



A woman and child beg for money in Athens, Greece. Trafficked children are often used to elicit handouts from strangers.

REUTERS

## GREECE CONFRONTS



# human TRAFFICKING

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The country's  
strategic  
location makes  
it a conduit  
for criminal  
activity

doors are half open. You cannot see what is going on inside but you can surely guess. On the next corner, a boy sits on the threshold of a block of flats. His face is dirty, his clothes are torn, and he isn't wearing shoes. When he begs for a penny, he doesn't look you in the eye. These examples occur in almost every big city in Greece. The only thing that varies is the intensity of the phenomena.

The situation in the Greek countryside is slightly different. Brothels and child beggars are not so conspicuous, but if you stroll by fields where crops are cultivated, you catch sight of dozens of men, women and sometimes children working there. They start at dawn, finish by sunset and rarely complain. These agricultural villages are usually too small to accommodate all the workers, so many live in tents and greenhouses near the fields.

The crime of trafficking in human beings (THB) is globally recognized as a form of modern-day slavery. The definitions of human

Walking the streets of big cities in Greece, you can easily notice old, almost abandoned houses with red lights glowing from atop the doors. No one is standing out front and no name is written under the doorbell. Windows are always closed, and

trafficking and slavery may differ, but the results are largely the same. Human trafficking includes deception and/or coercion to move people from one place to another for purposes of exploitation. Deception frequently involves promises of better working conditions, high pay, humane living conditions and even marriage. Trafficking knows neither limits nor boundaries; it can take place within the victim's country (relatively uncommon) or outside it.

Coercion, on the other hand, usually appears only after individuals are already being trafficked to the place where they will be exploited. Coercion can include traffickers withholding a victim's travel documents and raw violence, both psychological and physical. In addition, exploitation takes several forms and can be sexual and work-related. Some people are forced to beg. In more extreme cases, people are compelled to donate organs. Governments across the globe have taken legal and administrative steps to combat this phenomenon, which seems to have grown to epidemic proportions during the past decades. Greece is hardly immune.

Greece occupies a crucial position in the world. It connects three continents — Europe, Asia and Africa — and is an external border country for the European Union. Greece borders three non-EU countries — Albania, Turkey and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia — and one EU country, Bulgaria. Greece's southern provinces, including the island of Crete, are close to two African countries, Egypt and Libya. These

attributes render the country highly susceptible to waves of illegal immigrants attempting to enter Europe and the EU. Some hope for a better life and some engage in crime, although those two motivations are not mutually exclusive.

Similarly, people from inside the EU and Europe try to get to other, more developed countries for the same reasons. Thus, Greece, in spite of its financial crisis, has been a country people strive to reach either as a gateway to the EU or as a destination in itself. Greece's location and attributes also make it a transit and destination country for human trafficking.

Human trafficking first gained attention in Greece in the 1990s when greater numbers of immigrants began to enter the country. Soon after the new millennium, human trafficking increased slightly, and the Hellenic government decided to take action. A whole set of actions were approved and implemented, ranging from legislative provisions for tackling human trafficking to the establishment of special police forces and new governmental services.



European Union Home Affairs Commissioner Cecilia Malmström speaks with immigrants accused of entering Greece illegally in 2012. Human trafficking — smuggling people into a country for profit — is often indistinguishable from ordinary illegal immigration.

### LEGISLATIVE ACTIONS

In 2002, when government officials realized THB had reached worrisome levels in Greece, they rendered human trafficking as a unique offense in the Hellenic criminal code that deals with organized crime. Since then, the country, in conjunction with legislative initiatives promoted by the EU and the United Nations, incorporated a series of laws and presidential decrees to combat THB.

Seven Hellenic ministries now cooperate in handling trafficking cases: the ministries of Justice, Interior, Foreign Affairs, Public Order and Citizen Protection, Health, Education and Religious Affairs, and Labor. Other measures include offering protection and assistance to victims instead of prosecuting and deporting them, involving nongovernmental

organizations, and signing bilateral agreements.

A new law has brought about significant changes: It is now a criminal offense to threaten violence during human trafficking; young victims must be interviewed in the presence of a psychologist; victims are compensated as victims of organized crime; and a National Rapporteur bureau within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs coordinates and implements the national anti-THB strategy.

