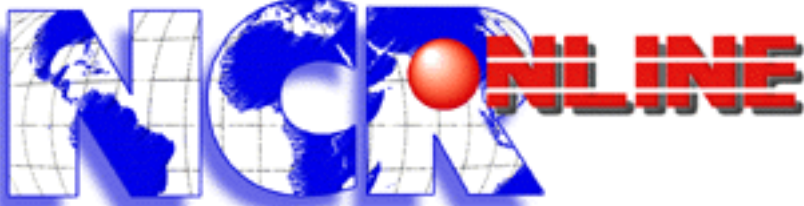


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## Cover story

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### Global slave trade prospers

By ARTHUR JONES  
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*Los Angeles*

**A** raid on a brothel in Bethesda, Md., almost four years ago helped trigger congressional legislation that serves as a key U.S. weapon in the ongoing battle against modern variants of slavery, particularly trafficking in women and girls. Trapped in the brothel were Ukrainian women smuggled into the United States to work as prostitutes against their will.

The raid and subsequent legislation are two in dozens of incidents, reactions and reports, part of a groundswell in the United States and around the world strengthening the case against a burgeoning global trade in people.

Owning a slave has never been cheaper than it is today. A healthy young African male can be bought on the Ivory Coast for \$35. In London, two 13-year-old West African girls, bought for \$1,200 each, were soon put to work as child prostitutes making \$400 an hour each for their owner.

In the United States, where an estimated 10,000 Asian women and girls work in underground brothels, slavery is remarkably varied in its forms. The CIA estimates that young women and girls are being smuggled into the United States at the rate of 50,000 a year. Kathryn McMahon, founder of the Coalition to Abolish Slavery

and Trafficking in Los Angeles, CAST, believes the 50,000 figure is low.

If brothels are busted and women arrested, “their captors bond them out and soon move them to another part of the country,” said Assistant U.S. Attorney General Mike Gennaco of Los Angeles.

In what amounts to a global epidemic of slavery, the United Nations estimates some 27 million slaves are being held worldwide. For smuggling people, organized crime gangs use the same routes and methods perfected in the drug trade and, to a lesser extent, the arms trade.

The United States and Western Europe are prime destinations. In the United States, slaves work in factories, fields, restaurants and homes, and in every facet of the sex industry.

“With globalization and cheap transportation, you can move people easier and quicker than guns or drugs,” said Joy Zarembka of the Campaign for Migrant Domestic Workers Rights. “And you can use them over and over and over again. You don’t just sell them once and call it a day. It’s very, very profitable.”

Many of the slaves smuggled into the United States are burdened with enormous “contracts” of \$40,000 to \$50,000, which the smugglers use as an excuse for withholding wages.

To counter the growing trend, the U.S. Congress passed its tough Trafficking Victims Protection Act last year with bipartisan support. This year, U.S.-based advocacy groups formed the first national anti-slavery coalition, the Freedom Network.

Underscoring the global dimension of the anti-slavery movement, the 180-year-old Anti-Slavery International, founded in London, has opened its first U.S. office.

Further, from Los Angeles to Boston, local U.S. attorney general civil rights offices stepped up their prosecutions. In Washington, foreign diplomats and officials of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have hurriedly settled increasing numbers of “domestic servitude” cases involving unpaid or underpaid domestic staff. Perpetrators have been convicted of violations of laws against involuntary servitude, illegal since the late 19th century, as well as

laws against harboring illegal immigrants and paying workers less than minimum wage.

From court records and interviews with activists, advocates, law enforcement officials and congressional staffs, *NCR* has culled some examples of slavery in the United States and around the world, along with an overview of the growing push against slavery.

A few of many cases include the following:

In Anchorage, Alaska, Russian folk dancers who thought they'd been brought to the United States as part of a cultural tour found themselves forced to dance nude in a bar, their passports and plane tickets confiscated. INS agents early this year saw the Russian dancers advertised as an attraction and went to check out the bar.

