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Witness for Justice #481

June 21, 2010

Tears Beyond the Cheers: Another Side to the World Cup

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One of the things I enjoy most about living in Washington, DC, is its international flavor and vibrant international communities. This means, of course, that World Cup fever has swept up many soccer fans living and working in the Washington area. As I walk through DC neighborhoods I see fans glued to televisions in pubs and restaurants, and hear the chants, cheers and groans echo into the street. I confess that I am not particularly a soccer aficionado, but I am drawn to the energy and excitement around the World Cup. I like the sense of global connection it creates.

But there is another side to this world celebration that reveals a much more troubling reality of global connection – that of international human trafficking. On a weekly television program called “Outside the Lines,” the sports broadcasting channel ESPN ran a story on the dramatic rise in labor and sex trafficking in South Africa, closely linked to the anticipated wave of visitors expected for the World Cup. With over half a million fans expected to converge on soccer venues around the country, labor and sex traffickers have found an opportunity to turn exploitation of women and children into considerable profit.

According to the ESPN report, young women and girls as young as 12-years-old, primarily from countries in Africa and Southeast Asia, have been brought to South Africa in the months leading up to the World Cup, by traffickers who lure them with the prospect of good jobs and educational opportunities. With so many families trapped in desperate poverty around the world, there is hardly a choice. When they arrive, they are forced to work in brothels or on the street, held in captivity behind locked doors, and often severely beaten and raped by traffickers. As one advocate for victims of trafficking notes, they are “tricked, transported and trapped, leaving many families never to see their loved ones again.

On June 14th, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton released the 10th annual “Trafficking in Persons” report, which outlines trends in labor and sex trafficking in 177 countries around the world. This year, for the first time, the United States was included in the report, a reflection of the widespread and far-reaching nature of human trafficking. According to the TIP report, 12.3 million adults and children are caught in the web of forced labor, bonded labor and forced prostitution around the world.

Human trafficking is by no means limited to large venues and events like the World Cup, but the global stage certainly offers the opportunity to shine a light on this worldwide human rights violation, often so close and yet so far from our sight. Would that we have eyes to see.

To learn more about the issue of human trafficking and what you can do in response, go to <http://www.ucc.org/justice/human-rights/human-trafficking.html>.

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