



BY GERALD MARTINEAU — THE WASHINGTON POST

Speakers at the conference included Katherine Chon of the Polaris Project, Jeanne Smoot of the Tahirih Justice Center, Gannon Sims of the State Department's office on human trafficking and Rep. Frank Wolf, who moderated the panel.

RAISING AWARENESS

Human Trafficking Hits Home

Activists Say Crime Isn't Just a Foreign Problem, Urge Action

By **ARIANNE ARYANPUR**
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Human trafficking is one of the fastest-growing crimes in the world and an increasing problem in the Washington area, human rights activists said yesterday in a panel discussion. They urged their Loudoun County audience to ask lawmakers to combat sexual slavery.

"A lot of times we're talking about these issues, thinking they're taking place in Thailand, when they're really taking place in Tysons Corner," said Rep. Frank R. Wolf (R-Va.), whose office organized the conference in Ashburn.

Human trafficking — forcing or coercing someone into labor or sexual exploitation — is growing, said Katherine Chon, co-executive director of the Polaris Project, a D.C.-based nonprofit organization that studies and helps trafficking victims. The area is one of the top 10 destinations for human traffickers, Chon said.

Speakers included a representative from the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, which estimates that 20,000 women and children are smuggled into the United States each year, with most forced

into prostitution.

Chon cited a Latino woman who was forced into repeated prostitution and Asians who were lured to the United States with promises of legitimate employment, only to be forced to work at illicit massage parlors to pay for their transportation. In some of the cases Polaris has studied, Chon said, traffickers approached children and women at bus stops and malls in Arlington.

"They're brought here illegally, so they don't know who to talk to," Chon said.

Danny Finotti, who with students from his high school's Amnesty International Club helped make up an audience of about 80 residents, religious leaders and workers from nongovernmental agencies, said most of his peers think human rights abuses occur only in other countries.

"But this just shows it's going on here," said Finotti, 17, who plans to share the information with classmates at Stone Bridge High School in Ashburn. "I think it will be a good way to get them involved."

Also in the audience was Alicia O. McPhie, international relations chairman of Leesburg's Zonta Club, which works to improve the

status of women. She said she came to see what could be done to help.

"It's about educating people and hoping that they can go out and educate others," McPhie said.

One of the topics of the session was sexual violence in Sudan's Darfur region, the focus of antigencide rallies planned for today on the Mall and across the nation.

Jeanne Smoot, who spoke on behalf of the Falls Church-based Tahirih Justice Center, which combats violence against women and children, pointed to the importance of grassroots education and advocacy.

The best way to fight human rights abuses, she said, is to increase local and international awareness: "Traffickers take advantage of our silence, of our inaction."

Last year, the United States gave \$95 million to 101 countries to fight human trafficking, protect survivors and jail traffickers.

Delmer Gann, a Federal Express courier who said he attended the conference because he has always been interested in human rights issues, said he thinks more should be done, citing a need for tougher legislation to crack down on traffickers.