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In D.C. Area, Most Cases Involve Prostitution

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The U.S. government's only human trafficking case in the Maryland suburbs in the past four years is the indictment of a Hyattsville man accused of pimping a 15-year-old girl.

Javier Miguel Ramirez was charged in June under federal sex trafficking statutes, which cover prostitution involving a minor. But Ramirez's attorney, Daniel Stiller, said that's not the public's image of human trafficking -- it's more likely to be seen as modern-day slavery in brutal or coercive conditions.

"While maybe this girl was sold into prostitution by her family in a Central or Latin American country," Stiller said, "my client allegedly pimping her in Maryland does not make him a human trafficker. As is so often the case with the Justice Department, they create a cause celebre, an issue celebre, and all they ever pursue is the low-hanging fruit."

U.S. Attorney Rod J. Rosenstein disputes that, saying that if Ramirez is convicted, "it certainly would constitute human trafficking." But the case is typical of Washington area trafficking prosecutions, which usually have involved prostitution. There have been relatively few trafficking prosecutions in the region, despite government estimates of as many as 17,500 victims a year nationwide.

Although the Washington area is considered a trafficking "hub" by some activists, federal prosecutors in Northern Virginia have brought just four cases since Congress passed an anti-trafficking law in 2000. There have been seven trafficking prosecutions in the past seven years in the Maryland suburbs. But the Ramirez case is the first to have been filed in federal court in Greenbelt since 2003.

In the District, the region's only Justice Department trafficking task force has been trying to find foreigners trafficked into the United States but is having difficulty. Since it was created in 2004, the task force has prosecuted four cases in federal court in the District and about 25 cases in D.C. Superior Court. All have involved U.S. citizens forced into prostitution, including children. Sixty-three victims have been identified, officials said.

One case targeted Barron Lewis, 34, of Memphis. He pleaded guilty in D.C. Superior Court to a single count of pandering and was sentenced in August 2006 to 20 months in prison. Lewis admitted that he and a co-defendant recruited a 17-year-old girl and a 23-year-old woman in Richmond and took them to the District, where he became their pimp.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Sharon Marcus-Kurn, who coordinated the task force until March, said that victims who are U.S. citizens are easier to find. "They're the low-hanging fruit. . . . The shows on

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television always have victims in chains and beatings. We don't have chains and beatings in most of our cases . . . but that doesn't negate the fact that they are trafficking victims."

In Greenbelt, a two-count indictment charges Ramirez, 34, with sex trafficking of a minor, an illegal immigrant from Mexico, and harboring an illegal alien. He pleaded not guilty last month, and his trial is scheduled for Dec. 11.

Two of the Northern Virginia cases also involved sexual trafficking. Another one, the prosecution of Kimberly Countryman, shows that shades of gray can permeate cases that the federal government considers trafficking.

Countryman, a native of South Korea, married a U.S. diplomat stationed there. When the couple returned to Chantilly in 2002, she employed a Cambodian mother of four named "C.C." as a servant.

In documents filed in U.S. District Court in Alexandria, Countryman admitted last year that she withheld much of the money C.C. was to be paid for working 12-hour days, confiscated C.C.'s passport, assaulted her four times and told her not to talk to outsiders.

As part of her guilty plea, Countryman admitted that she subjected C.C. to forced labor. Although she was only charged with visa fraud, the Justice Department classified the case as trafficking. Countryman's attorney, Simon Osnos, disagrees.

"It may be the only one in Northern Virginia that has overtones of trafficking," Osnos said, "but it's not a trafficking case."

When U.S. District Judge Gerald Bruce Lee sentenced Countryman in October 2006, he told her he was "quite disturbed" by how C.C. was treated. He added: "You're not here on trial for human slavery or anything like that."

The sentence: 180 days in prison.

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