

**2006 NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON
HUMAN TRAFFICKING REPORT
NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA
October 3 - 5, 2006**

by Peggy Birchfield, Executive Director

At the invitation of Attorney General Alberto R. Gonzales and the U.S. Department, I represented the Religious Freedom Coalition at the National Human Trafficking Conference which was held October 3 -5, 2006 in New Orleans, LA. The conference was well attended by state and federal officials, law enforcement officers, ICE agency personnel, and representatives of non-government organizations that have worked on this problem. The major goal of the conference was to come up with ways to help reduce and prevent human trafficking operations.



Peggy Birchfield with a trafficking victim from Vietnam who was enslaved for several years.

Trafficking in persons, or human smuggling, is one of the fastest growing areas of international criminal activity. Human trafficking operations often involve a number of different crimes and are conducted by large networks spanning several countries.

U.S. Attorney General Al Gonzales opened the national conference with several stories of this year's examples of convictions and prosecutions of traffickers. He shared the outcome and progress of survivors of this international crime. Efforts to identify and prosecute human traffickers have been stepped up. Convictions involving human trafficking in fiscal year 2006 were more than double the convictions from the previous year. According to the U.S. Government, 600,000 – 800,000 victims are still being trafficked globally each year, with most victims being women and children.

Each day participants of the conference were divided up into breakout sessions. We heard from anti-trafficking experts including prominent researchers, state and local officials, and also officials from various federal agencies. The conference examined research and statistics surrounding human trafficking crimes. We discussed improving the ability to identify and neutralize trafficking enterprises, enhancing response to trafficking victims, and disseminate methods to prevent human trafficking operations from taking place in communities. One of the biggest problems that the Department of Justice and law enforcement officers face with trafficking is obtaining information from victims and survivors in order to coordinate action.



Peggy Birchfield with Ambassador John Miller of the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, U.S. Department of State.

We began day two with the Assistant Attorney General Wan J. Kim sharing success stories of task force agencies. Approximately 26 states in the United States have existing anti-trafficking laws and several states have pending bills, and the White House administration and Department of Justice are working on ways to obtain and coordinate information from state and local law enforcement agencies. Traffickers move their victims between locations within the same country or sell their victims to foreign trafficking organizations, making it difficult for prosecutors to identify and punish those who are trafficking people. Victims that are enslaved and held captive are often prevented from practicing their religion. If caught they are often beaten or killed. I was part of many discussion panels which examined ways to stop trafficking and to help those already victimized. Discussions were held to help educate communities to recognize victims caught in this criminal network.

The final day convened with Ambassador John Miller of the U.S. State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, sharing his travel experiences to countries aboard and his meetings with victims and organizations of trafficking. The Ambassador identified with the challenges we face with victim identification and evidence needed to investigate and design strategies to prevent trafficking worldwide.

As stated on the walls of the U.S. Department of Justice: *Law Alone Can Give Us Freedom.* Not only is this etched on the walls but in the hearts of those working to serve justice.