

# FOCUS

## An Urgent Appeal to the SAARC Ministerial Meeting

# Dhaka Resolution Must Commit to Stop Trafficking in Women and Children

THE SAARC Ministerial meeting on Women began yesterday in Dhaka to discuss the social and economic aspects of women within the region. This meeting will adopt a "Dhaka Resolution" upholding women's rights in all spheres of society. This meeting has special significance in the context of the forthcoming Fourth World Conference on Women to be held in Beijing during September, 1995. Therefore, some very urgent actions must be taken which is affecting the lives of women and children within the SAARC countries. It is a very crucial opportunity for each of SAARC countries to play a responsible role.

level to stop trafficking, the lives of women and children are at danger. On the other hand, in the absence of effective measures taken by the governments of the SAARC countries, the trafficking network is gaining strength and has managed to develop a safeguarding measure in favour of them. Now, there is absolutely no time to spare. The governments of the SAARC countries must join their hands together in stopping the trafficking of women and children.

overseas — to Europe and America. Pakistan is reported to have received over 200,000 Bangladeshi women for slave trade and prostitution. Every day, over 50 women and children are reported to be taken out of the country through the land borders areas of the country. Estimates suggest that over 5000 Bangladeshi women and children are becoming the victims of trafficking with false promises of jobs, marriage etc.

Children in the middle class families also face kidnapping from schools and end up in the trafficking to middle eastern countries. Trafficking as a business is flourishing and has become a easy-money making opportunity. In the absence of a strong alliance

among the governments of each of the SAARC member countries, the traffickers are able to make unholy links with administration and therefore are never caught. Women and children are not only trafficked within SAARC countries. They are trafficked

within other Asian countries and to Europe and America. The increasing trend of buying organs of the women and children for various medical purposes in Europe is now a well-known fact.

There are several UN conventions which clearly prohibits trafficking of women and children and for abolition of slavery. The UN Convention of the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the exploitation of others (1949) and the supplementary convention on the abolition of slavery, the slave trade and institutions and practices of slavery are worth mentioning. These conventions have been signed by most of the SAARC countries, specially those of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Article 6 of the Convention of the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1979 mentions that "states parties shall take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of prostitution of women." Last year in December, 1994 the South Asian women, who met in Kolkata, Bangladesh brought out a South Asian Platform of Action in preparation for FWCW '95 state that though the malignant growth of trafficking in women has hindered development of women, yet it remained most "unaddressed" issue. At a national level the traffickers are hardly brought under the laws of the land. The similar concerns have been expressed and reinforced in the recent document of "Paurband Declaration," a declaratory position of the socially and politically active organisations and individuals working with women's issues.

of violence. The trafficked women leading an inhuman life when their entire body is sold for profit. Women are used not only for sexual slavery and abuse, but hunted for the healthy organs. This violation is inconceivable by any sensible human being. Our governments must take collective efforts to stop this barbaric trade which is occurring within SAARC region. The government of the sending and receiving countries of trafficked women and children must play a role to ensure strict enforcement of the national laws and to take responsibilities to repatriate the trafficked women and children to the respective countries. This is an immediate task, a demand of the women in the region. It is time that we form inter-country institutions to take responsibility of the victims. SAARC ministers should be able to come up with a clear resolution on this issue.

One of the common concern among the women's groups within the SAARC countries is the issue of trafficking of women and children within the SAARC and outside the SAARC countries. Unless strong actions are taken at the government

Within the SAARC countries, Bangladesh and Nepal are particularly victimized because women and children from these countries are taken out to be sold for forced prostitution, organ trade and for slave labour. Though Indian women are also suffering from such crime against them, India as a country has become the recipient of trafficked women in the brothels of Bombay and Delhi and also acts as the transit point for trafficking

Women's groups in Nepal reported that 100,000-160,000 Nepalese girls are forced to work as prostitutes in different brothels of India alone. About 5000 to 7000 young Nepalese girls are trafficked to India every day. About 45000 Nepalese girls are in the brothels of Bombay and 40000 in Calcutta.

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where the girl came from, it is usually from the southern part of Bangladesh taken from the northern borders. So far, the newspaper reports did not show trafficking of women from the districts of border areas, although poverty is quite rampant in those areas. In Kushtia area, however, some villages are used as stations of the traffickers, where they come and stay for a while. Then they marry the young girls and later on take them on the other side of the border. But it is also reported that the local people have become aware of the trafficking and therefore the traffickers are less interested in the local girls. Rajshahi borders of Bidirpur and Premtali were used mostly because there was less check posts.

