

Beat: News

UN uncovers human trafficking at camp in Malawi

Refugees at risk

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ARAC International Global Media Partners - The widespread exploitation of men, women, and children at a refugee camp in Malawi has been uncovered by the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Malawian Police Service.

Now measures are underway to dismantle the human trafficking networks operating within the Dzaleka Refugee Camp, identify and rescue their victims, and bring those responsible to justice.

"The situation was much worse than we first envisaged," says UNODC's Maxwell Matewere, who initially visited the camp in October 2020, where he trained camp staff and law enforcement officers how to detect and respond to trafficking cases.

"I even witnessed a kind of Sunday market, where people come to buy children who were then exploited in situations of forced labour and prostitution," he adds.

UNODC coached and mentored 28 camp officials and law enforcement officers who are now involved in the identification of victims and the investigation of trafficking cases and will train other colleagues at police stations and border crossing posts.

90 victims rescued so far

Since the training and the implementation of new anti-trafficking procedures, over 90 victims of human trafficking have been identified and rescued.

The guidelines for the identification, rescue, and referral of victims were developed by UNODC, with the support of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

"UNHCR together with all its partners will never give up on its efforts to stop the scourge of human trafficking and smuggling among refugees in Malawi," says Owen Nyasulu, a Field Protection Associate at UNHCR's Malawi office, who is supporting UNODC's work at the Dzaleka Refugee Camp.

Most of the victims rescued are men from Ethiopia, aged between 18 and 30. There are girls and women too, aged between 12 and 24 from Ethiopia, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

An international network.

The camp is also being used as a hub for the processing of victims of human trafficking. Traffickers recruit victims in their home country under false pretences, arrange for them to cross the border into Malawi and enter the camp.

Based on the recent, successful operations in the camp, which were based on intelligence information, the police now have more knowledge about the international nature of the trafficking network.

"There is evidence that victims are sourced in Ethiopia, DRC and Burundi by agents of the trafficking network offering work opportunities in South Africa – the economic powerhouse on the continent," says Mr. Matewere.

"At the camp, they are told they need to pay off the debts incurred from being smuggled into Malawi. They are exploited there or transported to other countries in the region for forced labour."

So far there have been five arrests and the cases are ongoing. The suspected traffickers are from Malawi, Ethiopia, Burundi, Rwanda, and DRC.

Too scared to testify

However, according to the Malawian Police Service, efforts to convict human traffickers and migrant smugglers are being hampered because the people affected are too scared to testify in court.

The Dzaleka Refugee Camp, the largest in Malawi, was established in 1994 and is home to more than 50,000 refugees and asylum seekers from five different countries. It was originally designed to accommodate 10,000 people.

"We do fear that this is just the beginning, and there are huge numbers of victims. Authorities strongly suspect there is a highly organised, international syndicate operating from within the camp," says UNODC's Maxwell Matewere.

Awareness-raising material about human trafficking will be distributed soon in the camp and is expected to lead to more victims coming forward for assistance.

"All security agencies operating in the camp must be frequently reminded about their role to eradicate human trafficking through regular training," says UNHCR's Owen Nyasula.

"These agencies need to work closely with religious and community leaders, as well as local police forces, to stop this form of modern slavery," he concludes.

Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-21030/un-uncovers-human-trafficking-at-camp-in-malawi.html>

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