

Hotline for Refugees and Migrants



Through Hidden Corridors

New trends in human trafficking which
exploit the asylum system in Israel



September 2017

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About the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants

The Hotline for Refugees and Migrants is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization which aims to protect and promote the human rights of migrant workers and refugees and prevent human trafficking in Israel.

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Summary

"R. supplied us with accomodation in Bethlehem and work in Jeruslaem. He took a cut from our salary for accomodation and other things. The guy that worked with him decided how much of our salary we would get in the end. I also know that, for a fee, he would fake documents for his workers"¹.

Since 2016 there has been a sharp rise in the number of Ukranians and Georgians applying for asylum in Israel. Data collected by the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants (HRM) shows that Israeli entities, including human resource companies, are involved in this rise by spreading mis-information in the the Ukraine and Georgia about the possibility of working legally in Israel. They charge large sums of money as agents' fees, and they may also be involved, to varying degrees, in selling fake documentation.

At the same time, due to the backlog at the Population and Immigration Authority's Refugee Status Determination Unit (RSD) in Tel Aviv, the processing of asylum requests can be very slow². Despite the fact that the Population and Immigration Authority (PIBA) has been handling services for an ever growing population for a long time, the necessary changes have yet to be made. The dysfunctional asylum system is therefore being exploited³ to bypass the regulatory system for bringing migrant workers to Israel. This is assumably due to the cap on the number of migrant workers the system allows coupled with a significant demand for workers.

¹ From an interview with G. T., a Ukrainian asylum seeker, 27th March 2017.

² HRM, No Safe Haven: Israeli Asylum Policy as Applied to Eritrean and Sudanese Citizens, December 2014: hotline.org.il/en/publication/no-safe-haven/

³ See HRM, Knocking at the Gate - Depriving Applicants of Access to the Asylum System Due to the Increased Number of Applucants from the Ukraine and Georgia, September 2017

Background

Since 2011 Ukrainian citizens have been exempt from submitting a prior request for an entry visa to Israel – this means they can enter the country with relative ease, obtaining a tourist visa at the airport for up to three months. Since 2013 Georgians have been similarly exempt from submitting a visa request. As early as 2009, senior officials in the Ministry of the Interior, including Mr. Eli Yishai (then Interior Minister) and Mr. Amnon Ben Ami (then the Director of PIBA), expressed their reservations about this change due to the concern that it would increase human trafficking⁴.

Anyone suspected of planning to settle or work in Israel illegally is refused entry at Ben Gurion Airport or has their stay curtailed by other means – for example, having to provide a monetary guarantee on entering the country or being granted a visa with shorter validity. During 2016 entry was refused to 5,700 Ukrainian citizens and 3,500 Georgian citizens⁵ who had traveled to Israel but were not allowed to leave the airport and had to return to their country of origin immediately.

In addition to those who were refused entry, the number of Ukrainian and Georgian citizens arrested across Israel and deported, due to overstaying or otherwise violating the terms of their visas, also rose. HRM representatives have found an increasing number of decisions of the Detention Review Tribunal which relate to the detention of Ukrainian and Georgian citizens. Yet, because they have valid passports and sometimes even a return ticket, they are deported within a few days. Every time HRM representatives visit an immigration detention facility, they send the Israeli Prison Service (IPS) a list of approximately ten Ukrainians they request to visit but each time they only manage to meet one or two of them as the rest have already been deported.

As far back as 2014, among the detainees in these facilities, HRM representatives identified women who had arrived in Israel on tourist visas and had been working at strip clubs, escort agencies, or as prostitutes either in private apartments or

⁴ Roni Sofer, Yishai: Ukrainians need visas because of prostitutes, ynet, 29th December 2009: www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3826993,00.html

Protocol of the meeting of the Subcommittee on Combating Trafficking in Women and Prostitution from 8 February 2010 (Hebrew): fs.knesset.gov.il/18/Committees/18_ptv_139603.doc

⁵ Ilan Lior, New Israeli Policy Allows Summary Rejection of Georgians Seeking Asylum, Haaretz, 27 February 2017: www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.774158

being sent out to hotel rooms by their employers. Some of them planned to leave Israel when their tourist visa expired, some had come to Israel several times as tourists, and some had stayed in Israel after their visa had expired. Most of the women told HRM representatives that contact had been made with them before they came to Israel.

