

Nigeria - Voodoo Aids Human Trafficking

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They are supposed to be huge barriers to traffickers, but many in the anti-trafficking movement see some security agencies, embassy and airline officials as the major leak in the bid to drive the human merchants underground.



Emmanuel Obe and NAN.

Victims of human trafficking found in a container.

Most of those contacted in the course of this investigation were unanimous that human trafficking has continued to thrive in Nigeria because of collusion among security, immigration, embassy and airline officials and traffickers. These officials often take bribes in exchange for facilitating smooth passage across the borders for traffickers and their victims.

A source in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs told this reporter that France and some other European countries had complained bitterly and repeatedly “that some of our immigration and border officials and airlines had been looking the other way and allowing traffickers to have their way.”

The Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation said some of its international partners, including its funders had raised the same concern. “It is sad that some officials are colluding with traffickers. It is a confirmation of the widely held belief that you can get anything done in Nigeria as long as you are ready to pay a bribe,” WOTCLEF Executive Director, Vero Umaru said.

Ostensibly to get to the root of this and similar allegations, the National Agency for the Prohibition of Traffic in Persons for four months late last year, collaborated with security operatives in eight countries for a joint and simultaneous covert investigation into human trafficking ring in the country.

The countries involved in the project include Nigeria, France, Belgium, Italy, Spain, United Kingdom, Ireland and Netherland. At the end of the operation, which climaxed on September

24, 2007 with operatives striking simultaneously in major airports in the countries, 56 Nigerians, including top immigration officials were reportedly arrested in the eight countries.

An unknown number of victims were also said to have been rescued. The names of the immigration officers and other officials that were implicated are yet to be made public. NAPTIP's Director of Investigation, Mohammed Babandede, confirmed the operation but declined further details.

He however said, "All I can tell you is that all those implicated are being investigated. And the Comptroller-General of Immigration is not even ready to cover them up. I will also like to tell you that our investigations have shown that traffickers are well-heeled as they have money to corrupt airliners, immigration officials and several other agencies in order to get through. They give bribes to people to procure both genuine and fake passports and visa with which to ship out their victims out of Nigeria."

The Head of the Anti-Human Trafficking Unit of the Nigeria Immigration Service, Mr. John Egwu, however said he was not aware that his men were colluding with traffickers. "Nobody has brought that to my attention. I cannot deny that outright because of the tendency of Nigerians to cut corners, but I don't have any such case on my hand," the Assistant Comptroller-General of Immigration said. "But I am not ruling out the existence of bad eggs among us. As far as I know, our men have done so much in terms of apprehending traffickers."

Voodoo and the Trafficking Business

Another major factor oiling the wheel of trafficking in the country is voodoo. Insiders in the trafficking business say once arrangements for victims' trips abroad are completed, traffickers seal the deal by taking the victims to shrines of voodoo priests for oath taking. There, victims are made to swear that they would never reveal the identities of their traffickers to anyone if arrested whether in the course of the journey or in the destination countries.

A repented former trafficker confirmed that voodoo, known as juju in the Nigerian parlance, is playing a great but nauseating role in the human trafficking business.

When traffickers are arrested in Nigeria, victims have often failed to show up in court to testify against them for fear that they would die if they violate the oaths they took. In administering the oaths, the source said traffickers usually collect the finger nails, menstrual blood and pubic hairs of the girls in preparing concoctions. NAPTIP's Deputy Director of Prosecution and Legal Services, Mr. Abdulrahim Shaibu, said his agency had had difficulty prosecuting traffickers because "victims are afraid of juju and are hardly forthcoming."

Babandede corroborated Shaibu. "We have found out that 90 per cent of girls that have been trafficked to Europe came from Delta and Edo States and were taken to shrines to take oaths of secrecy. When they reach their destination, they take a second round of oaths. So, they are hardly willing to testify against their traffickers in courts. Our first conviction succeeded because we raided a shrine and arrested the chief priest," he said. At the time, in 2004, NAPTIP was prosecuting one Sarah Okoya, the first trafficker to be jailed in Nigeria, for attempting to traffic six girls to Spain for prostitution. But because of the oath of secrecy that they had taken, the girls failed to show up in court to testify against Okoya. NAPTIP was

frustrated and it was on the verge of losing the case that it decided to raid the shrine of the priest who administered the oaths on the girls. NAPTIP eventually won the case as Okoya was sentenced to 12 months imprisonment.

