

A New Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking

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Colour maps of countries of origin and destination of trafficked person and digital pictures are available.

Video is available on request.

Interviews are available before the press conference.

London, England – On Monday, March 26 in London (at the House of Lords, Committee Room 3), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), together with other United Nations agencies, Governments, and NGOs will launch The Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking.

The launch, hosted by Baroness Mary Goudie, Member of the House of Lords and Board Member of Vital Voices Global Partnership, coincides with both the two hundredth anniversary of the abolition of trans-Atlantic slave trade and the bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire. **The Deputy Prime Minister, Mr John Prescott is expected to speak, along with UNODC Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa and Ms Julia Ormond, British actress and UN Goodwill Ambassador.** A series of events throughout the world will culminate in Vienna with an International Conference against Human Trafficking on 27 - 29 November 2007.

Some 2.5 million people throughout the world are at any given time recruited, entrapped, transported and exploited – a process called human trafficking – according to estimates of international experts.

Trafficking in persons, whether for sexual exploitation or forced labor, affects virtually every region of the world. UNODC reports that persons from 127 countries become exploited in 137 nations.

Because human trafficking is an underground crime, with many undiscovered and unidentified victims, the true numbers are not known. The United States government estimates that between 600,000 and 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders each year.

Human trafficking has become big business. The U.N. and other experts estimate the

total market value of illicit human trafficking at \$32 billion – about \$10 billion is derived from the initial “sale” of individuals, with the remainder representing the estimated profits from the activities or goods produced by the victims of this barbaric crime.

A Global Epidemic

Human trafficking is a global problem, which UNODC believes has reached epidemic proportions over the past decade. No country is immune, whether as a source, a destination or a transit point for victims of human trafficking.

Most victims of this modern-day slavery are women and young girls, many of whom are forced into prostitution or otherwise exploited sexually. Trafficked men are found in fields, mines and quarries, or in other dirty and dangerous working conditions. Boys and girls are trafficked into conditions of child labour, within a diverse group of industries, such as textiles, fishing or agriculture.

A recent UNODC report called “**Trafficking in Persons: Global Patterns**” identifies Thailand, China, Nigeria, Albania, Bulgaria, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine among the countries that are the greatest sources of trafficked persons. Thailand, Japan, Israel, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Turkey and the U.S. are cited as the most common destinations.¹

Distinct from the concept of forced labour, the act of human trafficking involves additional elements, for example the act of recruitment (often by deceitful promises); transportation; and the receipt and exploitation of the victim. Difficult conditions such as poverty, lack of opportunities, including unemployment, and displacement make people especially vulnerable.

Trafficking victims are held in bondage through physical and/or psychological force; they are not free to walk away. Even if they had the ability to escape from their enslavement, typically they have nowhere to go – they often lack identity papers and have little or no money. Traffickers also threaten to harm the victims’ families as an additional deterrent against trying to flee. Many are ill: HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases are common among women and girls forced into prostitution.

Human Trafficking is a Crime

The UN Protocol Against Trafficking in Persons, in effect since December 2003, makes human trafficking a crime. The Protocol has been signed and ratified by more than 110 countries, yet the participating governments and their criminal justice systems have not effectively curbed the practice. Few criminals are convicted, and most victims never receive help – on the contrary, many victims themselves are convicted of offences such as illegal entry or unlawful residence.

“Slavery is a booming international trade, less obvious than two hundred years ago for

¹ Available at www.unodc.org/unodc/en/trafficking_human_beings.html.

sure, but all around us,” says UNODC Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa. “Perhaps we simply prefer to close our eyes to it, as many law-abiding citizens buy the products and the services produced on the cheap by slaves.”

Among its goals, the Global Initiative aims to raise public awareness throughout the world as part of a larger strategy to eliminate human trafficking. This increased attention will enable effective prevention efforts, such as raising awareness among potential victims about the dangers of trafficking, reducing demand for services and products that rely on slave labor, protecting victims and improving law enforcement methods.

“Governments, businesses, NGOs and citizens everywhere have a responsibility to work together to address this modern-day slavery,” says Melanne Verbeke, Co-Founder and Chair of Vital Voices Global Partnership. “The new Initiative will be critical to progress in combating this global challenge. We urge everyone to join the 21st century anti-trafficking movement.”

Lured by the promise of a better life, victims often are misled or deceived by traffickers. They may initially consent to the recruitment as a means to escape from extreme poverty and miserable living conditions. Women who were promised domestic work or an education instead find themselves forced into prostitution or uncompensated labour. Parents are lured by the promise of good jobs and education for their children, who are then held as slaves.

