Traffickers blitz borders

Illega movement of humans second only to drugs as world's most profitable criminal enterprise

Analysis
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The immigration division of Home Affairs, over the past decade in particular, has found itself on the frontline of the complex war against human trafficking and people smuggling in South Africa.

The rise of this phenomenon in our country implies the existence of powerful organised criminal syndicates that are assisted by a mix of foreign and local agents and facilitators, many of whom conduct legitimate business and lend a veneer of respectability to this illicit endeavour.

While there may at times be a distinction between people smuggling and human trafficking, which turns on the issue of consent of the person who is the object of the illegal relocation, often the distinction is spurious. Smuggling may at times begin as overt migration but mutate into trafficking when the smuggler turns over the vulnerable migrant to trafficking syndicates. The new Act recognises this in its broad treatment of the offence in chapter 2.

In South Africa people smuggling is closely linked to the asylum system, which is often used as a means of registering the stay of persons who arrive on our shores illegally. Having inter alia implemented an accelerated process of determining newly arrived asylum seeker applications within six months, this incentive for using asylum has been introduced, leading to a dramatic decline in the number of new asylum applications last year.

New and altered modes of operation are constantly devised by trafficking syndicates and the state is in a perpetual drive to improve its detection and regulating capabilities - all of which require enormous resources which are more readily available in developed countries.

Border control and tighter enforcement of immigration and permitting processes by the Department of Home Affairs have become a major site of struggle between syndicates and the state. Ironically, the first line of attack by syndicates is to accuse the department of human rights violations in what is essentially a reputation war.

This is not unique to South Africa. On a daily basis attempts are made to broaden border security at ports of entry, utilising legitimate means of challenge alongside a carefully orchestrated propaganda war. Emphasised with these challenges is the use of fraudulent documents, collusion with corrupt officials and the acquisition of documents through misrepresentation by intermediaries with the department.

In this month of August as South Africa pays particular attention to the issues confronting fronts, it is apt to draw the link between the illicit sex industry and people smuggling and human trafficking. Here again the onslaught in the name of human rights takes the form of calls for the liberalisation of prostitution as if this is a benign practice which holds all promise for the attainment of the total emancipation of women. Nothing in these debates records the indignity, degradation and disgrace suffered by women and children who are trafficked in the so-called "trade".

The Internet has opened new avenues for traffickers who operate both internationally and domestically.

Combating and prosecution of persons and organisations involved in human trafficking in South Africa is in its infancy. These are very difficult cases to prove in court and perpetrators are highly resourceful and adept at evading capture by the police. Trafficking in South Africa is a major problem and we need to do more to combat it.

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