

Human Trafficking at the Crossroads

Private-Public Partnership to Fight Human Trafficking

2-3 March 2009
Manama, Kingdom of Bahrain



Speech

by

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Padre Miguel,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to take part in this meeting held under the auspices of Her Highness Sheikha Sabika Bint Ibrahim Al-Khalifa. This important event follows up the good work started by the Women's Leader' Council, launched at the Vienna Forum against Human Trafficking a year ago. My compliments to Suzanne Mubarak, to the council Co-Chairs Dr. Hammad and Baroness Goudie, and to the Council, who are leading the fight against a crime that shames us all.

The title of this meeting is "*Human Trafficking at the Crossroads*". I interpret it in a number of positive ways.

First of all, human trafficking is at the crossroads between the private and public sectors. On the one hand, the public sector should have the laws, courts, and police to deal with this crime. On the other hand, since most victims are being exploited for private gain – whether in brothels, factories or in sweat shops, farms, mines and construction sites – those who are profiting from the blood, sweat and tears of modern-day slaves must take responsibility. The solution is public-private partnership, just as from the title of this meeting – working together to keep slave-made goods and services out of supply chains and off the shelves.

Second, human trafficking is the tragedy of occurs at the intersection of so many activities, some licit. Victims are often duped into what appears to be legitimate work. Then they are coerced into exploitation, their passport taken away. If they escape and seek employment, they lack the necessary documents – putting them in a grey zone between victims of human trafficking and illegal immigrants. Others may be forced to work in legal activities – manufacturing, the sex trade or in domestic services – but are enslaved. These factors make the crime hard to detect, it makes the victims reluctant to come forward. It may even cause victims to be treated as criminals. Even worse than that: because of this interaction with licit activities, the crime of trafficking is often misunderstood. Not long ago, a senior minister from a major European country, when he learned that I was travelling to his country to address the crime of human trafficking, rebuked me: "*The crime of trafficking? They are just prostitutes!*" This benign (perhaps malign) neglect, is a complex reality that we must address.

Third, human trafficking is at a technological crossroads. Although slavery is as old as humanity, in recent years traffickers have been using technology to their advantage. The Internet can easily lure victims with false promises, or buying and selling trafficking victims or their body parts on the web. Technology is to some extent, now, used to fight back – blocking credit card payments for auctioning off cyber-slaves, or for downloading child pornography. There are plenty of other ways that technology could be used to stop the traffic, through sharing intelligence and data, networking among support groups, finding missing persons, and raising awareness. I wonder why even well-meaning governments oppose regulation of the web, to stop cyber-trafficking of humans – as well as other cybercrimes.

Fourth, the anti-trafficking movement is at public relations crossroads: we see growing awareness, though not yet growing results. Last year at the Vienna Forum there was a strong sense of common purpose, driven not least by outspoken anti-trafficking activists in civil society and the arts. Public opinion and the media have definitely wakened up to the problem. The Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking, our GIFT to the world, has mobilized a broad spectrum of expertise to strengthen prevention, prosecution, protection, and partnership. We have gathered more information about this crime, for example through the *Global Report on Human Trafficking* launched three weeks ago in New York: this should improve evidence-based policy. The UN General Assembly has taken up the cause: Father Miguel, we are honoured by your presence and appreciate your efforts. I hope member states will soon launch negotiations leading to an anti-trafficking plan of action.

Fifth, some Governments are at a crossroad and have started to take this issue more seriously. The number of states that has ratified the UN anti-trafficking Protocol has doubled in the past few years. Legal loopholes are being closed, starting from right here, Bahrain that passed a strong anti-trafficking law last January. Such legislation must be enforced: here news is not so good. According to the recent UNODV Report, 1/3rd of all UN Member States have not ratified the Protocol, and almost half of them have not made a single conviction against trafficking in persons. These countries are either blind to the problem, or not equipped to deal with it – or both.

Apathy and ignorance in the private sector

Frankly, I am not sure that private companies are doing much better. Together with the ILO and the UN Global Compact, we sent out a survey to 5000 businesses to assess what steps they have taken to address human trafficking in their supply chains. Very few have responded, so few that I could possibly count them on one hand.

For every company with a conscience – like Gap, Manpower or Microsoft – there are thousands of others without a clue: either apathetic or ignorant about human trafficking. Many of them – even if they don't know it – may be profiting from slavery. Some no doubt know the immorality and illegality of what goes on, but retort: "*under present economic conditions, the bottom line is what counts.*"

The problem seems to be worse the farther down in the supply chain. Big companies – like multinationals – are more aware of the issue, and the associated legal and reputational costs. They are better equipped to address it. But smaller enterprises are often less diligent. Our common challenge is to make sure all links in the production chain are clean: including subcontractors, recruitment agencies, and labour brokers.

To spur more businesses into action, encourage corporate responsibility, and reward those who champion the anti-trafficking cause, I have proposed to create a business leader's award against human trafficking. The biennial award, overseen by the *End Human Trafficking Now* campaign and UNODC, will be presented next year – for the first time. I hope that this award will deepen appreciation for the fact that fighting human trafficking is everybody's business.

Financial crisis increases supply and demand

Good practices are needed more than ever because the current economic crisis is making more people vulnerable to human trafficking, by increasing the demand for cheap goods and services, as well as by augmenting the vulnerability of victims to fancy promises of great jobs in fantasylands – jobs that soon turn into a nightmare.

For inspiration, I encourage you to look again at the Athens Ethical Principles or consult the Handbook for Employers & Business to combat forced labour that was developed by the ILO as part of UN.GIFT. This material offers excellent insights about what can be done, individually and collectively.

While we need to recognize the globality of the problem, we must act locally – to help individual slaves. Namely, we need practical initiatives especially to help victims. One area that UNODC is working on at the moment, together with NGOs and Hilton Hotels Austria, is to provide training and job opportunities for victims. This is one way of empowering them to overcome the stigma suffered by their ordeal and assist them to reintegrate themselves into society.

In conclusion, if we are at a crossroads, then let us ensure that our efforts intersect so that we move forward along a common path that will put an end to this modern form of slavery.