THE NATASHAS - The new global sex trade

The US State Department Trafficking in Persons Report released on June 11, 2003 begins: "As unimaginable as it seems, slavery and bondage still persist in the early twenty-first century. Millions of people around the world still suffer in silence in slave-like situations of forced labor and commercial sexual exploitation from which they cannot free themselves. Trafficking in persons is one of the greatest human rights challenges of our time."

On September 23, 2003, U.S. president George W. Bush went to the United Nations in New York City to deliver a blistering speech on Iraq. At the close, he shifted gears and turned to the subject of the global trafficking of women. President Bush began: "There's another humanitarian crisis spreading, yet hidden from view. Each year, an
estimated 800,000 to 900,000 human beings are bought, sold or forced across the world's borders,” he said. “Among them are hundreds of thousands of teenage girls, and others as young as five, who fall victim to the sex trade. This commerce in human life generates billions of dollars each year - much of which is used to finance organized crime."

This sex trade, president Bush referred to, has also been called a modern-day slave trade. It is pervasive and it is on the rise. It is international and it touches almost every nation on the planet in some way, either as a country of origin, transit or destination.

The trafficking of young women and girls for sexual exploitation is a monumental human rights tragedy. During a press conference in Washington DC on December 9, 2003, John Miller, director of the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking at the U.S. State Department, described the trade as "the human rights crisis of the 21st century," and while the debate on trafficking in human beings has been stewing on the international front burners for more than a decade, it continues to flourish worldwide unabated.

But what is truly disturbing is that it is a totally man-made disaster!

Every single day, hundreds of unsuspecting young women and girls are trafficked into the international sex trade throughout the
globe. Most times, they are lured by promises of employment as nannies, maids and waitresses only to find themselves gang pressed into prostitution upon arrival at their destination. Most are unaware of the evil that awaits them. As soon as they arrive, their travel documents are seized, and they are informed that they will be required to repay an enormous debt for the privilege of being trafficked. Many are subjected to brutal humiliations, beatings and torture if they refuse to obey their new masters, or if they fail to make the required amount of money each and every evening, every single day of the month, no matter what health she may be in or what the weather is like.

These victims live in constant fear. They are afraid even to attempt escape because the traffickers, pimps and brothel owners have convinced them that the authorities are directly involved in the traffic. Moreover, the women are told that if they go to the police, they will be arrested and jailed for being illegally in the country. Then, once they are deported, the traffickers will be waiting back home to punish these women for talking to the authorities.

Yet in most cases, even if these women do run, they don't have the facility to communicate because they are unable to speak the language of the country to which they've been trafficked.
So with no support network of family or friends in place, and completely isolated in a strange world, they are totally vulnerable to the demands and threats of their so-called owners.

The thugs behind this trade – the pimps, brothel owners, traffickers and crime gangs – don't give a damn about the victims. It doesn't matter that she may be a single mother or someone's daughter. They mean nothing to them. As soon as one is used up, she is discarded, tossed into the street, and another young woman is trafficked in to replace her.

Organized crime knows only too well how to exploit a weakness, and impoverished, desperate women are very easy targets. Traffickers simply hold out the carrot of a better life abroad and the victims come gushing in. Poor countries are constantly bombarded with enticing images of the incredible wealth, prosperity and decadence of Western society. These images are beamed in by satellite dishes, flashed on the silver screens in movie theatres and portrayed in glossy fashion magazines. These opulent displays of affluence and materialism send powerful messages to destitute people. It is almost impossible for poor young women not to want to buy into the dream or get sucked into a false promise.
But most women snared by the trafficking maze simply want to feed their families or help their aging parents. Others want to earn enough money to pay their university tuition fees.

And yes, many young women today are aware of the dangers out there. They have heard the stories of ruthless traffickers and they have heard the horror stories of the countless victims. Yet most are willing to roll the dice and take the chance that the recruiter, who has just invoked the names of Jesus, Mary, Joseph and all the important saints, is telling them the truth. After all, some women are fortunate and do land legitimate jobs abroad.

So just who are these traffickers and pimps? And how do they go about recruiting their quarry? For the most part, they are thugs. They may belong to a small criminal network or to a major organized crime group such as the Russian or Albanian mob, the Italian mafia, Chinese Triads, the Japanese Yakuza or the Hell's Angels. Some are small time pimps who control anywhere from two to a dozen women on the streets or in brothels. Most are just out to make a fast buck. But surprisingly, not all the pimps are low-life thugs. Doctors, psychologists, teachers, garage mechanics and even cops have been found running brothels filled with trafficked women.