In July 2016 charges were brought against an Israeli woman for human trafficking, pimping, instigating a person to leave a country for purposes of prostitution, threats and large-scale money laundering⁶. According to the indictment, the woman charged had instructed the women coming into the country how to act at the airport and what to say to the immigration officers.

At the end of 2016, PIBA reported⁷ that during the year approximately 9,000 Ukrainians and Georgians had come through Ben Gurion Airport into Israel and then submitted asylum applications. During the first six months of 2017, approximately 7,000⁸ asylum requests were submitted by citizens of those countries. This is a significant increase in the number of people seeking asylum. According to PIBA's data, 5,718 requests were submitted by Ukrainians in the first half of 2017 compared to 6,880 in all of 2016 and only 703 in 2015. There has also been an increase in the number of Georgians seeking asylum in Israel. In 2015 there were 736 requests submitted from Georgian citizens, compared to 3,668 in 2016 and 1,328 in the first half of 2017. According to the head of the Enforcement Administration at PIBA, over the last two years approximately 19,000 asylum applications have been submitted by Ukrainians and Georgians – making up the majority of applications for that period⁹.

⁶ Ahiya Raved, Couple suspected of running prostitution <empire>, ynet, 18 July 2016: www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4829914,00.html

⁷ PIBA, Data on Foreign Nationals in Israel, 2016 (Hebrew): www.gov.il/BlobFolder/generalpage/foreign_workers_stats/he/foreigners_in_Israel_data_2016_0.pdf

⁸ Shahar Smooha, The new infiltrators: 20 thousand Ukrainians and Georgians flooded Israel, Globes, 22 July 2017 (Hebrew): www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1001197809

⁹ *ibid*

Suspicion of human trafficking methods which exploit the asylum system

"It's no problem to find someone who'll help you get to Israel. There are thousands of results online. I went to a company who offered to help me for \$1,200. I was afraid they were conning me because this business is thriving. People promise a lot of things, but nothing comes of it"¹⁰.

The sharp rise in the number of asylum applications, the number of people refused entry at the airport, and the number of Ukrainians and Georgians detained in Israeli immigration detention centres can be explained by a number of interconnected factors: the change in the conditions of entry to Israel that took place in 2011, migration networks that are well established in Israel due to the local population from those countries who speak the same languages, changes in the pattern of trafficking in women for sex, the dysfunctional asylum system and the extended time it takes for asylum requests to be processed which is months or even years, the political and economic situation in the countries of origin – especially in areas of conflict – and finally, based on basic data and information collected by HRM, companies, at least some of whom are Israeli, who openly publish misleading information about the options for Ukrainian and Georgian citizens to get a work visa in Israel.

Examples of misleading information is as follows: "In the center of the country, for Ukrainians, Russians and Moldovans with refugee status (blue paper) housing is provided free of charge, travel to work is also free of charge, salary of 5500 shekels straight to you, for those who are interested call via Viber (number provided in the original ad) or the Israeli number (number provided in original ad)"¹¹. Or "Help getting refugee status in Israel, how easy and straightforward is it to move from the Ukraine to Israel?"¹² These are just two examples. There are many similar adverts, some of which also appeal to "beautiful women" and hint at a connection to the sex industry¹³.

"There was a family in one of the apartments in Bethlehem. The parents worked and the children stayed in the apartment. R. paid the parents 300-400 NIS after

¹⁰ See footnote 1.

