The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Moscow Police Break Up Human Trafficking Ring

By Allison Quinn

July 22, 2014



Three men were forced to panhandle a minimum of 3,000 rubles each day for the criminal group in the Moscow region.

Several suspects have been detained in connection with an alleged human trafficking scheme that saw three amputees forced to beg for change to raise funds for an organized crime group in the Moscow region.

Three men were forced to panhandle a minimum of 3,000 rubles ($85) each day for the criminal group, under threat of brutal beatings, police in Mytishchi, a suburb of Moscow, announced in a statement Tuesday.

One of the three victims is missing both legs. The other two are missing one leg each.

The suspects "took advantage of the helpless state of the victims, stole their identification documents and their artificial legs, used physical and psychological coercion and forced them

to engage in forced begging near large shopping centers and other public places," according to the statement.

The number of individuals detained in connection with the suspected crime ring was not disclosed, but two of the suspects in the case were identified as Moldovan nationals.

An investigation is currently under way, and the suspects face up to five years behind bars if convicted on slave-labor charges.

Human rights activists have warned of a surge in forced begging cases in recent years, often involving victims with physical disabilities, who traffickers believe are lucrative for their capacity to elicit pity from passer-by.

It is not unusual to see amputees in the Moscow Metro system meandering through trains and stations on makeshift scooters, asking commuters for spare change.

Reports by anti-trafficking organizations like La Strada and international bodies like the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe have shown that traffickers tend to prey on victims who already suffer from physical disabilities. But the same organizations report cases of traffickers inflicting injuries — including amputations — on their victims to both keep them in line and make their work more effective.

The U.S. State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report for 2014 slammed the Russian government for not doing enough to cut down on trafficking cases and prosecute the groups responsible for such schemes.

According to that report, Russia demonstrated "low political will to address human trafficking," with the lack of any single authority to spearhead anti-trafficking efforts and an "absence of funding in the federal and local budgets for trafficking prevention and victim prevention."

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Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/07/22/moscow-police-break-up-human-trafficking-ring-a37552