

DESTINATION CHAGUARAMAS:

USD 300.00 sale of a 15-year-old child from Venezuela to Trinidad and Tobago

Report by:

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During our eight-month Human Trafficking investigation in the Caribbean region conducted in 2019, we discovered that there was a higher demand for Sex and Prostitution services in Trinidad and Tobago when compared with other English-speaking countries in CARICOM. Our research took us down many dark roads and we interviewed many dangerous people, some of whom believed that what they were doing (Human Trafficking) was not a crime but just another business activity supplying a need for their clients. To understand more about the Human Trafficking industry in the Caribbean we had to take our investigation outside of the CARIFORUM region into places such as Venezuela, the Dutch Antilles, Columbia, Panama, Mexico, Brazil, and Chile. This article is about our understanding of Human Trafficking between Venezuela and Trinidad and Tobago derived from our investigation.

A major aim purpose of our research was to verify some of the stories, examine the local socioeconomic and other enabling conditions for human trafficking as well as to investigate why many of the victims in Trinidad and Tobago came from a specific area in Venezuela called the State of Sucre. Interviews with Trafficking victims in Trinidad and Tobago indicate that some knew each other from Venezuela, had gone to the same school, had played on the same sports team, and most importantly had come from the same region. From the research, it was apparent that there is a lack of awareness of human trafficking, especially in the rural and interior areas of countries in the CARIFORUM region. the focus of the relevant authorities however in combatting Human Trafficking is concentrated in the urban areas. Our investigation further revealed that in this region 63% of the human trafficking victims came from the rural and interior areas. In the case of Trinidad and Tobago, 43% of the Venezuelan human trafficking victims came from a specific locality in Venezuela.

Result of Interviews

Our team conducted 27 separate interviews with individuals from the State of Sucre and other neighboring states

(Sucre State is one of the 23 states of Venezuela. The state capital is Cumaná. Sucre State covers a total area of 11,800 km² and, as of the 2011 census, had a population of 896,921),

We interviewed key stakeholders such as teachers, store owners, students, boat captains, brothel workers, the unemployed, authorities and officials. and other alleged traffickers, smugglers, and intermediaries in the Human Trafficking 'industry' that supply victims to Trinidad and Tobago, the Caribbean, the United States of America and Canada.



The State of Sucre, Venezuela

Due to its proximity to Venezuela, Trinidad and Tobago is now one of the leading destination countries for Trafficking in Persons from the Northern and Central part of Venezuela. Although official data on the number of persons trafficked between these two countries is limited, the authors of this report estimate that close to 4,000 victims in the Güiria area only have been sold by Venezuelan Human Trafficking cartels to Trinidad and Tobago over the last four to six years.

Case of the Missing Venezuelan Teenager

Our investigation led us to the father of a missing Venezuelan teenager who had made a formal complaint to the authorities in Venezuela alleging that his daughter had been sold by a network that trafficked women to Trinidad and Tobago.

The young child was 15 years old named Omarlys, at the time when she drowned at night in the Boca Dragón Strait, an area of the sea between Venezuela and Trinidad and Tobago. If she had survived, her fate would have been sealed as a victim of Human Trafficking and a prostitute in Trinidad and Tobago.