A multistate prostitution ring using women from teens to 30-year-olds from Malaysia, China and Thailand was broken up by Las Vegas police late last year. A similar ring was broken up in Atlanta this year.

In Las Vegas, Mary Ha from China was alleged to have masterminded a scheme that operated from Hong Kong to the United States, with the women rotated through brothels in New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Las Vegas, San Francisco, Atlanta and Minneapolis.

When it comes to domestic workers, slavery in the United States can rival the cruelties of Sierra Leone cocoa plantations. The routes by which the domestic workers arrive in this nation can be circuitous indeed.

In Los Angeles, two Thai women were held against their wills for more than five years by Thai restaurant owner Suphawan Veerapol. She forced them to work 18 hours a day, seven days a week in her Woodland Hills home and in her restaurant.

A short distance away, in classy Rancho Palo Verdes, Supik Indrawati was held captive in the opulent home of businessman Robert Lie -- until, after being subjected to repeated rapes, she and her aunt finally smuggled out notes pleading for help. Indrawati's aunt, Siti Pasinah, was kept by Lie's daughter and son-in-law, both

veterinarians.

Similarly, rule by violence was the situation facing an illiterate Bangladeshi woman, Shaefeli Akhtar, 28, held captive in servitude for five years by Los Angeles Indian restaurant owner Nur Alamin.

Suphawan's Thai workers, Thonglim Khamphiranon and Somkhit Yindiphot, were brought into the United States illegally in the early 1990s. Suphawan's common-law husband was Thai ambassador to Sweden. Thonglim entered the United States as a Thai Tourist Board official. Somkhit was told to inform U.S. authorities she was in transit to the household of a diplomat in Africa and would be in the United States only two or three days.

According to testimony in the case, Suphawan confiscated the women's identifying documents immediately after they arrived. Thonglim was made to sleep on the floor outside Suphawan's bedroom door so she would always be on call. The two women began domestic work -- cooking, cleaning, caring for children and washing Suphawan's two Mercedes-Benzes -- at 6 a.m. daily. They were later transported to her restaurant where they worked until 10 or 11 p.m. with a further hour's work back at the house before being allowed to retire around midnight.

Suphawan took out fraudulent credit cards in the women's names and ran up extensive bills. She denied the women medical care. The women extracted their own infected teeth, including a molar, using nail clippers, because Suphawan refused to take them to a dentist.

In almost six years, a witness said, neither woman was given a day off. They were denied permission to return home to their families and children after three years, as originally promised. They were also denied permission to attend services at the Thai Buddhist temple.

Suphawan had told Thonglim that if she escaped, the restaurant owner would contact the police and the Immigration and Naturalization Service and file a false report saying Thonglim had embezzled money. In Thailand, Thonglim's family would be evicted and harmed, Suphawan said.

Prosecuting INS officer Philip L. Bonner told the court that in his experience the tactics were typical. In situations involving involuntary servitude, the perpetrators “censor and/or limit communications between the victims and the outside world,” he said. He told the court that threats “of legal process sometimes carries greater sway over the ‘worker’ than threats or even acts of physical abuse.”

The women finally escaped when Suphawan was visiting Thailand. Suphawan is serving an eight-year prison term convicted of involuntary servitude, harboring, smuggling and fraud. Somkhit and Thonglim -- who last year testified before Congress during hearings on the Trafficking Victims Protection Act -- share a small apartment in a low-income housing area. They work fulltime in restaurants, saving their money and sending it home. They are in a legal limbo regarding residency. They cannot return home without relinquishing their right to live in the United States. The protections in the act for which Thonglim testified have not been extended to them. Their case is being negotiated.

Meanwhile, Thonglim and Somkhit have continued to be outspoken on the slavery issue, said Jennifer Stanger of the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking. It’s a matter the Thai community “would rather sweep under the rug,” she said.

