

## Human Trafficking: Strengthening the commitment of the churches in the face of human rights violations

IMADR LATIN AMERICA BASE



*IMADR Latin America Base-organized workshop (November 2006, Buenos Aires)*

IMADR organized various anti-trafficking events and workshops in November 2006, in collaboration with the Ecumenical Service of Support and Orientation to Migrants and Refugees, CAREF, and the Women's Forum of the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI), at the Ecumenical Institute and University of Theological Studies (ISEDET), Buenos Aires, Argentina.

The convocation was part of the "16 Days of Activism" for the No Violence against Women campaign, coordinated in Argentina by the regional representative of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as well as several activities of CLAI taking place throughout Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean.

Of the sixty-five participants, there were representatives of member churches of the Latin American Council of Churches, ecumenical organizations, representatives of the Scalabrinian Congregations of the Roman Catholic Church, organizations from civil society, community leaders from different regions (including Oberá, Misiones and Montevideo, Uruguay), and theological students of ISEDET, among others.

The national encounter opened with a panel

discussion featuring experts on the issue of human trafficking, including a devotional that placed the issue of human trafficking inside an ecclesiological framework and allowing for the expression of expectations of participants. A UNHCR representative brought greetings to the audience, stressing the importance of the initiative. The panel included Dr. Mario Jorge Yutzis (Professor of ISEDET; member and Vice-president of the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination; Vice-president of IMADR), Norma Sanchis (Sociologist; Coordinator of the Network of Gender and Commerce in Latin America), and Sara Torres (Coalition against Trafficking of Women and Children; Co-coordinator of the "No to Human Trafficking" Network).

The panel explored the problem of human trafficking as a world-wide phenomenon, crossing boundaries and regions, subjecting six million people per year (four million adults, two million children, well over 90% female in total) to extreme conditions of exploitation, both sexual and in the exploitive labor sphere, to the extent that it is called "modern slavery." During the presentation, both global and local impacts of human trafficking were explored, including local case studies.

Following the panel presentation, the time for open conversation sparked great interest and debate. This was a moment of intense exchange that demonstrated the search for a commitment in the face of the pain of so many fellow human beings—brothers and sisters—a theme that would be revisited toward the end of the meeting.

The second day of the workshop began with a devotional that allowed for the presentation and integration of participants as a way to introduce the idea of working in a network to confront complex issues. After this, the Team of Institutional Strengthening on Human Trafficking (FOINTRA) of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) led a session to deepen the integral understanding of the issue of human trafficking. Their presentation included the following themes: the definition of trafficking according to the Palermo Protocol; identifying the circuits that exist in our country and in our region; the dimension and magnitude of the problem; groups considered most vulnerable and at high risk for being trafficked; methodologies of deceit (how victims are lied to and coerced into trafficking); and the consequences of this organized crime.

The entire session promoted a de-mythologizing of the traditional concepts of blaming, challenged the cultural understanding of organized crime and prostitution, strengthening interest in looking for ways of impact in prevention and intervention by the churches and ecumenical organizations.

Later, the team from the Ecumenical Service of Support and Orientation to Migrants and Refugees (CAREF) coordinated a workshop to reflect on the impact that this issue had on participants of the meeting, advancing the construction of a common diagnostic on this issue in the different regions according to the perception of those present, and discussing some possible actions to carry forward a common agenda toward the prevention and denunciation of this crime.

Among these common proposed actions for education and advocacy and focus on prevention, the following proposals were offered: the dissemination of a declaration developed by the group to be publicized within the churches, ecumenical organizations, and society; the development of graphic artistic materials encouraging advocacy and prevention at a local level; the publication of a synthesis of the reports and presentations of the event and workshops; and a commitment toward local initiatives, especially in areas of high risk, such as impoverished communities within the interior providences of Argentina and Uruguay.

At the close of the event, a Bible study was prepared



*IMADR director Dr. Mario Jorge Yutzis presenting at the panel discussion on trafficking (November 2006, Buenos Aires)*

by Biblical professor Christina Conti, focusing on the issue of slavery from the Old Testament.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The two-day event was intense, inspiring and moving for the participants. The emotional impact generated by what was, for many participants, “new information,” requires a time of reflection in order to transform the impact generated into motivation and commitment toward seeking alternatives to action, advocacy and intervention, both in denunciation and in assistance and prevention.

This is an issue that requires an urgent commitment on the part of churches, who are called to be a prophetic voice for those who have been silenced, and to make good use of their resources to assist, accompany and contribute toward prevention.

Leaders from all three organizing groups gave the gathering a very high evaluation, understanding this as the beginning of a process that needs to be continued in order to achieve the objective of expanding the commitment to include other people, networks and organizations to end human trafficking. Toward this goal, a commitment was made to follow up the encounter during 2007, with a second series of workshops in Buenos Aires, including a wider circle of networks and communities.

Bringing a wider awareness and motivating common actions and advocacy in order to end human trafficking requires working together to articulate an agenda within various social sectors, including the churches and ecumenical agencies. Until and unless this is accomplished, human trafficking, or “modern slavery,” will remain hidden from public knowledge or concern. 🕒