For the traffickers and the pimps, it is all about money. According to the United Nations, the trade in human beings is the third
most profitable criminal activity after illegal drugs and weapons. It generates upwards of $12-billion U.S. annually for traffickers and organized crime networks worldwide.

The trafficking trade is well organized. Human cargo can often be moved across borders and past immigration officials easier than narcotics or weapons. Even if trafficking victims are picked up in police raids and deported, they are often met at the airport or border crossing in their homeland and re-trafficked. Traffickers can make additional money from their victims by re-selling them to another pimp after their debt is paid, and the repayment cycle for the victim starts all over again.

Traffickers sell their human cargo for as little as $500 a woman, and that woman can make upwards of $250,000 a year for a pimp or brothel owner. Yet very little of that money is ever turned over to the victim.

Traffickers exploit the dreams, hopes and aspirations of those living in abject poverty and seeking a better life for themselves and their families. They use every ruse in the book to convince unsuspecting women that the job offer in some far off land is real. They use modeling and employment agencies that from the outside appear legitimate. They place enticing ads in newspapers offering exciting opportunities in foreign cities. They send head hunters into
towns and villages in fancy cars. Often the recruiters are former trafficked women who have been told they will be set free if they bring in two or three fresh recruits.

Men and women in positions of respectability in towns and villages have been used to recruit young women, even family friends and acquaintances! Worse yet, directors and workers at orphanages in Russia, Ukraine, Romania and Moldova have sold teenage girls to traffickers. After all, money talks.

Then there are the so-called "pretty boys" who are sent to cities and towns to romance young women, and soon after sweeping them off their feet, they "invite" them for a weekend outside the country. The "pretty boys" then sell the love-struck girl to a trafficker.

Marriage brokers are also in on the action, selling trusting brides to lecherous pimps who take them to places like Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States or Israel and then put them straight to work on their so-called honeymoon servicing clients.

Moreover, many girls and young women are simply abducted off the streets while walking home from school or an evening stroll.

While it is true that some women enter prostitution with eyes wide open, studies indicate that the vast majority of these trafficked women and teenage girls are forced into the trade.
What happens to them once they are in the clutches of brothel owners and pimps is the stuff of nightmares. They are literally trafficked into the anteroom of hell where their spirits and bodies are broken. They are held against their will, beaten, and raped repeatedly until they submit to every demand. Those who fight back are often maimed. Some are murdered in front of other victims as the ultimate threat.

All this happens in what is known as the "breaking grounds" - houses and apartments that are hidden from view.

What the public sees is the end product - the broken spirit in total surrender. So when we come face to face with these women on the side streets of international cities and towns, all we see are the hard eyes and the come hither smiles. We see the cheap make-up, the gaudy clothes and the stiletto heels, and we dismiss these women as prostitutes and whores who are not worth a second glance, a moment’s thought or a drop of pity.

Tragically, the victims of this vicious trade experience so very little of life before they witness the absolute, very worst of humanity.

What then are the triggers behind this explosion in the global trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation, particularly this latest wave from Eastern European nations like Ukraine, Russia, Romania and Moldova? After all, the international bazaar for women is
nothing new—Asian women have been its basic commodity for years, and armies of men still flock to Bangkok and Manila on sex junkets.

Over the past three decades the world has witnessed four distinct waves of trafficking for sexual exploitation. This latest traffic from Eastern and Central Europe has been dubbed "the Fourth Wave," and the speed and proportion is truly staggering. Just a decade ago, these women didn’t even register on the radar screen. Today, they represent more than 25 percent of the trade -- more than 200,000 women and girls!

The first wave of trafficked women came from Southeast Asia in the 1970s and was composed mostly of Thai and Filipino women. The second wave arrived in the early 1980s and was made up of women from Africa, mainly Ghana and Nigeria. The third wave, from Latin America, followed right behind and was comprised of women mostly from Colombia, Brazil and the Dominican Republic. So it’s not that the world has suddenly realized that its women are being kidnapped, sold and raped. The only difference is that today it’s flourishing like never before.

