

Operation Sneep:

"The frayed edges of licensed prostitution."

Vienna 4 October 2011

**Inge Schepers, Public Prosecutor, National Public Prosecutors' Office
Rotterdam, based in Zwolle**

The problem of human trafficking in the Netherlands

The nature and size of human trafficking in the Netherlands can be given only in approximate figures. The fact that our society is facing a serious problem is being confirmed by criminal investigations with some regularity. The problem of human trafficking is often its invisibility. Human trafficking sometimes literally takes place under our very noses and yet we do not see it! We do not or not sufficiently recognize the signals of human trafficking.

With the lifting of the ban on brothels in 2000, prostitution was pulled out of illegality, so that it could become a 'normal' branch of industry and a better picture could be obtained of objectionable practices. As a society, we made window prostitution a licensed branch to be able to control and counter situations of abuse. But in spite of it, licensed window prostitution is the very branch in which everything went as terribly wrong as Operation SNEEP demonstrated. In licensed window prostitution human trafficking was daily practice: manipulation, coercion, exploitation, even brute forces were the order of the day. Victims were dehumanized and degenerated into mere production factors. The lifeless victims were working as mechanical devices, often even up to 12 hours or more a day, day in day out, throughout the year. The fact that the victims will then cut off their emotions and resort to their survival instinct, makes the phenomenon human trafficking so horrible, so objectionable. The Public Prosecution Service has to act against this.

We are facing a serious problem that we will not be able to get to grips with easily with the classical criminal prosecution approach, and this notion made the Public Prosecution Service opt for a new approach.

That approach, the programmed approach, is in fact nothing more than "jointly buckle down to it!". The programmed approach entails the cooperation of the Public Prosecution Service and the various services in the field of criminal investigation as well as administrative cooperation with municipalities, like in Amsterdam, Alkmaar and Utrecht. All relevant partners have to be put in a position where they can identify and criminally and administratively counter human trafficking and obstruct human trafficking practices by putting up barriers.

Operation SNEEP is the criminal investigation component of this programmed approach. The investigation into the main suspects of a human trafficking ring – the group of suspects of SNEEP illustrates where the classical approach failed and the programmed approach will succeed.

Composition of the group

The main suspects of Operation Sneep were first spotted in the Netherlands by police officers working at the Amsterdam police station that monitors the red light district 'De Wallen'. Three men of Turkish origin, including the two brothers, came from Germany to Amsterdam in 1998. The three of them brought some German women who were going to work for them in prostitution. Within almost a decade this group developed into a network of some 50 pimps, bodyguards and other associates. The group has been active in licensed window prostitution in at least five Dutch cities. Moreover, there were collaborations with pimps and brothel keepers in various German and Belgian cities.

The group in the Netherlands featured a hierarchical structure and an assignment of tasks. After a while the three men, who would originally act as supervisors themselves, hired so-called bodyguards to keep an eye on the prostitutes and get insight in the number of clients and earnings. In time several bodyguards were promoted to pimps themselves and allowed to have women work for them. Some of them would nevertheless continue with their 'bodyguard activities'.

Victims

A total of 120 prostitutes have been linked to the group. On the basis of intercepts, surveillance reports or statements 78 of them could be labelled as probable victim in April 2007. At that stage, some two months after the first arrests, 10 women had reported human trafficking or made incriminating statements about the group. Some of them wanted to withdraw their report later. Most of the victims are from Germany or the Netherlands and other countries of origin include Ireland, Poland, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic. A part of the women were recruited on the clubbing scene, the majority, however, was 'snatched' from other pimps. The victims were working in window prostitution in the Netherlands. The women would usually work every day and also during their periods. Intercepted telephone conversations show that some victims would ask their pimp for permission to stop working. Many of the women had to hand over a daily target figure of €1,000. Many victims would be monitored by the criminal group virtually 24 hours a day.

Facilitators

The prostitutes would rent workrooms from licensed window rental companies in various Dutch cities. In a few cases there was direct contact between the window rental company and the pimps. A tax consultancy firm has been involved in the paperwork that prostitutes have to deal with in order to be allowed to work in licensed prostitution. In addition, several accounting offices and work agencies provided the suspects with pay slips. An abortion clinic took care of at least five abortions for the group. For breast enlargements one and the same cosmetic clinic was visited time and again. A doctor employed by this clinic would give discounts to new customers that were introduced by the main suspects. Two facilitators in the field of housing have probably been aware of the criminal activities of the group, to which they let several houses. Yet, there has only been one window lessor who formally reported alleged exploitation practices.

The classical approach and the programmed approach in Operation SNEEP

In 1998 the German police alerted the Amsterdam police to the brothers. Operation Caravan, begun on the basis of this alert, eventually foundered. The classical approach is unsuccessful. When by the end of 2005 another group of German Turks turns out to be active in human trafficking, it is decided to launch another inquiry.

There have been three phases in Operation SNEEP. An information phase, which ran from somewhere in April to the summer of 2006, during which information from other operations was analysed. An operational phase, running from the summer of 2006, during which investigative means were deployed such as telephone intercepts, systematic surveillance, car registration reading system and the IMSI catcher (for intercepting calls on pre-paid telephones). In the operational phase the cooperation between the Public Prosecution Service and the various investigation partners also got going. International police cooperation takes place between Germany, Belgium, Poland and Turkey. The Polish police were asked to interview victims who had meanwhile returned home. The Turkish police were approached in order to get insight into the assets of the main suspects. The most intensive cooperation was with the German police and the Public Prosecution Service. A letter of request served to get insight in the suspects' money flow and bank accounts (by means of intercepts and a financial inquiry). In the autumn of 2006 a financial inquiry was begun in SNEEP. Initially it focused on the deprivation of illegally obtained gain but before long it also aimed at bringing any facilitators into vision through money flows. The financial inquiry was above all begun to get insight in the (cash) money flows between pimps and prostitutes and thus prove exploitation.

The third phase of the operation - the arrest phase - arrived unexpectedly and sooner than planned. On 7 February 2007 an intercepted telephone conversation learnt that information from the letter of request was passed on to the sister of one of the main suspects. One of the main suspects in the Netherlands got word from Germany that his sister had been to the Bank in Germany in connection with the financing of a Hummer. In the bank an acquaintance of hers spoke to her in private and showed her a letter of the Oberstaatsanwalt referring to a Dutch letter of request. The sister passed this information on to the main suspects. Subsequently, the main suspect makes a telephone call to Germany to bring the keys from safes in Turkey. Another suspect books flights from Cologne to Antalya. Knowing Turkey will not extradite suspects with a (partially) Turkish nationality, the Public Prosecution Service has no other option but to make arrests.

In a criminal investigation things do sometimes not work out as planned or anticipated. This is what happened in Operation SNEEP. After the arrests of a part of the suspects the police approached victims to gather reports and statements. Experience with human trafficking operations learns how difficult it is to get statements from victims. In SNEEP in particular this turned out to be the case. This was anticipated during the criminal investigation. The Public Prosecution Service tried to collect evidence without the victims' contributions, e.g. by intercepts, surveillance and witness statements. However, the preliminary investigation was not nearly finished when all of a sudden the arrests had to be made. After the arrests attempts were made to obtain statements and reports from the probable victims. One woman who had meanwhile returned to Poland was approached to give evidence. However, a part of the women (eight) deny being a victim and are therefore unwilling to give a statement. This example illustrates the dilemmas and problems that are encountered in the gathering of evidence. All the same, the Public Prosecution Service believes it has a strong case against the suspects. During a long trial of many years 20 suspects have been prosecuted. Most of them are convicted.