

Guilty plea in human trafficking operation

Women enslaved in Essex hair salons

Thursday, March 19, 2009

BY JOE RYAN

Star-Ledger Staff

The young women were smuggled from West African villages to Newark and East Orange with promises of a better life.

But once they arrived, their passports and visas were taken from them. They were forbidden to leave their homes alone. They weren't allowed to learn English. To make friends. To date. And they were forced to braid hair seven days a week, 14 hours a day -- without pay.

Those were the rules for up to 20 girls and young women who braided hair at salons in Newark and East Orange, according to a man who pleaded guilty yesterday in U.S. District Court in Newark to helping run a human trafficking ring that investigators equated to modern-day slavery.

Dereck Hounakey, 32, a West African immigrant from Togo, spoke softly as he said he helped his mother smuggle the victims and force them to work. They ranged in age from 10 to 19, authorities said.

"Did you pay the girls?" assistant U.S. Attorney Shana Chen asked.

"No," said Hounakey, who acknowledged having sex with several of the females, including one minor.

Hounakey has been in custody since he was arrested in 2007 along with his mother, Akouavi Kpade Afolabi, and Lassissi Afolabi, who authorities say may be her husband. A fourth person, Geoffry Kouevi, was charged later.

A permanent legal resident of the United States, Hounakey is the first to plead guilty. His lawyer declined to comment after yesterday's hearing.

A lawyer for Hounakey's mother said she continues to maintain her innocence. "We look forward to our day in court," said the attorney, Bukie Adetula.

Human trafficking entraps tens of thousands of people every year in the United States, authorities said. Its victims are often lured to the U.S. with promises of employment, but then forced to work as prostitutes, house cleaners or in bars and restaurants for little or no pay.

Authorities said they hoped the hair-braiding case would send a message to those who try to exploit immigrants.

"Crimes such as this will not be tolerated," said William J. Hayes, acting special agent in charge of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement office in Newark.

Investigators say that in this case, the ring took advantage of a program that uses a lottery system to award immigrant visas to residents of countries with low rates of immigration to the United States. The lottery winners are allowed to sponsor their spouses and children for

legal residency in the United States. The suspects provided the smuggled workers with bogus documents to pose as family members of visa lottery winners, authorities said.

Authorities say Hounakey's mother contacted families in West Africa and offered to bring them to the United States for a better life.

For many, it was tempting. Tongo, population 5.5 million, is ravaged by poverty. Some of the victims recalled living in ramshackle houses with dirt floors.

Once they arrived, the suspects confiscated the victims' passports, visas and other immigration documents, authorities said. In exchange for their labor, Hounakey said the girls were housed in Newark and East Orange in homes rented or owned by Hounakey, his mother and Lassissi Afolabi.

Their rules were draconian, prosecutors say.

The girls and young women were forbidden to leave their homes except to go to the salons, said Hounakey, who drove them to and from work.

They worked at several salons, including Newark Hairbraiding -- owned by Hounakey -- and Ashley's Hair Braiding Salon in East Orange, owned by Lassissi Afolabi, authorities said.

They were not allowed to call home to Africa without permission, he said. If they were granted permission, Hounakey said he or his mother eavesdropped on the conversation.

The women were not allowed to speak to their counterparts who lived at the others houses, either, Hounakey said. When one girl broke that rule and called her cousin in 2006, Hounakey said he hit her in front of the others to teach them a lesson.

Between 2002 and 2007, the ring imported up to 20 girls and young women, Hounakey said. Four of the victims told The Star-Ledger last year that they were not, in fact, exploited. They described the suspects as benevolent parent figures who rescued them from the squalor of their villages. Prosecutors rejected their accounts.

Hounakey faces up to five years in jail and a \$250,000 fine. U.S. District Judge Jose Linares scheduled sentencing for June 22.

The trial for the others is scheduled for June.

"These young women were brought here and forced to work for free to satisfy the greedy motives of the defendants," said Acting U.S. Attorney Ralph J. Marra Jr. "The dignity and basic human rights of the victims clearly meant nothing to this defendant or his co-conspirators."

Joe Ryan may be reached at jryan@starledger.com or (973) 622-3405.