

Greetings to one and all, and welcome to another edition of As It Is. I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. Today we're off to West Africa to hear about human trafficking in Sierra Leone. Trafficking often involves selling people into slavery, using them sexually, or even removing and selling parts of their bodies. We'll have details, and some information about a group whose aim is the help those who have had these horrible experiences.

Then ...look over there. Isn't that Barack Obama, the President of the United States? Well, no, it isn't, but it sure looks a lot like him. We'll hear about a man who makes money pretending to be **the** man! As It Is ...on your radio and your computer ...from VOA.

Many suffer from trafficking in Africa

Estimates say anywhere from 12 to 27 million people around the world are victims of human trafficking. Humanitarian agencies say human trafficking is a 32 billion dollar a year industry. Sierra Leone is one of the many countries where it takes place.

The organization World Hope International operates the Trafficking in Persons Recovery Center in Sierra Leone. WHI describes the center as a place to care for victims after their bad experiences. John Lyon is the groups' vice president of programs. He says traffickers get people involved by making false promises of jobs or a better life.

“In Sierra Leone, what we are finding is two principle forms of trafficking – particularly in the labor trafficking area as well as sex trafficking. It’s hard to put numbers around it. Every country in the world has problems finding highly accurate numbers of what actually is the scope of this problem.”

He says before you can treat victims of human trafficking, you have to find them. Mr. Lyon tells about a case in northern Sierra Leone where one of the smaller mining companies employed young children in a mine.

“They were burrowing under the earth and some of the kids were actually killed in the mine. The kids were trafficked. They weren’t paid reasonable wages. Our program helped identify that case and brought it to the attention of the local authorities and helped prosecute the case with the Ministry of Mines as well as with the police.”

Human trafficking also comes by the sea. Mr. Lyon says the group has seen cases involving foreign fishing companies that take girls to their ships for sex. He said that just outside Freetown, a foreign shipping group kept sailing into land near the village where his organization had been working. Girls would go to their ships. He says the fishing company promised the girls jobs and a better life. But they were really using the girls for sex.

John Lyon says the fishing boat set to sea with several girls on board. WHI reported its finding to local officials. The officials stopped the ship and rescued the girls.

World Hope International has established 58 parent groups in the country that watch out for possible human trafficking. Mr. Lyon tells about the process.

“In Sierra Leone, the local villages are really the structure that you need to work through to really accomplish any kind of large-scale goal. And so in these 58 villages, we’ve worked with the villagers to help educate and sensitize the villagers as to what human trafficking looks like.”

The parent groups have helped identify a number of criminal activities, not just trafficking. Once children or adults are freed from or escape from traffickers, Lyon says, they need help healing and becoming part of their communities again. That process includes regular meetings by WHI workers with the children and their parents. It also includes education and physical and mental health treatment.

Mr. Lyon said the center does not limit how long a trafficking victim can stay in its treatment center.

Is that President Obama? Or not?

In some countries, people can be put in jail for impersonating a political leader. But in places where freedom of speech is protected, you may see people copying politicians in public or on television. Today, Kelly Jean Kelly tells us about one such impersonator here in the Washington, DC area.

Larry Graves looks a lot like President Obama and Mr. Graves spends much of his time acting like the first black president of the United States. He recently spoke at an environmental conference in Arlington, Virginia.

“I want to thank the Environmental Information Association for having me here today. Now I understand this is your 30th anniversary, so congratulations.”

As expected, some people attending the conference thought they were seeing President Obama. Mike Farrell was one of them.

“It’s really astonishing how close he actually is -- his mannerisms, the way that he speaks, actually his hair, you know the whole package.”

The crowd smiled and laughed once they understood that Larry Graves was just a President Obama look-alike. His performance includes two men who act as Secret Service agents, protecting the look-alike. Matt Baldwin has worked with Mr. Graves for five years.

“People have actually come up to me and asked 'Is that really the president?' Like really. I’ve had fun with it and I just didn’t say anything.”

Many people wanted to have their picture taken with the look-alike president, including Eric Goeller of Arizona.

“I just sent this picture of myself and Mr. Obama back home and I’ve gotten about 25 text messages.”

Environmentalist Sean Fitzgerald spoke at length with Larry Graves about the dangers of asbestos, which is known to cause cancer.

“I was thinking what would it be like if this was the real president.”

Mr. Graves is shocked that people talk to him like that, even knowing that he is not the president.

“I find it slightly incredulous that people do come up to me with such reverence, with such respect, with such awe.”

He says it took time to perfect the way President Obama speaks. He also uses makeup to help him look more like the president. This includes, darkening his eyebrows, deepening his lip color, and adding a mole.

Besides facial similarities, Larry Graves says he and the president have other things in common.

“We’re about the same size, body size. We’re both left-handed. We both like basketball.”

He has yet to meet the president, but hopes to one day. And he would like to face him in a game of pick-up basketball.

“I don’t think that Obama could beat me in a game of basketball.”

When he is not playing president, Larry Graves works as a substitute teacher in Gaithersburg, Maryland. His fifth grade students watched a video of his performance. At first they thought they were watching the president.

“It looked like our gym teacher but it was really hard to tell.

“It looked just like Obama. It feels like I’m getting taught by a famous gym teacher.”

The students say eventually Larry Graves’ voice gave him away.

Vince Brennan of Vermont was among the delegates at the Environmental Information Association meeting. He enjoyed having the President Obama look-alike stop by.

“It’s great to have great people like the president come down and see us.”

I’m Kelly Jean Kelly.

And I’m Jim Tedder in Washington. As we leave you today, we say happy birthday number 81 to country music singer Mel Tillis. Stay tuned for more Learning English programs, and world news at the beginning of the hour, on VOA.