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Conference: Human trafficking, sex slavery thriving in U.S., abroad

Jerry Filteau | Nov. 7, 2011

Young boys walk near shacks built on stilts in the San Francisco neighborhood of Buenaventura, Colombia, in this January 2006 file photo. Buenaventura, a major route for cocaine trafficking to the United States, is known as Colombia's most violent city. (CNS photo/Mike Ceaser)

WASHINGTON -- One hundred and fifty years after the United States fought the Civil War "to cure this country of the scourge of slavery," said the archbishop emeritus of Washington, "this terrible scourge" continues today, even in the United States.

Around the world, "800,000 [new] people are being trafficked annually, half of whom are children," as involuntary slaves in forced labor and prostitution, said Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick.

Today, 14,000 to 18,000 people are brought into the United States each year as sex or labor slaves, he said.

One-third of the foreign-born are children, he added.

"Slavery -- to own another person ? a person who was born to be free ? I can't put my head around it," said McCarrick, a leading social justice advocate in the U.S. hierarchy who retired in 2006.

He was the featured closing speaker at a daylong conference Oct. 26 at The Catholic University of America on human trafficking and slavery, which experts say involves millions of men, women and children around the world, including millions of women and children forced into a life of prostitution or coerced labor for which they receive little or no pay.

McCarrick's talk closed a conference that included a panel of Ethiopans who had escaped sex slavery or torture in their home country and eventually made a circuitous route into the United States as asylum seekers.

Also featured at the conference were keynote speaker Luis CdeBaca, the U.S. ambassador-at-large who heads the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, and a panel of experts involved in fighting human trafficking and sex and labor slavery.

The experts' panel also included Hilary Chester, associate director of the Anti-Trafficking Services Program of

the Migration and Refugee Services department of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

An important political subtext of the conference -- only recently introduced long after the conference plans had been made -- was the recent denial of a new U.S. Department of Health and Human Services contract to the MRS anti-trafficking program.

Since 2006, the MRS program had assisted some 2,700 foreign-born victims of U.S. sex slavery and had formed a major national network of Catholic and non-Catholic service providers to identify and assist victims of human trafficking.

But in 2009, the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts filed a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the HHS contract with MRS because it did not require MRS to include a full range of reproductive services, including referrals for abortion, sterilization and artificial contraception, in its anti-trafficking program.

The ACLU lawsuit appears to have been a decisive element in the government's decision to switch its funding for major anti-trafficking programs from MRS to other agencies that are willing to offer full contraceptive and abortion services to all clients, though the Obama administration has refused so far to declare the reasons for its shift in funding.

In his closing talk, McCarrick, referring to the nonrenewal of the MRS contract, sharply rebuked HHS for what he called an "illegal" repudiation of numerous U.S. laws protecting the conscience of social service providers who object for religious reasons to abortion, sterilization and artificial contraception.

Earlier, in response to an *NCR* question about the nonrenewal of the HHS contract, Chester said MRS in coming months and years will try to build innovatively on the network it has created with federal funding over recent years to continue combating human trafficking and sexual slavery in the United States, even though the federal funding has been cut off.

In a conversation following the meeting, however, she acknowledged that the denial of a new contract is forcing the bishops' agency to regroup and see what it can do with vastly reduced resources to continue the work it has begun.

She said MRS is also concerned about how to continue services to clients previously served within the network it had developed. She said it has urged agencies within the network to establish relationships with the newly HHS-funded anti-trafficking organizations in order to continue the anti-trafficking service work they are already engaged in.

Continuing service to clients who have been receiving assistance under the previous federal contract is a significant point of concern, she said.

The ACLU lawsuit that appears to have prompted the HHS denial of a renewed contract to MRS is another signpost in the church's growing political struggle with the Obama administration over narrowing definitions of what church social services to the poor and disadvantaged may be eligible for federal funding, despite a an overall administration policy of federal collaboration with faith-based social services.

On the same day the human trafficking conference was being conducted at Catholic University, Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., chairman of the bishops' new ad hoc Committee on Religious Liberty, gave testimony on Capitol Hill urging Congress to investigate the new requirements of reproductive services being demanded in federal contracts with religiously based social service agencies -- requirements that he said are "illegal" under existing federal statutes.

"This may call for a congressional hearing or other form of investigation to ensure compliance with the applicable conscience laws, as well as to identify how these new requirements came to be imposed," Lori told a subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee.

At the Catholic University conference, Demissie Abebe, director of TASSC -- the Washington-based Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition -- introduced several fellow Ethiopian survivors of torture and sexual abuse who had successfully escaped to the United States and are currently seeking asylum.

Abebe told *NCR* he was imprisoned twice in Ethiopia -- first for four months and then for two months -- and beaten and tortured there, for filing reports on government corruption, before he escaped and eventually made his way to the United States.

The Ethiopian panelists who followed, who did not want to be photographed or identified by their last names for fear of serious repercussions for family members still living in Ethiopia, included two women and a man who said their asylum pleas have been met with extreme skepticism and dehumanizing treatment by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) administration.

CdeBaca delivered an unusually blunt plea from an administration official for action to end human slavery practices around the world.

The recently adopted terminology of "'trafficking in human persons' is a euphemism for slavery," he said. "There are 30 million people being held in forced labor and sex labor around the world."

In 1990, CdeBaca led the prosecution of one of the first cases of modern human slavery in the United States, in which 56 deaf or hearing-impaired Mexican nationals were forced to beg daily in New York for contributions. He also successfully prosecuted a slave labor case in which about 300 Asian workers were enslaved in a textile mill in American Samoa.

John Chance, an American intelligence expert long involved in human slavery issues, described cases he had been involved in, including an American sweatshop in which he said 16 women were chained for 16 hours a day to sewing machines and beaten or raped by their Chinese-born guards if they complained or failed to produce their daily quota of garments.

Chance also described a New Jersey case in which his federal task force followed a daily exodus of undocumented eastern Asian workers from Philadelphia to a chicken-processing plant in New Jersey. One day, one of the workers severed a thumb while cutting up chickens, he said, and fellow workers rushed him to a local hospital. Within minutes, a leader of the illegal labor-lease group showed up at the hospital and said the worker's health care could only apply in Pennsylvania, he said.

He said the worker was then transferred back to Philadelphia, where a member of the labor-lease group cauterized the stump of the severed thumb with a hot soldering iron, ignoring medical possibilities of reattaching the thumb.

Sara and Saba, two young Ethiopian women who spent months escaping torture and sexual exploitation in their native country, said they encountered new forms of torture upon their arrival in the United States, where ICE officials forced them to live for months in crowded, unsanitary conditions in California as their asylum cases were being processed.

Another Ethiopian-born panelist, Adil, described his experience of four years in Texas detention centers as he tried to press his case for political asylum.

The Ethiopian panelists declined to give their last names for fear that family members still living in Ethiopia might face severe recriminations from the government there if their full identities were revealed.

The lead figure in the Ethiopian group, Abibe, told *NCR* during a break in the conference that his exile stemmed from his efforts to stop corruption in which U.S. development aid funds were being diverted to private accounts of Ethiopian officials instead of the projects for which they were intended. When he refused to file false audit reports, he was arrested and jailed, and after his second imprisonment on fabricated charges, he fled to the United States after escaping prison, he said.

He said he still bears scars on his body from the beatings and torture he suffered while imprisoned in his homeland. If the corrupt government there were ousted, he would return to Ethiopia as soon as he could, he said.

"That's where I belong," he said.

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington Correspondent.]

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