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Monday, Jan. 18, 2010

South Africa's New Slave Trade and the Campaign to Stop It

By E. Benjamin Skinner

For a South African victim of human trafficking, this was the endgame. On a freezing night last July, Sindiswa, 17, lay curled in a fetal position in bed No. 7 of a state-run hospice in central Bloemfontein. Well-used fly strips hung between fluorescent lights, pale blue paint flaked off the walls, and fresh blood stained her sheets, the rusty bedpost and the linoleum floor. Sindiswa had full-blown AIDS and tuberculosis, and she was three months pregnant. Sweat poured from her forehead as she whispered her story through parched lips covered with sores. A few blocks away, the roars of rugby fans erupted from Free State Stadium. In June the roars will be from fans of the World Cup. ([See pictures of South Africa.](#))

Sindiswa's family was one of the poorest families in Indwe, the poorest district in Eastern Cape, one of the poorest provinces in South Africa. Ninety-five percent of the residents of her township fall below the poverty line, more than a quarter have HIV, and most survive by clinging to government grants. Orphaned at 16, she had to leave school to support herself. Last February, a woman from a neighboring town offered to find work for her and her 15-year-old best friend, Elizabeth, who, like Sindiswa, was poor but was also desperate to escape her violent older sister. (I have changed Elizabeth's name to protect her identity.)

After driving them eight hours north to Bloemfontein, the recruiter sold them to a Nigerian drug and human-trafficking syndicate in exchange for \$120 and crack cocaine. "[The recruiter] said we could find a job," Sindiswa recalled, "but as soon as we got here, she told us, 'No. You have to go into the streets and sell yourselves.'" The buyer, Jude, forced them into prostitution on the streets of central Bloemfontein for 12 straight hours every night. Each morning, he collected their earnings — Sindiswa averaged \$40 per night; Elizabeth, \$65. Elizabeth tried to escape three times, once absconding for several weeks. Jude always found her or used Sindiswa as a hostage to lure her back, then enlisted an enforcer named Rasta to beat her. ([See pictures of violence in South Africa.](#))

It is unclear if Sindiswa contracted HIV before or after she was sold, but some of her clients didn't use condoms. She was diagnosed with the virus only a week before I met her. When she was too sick to stand and thus useless as a slave, Jude had thrown her onto the street. Nurses expected her to die within days.

Despite more than a dozen international conventions banning slavery in the past 150 years, there are more slaves today than at any point in human history. Slaves are those forced to perform services for no pay beyond subsistence and for the profit of others who hold them through fraud and violence. While most are held in debt bondage in the poorest regions of South Asia, some are trafficked in the midst of thriving development. Such is

the case here in Africa's wealthiest country, the host of this year's World Cup. While South Africa invests billions to prepare its infrastructure for the half-million visitors expected to attend, tens of thousands of children have become ensnared in sexual slavery, and those who profit from their abuse are also preparing for the tournament. During a three-week investigation into human-trafficking syndicates operating near two stadiums, I found a lucrative trade in child sex. The children, sold for as little as \$45, can earn more than \$600 per night for their captors. "I'm really looking forward to doing more business during the World Cup," said a trafficker. We were speaking at his base overlooking Port Elizabeth's new Nelson Mandela Bay Stadium. Already, he had done brisk business among the stadium's construction workers.

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Although its 1996 constitution expressly forbids slavery, South Africa has no stand-alone law against human trafficking in all its forms. Aid groups estimate that some 38,000 children are trapped in the sex trade there. More than 500 mostly small-scale trafficking syndicates — Nigerian, Chinese, Indian and Russian, among others — collude with South African partners, including recruiters and corrupt police officials, to enslave local victims. The country's estimated 1.4 million AIDS orphans are especially vulnerable. South Africa has more HIV cases than any other nation, and a child sold into its sex industry will often face an early grave.

As Sindiswa told me her story, her voice trailed off, and the man who brought me to her — Andre Lombard, 39, a pastor of the Christian Revival Church — laid his hands on her. Lombard had a penetrating gaze and a simmering rage toward men who abuse women. His father, a brutal drunkard, had beaten his mother regularly. Lombard became a born-again Christian at age 17, then served in South Africa's elite special forces for 11 years. ([See 25 people who mattered in 2009.](#))

He began a street ministry in April 2006 and recruited some 60 volunteers to distribute food, blankets and Bibles to the dozens of women and girls selling sex within a 10-block radius of the stadium. They also preached to clients and traffickers. Fights were commonplace. Lombard allowed his volunteers to carry firearms, and several wound up in the intensive-care unit of the local hospital. Lombard acknowledges that most of the prostitutes were not enslaved. Still, in a controversial move, he purchased bus tickets home for more than two dozen women as a way to "escape the streets." With no comprehensive rehabilitation, however, several wound up back in prostitution. Mainstream antitrafficking organizations often decry such tactics as reckless. In response, Lombard says, "I'm a goer. If you drive by and just talk about it and don't do anything, you're actually justifying it."

