

Cyber-protests grow over soccer sex slaves

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The international campaign against sex-slave trafficking in Germany at the World Cup is gaining momentum online, where one group has generated a petition with 20,000 signatures of protesters outraged at the practice, and other non-governmental organizations are offering aid for the exploited young women.

Last week U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice described the fight against the forced sex trade the "great moral calling of our time," as young women, kidnapped or lured with false job offers from Ukraine, Hungary and Poland are forced to perform sex acts for pay against their will.

Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., long known for his pro-life stance, held a

hearing last week in which he noted that the German government facilitated the prostitution rings, run by the criminal underworld, when it legalized the sex trade in 2002. Smith noted that at the World Cup, sex entrepreneurs have set up temporary wooden cabins on the streets of Berlin, called "performance boxes," where the soccer fans are cavorting with prostitutes, some as young as 14.

Sites on the Internet advertise even more elaborate brothels, including the storied four-story "Artemis," located near the Olympic Stadium, which Worldcupweb.com describes as "ready for the hordes of mostly male soccer fans from around the world who are flooding the city."

Fans reportedly pay \$90 for access to an array of 50 prostitutes, who are "outfitted with thong bikinis with a soccer ball motif," the Web site said. Rather than show porn videos to stimulate the men, however, the movie screens in the bordello are displaying the latest soccer matches.

"If you Google the term 'World Cup prostitution,' you will return hundreds of hits," said Austen Ruse, president of the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute, a non-governmental organization with offices in Washington and New York. "There is a lot of outrage over this. The U.S. has complained to Germany. There was a hearing in the U.S. House last week."

Ruse's organization, founded in 1997, is also fueling the fury against the exploitative practices allowed by the German government. At www.c-fam.org, the NGO has posted a petition for concerned folks to add their names to in order to protest the German policy. "We've had 20,000 signatures so far," Ruse said in an interview with The Web Tuesday. "The Internet is quite an echo chamber. It has quite a ripple effect."

After recently posting notice of its petition, the organization learned that protesters in London, reacting to the story of exploitation of underage

girls, demonstrated outside the German embassy in London.

"We put out the petition to raise awareness of the issue," said Ruse. "We will probably call a halt to it in a few days. We will deliver the signatures to the German Embassy in Washington and at the U.N. on June 26" -- the day that is marked by the United Nations to protest illegal sex trafficking worldwide, Ruse noted.

In addition to the online petition, Ruse's group has sent out the message about the sex-trafficking scandal via e-mail, and organizations like the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago's Respect Life Office have been forwarding them around the world for inclusion in church bulletins and the like. "There is a young girl in Russia who is about to answer an ad for a waitress job in Berlin while the World Cup is going on," states the e-mail from the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute, dated Wednesday, June 14, 2006. "When she arrives in Berlin, her 'employer' will beat her, steal her passport, chain her to a radiator in a dirty room, and force her into prostitution. We must do what we can to stop this outrage.

The Germans have tried to downplay the impact of forced prostitution on its legalized sex trade, and distributed a news release to reporters last week indicating that "there is no sound proof whatsoever that would corroborate any of the figures about thousands of women expected to be trafficked in Germany."

Human-rights group Amnesty International, however, has reported that violence and blackmail are indeed common tactics used against the young women, often from small towns or villages in rural parts of Eastern Europe. There may be as many as 40,000 women forced into sexual slavery during the four weeks of the World Cup, as there are not enough legal prostitutes to service the expected demand.

Another group, Catholic Relief Services, has been working on counter-trafficking. Executives at the Baltimore-based organization were briefed on an internal CRS report that described the World Cup as a huge business event for sex traffickers, The Web was told.

The European Parliament -- which the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute and other NGOs have been meeting with on the issue and related topics -- indicated that sex trafficking was indeed on the increase as a result of the soccer tournament. "There is a knock-on effect," said Franco Frattini, the European Union's justice commissioner.

The online protests and organizing efforts are having an impact on public policy and may lead to social policy changes in Germany, such as the delegalization of prostitution there, experts said. Author Usha C.V. Haley, who is a professor at the school of business at the University of New Haven, notes the "efficacy of the Internet as a medium for activism."

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