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CIA: U.S. slavery is growing

Foreign women,
children held in
illegal servitude

By JOEL BRINKLEY
The New York Times

WASHINGTON — As many as 50,000 women and children from Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe are brought to the United States under false pretenses each year and forced to work as prostitutes, abused laborers or servants, according to a 79-page CIA report.

The carefully annotated and exhaustively researched agency report — “International Trafficking in Women to the United States: A Contemporary Manifestation of Slavery” — paints a broad picture of this hidden trade and of the difficulties in fighting it.

Completed in November, the report is based on more than 150 interviews with govern-

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ment officials, law enforcement officers, victims and experts in the United States and abroad, as well as investigative documents and a review of international literature on the subject.

Law enforcement officials have seen evidence for years of trafficking in immigrant women and children, some as young as 9. But the report says that officers do not like to take on these cases because they

are difficult to investigate and prosecute. What’s more, it says, the nation does not have sufficient laws aimed at this problem, meaning that the penalties often are insubstantial.

Two years ago, Attorney General Janet Reno chartered an interagency task force to attack the problem, saying, “We are not interested in containing modern-day slavery; we want to eradicate it.”

Over the last two years, while up to 100,000 victims poured into the United States, where they were held in bondage, federal officials estimated that the government prosecuted cases involving no more than 250 victims. The Justice Department said it could not provide precise figures.

The report was prepared by a government intelligence analyst who was working on assignment to the CIA. While the

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CIA report says slavery in the United States is still growing

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report is not classified, it has not been made public. Another government official who wanted the report publicized provided a copy.

It describes case after case of foreign women who answered advertisements for au pair, sales clerk, secretarial or waitress jobs in the United States but found, once they arrived, that the jobs did not exist. Instead they were held under guard and forced into prostitution or indentured servitude. Some of them were sold outright to brothel owners, the report says.

"Examples of this may include Latvian women threatened and forced to dance nude in Chicago," the report says. Thai women were brought to the United States "but then forced to be virtual sex slaves." Chinese-Korean women were "held as indentured servants." And "Mexican women and girls, some as young as 14," were promised jobs in housekeeping or child care but, upon arrival, "were told they must work as prostitutes in brothels serving migrant workers."

GIRLS FROM Asian and African countries were essentially sold to traffickers by their parents, "for less than the price of a toaster," one government official said. This mainly happens in cultures where female children are not valued. The girls are smuggled into the United States where, in a typical case, they are forced to work "in an indentured sexual servitude arrangement," the report says.

A Nigerian smuggling ring, the report says, citing an Immigration and Naturalization Service case, charged parents from that country \$10,000 to \$12,000 to bring their children to New York so they would have "better educational opportunities." But once here, the smugglers "forced the Nigerian children to work as domestics."

Some of these cases received prominent news coverage when they were discovered. But they are only a tiny fraction of the problem. The report says 700,000 to 2 million women and children worldwide are victimized by traffickers each year. Although the numbers who come to the United States are relatively small, the report says that the problem "is likely to increase in the United States."

At a three-day conference in Manila, Philippines, last month, delegates from 23 Asian countries met to discuss the problem and called on governments to seize the profits of the crime syndicates involved. A Filipino group estimated those profits at up to \$17 billion a year.

Frank Loy, undersecretary of state for global affairs, told a congressional subcommittee in February: "It seems incomprehensible that at the dawn of the 21st century, the primitive and barbaric practice of buying and selling human beings occurs at all. Yet international trafficking in persons, predominantly women and children, is a widespread and, by all indications, a growing reality."

THE COUNTRIES that are the primary sources for traffickers are Thailand, Vietnam, China, Mexico,

Russia and the Czech Republic, the report says. Other countries that are increasingly providing victims include the Philippines, Korea, Malaysia, Latvia, Hungary, Poland, Brazil and Honduras, the report says.

The INS, one of several federal agencies with jurisdiction in this area, noted in an internal assessment last fall that agents had found 250 brothels in 26 cities nationwide that appeared to be holding trafficking victims. It was not always easy to tell, the CIA report says, because the victims generally did not speak English and might have been even more afraid of law enforcement officers than of their captors.

AFTER RAIDING one of these brothels, the immigration officers generally move to deport the women — the victims — because they are in the country illegally. Often the officials do not have enough information to prosecute their captors.

Government officials said the problem was not new, but the scope seems to have increased in recent years. The biggest reason is that, since the mid-1990s, traffickers from Russia and the former republics of the Soviet Union have aggressively entered the business, taking advantage of women from those countries who are looking to the West for opportunities.

"IT'S ACCELERATED tremendously in the last 10 years," said Donna Hughes, director of the Women's Studies Program at the University of Rhode Island. She has monitored the issue for a decade. "An important reason is that there's increased migration of women now for purposes of work."

A CIA analyst derived the estimate of 50,000 victims per year from public and classified intelligence data, a government official said. No comparable estimates were made in previous years, the official said, but the widespread opinion among govern-

ment officials was that the number was much smaller 10 years ago.

One reason for the scrutiny now is that senior members of the Clinton administration, including Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Attorney General Reno, in addition to the first lady, Hillary Clinton, have spoken out on the issue.

"We now have all of the other agencies involved, and we would not have been able to do that without the sense that there is a mandate from the president to work on this issue," said Theresa Loar, a State Department officer who is also director of the President's Interagency Council on Women.

EVEN WHEN traffickers are convicted, the penalties are usually light. In fact, there are few federal or state laws aimed directly at this crime. One federal law does forbid "sale into involuntary servitude." It carries a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison. Many recent trafficking convictions have brought sentences that were shorter than that.

Despite interest in the issue from the Clinton administration, government officials said, few resources have been devoted to it.

Two bills, in the House and the Senate, would increase prison time for traffickers, provide assistance for victims and increase resources and training for law enforcement officers.

THE BILLS would require the State Department to publish an annual report on trafficking and recommend sanctions against countries that are not, in the administration's view, fighting it aggressively enough.

Although the CIA report was distributed within the government last November, it does not appear to be getting much attention.

"No one really knows what do with it," one government official said. "I'm not sure people are really focusing on this."