One Samson Oveneri was in 2006 accused by NAPTIP of having deceived a girl into traveling to Spain to work in a salon for a woman that needed her service. Oveneri was arrested after the man, who was taking the victim to Spain on his behalf, was arrested at Seme border by immigration officials. The anti-trafficking agency was able to establish that the victim was actually being taken to that European country for prostitution, but the victim did not cooperate with NAPTIP officials because she had been taken to a shrine to take an oath of secrecy. Oveneri got a one-year jail term.

While NAPTIP was prosecuting one Franca Asiboja, who was eventually jailed for seven years for trafficking young girls to Burkina Faso for prostitution, it came to light in court that Asiboja had compelled her victims to take oaths of secrecy and loyalty before a shrine called Ogoje, manned by an old priestess. For the five months that they prostituted in Ouagadougou, before they were arrested by security agencies and repatriated to Nigeria, each of the girls reportedly paid 500,000 CFA to Asiboja in daily remittances.

The agency was only able to make headway in another case when the trafficker that was then being prosecuted, Constance Omoruyi, disclosed the identity of the priest, who administered oaths on her two victims, to investigators. At the time, the victims had vanished but the priest was made to testify in court. The court jailed Omoruyi for one year.

Egwu argues that it is the oath-taking ritual that is making the Nigerian human trafficking industry thrive. He said without the practice, the country's trafficking ring would have long been busted and traffickers driven underground. "Because of the oaths that traffickers administer on their victims, the entire trafficking business is shrouded in so much secrecy. For fear that they might die if they violate the terms of their oaths, victims hardly cooperate with investigators and hardly show up in court to testify against traffickers," the immigration official explained.

He cited the example of a Germany-bound woman who was arrested by immigration officials at the Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport, Abuja in mid-September 2008. When interrogated by officials, the victim first insisted that she was traveling unaccompanied to visit her father in Germany. For a long time, she refused to cooperate with investigators until she was pressed to confess that she had taken an oath never to reveal the identity of those who were taking her to Germany. "When we assured her that we had the wherewithal to render the oath she had taken ineffective, she decided to open up to us," Egwu said.

Babandede also said he and other investigators in his agency are regularly threatened by traffickers who he said send threat letters and make calls warning them to slow down on the war against trafficking or be prepared to lose their lives. "Prepare for war. Your family will get the result. Idiot," read one threat message sent to Babandede's telephone by an unknown person. "But we are not afraid. We will continue to do our job until we drive majority of the traffickers out of business," he said.

Tightening the noose

Law enforcement officials in Nigeria are fighting back ferociously against human traffickers, as new laws and a more aggressive awareness campaign take effect. The United State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons has rated Nigeria as having made progress in efforts to address trafficking in persons.

"It (Nigeria) increased the staffing of its National Agency for the Prohibition of Traffic in Persons to over 150 people. Officials delivered lectures on the new anti-trafficking law to immigration officials, judges and magistrates. They also delivered copies of the law to the police command in every state and various media offices, and discussed it on talk shows and state programs.

"NAPTIP established a National Investigation Task Force that set up small units in 11 states with the worst trafficking problems. It trained NITF on the provisions of the anti-TIP law, care of victims, Interpol standards, and corruption and human rights issues," the agency noted in a recent report.

To address the problem of law enforcement officers and immigration and airport authorities collaborating in trafficking across Nigeria's borders, it was gathered that NAPTIP has stepped up its intelligence arm and briefed the heads of police and immigration on the issue. The result is that both the police and the immigration service have set up anti-trafficking units, making it more difficult for perpetrators of the trade to operate. NAPTIP has also conducted trainings for border officials across the country and has also met with several major traditional leaders to raise their awareness about trafficking.

Because the war against human trafficking is getting tougher and tougher here, Nigerian traffickers are moving across the border into neighbouring Benin Republic, Ghana, Cameroun and Niger Republic, where they believe they could operate more freely, said Orakue Arinze, head of media and publicity at NAPTIP.

Some Nigerian girls were recently rescued in Ghana while they were being assisted by Ghana immigration officials to get to Europe.

UNICEF Protection Programme chief, Robert Limlim, is hopeful that the problem will subside now that the government has taken more aggressive measures: "Nigeria is clearly struggling with its own major challenges, but also using this to rally and even include other countries to fight this ring of criminals," he said.