**Sordid business**

BY Z U B E I D A M U S T A F A 2020-12-04

FOR 20 years, the US State Department has been annually documenting the efforts or the lack thereof of governments to check trafHckingin persons (TIP)that has become a massive crime worldwide over the years. The major success it has achieved so far is in creating public awareness about this abominable issue. In some cases, it has managed to get governments to legislate on the matter in a bid to check the prevalence of the crime.

The TIP situation in Pakistan is horrifying for two reasons. First is its extraordinary rise in the two categories covered by the US report, namely, kidnapping for bonded labour and for trading girls in prostitution.

Most shameful is our government`s own failure to investigate, prosecute and convict criminals involved in TIP. Worst of all, it has, in effect, become a partner in crime by dropping cases against the rich and the powerful as testified to by the American report. Official complicity in the crime allows the alleged criminals to be let off. As a result of its poor performance, Pakistan was downgraded to Tier 2 of the watch list in the report issued in July 2020.

In the 2019 report, Pakistan had been upgraded given its success in adopting the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act, 2018. But instead of moving forward, the country has slipped up in spite of a reasonably good law being in place. But that has been this country`s tragedy good laws but a failure to implement them.

Some examples from the latest TIP report are eye-openers. According to the report, Chinese and Pakistani traffickers joined hands to send over 620 Pakistani women to China ostensibly to get them married to Chinese men. Many of the women were abused while others were forced into commercial sex. The 31 Chinese who were charged were quietly acquitted. Foreign policy concerns seem to have overridden human rights in the name of `Sino-Pakistani friendship` or the One Belt, One Road project.

In 2019, provincial police identified 19,954 victims of trafficking (15,802 girls) as compared to 19,723 in 2018, but no significant measures were taken to investigate the crime and unsurprisingly there were no convictions. According to the report, those released/ let off on the government`s orders included a parliamentarian, a judge and his wife, and an army major.

The Arabs have also emerged as major foreign partners in the TIP business with Oman being one of the main centres for abducted Pakistani women. The FIA, which is the security agency entrusted with theresponsibility of investigating TIP crimes, has offices in three foreign capitals. Last year, it was investigating 800 cases in Oman alone. It is a pity that the government cannot provide protection to our own girls from predators ofallshades.

Thisisaclearindicationofthe oppression and tyranny the girl child is subjected to in Pakistan. The irony is that most victims of TIP crimes are also victims of poverty and are underprivileged as well. Rape, when it happens, leads to such a hue and cry that the whole country is shaken to the core. But when young girls are trafficked, a strange and embarrassed silence descends on us.

The irony of this strikes me hard.

Some attribute this phenomenon to the widely held belief that in cases of trafficking women are equally involved in a bid to earn money. Even if there is an iota of truth in this, it does not absolve society of its duty to protect and save our girls. Besides this attitude is largely misplaced. How can girls under 18 years, who are minors and need protection, be left to fend for themselves?They are the daughters of the nation and must be taken care of.

But the most horrendous part of the story is the impunity with which the state actually acts against these little girls to enable some men to earn millions to provide carnal pleasure to a few.

At fault is our corrupt police machinery, our inefficientjustice system, a huge unscrupulous section of lawyers greedy for money, and of course our activists who prefer to remain silent in the face of this grisly crime.

If justice has to be done, these elements will have to act. To be commended are the 58 lawyers from Karachi, Hyderabad and Sukkur who have shown the magnanimity needed to offer legal aid pro bono to women victims of sex crimes. The Sindh Commission on the Status of Women has done well in taking this initiative along with the Legal Aid Society headed by retired justice Nasir Aslam Zahid. We do need such men and women of courage and integrity to break the appalling chain of evil and greed that paralyses our justice and police system.

Trafficking is big business and the trillions it earns are used to bribe government functionaries to turn a blind eye to the existence of this lucrative business. m www.zubeidamustafa.com