



International Organization for Migration (IOM)  
Organisation internationale pour les migrations (OIM)  
Organización Internacional para las Migraciones (OIM)

## **World Day against Trafficking in Persons - 30 July**

### **CRISIS SITUATIONS ARE LABORATORIES FOR HUMAN TRAFFICKERS**

By Ambassador William Lacy Swing

When disaster strikes, the humanitarian community rushes to respond. We mobilize resources, activate response mechanisms, send doctors, search and rescue teams, logisticians, counsellors, engineers, equipment, tarpaulins, food, medicine and water. All the paraphernalia of an emergency response, swings into action, to conflict zones, natural calamities, or man-made disasters.

We know there will be acute needs. We know that there may be injuries, food shortages, water-borne diseases.

We know that people will become displaced and that women, the elderly, the disabled, young children, irregular migrants, will be the worst affected.

But there is one thing we have only just learnt for sure, though we long suspected it: Trafficking in persons not only flourishes during a disaster, it is a direct result of disasters, every bit as much as the infrastructural damages, the loss of life or the food shortages which garner far more attention.

IOM's new study, "Addressing Human Trafficking and Exploitation in Times of Crisis" makes the forceful case that protecting against trafficking and exploitation is a life-saving action, and should be treated as such alongside "traditional" relief interventions.

We looked at the armed conflicts in Libya, Iraq, Syria and across West Africa, at the earthquakes in the Indian Ocean region, Haiti and Nepal, Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, and the protracted unrest in Eastern Africa leading to migration through North Africa and onwards to Europe.

In all three categories of disaster we found that the lack of normalcy allowed traffickers to exploit existing or crisis-induced vulnerabilities. In conflict, the lack of rule of law creates a condition of impunity, where people are trafficked to finance the war, to provide sexual services, and to reinforce enslavement of ethnic minorities. This is particularly true in Libya and across the Levant where migrant workers are facing increasingly hostile and abusive working conditions. Meanwhile, the on-going conflict in Syria has forced many families and individuals to adopt harmful coping mechanisms such as forced early marriages and child labour, often resulting in exploitation and trafficking.

The chaos that results from massive natural disasters such as those seen in Nepal, the Philippines, Haiti and the Tsunami-affected countries in the Indian Ocean region can provide a perfect laboratory for trafficking activities where criminals experiment with new ways of exploiting vulnerable people. Meanwhile irregular migrants on the dangerous and remote migratory corridors of northern Africa can quickly be found by traffickers and duped into slavery.

It is estimated that up to 800,000 people are trafficked across borders annually in a business worth billions of dollars to the criminal gangs. Yet each year, only 45,000 are identified. IOM assists one in seven of these cases, helping them back to their feet after years of appalling abuse and cruelty. Sex slaves may have to service up to ten men per night, which leaves immense physical and mental scars.

Some of the 600 men we recently helped to free from Thai fishing trawlers in the seas off Indonesia had not been on dry land for years – one of the cases had been separated from his family, without any contact, for 22 years. People like this need understanding and help, often long-term, in times of stability as much as in times of crisis.

We want to see changes in the way the international community and its partners – humanitarian, military, civic society - respond to prevent trafficking and exploitation during crisis situations. The links between the vulnerability of mobile populations and exploitive practices which existed prior to a crisis need to be factored into a humanitarian response.

One of the most important areas is simple awareness-raising. To that end, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) for humanitarian response should strengthen the humanitarian community response and issue operational guidelines for anti-trafficking protection and prevention interventions before, during and after a crisis.

We applaud the work of Ms. Maria Grazia Giammarinaro, the UN Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, as her office continues to raise awareness on this topic, report findings to higher levels, and provide technical support to the humanitarian community and authorities of affected countries.

There are many more remedies and steps that need to be taken, before, during and after crises. A first one is for all of us to realise that the conditions that enable trafficking don't occur overnight – they are part of the fabric of the society we build. When that fabric is torn, the human traffickers move in.

Amb. William Lacy Swing is the Director General of the International Organization for Migration