¹¹ See for example (Russian): rabota-israel.ru/rabota37379

¹² From the website of an Israeli human resources company which offers consultation and accompaniment for the process of requesting asylum (Russian): www.refugeesline.com/blog

¹³ Links to websites and forums on the subject have been saved by the HRM.

cutting rent and other things out of their salary. The day after they got paid, the transportation for the workers came to collect us from Bethlehem. R. called the driver and told him not to let the parents get on, then he told the parents to be out of their flat the same day. That's how it happened that a family was left in the occupied territories with all their things and 300-400 NIS¹⁴.

Interviews that HRM representatives have conducted with Ukrainian citizens who were arrested and detained prior to deportation, confirm the conclusion that one of the reasons there has been such a wide-scale increase in the number of people from those countries coming to Israel, is the job ads that are published back in their country of origin. For example, A., who was imprisoned in the Givon detention center after being arrested with an allegedly forged appointment slip for an asylum interview, told a Hotline volunteer that back in the Ukraine he searched online for options to work abroad and found many sites offering work in Israel. He chose one called – Tov Rabota V'Israeli and made contact with them through an intermediary. He sent the intermediary documents by email, and she explained to him what he should say upon arrival at the airport in Israel. She instructed him to delete all correspondence relating to coming to Israel and correspondence with the agency and friends, and to say that he came to Israel to pray for the success of his business. After getting into the country he called the intermediary and she told him that she had been unable to get hold of his "agent". In the meantime, she told him he had to buy a "tourist package". After the trip A. met his 'agent' who took an extra payment of \$550 for taking care of his papers. A. was sent by the agency to submit an asylum application at the RSD Unit at 53 Salame Street, Tel Aviv. After waiting in line for a full day, he received an appointment slip for a future date to submit an asylum application. When he came to submit the application at the pre-arranged time, he was told that the appointment was forged and was arrested, taken into custody and most probably deported¹⁵. As A.'s story shows, the "assistance" from these entities does not end when the migrants get to Israel (assuming that they are not refused entry). From monitoring the entrance to the RSD office, Hotline representatives discovered actual "briefings" to groups of people waiting in line to submit their request. These observers also found that there are people who regularly wait at the entrance to the unit, organize the migrants around them, instruct them, arrange them into a queue and then fight for them to be allowed inside. Nearby there is a notice board full of adverts in Russian for these intermediary agencies which are targeted to the group of people waiting, and offering similar help to that promised in the online ads.

¹⁴ See footnote 1.

¹⁵ From an interview with A. A, a Ukrainian asylum seeker in Givon Prison on 8th March 2017.

6 Through Hidden Corridors

These testimonies make it clear that there are agencies in Israel who are very familiar with the regulatory system regarding migration to Israel and who exploit the slow asylum system to recruit workers without permits. They charge fees for services such as submitting an asylum application, transportation from the airport, finding accommodation and so on, while making false promises about the status and conditions that the workers will benefit from in Israel. At least one of the people involved is also a director of an Israeli human resources company¹⁶. In effect, from interviews conducted by Hotline representatives with Ukrainians held in custody, it turns out that many don't even manage to start working in Israel before they are arrested and deported from the country. Out of 25 interviewees, 9 reported that they had never worked.

In light of the growth of this phenomenon, HRM together with worker's rights organization Kav Laoved (Worker's Hotline), approached the Office of the National Anti-Trafficking Coordinator in the Ministry of Justice in November 2016, with a request to open an investigation and take action to enforce the law against the intermediary agencies operating in Israel and from countries of origin, but no response has been received.

