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Bribery major problem in developing world

By Louis Charbonneau

BERLIN (Reuters) - Demands for bribes from police and other public officials is a major problem across the developing world and even EU countries like the Czech Republic and Greece are major offenders, a corruption watchdog said on Thursday.

"Corruption has infiltrated public life and burrowed in," said Robin Hodess, policy and research director at Transparency International (TI).

TI, a Berlin-based non-governmental organisation, said its Global Corruption Barometer 2006 showed bribery was most prevalent in Africa, where an average 36 percent of those surveyed said they or a member of their families had paid a bribe in the last 12 months.

Latin America was next, with 17 percent of those polled saying they had bribed someone recently. In Russia and the former Soviet republics, the figure was 12 percent.

But the top bribery country was not in Africa, Latin America or the former Soviet Union. It is one of Europe's poorest countries, Albania, where two out of every three respondents said they had bribed someone in the last 12 months, TI said.

"Legislatures are elected with a precious mission, to place the interests of their citizens above their own," Hodess said.

"The barometer shows that this trust is being violated, at great cost to the legitimacy of elected officials in many countries. The democratic process is at stake if this warning is not heeded."

PAYING OFF POLICE, JUDGES

In Europe, the next worst country was Romania, which joins the EU with Bulgaria in January.

One in five Romanians said they had paid a bribe recently, TI said. Bribery incidence in Bulgaria was much lower at 8 percent.

EU members Greece and the Czech Republic were close behind Romania, with 17 percent saying they had paid bribes.

TI said the most common recipients of bribes were police. In Latin America, about one in three respondents who came in contact with the police paid a bribe. The judiciary in Latin America came in third place among corrupt institutions.

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"Citizens rely on the police to protect them, and on judges and the judiciary to punish the criminals. When these guardians are for sale, some people simply lose faith. Others take the law into their own hands," said Huguette Labelle, chair of TI.

In Africa, the average bribe paid to the police and judiciary was more than 50 euros (33.7 pounds). The amount paid to utilities, the second most commonly bribed institutions in Africa, was much lower at 6 euros.

The worst offenders among the African countries included in the survey were Morocco and Cameroon with 60 and 57 percent having paid bribes over the last year respectively.

In Latin America the largest bribes were paid for medical services, on average more than 450 euros. Bribes paid to the judiciary and tax officials come in second at more than 200 euros.

On average, western Europe and North America had the lowest incidence of bribery, with only 2 percent saying they had paid a bribe over the last year.

Despite this, the public perception of corruption in U.S. politics has risen in the last two years, TI said.

Apart from Israel, the Middle East was not included in the survey.

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