In the case of Indrawati, according to a *Los Angeles Times* account, businessman Robert Lie regularly ordered her to clean his toenails and massage his feet and legs. Over a period of time, he demanded that her strokes move higher up his legs until she was massaging his thighs and genitals. Then the rapes began.

Working from an English-Indonesian dictionary and a children’s library book, Indrawati managed to pencil a letter to the police:

“dear mr police office sir,” she laboriously wrote. “please please please I really need your help police officer sir. ... ”

In two-and-a-half years, said Indrawati, she never saw any money. During that period, Lie sent \$1,800 -- a rate of \$720 a year -- to Indrawati’s family.

Fred Lie, Robert’s son, was quoted as saying, “We treated them

like family.”

Robert Lie pled guilty to two counts of harboring an alien and two counts of willful failure to pay minimum wages in a plea bargain that allowed his wife, a kindergarten teacher, and his daughter and son-in-law to escape prosecution.

Indrawati and Pasinah now work as part-time nannies. According to the Los-Angeles based coalition against slavery, their legal status remains unclear.

Akhtar, the young woman from Bangladesh, was smuggled first to Saudi Arabia and then to the United States. She was beaten and intimidated to the point of being afraid to leave the house because the Alamin family told her that, as an illegal immigrant, she would be arrested. Finally she fled to a neighbor’s house and police were called. Alamin was sentenced to 11 years in prison and ordered to pay Akhtar \$125,819 restitution. His wife, Rabiye Akhter, faced a year’s imprisonment for harboring an illegal immigrant. Alamin’s attorney said there would be an appeal.

Mike Gennaco got his baptism into the slave trade six years ago, prosecuting the 1995 El Monte, Calif., garment case. It involved 72 unpaid Thais detained for five years in various places, including a rundown apartment complex, by armed guards and razor wire. The Thai captives made clothing for some of the biggest names in the fashion industry.

Armed guards and razor wire are unusual, Gennaco said. “In most of the cases we’re seeing, people are not being held by barbed wire or physical confinement, but essentially in prisons without walls. People use isolation techniques and psychological pressure to keep victims in a situation where one might think they’d be able to get up and leave if they wanted.”

Slaves arriving in the United States may fly in well-dressed, masqueraded as tourists or students. But they are stripped of everything the moment they’re out of the airport and into the waiting van. Gone are the clothes, the promises, the passports. Awaiting them are threats, rapes, brutality, isolation, and terror.

Zarembka of Migrant Domestic Workers Rights describes it as an

eerie pattern. “Their passports are confiscated as soon as they arrive. If there was a contract, it has long since disappeared or been disregarded. There are threats of being deported or sent to the police, and lots of psychological coercion. They’re told if they go outside they’ll be harmed, raped, because Americans are dangerous, evil, crazy. ‘Look at television,’ ” they’re told.

It isn’t just foreigners based on U.S. soil who abuse, she said. An Ivy League professor who specializes in women’s issues recently settled out of court in a suit brought by Zarembka’s domestic workers’ advocacy group. The professor had been physically abusing her Nepalese domestic worker -- and paying her \$45 a month, because, the professor said, “that’s what she’d get paid back home.”

In Washington, some diplomats, World Bank and IMF officials accused of unlawful treatment of workers quickly settle out-of-court rather than face up to slavery in their own households. Their legally present domestic workers, treated as virtual prisoners, report being brutalized by dreadful working conditions, unconscionably long hours and no pay. The worst cases document women who have been held in domestic servitude for almost 20 years.

Kevin Bales, Mississippi-based official of Anti-Slavery International, said slave labor is involved in the making of many imported items. His list includes Ivory Coast cocoa and cotton, Indian, Nepalese and Pakistan handmade carpets, soccer balls from India and Dominican Republic sugar.

