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According to an International Labor Office (ILO) report, a single female held for sexual exploitation yields an average of \$67,200 annually in Western Europe. In a three-month investigation, GlobalPost has uncovered mounting allegations that the highest levels of the U.S.-backed Kosovo government are involved in this human trafficking.

The victims of the trade are typically teenage girls who are recruited, seduced and often forced into what amounts to sexual slavery. There is prostitution in Kosovo that services the international community, the U.S. and NATO military forces and the U.N. and aid workers who operate here. But more frequently, investigators say, Kosovo is a trafficking hub for women sold into prostitution rings in the United Arab Emirates, Israel, Western European capitals and elsewhere. Much has been written about these victims, but less has been written about the men who carry out the trafficking.

In the course of its investigation, GlobalPost gained access to several men, including Luan, who say they were directly involved in the trade. The detailed information they provided helped to assemble an impressionistic picture of how the trade works here in Kosovo and beyond. And their statements combined with several intelligence reports and the findings of ongoing criminal investigations into organized crime in Kosovo reveal how the syndicate that carries out this trafficking does so with the complicity — and in some cases direct involvement — of the very highest levels of Kosovo's political leadership.

Sources point to the top

The United States and its NATO allies, and the United Nations, have said publicly for some years that corrupt officials within Kosovo's government and police have at times taken part in the illegal trade of women and girls for sex.

"Trafficking-related corruption continued to hamper the government's anti-trafficking efforts," the State Department writes in its 2010 Trafficking in Persons Report, citing experts in trafficking. "Foreign trafficking victims often arrive in Kosovo with valid documents and employment contracts stamped by Kosovo officials who may be aware that the document holders are trafficking victims."

But the privately discussed rumors that have circulated for almost as long among American officials, Western diplomats and ordinary people in Kosovo are much worse: that the corruption goes beyond low-level officials, all the way to high-level politicians.

No senior Kosovar official has ever been charged in relation to human trafficking in Kosovo. GlobalPost reporters, during the course of a wider investigation into allegations of broad criminality by former senior Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) commanders and their ties to the United States and other Western countries, interviewed three men involved in sex trafficking in Kosovo, two Albanians and Luan, a Kosovar Albanian. All three men insisted that some senior political figures, specifically former KLA commanders, were indeed involved in the trafficking of women and girls. Furthermore, GlobalPost has obtained several intelligence reports from NATO military and intelligence services that also claim senior former KLA commanders have been involved in the sex-slavery business. Further bolstering the claims, various well-informed people, including a former NATO intelligence official who worked in Kosovo and a Western diplomat with experience in the region, all say that it has been common knowledge in American, NATO and U.N. circles for years that the former guerrilla commanders — many of them now in positions of great power in Kosovo — are believed to be linked to sex-trafficking.

Luan said that officials in the parties of two former KLA commanders are closely tied up in the trade. The parties are: the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), whose leader is the current prime minister of Kosovo, Hashim Thaci; and the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), whose leader is Ramush Haradinaj, a former prime minister who is currently in custody at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague as he awaits trial on charges of war crimes.

"The whole thing, as well as any other illegal business, is controlled by the state both in Kosovo, Albania and all of former Yugoslavia," said one of the Albanian men, who called himself Rexhep. "No one can do [smuggle] drugs, women, cigarettes or anything without blessing from above. I mean, you can try but you'll be found in a ditch somewhere after many days already half-eaten by worms and dogs, which has happened to some."

The three traffickers who made the allegations against the former KLA commanders are self-described criminals and their stories could not be independently confirmed. They insisted on anonymity, saying they did not want to face retaliation from other criminals or arrest from law enforcement officials. Two GlobalPost reporters have for many years interviewed criminal figures in the Balkans and in every previous case the stories of the criminals have held up to scrutiny. The three traffickers agreed to be interviewed because they trusted the intermediaries used to arrange the interviews and the reporters, who have been working in the region for many years. The traffickers do not know each other; GlobalPost reporters found them through separate channels.

Intelligence reports finger Thaci

One of the NATO intelligence reports obtained by GlobalPost features a diagram linking Thaci to two other men who are then linked to prostitution. The report, like four other Western intelligence reports GlobalPost has viewed, links Thaci and four other former KLA commanders to a broad array of organized crimes.

