



More than a tourist destination

Trafficked persons flow across the triple border of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay at the Iguazu falls.



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PUERTO IGUAZU, Argentina — Maria Celia Wilson sensed something suspicious in the weeks before her daughter Paula disappeared. Phone calls were coming to the house from relatives whom she didn't know well, asking where Paula went to school and when she would get out of classes.

Wilson believes that her daughter was abducted by people who wanted to exploit her for domestic or sexual slavery. The perpetrators, she says, were distant family members involved in a human trafficking ring.

Argentine society is just beginning to address trafficking in persons, with mixed success. Last year Argentina passed its first federal anti-trafficking legislation, and a popular soap opera, "Stolen Lives," depicted one family's attempt to rescue their daughter from her abduction into forced prostitution.

But experts and family members complain that many traffickers operate with impunity, and so it has largely fallen to civil society to take action.

To evade detection traffickers move their victims around frequently — sometimes along drug routes, since many perpetrators are also involved in the drug trade. Many of the trafficking routes start in the northeastern corner of Argentina, at the celebrated Iguazu falls at the triple border of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay. The famous falls, bigger than Niagara, are adored by tourists for the 40 billion gallons of water that pour across them every day.

But there's a quieter stream flowing across the border: Argentine authorities receive a new report of a trafficked person every other day — and those are just the ones who are identified.

Human traffickers take advantage of a person's vulnerabilities, often lying and making false promises, said Monique Altschul, a former trafficking adviser to the International Organization of Migration. Wilson says that 18-year-old Paula had the psychological age of a 14-year-old when she disappeared.

Some traffickers tell victims "that they will work as nannies or on ships, and then they are taken to brothels and are not paid," Altschul said. "They say that because they had to pay for

the trip they are in debt, and they will never be able to repay the whole debt."

Argentina's new law, following U.N. conventions, recognizes that manipulation and deceit are as common and as criminal as brute force in these cases. But due to poor enforcement, Argentina still fails to meet the minimum anti-trafficking criteria devised by the U.S. State Department.

Viviana Camino, coordinator of the National Network to Stop Trafficking and Slavery, said that many law enforcement officials, especially at the local level, are themselves involved or complicit in the slave trade. Anecdotes abound of cops who run brothels using captured girls.

"There still has not been a real investigation into the network of complicity, which downplays the information about human trafficking," Camino said.

Victims' photos appear in newspapers, and Camino's National Network has a toll-free phone number for citizens to report sightings. Wilson says that she had to conduct her own search for her daughter, in tandem with organizations like that of Susana Trimarco. Trimarco, on whose story the soap opera "Stolen Lives" was based, was given the International Women of Courage Award by then-Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice for her anti-trafficking work.

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Wilson's search led her first to the northwestern province of Tucuman and then to the southern beach resort town of Mar del Plata. Those far-flung spots are two classic destinations for trafficked Argentines, often brought there from the tri-border area near the falls.

Ten miles down the road from the falls, Marcelina Antunes runs a Ministry of Labor anti-trafficking program called Light of Childhood.

Leafing through her scrapbook of missing and rescued kids, Antunes points to a picture of two teenage girls rescued from a brothel just over the Brazilian border. Antunes says that these two came from an Argentine town a hundred miles away, fooled by a woman who offered them work in a hotel.

Antunes then turns the page to a much younger girl who still hasn't been found. She says that the girl was sold, along with her youngest sister and brother, by her own mother. Antunes says both girls and boys are in demand for sex work.

A 2006 International Organization of Migration report found that brothels pay a few hundred dollars for a capture, depending on the kid's "quality" — youth costs more. A woman over 23 is generally considered worthless, but there's no lower age limit.

Until about two years ago, almost all of the cross-border trafficking in the region came into Argentina from the exterior. Now some of it's going the other way into Brazil, where, according to the U.S. State Department, between a quarter and half a million children are kept in prostitution.

But immigration officer Emilio Osses, who oversees one of the Argentine checkpoints in the area, said that contrary to popular belief, this is not the worst trafficking hotspot on Argentina's border. He says that this tri-border area is heavily controlled — saturated with officers from at least eight local, federal and international agencies, including lots of CIA agents.

And it's largely because of the intelligence community that there's a lot of hype around the tri-border, he said. There is a large and important Arab population here, and it's believed that the terrorist cells that bombed the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires had support in this area.

“That's why it has this stigma of terrorism, corruption, and illegal trafficking,” Osses said. “In reality, the tri-border area suffers from propaganda.”

But Osses goes on to admit that there's a lot of room for illegal trafficking here. In the high season, 30,000 people per day cross the triple border — and that's just at the official checkpoints. Like any border, much more of it is uncontrolled.

As for Maria Wilson's daughter, Paula was found living in good health with a man and newborn baby in Mar del Plata in April. But she still hasn't given a conclusive account of the last two years, and Wilson insists that her daughter was tricked and exploited by a prostitution ring. The case is under investigation by the Ministry of Justice's Federal Unit of Investigation of Kidnappings, Extorsions and Trafficking of Persons — although some local law enforcement agencies, says Wilson, dismissed the case early on by saying that there was no evidence of a crime.

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