

FIGHTING HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN UZBEKISTAN

By Erkin Akhmadov (02/06/2008 issue of the CACI Analyst)

The problem of human trafficking and the "export" of forced prostitution is present in every state of Central Asia. In Uzbekistan, increasing numbers of human trafficking victims has led the problem to receive growing attention from state organs. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Uzbekistan, more crimes of this character were investigated in the past several years, but the number of persons trafficked and abused is steadily growing. Most of the time, male labor migrants seek easy money in the Near Abroad, in Kazakhstan and Russia, while young girls and women, by contrast, earn their bread in the Far Abroad. Their route usually leads to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Turkey or Thailand. The Ministry of Internal Affairs statistics account as many as a thousand Uzbek girls smuggled abroad for commercial prostitution annually.

Currently, the government of Uzbekistan works on a bill to counteract human trafficking in the country. In addition to that, a database has been launched at Tashkent airport, which keeps track of people who often travel to the Arab states and CIS states. In October 2003, a special government regulation ordered border control services to check young women traveling to Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, South Korea, Malaysia and Indonesia without accompanying husbands more thoroughly. Moreover, they were given the authority to prevent women under age 30 from flights to these countries. Perhaps because of such regulations, lately flights from the Kyrgyz city of Osh to Sharja and Dubai in the Emirates have become the most common route for smuggling illegal migrants from Uzbekistan.

In fact, it is quite easy for citizens of Uzbekistan to travel to these countries legally, as any travel agency in Uzbekistan can easily issue tourist visas. The only formal requirement for most of these states is a marriage stamp in the passport. The visa issuing process is much harder and more sophisticated for travelers to Western countries, which explains the fact that the biggest receivers of Uzbek trafficked women are Turkey, the Emirates and Thailand.

On average, the price of an Uzbek girl smuggled for the purpose of sexual slavery is reported to be \$10,000. For transportation and delivery, the smugglers receive about \$2,500-\$5,000. After being smuggled to a foreign country, Uzbek women are subjected to numerous human rights violations. In the UAE they are reportedly treated the worst. According to confidential information of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, annually 5-6 Uzbek trafficked women get killed in the UAE. These are usually the ones who are not "in demand" anymore or are victims of wayward Arabs. Another option for such women is imprisonment for months on charges of visa regime violation, or illegal drug trafficking. Practically, there is nothing to protect or help the victims of the violations.

Article 135 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan punishes those smuggling people "with trickery" for the purposes of sexual exploitation with

five to eight years of imprisonment. Most of them, however, state in the court that they have just promised the victims work and a salary.

Four years ago, the Soros Foundation and a number of local women's NGOs conducted a conference on the problems of trading in women. Only after this event did Uzbekistan signed the Convention on preventing human trafficking and sexual exploitation. In 2003, a center for the victims of sexual abuse was established in Tashkent, becoming one of the most reliable sources for information about sexual slavery in the country. In December 2007, an International Conference on fighting human trafficking was held in Kyrgyzstan.

Fighting sexual slavery, human trafficking and the violation of human rights of Uzbek women abroad is a lofty act on the part of the state. Nonetheless, in many ways the effectiveness of the strategy could be strengthened by countering the roots of the problem. In most cases, women commit themselves to earning their living abroad because they are highly aware of the fact that they cannot earn even a portion of that money at home. As most of the women engaged in such activities evidently come from rural areas, it is a signal of the scale of the desperation and vulnerability of women in the rural areas. The high unemployment rate has the effect of forcing many women from Uzbekistan to search for sources of income abroad. Thus, the problem of human trafficking, besides calling for the attention of international community, exposes some of the internal problems of Uzbekistan.