

We all have a role to play to end human trafficking, officials say

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Teenage girls rescued from human traffickers paraded at Police Headquarters in Kacyiru in 2012. (File)

More work and effort is needed to curb human trafficking as ongoing efforts by government to foil and end the vice is not enough.

Most victims of human trafficking are traded for sex slavery, forced labour or commercial sexual exploitation to the trafficker or others.

When the government last year stepped up efforts to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, the Rwanda National Police (RNP) had already rescued more than 150 victims, in four years.

At the time, officials indicated that women and girls, and to a lesser extent boys, were trafficked for domestic and sex work both internally and abroad, several of them ending up in neighbouring countries, or in China, Europe, the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, and the US.

Oda Gasinzigwa, the minister for gender and family promotion, told *The New Times*, last week, said there have been noteworthy gains in the fight against human trafficking over the last one year.

“Society is now more aware about this issue due to the different sensitisation campaigns in schools, youth groups, among parents, and through the media, faith based groups and so on, for prevention,” Gasinzigwa said.

She pointed to more synergy with stakeholders in areas of information sharing to support bringing back victims, counselling, medical support, re-integration in families, among others, as some of the aspects facilitating response to the drive.

Last month, two people were arrested at Kagitumba border post in Nyagatare District as they attempted to traffic a 19-year-old girl to Uganda.

Between 2009 and 2013, RNP rescued 153 people.

In August, last year, President Paul Kagame weighed in strongly on the matter, calling on officials to fight what he then referred to as a growing problem.

“Can we afford to keep quiet in the face of human trafficking? People are not commercial goods. Ending trafficking of girls goes beyond law enforcement authorities; it is the responsibility of every citizen,” Kagame said in Parliament last year.

Globally, the most common causes of human trafficking, which is considered to be a modern form of slavery, include high demand for cheap labour or sexual desires, poverty, and gender inequality.

About half of all human trafficking victims are believed to be children, the majority of them female.

Flawed mindset

The 2013 UNHCR report on trafficking in persons indicates that Rwanda is a source and, to a lesser extent, a transit destination for women and children subjected to forced labour and sex trafficking.

“The challenge remains with dealing with mindset of some of our youth and parents who think that they will get a better life abroad. We are focusing on economic empowerment programmes for youth and skills development for job creation, in addition to the ongoing sensitisation campaign,” Gasinzigwa said.

Police have since installed Interpol’s communication system known as I-24/7 at border crossings to allow law enforcement agencies in Interpol member-countries to share timely information on any human trafficking suspects or victims.

Immigration alert

According to Ange Sebutege, the public relations officer at the Directorate of Immigration and Emigration, officers at border crossings and airports are ever vigilant about human trafficking. For example, she said, no minor can be allowed to leave the country unless in the company of genuine guardians.

“Young people below the age of 16 must be accompanied by a parent when leaving the country, short of that, we can’t allow them to cross borders,” he said.

Asked about the possible difficulty presented by the fact that at 16, a Rwandan child can obtain a national identity card, which is the only travel document required to cross into Uganda, or Kenya, Sebutege emphasised that the complexities of human trafficking go beyond travel documents.

“I can’t go into the details of our work but I will tell you that we thoroughly screen before kids are allowed to leave.

Where need be, parents are contacted. We don’t hesitate to turn people back when necessary. But what is important is that people need to understand that it is a collective responsibility. Parents, law enforcers and the entire community have a role to play here,” Sebutege said.

“Sharing information with all stakeholders and the public is very important in what we do. Conducting awareness campaigns to sensitise the population is equally important. This year, we worked with the Local Government ministry and organised community work at all borders after which we sensitised people about it.”

Regional concern

Last month, members of the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) asked member countries to do more in the fight against human trafficking. While sitting in Kampala, Uganda, the MPs unanimously adopted a motion calling for urgent action to prevent trafficking in persons.

The Assembly’s stance is not the first. While meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, in December 2013, the lawmakers adopted a similar motion urging partner states to ratify the UN Trafficking in Persons Protocol and enact legislation to address the crime.

In their latest effort, lawmakers backed the idea of enacting a regional law on human trafficking; hunting and prosecuting offenders; and pushed the Council to operationalise article 27 of the EAC Treaty so as to expand jurisdiction of the East African Court of Justice to tackle cases of human trafficking.

In an interview, Internal Security minister Musa Fazil Harerimana, said: “At policy level, laws are in place regarding that crime and mobilisation of the population so that the public is aware

about how that crime is committed is being done, especially since the perpetrators deceive parents that they have jobs or schools out there for their kids.”

Article 251 of the Penal Code states that any person who participates in any way, personally or through an intermediary, in trafficking a person out of Rwanda to a foreign country by: means of deception, use of force, threat or any other form of coercion; or by taking advantage of his or her troubles with the authorities, shall be liable to a term of imprisonment of one to three years and a fine of Rwf500,000 to Rwf2 million. The penalties under this Article will be doubled if the victim is a child.

Article 252 states that the penalty for human trafficking is a term of imprisonment of seven to 10 years and a fine of Rwf5 million to Rwf10 million.

If committed at an international level, it is noted that the offender shall be liable to a term of imprisonment of 10 to 15 years and a fine of Rwf10m to Rwf 20m.

Meanwhile, warning the public about conmen and women who lure unsuspecting girls and boys into trafficking by promising them heaven on earth, the police are urging people to report suspicious characters by giving timely and accurate information on free toll lines: 112, 113 and 3512.

The public can also reach Police on email, info@police.gov.rw, Twitter @RwandaPolice, and Facebook (Rwanda Police).

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