

Labour Abuses Fly Under the Radar

Belgorod, Russia Case Highlights Tragedy of Exploitation

As the spotlight continues to fall on Moldova as a country of origin for human trafficking, much attention has continued to focus on the trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation, leaving the seemingly unexplored issue of trafficking for labour exploitation lurking in the shadows.

Moldova experiences vast amounts of migration every year as thousands leave the country in search of a job or a better life abroad. This steady flow of migration out of the country has opened the door for massive numbers of foreign job offers to come pouring in, giving smugglers and traffickers a viable feeding ground to deceive, lure, and ultimately exploit these migrants, since many look to informal migration channels to pursue opportunities abroad.

Trafficking for labour exploitation is a highly lucrative business. Combining cheap or no-cost labour, low turnover and high outputs, the profits that can be made from just one farm exploiting labour migrants is incredible. One such example recently occurred in Belgorod, Russia.

In 2009, a farm harboring victims of labour exploitation in Belgorod, Russia was discovered. Individuals, couples and teenagers from several small villages in Moldova were recruited by a Moldovan couple for an employment opportunity. The traffickers lured 50 victims using the promise of good money (1000 euro per month depending upon the individual's productivity) to be paid at the end of the labour season. Victims were also promised shelter and transportation to and from Russia.

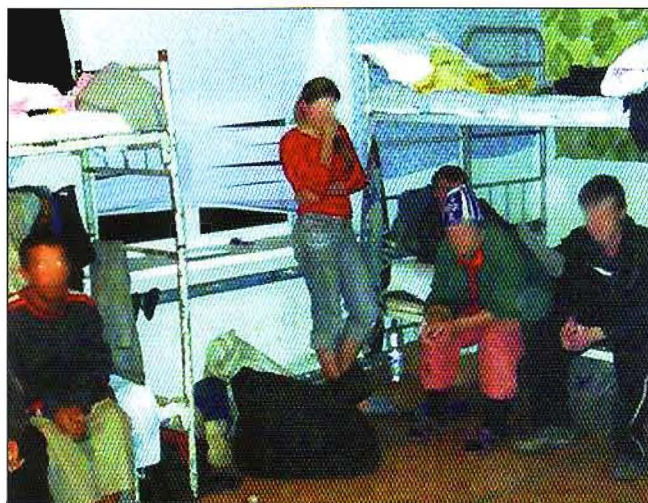
Upon the consent of these migrants, their identity documents were taken "temporarily", supposedly to be returned during their escorted trip back to Moldova. To avoid suspicion, the traffickers transported the victims through Transnistria (the de-facto region of Moldova) to Ukraine and then Russia. Traffickers chose the Transnistria route because a formal database for recording the movement of persons through the region does not exist.

The traffickers kept their victims under slave-like conditions; forcing them to work daily from 7 am to 10 pm without proper equipment, clothing, or

access to medical care. The managers used verbal and physical violence, threats of starvation, and even rapes to keep their "employees" in line. The traffickers, with the help of an assistant, would monitor the activities of their employees from the comfort of their cars; shouting commands, threats and obscenities, in an attempt to push the productivity limits of their "employees" to the brink of exhaustion.

In addition to the frequently discussed methods of coercion traffickers normally use, several interviews between the General Police Commissariat of Chisinau and victims from the farm would eventually reveal two new methods of coercion. First, the traffickers would allow certain victims additional, partially paid over time work, to diffuse any potential attempts of revolt against the traffickers. Secondly, the 15 minors on the farm were given the "privilege" of monitored phone calls to their parents in Moldova, reassuring them everything was fine.

The traffickers kept their victims imprisoned together; men, women, and minors, in what could be described as a run-down administrative building. Meanwhile, the traffickers slept comfortably in a furnished room just several meters away. The victims were forced to sleep on scantily constructed bunk-beds, the concrete floor, or any other makeshift bed they could fashion. Eventually, several victims developed the courage to plan and mount a successful escape which



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► required them to walk for nearly two months across Russia and Ukraine, since they were without their identity documents, before finally returning to Moldova.

This story, initially broken by a community newspaper, was broadcast on seven different television channels throughout Moldova. Their pathetic story would prove to be invaluable because it not only shed light on the under-reported crime of labour trafficking from Moldova, it also gave the victims from this farm who had returned to Moldova the opportunity to identify themselves as victims of labour trafficking, so that they might be able to better obtain assistance.

Despite multiple threats from the traffickers to the victims and their families, following the airing of the story, many of the Belgorod victims were able to get in contact with the General Police Commissariat of Chisinau. They ultimately provided the Police Officers with enough evidence to bring down the trafficking ring, and end the labour exploitation on the farm.

Following this initial contact with the victims by the General Police Commissariat of Chisinau, proactive identification measures utilizing community information were undertaken, enabling more victims from the Belgorod farm to be identified. However, many victims still remain at large.

In Moldova, trafficking for labour exploitation is only beginning to be recognized as a problem. The idea of a failed migration experience, fear of stigmatization, or the mere fact that many are not aware of the violation of their human rights makes identifying victims of labour exploitation a daunting task.

From 2004 to 2008, IOM provided assistance to 159 victims of labour

exploitation, including men, women and children. This assistance includes medical, social, psychological, legal and reintegration support. As part of the National Referral System for Assistance and Protection of Victims and Potential Victims of Trafficking, IOM continues to work in cooperation with the Government of Moldova to inform the public about the risks associated with irregular migration and to provide direct assistance to both victims of human trafficking and at-risk cases.

Through cooperative measures with the General Police Commissariat of Chisinau, and regional level Multi-Disciplinary Teams, IOM is working to identify more victims from the Belgorod farm and deliver the support services they require.

While labour migrants understood that the jobs they signed on to do would be difficult, they never agreed to the violation of their basic human rights or to being sold, beaten and exploited. As long as the trafficking of human beings and the exploitation of migrants continues, attention to the issue of human trafficking must be expanded to cover both sexual and labour exploitation in order to bring this phenomenon fully into the spotlight.

J. Blaec Kalweit – IOM Moldova, in co-operation with Mr. Valeriu Bobutac – General Police Commissariat of Chisinau

