

“Not For Sale – Joining Forces against Trafficking in Human Beings”

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Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland

Opening Remarks

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Minister Kurz,
Minister Mikl-Leitner,
Secretary-General Zannier,
Distinguished guests,

Let me start by expressing my gratitude to the Austrian Chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe and to the Swiss Chairmanship of the OSCE, for their support in organizing this important conference.

No doubt about it, human trafficking is one of the biggest evils facing humanity today.

By coming together over the course of the next two days, as government representatives, academics, activists, parliamentarians, researchers, and members of NGOs, we have the opportunity to join forces and take effective action against modern day slavery.

It is not without symbolic importance that we are meeting in the Hofburg Palace, where the Congress of Vienna sat two hundred years ago. This Congress was one of the first multi-lateral events tasked with creating an international body to eradicate the slave trade.

Even back then there was a strong consensus.

The delegates issued a declaration condemning the slave trade as "repugnant to the principles of humanity and universal morality."

And yet two hundred years later the slave trade – in the form of human trafficking – is still going strong.

This is shameful.

According to U.S. State Department estimates, there are currently more than 27 million people enslaved across the world.

Think about it for a second.

27 million.

That is three times the population of Austria.

That is almost six times the population of my native Norway.

Human trafficking is not a historic relic of medieval times, nor is it restricted to remote regions far beyond our borders.

The bitter truth is that trafficking goes on right here in Europe.

Figures from the Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) show that the number of trafficking victims identified in only 10 European countries monitored in 2013 was close to 5,000. And we have reason to believe that this is just the tip of the iceberg.

Human trafficking is a global problem and also clearly a European problem.

The question is: what must we do to make human trafficking a thing of the past, once and for all?

How do we finish the work that our predecessors started two hundred years ago, in this very building?

41 European countries have ratified the ground-breaking Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings.

This Convention established GRETA - an effective and independent monitoring mechanism controlling the implementation of the obligations contained in the Convention.

GRETA has so far evaluated the policies in 30 countries, and concluded that much progress has been made. But still much more needs to be done to put an end to trafficking in Europe.

The problem is complex, and our response must also be multi-faceted. The answer, or at least part of it, can be found in prevention, protection and partnership.

I would like to say a few words on each.

Let me start with prevention.

Safeguarding the rights of migrants is vital to prevent human trafficking from taking root.

From a human rights perspective, migration and human trafficking go hand in hand.

In recent years, the global economic crisis and strict anti-immigration policies have increased the vulnerability of migrants.

This is often exploited by traffickers.

Take the Morecambe Bay tragedy ten years ago, when 21 Chinese workers lost their lives searching for saltwater clams in the shallow waters off the UK coast, trapped and drowned by tides they did not understand.

The young men and women were paid 5 pounds for every 25 kilograms of clams that they collected.

They were not given any basic training that could have saved their lives.

There are many more stories such as this. Stories about people who only wanted a better life.

The bottom line is that combating human trafficking is bound to fail if the root causes are not tackled.

Decisive action must be taken against push factors such as destitution, discrimination and social exclusion.

Above all, we need to do more to empower vulnerable groups in order to prevent them from falling into the deep net of human trafficking.

I am encouraged to see that GRETA has noted a number of good practices relating to social and ethnic groups that are in greater danger of being trafficked.

For instance, in Serbia seventy-five health mediators have been trained in the prevention of trafficking of women and children in the Roma community, a group which has been identified as being particularly vulnerable to human trafficking.

They perform outreach work in Roma neighbourhoods, improve access to health care and help families send their children to school.

Similar programmes exist across the region.

For example, in Albania the "National Programme for Zero School Drop-out" fosters access to education for children belonging to vulnerable groups.

We need to do more to support such initiatives.

One of the main obstacles is often the lack of funding for activities which concern the integration of the Roma population.

It is therefore important to ensure that national budgets allocate sufficient resources for this purpose and make full use of available EU funds.

It is also critical that representatives from Roma communities play an active role in the process.

The second area I would like to mention is protection.

In order to better protect victims of trafficking, we must become better at identifying them.

One of the main challenges we face is that most victims of trafficking remain undetected.

GRETA has noted that in many European countries foreign victims of human trafficking are often treated as irregular migrants, rather than as individuals in need of assistance and protection.

To the untrained eye they may appear alike, but treating trafficking victims as irregular migrants can have tragic consequences: deportation can result in a high likelihood of traumatised victims falling back in the hands of traffickers.

