

IJM – response to BBC Africa Eye allegations

In response to the BBC’s allegations, IJM Ghana said:

“IJM has been active in Ghana since 2015 to stop child trafficking on Lake Volta. We have supported authorities on over 75 operations which have led to hundreds of children being brought to safety. In 90% of IJM supported cases, children have been reintegrated with family members who have been assessed as safe.

“The BBC’s allegations are incredibly concerning. Protecting children’s welfare is at the core of IJM’s work in Ghana and we’re always looking to evaluate any ways to improve policies and practices. We conducted a detailed internal investigation into the BBC’s claims. We will take on board any refinements to our processes, but – crucially – the findings revealed material inaccuracies in the BBC’s allegations.

“All decisions on whether to bring children to safety, as well as arrests and prosecutions, are made by the police and other authorities.

“In the ‘Hilltop’ case referred to by the BBC, IJM was fully transparent with police, providing them with the facts of the case, including that there was one likely case of child trafficking and three that were not clear. The police conducted their own investigations determining there was sufficient evidence before proceeding with the operation and – following information gathered on the operation – police filed trafficking charges against the suspects.

“IJM Ghana in no way misled the authorities on the facts of this case.

“Our work relies on the support of government and civil society, and survivor-led groups. We are grateful to our partners in Ghana for their ongoing support in tackling the very real problem of child trafficking on Volta Lake.”

Courage Hope, a survivor of child trafficking on Volta Lake who now leads ‘My Story Counts’, a chapter of the Ghanaian Survivor Network of more than 20 survivors, added his account of trafficking:

“Years ago, I lived with my mother until a strange man came and asked to take me to school. When we reached the place, the man told me that I wasn’t there for school, but for fishing. I was diving into the lake, paddling the boat, fishing with bamboo. They’d beat me and then throw me into the river and I will swim back again. And they are just beating me. I was there until one day, the police came to rescue me. So now, I am free. But I want to tell all the stakeholders that there are more children there who are suffering more than I have suffered.”

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IJM Ghana also said, in a more detailed response to the documentary:

Protecting and supporting children’s welfare is at the core of IJM Ghana’s work. All exploitation of children on Volta Lake is illegal under Ghanaian law, but our focus is on combatting child trafficking as these children are the most exposed to serious harm, life-threatening conditions and malnutrition. They are the least likely to be permitted to attend school.

The prevalence, danger and severity of child trafficking and exploitative child labour in the Volta Lake fishing industry is well established and has been documented by the Ghanaian authorities, the United Nations, academic studies and even the BBC itself in previous reporting.

In a new study commissioned by IJM and due to be released this year, researchers from leading academic institutions interviewed more than 1,200 children from communities surrounding Lake Volta. Their independent study found that 38% of the children were likely to have been trafficked and a further 45% were likely engaged in exploitative child labour that was harmful.

First-hand accounts from hundreds of children who survived trafficking and exploitation on the lake report being forced into life-threatening and exhausting work against their will. These children often experience beatings, malnutrition and sickness, and are at severe risk of drowning.

All cases that IJM refers to Ghanaian authorities have gone through a rigorous review. IJM presents all the facts in advance of any action including distinctions between suspected cases of trafficking versus suspected cases of exploitative child labour. Police and authorities make their own determination if Ghanaian law has been violated.

In the 'Hilltop' case, ahead of the operation, IJM was fully transparent with police, providing them with the facts of the case, including that there was one likely case of child trafficking and three that were not clear (including Fatima's). The police conducted their own undercover investigations determining there was sufficient evidence before proceeding with the operation and – following information gathered on the operation – police filed trafficking charges against the suspects.

All decisions on whether to bring children to safety, as well as arrests and prosecutions, are made by the police and Ghanaian authorities. In this case the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) determined that the three girls were not safe with their grandmother. Families were told by police what was happening and where the children were being taken. The IJM team who were supporting the authorities on the operation did not witness the police using guns in the manner described by BBC. Ultimately, DSW decided to place the children with other family members in a different area where they were able to go to school.

In relation to "Operation Freedom", the BBC claimed that Ms. Mawusi did not know the whereabouts of her children after they were removed by the authorities. This is not accurate - IJM, in partnership with government social workers, facilitated and supervised phone communication between Ms. Mawusi and her children while she served her term, to assure her of the children's safety and whereabouts. IJM and DSW also provided economic support in the form of business start-up equipment to the family to help ensure a safe return for the children. Upon monitoring the home to ensure that Mawusi's sister Mavis was thriving economically with her business, DSW reintegrated the children with her.

IJM Ghana, led and staffed by Ghanaians, successfully helps to reduce levels of child trafficking by supporting government partners to stop this exploitation. It has worked with authorities on more than 75 operations, which have led to hundreds of children being brought to safety. In 90% of IJM supported cases, children have been reintegrated with family members who have been assessed as safe.

The Ghana team sets various targets for its work as one of several ways of evaluating IJM's programs. This allows the team to evaluate, learn and make its work more effective.

No IJM Ghana staff member has been disciplined or dismissed for failure to meet victim relief targets.

IJM's global mandate is to protect the most vulnerable people in our societies from violence, by helping to strengthen public justice systems through increasing their capacity to handle crime. Around the world, IJM's approach has led to reductions in child trafficking of up to 86% in places where we have worked.