On the surface, there is no complicated or complex answer to what has triggered the explosion. It is very simple. The ingredients are a caustic mix of extreme poverty and criminal greed.
On the poverty side of the coin, women in the former Soviet States, for example, make up the vast majority of the poor and unemployed. Studies in Russia and Ukraine show that women make up 70 to 85 per cent of the unemployed. More and more, women are also forced to hold shattered families together that have been torn apart by male alcoholism and violence.

This is the direct result of the social and economic upheaval that engulfed the former Soviet states when the Iron Curtain crumbled, and the mess that followed made these newly minted nations easy targets for criminals interested solely in pillaging and plundering each country’s resources, including the exploitation of the most vulnerable in its society.

The root causes of poverty in these former East Bloc nations lie in the complex machinations of globalization, and central to this are the repressive economic policies instituted by international banks that require these impoverished nations to make drastic structural adjustments in their budgets: changes that force them to cut back on crucial social programs and safety nets which in turn drive more and more women out of their homelands to seek jobs abroad.

Trafficking in people is, as the International Labor Organization points out, "the underside of globalization."
Another contributing factor are the repressive immigration policies of Western nations that have cast human traffickers into the role of major players in the international global migration scene.

Human trafficking is not new. It has been going on for centuries. What is new is the global sophistication. Traffickers use high tech communications and sophisticated transportation methods to sell human beings into situations of sexual slavery with little or no fear of arrest or prosecution.

And this despicable trade continues to grow because of the widespread oppression of women in much of the world, and this is reflected day in and day out in society's continuing objectification and commodification of women.

Rather than being seen as victims of untold human rights abuses, they are accused of venturing out with eyes wide open to earn money the easy way - in the so-called *oldest profession* - on their back. They are accused of leading hapless men astray, of luring otherwise upstanding businessmen and community leaders into their webs of deceit and debauchery. Women are the ones labeled prostitutes, whores and sluts while the men are benignly tagged as johns, clients and customers.

Yet when you examine the facts, men are behind all of this. Men are the driving force in the entire global sex slave trade.
In economic parlance, women are the supply side of the coin. Flip the coin and you get the demand side with the emphasis, in this case, on three letters "m...a...n." Without the demand, there would be no supply. This is basic logic. You can't get simpler than that.

Every single day, seemingly endless platoons of johns pay their $50 or $100, and close their eyes for a few minutes of physical bliss while they deepen the misery of others. They ignore the harsh reality of these victims because all these men are interested in is their almighty release! In so many cases, they are psychological basket cases, obsessed with power and control, perversion and fantasies, self-loathing and hate for their mothers and a whole host of Freudian afflictions. But I'm not here to explore the psyche of depraved men and their predilections.

However, in my research on men seeking paid sex with women, I hit on the fuse that ignited the world-wide explosion of the flesh trade -- that wonderful, high tech invention that was going to bring all good things to the world -- the Internet.

In the days before the Internet, men searching for purchased sex relied largely on the Postal Service and brown paper envelopes concealing skin magazines. On the various pages, they learned what situations might be out there for them to tap into. But there was one drawback. By the time they got their magazines, the brothel may have
been put out of business or forced to run to another clandestine location. Moreover, men looking for purchased sex don’t usually hang out in bars chatting with each other and trading information. It just isn’t done. It isn't cool.

However, with the advent of the Internet and chat rooms, the entire situation changed virtually overnight. The Internet is jam packed with thousands of sex and porn sites. It is almost impossible to avoid them. They simply pop up on your screen, oftentimes by posting a very simple, benign request on a search engine for information on education or health care, and god forbid you type in the phrase: massage-therapy!

With the click of a mouse, men hungry for sex can find exactly what they are looking for in the privacy of their homes while surfing the Net.

It is instant gratification. Men chat with each other in anonymity. They brag and they share information on brothels and the young women they’ve had sex with. They even post photographs of their victims. With the click of a mouse, sex tourists and men heading overseas on business trips can find the exact locations of brothels in virtually every single city on the globe. They get the cost, the names and descriptions of the young women in these brothels and a road map of how to get there.
My research for *The Natashas* led me to one chilling conclusion about the Internet: it is the steamiest whorehouse on the planet.

The toll of trafficking is nothing short of outrageous. It is wreaking havoc on entire communities and as well as the world. Once used up, most of the women return home psychically and psychologically shattered. So many end up committing suicide because in the majority of cases, there are no havens or rehabilitation centers for them to spend time to recuperate from their ordeal. They simply head back to their villages or towns where they are labeled and stigmatized by the local population as whores.

