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Slaves among us

Nearly 400 years since the British ban, slavery still extends to all corners of the world -- developing and advanced.

By John Miller

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THE EXISTENCE of slavery in the 21st century comes as a shock to many Americans who believe that the institution ended with the Civil War. Although slavery today is not legal, it flourishes.

The international slave trade reaches into every country around the world and involves, at the least, a few million people and, by some estimates, as many as 27 million. It includes the old-fashioned buying, selling and owning of humans as well as many forms of sexual exploitation and "bonded" labor — in which people are held against their will and forced to work on farms or in factories to pay off obligations that never end.

In the so-called advanced countries, the largest category is sex slavery, which is linked to legalized or tolerated prostitution. In the Near East, the largest category is domestic-servitude slavery, fed by a massive migration of young women from South Asia. On the Indian subcontinent, the largest category is bonded-labor slavery of the lowest castes in rice mills, carpet factories and brick kilns. In Uganda and Sri Lanka, the largest category is child-soldier slavery.

Modern slavery is more gender-based than race-based — most victims are girls. In many instances it is linked to organized crime, and globalization plays a part as well. Except for bonded-labor slavery, rarely does one find a victim in her hometown; she has been trafficked from one region to another or across international borders.

As U.S. ambassador-at-large on modern-day slavery, nothing moved me as much as the meetings I had all over the world with survivors. I did not believe slavery could exist in a democratic country until I met Katya in the Netherlands. Katya had left a failing marriage and a 2-year-old daughter in the Czech Republic when a "friend of the family" suggested that she go to Amsterdam, where she could make money as a waitress. She and other young women were driven across Europe by a Czech trafficker who turned them over to a Dutch trafficker. Katya's passport was seized, and she was driven to a brothel in Amsterdam's red-light district.

When Katya protested, explaining that she came to the Netherlands to work in a restaurant, the traffickers claimed that she owed them 20,000 euros for bringing her across Europe. When she refused to cooperate, she said, the traffickers told her that "you will if you want your daughter at home to live."

Katya succumbed, as have many in Western Europe, Japan and even the United States.

I met Susan in Minneapolis. Starting at age 13, she spent two decades terrorized by a pimp. At first she thought she loved him, but she soon realized she had no control, no way out. When Susan was rescued, she was penniless and so traumatized that she could not get on a bus alone.

Lord, a Laotian teenager I met in Thailand, was 11 when she was sold by her parents, then resold and finally deposited across the border in a Bangkok embroidery factory. Prevented from leaving the factory, given minimal food and clothing and no wages, Lord and other children sewed 14 hours a day. When she rebelled, she was banished to a closet as an example. Her owner poured industrial chemicals on her.

And there was Nour, a young Indonesian woman who came to Saudi Arabia to work as domestic help and send money home to her family. She was locked up by her masters, beaten and lost fingers and toes from gangrene.

Katya, Susan, Lord and Nour are more fortunate than most victims — they escaped or were rescued, and they survived. Katya had the help of a friendly taxi driver; Susan met outreach workers on the street who persuaded her to make a break; Lord was rescued by the police; and Nour was discovered at a hospital where she had been taken by her owners for "repairs."

There are signs of belated progress. When the U.S. passed its anti-trafficking law in 2000, only a handful of countries had such laws. In the last two years, 80 countries have passed similar legislation. Several years ago, the number of human traffickers sent to jail numbered in the hundreds. In 2005, the year of the most recent State Department statistics, that figure was 4,700. Over the last few years, hundreds of shelters have been set up around the world to care for survivors. Media coverage of the problem, and public awareness, has risen exponentially. And yet so much more remains to be done in every country, including the U.S.

What can Americans do? Support church and civic groups that help fight modern slavery abroad. Find out if there is an organization caring for survivors in your community and support it. Make sure local police are sensitive to and search out victims. Californians should make sure the state's 2005 anti-trafficking law and local anti-pimping ordinances are enforced.

This month marks the 400th anniversary of the end of the slave trade in Britain, a first step toward full abolition in the British empire and later in the United States. That work was championed by hundreds of activists — among them William Wilberforce in England and Frederick Douglass and

Harriet Beecher Stowe in the United States — who nurtured a 19th century abolitionist movement. Now it falls on us, their descendants, to continue their work, nurturing a new abolitionist movement for the 21st century.

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