

Zero Tolerance for Human Trafficking - Department of Defense charged to stop military members' demand for prostitutes.

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It's a given: Prostitution co-exists with military bases and installations. Where there are military forces, you'll find brothels. For years, officials and law enforcement turned a blind eye. They won't get away with that much longer. Activists and congressional leaders have expressed outrage that military personnel would abuse vulnerable children and women in nations that they are supposed to protect. For Americans who support our troops, hearing of these actions is disheartening.

In response, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) has established a zero-tolerance policy to aggressively implement policy directives against trafficking. Significantly, these directives cover military contractors and subcontractors, too. Some of the civilian personnel hired by the military have been among the most notorious of those who, though sent to protect people, have ended up abusing them.

On Wednesday, the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on International Relations held an open joint subcommittee hearing on DOD's implementation of those policy directives. Recognizing that prostitution is the driving force behind, the hearing was an unequivocal statement that the United States military must take decisive action to curb military involvement in creating a for prostitution, which fuels trafficking. In a thinly veiled warning, Rep. Christopher Smith (New Jersey), said, "Anti-trafficking efforts must become part of DOD's organizational culture and infrastructure. Despite some progress, I am concerned that this is not yet the case."

The hearings conveyed the message that if the wickedness doesn't end, shaming will begin. In other words, the bottom line is implementation, not just policy. Congress is unwilling to let the military get by with conformity on paper; it is demanding evidence of success in combating trafficking. In his opening remarks, the chairman of the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel, Rep. John M. McHugh (New York), expressed appreciation for DOD's "aggressive approach" in combating trafficking, but stressed that "there is more work to be done" as communicated in the latest report, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2007.

Rep. Smith, a co-convenor, acknowledged the importance of the policy directives and praised the DOD's action in South Korea, where "strong and decisive" action has curbed the involvement of U.S. service members "in creating a demand for prostitution that fuels trafficking." Even so, he acknowledged "horrific accounts" of the evils perpetrated by military service members, government contractors and international peacekeepers around the world. Rep. Smith stressed that unless the U.S. military takes the lead, we can't expect to see international organizations do anything. He noted the "slow pace" of the United Nations' efforts – investigations of nearly 300 personnel have resulted in almost half being repatriated and around 40 cases dismissed. Those investigations show that while policies are important, the key is implementation. "Bureaucracy," said Chairman Smith "is no excuse for tolerating exploitation."

The necessary reforms received a jump-start in 2002 when a National Security Presidential Directive established the United States' zero-tolerance position. The State Department's Trafficking in Persons office (TIP) was charged with overseeing 11 government agencies working together to implement the Directive. In his remarks, Ambassador John Miller, Director of the TIP office, called this arrangement "good for accountability and for maximizing our success against human trafficking here and abroad." He lauded the U.S. military for "taking proactive steps" against trafficking and said that, compared with other militaries around the world, the U.S. military stands at the "forefront of armed forces that are instituting serious change" to "combat modern-day slavery." DOD official Gail H. McGinn began with a less-than-inspiring defense of the department's efforts. She cited classes in awareness, including special modules for commanders and law enforcement personnel. Further, DOD has implemented a "best practices" recognition program. Another DOD official, Thomas F. Gimble, explained the impetus for the "thorough, global and extensive" investigation of military involvement in trafficking in South Korea and announced that a report (reflecting 900 interviews and 10,000 responses to an online survey) will be released in August. Air Force Colonel Robert K. Boyles reported on the initiatives in Iraq, especially regarding contractors and their potential for trafficking abuses.