

## **Foreign Secretary, William Hague, has spoken at the opening of the Parliamentarians Against Human Trafficking London Conference on 16 October, 2012**

Thank you, Anthony, for that very kind introduction. I would like to pay tribute to your dedication to this issue is impressive; you founded this All Party Parliamentary Group; established the Human Trafficking Foundation; and it was your Early Day Motion that saw Anti-Slavery Day, which takes place this Thursday, put onto the Statute Book. You deserve a good round of applause.

I am grateful to you for inviting me here today to open the Parliamentarians Against Human Trafficking London Conference organised by the All Party Parliamentary Group Against Trafficking.

It is a topic that is very close to my heart and one in which I hold a deep personal interest. You mentioned my book on William Wilberforce. When William Wilberforce spoke in the House in 1791 he said that when people look back on the slave trade that they would “scarce believe that it has been suffered to exist so long a disgrace and dishonour to this country”.

It is also an issue in which the Foreign Office has also, historically, played a leading part. One of my predecessors as Foreign Secretary, George Canning, who took office in 1822, denounced slavery as “the scandal of the civilised world”.

By the early 1830s the Foreign Office’s Slave Trade section was the largest single division of the whole department and could be regarded as the first human rights department of any foreign ministry in the world. It, in effect, led a huge public diplomacy exercise, campaigning for abolishing slavery around the world and publically shaming those who persisted in the trade.

By the 1840s anti-slave trade diplomacy was described by another of my predecessors, Lord Aberdeen, as “a new and vast branch of foreign relations” and in 1864, Prime Minister Lord Palmerston said that “the achievement which I look back on with the greatest and purest pleasure was forcing the Brazilians to give up their slave trade”. Now we have to continue that record of striving to ensure basic human rights and dignity for all people.

Were Wilberforce around today, more than 200 years after legislation was passed to abolish the trade in this country, I think that he would be appalled by human trafficking; essentially slavery, in its modern form. I am sure he would aim to tackle this issue with the same energy, commitment and fortitude that he brought when originally addressing the issue two centuries ago.

Estimates on the scale of human trafficking, as you know, vary enormously from between 800,000 to 2.6 million people being trafficked annually worldwide. This is just referring to trafficking across borders, not domestically as Anthony mentioned. That means that perhaps as many people as the entire population of metropolitan Birmingham are subject to this abhorrent practice each year.

Even at the lower estimate that is still 10 times the number of slaves who were each traded in the 18th century and more people are trafficked annually in the present day than were ever trafficked in the entire 350 years of the transatlantic slave trade. These are horrific facts and this is an inhuman practice that destroys lives.

Just this month I received a report on an individual from Vietnam. He arrived in France via Malaysia on a Schengen visitor visa. Having been lent many thousands of dollars at extortionate rates he was transported on the back of a lorry to the United Kingdom where he was promised work. The promise of work turned out to be a job working in a cannabis cultivation facility for which he was never paid. Isolated and insecure he described his whole trafficking experience as incredibly traumatic. He later returned to Vietnam and is now being supported by local organisations that are helping him to reintegrate.

His is just one story, and there are many others, amongst hundreds of thousands. As with any illegal industry human trafficking has become big business for organised criminals, to the detriment not only of the people trafficked but to wider society as well.

It is estimated that trafficking nets around \$36 billion a year, the second most lucrative organised criminal activity worldwide, and that money feeds into other transnational criminal issues such as the drugs trade, trade in small arms and providing funding for terrorism.

The Prime Minister has stated that this Government is “fully committed to combating human trafficking” which is why we launched our strategy to deal with the problem in July last year. This strategy of course has to take a comprehensive approach, both tackling the criminals themselves but also offering and maintaining care for the victims.

It is based on four central principles.

First, we are improving our identification of potential victims and offering greater support to those who have become victims of this abhorrent crime. Trafficking is a gross violation of a person’s basic rights and dignity and disproportionately affects the most vulnerable; the large majority being women and children.

We are working in a joint venture with The Salvation Army to provide physical, emotional and practical support to the victims of trafficking based on their individual needs. We have also developed a programme of work that looks to address the particular vulnerabilities of child victims to ensure that they have adequate care and support.

