

Sin City of the East

By **Malia Politzer**

MACAU—Walk into a massage parlor in this Chinese enclave, and you'll likely meet beautiful young women—some of whom aren't there voluntarily. So it goes in Asia's sin city, where gambling and legalized prostitution go hand in hand.

That Macau has a thriving sex industry is not news. But many of these women are victims of modern-day slavery. So says the U.S. State Department's annual Trafficking in Persons report, which puts Macau on the Tier-2 watch list for the second year in a row and earned it a personal visit last month from Mark Lagon, the U.S. ambassador-at-large to monitor and combat trafficking in persons.

Human trafficking is a growing problem all over the world—but it is the worst in Asia, where Mark Taylor, a State researcher and one of the main writers of the annual report, estimates that four of every 1,000 people are victims of trafficking. Explosive economic growth in some regions, combined with extreme poverty in others, increasingly porous borders, easy access to information and cross-border social networks have facilitated a massive movement of people looking for better economic opportunities abroad. But weak rule of law, high levels of governmental corruption and indifference also leave migrants vulnerable to the worst forms of exploitation: debt bondage and—particularly for women and children—sexual servitude.

The International Labor Organization estimates that nearly 12.3 million people world-wide are trapped in slave-like conditions—ranging from forced labor, bonded labor, forced child labor or sexual servitude—at any one time. Many are in Asia. It doesn't help that two of the world's most populated countries—China and India—are stuck on the Tier-2 watch list for the second consecutive year, along with Cambodia, Burma and North Korea still languish in Tier 3—reserved for the worst offenders—and were joined this year by Malaysia.

Macau should be an exception, but it's not. Unlike many of its Asian neighbors, Macau has a booming economy, with a per-capita GDP of over \$28,400 in 2006 and annual growth close to 17%. Unemployment is low and foreign investment high.

After opening up the gambling industry to foreign competition in 2002, the territory now boasts 25 casinos, including American-owned Las Vegas-strip attractions such as the Wynn Macau and the Venetian Macau. A Playboy Bunny Mansion soon will be added to the mix. No wonder Macau, which out-earned the Vegas strip by more than \$300,000 last year, has nearly doubled tourist visits to 12 million over the past five years.

Despite—or perhaps because of—its swift development, Macau has become a major sex-trafficking destination for victims from the Philippines, Thailand, Mongolia, Russia, Vietnam and mainland China, according to the U.S. report. The Mongolian government recently identified Macau as the top destination for trafficking victims from its country. University of Macau sociologist Alex Choi counted 30 documented cases of human trafficking involving 119 women—three of them minors—in 2006 alone. "And that's just the tip of the iceberg," he says. These were cases in which women actually came forward to report that they were trafficking victims, according to Mr. Choi. The vast majority are unable to do so, for fear of deportation or retribution.

Yet until recently Macanese authorities have made few efforts to seek out victims, or to prosecute traffickers. Trafficking victims who have been detained—usually on visa violations—are often summarily deported and receive little or no police protection. Of the many trafficking cases reported every year, there have been no prosecutions, according to Mr. Lagon.

But a hefty economic blow from the U.S. might cause Macau to change its tune. The State Department has announced that if Macau doesn't make signif-

icant efforts to combat trafficking within the next 12 months, it could slide from the Tier-2 watch-list to Tier 3—and face sanctions such as the withholding of nonhumanitarian, nontrade-related foreign assistance and funding for employer and official training or student-exchange programs. The U.S. would also oppose any additional assistance (excluding humanitarian, trade-related, or development-related assistance) from international financial institutions, according to the report. In a meeting with the U.S. government last month, Macau Chief Executive Edmund Ho expressed a commitment to make significant efforts to combat trafficking in a matter of months.

Fighting trafficking is no easy venture—particularly in Macau, where sex tourism and gambling have been key industries for more than 150 years. Because prostitution is legal, police seldom question whether women are in the trade voluntarily, according to State's researcher, Mr. Taylor. That's bad news for migrant trafficking victims, many of whom don't speak Chinese. And unlike countries with known trafficking problems, Macau—which is a special administrative region of China—lacks consular representation, which acts as a support system to foreign citizens in trouble. Matters are further complicated by large organized-crime rings that often control the massage parlors, saunas and discos where many victims work.

Possibly the greatest challenge facing Macau's antitrafficking efforts is the crime's invisibility. Sex workers—the majority of whom are migrant workers, according to Macau University's Mr. Choi—are stigmatized and often perceived by the general population as deserving of

the dangers they face. Nor does Macau have nongovernmental organizations working on behalf of trafficking victims; in other countries such groups frequently shoulder much of the burden of victim identification and assistance. The Good Shepherd Centre, a women's crisis center run by Catholic nuns, has recently begun focusing on trafficking issues in Macau. But the lack of any social support structure, information about the breadth of trafficking, or public awareness makes it difficult to identify or reach out to victims, according to director Sister Juliana Devoy.

Still, there are steps Macau could take to show that it is serious about combating the problem. Hitting some of the basic benchmarks set out in the U.S. report—implementing a comprehensive trafficking law, stepping up efforts to prosecute traffickers, creating a governmental position dedicated to anti-trafficking efforts, training po-



Reuters

Who's manning the casinos?

lice on how to identify victims and raising public awareness—would be a good start. Macau could work with source countries to combat trafficking. Representatives from Mongolia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Asia Foundation, International Organization for Migration and Mongolia's Center for Gender Equality visited Macau last month to discuss bilateral efforts. Mongolia has expressed interest in opening a consulate there, as has the Philippines.

Success will depend, in large part, on Mr. Ho's promise to crack down on trafficking. Let's hope he follows through on his word. Asia's sin city doesn't need human slaves to flourish.

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