More frightening is the fact that many of these women are infected with HIV/AIDS, and a host of other sexually transmitted diseases. No doubt, they have passed these diseases on to their clients who in turn have passed them on to others including their wives. Research shows that sex trafficking is a major force in the global spread of AIDS. Trafficked women are at an extremely high risk for infection from HIV. The very places that imprison them are breeding grounds for AIDS. Yet while the UN and world governments dole out billions of dollars on prevention and treatment, these programs do nothing to protect the thousands of trafficked women and girls who are forcibly infected with the deadly virus.
Even more tragic is the dramatic increase in the number of trafficked children for sexual exploitation worldwide. The reason: men are demanding to have paid sex with younger and younger girls because they believe these children are AIDS free!

Last year, according to UNAIDS, three million people died of AIDS while the newly infected numbered 5 million, bringing the total number of people living with the virus around the world to 40 million! Moreover, more than fifty percent of those newly infected by HIV are between the ages of 15 and 24 years old. In some places, among 15 to 19 year olds, two girls are infected for every boy.

The United Nations and the world have united in a battle to defeat the spread of AIDS. For AIDS prevention to be truly effective, the global community must launch an all-out war against the trafficking trade. Until we do, the AIDS epidemic will continue to spread unchecked.

There is one argument being put forward by some who claim their remedy would shut down trafficking of women for sexual exploitation, and possibly curb the AIDS infection rates. This comes from the proponents of legalized prostitution, and their contention is nothing short of specious.

Germany and the Netherlands have recently legalized prostitution. The German and Dutch governments purport that doing
so is an ideal way to deal with trafficking. They have bought into the mantra that legalization will better protect the rights of women entering the trade. However, the only tangible effect of such legalization is that the state has effectively become another pimp, living off the avails of women in prostitution through taxation, and reaping huge benefits from increased foreign sex tourism.

The reality is that German and Dutch women are not the ones lining up to enter the trade. They have real jobs that don’t require them to shed their clothes and have their bodies invaded by a dozen men a day. As a result, brothel owners have had to meet the growing demand for prostitutes by recruiting the supply from nearby Russia, Moldova, Romania, and Ukraine. You’ll be hard-pressed to hear Dutch or German spoken in the brothels and alleyways of Amsterdam or Berlin. What you’re more likely to hear is Ukrainian, Russian, Moldovan, and Romanian. In fact, a report by the International Organization of Migration states that, in the Netherlands, nearly 70 per cent of trafficked women involved in prostitution were from Central and Eastern European Countries. In Germany that figure is as high as 87 per cent.

This simple fact speaks volumes. More disconcerting, however, is the finding by non-governmental organizations that legalization in these two nations has led to a dramatic increase in demand. There is
mounting evidence showing a direct correlation between the legalization of prostitution and an increase in victims of trafficking for sex.

But even more importantly, do these governments really believe that hundreds of thousands of young women and girls from Ukraine, Russia, Moldova and Romania are lining up to be prostitutes in foreign lands? Do these governments really believe that these young women and girls want to have their bodies invaded by 10 or 15 strange, doughy middle-aged men every single night, only to turn over most of the cash they earn to some disgusting pimp?

As I mentioned earlier, some women opt for this so-called profession. Most don't. No girl does! If they had control of their lives virtually everyone would opt for a real job, one that doesn't involve taking off their clothes and servicing platoons of strangers.

So, given what is now known about the sheer scale, brutality and misery caused by this trade, you would wonder why there isn't an all out war to stop the traffic.

Over the past decade, there have been conferences—endless international confabs with well-meaning human rights workers highlighting the cesspools of debauchery in different parts of the world. Social workers have gathered to discuss, define and document
the problem. Government leaders have expounded with indignation and vowed to put an end to the scourge. Myriad studies and research projects have examined the “causes” and “effects,” and enough reports have been written to fell several forests. Yet the problem persists—and has gotten infinitely worse.

The bottom line is the victims have been getting nothing more than a lot of lip service from the international community and very little concrete action, and the traffickers know this only too well. That is why they continue virtually unfettered to buy and sell human beings. What they are doing is simply exploiting the lack of political will by governments worldwide to tackle trafficking and its root causes.

In fact, this wholesale rape of girls and women occurs, and is allowed to continue, because of national and international government complacency, complicity and corruption.