“Trafficking in persons involves recruitment, transportation or the receiving of a person,” says Kristiina Kangaspunta, Chief of UNODC’s Anti-Human Trafficking Unit. “It involves abuse of power, violence, deceit and abuse of vulnerability for the purpose of ongoing exploitation that generates illicit income for the traffickers.”

No Accurate Count

Because human trafficking is a crime, and therefore clandestine, accurate numbers are not available. Many experts believe 2.5 million represents the tip of a much greater iceberg. The International Labour Organization (ILO) calculates the minimum number of people in forced labor at 12.3 million, while research by Free the Slaves, an NGO based in the United States, estimates 27 million people in slavery.

German authorities place the number of victims trafficked into that country at between 2,000 and 20,000 each year, but in 2004 only 972 victims were registered.

The wide range of estimates highlights the need for better reporting. “We need accurate numbers,” says Kangaspunta, “but all our numbers are based on second-hand information. How do you count something that is all underground? We can’t go to official statistics because nobody knows about these crimes.”

A Complicated Issue

The issue of human trafficking is immensely complex. Trafficking takes many forms. International groups draw distinctions between victims of human trafficking, migratory labourers and forced labour in one location, such as factory work in a village or agricultural work in local fields.

“It is all slavery,” says Kevin Bales, President of Free the Slaves. “The difference is in the way people are taken into slavery.” Some people are born into slavery. Though a common perception is that slavery has ended, it still persists. “Slavery is basically the same as it always has been,” says Bales. “Slavery has always been about one person controlling another, often using violence, to make a profit.”

Throughout history, slaves have been a capital investment for owners, costing as much as the equivalent of \$80,000 apiece. The unfortunate difference in the 21st century is that modern slaves are inexpensive. With a swelling global population and immense poverty in much of the world, the price has dropped to about \$100 a person, Bales reports. “That means they are disposable. People enslaved today are less likely to receive medical care if they need it, or decent food to keep them alive because they are so inexpensive.”

Sexual Exploitation Common

Data collected by UNODC show that about 80 percent of the victims of human trafficking, most of them women and young girls, are forced into prostitution. The remaining 20 percent, usually the men and boys, face forced labour. About half are under the age of 18.

Those percentages may be misleading, says Kangaspunta. Most groups concerned with human trafficking focus on women and sexual exploitation and do not see the males in the fields, mines and construction jobs or even the women and children in sweatshops and domestic servitude.

The issue is politically sensitive because many so countries and corporations have benefited from this kind of enforced, cheap labour.

Human trafficking has become big business, both for criminals engaged in trafficking and for those who profit from the free labour. “The economy of human trafficking is significant,” said Executive Director Costa. “Since the world woke up to this terrible reality, the mass of people trafficked and exploited would populate a state like Kansas, producing an income equivalent also to that of Kansas, or Montana.”

Goal: End Human Trafficking and Modern-Day Slavery

The ultimate goal of the Global Initiative is the end of human trafficking and slavery. The strategy for achieving this goal starts with efforts to increase public awareness of the problem. Another element is to coordinate existing but disparate efforts by international and national groups, governments and non-governmental organizations and by concerned individuals to end the practice.

Greater enforcement is essential. Nearly 120 states have signed the UN Protocol, and 110 have ratified it; but few have taken the steps to implement it. “The Protocol is only a piece of paper unless it is implemented,” says Costa. In some countries, the power of organized crime, corruption and complicity of police stifle enforcement efforts. “Even in well-meaning countries, convicted traffickers sometimes get off with a slap on the wrist.”

More resources, both money and personnel, are also needed. The number of people available for this effort, including international and government workers and volunteers, is no more than 2,000. “There aren’t nearly enough people to do the work,” he says.

Funding to combat human trafficking has been minimal. “Everyone agrees trafficking is a problem, but funding for global action by UNODC has been less than \$15 million for the past seven years, and not much better for other organizations,” says Costa. “If we can make this a priority, we will find the funds. Political will is shown by how many resources are given”.

“The international community has been discussing this issue for ten years, so we have an idea what should be done,” says Costa. “We have to decrease the number of victims by preventing trafficking, we have to increase the number of victims who are rescued and supported, and we have to increase the number of traffickers who are convicted. We have the tools to do this but we do not have the political will, large scale public awareness or the resources to make it happen.”

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