Jessore border is very active in this trade. Some hotels and godowns in Jessore town are used to keep the girls brought from different parts of the country. In 1990, a newspaper report mentioned (Ittefaq 15 October, 1990) that at least 13 women are being trafficked every day. The police sources reported that in eight months they could rescue only 28 women who were being trafficked, and could arrest 38 traffickers. Usually the traffickers are not accompanying the women while crossing the border. Therefore, it is difficult for the border police to arrest them. It is also found that there are female members in the trafficking gang, which helps the traffickers to hide their identity. However, among the arrested traffickers, women members were also there.

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### Highlights of the Newspaper Reports about Trafficking in Women and Children in Bangladesh

TRAFFICKING in Bangladeshi women and children is now a known phenomenon. Nari pachar or the Trafficking is seen as a criminal act by some unscrupulous flesh traders linked to a regional-and international trafficking network. It is not new, at least the police record shows very specific records of trafficking since 1979. According to an estimate of the Human Rights organisations in Pakistan, where most of the trafficked women are sold, there are about 1500 Bengali women in Jail and about 200,000 women and children are involved in the slave trade. According to another report (Sangbad 28 December, and 30 December, 1992) there are 200,000 women in different middle eastern countries, and 2100 women in Pakistan jail. Another 500 women were in different jails in India. It is difficult to assess whether trafficking has increased or decreased in the recent compared to the past, but certainly there is more consciousness at the level of media and at the level of law enforcing agencies. The resistance against trafficking in women has developed in the national women's movement and links are being made among the women's groups resisting trafficking in women in South Asian countries. The information flow among the women's groups is not yet properly developed but a lot of discussions are going on at the level of strategies for resistance. In the following I shall attempt to highlight on the issues related to trafficking which will also serve as a guideline for future research and policy actions in this field. While I will only use references from the newspapers reporting on trafficking in women, the news items are transcribed from Bengali to English for detailed information. In the beginning I must thank the journalists and some members of the law enforcing agencies who are actively providing information of the general public in this regard.

#### a. SOURCE OF INFORMATION:

The main source of knowing about trafficking is mainly through the reporting of the conscious reporters of national dailies and weeklies. There are some very good investigative reporting on the trafficking in Bangladeshi women. In fact, so far print media is the only source. The women activist groups and the researchers have to rely on these sources for their work.

#### b. THE NATURE OF REPORTING:

In the daily newspapers, the trafficking in women is reported mainly in two ways: 1. as a news on arrest of traffickers; 2. as a news of rescued women and children from the border areas; 3. news about the condition of trafficked women abroad and 4. (in rare cases) news about women coming back after being trafficked.

#### c. THE FIRST TWO TYPES ARE MOST COMMON:

The first two types are most common reports on trafficking in women and children. The newspaper reporting are based on the police reports from the bordering areas. The rescued girls then interrogated to get more information about their own background and how they were trapped into the hands of the traffickers. Some of the alleged traffickers, happen to be only middlemen in the whole process. The information revealed from them seldom help to know the main culprits of the flesh trade both within and outside the country. However, it is quite well established that the trafficking is illegal and is seen as a crime. The reports, therefore, help to take position against this criminal act.

#### d. MAJOR INFORMATION RECEIVED FROM THE NEWSPAPER REPORTING:

1. About the age of the trafficked women and children: The children, often accompanied by their mothers, can be as young as two to three years. But children are also kidnapped from different places and are trafficked together with other women. The women are 30 years of age, among them most of them are girls below 18 years of age.