After we left the hospice, Lombard drove eight blocks east of the stadium to the notorious Maitland Hotel. Police had identified the Maitland as a base of drug- and human-trafficking operations. HIV-positive survivors described how traffickers used gang rape, drug provision, sleep deprivation and torture to "break" new children on the fifth floor; the fourth floor featured an illegal abortion clinic. On other floors, as many as four girls slept on a single mattress. Police raided the Maitland in 2008 and shut the place down last January. Traffickers had been tipped off about the final raid, yet officials still rescued dozens of underage girls and

seized weapons and thousands of dollars' worth of drugs. Though still officially closed, the Maitland was active. Next door, a club blasted music by Tupac, and several girls worked the front of the hotel, where a makeshift concierge took rents. ([See TIME's tribute to people who passed away in 2009.](#))

A shivering girl in a red sweatshirt and flip-flops stood alone at the corner of the hotel. She said she was 15 and desperately needed help. I asked Lombard's volunteer to translate from Xhosa. Shockingly, this was Elizabeth — Sindiswa's best friend — still controlled by Jude. Having researched modern-day slavery for eight years, I knew how difficult it was for survivors to heal after emancipation. In this case, mere emancipation would be a dangerous procedure.

Earlier that day, I spoke with Luis CdeBaca, who was visiting South Africa on his first foreign visit as President Obama's ambassador-at-large to monitor and combat human trafficking. "Dedicated cops, prosecutors and victim advocates are fighting the traffickers in several host cities, but they're largely doing it on their own," he said. Obama has pledged to make the fight to abolish modern-day slavery a top foreign policy priority, but the U.S. currently spends more in a single day fighting drug trafficking than it does in an entire year fighting human trafficking. So CdeBaca, whose office evaluates every country based on its efforts to fight human bondage, must rely largely on diplomatic pressure. "An exploitation-free World Cup will require resources and political will from the South African government and the international community alike," said CdeBaca.

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Such political will is not evident. At best, the South African government's response to child sex trafficking has been superficial or piecemeal; at worst, some officials have actually colluded with the traffickers. American and South African law-enforcement sources described how police at all levels have solicited underage prostitutes in Bloemfontein, Durban and other World Cup cities. South African officials claim that Parliament will pass a comprehensive law against human trafficking in early 2010. For now, enterprising police officers who take on human traffickers do so with few legal tools at their disposal. Convictions for trafficking-related offenses typically bring little or no jail time. And those vigilante humanitarians like Lombard face an emboldened and violent adversary, as I saw that evening. ([See TIME's South Africa covers.](#))

Elizabeth insisted that we recover her scant possessions: a handful of clothes and a Bible. Jude had convinced her that he would perform witchcraft on those items, to track and punish her if she again attempted escape. We drove to Jude's fortified crack den five minutes away. Lombard and I followed Elizabeth into the darkness behind the compound. We were joined by Shadrack, a kung-fu-trained church volunteer who worked as a financial adviser by day. Elizabeth tapped a secret knock, and after Jude ushered her in, Shadrack wedged his foot in the door. We pushed into the dingy flat, which bore the medicinal odor of crack. As the churchmen escorted Elizabeth to retrieve her clothes, I smiled and feigned ignorance of their intent. While Lombard and Elizabeth retrieved her possessions, I spoke to Jude alone. Short and muscular, with dark, patchy skin, Jude wore slim, brown corduroys and white Crocs with green dollar signs. Jude explained that he lured girls from Johannesburg, where many survive by "picking through garbage." Our conversation turned to soccer. I asked

him if he was looking forward to the World Cup. "Yeah, this is good! Us people are going to make a lot of money then if you know what you're doing." ([See pictures of Johannesburg preparing for the World Cup.](#))

As I prepared to leave, a woman began screaming from a sealed-off room in the compound. Lombard burst back into the room and forced his way to the darkened recesses of the compound. He kicked in a door to find Rasta, the syndicate's enforcer, half naked with the screaming woman, who ran behind Lombard. "Did you beat her? Because if you beat her, you must beat me," Lombard said, inches from the flaring eyes of the muscular Rasta. Rasta launched a haymaker at Lombard, who ducked. Rasta threatened to call in his "brothers." "I'll break their legs too," Lombard retorted as we retreated to our car, where the photographer traveling with us, Melanie Hamman, was bent in prayer with Elizabeth. With Jude chasing us on foot, we drove off.

Newly elected South African President Jacob Zuma addressed fears about sex trafficking in a speech last August. "We have noted the concern amongst women's groups that the 2010 FIFA World Cup may have the unintended consequence of creating opportunities for human trafficking," the President said. "We are putting systems in place to prevent this, as part of general security measures that we should take when hosting an event of this magnitude."

Zuma's pledge was too little, too late for Sindiswa, who died on July 22. Immediately after we took Elizabeth off the streets, Hamman and I drove her eight hours to her home in Eastern Cape. Wary of the failure rate of Lombard's unmonitored returns, we worked with a dedicated social worker in Indwe to ensure that the conditions under which she was originally trafficked did not reappear. A suburban-Chicago couple has given her a full scholarship, enabling the otherwise impossible goal of finishing school. She is HIV-negative. It is a stretch to call her lucky. But she has another chance at life.

Skinner is the author of A Crime So Monstrous: Face-to-Face with Modern-Day Slavery (Free Press, 2008), which was awarded the 2009 Dayton Literary Peace Prize for nonfiction. This investigation was supported by a grant from Humanity United.

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