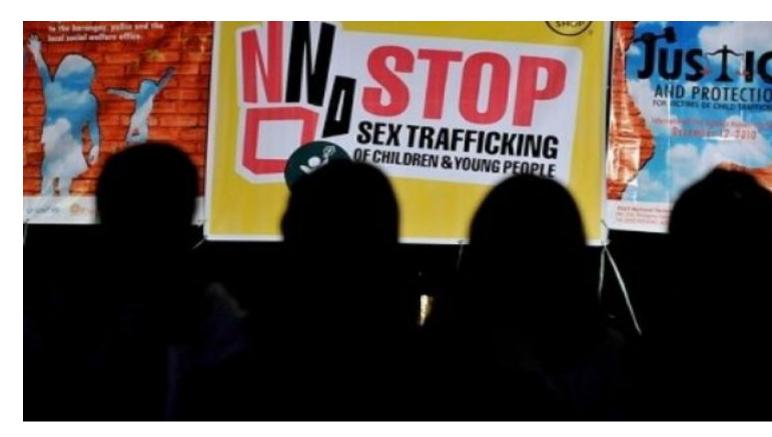# Human trafficking in U.S. surges during COVID-19 lockdowns

New York, June 18 (RHC)-- Lockdown measures enforced in the United States against the spread of the new coronavirus led to an escalation of human trafficking, anti-trafficking group Polaris said Monday.

The outbreak of COVID-19, starting about mid-March in the U.S., forced the closing of businesses across the country and threw millions of people out of work. "The economic upheaval, the fact that people are essentially trapped with their abusers, the desperate straits so many find themselves in, are conditions where trafficking thrives," said Polaris's interim chief executive Nancy McGuire Choi.

Traffickers often use force, fraud, or coercion to make victims engage in labor or commercial sexual exploitation. Polaris said the number of people seeking emergency shelter to escape trafficking, violence surged to 54 in April from 29 in March.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) also warned that the pandemic has created new opportunities for organized crime to profit.

"Traffickers may become more active and prey on people who are even more vulnerable than before, because they have lost their source of income due to measures to control the virus," Ilias Chatzis, the chief of UNODC's Human Trafficking Section, said in a news release.

According to a document published by the U.S.-based anti-trafficking coalition, Alliance to End Slavery and Trafficking (ATEST), measures due to the pandemic have exacerbated living conditions for trafficked individuals who have become more easily controlled by traffickers.

Undocumented migrants and refugees are among the most vulnerable and at a heightened risk to be recruited into trafficking.

An estimated 400,000 people are believed trapped in modern slavery in the U.S. from sex work to forced labor, according to the Walk Free Foundation, a human rights group.

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