department as of April 2004 had 153 open investigations, double the number as the same point in 2001.

From January 2001 through mid-May of this year, prosecutors have charged 149 individuals in trafficking cases and won 78 convictions or guilty pleas, a 50 percent increase over the previous three years, according to the report. The number of prosecutions since 2001 represents a threefold increase over the three previous years.

R. Alexander Acosta, assistant attorney general for civil rights, said the Justice Department hoped to increase prosecutions in the coming months by focusing resources on selected cities and joining forces with state and local police. Philadelphia, Phoenix, Atlanta and Tampa, Fla., are the first four cities getting intensified anti-trafficking attention.

“While we’re gratified that we’ve tripled prosecutions, we need to do more. And we are doing more,” Acosta said.

Some recent examples:

- Seven people pleaded guilty in 2003 in south Texas to charges they brought women across the Mexican border to trailer homes where they were forced to cook, clean and submit to rape. The ringleader, Juan Carlos Soto, was sentenced to 23 years in prison and the women were paid restitution.
- Two people pleaded guilty and one was convicted of illegally bringing more than 250 Vietnamese and Chinese women to work as sewing machine operators in an American Samoa garment factory. The women experienced food deprivation, beatings, physical restraint and were forced to live in guarded barracks. The main defendant, Kil Soo Lee, faces a June sentencing date.
- Ramiro Ramos was sentenced in March to 180 months in prison for illegally transporting Mexican workers to fruit harvesting fields in Florida, where the victims were threatened with beating and death if they tried to leave and were kept under constant surveillance.

The Justice Department report estimated that between 14,500 and 17,500 people are victims of human trafficking each year in the United States. About two-thirds of the cases prosecuted involve prostitution or sex slavery, with most of the rest involving forced labor.

The report also says that more than \$8 million in Health and Human Services Department grants have been awarded to provide victims’ services such as temporary housing, transportation, legal assistance and education. The agency also has certified 448 victims since 2000 for its refugee resettlement program.

On the Net:

Justice Department: <http://www.usdoj.gov>

Immigration and Customs Enforcement: <http://www.ice.gov>

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