

END NOTE

THE 'NATASHA TRADE'

By Taras Kuzio

The Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (OMCTP), established within the U.S. State Department in October 2001, estimated in its second annual

report released in June that between 700,000 to 4 million women, men, and children have been "bought, sold, transported, and held against their will in slave-like conditions." Although this figure includes forced labor, the majority of these slaves are sex slaves.

Poor socioeconomic prospects in their own countries are the main reason why so many women migrate abroad from postcommunist Europe. Between 60-70 percent of the unemployed in Russia and Ukraine are women, who tend to be paid less than men and are usually the first to be dismissed from jobs.

The sex-slave trade, which has been given the name the "Natasha Trade," is more than a human story of modern-day slavery. It generates huge profits for organized crime -- some \$83 million a month in Italy alone. It also breeds corruption among state officials involved in collusion in the trade, and destroys morale among peacekeepers who are accused of complicity in, and use of the sex slave trade, in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosova. Many sex slaves are sexually underage, orphans, the children of divorced marriages, or runaways fleeing abusive parents.

The sex trade also breeds violence and murder. Only "a tiny percent of those 'sold' manage to return home alive," a Dnipropetrovsk prosecutor's office investigator said. With their passports confiscated, the sex slaves have no form of identification, are sold on to different clients, subjected to torture, and deprived of food and sleep. But if they become physically ill and mentally traumatized they are no longer of any use to their traffickers.

The sex trade also contributes to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Some sex slaves turn to, or are given, drugs to keep them pliant, thereby increasing the number of drug users. Drug users, in turn, are a major source of the spread of AIDS because they often share needles. Sex slaves who have managed to escape and return home are also a source of sexually transmitted diseases as they were often raped and forced to have sex without protection.

The trade also spreads AIDS in the countries where the sex slaves are held against their will. Turkish officials and the media have blamed "Natashas" for the rising incidence of AIDS in that country. The reluctance of rural Turkish men to use condoms means they often pass on sexually transmitted diseases to their wives.

The AIDS epidemic is growing faster in the former USSR than anywhere else in the world, and the region has become second only to Africa with 250,000 persons infected last year alone. Although Ukraine has the highest rate of AIDS infection in postcommunist Europe, with 1 percent of the adult population estimated to have HIV, this was ignored until November 2000 when a presidential decree adopted a three-year program.

A recent BBC news report described the Ukrainian port of Odesa as the "AIDS capital of Europe," and AIDS is developing in Ukraine as fast as in Africa. Dr. Aleksandr Sidyachenko, head of prevention and treatment of infectious diseases for the Odesa Oblast health authority, admitted that "We are witnessing the beginning of the AIDS epidemic [in Ukraine]."

Of the 27 postcommunist countries, Ukraine, Russia, Moldova, and Romania are the main source of sex slaves. The second OMCTP annual report found that in Moldova, new amendments to the Criminal Code that were adopted in April have yet to lead to any convictions. Similar amendments imposing penalties for human trafficking went into effect in Ukraine in September 2001. Both countries are classified as "Tier 2" by the OMCTP, meaning they have begun to attempt to deal with the problem of trafficking of women. Meanwhile, in Russia, there is still no legislation against sex-slave trafficking and the country "is not making significant efforts to" undertake any action. Russia is therefore classified as "Tier 3" by the OMCTP.

The transit countries for the trafficked women are Albania and the former Yugoslavia. The major destinations for the "Natasha Trade" are Germany, Italy (half of its 50,000 prostitutes are East Europeans), Turkey, Israel, the United States, and the United Arab Emirates.

In Israel, Amnesty International reported that 10,000 women from the former USSR became sex slaves in the last decade and until recently the authorities were reluctant to prosecute those involved. In August 2000, four Ukrainian sex slaves died in a brothel in Tel Aviv after an arsonist, suspected of being from an extremist ultra-Orthodox Jewish sect, set it ablaze. Between 100,000-150,000 women are sold as mail-order brides to Israel each year, an industry that generates \$17 billion annually. Some of these women end up as sex slaves.

Ukraine not only has the highest rate of AIDS infection in Europe, it has eclipsed Latin America as the leading source of trafficked women. The 14 August edition of the Ukrainian parliamentary newspaper "Holos Ukrayny" reported on the breakup of a gang that had sent women to the United Arab Emirates and been paid \$2,000 for each girl. In the last three years, 125 criminal cases have been instituted in Ukraine against persons accused of the "unlawful employment of Ukrainian citizens abroad."

According to "Holos Ukrayny," 120,000 young Ukrainian women were trafficked last year alone and a total of nearly half a million in recent years.

The International Organization for Migration estimates a higher figure of 1 million Ukrainians abroad who are in danger of being forced into becoming sex slaves. In the brothels of Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Italy, Greece, and Spain, an average of 10 percent of the women are from Ukraine. In the Netherlands an estimated one-third of the prostitutes are believed to be from Ukraine, while in Greece, the term "waitress" has become synonymous for a Ukrainian woman engaged in prostitution, either voluntarily or as a sex slave.

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