

GLOBAL LEADERSHIP IN TACKLING SLAVERY & TRAFFICKING

The Rt Hon Theresa May MP

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Thank you very much, Helga.

It's a pleasure to be here in Vienna.

I've seen at first hand how the OSCE works to address the most pressing issues of our time.

Whether that's trafficking, terrorism, human rights or armed conflict.

But more than that - it's an essential component of our multilateral system.

The rules-based international order that's fundamental to political stability and our collective security.

The OSCE brings together 57 participating countries across three continents, representing over a billion people.

Its strengths lie not just in the coordination of national policymaking, but in its ability to harness the expertise and experience of wider civic society.

Agencies, NGOs, charities, the private sector and academia.

Because global challenges require an effort beyond the capabilities of sovereign states alone.

I'm delighted to see that broad representation here today - and I'm looking forward to hearing your perspectives.

THE CHALLENGE

Twenty years ago, the Ministerial Council agreed the OSCE Action Plan on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings.

It was a landmark commitment that has underpinned our ability to coordinate the prevention of trafficking and the protection of victims.

And over the last two decades, the Alliance against Trafficking in Persons has played an invaluable role in helping states to translate their objectives into action.

We have made enormous progress.

But this 20th anniversary reminds us of the scale of the challenge before us.

The recent *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery* report found that there has been an increase of 10 million people being forced to work or marry since 2016.

That brings the estimate of people living in modern slavery to 50 million.

More than at any other time in human history.

Slavery and trafficking are among the largest organised criminal activities in the world.

These crimes exist in all of our societies. They respect neither borders nor jurisdictions.

Yet compared to other offences, our collective response has been disproportionately weak.

And in 2023, we are fighting on several new fronts.

We are seeing how crises can dramatically increase vulnerability to exploitation.

We need only look to the war in Ukraine, the Covid-19 pandemic or the direct effects of climate change.

And with the widespread adoption of the internet, trafficking is increasingly being enabled and facilitated online.

Today, 75% of sex trafficking victims are advertised on the internet.

Yet for all the progress we have made, only 14 participating OSCE states have imposed reporting requirements on tech companies.

And with increasingly globalised supply chains, the goods and services we consume are more likely than ever to be the product of forced labour.

Thirty of the OSCE's participating states have public procurement policies in place to reduce the risk of trafficking in supply chains.

But that's still only just over half of all OSCE countries.

And only 16 of our 57 states have gone further, introducing laws that require businesses to act responsibly across their supply chains.

It's clear that more action is needed.

TAKING ACTION

At a national level, our anti-trafficking responses can be stronger.

Having a position statement or policy is one thing, but enforceable legislation quite another.

As the UK's Home Secretary, I introduced the first piece of legislation of its kind in Europe.

It is more than a deterrent.

It has become a vital policing tool to stop known perpetrators of trafficking from travelling freely across borders.

It has delivered tough penalties and put slave drivers behind bars.

It has enhanced the protection and support given to victims.

And it placed a world-leading obligation on businesses to demonstrate that modern slavery is not taking place in their supply chains.

But legislation is only half the story.

For laws to be effective, governments must support their implementation with practical mechanisms which identify and support victims.

Ultimately this activity has to be prioritised through national budgets.

And perhaps most valuable of all, it requires the investment of political capital.

At the General Assembly in 2017, I launched the UN call to action to end forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking by 2030.

We committed to implement national strategies and called for more cooperation between countries on law enforcement and the protection of the most vulnerable.

We still have a long way to go if we are to meet our target.

But the call to action demonstrated the broad support that existed across the international community to bring this exploitation to an end.

It received the endorsement of over 90 countries, from Norway to Bahrain to South Korea.

It established international momentum, building on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

And over the last six years we have made steady progress.

But the striking acceleration in slavery and trafficking shows that steady progress is not enough.

There is an urgent need to scale up investment and action.

And that requires greater political leadership.

It's clear to me that to achieve greater momentum at a political level, we need to raise the profile of this challenge.

That's why last year I commissioned the UK's Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre to examine the case for establishing a Global Commission on Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery.

The team carrying out the study met with more than 50 organisations working to address modern slavery across the world.

They included governments, inter-governmental bodies, civil society organisations, human rights groups, survivors and businesses.

The message from the study was clear.

Despite global agreement on eradicating modern slavery by 2030, there is a widespread sense that political momentum has been lost.

The study concluded that there is a compelling need for a global commission to provide greater political leadership.

And I can confirm today that it's my intention to bring together the coalition required to establish such a commission.

It will have three clear objectives.

Firstly, to provide leadership and visibility at the highest ranks of international politics, working with the most senior decision-makers to catalyse action.

Secondly, to mobilise the evidence-base needed to spur political action within and between states.

And thirdly, to amplify existing international collaborations to maximise their impact.

Over the coming months, we will seek to bring together influential figures of renown from politics, civil society, business and academia.

It will be led by high-profile commissioners from across the world who have the stature to help restore lost momentum.

And people with lived experience will be central to the work of the commission.

We are having conversations with several countries that are prepared to act as co-convenors.

And I would like to extend the invitation to everyone here today to be involved through the organisations or governments that you represent.

CONCLUSION

Because governments acted in the centuries before us to condemn slavery to the history books.

But contrary to popular belief, it remains a daily reality for 50 million men, women and children.

Where there were once chains and shackles, today there is deception, fear and coercion.

It hides in plain sight in our everyday lives.

In our workplaces, in the goods we buy, the food we eat and in the services we consume.

Because slavery is an insidious crime that knows no geographical boundaries.

A global epidemic to which no country is immune.

And in epidemics, each of us must act to effect systemic change.

For too long we have allowed those who trade in human misery to prosper.

So 20 years on from the OSCE Action Plan, let us recommit ourselves to this task.

To provide stronger leadership in addressing the greatest human rights issue of our time.

Let's match our words with action.

Thank you.