

## **SAfrica makes first human trafficking conviction**

Text of report by non-profit South African Press Association (SAPA) news agency

[Unattributed Report: "South Africa Convicts First Sex Traffickers"]

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South Africa has made its first conviction for human trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation, the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA) said on Wednesday.

The state used racketeering laws related to sexual exploitation to convict a couple, South African Basheer Sayed and Thai national, Somcharee Chuchumporn, in the Durban Regional Court, said NPA spokesman Mthunzi Mhaga.

"We are using that so that we can charge people for trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation."

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) welcomed the conviction.

"We would welcome any prosecution for trafficking in humans in particular successful prosecutions," said UNODC national project coordinator for human trafficking Johan Kruger.

Sayed and Chuchumporn are due to be sentenced on May 10 and face a maximum sentence of life imprisonment or R100m [Rand] fine, he said.

The duo were arrested in 2007 after three Thai woman fled their brothel on Umbilo road and sought sanctuary at their embassy.

The woman were recruited by Chuchumporn in Thailand.

"It was clear from the moment they left Thailand it was for prostitution. There were no false pretences," said Mhaga.

Though the women knew they were recruited to be prostitutes, the harsh treatment they received at the brothel forced them to flee.

"It was also revealed that they were responsible for managing operations and activities at the said premises. The premises were therefore identified as the central operational point for the unauthorised and unlawful activities," said Mhaga.

"There was therefore an existence of an organized human trafficking structure where females were being sexually exploited for a profit."

The women have since returned to Thailand.

Sayed and Chuchumporn are presently out on bail of R30,000 and R5,000, respectively.

They were convicted on 19 counts. In addition to racketeering, they were convicted for contravention of the Sexual Offences Act and Immigration Act and money laundering.

Police confiscated R19,700 and have shut down the Umbilo road brothel.

The conviction comes on the heels of a bill promulgated in Parliament last week which would target human trafficking.

Presently, the NPA is prosecuting accused human traffickers for a combination of other crimes, such as in the case of Sayed and Chuchumporn.

However, Mhaga said that while human trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation could draw long sentences, this was not necessarily the case with human trafficking for other reasons.

It is hoped that the new legislation will address this.

Kruger applauded the NPA's use of existing legislation to prosecute human traffickers.

"This serves as a guide for prosecutors in the absence [of human trafficking law], when you have a skilled prosecutor who can use other legislation to secure a conviction," he said.

The NPA is also receiving assistance from the European Union (EU) to tackle human trafficking. Last week, an EU representative said the NPA had received 3.6m Euros (R35m) to identify and prosecute human trafficking.

"They are important partners in our campaign," said Mhaga.

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