Strategies to prevent the trafficking of women and children vulnerable to sexual exploitation

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The European Parliament adopted a resolution based on the own-initiative report drafted by Christa **PRETS** (PES, AT) on strategies to prevent the trafficking of women and children who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation. (Please see the summary of 24/11/2005.) The report was adopted by 622 votes in favour, 12 against and 19 abstentions.

Parliament began by recalling that every year, over 100 000 women are the victims of trafficking in the EU. Trafficking is the fastest-growing criminal activity in comparison to other forms of organised crime. One of the principal preconditions for international trafficking in women and children is the existence of local prostitution markets where certain people can sell and buy women and children for the purpose of exploiting them sexually. Traffickers in human beings mainly send women and children from countries in the south to countries in the north and from east to west, where demand from purchasers is strongest.

Parliament felt that it is necessary to address the prevention of trafficking not only through individual actions by each Member State but by a holistic and integrated multidisciplinary approach at the EU and international levels which would include the laying down of aspects of criminal law which are common to all the Member States and which relate in particular to effective, and dissuasive penalties. Building effective prevention strategies requires, inter alia: addressing the triangle of the trafficking market, i.e. victim, trafficker and client; systematic provision of information and raising awareness amongst all categories of the population and in particular amongst vulnerable groups; and cooperation among the countries of origin, transit and destination.

Parliament deplored the fact that the measures which have so far been taken to reduce trafficking in human beings have not yielded results in the form of a reduction in the numbers of women and children being exploited in the sex slave trade. It also regretted that there is a lack of recognition of the links between trafficking and migration, social protection and development policy, and calls for more coherent external policy on trafficking. The Commission and Council are asked to create a clear legal basis for combating all forms of violence against women, including trafficking. Parliament demanded the “communitarisation” of a European policy to combat trafficking and on the related topics of immigration and asylum, and specifically on a right to asylum on the grounds of gender-based repression and persecution. The Council and Commission should also include in their political dialogue with third countries, the issue of the trafficking of women and children and – if no improvement is forthcoming or no clear signal is given by the third country of a political will to take action – take appropriate measures such as those listed in the human rights and democracy clauses in all cooperation and association agreements with third countries.

Parliament regretted the lack of reliable data on the phenomenon of trafficking in Europe and the fact that neither the Commission nor Europol, nor any other EU body, has been able to publish precise figures about the EU-wide extent of trafficking in human beings, and regretted particularly the lack of data on more vulnerable groups, such as women and children, and the failure to take effective steps to tackle the problem. It urged the Member States to launch national contact points or to appoint national rapporteurs to gather and process information on trafficking, and stressed the importance of gathering gender-based and comparable data, bearing in mind that it is of the utmost importance to ensure the confidentiality of information and to grant NGOs access to information and figures.

Research into the underlying causes of trafficking in human beings particularly trafficking in women and children for purposes of sexual exploitation - (i.e. what factors place people at risk of being trafficked and what factors affect demand for sexual services and sexual exploitation of women and children) should be carried out at both national and Community level. Action should be taken first and foremost with a view to explicitly discouraging demand by means which include educational, legal, social and cultural measures. Member States must make a stronger commitment to gender mainstreaming and to a child-sensitive approach in the EU development cooperation and poverty reduction programmes. Parliament regretted the lack of any analysis of the demand for prostitution in the Member States as a possible motivation for the phenomenon of trafficking. The Commission should carry out a comprehensive study on the impact of the Member States' legislation on prostitution on the number of victims of trafficking. Parliament also called on the Commission and the Member States to tackle the tendency to use new technologies, particularly the Internet, to disseminate information about access to, and demand for, women and children for sexual exploitation, the increase in which affects the increase in trafficking.

Parliament went on to stress the link between sexual exploitation and labour exploitation in the provision of domestic services. Children and adolescents, subject to a dependence of which traffickers take advantage, are exploited not only sexually but also in ways connected with slavery, illegal adoption and forced labour.

The humiliating practice of buying and exploiting women and children should be made the subject of a campaign under EU programmes in this field. This campaign should be announced by the Commission and the Member States, with the unqualified support of the European Parliament and of all the other European institutions in their respective fields of competence. Parliament called on the Commission to submit an independent Daphne programme and ensure that it is kept distinct from the anti-drugs programme. It suggested that the Commission to launch an EU-wide Anti-Trafficking Day with an international anti-trafficking logo to raise general awareness of the phenomenon of trafficking in women and children and to increase public awareness and the visibility of the issue by addressing the public with one coherent message. This EU-wide Anti-Trafficking Day could coincide with the global campaign called "Stop the Traffic" on 25 March 2006.

Parliament called on the Member States to establish awareness-raising campaigns targeted at providing information about the dangers and educating vulnerable members of society in the countries of origin and to alert and raise the awareness of the public about the problem and reduce the demand in the countries of destination. In this regard, Member States must recognise that business travellers can be a part of the solution to trafficking if they are actively engaged in the awareness-raising process and are encouraged to report what they see. Parliament called on the Member States, especially on Germany, to take appropriate measures in the course of the World Cup football tournament in 2006 to prevent trafficking of women and forced prostitution.

Member States are asked to implement legislation that would strengthen the prosecution and punishment of traffickers, whether natural or legal persons, their accomplices, authors of websites that advertise trafficking agents, persons arranging or using seeking sexual services from minors, and to prosecute the laundering of the proceeds of trafficking. Member States should also prosecute clients who knowingly make use of the services of forced prostitutes.

People who have been subjected to sexual exploitation must be considered victims. Bearing in mind how immensely difficult it is for them to find a way out of their situation, both the EU and the Member States should take the necessary measures to protect and support them, such as not sentencing people who have been victims of trafficking; medical and psychological care; offering women and children support, either to return to their country of origin at their own request, or to make a new start.

Finally, Parliament regretted the lack of measurable added value delivered so far by the existing agencies and organisations at European level, especially the limited exchange of information between the Member States and Europol, which is the main European tool for fighting trafficking in human beings. Among its numerous analyses of specific crimes, Europol has so far produced only one analytical document in this field. Europol should give greater priority to combating trafficking.