#### e. HOW THE WOMEN AND CHILDREN ARE COLLECTED:

There are basically two ways of collecting women and children (boys and girls) from different parts of the country. One is to kidnap and take away through the borders. But this has become difficult and there are more chances getting caught red handed. The second method is to allure the women directly by giving them hopes of jobs and marriage options. The women and their families agree to these proposals with the hope of a "better

#### f. HAPPENING TO THEM:

They have the hope of jobs and for a good marriage. The families having problems in marrying their daughters for demand of dowry become an easy prey to this offer. Therefore, girls are vulnerable at the hands of their parents because they are seen as a burden after a certain age. The poor parents, being unable to respond to dowry demands voluntarily handover their daughters to the unknown groom, even when he is proposing for taking her to India. The offer of marriage is mostly acceptable in cases of girls who could not be married for dowry, or those who came back from husbands' house immediately after marriage, again because the father could not meet continuous dowry demands. Another factor, which is quite disturbing in all the news reports that, the uncles (maternal or paternal uncles, known as Mama or Chacha) persuade the fathers of the girls to give their daughters to these grooms. In fact, some of these uncles are paid by the brokers to carry out the job of persuasion.

#### g. WOMEN AND CHILDREN ARE SOLD, ENGAGED IN PROSTITUTION AND ORGAN TRADE:

Newspaper reports clearly find out the link of trafficking for prostitution, bonded slavery and organ trade. The price of young girls is between Tk 10,000 to Tk 12,000. Sometimes, "beautiful and healthy" can be sold over Tk 20,000 to Tk 30,000. Children are sold Tk 7,000 to Tk 8,000.

Women are sold as bonded Labour and for prostitution. The reports of Bangladeshi women from Pakistan and India shows that they have ended up in brothels, where they are sold. Children are also used for child prostitution, organs trade and for camel race in middle east.

h. News about government commitment towards stopping this crime: In 1992, a news item (Ittefaq 15 July, 1995) revealed that the government has taken up the issue of trafficking in women and children very seriously and wants to punish the persons involved in this crime. Although there is an Ordinance called "The Cruelty to Women (Deterrent Punishment) Ordinance, 1983, the punishment is for life term or for 14 years imprisonment for kidnapping or abduction of women of any age. The government recognized that the criminals cannot be punished under this law because of many loopholes in it. So in a policy meeting, it was decided to make the law more strict to be able to punish the traffickers. Plans were undertaken to form divisional courts in the four divisions to follow the cases as quickly as possible.

The dailies and weeklies which are consulted for this are —  
Daily newspapers: Ittefaq, Sangbad, Dainik Bangla and Bangladesh Observer  
Weekly newspapers: Bichitra and Robbar

