

Foreign Office Minister delivers speech on Human Trafficking to mark Anti-slavery day 2012

Foreign Office Minister Hugo Swire gave a speech on tackling human trafficking on 24 October, 2012

Thank you Susannah for your kind introduction, and indeed to your whole team for organising this important event with the Home Office. The problem of human trafficking is fresh in our minds following Anti-Slavery Day last week.

And it is an area on which I have been engaged for some time. In my previous job in the Northern Ireland Office, I was proud to work with my old friends, Anthony Steen and Baroness Butler-Sloss, to promote the good work of the Human Trafficking Foundation on both sides of the Irish border.

Of course, my new home – the Foreign and Commonwealth Office – has a rich history of fighting slavery, human trafficking and other international violations of basic human rights – the legacy of William Wilberforce and his brave colleagues.

And it would be remiss of me to pass up the opportunity to earn some ‘brownie points’ with my new boss, the Foreign Secretary, by drawing your attention to his excellent, well-researched and fascinating book – ‘William Wilberforce’ by William Hague – still available in all good bookstores!

So I am delighted that we have such a wide range of distinguished participants here this evening to discuss how we can all work more closely on combating this particularly pernicious crime.

In my brief remarks, I want to focus on the big picture: the global nature of human trafficking and how the international community needs to work together to combat it.

I will then hand over to my colleague, Mark Harper to concentrate on this government’s strategy to tackle the problem and how it is being implemented here in Britain.

It is difficult to know precisely how many people directly suffer from human trafficking. However, according to some estimates, at any given time as many as 27 million men, women and children are captive to human traffickers.

To put the scale of this problem in its historical context: today more people are trafficked each year than the total number of those trafficked in the 350 years of the transatlantic slave trade.

People talk about the abolition of slavery. But slavery has not been abolished. It continues on an unprecedented scale and with unparalleled barbarity. Today, human trafficking involves not only slavery, but blackmail, kidnap, rape and murder.

So the fact that slavery is universally illegal is no reason for complacency. Human trafficking is the second most lucrative organised criminal activity in the world, worth around \$36 billion annually.

It is a phenomenon that is not restricted to any particular country, region or continent, and it is certainly not restricted by national boundaries. Many victims find themselves in countries foreign to them where they are particularly vulnerable – they may not speak the language, may have no contact with any family or friends, and may fear the authorities.

Why we need to act

So there are two fundamental reasons why governments should take action, and take action together. The first is that this crime is particularly abhorrent. It ranks among the worst forms of human rights abuse. There is surely nothing more degrading, demeaning or dehumanising than being sold into the sex trade or being forced into manual labour and criminal activity.

Some people are trafficked for spare parts – organs that extracted by their purchaser. Many of the victims are children, abducted from their families to fight in wars, to suffer sexual abuse, and to have their chances of a normal life robbed of them. I believe we have a moral duty to take action.

The second reason for governments to work together to fight this scourge is that it does not only affect the direct victims. Human trafficking is the lifeblood of many organised criminal groups. The \$36 billion that it generates could well feed terrorism and trade in drugs and arms.

So the effects of human trafficking are broadly felt across societies. As governments, we have a duty to protect our citizens from these threats.

But we cannot effectively tackle the problem in isolation. It is a transnational crime, and it requires a transnational response. That is why this we are here this evening in the Locarno Room of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Because while the Prime Minister has made clear that fighting human trafficking is a “Coalition priority”, in order to be effective, we need to be able to work closely with other countries.

In particular, we want to focus on how we can break each and every link in the human trafficking chain. Let me take you through each in turn.

Prevention

The first link in the chain is the targeting of potential victims. To break this link, we have to reduce the vulnerability of people to human traffickers. I am sure that Mark will go into detail about the victims that we find here in the United Kingdom. But the vast majority of those victims originate from outside Britain. So we want to work with governments to prevent their citizens from falling prey to traffickers in the first place.

At a very basic level, this involves alleviating the conditions of vulnerability – such as poverty, lack of education, and lack of employment opportunities – that lead people into the arms of traffickers. This is central to much of the work of our Department for International Development. But it also runs specific programmes in South Asia and West Africa which target communities in which human trafficking is particularly prevalent.

Prevention also requires educating potential victims about the threat of human trafficking. I understand that the vast majority of victims are deceived into captivity, being unaware of the

dangers inherent in migrating to find work. So part of our preventative work is focussed on raising awareness among vulnerable groups.

Embassies and High Commissions across our network have partnered with local NGOs to this end. For example, our embassy in Prague has launched a project with La Strada and Diaconia, both local charities, which raises awareness of human trafficking in socially excluded groups across the Czech Republic.

Transit

The next link in the chain which needs to be broken is the transit of victims across borders. For those unfortunate enough to fall prey to human traffickers, it is important that police and border officials are able to work together to prevent victims from being removed from their own countries.

The Metropolitan Police run joint operations with their counterparts across Europe and beyond. And we are eager to expand cooperation with other law enforcement agencies across the world. Assistant Chief Constable Olivia Pinkney and Detective Chief Inspector Nick Sumner will tell you shortly more about this good work.

Further cooperation will also help to break the next chain-link: identifying trafficked individuals and their captors, rescuing the former and prosecuting the latter. Intelligence sharing is needed to capture and convict trans-national criminals. So we are particularly proud of the Arrest Referral Programmes that we have developed with the State Police forces in India and hope that we can set up similar programmes with other partners.

Repatriation and reintegration

But liberating the victims and apprehending the perpetrators is by no means 'job done'. I am horrified by some of the bureaucracy required for victims to be able to travel home after the terrible ordeals that they have endured. It can take many months to obtain the requisite travel documentation, which seems like pouring salt into the wound. I sincerely hope that we can find a way of expediting the safe return of victims desperate to get home to their families.

The final link in the chain that needs to be broken is the one connecting rescued victims with the risk of further human trafficking. Because those returned to their communities following captivity or forced labour are especially vulnerable. We are therefore keen to work with governments and organisations in helping to protect victims from ever being subject to human trafficking again. That is why we are funding a reintegration centre in Lao Cai, Vietnam, to support girls rescued from trafficking.

Conclusion

This government cares deeply about human trafficking. It has been highlighted as a Coalition Priority, the Prime Minister is personally engaged on the issue, and last week the Foreign Secretary spoke about his commitment to tackling the problem.

At the heart of this commitment is an acknowledgement that that human trafficking is a transnational threat that requires a transnational response. As the Foreign Secretary said, it is a threat 'that we cannot inure ourselves against through unilateral action alone'. I will hand

over to Mark to go through our own government strategy and where we require international coordination.

We have invited you here this evening because we want to work with you – NGOs, charities, representatives of other governments. We want to explore where we can deepen our cooperation and collaboration. Human trafficking is a plague that affects all of our countries – it fuels organised crime, it exacerbates the drugs trade, and it endangers our citizens. But worst of all, it destroys the lives of some of the world's most vulnerable people, stripping them of their freedom, their dignity, and their humanity.

In the 19th century, Great Britain was at the forefront of efforts to abolish the slave trade. With courage commitment and tenacity, it was able to change global norms and have the practice universally repudiated. Now in the 21st Century, slavery is less visible than it was then, but we do not kid ourselves that it has gone away. We realise that we must work together with the same courage, commitment and tenacity to ensure that we finish the work that we began to eradicate this hideous crime in all of its forms.