Much of the blame can and must be laid at the doorsteps of myriad governments that tolerate or turn a blind eye to what is going on. Every single day of their tragic existence, hundreds of thousands of young women and girls face walls of indifference and witness corruption of the very individuals who have taken an oath to serve and protect.

Evidence of government complacency in the trafficking trade is staggering. International studies and reports are replete with
examples of blatant and overwhelming insensitivity. Yet despite the
damning reports detailing what has been occurring openly throughout
the Western world year after year, and despite the tragic testimonials
of thousands of victims, the prevailing attitude among the very people
who should know better crosses into the realm of criminal neglect.

Once in the clutches of traffickers and pimps, women get little
sympathy from government officials or the public in general. Most
times, their plight is met with apathy and scorn. After all, they’ve been
working the streets.

And it is there on those streets that these victims first slam up
against the biggest hurdle of indifference—the police. They learn
quickly that the man on the beat cares little about them and that there
is absolutely no upside in running to him for protection. It is a
complacency that plays directly into the hands of organized crime and
makes it that much easier for low-life criminals to get into the trade.

Martina Vandenberg is a dauntless researcher who has
investigated the trade for Human Rights Watch in trafficking hot spots
like Bosnia, Israel and Greece. Her conclusion: “The human rights
violation of trafficking in persons cannot flourish without the complicity
of indifferent and corrupt state officials.”

But it is corruption that is the grapnel of the vast, brutal trade in
women and girls. Trafficking thrives because of it, and could not exist
to the extent that it does without it. Cash and free sex are the driving forces. As long as there are government officials with their hands out or cops with their pants down, the trade will continue to thrive.

In myriad reports compiled since 2000, the U.S. State Department has identified a litany of former Soviet states and East Bloc nations where corruption is a way of life. In its Country Reports on Human Rights released in March 2002, it found that in Belarus “there is existing data to the effect that corrupt militiamen are involved” in trafficking women and girls. Another on Bulgaria says “Women do not trust the police in cases where they need to report forced prostitution and trafficking. Profits are so huge that police may be bribed.” The report notes that corruption in that country has reached “massive proportions.” The report on Georgia points out that citizens “do not trust the police because of the very high level of corruption among policemen,” adding that police "work in collaboration [with pimps] and profit themselves from the business.” The country report on Moldova cites “widespread corruption and the connections of government officials and police with organized crime groups” in the trafficking chain.

Corruption in Russia has been cited repeatedly in numerous reports as a key factor behind the trade. They note that Russian women “cannot find the courage to approach police with complaints against the
agencies that recruited them once they are back in Russia. The reason for their passivity evidently lies in the fear of organized crime and a general lack of trust in Russian law enforcement organs.” The same is true in Ukraine, where “local militia and border guards received bribes in return for ignoring trafficking.” Some reports allege that “local public officials abetted or assisted organized criminal groups in trafficking women abroad.”

And it’s not just the former Soviet states and East Bloc nations that wallow in corruption. The kind of money, power and influence that organized crime generates from the sex industry makes it easy for criminals to target greedy government officials and cops worldwide. International reports and studies are replete with such accounts wherever trafficked women end up.

Without doubt the worst kind of corruption involves the police whose job it is to serve and protect the people, and the weakest link in this chain of command is usually the cop on the beat. The violation of duties range from passivity—ignoring, tolerating or avoiding action—to deliberate obstruction of investigations, including warning criminals of impending raids and accepting bribes and sexual favors. And two countries that should know better from a human rights perspective and that have come under severe international criticism for police corruption in the trafficking trade are Greece and Israel.
Greece has been rocked repeatedly by allegations of rampant police corruption. For the procurers of an estimated 20,000 foreign women—mostly from Ukraine, Russia, Moldova, Bulgaria and Romania—paying for police protection is a normal business transaction. The women are smuggled into the country right under the watchful eyes of Greek border guards and police to work as unregistered prostitutes in brothels, bars and massage parlors. The result: Greece has become a magnet for sex tourism. Before the fall of the Iron Curtain, it had no more than 2000 so-called illegal prostitutes, mostly locals. Today, the visibility of the street trade is truly staggering.

In July 2001, when the U.S. government put out with its first annual worldwide report trafficking in persons, it cited corruption in the police and border control as “a major problem.”