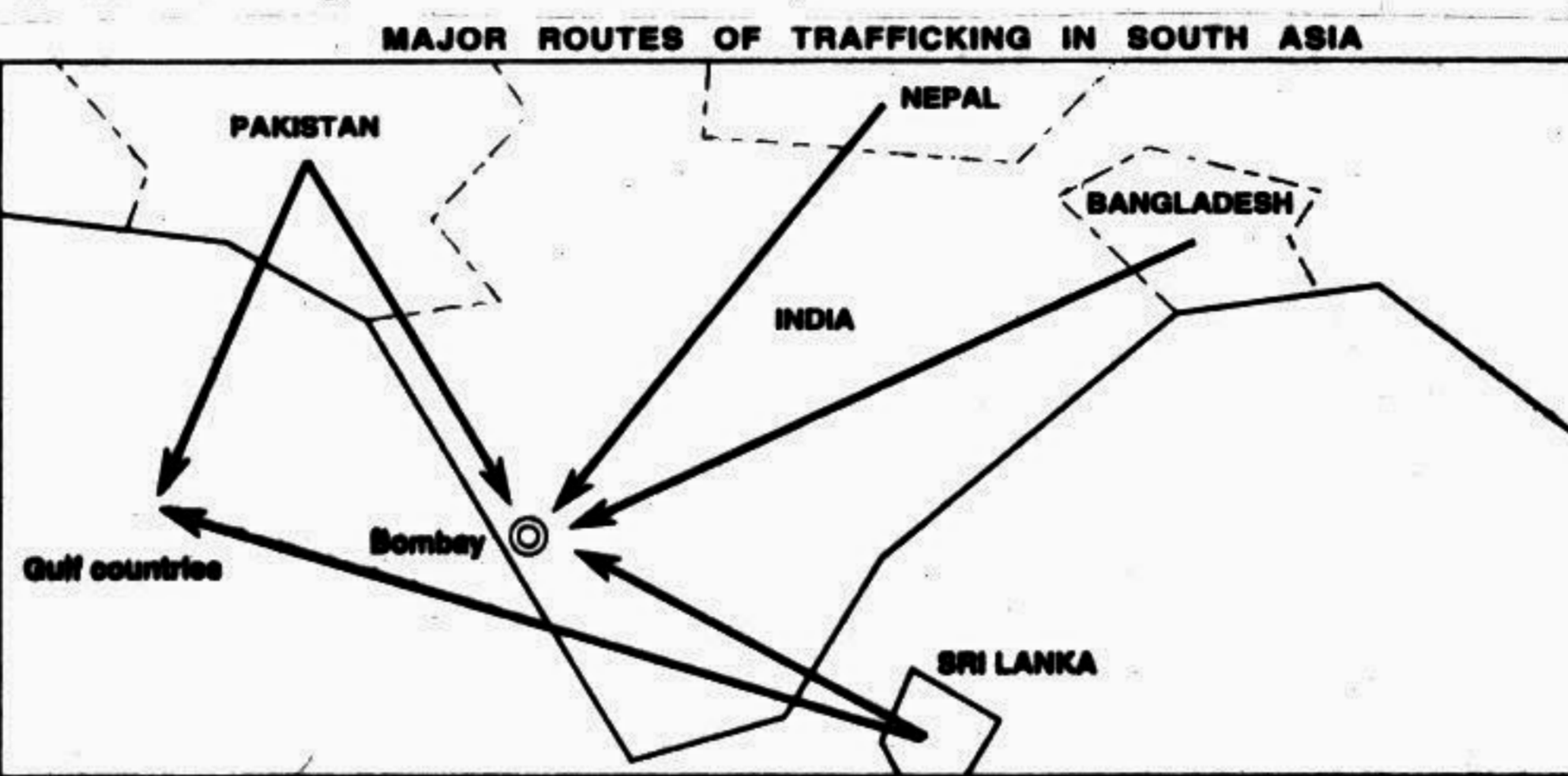
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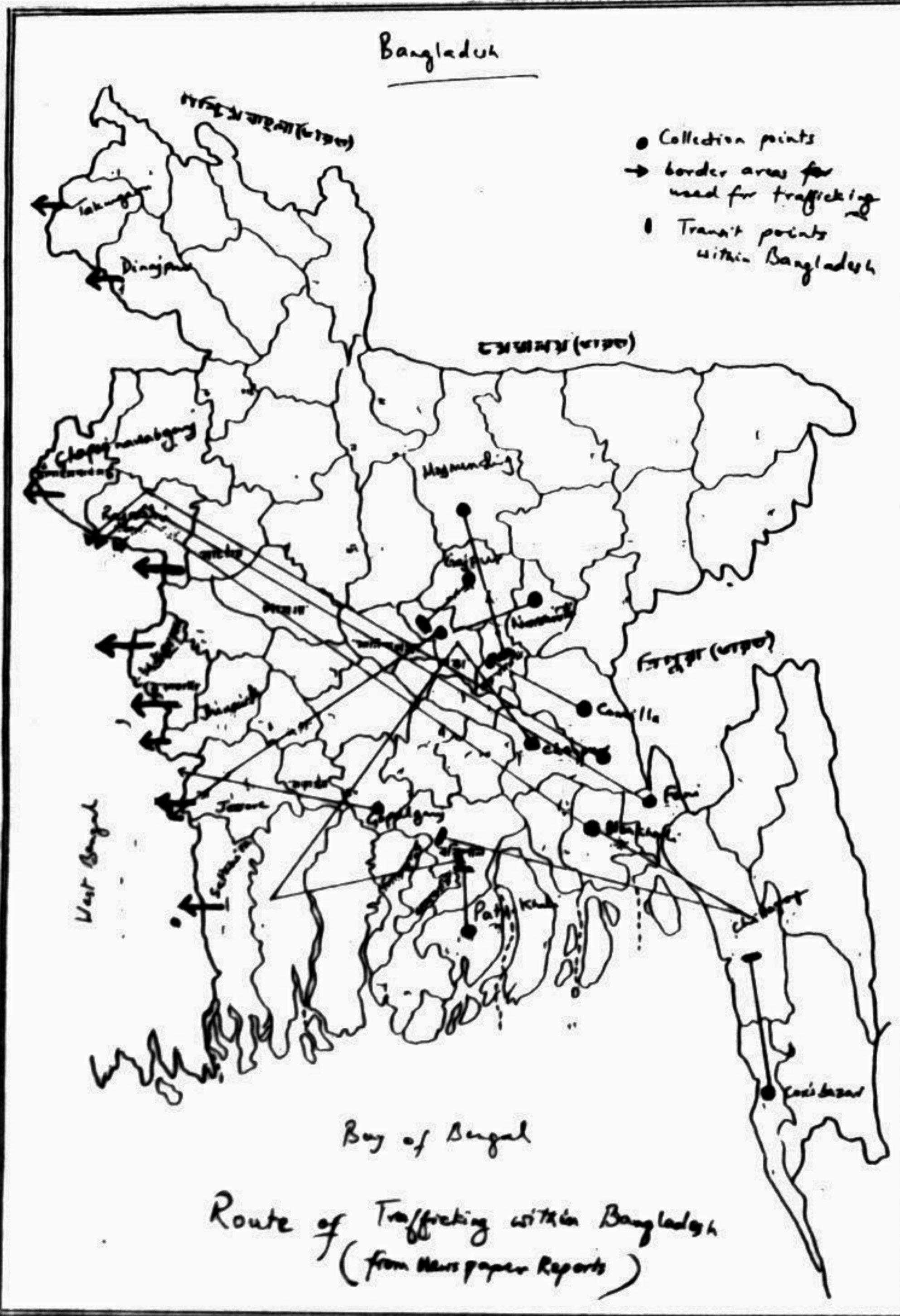
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Source: IMADR Review for Research and Action, May, 1994 No. 2 Tokyo, Japan