One destination for the young men purchasable for \$35 on the Ivory Coast are the cocoa fields of Sierra Leone. The young men are brutalized and beaten to make them stay. They’re badly fed and unpaid. In India, boys as young as 5 and 6 are kidnapped, taken hundreds of miles from their homes and locked in huts to weave carpets 14 hours a day, seven days a week. Some of those handmade carpets are sold in U.S. department stores, Bales said.

Bales is the author of *Disposable People: New Slavery In The Global Economy* (see review, page 15).

## **Working against the trade**

The contemporary movement against slavery got its start in the Far East in the late 1970s and early '80s in a reaction against global sex tourism and, to a lesser extent, the plight of young girls caught up in the sex trade around overseas U.S. military bases such as the now-closed naval base at Subic Bay in the Philippines.

This writer, in the Philippines in the 1980s, can still recall the anger and disgust on the face of a nun working on these issues who told of a serviceman's graphic description of his teenage prostitute girlfriend.

As more details of sex tourism became known -- Asian and European men seeking young girls and boys for sex in the impoverished cities of Asia, and to a lesser extent Africa -- a loosely connected association of people working against the trade, came into being. Many of them had connections to the worlds of nongovernmental organizations -- NGOs -- and religious networks.

Maryknoll Sr. Mary Ann Smith, who worked in the Philippines from 1960 to '68 and 1972 to '76, told *NCR* that in the 1970s the Thailand-based Ecumenical Coalition Against Third World Tourism observed that children involved in prostitution were getting younger and younger. "There were already sex tours from Japan to the Philippines," Smith said. The coalition studied four countries -- Taiwan, Thailand, the Philippines and Sri Lanka (Sri Lanka was the only destination that was primarily for the prostitution of young boys) -- and verified their suspicions. Out of that study came ECPAT, originally standing for Elimination of Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism, now the acronym for Eliminating Child Prostitution, Pornography and Trafficking. Smith today is president of the U.S. arm of the organization. She is also a staff member of Network, the Catholic social justice lobby in Washington.

### **'My heart broke'**

There are direct links between efforts to combat slavery in Asia and recent action in the United States.

For example, almost two decades ago, McMahon attended a meeting in a Santa Monica, Calif., church basement where a nun spoke about the trafficking of children. "As a consequence,"

McMahon said, “I joined an international network focused on the Philippines port of Gabriela.”

The Gabriela Network, which came out of the popular movement in the Philippines, works for social justice and women’s rights there.

The trafficking issue got under McMahon’s skin. “I have a broken heart,” she said. In the 1990s, the Cal State Long Beach professor of women’s studies traveled five times to Southeast Asia. “I following my nose around Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, talking to everyone -- U.N. officials, families of trafficked people, young girls rescued from brothels.”

In Thailand she learned about the locked brothels in the North; in Vietnam, about the Vietnamese women and girls taken into Cambodia to service the troops. She went to investigate.

“My heart broke for sure when I saw these little girls, 11 to 15,” she said. The images never faded. “I went from incredible rage to incredible grief. I did actually get pretty ill. The way I cope with it is to work on their behalf. I’m still at it, but a little battered.”

In 1997, McMahon formed the Los Angeles’ Trafficked Women Project, which lasted a year and was transformed into the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking.

Asia is the connection, too, to the fledgling U.S.-based Freedom Network, a coalition intended to bring together groups nationwide working on the trafficking and slavery issues. Ann Jordan, at its epicenter, worked in China and Hong Kong in the 1980s and ’90s.

Now director of the Washington-based International Human Rights Law Group’s project on trafficking, Jordan was a Fulbright scholar specializing in women’s rights. She taught law in a Chinese university, then taught in Hong Kong until the colony’s 1997 transition to Beijing’s control.

She worked with women’s groups in Thailand, Cambodia, India and Nepal putting together a migrant women’s handbook. It told them “what they needed to know before they migrated, what trafficking is, who to contact abroad,” she said.

