

Raise global awareness of child trafficking to stop it, Stanford scholar says

May 14 2014, by Clifton B. Parker



Stephan Sonnenberg, a lecturer at Stanford Law School, sees the international spread of outrage over the fate of 300 Nigerian girls kidnapped from their school in April as a sign that child trafficking is of global concern. Here, women rally near the Nigerian embassy in Paris on Monday. Credit:

http://news.stanford.edu/news/2014/may/images/13829-nigeria_news.jpg

The search is intensifying for the nearly 300 Nigerian girls who were kidnapped from their school in April by a radical Islamist group. The

U.S. government and others worldwide have offered intelligence and investigative help to the Nigerian government. The group that abducted the girls, Boko Haram, has threatened to sell them into slavery, prostitution or coerced marriage. Moreover, the story reflects a larger problem worldwide in the human trafficking of children.

Human rights expert Stephan Sonnenberg, a lecturer at the Stanford Law School, talked with Stanford News Service recently about the mass abductions. Sonnenberg is co-teaching a course on the legal, historical and medical issues involved in [human trafficking](#). His teaching colleagues are Katherine Jolluck, a senior lecturer in history, and Suzanne Lippert and Rebecca Walker, both clinical assistant professors of emergency medicine at Stanford.

What can be done to save the girls?

It seems to me that the best hope of saving the abducted girls lies in quiet negotiations, ideally involving the parents of the girls and community leaders of the northeastern Nigerian town of Chibok, from where the girls were abducted. When I read about this incident, I was reminded immediately of an incident that took place in northern Uganda in 1996, where the rebel Lord's Resistance Army abducted 139 girls from the St. Mary's College boarding school in Aboke, Uganda. That incident had a similarly terrorizing impact on local populations. In that instance, a nun and two teachers who worked at the school took it upon themselves, immediately in the aftermath of the abduction, to negotiate the release of the girls. They eventually succeeded in securing the release of 109 of the girls. Many of those 30 girls who remained were forced to commit unspeakable atrocities against civilians and one another, and reportedly forced into marriage with senior LRA commanders.

How can international law be applied to such an

instance or any others of child trafficking/kidnapping?

There is no doubt that child trafficking and kidnapping is illegal as a matter of [international law](#). For the most part, however, the law only obligates states to collaborate in their [law enforcement](#) approaches to this issue. Thus, insofar as the abducted girls were trafficked across international borders, the worldwide outcry over their plight should be directed at encouraging neighboring states to coordinate their efforts to identify the girls and return them to their families. International funds should also be made available to provide these [girls](#) with immediate medical, psychological and social support wherever they are identified, as a matter of right.

How large a problem is child trafficking in the world?

Child trafficking is a major issue. Definitive numbers are difficult to come by. Estimates vary widely, but it is estimated that hundreds of thousands of children are trafficked across international borders every year. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in 2009 estimated that 20 percent of trafficking victims worldwide were children. In 2012, the same office estimated that this number had grown to 27 percent. In Africa and the Middle East, approximately two-thirds of the total number of trafficking victims are children. Whatever the figures, it is clear that this is a serious problem.

What is your best advice for the U.S. government in offering to help find the girls?

The United States government can assist other governments with logistics and material support in helping to coordinate what looks likely to be a major [international law enforcement](#) operation. The United

States might be able to deploy some of its expertise in helping to ensure that any law enforcement operations are consistent with globally applicable [human rights](#) norms.

Why should the Nigerian kidnappings matter to the rest of the world?

The fact of the matter is that this does matter to the rest of the world. The abductions have been headline-grabbing news for some time now. To me, this is proof that our common humanity does not stop at our national borders. It reinforces the notion for me that national security is not the only type of security we care about, and that people around the world can be moved to care about the plight of innocent schoolgirls who were abducted and trafficked in faraway northern Nigeria.

Moreover, it is a problem that should touch each and every one of us every day. Many of the products we enjoy on a daily basis (chocolate, coffee, cotton, etc.) have been plagued in some countries by reports of relying heavily on child labor. This should encourage all of us to think hard about how our own constant quest to find the lowest price possible at the cash register can inadvertently support child labor.

Provided by Stanford University

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