

# Saving the Victims, One by One

An Interview

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The International Organization for Migration and local affiliates work in projects all over the globe to extract victims of trafficking from their plight.

One hundred forty boys hope to be liberated from indentured servitude in Ghana in July. The International Organization for Migration in partnership with local nongovernmental organizations has been working for months to free these boys from forced and grueling labor serving "slave masters" on board fishing vessels plying the waters of Lake Volta. This will be the first round of releases in an ongoing project that aims to liberate more than 1,200 boys from harsh conditions in which they receive poor nutrition, no education, and no family nurturing.

The release of the fishing boys will be a victory in counter-trafficking efforts, but a small one. There are perhaps thousands more fishing boys who remain in indentured servitude. Throughout West Africa, an estimated 200,000 children are trafficked each year, according to UNICEF.

Marco Gramegna is the director of the counter-trafficking service for the International Organization for Migration, based in Geneva, Switzerland. He spoke with *Global Issues* Managing Editor Charlene Porter.

**Q:** What is the regional scope of human trafficking in West Africa?

**Gramegna:** In West Africa, we're dealing normally with kids who are trafficked for labor exploitation into agriculture from country to country, particularly Mali to Sierra Leone or Mali to Ivory Coast. They are kids who are sold by their families or just given to members of the family or foreigners who would take them to work someplace else for a better future in exchange for a certain amount of money to the family.

These kids are exploited in agriculture. They may come legally or illegally to the country of

exploitation, but they don't know where they are. They work a huge number of hours per day without any compensation and totally lost from their families or their countries of origin. In the crisis and conflict situations of many countries of West Africa, the fate of these children, if we do not intervene, is that they are likely to become either sex slaves for soldiers or soldiers themselves.

In communication and coordination with the countries and families of origin, what we do normally is return those kids back home to their families or, if not possible, to families that would receive them.

In West Africa, you can find different levels of trafficking for different objectives going from sexual exploitation, labor, domestic work, begging, criminality, and a mixture of all that.

What we deal with as well is the case of trafficking in women and girls for sexual exploitation—either within the borders of a country, or externally to either other African countries or Europe. Countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal would be the main countries of origin.

What we do is return them voluntarily to their countries, and we try to provide some reception, shelter, and rehabilitation and reinsertion in the countries of origin.

The cases of women and girls trafficked for sexual exploitation are the most well known. But in working with children, we are underlining the importance that trafficking in children has in West Africa, which is among the most important in the world in terms of numbers.

**Q:** It is widely acknowledged that gathering data on numbers of trafficking victims in a region is extremely difficult, but do you venture any estimates on how many people are victimized by trafficking in West Africa each year?

**A:** It's very difficult, almost impossible to say, being that it is an illegal activity. There are no records, there are no statistics, and definitions are varied. Governments will record this in different ways if they record it at all. It is extremely difficult to risk a figure, but the figures are in the tens of thousands of victims a year.

**Q:** How broad a practice is it for families to give their children away and expose them to exploitation?

**A:** It happens in West Africa, but also in other regions of the world. You see it in the Balkans for at least the last 1,000 years. You see it in East Asia, in the hills of Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and southern China. It's a traditional habit for poor families to sell or give away their children. Normally it is the girls because in patriarchal cultures a lower value is placed on girls than boys. So these kids are sold to assure them a future or some employment in other parts of the world, or just to get rid of them because they are one more mouth to feed. You can see this in the Balkans in Albania and Kosovo in traditional legal and social codes where women and girls have a monetary value next to cows and sheep.

You get into all the cultural intricacies to try to explain why people can give away or sell a baby or a child, but this is one of the underlying conditions for trafficking in children and women.

**Q:** In the last half of the 20th century, every decade is marked by a broader understanding and institutionalization of human rights principles. To what degree are those concepts reaching these remote areas and breaking through these traditional practices?

**A:** Human rights is something that has been underlined by more advanced countries in the last 50 years or so. We understand it very well. We are trained, formed, obliged to understand human rights as they were defined in 1948 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and even in discussions of years before. We understand these as intellectual, cultural practices to be followed. But these are agreements among states. States have to recognize and ratify such documents and then try to reflect those agreements, those principles, in their own practices and their own legislation. Then there's the enforcement by police, authorities, and institutions of the country. Then comes education, training of the people, and practice in these principles. Some times these new practices will have to fight traditional cultures.

That's why the Universal Declaration was passed in 1948, to fight traditional practices against human rights. And some of those practices are not only political activities, but also cultural behavior.

