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Babies bred for sale in Nigeria

Child trafficking in Africa's most populous nation has taken on disturbing new proportions, with police raids revealing the existence of what local media have dubbed baby 'farms' or 'factories'

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AFP, ENUGU, NIGERIA



Above and top: These photos taken on Sept. 26, 2003, show dozens of slave children riding in the back of a police vehicle after they were detained in Seme, a major border post and smuggling hub on the highway between Lagos, Nigeria's commercial capital, and Cotonou, a major port and business center in the Republic of Benin.

PHOTOS: AFP

Neighbors were suspicious of the daytime silence at the maternity clinic that came to life only after nightfall, though never suspected its disquieting secret — it was breeding babies for sale.

But recent police raids have revealed an alleged network of such clinics, dubbed baby "farms" or "factories" in the local press, forcing a new look at the scope of people trafficking in Nigeria.

At the hospital in Enugu, a large city in Nigeria's southeast, 20 teenage girls were rescued in May in a police swoop on what was believed to be one of the largest infant trafficking rings in the west African country.

The two-story building on a dusty street in Enugu's teeming Uwani district now stands deserted, shutters down. Neighbors had long found something bizarre about the establishment, where there was virtually no activity during the day, they said.

The doctor in charge, who is now on trial, reportedly lured teenagers with unwanted pregnancies by offering to help with abortion.

They would be locked up there until they gave birth, whereupon they would be forced to give up their babies for a token fee of around US\$170 dollars.

The babies would then be sold to buyers for anything between US\$2,500 and US\$3,800 dollars each, according to a state agency fighting human trafficking in Nigeria, the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP).

But luck ran out for the gynecologist, said to be in his 50s, when a woman to whom he had sold a day-old infant was caught by Nigeria's Security and Civil Defense Service (NSCDS) while trying to smuggle the child to Lagos, the security agency said.

Statistics on the prevalence of baby breeding are hard to come by, but anti-trafficking campaigners say it is widespread and run by well-organized criminal syndicates.

"We believe the scope is much wider than we know," said Ijeoma Okoronkwo, head of NAPTIP.

"It has been happening over time, but we did not know. The first indication we had about this came in December 2006, when an NGO raised the alarm and told us babies were being exchanged for cash and that there were a number of hospitals involved," she said.

BREEDING BABIES

The practice takes varying forms. One is where desperate teenagers with unplanned pregnancies, fearing ostracism by society, get lured to a clinic and are forced to turn over their babies.

The girls are so intimidated many can hardly relate their experience freely.

But one brave victim, an 18-year-old, who asked not to be named for fear of reprisal, recounted her weeklong ordeal when she was trapped inside one of the clinics days before it was raided by police.

"The moment I stepped in there, I was given an injection, I passed out and next thing I woke up and realized I had been raped," said the girl, who was five months pregnant at the time of her ordeal.

When she asked if she could telephone her family to let them know of her whereabouts, the doctor slapped her on the face.

She was shoved into a room where 19 other girls were kept; all had been through a similar experience. She said the doctor raped her again the following day. A week later police swooped on the clinic.

Another category of young women, driven by deep poverty, lease out their wombs and volunteer themselves, as regularly as is biologically possible, to produce babies for sale.

"When we raided the hospital, we found four women who had been staying at the clinic for up to three years, to breed babies," NSDCS boss for Enugu state commandant Desmond Agu said.

The doctor, whom police named, "had been inviting boys to come and impregnate girls," said Agu.

This was just one of around a dozen centers — masquerading as maternity clinics, foster homes, orphanages or shelters for homeless pregnant girls — unearthed in recent months where babies were swapped for cash, said the NAPTIP boss.

Last month police swooped on a so-called foster home, not far from the Enugu police headquarters, where seven pregnant teenage girls and five workers were rounded up, residents said.

In 2005, a Lagos-based orphanage suspected of ties to child trafficking rings, was shut down.

There, charred baby bones were discovered on the rubbish tip, leading to suspicion the orphanage was involved in the peddling of human body parts, possibly for use in rituals or for organ harvesting.

In other cases observers say babies are purchased to be raised for child labor and sexual abuse or prostitution.

A PROFITABLE BUSINESS

Trafficking in humans has become a lucrative trade.

Globally, it is estimated that billions of dollars exchange hands annually in payment for humans, according to the International Labor Organization (ILO) and several UN agencies.

Witchcraft rituals also fuel baby trafficking, but experts say it is other motives that predominate, at least in this region of Nigeria.

Communities frown on children born out of wedlock and childlessness in marriage remains a curse for the woman.

"In the Igbo society, the price to remain childless is too high," said clinical psychologist Peter Egbigbo.

"Childless people want to pay any amount for a child and doctors become rich over night," he said, adding that those who are ready to adopt a baby would rather hide the fact that it is not their biological child.

Exchanging babies for cash is widespread in the region and in many cases locals do not see anything wrong in so doing.

"Many people don't even know what they are doing is criminal. They just think it's adoption — you walk into a clinic, pay a fee and you have a baby," said Okoronkwo.

Buying or selling of babies is illegal in Nigeria and can carry a 14-year jail term.

It is estimated that globally hundreds of thousands of people are trafficked annually.

UNICEF, the UN Children's Fund, estimates that at least 10 children are sold daily across Nigeria, where human trafficking is ranked the third most common crime after economic fraud and drug trafficking.