

Sex trafficking, indentured labor bedevil victims and foes alike

WASHINGTON - The scourge of human trafficking, be it in the form of sex slavery or immigrant work gangs, not only bedevils people victimized by those practices but even those who campaign against them.

During an Oct. 26 conference on trafficking at The Catholic University of America, Ethiopian trafficking victims told of going through a dozen different countries at the behest of smugglers before arriving in the United States, where their treatment by federal Immigrations and Customs Enforcement agents was even harsher than in their home country.

"I am a survivor from two countries: from Ethiopia, and here in America, too," said Fineam Benjamin, who fled his homeland in 2006 amid repression from the Ethiopian government, which is still in power in the East African nation.

Benjamin said he arrived in Laredo, Texas, expecting hospitality. Instead, he said, he was tortured by border police.

"They took away all my cellphone numbers," rendering him unable to reach anyone, Benjamin said. "For six months, no communication. I am in a single room in Laredo, Texas," he added, pausing to choke back tears. "I'm sorry," he told his audience. "I'm just feeling a little bit sad about what was happening to me."

In Ethiopia, "God gave me a chance to escape," Benjamin said. "Here, you have no way to escape. You have no way to kill yourself if you are desperate." He added, "I am the only one they keep that long. I don't blame the country. (But) I still hurt."

Luis CdeBaca, director of the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, also addressed the conference, sponsored by the Franciscan Action Network, Franciscans International, the Franciscan Federation and the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies at the university.

CdeBaca said "human trafficking" became the agreed-upon term at the United

Nations to describe the practice because “modern slavery” sounded too blunt.

CdeBaca said he personally comes up short in trying to practice what he preaches as head of the monitoring office. For example, he said, “I still don’t know where the cotton in my shirt comes from,” as children are frequently used in some countries to pick the cotton crop. Even with the McDonald’s Filet-O-Fish sandwich, which he said he loves to eat during Lent, “there’s a 60 percent chance that fish was caught by someone enslaved somewhere south of New Zealand.”

Moreover, CdeBaca took an online test at the website <https://slaveryfootprint.org>, which tracks sources of labor and goods, and, based on his answers, was told there are “84 slaves around the world laboring to maintain my lifestyle.”

CdeBaca praised the efforts of the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility and Manpower Strategies to reward good employer conduct and undercut exploitative employers. “If you ask politely but firmly enough, it sounds like demands to these corporations,” he said, adding that people should check the supply chain on consumer products.

During a panel discussion, Ron Chance, an adjunct professor of intelligence studies at Neumann University in Aston, Pa., told of his days doing intelligence work – first to root out mob corruption in labor unions, and later against smugglers of indentured laborers.

At a garment sweatshop, Chance said, he once found 16 women “physically chained to their sewing machines for 16 hours a day. If they protested, they were beaten and raped by the Chinese guards who brought them there every day.”

He described an immigrant worker at a chicken processing plant who accidentally cut off a thumb and was taken, with his severed digit, by six of his co-workers to a nearby hospital. But the “labor leaser” – Chance’s term for a crew leader – took the man, sans thumb, out of the hospital, declaring he didn’t have medical insurance in that state. Instead, the labor leaser took the man to a “witch doctor” who cauterized the thumb, Chance said. The labor leaser was never prosecuted for this, he added, but later was convicted of fraud for pocketing \$175,000 in unemployment claims for 24 of his workers.

Another panelist, Sister Eileen White, spoke of her work at Dawn's Place in Philadelphia, a halfway house for women newly freed from sex slavery.

Their first women were five Central Americans who had been forced into prostitution. "Although all five had their own rooms, they all slept together because they were terrified," said Sister Eileen, a member of the Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart.

The job of Dawn's Place is "to find a way to offer a better hope than what the exploiters were offering," she said. The youngest of the five women, who was 18 when she arrived at Dawn's Place after three years on the street, "may be back in the business of sex work," Sister Eileen added. "She assures me she is not. She still calls."

Still, "we have not yet found an acceptable means of measuring our success at Dawn's Place," Sister Eileen said. "Some of our international guests have returned to prostitution. Some of our American guests are back in 'the life,' as they call it."