

Statement by the UK Permanent Representative in the Permanent Council on 29 March 2007 on the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire.

1. 25 March 2007 marked 200 years since the British Parliament adopted legislation to abolish the slave trade in what was then the British Empire. This Act of Parliament was the beginning of a long road to the final abolition of slavery itself within the empire, 25 years later. In 1807 Parliament made it illegal for British ships to be involved in the slave trade. This marked the beginning of the end of the transatlantic traffic in human beings. The bicentenary is thus an opportunity for us all to remember the millions who suffered and to pay tribute to the courage and moral convictions of all those who campaigned for abolition.
2. Let me repeat what the British Prime Minister has said, "The slave trade was a profoundly inhuman enterprise and the bicentenary provides us with an opportunity to express our sorrow that it happened."
3. The Bicentenary is also an important opportunity for us to confront the tragic fact that today, in many parts of the world contemporary forms of slavery still persist, two centuries after the argument of its abolition was won in the United Kingdom.
4. Slavery today exists in many guises. But it is trafficking in human beings which perhaps most closely resembles the slave trade of 200 years ago. The UK has been consistently committed to the abolition of this evil. We continue to work to this end including in organisations such as the OSCE.
5. On 23 March the UK signed the Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking, on the desk of William Wilberforce. This was a symbolic gesture to the British Parliamentarian writer and social reformer whose dedication to the cause of the abolition of slavery resulted in the Act of Parliament of 1807. By signing the

Convention, the UK reaffirmed the commitment that it has long shown to its aims. And on the same day, the UK's national action plan on trafficking was launched. We hope that this plan will prove to be an effective instrument in implementing the Convention's aims.

6. On 26 March the UNODC launched its global initiative to fight human trafficking and modern day slavery at the House of Lords, the upper chamber of the British Parliament. The global initiative aims to focus and intensify the efforts of us all to stop these crimes.
  
7. Let me take this opportunity to acknowledge and highlight the important role that the OSCE is playing in combating human trafficking. The UK has shared a particularly fruitful relationship with the OSCE in recent years, for example in the opening of the Anti-Trafficking centre in Sheffield last year. Moreover we have modelled our national action plan on trafficking closely on that of the OSCE to which we are indebted. Ladies and Gentlemen I think it is clear that if we in Europe are to succeed in the elimination of human trafficking, the commitment and expertise of the OSCE will be invaluable in the period ahead.