

# Abolishing Slavery in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Stop the Traffik Public Lecture  
London, 27 November 2008

Ladies and Gentlemen ,

Next Tuesday (2 December) is International Day for the Abolition of Slavery. You would think that there is no longer need for such a day. After all, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was agreed upon 60 years ago (on 10 December), declares that “No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.”

Yet this sentence rings hollow. Slavery still exists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Every day, somewhere on our planet, scores of new victims join the unseen masses of slaves that are tricked and forced into sweatshops, mines or plantations, the sex trade, domestic service, or into becoming child soldiers. Rights and freedoms that we take for granted are being denied to millions of people around the world – mostly women and children – whose lives are for sale. This is a crime that shames us all.

## *More than moral outrage*

So what are we going to do about it? How can we free the slaves? Moral outrage is not going to stop the traffic. We need awareness, and we need action.

My Office is the custodian of the world’s main legal instrument to stop human trafficking. The UN Protocol against Trafficking in Persons includes measures to prevent this crime, protect the victims, and prosecute the criminals.

Concerning **prevention**, we can all be grateful for the outspoken advocacy of modern-day abolitionists like Emma Thompson and Cherie Blair who have championed this cause. My thanks to the media for shining the spotlight on human trafficking, and to grass-roots movements like Stop the Traffik. Thanks to you, and the Global Initiative against Human Trafficking (known as UN.GIFT) the world is starting to wake up to this problem. With the Global Webcast planned for next year we will reach a whole new audience – raising awareness among school children around the world. Thank you Steve for this initiative.

Some of you may ask, how big is the crime of human trafficking? We don’t know, and that’s part of the problem. We have an idea of its various forms and where it takes place, but we are still chasing shadows. To rectify the information deficit, UNODC will publish a Global Report on Trafficking in Persons early next year. Based on this evidence, we should be able to better assist the vulnerable – mostly women and girls from poor countries.

Poverty is not the only factor. Human trafficking starts in the head – by viewing women as objects. Whether its burkas or bikinis, the portrayal and treatment of women as either property or sex objects is an affront to human dignity and creates both the supply and demand of women and girls who are traded like commodities. Stopping gender-based exploitation is a noble cause in itself. It will also help to stop human trafficking.

What about the criminals – how can they be deterred? Since traders in human flesh are motivated by profit and exploit opportunities, raising the costs and risks of trafficking will make it a less attractive business. Therefore, companies should keep slavery out of their supply chains and slave-made products off of their shelves (from footballs and sports shoes, to chocolate, or luxury goods). As consumers, we should ensure that we are not generating demand for the goods and services of human trafficking victims.

What about **protection**? We need to raise awareness among law enforcement officials to make them more sensitive to human trafficking and to develop the skills they need to deal with it – for example to distinguish between victims and criminals, to provide for the special needs of women and children, to protect witnesses, and to catch the criminals.

Let me give you a concrete example of what we are doing on the ground, together with Stop the Traffik. There is a well-known trafficking route between Bangladesh and Mumbai, mostly targeting young girls (some not even teenagers). We have launched an early intervention project – working with local partners – to attack the problem at different stages. For example, at the source, in Bangladesh, we are raising awareness among potential victims. We train railway employees and border police to be more vigilant, and to intervene appropriately. In Mumbai, we work with police and NGOs involved in raiding brothels – to ensure that girls that are rescued get the care that they need, and are not re-trafficked. We also help businesses to clean up their labour practices. And we work with shelters and social services – Good Samaritans who offer refuge, support and education to people who have been violated in the most horrendous ways. They play a crucial role in freeing survivors from the mental enslavement of human trafficking, empowering them to return to society and to rebuild their lives with dignity.

What about **prosecution**? Many States still lack laws that would make human trafficking a crime. Others have laws, but fail to implement them. Both problems need to be rectified. I applaud the recent ruling by the ECOWAS Court of Justice that convicted the state of Niger of failing to protect a 12 year-old girl from being sold into slavery. Other courts should follow this example.

Countries need the law enforcement skills to catch traffickers. UNODC is providing technical assistance to break up trafficking rings, for example through investigative techniques and anti-money laundering.

Borders don't stop traffickers, so they shouldn't stop the police either. Since most human trafficking is transnational, disrupting it requires intelligence sharing and international cooperation. Thanks to the UN Convention against Organized Crime, the arm of the law is

getting longer. There is a vast arsenal of legal weapons that can be used – like mutual legal assistance, extradition, and joint investigations.

Technology can also be put to good use, for example tracking and blocking credit card payments that exploit trafficking victims, or monitoring and disrupting human trafficking routes.

### *Play your part*

Ladies and Gentlemen, while human trafficking is an uncomfortable truth, global action to fight it *is* gaining momentum. At the highest level, the issue has been raised in the UN Security Council and the General Assembly. 124 countries are Party to the UN anti-trafficking Protocol, and Member States are considering a plan of action to strengthen their fight against trafficking.

My Office is working with other members of the UN family, as part of UN.GIFT, to step up the operational response. We have just released a Toolkit to Combat Trafficking in Persons that is full of good practices.

Businesses are becoming more engaged, whether it be tourist operators introducing codes of conduct to stop child sex tourism, Internet providers cracking down on abuse of their services, or retailers back-checking their supply chains.

What can *you* do? Many of you are already involved in raising awareness and taking action at the local level – keep it up. Together we can break the chains. How? Through fund-raising – maybe tonight’s event will inspire some of you to support worthy projects. Through networking – use your contacts to strengthen social responsibility among corporate partners, and to forge stronger alliances among civil society organizations. Some of you may be able to provide direct services to victims, like legal assistance, medical and psychological aid, or job training.

We all have a role to play. Human trafficking is not some sort of unstoppable force. It is a series of acts that bring vulnerable people into the hands of criminals for the purpose of exploitation. We can stop the recruitment, the transportation and the harbouring of trafficking victims. We can stop the coercion, abduction and deception. We can stop the sexual exploitation, the forced labour, slavery, and the removal of organs. Ladies and Gentlemen, we *can* stop the traffic.

Thank you for your attention and support. Keep up the fight.