News
Trafficking



A suspected victim of human trafficking to India who returned to Kenya with the help of the International Organization for Migration is seen in Nairobi on Aug. 4, 2020. (CNS/Reuters/Jackson Njehia)

Carol Glatz

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Rome — March 24, 2022

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Protecting the human rights of people fleeing from or caught up in conflict zones must be as big a priority as providing them with basic material needs, said the leader of an international anti-trafficking network.

People facing a humanitarian crisis need material assistance and they need experts committed to protecting their human rights, said Comboni Sr. Gabriella Bottani, international coordinator of Talitha Kum, an international network of women and men religious and lay experts fighting human trafficking.

"Every conflict, every war, wherever it happens in the world, is (fueling) not just human trafficking, but is creating many other serious violations of human rights," she told Catholic News Service on March 24 by phone from Milan.



Comboni Missionary Sr. Gabriella Bottani is the international coordinator for Talitha Kum (Courtesy of Talitha Kum)

The best way to prevent abuses, including human trafficking and exploitation, is to stop what generates the huge numbers of potential victims: war, conflict and social instability, she said. "We need to do everything possible to restore peace."

Because of its international reach with its partner groups made up of religious congregations on five continents, Talitha Kum understands the common risks, red flags and causes of human trafficking. The network helps fund and train sisters and laypeople to be anti-trafficking experts on the ground wherever they work.

For example, two huge areas of concern continue to be Myanmar and Syria where protracted conflict, instability and poverty have led to horrific human rights' violations of civilians, Bottani said. In Syria, for example, people have been forced into armed conflict, prostitution, marriage or being sex slaves for rebels or army personnel, she said.

According to what she has heard from people on the ground in Syria, the priority has been to respond with emergency relief like food, blankets and basic needs, and less on protecting people's rights and vulnerabilities, she said.

"It is important to provide support for victims of human trafficking in conflict zones and prevent it," she said.

For those fleeing Ukraine into Poland, Talitha Kum's partner group is "Bakhita: Religious in Poland Networking Against Trafficking," which has been active since 2011.

What religious sisters do, Bottani said, is to work directly with local dioceses and Catholic charities to make their properties and resources available as part of one coordinated strategy, instead of acting on their own and risking redundancies.

"So, often when you hear that Caritas or a diocese is hosting however many people, many of them are in structures led by religious sisters," she said.

Advertisement

Religious sisters in Poland have so far opened up many convents, retreat centers and other structures, some near the border with Ukraine, to refugees and one religious congregation opened its convent for housing unaccompanied minors and

orphans, she added.

"Offering accommodation to people at risk of trafficking plays an important role in preventing human trafficking," she said, because it provides safe spaces for those who are a major target of traffickers, including women traveling alone with children.

Talitha Kum does not have a network in Ukraine, but many sisters are working inside the country helping coordinate people's safe passage into bordering nations and connecting them with legitimate forms of assistance, she said.

The "Bakhita" network works with refugees and the sisters build trust with people who may be skeptical or suspicious of those offering assistance, she said.

"Bakhita" members on the border in Poland are also "very quickly identifying risks" by listening to people and their concerns, she said; they are in contact with human rights advocates who are keeping track of suspicious activities and reports of disappearances so they can present evidence to government authorities, she added.

Human trafficking is very complex because "it is a process in which you do not know you are trafficked until you are in a situation of exploitation," Bottani said. The process can start off seeming legitimate; for example, it is not a crime to offer people free lodging in a private home, but from there, guests can be abused — even by a host family — or tricked or forced into illegal activity abroad by traffickers.

Speaking about refugees and civilians stuck in conflict zones, "we need to be very aware that they are in such a vulnerable condition, easily making them victims of other forms of crime and violations of human rights," she said.

The war in Ukraine has drawn greater attention to the importance of peace and the need to help those forced to flee, and it is "an appeal not to forget the other conflicts going on," she said.

"The call for solidarity is inclusive, embracing all people facing the same pain and violence," she said.

This story appears in the **War in Ukraine** feature series. View the full series.