



A child worker at a laterite quarry in Ratnagiri district, about 360 kilometres south of Mumbai. Danish Siddiqui / Reuters / April 14, 2011

Plagued by decades of child trafficking, India activists call for crackdown

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MUMBAI // Activists are clamouring for the rapid introduction of a new law to crack down on child trafficking in India, a problem that has plagued the country for decades.

Child trafficking is "a matter of grave concern", said Kailash Satyarthi, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and activist for children's rights.

"Despite the efforts of the government and civil society groups, we are failing to protect young girls and boys from trafficking and modern forms of slavery. "

India's ministry for women and children unveiled a draft of new anti-trafficking legislation in May last year but it has yet to present the final bill in parliament.

Mr Satyarthi said the government needed to produce a "strong and comprehensive" law as a matter of urgency. "We need a national surveillance system and structure ... [that] takes concrete measures for women and child protection and victim rehabilitation," he added.

Children, largely from poor backgrounds, are trafficked in India for reasons including labour, sex work, adoption, to be sold off as child brides, and in some cases, sent overseas.

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The victims are taken from villages to cities where they work in factories or as domestic help. In many cases they are not paid and so they are essentially slaves. In a number of instances, the children go missing without trace.

The extent of the problem was highlighted a few weeks ago after the arrest of Juhi Chowdhury, a leader from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, who was allegedly a central figure in a child-trafficking ring in West Bengal.

The racket involved selling Indian babies to Indians and foreigners from countries including the United States and Australia, for about 100,000 to 200,000 rupees (Dh5,600-Dh11,250), according to the police.

West Bengal, which has borders with Bangladesh and Nepal, has become known as a hub for human trafficking.

Government data shows that 9,104 children were trafficked in India last year, up 27 per cent from the previous year.

But Mr Satyarthi said such numbers do not reveal the full picture because a "lack of data has made it difficult to even report the figures correctly".

"National and regional government agencies are finding it difficult to investigate and prosecute trafficking cases due to discrepancies in the law, which allow perpetrators to get away with their crime."

Komal Ganotra, the director of policy and advocacy for Child Rights and You, a non-governmental organisation working in India, said child trafficking was largely the product of social and economic inequality. Children in rural areas are particularly vulnerable, because of the poverty and lack of work opportunities there.

She said new legislation was long overdue.

India's existing law against human trafficking, introduced in the 1990s, had failed because it was reactive rather than preventative, and adequate protection by the authorities rarely extended to rural areas, enabling child trafficking to flourish. The Indian law also focuses more on commercial sexual exploitation and does not sufficiently address the many other activities for which children can be exploited.

Consequently, conviction rates for trafficking offences are low.

The government said last week that it was taking steps to tackle trafficking and was working to finalise the new legislation.

Shrimati Krishna Raj, a junior minister for women and children, said the legislation would include preventative measures such as anti-trafficking committees at national, state, and district levels and more investigations into trafficking offences.

"In addition, it defines some new forms of trafficking as aggravated or otherwise and proposes creation of a dedicated fund for the rehabilitation of victims of trafficking."

The proposed legislation will be finalised and the government's approval sought before being introduced in parliament, she said, without giving a timeline.

Ms Ganotra said it now seemed unlikely that the bill would be introduced in the current parliamentary session, but hoped this would happen in the next session of parliament in July or August.

"The indication definitely is that [the new legislation] is a much more comprehensive law which covers all dimensions of trafficking and focuses on prevention as well as response, so we are hopeful for a positive move," she said. "In India, the way we have visualised trafficking as a problem has not been as big as it really is."

For example, she said, an adult could travel within India with a group of children that he or she is not related to and would not be legally required to provide any documentation of authorisation.

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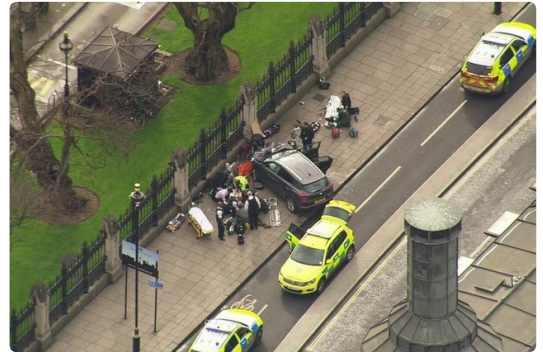
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