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Syndicate suspected in child trafficking ring

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THE appearance of six men in the Port Elizabeth Magistrate's Court this week on 30 charges of violating the Child and Sexual Offences Act, drug trafficking and rape has highlighted the scourge of child trafficking in the city ahead of the Fifa World Cup. The six men, all Nigerian nationals and believed to be part of a syndicate, are accused of luring children as young as 11 into the sex trade for financial gain, as well as molesting their victims sexually.

They appeared in court on Monday for a bail application and are due to appear again tomorrow.

The men, aged between 25 and 37, were arrested between December and March, on separate occasions in Port Elizabeth and in Bloemfontein.

The state alleges that one of them, Christian Ndukauba, sexually molested an girl aged 11 on four occasions in a flat near the Belvia Hotel in Govan Mbeki Avenue.

The state also alleges that on December 16, 2007, Ndukauba unlawfully offered the sexual services of a child to a certain Dr Mike and other unidentified people at the Maitland Hotel in Bloemfontein.

Ndukauba's co-accused, Austin Okeke, is alleged to have molested a girl aged 12 on two occasions in the same Govan Mbeki Avenue premises.

Police Captain Sandra Janse van Rensburg said that since December 11 men, including the six that appeared in court this week, had been arrested in Port Elizabeth and Bloemfontein in connection with child trafficking.

"All these men are suspected to have been working together and their arrests stem from information generated from an investigation that started in 2007."

Janse van Rensburg said the two children involved, who were rescued by police, "are being looked after at a place of safety".

Well-placed sources told The Herald that four men believed to be part of the group had skipped the country and flown back to Nigeria when police made the initial arrests in December.

Despite the arrests, police say there is no evidence to suggest an increase in human trafficking in Port Elizabeth. However, they still regard it as a "top priority" – especially following international concerns over a peak in child trafficking during the World Cup.

Janse van Rensburg said human trafficking experts were on "high alert" amid fears that criminal syndicates were operating in Port Elizabeth.

A joint provincial task team made up of police, the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA), non-governmental organisations and social development agencies was formed late last year to investigate and assist in human trafficking-related cases.

Janse van Rensburg said people often assumed an element of human trafficking when e-mails circulated concerning missing teenagers or children.

However, "in every investigation we have done into e-mails about missing children, there has been no element of human trafficking at all".

Police human trafficking detective Marcel van der Watt said: "These men prey on both adults and children who are vulnerable. In most situations, victims are lured away by traffickers promising them the world and before they know it they are in the sex trade."

In most reported cases, victims of human trafficking were over the age of 18 and at a vulnerable stage in their lives. One method was to take a girl to a party and introduce her to someone who introduced her to drugs. This often led to addiction and prostitution.

Van der Watt said there were many ways in which traffickers operated. "They would ideally prey on children who are victims of parental neglect," he said.

In all instances, he said, human traffickers targeted vulnerable women and girls. It was a global problem which generated about R250-billion a year.

Human trafficking trauma counsellor John Preller said he had not previously come across child trafficking victims as young as 11.

In a recent study funded by the NPA, the Human Sciences Research Council revealed that the largest movement of trafficked people was from rural areas to cities.

The report said the potential link between human trafficking and large events started attracting attention in the wake of the 2004 Athens Olympics and the 2006 World Cup in Germany.

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