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COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights,
and International Organizations

Tier Rankings in the Fight Against Human Trafficking

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Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee,

I would like to thank you for this opportunity to offer my personal knowledge of challenges we have faced in rescuing victims of human trafficking in Russia. I speak on behalf of the Coalition to Abolish Modern-day Slavery in Asia (CAMSA), which was co-founded in February of 2008 by Boat People SOS and other international organizations. Over the past five years we have rescued or assisted over four thousand victims of labor and sex trafficking in different countries, including Taiwan, China, Malaysia, Jordan, Russia, and the United States.

A disclaimer is in order. My knowledge does not encompass the full gamut of human trafficking issues in Russia, but is limited to the problem of Vietnamese trafficked to Russia. No doubt trafficking in Russia takes many shapes and involves more than Vietnamese. We are looking at Russia only from the angle of its being a destination country. Russia is also a source and a transit country in the movement of trafficked victims.

Since last year I have personally worked on 6 cases involving some 300 Vietnamese victims of labor and sex trafficking trapped in Russia. This experience would shine some light on the highly complex and murky human trafficking situation in this vast country.

According to the Vietnamese government's official statistics there are 10,000 Vietnamese migrant workers in Russia; 30% of them left the country officially under Vietnam's labor export program while the rest entered Russia on tourist visas. We believe the actual number is many times higher. According to our reliable local independent sources of information, there are approximately 3,000 Vietnamese-owned sweatshops in and around Moscow alone, each employing from a few to over a hundred workers. Many of these workers are victims of forced labor. There are also numerous brothels run by Vietnamese in and around Moscow; young Vietnamese women are lured to Russia with employment offers and forced into prostitution, serving mainly Vietnamese clients.

The existing system in Russia makes it practically impossible for victims to escape and seek help. About half of the identified victims that we have tried to rescue for the past 18 months are still held captive by their traffickers. Following are the challenges that we have identified.

Investigation and Prosecution of Traffickers

None of the cases that we have brought to the attention of the Russian authorities has been identified as human trafficking.

In 2003 the Russian Federation introduced changes and additions to its criminal codes defining the crimes of human trafficking and specifying corresponding punishments. However, these provisions are of little use if even classic cases of human trafficking are dismissed by law enforcers as mere violations of labor and employment laws.

Last year we reported to the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation acts of labor trafficking committed by two Vietnamese-owned sweatshops, VINASTAR and VICTORIA, involving a total of over 250 victims of modern-day slavery.

These victims were forced to work 15-18 hours, sometimes as much as 22 hours, a day. There was no holiday, no break on weekends. There was nothing left of their salaries after deductions for food and lodging. They were held captive day and night within the confines of the sweatshops, which operated in formerly abandoned Soviet-era military facilities. Many victims developed skin diseases for lack of sunlight. One victim later reported that in the two years of captivity she was allowed only twice to the facility's backyard, where she had some fresh air. Those who managed to escape, when caught by the Russian police, would be returned to their traffickers. Some had been taken away and no longer heard of. Some were sold to other employers.

In late July, receiving tips from a local Vietnamese advocate, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) news service managed to get into the VINASTAR sweatshop and came out with incriminating evidence of human trafficking. A few days later, the Russian immigration service conducted a surprise raid on the premise of the factory. They identified many workers to be illegal migrants, and investigated the factory owner for employing illegal migrants. There was no mention of human trafficking.

Then in early August, the Russian police inspected the VICTORIA factory. The employer, probably tipped off in advance by an insider, had already moved all the victims to a different place in the facility that was not inspected by the police. The police issued fines to the employer for not having valid work permits for his employees. The police made no attempt to contact the victims to investigate reported acts of human trafficking.

In late January of this year, I received a letter from the Investigative Committee declaring "case closed"-- the local police had visited the location of the VICTORIA facility but the landlord denied knowing of any such sweatshop, despite the fact that BBC's TV crew had filmed the facility. Back in August we had informed the Investigative Committee that VICTORIA had already changed its name and moved to a new location.

Protection of victims of human trafficking

In 2004, Russia's federal law "On State Protection of Victims, Witnesses and Other Parties to Criminal Proceedings" was introduced. In practice, none of the victims of human trafficking we help qualifies for protection under the new law because they are not recognized as such.

The local police in and around Moscow seems to get along well with the traffickers. In the VICTORIA case, two victims, husband and wife, made a successful escape in early February 2012. In late March the police apprehended them because there was a supposed warrant for their arrest for fighting. They were however not taken to the police station but sent back to

VICTORIA, where they were subjected to torture, fined 2,000 USD for the escape, and forced back to work.

In the VINASTAR case, 5 of the victims disappeared after the police raided the factory. They were not among those repatriated and nowhere to be found. These five were the most vocal of all strikers. We later learned that, in advance of the raid on July 31, the local police had already moved them to a local prison. Our local contact made inquiries with the prison's administration and was told that there was no record of their incarceration. In essence the local police used this prison as a holding place to completely isolate and silence potential witnesses. These victims were released weeks later and only after their families had each paid a 500 USD ransom.

Vietnamese victims of sex trafficking have reported to us that their traffickers retain the local police as "bảo kê" (literally "insurers"), meaning that the police would act at the request of the traffickers to ensure that non-cooperating victims will cooperate.

Prevention of human trafficking and monitoring of immigration patterns

Late last year one of our Vietnamese American volunteers planned a visit to Moscow. She was issued a tourist visa after three interviews spanning two weeks. Clearly the same standard does not apply to the issuance of Russian tourist visas to Vietnamese citizens in Vietnam.

Even casual inspection of tourist visa applications should suffice to reveal that there is a disproportionate number of Vietnamese from poverty-stricken villages in rural or mountainous areas traveling to Russia as tourists. This should have raised a red flag because these tourists struggle to place food on the table. A potentially effective but simple prevention measure is to inform such "tourists" of the risks of being trafficked and how to get help if trafficked. This is not being done.

We have discussed with our local Vietnamese contacts about distributing preventive information to the community of migrant workers in Moscow. Our contacts expressed fear of retaliation because organized crime syndicates operate openly while the police cannot be counted on for protection.

Involvement of civil society

Victims of human trafficking in Russia have practically no support from the NGO community. There is no NGO offering shelter, assisting with the rescue, or advocating for the rights of victims.

In February of this year, four Vietnamese victims of sex trafficking managed to escape the brothel where they had been held captive. I did an extensive search for an NGO that could take them in, give them temporary refuge, feed them and act as their advocate. There was none.

In 2009 we hosted at our national headquarters in Northern Virginia a dozen representatives of Russian NGOs working on human trafficking issues. All these NGOs had ceased operation because of the unsupportive environment they had to work in. The few international NGOs that we knew had pulled out of Russia.

Running out of money and a place to hide, the said four victims were soon recaptured by their traffickers.

In conclusion, Vietnamese victims of human trafficking in Russia have practically no chance of finding freedom. The syndicates that traffic them do so almost openly, counting on the complicity of the local police. The Investigative Committee at the federal level often relies on the local police to investigate reported incidents of human trafficking. In rare instances where victims could escape their traffickers and evade the local police, there is no place for them to hide and no one to come to their rescue. There are fewer NGOs fighting human trafficking in Russia today than four years ago.

I do not see or foresee any improvements to the current situation for the near future.