Another NATO intelligence report, written in November 2000, claims that a close associate of Thaci is involved in sex trafficking: "Prostitution: arrival of women mostly from Bulgaria, Czech Republic and Slovakia is under [the man's family's] indirect control and it receives profit."

A third intelligence report, which is dated March 10, 2004, and is marked "SECRET Rel USA KFOR and NATO" and was confirmed by a Western diplomat as being viewed by U.S. government officials, describes one of Thaci's close associates — former KLA commander Xhavit Haliti — as believed to be "highly involved in prostitution," among other alleged crimes, including murder.

"We just controlled the main border crossings while petrol, drugs and trafficked women continued to be poured in both through official and illegal entries," the former NATO intelligence officer said. "We lacked resources and permission from higher authorities to act since the number one priority was peace and stability and they wouldn't allow anything to disrupt that."

The official added: "A lot of trafficked women entered Kosovo without any hurdle. The people behind the brothels and sexual slavery were all with the government, KPC [the Kosovo Protection Corps], the PDK and the AAK. No one outside these structures had even a remote chance to run it on such a large scale."

In spite of the longstanding allegations against Thaci, which American officials have known about for years (the NATO and other intelligence reports have been in wide circulation among American and European diplomats for years, sources tell GlobalPost, and two are even on the internet for all to see), Thaci has received strong support from the United States. He visited Vice President Joseph Biden at the White House in July and has hosted Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Kosovo.

The "FedEx" of trafficking women

Describing himself as "the Balkan version of DHL and FedEx" for trafficked women and illicit goods, the second Albanian trafficker, who gave his name as Gjon, said he had worked for and with Kosovar organized crime groups headed by former senior KLA commanders.

During the 1999 war, in which the KLA was based in Albania, its intelligence service, SHIK, was involved in sex-trafficking, Gjon said. "Groups [of trafficked women] were arriving in Durres and Fushe Kruja [in Albania], that were almost exclusively for the KLA, who were there during and after the war," Gjon said. "SHIK escorted them. After a while some of them were shipped to Italy while others [were sent] to Kosovo. I've been to parties where they had to serve you all the way."

Rexhep said he was a former proud KLA fighter and is now a successful businessman with legal and illegal businesses in Kosovo and other countries. In spite of his pride in fighting with the KLA during the war he acknowledged that SHIK and former KLA officials were involved in the sex-trafficking trade.

"Is the KLA involved? Are you kidding me? It's all KLA or those who contributed [to the war] somehow," he said. "All the big money flows are directly controlled by SHIK and without their blessing you better not start anything if you mean well to yourself and your family."

GlobalPost made repeated attempts to interview the American ambassador to Kosovo, Christopher Dell, about U.S. relations with senior former KLA figures and allegations of criminality, but he declined to accept interview requests or respond to written questions. State Department officials also declined to respond to questions or be interviewed. Thaci also declined repeated requests for an interview.

Catering to the expat community

The three men involved in trafficking gave GlobalPost a rare look inside the criminal side of a trade that caters to Kosovar men and NATO troops and other international officials who have been in Kosovo in large numbers since 1999. All three men said that NATO troops, U.N. officials and other internationals working in Kosovo made up a significant proportion of the clientele for trafficked women, something repeatedly confirmed by anti-trafficking organizations. The former U.N. administration in Kosovo, UNMIK, regularly published an "Off-Limits List" of brothels, hotels, bars, clubs and other locations where staff were ordered to "STAY OUT" of. The 2008 spreadsheet lists 109 establishments and states: "By frequenting bars, brothels, strip clubs and night clubs, international representatives and by default their organizations are condoning and supporting the sexual exploitation and slavery of women and contributing to the profits of organized crime."

Prostitution "is a state-sanctioned business with tacit approval of foreigners and for their enjoyment," Rexhep said.

In recent years, the U.N., NATO, EULEX and the Kosovo police have improved their anti-trafficking efforts, according to trafficking experts and the State Department. But the demand from foreigners, and locals, remains strong, the three traffickers say.

Recruitment tactics

To meet that demand, the three men and their colleagues in the organized crime world looked beyond Kosovo's borders.

"We were mostly bringing girls from Moldova, Ukraine and Russia," said Luan, 30, who started his criminal career as a thief in Germany and Switzerland before he became a trafficker. "But sometimes we also had girls from Serbia, Romania, Czech Republic.