In December 2000, the Greek police department’s Internal Affairs uncovered a major prostitution procurement ring allegedly run by officers in the central region of Thessaly. According to a leaked confidential report, the operation—known locally as the “meat machine”—had trafficked some 1200 Eastern European women into Greece to work as prostitutes and raked in more than $100 million in criminal proceeds over a ten-year period. Police of varying ranks were involved in the ring, as well as respected businessmen, an employee of a prosecutor’s office who allegedly tried to extort money from the
racket, and two personal security guards for an influential Member of Parliament. One of the trafficked women purchased and used by the ring told a judge that police officers frequented the club where she worked. By day they would come in uniform to check that the club’s papers were in order. They would return at night in street clothes for “gratis” services.

Police corruption is also at the very core of the trafficking trade in Israel. Yet despite the countless allegations against serving and retired cops, this sordid situation hardly causes a stir in political and government circles.

Nomi Levenkron, a human rights lawyer in Tel Aviv, has documented an alarming number of cases involving police corruption. In an interview with me, Ms Levenkron said: "I cannot stress enough the widespread phenomenon of bribery among Israeli policemen, many who cooperate freely with pimps and traffickers. Furthermore, many policemen are regular clients of brothels. This keeps many victims from complaining against their assailants since they see this as cooperation between the assailants and the authorities, leaving them no option of escape."

Sigal Rozen, who heads the Hotline for Migrant Workers in Tel Aviv, said that in some cases police “receive discounts due to their good relations with the brothel owners.” She added that “the most
extreme cases we know about are those of policemen who were actively involved in buying and selling women or policemen who returned arrested women back to their pimps for a proper amount of money.”

Stories of systemic complacency, complicity, and corruption abound on the trafficking scene worldwide. It is a wonder that any women are rescued at all. And when they are, most are treated by the authorities as whores. The reason is simple: if a cop were to admit that he’d used any of these women, he’d also have to face the fact that he’s guilty of rape.

To most trafficked women the “enemy” includes police, border guards and immigration officers. But there is yet another formidable foe among those in uniform: military men. In war-torn regions under the control of UN peacekeepers and U.S. soldiers - places like Bosnia and Kosovo - the words “democracy” and “peace” ring hollow for thousands of trafficked women imprisoned in bars and brothels adjacent to military bases. In these far-flung, out-of-sight hovels, fifteen-year-old girls are fair game, and rape is just another word for rest and recreation.

On April 24, 2002, David Lamb, a former UN international police officer, appeared before members of the U.S. Congress House Committee on International Relations. He told them that: “UN
peacekeepers’ participation in the sex slave trade in Bosnia is a significant, widespread problem. More precisely, the sex slave trade in Bosnia largely exists because of the UN peacekeeping operation. Without the peacekeeping presence, there would’ve been little or no forced prostitution in Bosnia.”

Lamb also pointed out that the women in the sex trade are foreigners, mostly from Romania, Moldova and Ukraine, who are brought into the region to provide services to a paying clientele, “a large component of which is foreign workers and peacekeepers.” He concluded that “for the UN mission there are no greater problems” than those presented by the sex trade in Bosnia, adding that the UN’s “cover-up policy” serves to “undermine all that the UN should stand for.”

The grim reality in this entire sex slave calamity is that both the sending and receiving countries are doing very little to stop the traffic. The proof is in the results. To this very day, trafficking continues to flourish unabated. Western nations are inundated with trafficked women and organized criminal gangs controlling them.

Within each sending and receiving country, there is weak inter-agency coordination, and pathetically low funding for government
departments tasked with preventing trafficking, prosecuting traffickers, and protecting victims.

Put simply, foreign women trafficked into a country for the commercial sex industry is not a priority. More to the point, there is one card rarely laid on the table of in this issue and that is the race card! The muttered whispers in some government corridors is "better those girls than our girls" and that attitude is pervasive, as it is despicable.

Every government whose girls and women are trafficked wholesale to places like Germany, The Netherlands, Italy, Greece, Serbia, Turkey, Israel, Canada and the United States should hold their heads in shame.

Any government that cannot and will not protect its most vulnerable citizens should be turned out of power to make room for someone who will tackle this issue with forceful commitment.

