

AFRICA: High cost of child trafficking
By IRIN Humanitarian News and Analysis
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POINTE NOIRE, 25 January 2012 (IRIN) - Forced child labour remains rampant in Central Africa, where poverty fuels the trafficking of children from poorer countries to oil-rich states such as Gabon, Equatorial Guinea and the Republic of Congo, according to experts.

"Trafficking in children is real," said Gabon's social affairs director-general, Mélanie Mbadinga Matsanga. "Gabon, for example, is considered an Eldorado and draws a lot of West African immigrants who traffic children."

Matsanga was speaking at a conference on preventing child trafficking held in Congo's southern city of Pointe Noire. The meeting was attended by delegates from Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Equatorial Guinea and Gabon.

Gabon is primarily a destination and transit country for children and women, who are subjected to forced labour and sex trafficking; boys are forced to work as street hawkers or mechanics, states the US State Department's human trafficking report for 2011.

Child trafficking is defined by the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of children for the purpose of exploitation. This definition is especially important in West and Central Africa where it often occurs with the consent of the parents and sometimes, of the children themselves, notes a UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) report.

But a "near total absence of data" on the scope of the problem prevents media coverage of the issue, which is essential in influencing public opinion, noted the 2002 UNICEF report. A decade later, the problem persists. "It is hard to count the number of children [affected]. It is even difficult to talk [about them] because their attitude shows that [the children] themselves are convinced that the work they are forced to do is not normal," Marianne Flach, UNICEF's representative in the Congo, told IRIN.

"The parents in the countries of origin do not even know what happens to their children in the countries of destination," added Flach.

Children and their families are ensnared by the empty promises of a better life, leading to the smuggling across borders every year of hundreds of thousands of children, denying them education, health, the right to grow up within a family and to protection from exploitation and abuse, say experts.

Kidnapping on the rise

In Cameroon, says the State Department report, trafficking operations usually target two or three children, such as when rural parents hand over their children to a middleman promising education or a better life in the city. But traffickers there are increasingly kidnapping their victims, as heightened public awareness means parents are giving away fewer of their children to middlemen.

"Trafficking is nothing but abuse," Marcelline Pambou Loubondo of the NGO Movement of Mothers for Peace, Solidarity and Development, told IRIN.

"The traffickers are looking for a better life. They want to get rich very fast, which is why they employ children."

The children are often forced to engage in petty trade day and night, lest they are beaten up, added Loubondo.

The presence of local and foreign armed groups also poses a threat to children's rights, as do burgeoning

oil and mineral sectors. In the DRC, for example, armed groups continue to abduct and forcibly recruit men, women and children as combatants, labourers and sex slaves.

A significant number of unlicensed Congolese artisanal miners – men and boys – are also exploited in situations of debt bondage by businessmen and supply dealers from whom they acquire cash advances, tools, food, and other provisions at inflated prices, and to whom they must sell the mined minerals at below-market prices, notes the State Department report.

In Equatorial Guinea, children “...are believed to be exploited in Malabo and Bata where a burgeoning oil industry creates demand for cheap labour and commercial sexual exploitation”.

According to delegates at the conference, source and destination countries need to form bilateral accords given the trans-border nature of trafficking.

Weak law enforcement

At present, those involved in human trafficking are not systematically targeted by law enforcement officials even as trafficking seems to undergo a “seemingly uncontrollable rapid expansion”, noted Congo’s Social Affairs Minister, Emilienne Raoul.

In Gabon too, according to the US State Department report, the lack of enforcement of counter-trafficking laws has meant there have been no convictions, despite the arrest of more than 68 suspected trafficking offenders between 2003 and 2010.

While trafficking is often associated with clandestine migration, the merging of these two issues has serious consequences, with trafficked children seen as young offenders rather than victims in need of special protection measures, notes the International Organization for Migration.

“Human trafficking is a form of migration particularly detrimental to human rights,” added Robert Kotchani, a UN human rights official.

But, “in the same manner that slavery ended, human trafficking can equally end”, said Viviane Tchignoumba Mouanza, a magistrate and president of the association of female jurists in the Congo. “It is a problem with the mentality, sensitization and reach of the law.”

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