

U.S. jails sex-trafficked kids in human rights abuse, groups say

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By Stella Dawson

WASHINGTON (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - The United States violates human rights by treating sex-trafficked children as criminals and throwing them into jail, rights groups told an international commission on Monday.

Federal and international law requires that children in the commercial sex trade are treated as victims of trafficking, not as prostitutes.

But most U.S. states and localities fail to apply the law, the groups said at a hearing before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), which reviews human rights abuses in the region.

Criminalizing child victims of the sex trade traumatizes youngsters, Yasmin Vafa, legal director at the Human Rights Project for Girls, and Santiago Canton, executive director at the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights, told the commission.

"When girls are incarcerated for the experience of being property and serially raped, their ability to return to family, community and school is less likely, which only serves to tighten the traffickers' control," they said in prepared remarks.

Approximately 300,000 American children are at risk for commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking each year, with 13 to 14 being the average age a child is first forced into sexual acts, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigations.

Each year, more than 1,000 children are arrested in the United States for prostitution, most of them not of a legal age to consent to sex, the U.S. Justice Department says.

One study found that the city of Dallas, Texas, detained 165 juveniles on prostitution and related charges in 2007, and that in Las Vegas over 20 months, 226 children were brought before the juvenile court.

Despite U.S. federal law and international protocols, many state and local law enforcement officers continue to arrest and incarcerate children as prostitutes, even in the 15 states that have adopted "safe harbor" laws designed to shield children from prison where they can be raped again.

By bringing the issue before the IACHR - an agency of the Organization of American States (OAS) - the rights groups are seeking to apply international pressure on the U.S. government to strengthen its anti-trafficking laws and set national standards of care for child victims of sex trafficking.

"I am quite alarmed and deeply disturbed," said Rose Marie Belle Antoine, an OAS member who presided over the hearing.

The IACHR offers a human rights forum for the 35 OAS member countries in the Americas, but because the United States has not recognized its judicial authority, no court case can be brought.

Ambassador Patricia Butenis, acting director of the U.S. State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, told the commission the United States agrees children should not be criminalized as prostitutes, as federal law specifies, and recognizes that "tragically it still occurs".

Asked what more the United States can do to implement federal law, she said, "Politics in the United States are complicated."

Government officials spelled out a series of programs they run to support state and local law enforcement, families and welfare agencies in tackling child sex trafficking.

A number of bills are before the U.S. Congress to improve services for sex-trafficking victims, but both federal and state budgets are extremely tight to fund victim support programs.

(Reporting by Stella Dawson, editing by Alisa Tang)