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Trafficking in Persons Report 2010 - Sierra Leone

SIERRA LEONE (Tier 2)

Sierra Leone is a source, transit, and destination country for children and women subjected to trafficking in persons, specifically forced labor and commercial sexual exploitation. Victims come largely from rural provinces and refugee communities within the country, and are recruited to urban and mining centers for the purposes of commercial sexual exploitation, forced domestic work, and forced service or labor in petty trading, street crime, and begging. Trafficking victims may also be found in the fishing and agricultural sectors or are subjected to forced prostitution or forced labor through customary practices such as forced and arranged marriages. The incidence of transnational trafficking is relatively small, but Sierra Leone is likely still a source and destination country for the movement of persons to destinations in West Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, where they are subsequently subjected to nonconsensual exploitation. Sierra Leone may also be a destination country for children trafficked from Nigeria, and possibly from Liberia and Guinea for forced begging, forced labor, and commercial sexual exploitation.

The Government of Sierra Leone does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking; however, it is making significant efforts to do so, despite limited resources. At the end of 2009, the government quadrupled the budget of the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender, and Children's Affairs (MOSWGCA), which leads the government's antihuman trafficking efforts. A significant share of the increased funds was assigned to anti-trafficking activities. Because no government-funded victim services existed, non-governmental and international organizations continued to assume the responsibility for support of trafficking victims, as well as the responsibility for training government staff on implementation of the anti-trafficking law. While the government has identified human trafficking as an important policy issue, identifying available resources and building capacity to combat the problem will remain a serious problem well into the future due to the government's limited financial and human resources.

Recommendations for Sierra Leone: Strengthen efforts to prosecute and convict trafficking offenders; train law enforcement officers and social workers to identify and care for trafficking victims using approaches that focus on the needs of the victims; implement formal procedures to identify trafficking victims among vulnerable populations, such as females in prostitution, unaccompanied foreign minors, and illegal migrants; ensure victims have access to basic services and shelters for trafficking victims, providing government support where possible; improve coordination among police and social service providers to ensure that all victims receive access to necessary care; and improve efforts to collect data on anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts and victim assistance.

Prosecution

The Government of Sierra Leone demonstrated limited progress in law enforcement efforts over the last year by convicting two trafficking offenders under its 2005 anti-trafficking law, in contrast to no convictions obtained in 2008. The Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2005 prohibits all forms of human trafficking and prescribes a maximum penalty of 10 years' imprisonment for both sex and labor trafficking offenses. This penalty is sufficiently stringent, but not commensurate with penalties for rape, which carried a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. The Child Rights Act of 2008 includes a number of provisions that relate to trafficking, though many police officers opted to use abduction and unlawful child harboring statutes when charging trafficking suspects. In May 2009, a Sierra Leonean woman was convicted of "conspiracy to commit trafficking" after luring a 6-yearold girl to Kailahun, where she attempted to sell the child. The woman was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment. Also in 2009, a Guinean man was convicted of the same crime and sentenced to eight months' imprisonment after transporting and attempting to sell his son in Sierra Leone. According to an NGO, in addition to these two convictions, three other cases reached the court during the reporting period and are awaiting a verdict. It is unknown whether these cases constitute human trafficking. The government did not provide specialized training on investigating or prosecuting human trafficking offenses, but did make law enforcement officers and other government officials available to attend training conducted by international organizations and local NGOs. An international organization reported that the government forged an operational partnership with the Government of Liberia to pursue a joint investigation and repatriation case during the reporting period. Further information regarding this case was not available.

Protection

During the past year, the Sierra Leonean government continued to ensure victims' access to protection services provided by NGOs and international organizations, as a severe lack of resources and personnel limited its ability to deliver services directly. The government developed and began implementing a protocol for law enforcement and social services authorities' identification of trafficking victims, but only a small number of officials were trained to follow it during the reporting period. Most high-risk persons – such as females in prostitution, unaccompanied minors, and undocumented immigrants – remained unscreened. The government's plan to provide a new shelter for trafficking victims of all ages in Freetown was not fulfilled, and no shelter exists at present in the country's capital. The government did not directly provide trafficking victims with legal, medical, or psychological services, or any funding to organizations that assisted victims. The government did not provide assistance to foreign trafficking victims. The Police Family Support Units reported that 22 trafficking victims were assisted by police during 2009. In January 2010, it began using a new database to track trafficking cases. Although the Family Support Units were charged with referring victims to MOSWGCA, police officers were often not present at every Family Support Unit's location. As a consequence, police frequently had to turn victims over to newly formed Voluntary Parental Groups (VPGs), whose ability to deal with this responsibility was unclear. In cases where victims were identified, however, authorities encouraged them to participate in the prosecution of their traffickers, but the general inefficiency of the judicial sector frustrated those efforts. Many victims lost patience waiting for a trial in their cases to begin. The anti-trafficking law did provide for victim restitution, but no victims received any kind of civil damages for abuse or hardship suffered during the trafficking experience. Sierra Leone did not provide legal alternatives to the removal of foreign victims to countries where they faced hardship or retribution. No agency reported that trafficking victims were penalized for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked. The government did not provide assistance to its nationals who were repatriated from other countries.

Prevention

The government made minimal efforts to raise awareness about trafficking during the reporting period. Through the Trafficking in Persons Task Force, it sustained partnerships with NGOs, the IOM, and foreign governments to conduct training for police

prosecutors and officers, both in the field and at the Cadet Training School. The government did not appear to monitor immigration and emigration patterns for evidence of trafficking. The government did not make efforts during the reporting period to reduce the demand for commercial sex acts. The government did not provide anti-human trafficking training for armed forces it deployed to the international peacekeeping mission in Darfur. Sierra Leone is not a party to the 2000 UN TIP Protocol.
