

Women Sold 'Like Sacks of Potatoes'

By Vesna Peric Zimonjic

After the wars that tore the former Yugoslav federation apart in the 1990s, the area has become notorious now for the trafficking of women who end up as sex slaves.

An estimated 700,000 women illegally pass through European borders every year, according to EU (European Union) security chief Javier Solana at a recent conference on organised crime in south-east Europe.

"They end up as prostitutes and sex slaves, sold like sacks of potatoes," she says. "The prices range from 500 to 1,500 dollars, and some are sold by their 'bosses' several times."

Reports by the EU, Human Rights Watch (HRW), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and local NGOs say victims of sex trafficking are brought mostly from Romania, Moldova, Ukraine and

women cannot happen "without the knowledge and tacit approval of top police and justice officials."

Raicevic came into the spotlight after an account by a woman in her shelter led to the arrest of the Montenegrin deputy public prosecutor. The official from Montenegro, sister federation to Serbia within Yugoslavia, was arrested for involvement in trafficking of women.

Many women sold all over the Balkans end up in bars and nightclubs. A report from HRW in November said that 227 nightclubs had been opened in Bosnia since 1995, when the Dayton Accords brought peace and international forces to the republic. Bosnia, with a population of 3.5 million, became home to more than 50,000 international peacekeeping troops and dozens of international aid organisations.

HRW says most of about 2,000 women who began work in these new bars were forced into prostitution. Their ages vary between 17 and 33, but there were also several girls as young as 13. In a crackdown on such exploitation, 124 bars and clubs were closed in July last year.

The situation is similar in the UN-administered province of Kosovo, home to 35,000 international

peacekeepers since 1999. The latest IOM report says more than 600 women working as prostitutes have been sent back to their home countries since 1999.

More than half of them are believed to have been victims of human trafficking. They worked in some of 266 nightclubs that came up in the tiny province of 1.8 million people. The report says 59 percent were aged between 18 and 24, while 13 percent were aged between 14 and 17.

The IOM report says there is an average of nine brothels in each of the 30 municipalities of Kosovo. The little town of Urosevac has 74. Urosevac hosts Bondstill, the biggest U.S. military base in the Balkans.

The IOM report says an operator with 10 women in a brothel is able to earn more than 100,000 US dollars a month. "The main problem in the whole area is that there are no laws dealing with human trafficking," says Jelena Djordjevic of Astra, an NGO.

The laws in the region cover only illegal deprivation of liberty of one person by another. The crime is punishable with up to three years in prison, but local judges usually give light sentences.

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Human trafficking is the fastest growing transnational criminal activity," according to a UN (United Nations) report. "It is also the biggest violation of human rights in the world."

More than 200,000 of these women cross the borders around Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Albania, he said.

"The area has become the biggest crossroads for trafficking of young women, attracted by false promises of well-paid jobs in the West," says Mara Radovanovic, head of Lara, an NGO (non-governmental organisation) in the Bosnian town of Bijeljina.

Russia. After being exploited in the Balkans, they end up as sex slaves in EU countries.

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Ljiljana Raicevic who heads a "Safe House for Women" told Inter Press Service that trafficking of

Women with HIV Defend their Right to Bear Children

By Mario Osava

Sumaia dos Santos Dias was railroaded into having a litigation after giving birth to her third child at the age of 24, because she tested positive for HIV, the AIDS virus.

Today she is working to defend the reproductive rights of other pregnant women living with HIV in Brazil.

Boa Vista, where Dias lives, is in the

extreme northern part of the country's Amazon jungle region, far from large cities like Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo.

Dias, whose child was not infected by HIV, said she was pressured by her doctor to have the litigation, on the argument that she would "endanger the life of an innocent child," or leave her children orphans. Her husband had infected her with HIV and died shortly

after the birth of their third child.

Six years later, she takes six antiretroviral pills a day—the drugs that delay the onset of full-blown AIDS—and remains in good health while raising her children on her salary as an employee in the state government.

Wanting her experience to be of use to others, Dias joined the Network of Positive Citizens, an organisation of women living with HIV. The Brazilian Health Ministry has a Sexually Transmitted Diseases and AIDS (CETSS) programme that train members of the network to take part in prevention efforts.

CETSS defends the right of HIV-positive women to have children.

"It is not up to a health professional to decide whether or not these women can have children. It is their job to offer them all the information so they can decide for themselves," said Katia Souto, in charge of gender issues in CETSS.

The Health Ministry provides medicines free of

charge to all HIV/AIDS patients, including pregnant women, who by following a strict treatment plan reduce the risk of passing HIV on to their unborn children by nearly 90 percent.

When only the male partner in a heterosexual couple is infected, in vitro fertilisation procedures now allow a woman to have children with no risk of contagion.

Source: Inter Press Service, 26 December 2002

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"Yugoslavia has signed an agreement with the EU-sponsored Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe in order to fight organised crime in this area," assistant federal Interior Minister Brankica Grupkovic told journalists in Belgrade recently.

"Besides increased cooperation of police in prevention of human trafficking in the area, we will be obliged to introduce modern laws that provide up to eight years imprisonment for human trafficking," she said. "Maybe this could be a good start that would lead to the solution to the problem."

Source: Inter Press Service, 26 December 2002

