Tech Gets Enlisted In The War Against Human Trafficking

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The fight against human trafficking is using a few new weapons: texting, iPhone apps and smarter passports.

An estimated 12.3 million adults and children around the world are trafficked — compelled in a variety of ways to work against their will — the U.S. State Department says.

"It's basically modern-day slavery," said Mark Latonero, research director for the University of Southern California's Annenberg Center. "It's a pernicious and widespread global problem."

The term "trafficking" covers a wide area.

"It's not just forced prostitution, it's also forced labor — people working in slaverylike conditions on farms, fishing boats, in nail salons, whatever," Latonero said.

He's working on a project to make it easier to get help for trafficking victims via cell phone.

The Technology and Trafficking in Persons Research Initiative will allow concerned citizens, potential trafficking victims and possibly victims themselves to text information to a hotline. The project is led by the Annenberg Center.

Texts will be sorted by a computer and sent to appropriate agencies that could help, Latonero says.

The initiative focuses on the Mekong region in Southeast Asia: Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, southern China and Burma.

"This part of the world is a major source, transit and destination region for men, women and children forced into labor and prostitution," Latonero said.

Cell Phones Aplenty

The program could be in place by mid-2011 in Thailand, with government funding and philanthropic grants expected to cover the $500,000-plus launch costs.

Though residents of the region are extremely poor — which makes them vulnerable to trafficking — most have cell phones, Latonero says.

"That," he said, "is our opportunity."

Phones are used on another front in the fight against trafficking. An iPhone application for consumers concerned about whether forced or child labor was used to create their purchase became available last month.

The app, Free2Work, is a joint project of Not For Sale, a San Francisco anti-slavery nonprofit, and the International Labor Rights Forum, a nonprofit advocacy organization for workers. Juniper Networks (JNPR) funded the development of the application, which is free.

With the app, shoppers can access information about the labor practices of some 60 companies, including Nike (NKE), Hasbro (HAS), Hewlett-Packard (HPQ) and Apple (AAPL). It rates the companies' labor practices. Not For Sale compiles information from company Web sites and public databases to create its corporate ratings.

"It's when people are shopping that they really need that information," said Dave Batsone, president of Not For Sale.

This is an innovative use of technology, says Noah Flower of consulting firm Monitor Institute.

"Providing ethically minded consumers with point-of-purchase information is a major step forward in enabling them to make informed decisions," said Flower, who tracks how nonprofits use technology.

Trafficking can refer to the open movement of people — carrying fake identification — on transportation such as planes and ships.

Biodata-Enhanced Passports

Smart passports are the most traditional way to combat this type of trafficking, says Benjamin N. Lawrance, Conable Chair in International Studies at Rochester Institute of Technology.

Smart passports contain a microchip with a traveler's biodata such as fingerprints or iris scan.

Used in Western countries, including the U.S., smart passports are far superior to older-style passports used in many countries that "export" trafficked persons, Lawrance says.

And fraudulent passports and other documents are easy to get in those countries, says Lawrance, an expert on West African trafficking.

Lawrance pointed to an incident earlier this year. A 16-year-old Ghanaian boy was trafficked to Britain to work as a prostitute. The boy had a passport, a visa and a letter saying he would be employed in a soccer program.

All his fake, low-tech documents were obtained in Ghana. "The technological impediments to trafficking that boy are very few," Lawrance said.

If more countries used Western-style smart passports, it wouldn't stop trafficking, Lawrance says, but it would make it tougher.

Trafficking costs would rise because of the greater expense of producing smart passports. Traffickers might then rely more on other methods, such as transporting victims in a ship's cargo hold rather than on an airplane, Lawrance says.

Smart passports could also reduce "retrafficking," he says. Victims returned to their own country without proper documentation are vulnerable to being trafficked again. If they had smart passports issued in the country deporting them, retrafficking would be less likely, Lawrance says.

"The market for cheap, coerced labor exists. It will always exist," he said. "I'm not sure technology is going to stop trafficking. It will make it harder for victims to be retrafficked."

The extent of the international trafficking problem is news to many, Lawrance laments.

"There are more people today being trafficked than ever before in human history," he said. "It's a huge business. I don't like to think of it as a business, but it is."

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