

Leaked CIA report says 50,000 sold into slavery in US every year

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A Central Intelligence Agency report leaked to the *New York Times* describes a flourishing trade in slave labor that brings some 50,000 women and children into the United States every year to serve as prostitutes, domestic servants or bonded workers. The report estimates that the number of slave laborers imported into the US from around the world has grown rapidly over the past decade, and predicts their ranks will continue to increase.

The scale of human misery indicated in the report is difficult to quantify: women and children from Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe lured to the US with promises of jobs and educational opportunities, only to be forced at gunpoint to work in brothels or sweatshops, or labor as domestics. Others, born into unspeakable poverty, are sold into bondage by their parents.

The report, entitled "International Trafficking in Women to the United States: a Contemporary Manifestation of Slavery," reveals not only the growth of slavery alongside staggering levels of wealth for those at the top, but a political and legal system which is indifferent to the problem.

The very fact that the report had to be leaked to reach the light of day is indicative of this indifference. The agency study was completed last November and circulated within the government. It is not classified, but has never been released. According to the *Times*, which published an account of the report on April 2, the newspaper was provided a copy by a government official "who wanted the report's findings publicized."

"No one really knows what to do with it," says a government official quoted by the *Times*. "I'm not sure people are really focusing on this."

Over the past two years, while up to 100,000 victims came into the US, where they were held in bondage,

federal officials estimated that the government prosecuted cases involving no more than 250 slave-laborers.

The CIA study describes case after case of foreign women who answered ads for au pair, sales clerk, secretarial or waitress jobs but found, once in the US, that the jobs did not exist. They were taken prisoner, held under guard and forced into prostitution or bondage, some having been sold outright to brothel owners.

The countries named as the primary sources of traffickers are Thailand, Vietnam, China, Mexico, Russia and the Czech Republic. Others that are increasingly providing victims include the Philippines, Korea, Malaysia, Latvia, Hungary, Poland, Brazil and Honduras. Noteworthy in this list is the prominence of countries enjoying the supposed blessings which, according to the West, come with the introduction of capitalist market relations.

Indeed, the biggest reason for the sharp rise in the slave-labor trade, according to the *Times*, is that "since the mid-1990s, traffickers from Russia and the former republics of the Soviet Union have aggressively entered the business, taking advantage of women from those countries who are looking to the West for opportunities." The *Times* skirts the question of why so many women from these countries should be desperate enough to risk everything and come to the US, but the explanation is obviously to be found in the social catastrophe that has engulfed wide layers of the population of these countries.

The spread of slave labor, estimated by the CIA to involve 700,000 to 2 million women and children a year, coincides with growing poverty and social inequality on a global scale. The US, in the midst of a record boom in profits and share values on Wall Street,

is not exempt from this phenomenon.

That such conditions exist in the US is not a new revelation. Over the past five years several cases of groups of foreign workers living under conditions of bondage have been exposed. In 1995, 72 Thai clothing workers were found imprisoned in a Los Angeles sweat shop where they were forced to labor 22 hours a day for 62 cents an hour. Two years ago a slave-labor ring was discovered in the Jackson Heights section of Queens, New York. In all, 57 Mexican deaf mutes were forced to labor from dawn to midnight, selling \$1 trinkets on the subways and at New York's airports.

But outside of some well-publicized statements from the Clinton administration deploring the international slave trade, and the establishment of a federal task force on the enslavement of women headed by Attorney General Janet Reno, virtually nothing has been done. The token character of the task force is indicated by the *Times*' description of its activities. It meets every two or three months and sponsors training seminars for law-enforcement personnel. Beyond this, the Justice Department has set up a "hot line" for victims, which is only staffed during weekday business hours.

The CIA report acknowledges that the government's efforts are fragmented and ineffectual. A number of federal agencies have jurisdiction, including the FBI, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the Department of Labor and the State Department, but none of them consider prosecuting trafficking of women and children as a "desirable" assignment, because "investigating trafficking and slavery cases is arduous" and "unrewarding."

The INS noted in an internal assessment last fall that agents had found 250 brothels in 26 cities that appeared to be holding trafficking victims. When such brothels are raided, according to the *Times* article, immigration officers generally move to deport the victims, while their captors are rarely prosecuted. In the few cases where traffickers have been convicted, the penalties have been light.



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