

Thursday, September 30, 2010

Verbatim, as delivered

Chairman Howard L. Berman's opening statement at hearing, "Out of the Shadows: The Global Fight Against Human Trafficking"

Human trafficking, or "trafficking in persons," is an affront to human dignity that links communities across the world in a web of money, exploitation, and victimization.

Trafficking encompasses many types of exploitative activities including sex trafficking, slavery, forced labor, peonage, debt bondage, involuntary domestic servitude, and making children into soldiers.

The International Labor Organization estimates that 12.3 million children and adults are currently suffering from forced labor, bonded labor and forced prostitution worldwide. Of that number, approximately 2.4 million are trafficked either internally or across national borders.

Human trafficking is a \$32 billion global criminal enterprise, second only to illegal drugs in the profits it generates for its perpetrators, which range from sophisticated criminal syndicates, to independently owned businesses with labor recruiters, to family operations.

Trafficking is a problem that can be effectively confronted only through cross-border cooperation, but it has proven very difficult to combat.

Next month marks the 10th anniversary of enactment of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, authored by my colleague Chris Smith. That law provided protection and assistance for victims of trafficking, authorized public awareness prevention campaigns and strengthened the prosecution and punishment of traffickers.

We have reauthorized the Trafficking Victims Protection Act several times, and in the process made the Act much more effective in protecting the most vulnerable and punishing the guilty.

115 other nations now have laws on the books banning all forms of trafficking, and the number of victims identified and traffickers prosecuted have grown over the years.

But trafficking remains a persistent problem, and many challenges remain – both at home and abroad – as we look to the next decade of anti-trafficking efforts.

Earlier this month, the Department of Justice and the FBI dismantled the nation's largest human trafficking ring and indicted six recruiters for bringing 400 Thai laborers to the United States.

These laborers were lured to the U.S. with false promises of high-paying jobs. Some of the victims were duped into paying up to \$21,000 in recruiting fees. Once in this country, their passports were confiscated and they were forced to work under slave-like conditions. If the victims complained, they were threatened with deportation.

They lived without electricity, sanitation and running water. They were cheated out of their wages for back-breaking work picking fruits and vegetables. Because their food rations were insufficient, many had to resort to eating leaves or fishing in rivers.

This example of forced labor trafficking involved labor brokers who convinced their victims that they were not "free" until they first paid off their recruitment fee debt. With a high debt, workers entered into a debt bondage situation and became vulnerable to exploitation.

We need to pay particular attention to this form of forced labor trafficking and examine the role of labor brokers and how their presence increases the chances of exploitation of workers. According to Anti-Slavery International, debt bondage is “probably the least known form of slavery today, and yet it is the most widely used method of enslaving people.”

The State Department’s annual trafficking in persons report contains a wealth of information about debt bondage, forced labor and other forms of trafficking worldwide. The report also provides a country-by-country analysis and ranking, based on what progress countries have made throughout the year in their efforts to prosecute, protect and prevent trafficking in persons.

We are honored to welcome Ambassador-at-Large Lou CdeBaca, who oversaw the compilation of this year’s TIP report. We are particularly interested in hearing from him about the major trends and challenges in trafficking, whether sanctions are a useful tool in persuading other nations to increase cooperation with the United States in anti-trafficking efforts, and the U.S. ranking in the report.

The fight against human trafficking is the modern-day continuation of the fight against slavery. It is the fight to give all people the dignity they deserve, and to prevent human beings from being reduced to machines for production or pleasure.

A number of my colleagues on both sides of the aisle have been leaders in the fight against human trafficking, and in the months ahead we will continue our efforts to make the Trafficking Victims Protection Act as effective as possible.

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