

national

Traffickers hunt Japanese too, activists warn

More thorough law needed to halt enslavement of women, kids: NGO

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KYODO

Sri took what appeared to be a lucrative job offer at a Thai restaurant in Japan to earn money to put her younger brother through school.

But she never imagined upon arriving from Thailand that she would find herself bound to her broker by a nearly ¥5 million debt and be forced into prostitution.

Many Japanese are stunned to learn their country is both a destination and transit point for sex and labor traffickers and their victims.

For more than a decade, in fact, Japan's record on human trafficking has been one of the worst among the developed nations. Activists say there is a need to raise public awareness of the issue and introduce comprehensive legislation to address what they say is a modern form of slavery.

"Behind the lack of an effective law is the fact that nobody really knows this kind of thing goes on in Japan. Many people are startled to find out that this crime exists here at all," said Shihoko Fujiwara, founder and head of the Japan office of the Polaris Project

consecutive year in 2013. Tier 2 is the category for countries that fail to comply with the minimum standards for eliminating trafficking as outlined in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, which became law in the United States in 2000.

While many developed nations, including the United States, Canada and France, are ranked Tier 1, Japan is ranked equal with such countries as Nepal, Senegal and Zambia. It is also one of the few developed nations yet to ratify the United Nations protocol on preventing, suppressing and punishing trafficking in people, which supplements the U.N. Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.

Although Japan amended its penal code in 2005 to criminalize the "buying and selling of human beings," critics argue that this "overly narrow" definition results in few criminal prosecutions because many women are forced into human trafficking as a result of blackmail and fraud, with no monetary transactions involved.

"The article exists, but it only covers a small portion of the overall flow of the crime," Fujiwara said, calling for a law that



Helping hand: Shihoko Fujiwara, head of the Japanese office of the Polaris Project, speaks at a seminar on human trafficking in Shibuya Ward, Tokyo, on Nov. 27. KYODO

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and other underworld elements involved in the business are adopting more sophisticated methods, experts say.

"In the past, most victims were sent to Japan through brokers and their passports were taken away. But now the crime takes less obvious forms, because many women are recruited and managed by their own relatives," said Hiroko Ueda, director of Help Asian Women's Shelter, which provides emergency accommodations to victims of human trafficking.

In some cases, women who were once trafficked themselves facilitate the trafficking of others.

"Many Filipino girls are invited by their aunts, who turn victimizer after paying off their own debts. They collaborate with gangsters and lure girls by saying they can take warm showers and eat sushi in Japan," she said.

Because victims nowadays are more likely to keep their passports and mobile phones, it is hard to determine whether they have no avenue of escape. But one young woman said she is often afraid to return home because members of her own family are in cahoots with her aunt, she said.

"It is crucial to secure a safe place for them to return," said Ueda, who highlights the importance of setting up shelters not only in Japan, but in other countries as well.

Fujiwara, founder and head of the Japan office of the Polaris Project, which supports sex trafficking victims. The office will run under the new name Lighthouse: Center for Human Trafficking Victims, starting on Jan. 1.

Fujiwara said that more Japanese women, including girls as young as 13 or 14, are falling prey to traffickers because they don't have to be flown in from overseas, which lowers the traffickers' costs. Those being targeted include victims of domestic violence, single mothers and women facing serious financial hardship following the 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

According to the U.S. State Department's annual Trafficking in Persons Report, Japan remained in Tier 2 for the 13th

overall flow of the crime," Fujiwara said, calling for a law that can deal with trafficking in its entirety.

Prosecutors need to bring charges by combining a number of different statutes, but since these do not capture all the elements of human trafficking, only a handful of victims are recognized as having been trafficked, experts say.

Yoko Yoshida, a lawyer and co-leader of the Japan Network Against Trafficking in Persons, said: "There are so many gray cases that are not recognized as human trafficking. At the very least, we need to be able to analyze why some cases are recognized and others are not, but currently that information is not available to us.

"The amendment to the penal code was not enough to close the gap with the U.N. protocol. Also, we need to place more restrictions on the sex industry," she said.

Yoshida wants to see the government make more effort to crack down on human trafficking cases involving Japanese, not just foreign women, and would like to see it form an organization devoted exclusively to dealing with the issue, rather than just relying on nonprofit organizations and private shelters.

Since many who are trafficked choose not to go to the police for fear of reprisals and concern that they will not get a sympathetic hearing from the Japanese authorities, the Polaris Project

sometimes works on its own to free victims.

In one of many harrowing cases, Fujiwara and a staff member rescued a South Korean woman in her 20s who was forced to work as a prostitute to pay off her debt bondage after being recruited by a South Korean broker and sent to Japan on a tourist visa.

Monitored by a security camera almost 24 hours a day, she had almost no chance to escape from the small room in Tokyo's Ueno district where she was kept. Fears over her deteriorating health finally prompted her to seek help from a Korean nonprofit organization that subsequently contacted the Polaris Project.

"She was so weak and could barely stand or walk," Fujiwara said. "But she was never allowed to visit a hospital and was forced to accept customers up until about three hours before we arrived."

Since 2005, Polaris Project has received around 3,000 consultations and has been able to offer help to some 150 women and children. It estimates the number of sexual trafficking victims in Japan at 54,000 a year.

But the number of human trafficking victims recognized by the National Police Agency in 2012 stood at a mere 27. The case of the South Korean woman was not among them.

Another factor hindering police efforts is the fact that yakuza

only in Japan, but in other countries as well.

"Anyone might come across the crime in his or her neighborhood or even aboard a plane when victims are in transit. In fact, there have been cases in which brokers were caught following tips by citizens," Fujiwara said. "It is important not to be indifferent."

"Many people still think that prostitutes choose their line of work, but I want more people to know that there are also victims who are unable to escape from the horrible situations they find themselves in."

To consult the Polaris Project, call 0120-879-871. To make a donation, call 050-3496-7615.
