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**Somalis in Twin Cities Shaken by Charges of Sex Trafficking**

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MINNEAPOLIS — When the girl now identified as Jane Doe 2 came under their control in 2006, at age 12, the Somali Outlaws and the Somali Mafia gangs set a firm rule: Their members could have sex with her for nothing; others had to pay with money or drugs.

Repeatedly over the next three years, in apartments, motel rooms and shopping center bathrooms in Minnesota and Tennessee, the girl performed sexual acts for gang members and paying customers in succession, according to a federal [indictment](http://www.justice.gov/usao/tnm/press_releases/2010/11_8_10.html) that charged 29 Somalis and Somali-Americans with drawing young girls into prostitution over the last decade, using abuse and threats to keep them in line, and other crimes. The suspects, now aged 19 to 38, sported nicknames like Hollywood, Cash Money and Forehead, prosecutors said.

The allegations of organized trafficking, unsealed this month, were a deep shock for the tens of thousands of Somalis in the Minneapolis area, who fled civil war and famine to build new lives in the United States and now wonder how some of their youths could have strayed so far. Last week, in quiet murmurings over tea and in an emergency public meeting, parents and elders expressed bewilderment and sometimes outrage — anger with the authorities for not acting sooner to stop the criminals, and with themselves for not saving their young.

The indictment was the latest in a series of jolting revelations starting around 2007, when a spate of deadly shootings in the Twin Cities made it impossible to ignore the emergence of Somali gangs. Then came the discovery that more than 20 men had returned to Somalia to fight for Islamic extremists, bringing what many Somalis feel has been harsh and unfair scrutiny from law enforcement and the news media.

“And now it’s this sex ring,” said Zuhur Ahmed, 25, who discusses Somali issues on her weekly program on [KFAI](http://www.kfai.org/somalicommunitylink) community radio in Minneapolis. “Everybody is wondering what’s going to be the next thing.”

[Cawo Abdi](http://www.soc.umn.edu/people/abdi_c.html), a Somali sociologist at the [University of Minnesota](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/u/university_of_minnesota/index.html?inline=nyt-org), said that past surges in concern about troubled youths had not been followed up with money and programs to help them. “This is viewed as such a huge scandal and outrage,” she said of the new charges, “that it has to lead to some kind of action.”

Many Somali immigrants are adapting well to the United States, as demonstrated on a major Islamic holiday last week when, in what has become an annual ritual, thousands streamed from morning prayers to enjoy the giant indoor amusement park at the Mall of America. Girls in traditional head scarves and boys in their best white shirts lined up for wild rides like the Splat-O-Sphere and the Log Chute. Yet poverty remains common, and their wrenching history creates some special obstacles for Somali families.

“The migrant youth are more at risk than other kids,” said Dahir Jibreel, a former teacher who is the executive director of the [Somali Justice Advocacy Center](http://www.somalijustice.org/), a small nonprofit group that hopes to develop community programs.

Typically, the parents grew up in Somalia while their children have grown up in America, and they inhabit different cultural worlds. The parents, some of whom have not mastered English, expect obedience and modesty and closely follow politics back in East Africa; the children are focused not on the homeland but on the money, clothes and excitement dangled by American culture.

Compounding the challenges, some young Somalis arrived in the United States after traumatic years in refugee camps, and without their parents. A significant minority have dropped out of school, only to spend time lurking in the streets around Riverside Plaza, a low-income high-rise complex in the neighborhood some call Little Mogadishu, or around one of the city’s Somali shopping centers.

The indictment that set off the current soul-searching accuses the members of three interlinked gangs — the Somali Outlaws, the Somali Mafia and the Lady Outlaws — of involvement with the sex trafficking as well as thefts and large-scale credit card fraud.

One girl, identified as Jane Doe 1, was not yet 14 in 2005 when gang members first drove her to Tennessee and Ohio to trade sex for money and drugs, according to the indictment. Another girl, Jane Doe 3, was 15 in 2008 when she argued with her mother and fled to a gang member known as Boss Lady, only 18 herself, who put her up while managing her prostitution.

Some Somali leaders, including relatives of some of those charged, insisted that federal agencies were exaggerating both the crimes and the reach of any gangs.

The authorities have identified “a couple of hundred” Somalis who are members or associates of several different gangs, said Jeanine Brudenell, a community liaison with the Minneapolis police. The groups tend to be loosely structured, and while they are known for robberies and occasional [marijuana](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/m/marijuana/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) dealing, they are not large-scale hard-drug syndicates like some American gangs.

Mr. Jibreel, the former teacher, said he had heard other examples of teenage girls who ended up as sex slaves. He said he had recently helped one girl who ran off at 12 and turned to prostitution and drugs under the aegis of gangs. She had a baby at 16 who was taken away by child protective services and continued her underworld life — under threat of death if she tried to leave it — until she recently gave birth to a second child whom she is determined to keep.

In a community that shies away from public discussion of sex and crime, some religious leaders and social workers have tried in the past to warn about the perils facing Somali youths.

“I see these indictments as a wake-up call for parents,” said Hassan Mohamud, a lawyer and imam of the Da’wah Islamic center in St. Paul.

Imam Mohamud visits Somalis in prison, trying to lure them to the fold, and his mosque offers after-school Koran classes to scores of young people, but he added that the community needed money for things like soccer coaches as well as stronger religious training.

One former gang leader he helped is Abdulkadir Sheriff, 31, whose tale, though many details cannot be independently confirmed, seems to encapsulate the strains and temptations of many Somali youths.

Mr. Sheriff said he fled Somalia for Kenya after seeing two sisters raped and murdered. He ended up in Minneapolis in 1996 with a sister and her husband, at the age of 17. They moved into the forbidding towers of Riverside Plaza, and he was kicked out of high school within a month after getting into fights. (To this day, he cannot read or write.)

Mr. Sheriff said he helped form Somali gangs for protection and self-esteem. “The only way to survive is to be somebody,” he said. He admitted carrying guns and selling drugs, spent a year in prison for car theft and beat a murder rap, but he insists that he was not involved in prostitution.

In 2007, as Mr. Sheriff emerged from a bar near the apartment towers, a rival stabbed him in the neck and left him for dead. His recovery, he said, “was a sign from God,” and his conversion was cemented by a visit from Imam Mohamud. Now Mr. Sheriff, who speaks with a raspy voice because of damage to his vocal cords, works as security chief at the Da’wah center and leads an Islamic 12-step program to help others stop drinking.

When he sees his surgical scars in the mirror, Mr. Sheriff said, “This reminds me that I’ve got a second chance.”

“There won’t be another one,” he said.