

# Shattered Dreams

Destitute are easy prey for human traffickers

**Each year, more than 1.2 million people worldwide become victims of human trafficking, UNICEF reported. Traffickers lure people with promises of legitimate work, good wages and the hope of starting a new life, and then exploit them. Some of these victims, including thousands of children, end up in forced labor camps or in the shadowy world of sexual slavery.**

Moldova is one of Europe's poorest countries. It has one of the continent's worst human trafficking problems, Inter Press Service reported in 2009. About one-quarter of the nation's young workers work abroad, the *Epoch Times* reported in April 2009, citing Moldova's government records. According to the International Organization for Migration, or IOM, most of these people leave to escape poverty and the lack of support by government agencies in the nation; most of the victims of human trafficking fall prey to sexual exploitation and forced labor, mainly in Turkey and Russia.

Driving the Moldovan exodus was the people's discontent with the government. Many became disillusioned when the government failed to deliver promised democratic reform. They also left because of the economic crisis, decreased wages and lower pensions. But the worsening worldwide economic crisis actually helped curb some of the illegal migration, especially into Europe, the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reported. As the continent shed jobs, less work was available to undocumented migrants. That helped make trafficking less lucrative.

"The first thing that affects migration is the fact employers do not want as many workers," Georges Lemaitre, an immigration specialist with the organization, said in a January 2010 Voice of America report. "They are not looking to hire as many immigrants. So this is the first thing that reduces the level of migration. The second is the fact immigrants themselves do not see many opportunities. So they themselves tend to come less often."

Still, many people choose to migrate, hoping to beat the odds, even if there are fewer job prospects. They enter countries where border control officials, stretched to the limit, cannot contain the illegal migration problem. A porous border is one reason human trafficking also affects Bulgaria, a source and transit country. Out of its 7.5 million citizens, more than 1 million have migrated abroad for work since the early 1990s. More than 10,000 of them become trafficking victims each year, UNICEF reported.

The situation is similar in Romania, Serbia and Hungary. But few former Soviet Bloc nations are equipped to deal with the problem. Many of the countries are struggling with overtaxed police and immigration agencies and poorly protected borders. And they have transitional economies hard hit by the global economic crisis. Human trafficking woes receive a lower priority than other issues, the office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees reported.

Sexual exploitation is only one prong of the trafficking problem. As former *New York Times* foreign correspondent David Binder pointed out, sex traffickers often branch into narcotics and customs fraud. "Some criminals have found common interest with terrorist groups," Binder announced at a conference on Eastern European transnational crime held at the University of California, Los Angeles.

The IOM is dedicated to helping nations stem the rising tide of human trafficking. Founded in 1951 to address migration after World War II, the agency is an intergovernmental organization representing 127 nations.

A border guard checks the passports of Moldovans trying to enter Romania.  
One quarter of all Moldovans have left their country since 1991 to seek work elsewhere.



As stated on its website, IOM is “committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and society.” It works with national, international and nongovernmental partners to find “practical solutions to migration problems and to provide humanitarian assistance to migrants in need, including refugees and internally displaced people.”

But the agency cannot do it alone. Stemming human trafficking requires a multi-pronged approach that goes after the root causes and the key players. Prevention is the crucial starting point. “We know through our daily work with victims that almost all of them were victims of socio-economic misery and abuse before their trafficking ordeal. By adopting a more proactive prevention strategy aimed at high-risk groups, we feel we can tackle human trafficking in Moldova more effectively,” said Martin Wyss, IOM chief of mission in Moldova. “This means providing assistance such as counseling to those who might otherwise fall through the social net, vocational training and placement in other programs that can help unemployed potential victims find a job or temporary shelter if they are escaping domestic violence.”

IOM’s Moldova mission team identifies human trafficking victims and arranges their return home, where the mission’s assistance and protection center is a temporary refuge. The center offers medical, psychological, legal, social and reintegration services. More than 2,500 victims received help at the center between 2001 and 2009. The center has also helped more than 170 trafficked children and prevented more than 1,300 at-risk Moldovans

from becoming victims, the IOM reported.

Poverty, domestic violence, lack of education opportunities and poor prospects are usually the reasons people fall prey to traffickers. Addressing these issues at the national and international level is challenging, especially against the backdrop of the global economic downturn. But facing the issues is essential to putting an end to human trafficking.

An important component of preventing human trafficking is raising awareness — especially among the at-risk groups — by informing them of the constantly changing tactics used by traffickers as well the consequences for victims, the IOM reported. Moldova, Romania and Bulgaria are using awareness campaigns in their fight against trafficking. In addition, the countries run telephone-counseling services for domestic abuse. The hope is that helping victims of domestic abuse will lower the number of women vulnerable to trafficking.

The countries most affected by human trafficking are often not in a position to address the problem on their own. Since



PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION



Moldovans wait in line at the Romanian consulate in Chişinău, Moldova, in July 2010. For thousands of poor Moldovans, dual citizenship offered by Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria offers a shortcut into the European Union.

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the crime is an issue affecting nations far beyond the source countries' borders, the IOM said it is in the best interest of the international community to work together to fight human trafficking. The European Union acknowledged that human trafficking is a problem within its borders. EU elections in July 2009 led to an alliance of pro-EU politicians who believe in market reform and who also think that supporting human rights can advance that cause.

Comprehensive initiatives by organizations such as the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, or UNODC, the IOM and EU aim to strengthen international ties between judicial, police, border security, legal and social services agencies in the source, transit and destination countries. On its website, the UNODC stated that it also "offers practical help to states, not only by helping to draft laws and create comprehensive national anti-trafficking strategies, but also by assisting with resources to implement them." The group helps nations develop local capacity, expertise and tools that encourage cross-border collaboration during investigations and prosecutions.

"Various forms of human exploitation and conventional crimes, including participating in and the exploitation of various illicit markets, become the prerequisites to the conduct of successful terrorist operations," Canada's International Centre for Criminal Law Reform and Criminal Justice Policy reported to the UNODC.

Collaboration is the key to success in helping to stop human trafficking, said Dora Bakoyannis, then Greek minister of foreign affairs, in a June 2009 Reuters report. "One thing is clear: Genuine solidarity and fair burden sharing between member states is urgently needed in order to effectively tackle this common European challenge," she said.

Tougher laws also are important tools in the fight against human trafficking. Hungary adopted a national strategy of community crime prevention in 2003 that makes the fight against human trafficking an international priority. Romania and Bulgaria passed laws against human trafficking in 2004 before becoming EU members in 2007, and both have since set up national anti-trafficking agencies. Moldova passed its first law to prevent and combat human trafficking in 2005. Across Europe, the plight of exploited migrants has become as important as stopping the traffickers who prey on them. International organizations and Moldova's people and government are working together to find solutions to human trafficking, illegal migration and the organized crime behind much of the problem.

"We want to build an EU that is truly able to protect the most vulnerable citizens against the most terrible crimes," said Jacques Barrot, the European Community's vice president for justice, freedom and security, in a statement on the community's website. "Our message is clear," he said. "These crimes which know no boundaries are unacceptable. Europe will continue to set the highest and most ambitious standards in fighting them." □

Ukrainian border guards patrol their frontier with Moldova in January 2010. The sign warns against illegally crossing the border, something many Moldovans do when they leave their nation in search of work.