It is crucial to provide better training for a variety of professionals in the identification of victims of trafficking.

It is also important to give specialised NGOs access to migration detention centres.

Protection of trafficking victims can – and must – be enhanced through labour regulation and thorough inspections.

The "Gangmasters Licensing Authority" set up by the British government after the Morecambe Bay tragedy provides an example of an effective framework against exploitation and abuse.

The framework's mutually reinforcing regulation, inspection and enforcement powers give it muscle and credibility.

In Belgium, we have seen how specialized training sessions on trafficking can increase the alertness of labour inspectors.

Equally important is the training of staff in holding centres for irregular migrants.

Sometimes these centres represent the last chance to identify victims of trafficking before deportation.

The Council of Europe Convention puts in place a recovery and reflection period of at least 30 days before any suspected victim can be deported.

GRETA has observed that the application of this period must be improved.

It should not be made conditional on co-operation with the authorities to prosecute the traffickers.

And it should be granted immediately when there are reasonable grounds to believe that a person is a victim of trafficking.

We should all bear in mind that escaping from an exploitative situation is a long road.

Victims have been under tremendous pressure and abuse and need help to find their place in society, be it in the country to which they have been trafficked or in their country of origin.

We need to restore what was taken away from them to help them make their own future.

The Council of Europe Convention provides for renewable residence permits to victims of trafficking, on the basis of their personal situation or on the basis of their co-operation with the authorities in the investigation of criminal proceedings.

GRETA has encouraged residence permits with regard to the personal situation of the victim.

Some victims themselves choose to go back to their countries of origin where reintegration is crucial to avoid re-trafficking.

In Serbia, the NGO "Atina" works with financial support from the International Organization for Migration, the National Employment Service and the Agency for Co-ordination of the Protection of Victims of Trafficking to reinsert trafficking victims into the labour market. Concretely, the project envisages tax exemptions for employers who provide jobs to victims.

Similarly, in the Republic of Moldova, the National Employment Agency offers counselling and training and gives an allowance for vocational integration or reintegration.

Third, and finally, we need to strengthen national and international partnerships aimed at eradicating human trafficking.

Human trafficking is a complex criminal activity and a transnational threat that has no respect for borders and boundaries.

No nation, no government, no organisation can meet this challenge alone.

It can only be effectively combatted by joining forces through partnerships at all levels.

At the national level this means closer co-operation between authorities and civil society, in particular specialised NGOs which are in daily contact with victims.

In several countries recently assessed by GRETA, NGOs have shown that they can play a pivotal role in the identification of victims of trafficking.

A case in point is Moldova, where regional multidisciplinary teams composed of representatives from the social services, medical establishments, police and NGOs all work side-by-side to identify trafficking victims.

This should be the rule, not the exception.

However, in many countries identification still rests exclusively in the hands of the law enforcement authorities.

Partnerships between states are no less important, especially when it comes to investigating and prosecuting transnational criminal networks.

When orchestrated correctly, international co-operation can be very effective.

For example, take the joint operation organised in 2010 between Romanian and British law enforcement officials together with Europol and Eurojust.

The operation resulted in the dismantling of a human trafficking network and the arrest of 17 suspects.

Most importantly however, 180 child victims were identified.

This goes to show that partnerships can and do pay off.

Of course, international co-operation is not always easy.

Several countries evaluated by GRETA have voiced their concern regarding difficulties dealing with certain countries of origin, including Nigeria.

So far, bilateral agreements between some European countries and Nigerian law enforcement and anti-trafficking agencies have had a very limited impact.

The same applies to the allocation of financial resources designated for the training of professionals and improving trafficking prevention in Nigeria.

This lack of bi-lateral progress is worrying.

And it is dangerous for both sides.

To remedy this we need better cooperation between law enforcement agencies.

We need smoother sharing of intelligence.

We need a closer working relationship between the public and private sectors.

This includes financial and communication service companies used by traffickers to transfer money to their home countries. .

But most of all we need a pan-European response to human trafficking challenges, using the tools provided by international treaties such as the Council of Europe's Anti-trafficking Convention.

I am convinced that the provisions and the co-operation framework of the Convention are robust and could benefit other continents as well – not only Europe.

Only by working together can we end the cycle of exploitation for millions of human trafficking victims.

And giving back their freedom is only the beginning.

We must also help them restore their dignity, help them recover and rebuild their lives.

For this to happen, and to ensure that the days of human traffickers are limited, we must speak with the same voice. We must act together.

And most importantly, we must never look away.

Thank you.