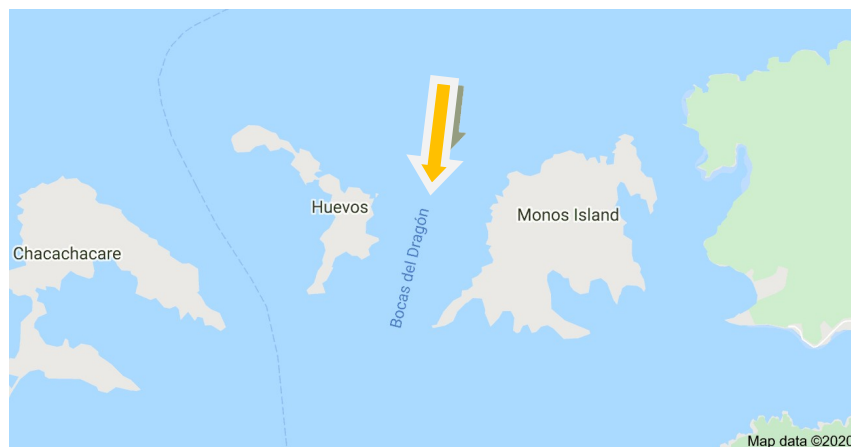


Photo of the Bocas del Dragón Strait Trinidad and Tobago

According to Britannica, the Bocas del Dragón Channel (otherwise called Dragons Mouths) is located in the southeastern Caribbean Sea between Point Peñas (the eastern end of the Paria Peninsula in northeastern Venezuela) and the northwestern extremity of the island of Trinidad. The Channel, about 20 km wide, is one of two separating Trinidad from mainland South

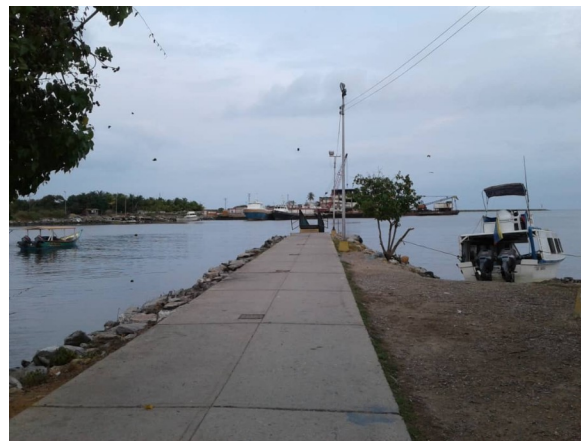
America; the other is the Serpent's Mouth located off the island's southwestern coast. Between these passages lies the broad Gulf of Paria. Dragons Mouths is named for its many teeth-like rocky islets and both these islets and the strong current of the channel have long been dangerous to navigation.

Omarlys was traveling with her cousin, a 16-year-old girl named Unyerlin, who also drowned with her. Both teenagers had been captured by one of the many Human Trafficking Cartels that operates from Güiria.



Photo of Giuria, Venezuela

Founded in 1767, the city of Güiria, a small fishing town in western Venezuela, is the capital city of Valdez Municipality in the State of Sucre. Güiria is known as the place where the military campaign for South American independence set out for Upper Peru and it was also a starting point of the 1901 Venezuelan Civil War (Revolución Libertadora). Güiria is the state's third-largest urban centre, with a population of approximately 40,000. It is an important harbour, and is the only one in Venezuela located on the open Atlantic Ocean rather than on the Caribbean Sea. It is also the economic centre of Paria Peninsula, owing to its close proximity to the natural gas fields in the Gulf of Paria, where several state and private companies have exploration projects.



This is the La Playita port. From here some boats leave with people who travel illegally to Trinidad and Tobago, including women who will be trafficked and sold as prostitutes. (Photo in 2019 by Nayrobis Rodríguez)

During our investigation, it was revealed that the young girls were aboard a small vessel called the 'Jhonaili José' travelling with 37 other people who also drowned. The use of small boats is one method used to transport traffickers and the trafficked victims out of small villages into larger vessels to be transported to Europe, Asia and North America. On that fateful night, the boat was heading directly to Chaguaramas, Trinidad and Tobago.

The young woman and her cousin left their house that night. According to relatives, Omarlys had told her mother that she was going to do homework at a friend's house. She had no suitcase or any of her belongings with her. She never returned home.

Omar Velásquez, Omarlys' father, his wife and sister had been searching for the teenage girls, who suddenly disappeared one night from their home in Cumaná, a small capital city of Sucre State, on the west coast of Venezuela, six hours away from Güiria. It was rumored that the girls were kidnapped on the street near to their home.

It was a week later that Omar found out about his daughter's death through social media.

Even though Omarlys' family was poor, they lived in a relatively safe neighborhood in the west of the city. Omarlys attended the local public school in the area. She was a good student who loved sports and loved to debate. She was obedient and had wanted to become a nurse after graduation.