But far more contemptible are the nations that take these women and girls to feed the cravings of their depraved men – and buffer up the tax coffers from sex tourism. These are the nations that should truly hold their heads in shame. They should know better and they should be pulling out all the stops to put an end to the misery that their citizens and the sex tourists are causing.
If a country is to be judged on how it deals with this scourge, that judgment must be based on the action it takes to eradicate trafficking. The only thing that will send traffickers and pimps scurrying back into their rat-holes is the full force of the law—unwavering prosecution, heavy prison time and confiscation of all profits amassed on the backs of these women. Criminals need to know that buying and selling women is not a misdemeanor and that it will not be tolerated. Not now. Not ever. And johns caught using the services of trafficked women and girls should be served notice that they too will be rounded up, charged, prosecuted and jailed.

Applying the full force of law is also the only way to get through to the corrupt cops and public officials that enable the trafficking trade to thrive. Keep in mind that none of this could happen without them strenuously craning their necks to look the other way. Nor would police indifference be as big a problem as it is if some of the men in blue weren’t slinking into the brothels and massage parlors for “freebies” on the side.

Both the sending and receiving countries have passed laws with stiff sentences for traffickers. But the key is in enforcement and that is not being done.
Government leaders must send a clear and forceful message that trafficking will NOT be tolerated and that those who enter the trade will regret that day. It is high time they act with force and with commitment because in the grand scheme of things – this is not a difficult crime to solve and put an end to.

The perpetrators act in the open. It is not profitable for them to go underground. They know that sex craved men need instant gratification and don’t like spending hours trying to locate their quarry. You see, johns are basically cowards. If they see cops, if they hear threats of heavy jail time and serious fines, if they hear they will be identified in local newspapers, they will think twice about whether five-minutes of sexual bliss are worth it.

As for the criminals, they will not be deterred unless they know they will face serious consequences for their actions. Yet to date, courts in Western nations continue to mete out punishments to pimps and traffickers that for the most part are nothing more than a slap on the wrist. Three months in jail or a community service order are hardly effective deterrents. On occasion a gang is taken down in a raid or a pimp is arrested. There is a trial and, occasionally, a judge metes out a tough sentence. But that is a rarity.

What has to happen is that every single national government must issue clear and unequivocal orders and standards to judges and
police in dealing with this horrendous crime. Governments must ensure the certainty of severe punishment for those convicted of trafficking, abduction and rape.

They must ensure that every penny made of the backs of these women is taken from the bank accounts of these criminals and distributed to the victims and rescue agencies. In no uncertain terms, Governments should inform sex tourists travelling to their countries that they will face the full force of the law if they are caught with trafficked women.

“Your honor, I had no idea. I didn’t know.” Will not be an acceptable defense.

Given the mindless chatter of johns on the Internet, only a fool could not know what is going out on there.

Just as importantly, governments need to provide support services for trafficked women and girls. These women are victims of incredible violence and violations.

Putting a meaningful dent in this criminal enterprise requires a committed, all-out frontal assault. What are needed now are actions, not words and empty promises from political leaders. Government leaders must send unequivocal orders to prosecutors and police to crack down hard on the traffickers and pimps.
What is truly stunning is that with few exceptions, most governments and police forces around the world regard the mass rape of women and girls as a far less serious crime than trafficking in drugs! And this, I submit, may have something to do with unspoken biases. In other words, better someone else’s daughters than ours!

For the Natashas, the only avenue of escape is a real job—a serious chance at a real life. That is all they ask for, and the well-heeled nations of the West—particularly the destination nations—have to contribute meaningfully to the solution. They must find ways of helping these women, not only with skills training but with offers of employment that don’t require them to take off their clothes. The overwhelming majority of impoverished women do not view prostitution as a “job opportunity” or a “profession.” Those who get dragged into it see it as a cold hard prison sentence. The bars where they work are their torture chambers. Their bedrooms are their cells.

Clearly, no single country or institution can effectively combat this scourge alone. What is urgently needed is a firm resolve and an unequivocal commitment from national governments around the globe to tackle this problem. Breaking this repugnant form of sexual exploitation must be a moral, legal and political imperative.

Every single one of us must keep in mind this one paramount fact: These young women and girls are the potential mothers of a
nation. What will become of them, and what will become of their homelands, if we continue to ignore this crisis?

The trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation is a crime against humanity. It is an affront to the dignity of all women. It is an affront to the universality of human rights, and it shames us all.

The global foot-dragging has gone on long enough. The time has come to put an end to the suffering. The time has come for all women’s rights groups and all of us who are concerned with human rights worldwide to yell loud and clear -- it’s time to STOP THE TRAFFIC.