

U.S. monthlong observance targets ‘global travesty’ of human trafficking

WASHINGTON - By proclaiming January Human Trafficking Prevention Month, President Barack Obama signified he is “very much in touch” with a problem he has called “a global travesty,” said Julie Tanner, assistant director of socially responsible investing for Christian Brothers Investment Services.

The investment firm urges companies in its portfolio to adopt standards that would lessen the incidence of human trafficking that could be enabled by their firms, both globally and domestically.

Tanner and others engaged in the fight against human trafficking were caught unaware that Obama was going to make such a proclamation. Even so, “we’re really excited about it,” she said.

The president chose Jan. 1 as the start in recognition of the Emancipation Proclamation, which took effect Jan. 1, 1863. For the end he chose Feb. 1 - called “National Freedom Day” in Obama’s proclamation - for the date in 1865 when President Abraham Lincoln signed the 13th Amendment banning slavery and sending it to the States for ratification.

“Human trafficking is a global travesty that takes many forms. Whether forced labor or sexual trafficking, child soldiering or involuntary domestic servitude, these abuses are an affront to our national conscience, and to our values as Americans and human beings,” Obama said in his Dec. 22 proclamation. “From every corner of our nation to every part of the globe, we must stand firm in defense of freedom and bear witness for those exploited by modern slavery.”

Trafficking foes also were using the Feb. 6 Super Bowl to focus on the issue, for example asking hotels to watch for signs of human trafficking, especially child trafficking, as was done during last June’s World Cup.

Tanner credited Obama for linking the fight against human trafficking to the dates spanned by Human Trafficking Prevention Month.

“It’s great that he’s obviously very much in touch with how much publicity human trafficking is getting and how the United States has really ramped up their efforts on this,” Tanner said in a Jan. 14 interview with Catholic News Service from New York.

A Cabinet-level Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking, created by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, coordinates the federal government’s anti-trafficking efforts. The State, Defense, Justice, Agriculture, Labor, Education, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services departments have their own initiatives to combat trafficking, as do the Agency for International Development and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

But it is an uphill climb. A State Department fact sheet, citing its 2010 Trafficking in Persons Report, noted that an estimated 12.3 million adults and children are in forced labor, bonded labor or forced prostitution worldwide, 56 percent of them women and girls.

And while there were 4,166 successful trafficking prosecutions in 2009, up 40 percent from 2008, there are 62 countries that have yet to convict a trafficker under laws in compliance with the Palermo Protocol – which was adopted in 2000 – and 104 countries without laws, policies, or regulations to prevent trafficking victims’ deportation.

The 2010 report included the United States for the first time. While it got relatively good marks in the report, Tanner said, the report noted that “we’ve got to get away from this boys will be boys (mentality) ... and say that this is unacceptable.”

The climb is steep in the private sector as well. Christian Brothers Investment Services has been in conversations with hotel chains it holds stock in about training their staffs to detect possible human traffickers staying in their hotels, but only one – Carlson, which operates the Radisson chain – has agreed.

Last year, human trafficking watchdogs focused their efforts on the monthlong World Cup tournament in South Africa. This year, they are setting their sights on the

Super Bowl, to be played Feb. 6 in Arlington, Texas.

The Super Bowl represents an economic boost nearing \$1 billion to the host city and surrounding region, and some of that money could get into the hands of traffickers.

The San Antonio-based Socially Responsible Investment Coalition has undertaken responsibility to call hotels in the Dallas-Fort Worth area to ask that when they're training staff for the inevitable flood of guests staying in their hotels for the Super Bowl, they include a workshop on trafficking issues.

Benedictine Sister Susan Mika, the coalition's executive director, told CNS Jan. 19 that the results from the phone calls and follow-up had not been tabulated, but so many volunteers had expressed an interest in phoning the hotels that the coalition was able to double the number of hotels contacted.

"Many of our members have this as a priority and they work on this all the time," she explained. "At our meetings we've had updates, we've had people who present (workshops) on this and encouraged us to do various actions.

"It's one of those issues that doesn't go away, and we work on this continuously," she said.