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No news after the arrest: There are many news including pictures of the rescued women and the brokers and members of trafficking gang. But there is hardly any news afterwards. Whether any traffickers got punishment is never reported. We also do not have any information about the fate of women "who were rescued". How safe they were afterwards! It is usually found that the girls also have difficulty when they are in the custody of police. There are reports of rapes in the police station as well. For the girls, who were deceived by false promises of better jobs and marriage prospects are not known whether they could go back to their own villages with honour?

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## Eugenics Law 'Will Not Lead to HIV Testing'

by Nick Young

A leading figure in China's effort to combat the spread of AIDS has denied that mandatory testing for HIV, the virus that leads to the disease, will be introduced through a new "birth quality control" law.

Under the Maternal and Child Health Care Law, which takes effect in June, couples wanting to marry must be medically certified as free of genetic, mental or infectious disorders. Antenatal tests to detect possible foetal abnormalities will also become compulsory.

Promoted as part of a government drive to "improve population quality," to some extent the new measures merely formalise previous arrangements. Marriage licensing authorities have commonly, although often arbitrarily, demanded clean bills of health from intending couples, including tests for syphilis and gonorrhoea.

Within the terms of the new law, HIV testing could become a routine and compulsory condition for obtaining permission to marry.

But the issue has not been considered," according to Professor Chen Chunming, senior adviser to the Chinese Academy of Preventive Medicine, which is responsible for tracking HIV and AIDS in China. Such action, she told Panos, "would require multi-ministerial action" and there was no sign that this was government's intention.

Public education and work with high-risk groups should be the mainstay of preventive campaigns, said Professor Chen, who also sits on the Health Minister's Expert Committee on AIDS Control.

Any legal reform should focus on safeguarding the rights of people who had tested HIV positive, since "the more you discriminate, the more you drive the infection underground, and then it is harder to contain."

Some 1,800 people in China have been diagnosed as HIV positive, but the Academy of Preventive Medicine estimates the actual figure is nearer 10,000.

Of this relatively small total, the greatest concentration of cases is in the south-western province of Yunnan, bordering Myanmar and Thailand, where HIV is much more prevalent.

Shared use of needles among intravenous drug users has so far been considered the main route of transmission in the border areas, but the incidence of the virus among commercial sex workers is thought to be growing significantly.

Western researchers who have visited the area believe that sex workers are only dimly aware of the risks of HIV, and take minimal preventive measures.

Although sex workers clearly comprise one of the highest risk groups, Professor Chen agrees that it is difficult to target them for educational campaigns since prostitution, although often overt, remains illegal. This makes it hard for medical authorities to gain sex workers trust.

Despite this, and commonplace allegations of corrupt police or army involvement in prostitution rackets, Professor Chen believes prostitution will never be decriminalised.