So human rights belong to humanity as principle now, but do they reach the last human being on the hills of Thailand or on the Volta River? I think the remote populations of the world are ruled by their own traditional cultures, and rules and regulations, more than international ones. I think it will take some time for the humanist principle to reach all of the six billion people living on Earth.

It's not that I'm condoning this ignorance of human rights principles, but this involves a long-term training and imposition of humanitarian principle—things that some people are totally ignorant of.

**Q:** Turning to the story of the slave fishing boys in Ghana, Dr. Ernest Taylor, who is working to reunite the youngsters with their parents, readily admits that he won't reach them all, that he can't reach them all. Are counter-trafficking initiatives played out just one victim at a time?

**A:** That's the only way to deal with it. We are coping with a small percentage of the universal caseload. It's very good to be clear about that.

If we have a program assisting victims of trafficking in the Balkans, helping, say, 1,500 women per year, we know that the total caseload is huge. This is probably a drop in the ocean. We don't mind. If we didn't do it, the problem would be much worse. That's why we take a concrete caseload per project per year.

The 1,200 boys in Ghana is a very realistic caseload. That would mean that the actual number of children working in forced labor is probably 10 times that, if not much more than that.

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—Gramegna

**Q:** IOM is helping to release about 1,200 boys. What do you do to support their families, provide them with some opportunities, and prevent this from happening again?

**A:** That's probably the most difficult part: preventing these kids from being re-victimized. We can't send these boys—or any trafficking victims—back to the same situation. We have to empower them in a different situation. Children will need support for a different kind of reinsertion in their communities. The families would have to have training on breaking cultural habits, and not selling their children. The children need to recognize that they have other choices in life, which would occur through education, or perhaps employment and education.

**Q:** So how do you do all that?

**A:** Through education and assisting the families economically to avoid their sending children off again. It's going to be difficult because the cultural habits will be very strong.

**Q:** Taking the larger view, however, there are some sweeping regional issues of sustainable economic development involved in the issue of trafficking. All of that goes far beyond the scope of this project to free slave fishing boys in Ghana, doesn't it?

**A:** IOM is not a development organization. It's beyond our mandate. But when we're dealing with these individuals, we try to somehow modify the root causes for the boys who are returned to their families. We know it is a very difficult thing to do, but sometimes creating certain privileges for those who go back—in terms of education, employment, vocational training, a different family setting—would make a difference in their future.

**Q:** On the matter of the enactment of new legislation to attempt to curtail trafficking in Ghana and elsewhere, what are your thoughts on the effectiveness of legislation and the probability of its enforcement?

A: Legislation is definitely very much welcomed in any country. The lack of legislation means definitely a total lack of action by institutions, but the fact of having legislation doesn't assure you of everything. That's a problem in some of the countries that have passed legislation, but where legislation is not sufficiently enforced.

Legislation is good because it gives us the platform to start acting concretely with local institutions. We believe legislation must be followed by training and education, particularly in the minds of law enforcement institutions and officials.

They need to learn about their new legislation, but also the real meaning of this. What is trafficking? Who is a victim? So the legislation gives us and other actors a platform to start active training for local institutions to enforce new legislation and to engage with nongovernmental organizations and intergovernmental organizations to prevent this problem of trafficking or slavery and to protect and assist the victims.

My forecast is that it is very good that Ghana is about to adopt legislation that is within the framework of the international trafficking protocol and the convention against organized crime. After that, the rest has to be done: training, enforcement, and monitoring. Avoiding corruption is, of course, a huge issue, not only in West Africa, but all over the world without exception.

So legislation is good, but much has to be done after that.

Q: How long do you think it will take to really spread the message about the heinous nature of trafficking?

A: We have developed more experience on training law enforcement now, all over the world, but mostly in countries of origin and destination of trafficked victims. The training is not a long process, but it's a process where the final result will be smaller than the forecast. You start training 100 police officers. You will end up with five, or six, or eight that you can trust and you can work with on trafficking problems. This has been normal.

We provide training for law enforcement about the basics of trafficking—the definitions and specific police training on investigation techniques and prosecution techniques. But we know, at the end, we will end up working directly with only 10 percent of them—for one reason or another, for personnel turnover, for corruption, for lack of interest, for lack of learning.

Ten percent is fine with me, as long as there is a unit of police—including women—who will be dealing with trafficking. You have to get the most committed people to work with you. It's very difficult for people in high-trafficking areas to avoid corruption, especially when you make \$20 per month in salary, and the trafficker comes to pay you \$1,000 each time he would cross your jurisdiction with a victim. Law enforcement officers who are going to be committed to ending human trafficking must have motives based on human principles, dignity principles more than anything else.

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*Porter conducted a telephone interview from Washington with Gramegna at IOM headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland.*

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