“Women are being trafficked into countries you’d never imagine,” she said. “I’ve heard from our people in Cambodia of Bulgarian women being trafficked there. It’s from any place to any place and for anything -- factory work, domestic, agricultural, prostitution. With immigration increasing, the problem is getting worse. Crime gangs are much more sophisticated. Borders mean nothing to them. They’re all working together in different ways.”

She realized when the migration booklet was being prepared there was no U.S. contact for trafficked women.

“I decided when I moved back, I’d set up a network here.” Advocacy work at the United Nations on a new international trafficking protocol and on the legislation that led to last year’s Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, deflected Jordan from her network.

Then, in January this year, The Freedom Network’s first meeting was held. A Baltimore-Washington core group is being formed with links to others in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Chicago.

### **‘You need to be sensitive’**

Los Angeles assistant U.S. attorneys general Tammy Spertus and Caroline Wittcoff, who handled the case of Shaefeli Akhtar, the woman held captive for five years by Los Angeles Indian restaurant owner Nur Alamin, explained to *NCR* the difficulties in taking a slavery case to trial.

“She was terrified,” said Wittcoff. “We got information from her family in Bangladesh that they had been threatened. We spent a lot of time with her trying to reassure her that everything was OK.”

Said Spertus, “You really need to be sensitive to what the victim has gone through, sense the cultural differences that exist. We spent quite a bit of time trying to familiarize her with the legal process, explained what a jury is, showed her the court.”

Wittcoff said, “The preparation that goes into a trial like this is extensive. It’s a scary experience to face your accuser.” She said

the veiled Akhtar was timid and emotional on the stand. She found it difficult to look at the defendant in court when asked to identify him.

There are similarities between the sensitivity required in prosecuting slavery cases and rape cases, Wittcoff said.

Worldwide, some nations are trying hard to make inroads in slavery, Ann Jordan of Human Rights Law Group said in an airport telephone interview shortly before she left for Moscow. The Netherlands and Italy have come up with legislation related to trafficked women. The European Union is trying to frame a policy, and the United States “has good protections. But there’s no services yet and no [congressional] appropriations.”

Which brings the account back to the raid on the Bethesda brothel more than three years ago that freed the Ukrainian women.

News reports of the raid caught the attention of Sheila Wellstone, active nationally campaigning against the abuse of women, who showed it to her husband, Sen. Paul Wellstone, D-Minn. Wellstone -- whose parents were Russian Jews from the Ukraine -- brought together people familiar with the trafficking issue and began crafting legislation.

It has had bipartisan support. The Clinton White House made an issue of trafficking, and Clinton also signed into law the Mann Act that enables the United States to prosecute domestically U.S. citizens who travel overseas to engage in sex with children.

U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft, charged with enforcing the new law, has noted that the Trafficking Victims Protection Act was the final legislation he voted for before leaving the Senate.

Wellstone’s press secretary, Jim Farrell, said the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, signed into law last October, was “a much better version” than the original proposal. “We had to negotiate with [the] State and Justice [Departments]. In the Senate itself, [Sen.] Sam Brownback, [R-Kan.] did great work with us,” Farrell said.

One vital element in the trafficking act is the “T-visa,” a temporary

visa that allows victims fleeing slavery to gain legal standing while their cases are being heard, and possibly gain permanent status.

The new act, Farrell said, toughens federal trafficking penalties, criminalizing all forms of trafficking in persons. It “establishes punishment commensurate with the heinous nature of this crime,” he said.

The law also provides for promotion of public anti-trafficking awareness campaigns, increases protections and services for victims, stops the practice of deporting victims back to potentially dangerous situations in their home countries and provides the time necessary to bring charges against people responsible for victims’ conditions.

There’s a little money -- the trafficking law’s international segment has been allocated \$7.6 million, but the domestic money is not in place, except for \$10 million in the Bush Health and Human Services budget toward the cost of establishing who is a trafficking victim.

Wellstone and Brownback and their allies are looking for a further \$13 million to gear up the domestic program.

Beyond that, Zarembka insists, the slave’s best ally in the United States is a vigilant public.

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