

Human trafficking steals every good memory, we need to reclaim them for the sake of future generations

[This opinion article by Yury Fedotov, Executive Director, UN Office on Drugs and Crime is available for publishing in media outlets, if you are interested please contact crimecongress@unvienna.org]

In November last year, I stood with the UN Secretary-General at a packed gala event in the first district of Vienna as he delivered a moving speech on the tremendous damage that human trafficking does to the lives of children, women and men.

Speaking to an audience offering support to the UN Trust Fund for Victims of Human Trafficking, the Secretary-General said he had been struck by the comments of a young female trafficking victim.

“This very young girl,” said the Secretary-General, “suffered poverty and abuse. She said, ‘I don’t remember good things.’” This sentiment exists in different forms in many trafficking survivor statements where the shock of being reduced to a living commodity strips away both confidence and dignity.

UNODC, in December, released its new human trafficking report and it provides disturbing support for the Secretary-General’s comments. One in three victims of trafficking, for example, is a child. A chilling rise of 5 per cent compared to the period 2007-2010.

Just as significantly, the report found that two out of every three children trafficked are girls. Indeed, women and girls now account for 70 per cent of the total number of trafficking victims worldwide.

Trafficking is truly global. There are no countries where the vulnerable are safe from this crime’s long reach. Supporting this fact, UNODC’s trafficking report found victims from 152 countries in 124 countries globally.

Given the terrible damage to individuals and the prolific nature of trafficking, it is clear that action needs to be taken. Not tomorrow, but today. This includes a tough criminal justice response designed to shake the criminals out of their complacent belief that human trafficking is a low risk crime that delivers huge returns.

Our responses also have to be effective and directed at the specifics of this crime at the country and regional levels. The victim must be placed at the heart of our actions, and there is a need for programmes that address their economic, social and psychological needs.

The problem, as the Secretary-General makes clear, is that we are confronted by a breath taking range of painful individual experiences ranging from former child soldiers, forced beggars or those who have escaped enslavement in brothels and sweatshops.

We need to act with steely resolve to ensure that the international community cooperates globally to confront this crime wherever it appears. To achieve this, every government must ratify the Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and its protocol on human trafficking. But this is not enough. Implementation of the provisions into domestic law is a must.

Governments and people appreciate the situation. But it is time to accelerate our actions. I have proposed, and will continue to do so, a concentrated decade of action against this crime in all its shameful forms, as well as more work to raise awareness about its dire consequences.

I believe that governments have a duty to lead by pushing the issue further up the international agenda, and by delivering an integrated law enforcement and protection response. An approach that hunts down the criminal's profits, breaks up the networks and throws a protective arm around the victims. We need boldness and singularity of purpose.

Our global mission must be to stop a young person's childhood experiences, which should be the best of their lives, from being stolen and cruelly obliterated. If we fail, we risk a new generation of young people who cannot remember good things about the past.

Yury Fedotov, Executive Director, UN Office on Drugs and Crime