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Dominican Republic busts child sex parties to combat trafficking

By [Anastasia Moloney](#)

BOGOTA (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - When Matt and seven traffickers lay face down and handcuffed in a luxury villa one afternoon last month, surrounded by Dominican police pointing guns at them, he knew the sting operation had been a success.

Three days earlier Matt, a former CIA agent and United States diplomat, had been posing with an undercover team as tourists looking to buy sex with children in the Dominican Republic's northern beach town of Sosua.

The island's palm-fringed white beaches attract around five million visitors a year, making the Dominican Republic the most visited destination in the Caribbean and the \$5 billion tourism sector its largest foreign exchange earner.

But the island is also known as a sex tourism hotspot, driven by demand from foreign tourists, Dominican expatriates visiting the island, and local people.

While adult prostitution is legal in the Dominican Republic, it can lead to sex trafficking - known as modern day slavery - when someone is forced, deceived or coerced into commercial sexual exploitation against their will.

"You dangle the bait and see who bites," said Matt, now vice-president of foreign missions and intelligence at Operation Underground Railroad, a U.S.-based organization that rescues children trapped in sex trafficking rings worldwide.

"At first the traffickers working on the beach offer you women but eventually, if you talk long enough with them, they will offer you young girls. We imply to the traffickers we only want the really young ones."

Matt and the undercover team told the traffickers they were organizing a private party for their boss, a wealthy American businessman who was flying in for the event.

The price for a girl for the six-hour sex party was \$500.

"They talked to us as if they were selling a product. All the traffickers see is the money. We were told the girls would do anything we wanted, however we wanted," Matt, 43, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation in a telephone interview.

PARTY BUST

As the music and drinks flowed and the hidden cameras rolled, 15 men and one woman posing as partygoers, including an ex-U.S. Navy SEAL and three undercover armed Dominican police, mingled with the 29 women and girls the traffickers had brought.

The money changed hands and someone said: "Let's have the wine," the signal to send a message to seven other Dominican police who were staking out the sex party in a house across the street.

Minutes later, police stormed through the front door and arrested seven alleged traffickers - five men and two women - along with Matt and the undercover team to preserve their fake identities.

The sting operation, based on investigative work by U.S. law enforcement officials and Dominican state prosecutors, follows several others, part of a campaign by the two governments to fight child sex tourism on the island.

Worldwide there are nearly two million children in the sex trade, and no country is immune from the scourge of human trafficking in a global industry the International Labor Organization estimates is worth \$150 billion a year.

After the sting, the suspects were placed in pre-trial detention for a year awaiting trial, and if convicted, they could face up to 15 years in prison for trafficking.

Of the 29 victims of sexual exploitation rescued, 14 were aged between 14 and 17, of whom eight remain in a government shelter.

Over the next three months, they will get support from social workers and psychologists provided by the International Justice Mission (IJM), a Washington-based non-governmental global rights organization also involved in the rescue mission.

"If you release victims without giving them proper care and treatment they will often go back to being sexually exploited," said Pablo Villeda, IJM's vice-president of operations in Latin America, who works closely with local authorities in sex trafficking cases and in supporting rescued victims.

The rescuers hope that sting operations can deter other sex traffickers and tourists.

"We want to make Americans, Canadians and western European tourists think twice about what they're doing and put doubt in their minds before they have sex with children," said Matt, who for security reasons only gave his first name.

"The people working on the beach never thought they were doing anything illegal. The traffickers never in their wildest dreams thought they were going to get arrested. We want to break this cycle of impunity," he said.

Rights groups say stopping the trafficking is not helped by the country's tolerance of the practice of selling children for sex work.

An IJM investigation covering 412 establishments across 20 towns in the Dominican Republic last year found that one in every 10 women working in the sex trade in bars, nightclubs and brothels was under 18, while one in every four sex workers in outdoor places - streets, beaches and parks - was a teenager, most of them aged between 15 and 17.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Government attitudes towards human trafficking are slowly changing.

"The current administration acknowledged this was a problem and that it needed to be dealt with," Villeda said.

"There's been a shift in attitudes - not to treat victims as criminals and the cause of the problem, but as vulnerable individuals with few options."

The attorney general created a special office on human trafficking in 2013, new laws have been passed imposing tougher punishments on traffickers, and a trafficking national hotline has been set up.

At least 39 visitors to the Dominican Republic have been denied entry by immigration officials since late 2013 because they have child sex tourism and other sex crime convictions, according to the U.S. State Department's 2014 report on trafficking.

The hotel industry has also taken action, signing a code of conduct to prevent adults and children being sexually exploited and training staff to spot potential sex crimes.

At hotel receptions in beach resort areas it is common to see signs saying: "It is prohibited to take minors into hotel rooms" and "Trafficking and sexual exploitation are crimes punishable by law."

FEW CONVICTIONS

Despite these efforts, the number of convictions in the Dominican Republic remains low, as it does worldwide.

The government jailed six sex traffickers for periods ranging from two to 15 years in 2013, the U.S. State Department's report said.

The Dominican Republic has been on the U.S. Department of State's Tier 2 list for three years, indicating that it does not fully comply with minimum standards to combat trafficking.

"Official complicity in human trafficking remained a serious concern," the report said, noting that the government placed one police officer in pre-trial detention for being part of a sex trafficking ring that included children in 2013.

Poor, uneducated and unemployed women and girls, who often come from broken homes where relatives are or have been sexually exploited, are most vulnerable to recruiters' false promises of earning money as a waitress, dancer or model.

Forty percent of the country's 10 million people live in poverty.

"Girls living in poverty with little hope and few options before them become the perfect kind of victim," Villeda said.

"After being sexually exploited their sense of identity and worth have been destroyed. They have a broken heart and soul."

(Reporting By Anastasia Moloney; Editing by Tim Pearce)