

# **UN Expert Panel marking the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery**

## **“Revealing the Child Faces of Modern Slavery”**

### **Statement of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein**

2 December 2016

Distinguished Chair,  
Excellencies,  
Colleagues and friends,

Every year, on this day, we commemorate and renew the world's pledge to end modern slavery. We reaffirm the world's commitment to free the millions of women, men and children who suffer forced and child labour. Children and young women trapped in forced and early marriage. Children forcibly recruited for use in armed conflict. Entire families enslaved in debt bondage, perhaps for generations. And the many victims who have become captives of human trafficking – frequently leading to their sexual exploitation and abuse.

Slavery is not just an abomination of the past. Although enslavement is among the gravest and most comprehensive violations of human dignity, and although it has been universally prohibited by law, still, in the year 2016, millions of people are living as slaves or in slave-like conditions – in every region.

How many people are victims of slavery today? The estimate by ILO of 21 million people enduring forced labour is often cited. But this is a loose estimation, because so much modern slavery is hidden from sight. Victims, including children, are frequently enslaved precisely because they have been rendered vulnerable and invisible – by years, perhaps generations, of multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, and failures by States to protect them.

Today's discussion focuses on the enslavement of children. As many of the experts on today's panel can testify, every day children are forced into situations where they are mercilessly exploited. Little girls are forcibly married, sexually abused and exposed to domestic servitude. Or, in some conflict zones, they may be enslaved by extremist groups – literally bought and sold, and subjected to relentless physical and sexual violence. Boys and girls alike are forced to work, frequently without pay, in extremely hazardous conditions which may profoundly damage their physical and mental development. They are abducted and forced to become combatants – obliged to kill and torture.

In the context of today's large-scale movements of people, I am also acutely worried about the vulnerability of migrants to human trafficking. Monitoring teams from my Office have repeatedly received information from migrants – many of them children – who have been held captive in inhuman and degrading conditions during their journeys, and who give credible evidence of many people being subjected to forced labour, violence, sexual violence and extortion. The particular vulnerability of migrant children, and especially unaccompanied migrant children, is also increasingly observed by the Humanitarian Funds managed by my Office, and has been noted by both IOM and UNICEF.

Far too many of these victims go unidentified, and thus never receive help. This is partly because people who have been subjected to slavery may fear retaliation if they step forward – especially children who are not being given adequate protection. Many have endured terrible crimes and distrust authorities and officials. Building trust is the first step in engaging

survivors – and this must mean establishing that officials are trustworthy. We need far more effective protocols for response by law enforcement and judicial institutions, and much better provision of psycho-social care.

This International Day for the Abolition of Slavery also marks the date of the adoption by the General Assembly of the United Nations Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others. It is time for that Convention to be much more broadly and effectively enforced. Investigating these crimes, and holding the perpetrators to account, is not only an act of justice but also one of prevention. Just as lawlessness creates a safe zone for slavery and abuse, the affirmation of the rule of law is an invaluable step towards non-recurrence.

States have also committed themselves to ensuring that all victims of slavery under their jurisdiction obtain redress, including rehabilitation. The provision of this assistance is not an optional act of charity, or even just an ethical imperative – it is the law. The physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of child victims of slavery must include specialized services to address their trauma, within an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child. States should ensure that the child's best interest is always prioritized. Children who have been victims of slavery must receive social and legal services to facilitate their reintegration into society, and to protect them from repeated victimisation.

Many organisations supported by the UN Voluntary Fund for Contemporary Forms of Slavery do just such work. With their help, child victims may be able to regain a sense of autonomy and help to effect change within their communities. Today, you will hear from professionals who work every day, in every region of the world, with children formerly enslaved. They have witnessed the effects of exploitation, violence and captivity on children's development – and they have experience in helping children regain dignity, rights and trust.

I pay tribute to the work of these men and women, and I thank the Fund's Trustees and Secretariat for gathering us today to awake our conscience and spur a better collective response.

Modern-day slavery is a global affront to humanity, and it demands stronger global action. We need deeper partnerships between civil society organisations and law enforcement, as well as better collaboration and cooperation between source and destination countries. Combating slavery not only means its direct prohibition in law but also fighting its root causes, increasing access to justice for victims through effective enforcement of legal provisions, and better provisions for rehabilitation. The broader SDG agenda calls us to accelerate our efforts to achieve such aims.