

Beyond Politics: People for Sale in Hungry World

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One might be tempted to dismiss the recent findings of the US State Department on human trafficking as largely political. But do not be too hasty.

Criticism of the State Department's report on trafficked persons, issued on 16 June, should be rife. The language describing US allies' efforts to combat the problem seems undeserved, especially when one examines the nearly 320- page report and observes the minuscule efforts of these governments. Also, it was hardly surprising to find that Cuba , North Korea , Iran and Syria — Washington 's foremost foes — languish in the report's Tier 3 category, i.e. countries where the problem is most grave and least combated. Offenders in Tier 3 are subject to US sanctions, while governments of countries in Tier 1 are perceived as vigilant in fighting human trafficking.

One could also question the US government's own moral legitimacy; classifying the world into watch lists, congratulating some and reprimanding and sanctioning others, while the US itself has thus far (and for nine consecutive reports starting 2000) been immune to self-criticism.

Undoubtedly, the political hubris and self- righteous underpinnings of the report are disturbing, but that hardly represents an end to the argument. The fact remains that the report's rating of over 170 countries is thorough and largely consistent with facts as observed, reported by the media and examined in other comprehensive reports on the same issue. Indeed, the UN's own Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, launched by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in February 2009, affirms much of the State Departments' findings regarding patterns of abuse reported around the world, most notably in Africa, the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region.

The report examined governmental responses to the exploitation of people, including children, for the purposes of forced labour, sex and stolen organs. At least 12.3 million adults and children are used to sustain the thriving business of modern-day slavery, though the real number is probably much higher given that human traffickers have little interest in divulging exact data.

The global financial crisis has fuelled the demand for cheap labour, making the exploitation of the most vulnerable people part and parcel of the economic recovery plans of many companies, and even countries. Under these circumstances, there should be little doubt that the UN's once promising campaign to eradicate much of the world's hunger by 2015 is already a pipedream.

One of the testimonies cited in the State Department's report was that of Mohamed Selim Khan, who "woke up in a strange house and felt an excruciating pain in his abdomen.

Unsure of where he was, Khan asked a man wearing a surgical mask what had happened. 'We have taken your kidney,' the stranger said. 'If you tell anyone, we'll kill you.'

Khan's experience epitomizes the nightmare of millions of people around the world, as they struggle to provide for hungry families. Their plight is no secret. It can be seen on the streets of many cities around the world, from Europe to Asia and Central America to the Gulf, where worn out, haggard looking men in dirty uniforms are working long hours for little pay, trapped between pressing needs at home and the merciless demands of their "recruitment agencies".

But cheap or forced labor is not the only form of human trafficking. According to the UN's Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, based on data collected in 155 countries, "the most common form of human trafficking [79 per cent] is sexual exploitation".

IRIN News, affiliated with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, reported on 18 June that "women from the former Soviet Union and China are still being trafficked across the border with Egypt into Israel for forced prostitution by organized criminal groups". Israel has been identified as a "prime destination for trafficking by both the State Department and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime". One Israeli gang alone, according to the report, has trafficked over 2,000 women into Israel and Cyprus in the last six years.

One has to wonder the wisdom of international conferences and global efforts aimed at cracking down on Gazans smuggling food and medicine across the same Egyptian border to survive the Israeli siege when almost no efforts have been dedicated to ending the stark exploitation and abuse of thousands of women enriching Israel's sex industry.

Dare I say that while human trafficking is itself an apolitical issue, recognizing and combating, or failing to combat, the problem is very much political. Think of the banking crisis, which fuelled a global recession, and the way astronomical amounts of money have been dedicated to solving it, trillions of dollars in global bailouts ultimately rewarding those who caused the crisis in the first place. Compare these efforts to the pathetic attempts at halting the disgraceful commercialization of humans, their organs, their sexuality, their very humanity.

The problem is now compounded. UN food officials declared on 19 June that hunger around the world has passed the unprecedented threshold of one billion, that is one in six people. The alarming increase of 100 million hungry children, women and men from last year's estimates is blamed on the economic recession. While international institutions are efficient at recognizing such problems, proposed solutions often lack sincerity, or any sense of urgency.

"A hungry world is a dangerous world," said Josette Sheeran of the World Food Programme. "Without food, people have only three options: they riot, they emigrate or they die." They also become products in markets ready to exploit those whose very survival is at stake.

When Julia, from the Balkans, was eight years old, she was taken along with her sisters to a neighboring country, where she was sold to beg. She was beaten every time she failed to return with her fixed quota of money. Once she became a teenager she was forced into prostitution. After escaping she was placed in a government orphanage from which she also escaped, returning to the streets. According to the State Department report, eventually

“Julia was arrested on narcotics charges”.

Can this injustice be any more obvious?

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