REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Slave Labor, Still

Britain this year marks the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. But just because slavery is outlawed in most corners of the world today doesn't mean it has been eradicated. If anything, it's thriving.

That's the depressing message of the U.S. State Department's Report on Trafficking in Persons, released this week. From forced sex to indentured servitude, trafficking is escalating. More than 800,000 people—half of whom are children—are trafficked across borders each year, according to State. Besides depriving people of their freedom, modern-day slavery impacts global health and boosts organized crime. Yet good data and public awareness are often hard to come by—which is why State's report on government policies on trafficking merits a closer look.

This year, there's a new, old trend on the rise: slave labor. We've long supported the free movement of people across borders, which helps the poor find better economic opportunities. But in today's globalizing world, more and more workers find themselves duped, toiling under pseudo-legal contracts or bonded to an employer and too indebted to escape. It's a negative side of what otherwise is a positive trend—more economic opportunities in an increasingly integrated world.

> It's not just sex trafficking that's on the rise.

The rise in trafficking is also testament to the willingness of people to better themselves, regardless of the physical and economic risks. That presents a challenge to countries on the receiving end of trafficking. They may benefit from the cheap labor but would be better off finding legal ways for immigrants to enter, cutting out the corrupt middleman.

One way to do this is through legislating punishments for trafficking, but this isn't necessarily a panacea if enforcement lags. Malaysia, for instance forced an anti-trafficking law through parliament this year—though we're told it's more for show than substance—in a country that's regularly cited as one of the worst Asian offenders. India has decent laws on the books but rarely backs them up with arrests. Little wonder the world's most populous democracy is also a huge hub for bonded child labor.

A better way to attack the problem is to enable legal ways to channel immigrant flows. If would-be immigrants knew they could apply to work legally in another country—and chances were good they'd be accepted—they would be less likely to become victims of traffickers. Australia caught onto this idea with its guest worker program; America is currently wrestling—unsuccessfully so far—with a similar idea.

But it's hard to tackle the trafficking problem without knowing its extent in the first place. Very few non-governmental organizations focus on labor trafficking, preferring instead to aid victims of the sex industry. Few governments outside the U.S. even recognize labor trafficking as an ill on par with sex trafficking. And even fewer exchange information about it.

The best hope for combating trafficking lies with governments that are accountable to their citizens. That includes, for example, Mexico and India, both of which are on State's "Tier 2 watchlist"—countries where trafficking "is very significant or is significantly increasing." Tier 1 is reserved for governments that enforce anti-trafficking laws; Tier 3 is for the worst offenders, which are subject to U.S. trade sanctions. It's no coincidence that Tier 3 constitutes a roll call of dictatorships, from Cuba to Iran.

Little will happen if the issue remains invisible, or worse, ignored. Three cheers, then, to the U.S., which was one of the last developed countries to abolish slavery, for now leading the fight against it.

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