Second, we are enhancing our ability to act early and to help other countries to deal with the issue at source before it reaches the United Kingdom. In the Foreign Office we are sponsoring projects, using our global network of Embassies and Consulates to help other parts of British Government, whether the police, DfID or SOCA to share their knowledge and expertise with other nations. We have identified a number of countries who are a source of trafficked individuals to the United Kingdom, and we have put together a joint programme of work to deal with the problem. We aim to raise awareness of the issue and support local law enforcement to build up their capacity to identify and interdict criminals in their own countries.

Third, we are improving our work at the border with a smarter, more targeted approach that aims to address the very specific and unique aspects of the trade in people. This means we are training our staff to identify the signs of human trafficking and developing specialist teams to directly combat organised immigration crime. We currently have 750 investigators in 46 teams tackling the problem.

Finally, we are strengthening our enforcement against the practice of trafficking here in the UK. We are improving our intelligence cooperation between law enforcement agencies. We have also set up a centralised online service, the National Referral Mechanism, so that experts in the field from SOCA, the police, or the Crown Prosecution Service can collaborate and share expertise without duplicating effort.

There are still areas in which we can develop further and do more to link together different law enforcement agencies. There are limits to our information technology systems that we can tackle in the future. This will be something that is addressed when the National Crime Agency is built late next year.

This sort of collaborative working is also something that we are looking to improve between countries as well as domestically.

As with many issues, such as terrorism, climate change or the drugs trade; human trafficking is a transnational threat; one that has no respect for borders and boundaries; one that we cannot inure ourselves against through unilateral action alone.

The London Metropolitan Police already run joint investigations with their Polish, Bulgarian and Romanian counterparts. In fact we have recently signed a cooperation agreement with Romania specifically to fight human trafficking, demonstrating the commitment of both of our countries to tackling it. I hope that we can further strengthen and deepen the work of these collaborations in the future and increase the number the countries that we are able to work with.

And we shouldn't limit ourselves to bilateral action. Two of the five most common countries of origin for victims of human trafficking found in the UK are from within the European Union and UK Border Force and Border Agency investigations suggest that the United Kingdom is increasingly being used as a transit hub for trafficking into the EU. This is a problem that is continually growing.

The European Union has long sought to combat this crime and bring the individual actions of Member States together as a cohesive whole. This can only be to the benefit of the victims which is why we opted into the Directive on Human Trafficking and are on track to have implemented it by April next year.

That is why events such as this conference are so important.

They provide an opportunity to increase the awareness and understanding of the issue. Though the problem of human trafficking is one of huge proportions, the attention that it receives in comparison to drug trafficking or terrorism is minor.

Last year, for the first time, the Prime Minister hosted a reception at 10 Downing Street to mark Anti-Slavery Day and to raise the profile of a crime that has remained invisible for too long.

By coming together, as Parliamentarians, Special Representatives, researchers, academics and members of NGOs, you will be able to share information, ideas, and discuss opportunities to bring the issue to wider attention in your own countries and you can urge your Governments to do more to tackle the problem.

These events can genuinely help to increase the pressure on Governments across Europe to improve national and international anti-trafficking efforts. We must work collaboratively wherever possible. That means better cooperation between our law enforcement agencies, better sharing of intelligence, closer working between border agencies and business, governments and NGOs working as equal partners to tackle this scourge.

I would like to pay tribute to all those who are involved in this initiative, and would like to make special mention of ECPAT UK and its director Christine Beddoe, and Baroness Nicholson, who is the Chairman of the Asociația Children's High Level Group in Romania, the project's third partner.

I hope that we can continue to grow the network of Parliamentarians across EU Member States, and with the support of the NGO community, keep the pressure on to ensure effective implementation of the Council of Europe's Convention against Human Trafficking and the EU Directive on Human Trafficking.

We must raise the cost for anyone who seeks to profit in modern day slavery. We must see more traffickers brought to justice; their crimes punished and their victims offered support and protection.

You have already demonstrated that this is an issue that matters; and an issue in which a real difference can be made. You may rest assured that you have a Government that will give you its support; working together with you in harness to end this repugnant practice once and for all.