

Kazakhstan: Human Trafficking Numbers Underreported

Author: IWPR

Experts say scale of trafficking much larger than official figures suggest.

Although the Kazak interior ministry reported only 20 human trafficking cases last year, some experts say the figure is grossly underestimated.

There are no more accurate data available, but local non-government groups say at least 100 people from neighbouring Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and other states suffered labour or sexual exploitation in Kazakhstan last year; and that does not include those trafficked through and out of the country.

The term “human trafficking” applies to cases where individuals are smuggled into or through a country and then forced to work – often ostensibly to pay off the cost of transporting them there. The coercion and working conditions, sometimes but not always in prostitution, amount to a form of bondage or even slavery. This sets human trafficking apart from simple “people smuggling” or “migrant smuggling”, in which the journey is arranged by illegal means but once in the country, the individual is free to leave and find work for themselves.

Zulfia Baysakova, who chairs the board of the Alliance of Crisis Centres of Kazakhstan, is sceptical about the accuracy of government statistics.

“The interior ministry data are incredibly low – 20 cases for a population of 16 million is an incredibly low indicator,” she said. “An area which generates the third-largest profits [among illegal activities] in this region, after the drugs trade and the financing of subversive organisations, cannot be limited to such insignificant figures.”

The US State Department’s Human Trafficking Report for 2009 said there were 50 individuals recorded as victims of trafficking in Kazakhstan last year, but noted that other cases went unrecorded.

Beket Aymagambetov, deputy chief of the Kazak interior ministry’s Crime Police Department, told IWPR that 13 relevant cases were recorded in the period from January to the end of March this year. Seven of them involved trafficking, in four cases of minors; and two cases each of abduction and unlawful detention for the purpose of exploitation.

The State Department report noted that trafficking takes place in several forms in Kazakhstan. Men, women and children from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan pass through the country en route to Russia and the United Arab Emirates for exploitation in the sex industry, or to work as forced labour in the construction and agricultural sectors. Significant numbers of Uzbek nationals are brought into Kazakhstan itself for sexual exploitation and forced labour as household servants or tobacco, cotton and meat industry workers, and there is trafficking within the country for forced labour and prostitution. Women from Kazakhstan are trafficked to the sex industry in China and Turkey.

The reason why Kazakhstan is a favoured trafficking route is geography – it has long borders with the other Central Asian states to the south and Russia to the north.

Kazakhstan has yet to ratify the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially

Women and Children, which supplements the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organised Crime, but human trafficking for the purposes of exploitation is banned under several articles of the national criminal code. Penalties were toughened in 2006 so that traffickers now face up to 15 years in jail.

In 2008, there were 44 police investigations resulting in 30 prosecutions, twice the numbers recorded the previous year, according to the State Department's figures. Twenty-four of the accused were convicted.

The International Organisation for Migration estimates that 70 per cent of trafficked persons are in transit through Kazakhstan, while for the rest it is their destination. Eight out of ten are female adults or minors.

The State Department report said that while the Kazak government "does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking... it is making significant efforts do to so". This included greater efforts for investigate, prosecute and convict traffickers and better public awareness programmes.

Baysakova believes it is vital that the authorities get a better grip on human trafficking. "It's a major problem for Kazakhstan as it aspires to become one of the 50 most competitive countries and to join the World Trade Organisation," she said.

The Kazak interior ministry insists that proper mechanisms are in place to combat trafficking, such as a national action plan and a coordinating council which is led by the justice ministry.

At lower level, the national police and its corresponding departments in Astana and Almaty, the capital and the largest city, respectively, have dedicated anti-trafficking units, with hotline numbers which victims can call.

Baysakova says the police and other relevant agencies do not coordinate properly, and many of their staff are poorly trained.

"All of the government's coordination to combat human trafficking is just nominal," she said.

Nor is there adequate liaison with other countries, she argues. "I'm talking about our police officers' activities abroad - they just get ignored," she said.

Andrei Grishin of the Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law agrees that what the country lacks is coordinated overall policy.

One area where Grishin says there have been improvements is the trafficking of women to other countries. "International organisations took an interest in this issue, so Kazakhstan is required to respond to their comments in some manner," he explained.

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