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NIGERIAN DIASPORA RAISES THE ALARM AS TRAFFICKED VICTIM FACES DEPORTATION FROM TEXAS

April 3, 2007, Washington DC: Celestina Ifeacho Joseph was trafficked to the United States from Nigeria in 1984, at the age of ten. She was then forced to work for a wealthy Nigerian couple in Houston for 15 years without pay, and sexually abused. Today she awaits deportation in a US government detention center.

On March 25, Ms. Joseph was interviewed from jail by a local Houston radio station. Clearly distraught, Ms. Joseph said that she has been visited by associates of her traffickers in jail and that her parents and sister in Nigeria are in hiding. "They are threatening my life," she said. "Please – I just need help. I'm helpless here."

Ms. Joseph's case is being publicized by Africans in America (AIA), an advocacy organization in New York that seeks to educate the Nigerian diaspora in the US about trafficking. AIA has appealed for a lawyer to assist Ms. Joseph and is asking the US immigration service to reconsider the deportation order.

At first sight, Ms Joseph would seem a logical candidate for protection under the US Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) which seeks to protect, rather than punish, victims of trafficking and offers them special permission ("T" visa) to stay in the US if they denounce their traffickers. The TVPA is considered one of the main human rights success stories of the Bush administration. Each June the US issues a report that grades all countries except the US for their efforts to stop trafficking.

At the same time, the TVPA runs up against the need to control illegal immigration. Most trafficking victims enter the US illegally because they are brought in by their traffickers on forged documents.

Ms. Joseph managed to escape from her traffickers in 1999 – a year before the TVPA was enacted - and missed the 2002 deadline for applying for a T visa. But AIA says that after missing the deadline, she was too intimidated to approach the authorities.

Ms. Joseph told the radio station that she was brought to the US on a promise of being put through school. She was delivered to the home of Mrs. Beatrice Ikeakor, a wealthy Houston-based Nigerian businesswoman, where she looked after the children before being put to work in a restaurant owned by Mrs. Ikeakor and her husband. Ms. Joseph was then sent to work in an old people's home owned by the couple. According to AIA, Ms. Joseph was recruited in Nigeria by Mrs. Ikeakor's sister.

Ms. Joseph claims that she was sexually abused during her enslavement. In 1997 she was forced to marry a man. After escaping in 1999, she started to rebuild her life and entered a community college where she was studying to be a nurse when she was arrested.

The case has been complicated by the fact that Ms. Joseph's lawyer appears to have been close to the traffickers, and consistently misrepresented her case. She asked him to withdraw and hand over the files, which he has yet to do. In an added twist, Mrs. Ikeakor herself contacted AIA and complained that she did not know the meaning of trafficking.

The case illustrates the central involvement of diaspora communities in trafficking, both as a source of traffickers but also as an ally in preventing and exposing the crime. Mr. Ezekwenna from AIA told the Advocacy Project that his group, which was founded in 2001, had helped about 25 victims of trafficking from Nigeria in the US.

AIA recently secured a T visa for Stella Okereke, a 68-year old Nigerian who was forced to work in New York basement for 12 years. Mrs. Okereke escaped from her traffickers in 2000, but AIA managed to secure a T visa for her after finding pro bono legal aid. AIA introduced Mrs. Okereke to the Nigerian Minister of Women's Affairs at a recent event in New York, to publicize the role of the diaspora in trafficking.

On Monday, AIA sent Ms. Joseph's case to the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, which coordinates a network of support groups for victims of trafficking in the US.

* To hear the interview by Ms Joseph, log into KPFT radio Houston <http://kpft.org/>, register, and play the March 25 edition of the Haiti show (7.30 pm). Ms. Joseph's interview comes on after several minutes

* To read the press release by Africans in America, or to contact AIA, visit <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home.html>

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