



HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND CONFLICT

By Dr. Louise Shelley / summarized by Stina Hartikainen

*At a recent ISDP Forum on Transnational Crime, Dr. Louise Shelley discussed the link between human trafficking and conflict. Dr. Shelley is Professor, Founder and Director of the Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center at the George Mason University. The presentation was partly based on her latest book *Human Trafficking: A Global Perspective*, Cambridge University Press 2010. The summary was compiled by Stina Hartikainen.*

The rise in regional conflicts since the end of the Cold War has contributed to a growing problem in the globalized world: an increase in human trafficking. Conflicts in East and Central Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America have led to large numbers of displaced people and refugees being increasingly vulnerable to exploitative forces. While the conflicts may seem distant, their effects are global, and trafficked women and children often end up as prostitutes or domestic servants in European capitals. Understanding the connection between, and mechanisms behind, human trafficking and conflict is crucial in gaining better knowledge of how to deal with the problem.

A Diverse Phenomenon

The impact of conflicts on human trafficking is extensive and widespread. Human trafficking has been connected to conflicts in almost all regions of the world. The situation is alarming in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cambodia and Afghanistan as well as in the Balkans and Latin America. Criminal gangs are the main perpetrators in Latin America; independent militias are often responsible in African conflicts, while organized criminal groups operate in Europe and Asia. Links can also be traced between human trafficking and terrorist organizations. There is strong evidence that, for example, the PKK in Turkey is heavily involved in human trafficking.

The public understanding of human trafficking is often linked to the sex industry and exploitation for sexual purposes, and trafficking for sexual purposes is certainly extensive. There are also other purposes of human trafficking, however. Forced labor in the domestic and agricultural

sector in Western Europe and North America is common, as well as forced marriages. While it is important to pay attention to the exploitation in the sex industry, it is crucial for understanding the extent of the problem to widen the perspective to other sectors where trafficking is found.

Human Trafficking and Regional Conflicts

The relationship between human trafficking and conflicts is complex, as people are being trafficked both into and out of conflict zones. Women may be coerced into the conflict as comfort women for the local troops, as has been the case in for example Afghanistan. In Uganda, large numbers of children were forced to join the conflict as child soldiers. There is also trafficking of people out of conflict, as the general insecurity causes many to try to escape the situation. Trafficking may be initiated as a consensual (and often costly) arrangement where people pay to get themselves or family members smuggled out of the region. Nevertheless, it may result in human trafficking as people are often exploited in transit or recipient countries. There are examples of parents paying for their children to be smuggled to Europe where the children have ended up being used both in the sex industry and as household servants. Human trafficking is accordingly not only a result of forced abductions and coercion but also a consequence of criminal networks taking advantage of the vulnerability of the local population.

Human trafficking is further used to fund both conflicts and other illicit activities. People are sold or traded for weapons as if they were commodities, in order to increase profits and enable the continuation of conflicts. Forced la-



bor is not uncommon. In the Democratic Republic of Congo children were forced to work in mines to extract valuable natural resources to gain funds for the warring parties. Furthermore, people have been forced to work as couriers of drugs, arms and other illegal products, as the criminal networks engaged in human trafficking are often also involved in other illicit trade.

Human Trafficking and International Peacekeeping

Adding to the problem of human trafficking in regional conflicts is the impact of international peacekeepers. In the conflicts in the Balkans for example, the presence of peacekeepers led to the establishment of brothels and prostitution, where trafficked women from Eastern Europe were abused by the soldiers. There are also examples of peacekeepers in refugee-camps buying sexual services from women and children in exchange for food. The top priority in peacekeeping missions is to protect the peace and ensure stability in the conflict zones, which may result in trafficking being viewed as a secondary problem. However, by neglecting or even supporting the practice of human trafficking the international presence may instead serve to embed the influence of criminal networks in these regions. This undermines the very mission of peacekeeping.

Human trafficking is a complicated phenomenon and a growing problem for the developed and developing world alike. Making sure the international presence in conflict is not a part of the problem should be an area of priority. Educational efforts to prevent the use of brothels or other illegal and immoral behavior are undertaken in several international organizations, such as the United Nations. However, there is a lack of clear jurisdiction and legislation regarding these matters, which makes it largely a crime without punishment. Implementing and enforcing proper mechanisms for prosecution is central not only to prevent the continuation of illegal conduct, but also to maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the local population.

Dealing with Human Trafficking

Criminal networks engaged in human trafficking operate as businesses on an open, albeit illegal market. Considering the trade in human beings in the light of a market structure,

where demand and supply are the ruling forces, is one possible way of developing effective measures against human trafficking.

When dealing with the problem of human trafficking – and more specifically its connection to the sex industry – governments have used different approaches. Both Sweden and the Netherlands have directed efforts into controlling the demand in the sex industry, but in very different ways. The Swedish legislation targets the buyer instead of the seller by making purchasing sex illegal, partly to enable prostitutes to report abuse without themselves risking criminal charges. While there is seemingly a decrease in the open prostitution in Sweden, the lack of legal harmonization in Europe has resulted in the problem being exported to neighbouring countries. On the other hand, the Netherlands have legalized brothels that employ legal workers in order to decrease the demand for trafficked women. However, the decrease in legal brothels in the Netherlands over the past years can be a result of the illegal sex industry moving underground rather than disappearing.

While attacking the demand side of the trafficking industry is important, another necessary aspect to prevent human trafficking is to focus on the supply. Being aware of the structures of the criminal networks and how they operate is crucial to detect human trafficking, and thus prevent victims of being abused in the recipient country. For example, Asian groups often have a single unitary structure from the country of origin to the recipient country. This makes it possible for law enforcement agencies to follow the supply-chain and find both the original location and the responsible networks. Russian or East European groups, on the other hand, are more likely to control only a part of the supply chain, which makes the full network harder to detect.

Furthermore, the legislation and criminal punishment of human trafficking needs to be developed. While drug trafficking is prosecuted and heavily punished with prison sentences and seizure of assets, human trafficking is regarded as a low risk business. At the same time, it is often the same criminal networks that are involved in drug trafficking as in human trafficking. The lack of effective legislation in the area of human trafficking may have resulted in increased exploitation as criminal groups switch from one illegal activity to another.

Education and cooperation are two important tools for the prevention and detection of human trafficking. Coop-



eration within and between law enforcement agencies is important in order to develop a more global framework against human trafficking. Educating personnel in sectors that are more often in contact with human trafficking, such as airports and harbours, might be one way to enable the detection of suspected human trafficking. There is also a need to inform authorities how to handle victims of human trafficking, in order to provide education and the possibility of a life outside of the illicit markets.

Concluding Remarks

It is essential that the problem of human trafficking is taken seriously as regional conflicts continue and with it the practice of human trafficking. Peacekeeping missions and international engagement in regional conflicts are increasingly central on the global agenda, yet the international community fails to give top priority to one of the most severe effects of these conflicts: the trafficking of human beings. However, the human, social and economic effects of human trafficking inevitably forces us to change our framework and prioritize human trafficking on the national as well as global agenda.

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