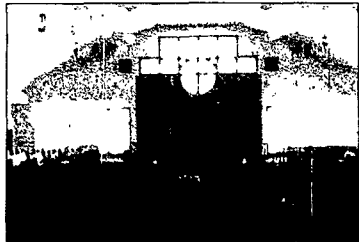


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Reuters/CNS

Salaj Mohammed Kasim, 7, weeps during a March 4 police raid on an embroidery workshop in Bombay, India, during which more than 90 child laborers were rescued. Annually, between 400,000 and 1 million people — mostly women and children — are taken across international borders worldwide to work in the sex trade or other forced labor. Catholic organizations are spearheading an effort to bring the growing problem of human trafficking out of the shadows.

Human trafficking: A worldwide problem

WASHINGTON (CNS) — A coalition of more than 20 Catholic organizations is taking a leading role in efforts to bring the hidden problem of human trafficking out of the shadows.

With an estimated 18,000 to 20,000 victims of human trafficking — most of them women and children — entering the United States each year, the problem is widespread. The number of people brought across international borders worldwide for the sex trade or other forced labor is placed at anywhere from 400,000 to 1 million or more annually.

But those who profit from the trade in human beings often keep their victims under such close watch that finding those who need assistance is a huge challenge. Attending weekly Mass might be

the only activity that the trafficker allows them to do alone.

"Oftentimes the only contact that people who have been trafficked have with the outside world is through religious ministers," said Laurie M. Latuda, a grants and programs administrator with the Office of Refugee Programs in the U.S. bishops' Migration and Refugee Services.

MRS provides administrative support to the Coalition of Catholic Organizations Against Human Trafficking, whose members meet four times a year to share information, educate themselves about particular aspects of the trafficking problem and have a dialogue with government leaders.

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Story by Catholic News Service