A Facebook profile of a woman named Maria had posted the girls' names, reporting them as 'missing' while traveling on a boat which led to Omar's discovery about the possible demise of his daughter and his niece.

With great despair and very little money in his pockets, Omarlys' father and his wife traveled to Güiria hoping to hear from their daughter and niece. Upon reaching the town, Mr. Velasquez was confronted by reality when told that his daughter had been sold to a human trafficking network for USD\$300. It seemed that she, along with four other young women, had spent a week in a 'shelter' operated by the traffickers where they had been given food and drink while awaiting their trip to Trinidad.

Mr. Velásquez tried desperately to report this state of affairs to the government authorities, convinced that the girls had been induced by tricks and lies to leave since his daughter did not even own a passport. In making an attempt to report this incident to the police, he and his wife were met with obstacles which included death threats against them. There was no investigation and no one was ever charged in respect of these missing girls.

Mr. Valesquez stated during the interview, *"They only threaten us and tell us not to ask anything."*

Omarlys' father was also informed that in Güiria, there were people in high authority who were also linked to the human trafficking business.

A few weeks later Omarlys' father discovered that his daughter and niece were taken from Cumaná to Güiria allegedly by a man known only as "Tico" who had had strong Trinidadian and Asian connections. It was further alleged that Tico was a middleman who recruited girls for an Asian human trafficking syndicate located in Trinidad and Tobago and Brazil that specialized in the kidnapping, trafficking and sale of young victims. It was allegedly at Tico's house that the two young cousins, together with three other young women, had stayed for five days awaiting that ill-fated trip to Trinidad.

Tico, whose real name was "Hector", was also among the list of those who disappeared in the shipwreck of the **Jhonaili José** boat. During interviews with his sister Elaiza, she denied that "Tico" was part of a human trafficking network. But, she however confirmed that the teens stayed for five days at his home.

She stated:

"Tico was friends with a woman named Maria, who asked him to please give accommodation to these five girls who would travel to Trinidad and Tobago."

María is the name of the woman who had posted on Facebook the names of the young women who disappeared at sea.

Elaiza insisted that her brother Tico "only did a favor" by giving them a place to stay and some food. She said that the young women who were in his house knew that they would travel to Trinidad for employment at a specific restaurant and nightclub. However, Tico had traveled with the teenagers on the same boat that would take them to the port of Chaguaramas.

Out of the 39 people who set sail in the **Jhonaili José** on the night of April 23, 2019, only eight persons survived. By all accounts, the Venezuelan State did not participate in the search for the castaways. The authorities in Güiria had insisted that they did not have optimal boats or fuel to carry out the search. The eight survivors were rescued by fishermen from the nearby town.

In this case, nine people were arrested and accused of human trafficking by the Public Ministry in Venezuela including the captain of the boat and a sports teacher. These men allegedly recruited women to hand them over to a prostitution ring in Trinidad and Tobago. Two national guards were also arrested and accused of participating in the trafficking network.

However, despite complaints from the victims' families, countless protests, and the support of Carlos Valero and Robert Alcalá, two deputies from the National Assembly run by the Opposition, Nicolás Maduro's administration made no progress in investigating the network of human trafficking nor were they able to offer answers about the search for the bodies at sea.

Over one year after the shipwreck in the town of Güiria, the illegal departures of small boats with minimal to no safety conditions continue to set sail with passengers traveling to Trinidad and Tobago. They want to escape poverty in Venezuela and have an opportunity to work and earn in foreign currency to send money back to their relatives. However, these economic

victims continue to be trafficked in exchange for food, medicine supplies, household items and money.

Despite the COVID-19 Pandemic human trafficking continues unabated, young women who do not know that their destiny is prostitution are still being trafficked to the Twin Island Republic. Our research on Human Trafficking in the Region indicated that Trinidad and Tobago have the highest demand for sex and prostitution services which is estimated at 81 per cent. However, unlike other countries such as Jamaica and Antigua and Barbuda where Human Trafficking is on the decline due to high public advocacy by these governments, the demand for sex and prostitution in Trinidad and Tobago is driven by a higher than usual local consumption rate, especially in the Borough of Chaguanas.

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