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Conference Spotlights Human Trafficking In Region

Megan Kuhn

05/02/2006 -- When Americans hear about sexual slavery—girls as young as 12 being raped by 30 to 40 men a day—they often think of it as a crime that only occurs in developing countries, said U.S. Rep. Frank Wolf (R-VA-10) as he introduced the first panel discussion of his Human Rights Conference Saturday.

"This doesn't only happen in Thailand, it happens in our land. It happens in our region," he said.

Human trafficking is described as inducing someone into the commercial sex industry or labor through force, fraud or coercion. Not only is the crime increasingly local—the Washington, DC-based nonprofit Polaris Project aided 90 trafficking victims in this region during the past two years—the majority of victims of human trafficking in the United States are not foreigners, but young American women and children, said Polaris co-executive director Katherine Chon.

"It sounds sensational because it's far from the realities of our experience," she said. Predators kidnap a minority of young girls and women, but most often they lure their victims away from home by preying on their vulnerabilities and dreams of a better life, telling victims that they—not their parents—love them. Then the pimps begin to dominate every part of the young girls' lives, telling them "if you love me, here's what you wear," she said.

Chon said trafficking victims in Northern Virginia work at bus stops and traditional commercial sex industry venues such as strip clubs and escort services. "You name the commercial sex industry and traffickers put their victims there," she said.

Chon and other panelists who gathered at the School Administration Building in Broadlands urged the 80 attendees to pressure lawmakers to combat sexual slavery. "Traffickers take advantage of our silence," she said. "Traffickers tell victims, 'you're not worth anything. No one cares about you.' The victims themselves don't see it as human rights abuse. Even if you're not part of the support system, our silence empowers traffickers."

She noted that anti-trafficking bills have not gone far in the Virginia General Assembly. Wolf said passing legislation requires educating the General Assembly because members often do not know that sexual trafficking happens in their districts.

Educating women is also key to combating human trafficking, but so is re-

educating men that things associated with sex trafficking, such as strip clubs and prostitution, are serious matters, said Gannis Sims of the U.S. State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking. Too often the culture glorifies these things, he said, noting that a song about a pimp, "It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp" won an Academy Award this year.

Loudoun Sheriff's Office spokesman Kraig Troxell said he was unaware of any instances of sexual trafficking in Loudoun County. Five or six years ago the sheriff's office shut down a Sterling massage parlor for offering sexual acts on the premise. Troxell said the massage parlor employees were voluntary participants and not illegal aliens. In 2003, deputies shutdown an illegal escort service in Ashburn and the operator was sentenced to three years in prison in federal court.

Conference panelists also addressed international human trafficking and other injustices such as religious persecution in Vietnam and China, concentration camps in North Korea and the genocide in Darfur, Sudan.

Stone Bridge High School's Amnesty International Club president Siree Allers said her organization had been focusing on the Darfurian genocide in April, but upon hearing about human trafficking at the conference, the high school junior said, "I thought I knew about the world. It really opens your eyes. I'd heard about it but never knew it existed" in this area.

Allers and fellow clubs members, as well as members of Crossroads United Methodist Church in Ashburn, rallied against the Darfurian genocide with 10,000 to 15,000 people from across the country at the mall Sunday.
