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Bush signs anti-trafficking legislation

by Wire Services

The chairman of the U.S. bishops' migration committee said that reauthorizing the anti-trafficking law was "an important step toward eradicating this scourge."

Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City said in a statement, "President Bush has done much to elevate public awareness about human trafficking and should be thanked for his leadership." He encouraged President-elect Barack Obama and the incoming Congress to "remain vigilant and continue to work to end this abominable practice."

Bush signed the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 in an Oval Office ceremony Dec. 23.

"This is a piece of legislation we're very proud to sign and to see that it's authorizing funding for fiscal years ... 2008 through 2011," White House Deputy Press Secretary Tony Fratto told reporters before the signing ceremony. "And this program has been very effective around the world in trying to stop trafficking in persons in Africa and Asia."

The law aims to prevent and prosecute trafficking of humans in foreign countries and assist its victims.

Among the additions to the bill from previous versions are new services and benefits to trafficking victims, said Julianne Duncan, associate director of children's services for Migration and Refugee Services of the U.S. bishops' conference.

Some benefits, for instance, will now be available immediately for trafficking victims who have a pending application for a visa, Duncan said.

Other changes will aid vulnerable children who are at risk of being trafficked, and make more children eligible for permanent legal status and the benefits of the refugee program. Duncan said the revised

program also will require that children in the anti-trafficking program be placed in the least restrictive settings and receive home study before they are released.

It also will provide protections for children who are not admitted to the United States and are returned to their home countries, she said.

Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, said the bill "will significantly assist the United States government in impeding the trafficking of women and children for sexual purposes."

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Wester said, "It's a tremendously important new tool available to law enforcement officials in prosecuting those who traffic in human flesh. It will make a real difference to the victims of sex trafficking."

The bill, which passed both houses of Congress on Dec. 10, is named after William Wilberforce, a 19th-century British abolitionist.

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