On August 11, 2017, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) sent a letter¹⁷ to HRM and to the Ministry of Justice's Inter-ministerial Coordinator for Combating Trafficking in Persons, Ms. Dina Dominitz. The letter detailed the case of V.P., a Ukrainian citizen who was identified as a victim of slavery after being deported from Israel. Mr. V.P. was recruited by a Ukrainian manpower company and promised work in Israel. He paid \$800 for the service and received guidance on how to pass border control at Ben-Gurion airport. After passing border control, two Israelis of Ukrainian origin were waiting for him and took him to an apartment where they housed him, and also provided him with documents that were later discovered to be forged. They charged him \$400 in addition to the amount he paid in Ukraine. From the apartment he was taken to a factory where he worked with 15 other Ukrainians between 12 to 15 hours a day and was paid \$600 for the whole month during which he worked there. According to him, the factory was heavily guarded and they were forbidden to leave the premises except to be transported back to their accommodation. They were also subject to threats that they would be turned over to the authorities. V.P. was arrested and deported from Israel after an inspection by the authorities at the factory during which he discovered that the documents given to them were forged.

¹⁶ This information has been confidentially documented by HRM.

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Recommendations

HRM calls on PIBA and enforcement agencies to take legal action against those bodies profiteering from bringing workers in 'by the back door' while exploiting the already dysfunctional asylum system of the State of Israel. The Hotline objects to the damage this does to access to the asylum system and insists that the State of Israel has a duty to conduct a basic review of the requests, even when they suspect the asylum system is being exploited.

Recommendations for the Foreign Ministry

Cancel the visa waiver that is currently in place for Ukrainian and Georgian citizens.

Recommendations for PIBA

1. Administrative work should be undertaken to collect all relevant information on vulnerability to human trafficking, the involvement of Israeli entities, and the blueprint for recruiting and working in Israel, and this should be forwarded to the Ministry of Justice and the Israeli Police.
2. As soon as possible, the large volume of information that is in the hands of PIBA officials and guards of the building at 53 Salame St. Tel Aviv, about people of interest who might be involved in human trafficking while exploiting the Israeli asylum system, should be forwarded to the Israel Police.
3. All PIBA representatives that come in contact with this population, which includes those in the RSD Unit, inspectors in the Administration of Border Crossings and Border Control inspectors in the Enforcement Administration, should be trained to recognize victims of trafficking and prevent them from being held in conditions of slavery.
4. Information should be distributed in the language of those who come to the RSD Unit and those who are detained, about warning signs for human trafficking and being held in conditions of slavery and about the existing places to get help in Israel.
5. There should be an increase in the number of offices and clerks who are trained to work with the population of asylum seekers so that the backlog in the asylum system and its slowness is not exploited by parties with an interest in doing so.

8 Through Hidden Corridors

6. The adverts for intermediaries and other interested parties, should be removed from the notice board near the RSD Unit.
7. Those interested parties should not be allowed to organize the queue which forms outside the office of the RSD Unit.
8. The right for asylum seekers to have representation should be upheld and their proxies should not be denied entry to the office.

Recommendations for the Israel Police

With immediate effect there should be a push for significant investigations and an examination of criminal activity against those in Israel and abroad who are involved in what looks like an organized network of human trafficking, instigating leaving the country of origin, document forgery, profiteering and facilitation.

Recommendations for the Ministry of Justice

To correlate the information collected by the different authorities which indicates suspicions of human trafficking and to profile the vulnerable population amongst the Ukrainians and Georgians coming to Israel. As early as possible (under the auspices of either the Directors General committee on the struggle against human trafficking or the Office of the National Anti-Trafficking Coordinator) an inter-ministerial work plan should be formulated to deal with this phenomena.

A Course of Human Trafficking



RECRUITMENT

Online recruitment leading the victims to leave their home country.



BRIEFING

How to pass the border control and enter the country successfully.



PICK-UP

Transportation from the airport.



ACCOMMODATION

Fees are deducted from future earnings.



ASYLUM APPLICATION

Assistance, and in some cases – the falsification of documents and appointment slips.



EMPLOYMENT

Conditions might lead to exploitation and enslavement.



DETENTION

Due to illegal stay, working without a permit or the possession of fake documents.



DEPORTATION

Back to home countries, without a proper investigation of the responsible parties.



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