Since enactment of the first human trafficking law, the Hellenic Police have established special Human Trafficking Forces. Fifteen such forces now exist, with personnel specializing in combating THB. Special training by national and international organizations and cooperation with international authorities further enhances success. However, police continue to face challenges despite the level of effort given to THB cases.

### VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS

THB offenders can be categorized into those engaging in sexual exploitation and those engaging in other forms of exploitation. The first group represents the majority and includes Greeks, as well as people from Eastern Europe and the Balkans. The latter group also contains Greeks collaborating with people from victims' countries of origin. Greek offenders are invariably responsible for transporting and hosting victims and for dealing with requests for potential "clients." Foreign offenders usually recruit victims and communicate with them after they are trafficked. Their main task is to keep victims "enslaved" and unable to react. Recently, the trend has been for women who were previously exploited to become offenders themselves.

Perpetrators use different strategies to discourage victims from either reacting to their exploitation or reporting it to the police. One common method is shifting victims between different parts of the country to keep them disoriented and make them harder to trace. Additionally, offenders tell victims that they cannot escape from their slavery because of the offenders' "connections" with local authorities that keep police from helping victims. It is also quite common for offenders to gain compliance by threatening the lives of victims' families. A new trend is for offenders to tell victims they owe a huge debt to the traffickers and that they have to work it off without pay.

Victims typically range in age from 13 to 65 and leave their home countries in the hope of improving their lives. They usually come from Eastern Europe and the Balkans, and more recently, from Asia and Africa. Most are ill-educated, unable to read and write well, and financially desperate. Women are generally put to work in brothels as prostitutes, men are assigned to the fields, and children are the ideal



“bait” for begging. Of course, one may see men begging or children and women working in the fields, but this triggers suspicions of trafficking and is usually avoided by criminals.

Traffickers usually deprive victims of travel documents so that they cannot escape. Further, they usually believe threats from their traffickers against their relatives. Many victims receiving low pay for their services don't even believe they are being mistreated. This impedes the identification of victims since, even when they are spotted and interviewed, victims often deny they have been trafficked and exploited. Complicating the situation further is victims' inability to speak Greek, making them reluctant to approach authorities for help.

### GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

In light of these problems, the Greek police and government have established the National Centre of Social Solidarity (EKKA) in the Ministry of Labor and coordinated its work with the police. Greece has also adopted national and international action plans for human trafficking, named “ILAEIRA.”

EKKA, along with more than 12 Hellenic and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that have signed a memorandum of cooperation with the police, contribute substantially to THB cases. EKKA and the majority of the NGOs operate 24-hour-a-day hotlines. They provide shelter to victims and offer the services of sociologists, psychologists, social workers, lawyers and doctors. When victims are hesitant to approach the police,

EKKA and NGOs are often the first to collect THB complaints. Their staffs handle victims with extra care while involving the special police forces.

Similarly, in cases in which victims turn directly to the police, they are immediately assigned to a psychologist and an officer to establish a trusting rapport. Many victims come from countries in which they believe the police cannot be trusted. Soon after the interview begins, victims are given sheets informing them of their rights in 13 foreign languages. The Greek government provides protective shelters and escorts victims to court when legal proceedings take place.

ILAEIRA is one of the police's greatest achievements. The plan, introduced in 2007, enjoys the support of international and European law enforcement agencies such as Europol and Interpol, and promotes coordination of state and international organizations in handling THB cases. The project is also supported by the International Organization for Migration and more than 12 state and international NGOs. The contributions of Europol and Interpol have been indisputable.

The Hellenic government has taken sizable steps toward effectively handling and combating human trafficking. Its efforts can be proven by statistics, cases investigated and resolved, and the number of lives saved. The country's arsenal of legislative, governmental and law enforcement measures directed at the crime indicates that Greece recognizes human trafficking as a major threat that needs to be defeated. □

A Bangladeshi laborer sits in a tent near a strawberry farm in southwestern Greece in April 2013. Immigrants, some of them illegal, make up a large percentage of the country's agricultural workers.