

African Blacks Sell Black Children Into Slavery

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Concern Grows Over Children on Ship Off West African Coast

By REUTERS

OTONOU, Benin, Monday, April 16 — West African police officers hunted today for a ship thought to be carrying scores of children sold as slaves that has been roaming off the coast for more than two weeks.

The police in Benin said they had alerted neighboring countries to prevent the ship's captain from unloading its human cargo, believed to be 180 children sold by poor families to be forced into work on plantations or as domestic servants.

Port officials said the vessel, which was expected to dock in Cotonou after a round trip of more than 1,250 miles, was not responding to calls and had not tried to make contact with Benin's authorities.

"We are still waiting for the ship, but it hasn't given any signs. We have had no radio communication with them," a port official told Reuters late on Sunday.

Interpol sources in Cotonou said the police wanted to question a businessman and two of his associates who were thought to have chartered the ship. The police called for help from colleagues in Nigeria, Togo, Ghana and Ivory Coast.

"The whole coast is under surveillance," said Martin Cocou Degan, head of the police division fighting child trafficking.

Despite international efforts to curb the trade, child slavery persists in West and Central Africa, from where European slave traders shipped millions of people to the Americas from the 16th to 19th centuries.

The ship, the Nigerian-registered Etireno, set sail for Gabon on March 30 but was turned back in Libreville and later in Cameroon's port of Douala. Aid workers said they were concerned the ship's crew might try to offload the children to escape retribution.

They said they had reports from the police in Douala, the last to see the ship before it set out for Cotonou on Thursday, that some children on board were sick.

"We don't know where the boat is, but conditions on board must be very bad," said Estelle Guluman of the United Nations Children's Fund in Cotonou.

"The ship was only expected to go to Gabon, so it didn't carry a lot of supplies. But instead of a four-day journey, it has been at sea for more than two weeks."

First reports put at 250 the number of children on board the ship, described as a trawler that usually carries cargo within the region. But officials in Benin said they believed there were 180.