

Speech: Attorney General speech at the Modern Slavery Summit

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak to you this morning. Firstly, I would like to take this opportunity to pass on my thanks to the CPS for organising and hosting this important summit on prosecuting Modern Slavery crimes.

On behalf of the UK Government may I also pass on a very warm welcome to you all. Many of you have travelled a long way to be here, and I hope this summit will be an important step in improving international dialogue and combatting the crimes of forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking.

As we are all very well aware, modern slavery exists in all our societies. It respects neither borders nor jurisdictions and its victims are subject to the most appalling mistreatment and exploitation, this brings our task at this summit into sharp focus.

I know you will be looking at identifying ways to better support victims and witnesses, and establishing a strong, active international network to tackle Modern Slavery.

In the last 8 years, the UK has clearly demonstrated that with the right will and mind-set it is possible to transform our approach to Modern Slavery.

The then Home Secretary, and current Prime Minister, identified modern slavery as a significant problem, and since then this Government has put in place an ambitious strategy and dedicated legislation to tackle it.

Prior to 2010, there was no bespoke legislation and the law enforcement response was not sufficiently coordinated or effective to deal with this type of offending.

Giving law enforcement agencies the tools to tackle modern slavery is paramount in achieving successful prosecutions, and at the same time protecting victims. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 does just that. The Act not only consolidates all modern slavery legislation into one Act, assisting both the police and prosecutors but introduces other equally important measures to improve the criminal justice response. For example :

- the introduction of maximum life sentences for perpetrators;
- the provision for civil prevention and risk orders', which stop potential acts of trafficking or forced labour from taking place; and
- the introduction of a statutory defence for those forced or coerced to commit crimes like cannabis farming – which will also help safeguard victims from abuse.

These measures are now beginning to have a real impact and – we are seeing a real rise in convictions for new offences prosecuted under the Modern Slavery Act and at least 56 Slavery and Trafficking Prevention and Risk Orders to

restrict offender activity are in place.

In addition to these new measures and tools, training remains important. Investigators and prosecutors need to be well trained so they are readily able to identify elements of Modern Slavery in their cases. They also need to be aware of the new tools they have available to tackle these crimes and prevent further offending from taking place and to identify and protect victims.

As well as a criminal justice response, it is important that there other powers and regulations in place to stop the exploitation of vulnerable victims and to disrupt potential crimes before they take place.

The Modern Slavery Act established an Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner. Their job is to work with law enforcement agencies, local authorities and third sector organisations to encourage identification, prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of modern slavery crimes – across the UK and internationally. This role is essential in order to advise the Government on improvements to the system and to encourage joined up working across the UK.

More recently the Government has used the Immigration Act 2016 to extend the remit and strengthen the powers of the Gangmasters Labour Abuse Authority. Its new mission will be to prevent, detect and investigate worker exploitation across the entire economy.

The Modern Slavery Act also includes a world-leading transparency in supply chains measure requiring certain businesses to report how they are eradicating modern slavery from their organisation and their supply chains. By forcing business to report on this, it has made them much more aware of potential modern slavery crimes. Most importantly, the Modern Slavery Act has provisions to give protection to overseas domestic workers, a duty on public authorities to notify the Home Office when they come across potential victims.

Crucially, we have found that where support for victims of this crime, who are typically extremely vulnerable and often reluctant, or fearful of engaging with law enforcement, is prioritised prosecution rates are higher and the chance of a successful prosecution much more likely.

The National Referral Mechanism – the NRM – is the UK system for identifying and providing access to support to potential victims of modern slavery. The Modern Slavery Act ensued that this support was extended to all victims of Modern Slavery in England and Wales.

The NRM should act as bridge – helping victims to be lifted out of situations of exploitation; providing specialist care and support to enable them to begin to recover and rebuild their lives; and facilitating their return to the relevant community.

We recognise that the NRM does not always do this for victims, and that is why are committed to reforming it to ensure better results for victims.

Having a regulatory environment which encourages collaboration between law enforcement agencies, first line responders and licensing authorities is essential in tackling such a wide ranging crime and our research reflects that this aligned approach produces better outcomes for victims. The global prevalence of Modern Slavery is significant, and whilst it is a largely hidden crime the International Labour Organisation and Walk Free Foundation in 2016 estimated that there are 40.3 million caught up in Modern Slavery globally. This is a conservative estimate and in reality there could be many more victims worldwide.

No country can tackle modern slavery alone and I am proud to be part of a Government that is leading the fight against this horrendous crime internationally.

To drive further progress and collaboration at the international level, the Prime Minister convened a group of world leaders at a modern slavery event during the UN General Assembly in September 2017. Leaders and senior ministers from 21 member states attended the event and 42 countries have now endorsed an ambitious Call to Action to End Forced Labour, Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking. This sets out the practical steps that countries will take to effectively respond to modern slavery and fulfil the commitments set out by the international community. At that meeting the Prime Minister also announced that the UK would double its aid budget spend on modern slavery to £150m.

£33.5 million of this is set aside in a Modern Slavery Fund, managed by the Home Office, and of this £11 million has been allocated to an innovation fund to trial new approaches to tackle and reduce the prevalence of modern slavery and to identify interventions that could be scaled up.

This £11 million fund is currently supporting 10 successful projects which are being taken forward by a range of organisations including NGOs, universities and multilateral organisations. These projects target issues such as tackling slavery in supply chains, supporting victims, exploring vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation and helping to share skills and expertise with overseas partners.

It should not be surprising that the majority of the victims referred to us are from countries other than the UK. In the last year there has been a significant increase in referrals from Sudan and Ethiopia with the most referrals coming from Vietnam and Albania.

In response, we are increasing bilateral engagement with and increasing the operational response in countries from which a high number of vulnerable people are exploited and trafficked into the UK.

Building strong partnerships is the key to improving our understanding of the context that leads to vulnerable people being exploited and trafficked to the UK to better inform our approach and operational response so this can be disrupted. This conference is an excellent step in improving that collaborative approach.

We are increasing law enforcement cooperation, including through establishing joint investigation teams and greater intelligence sharing, to tackle this crime and bring perpetrators to justice. Additionally we are working with international law enforcement agencies to improve the international operational response. For example, the UK has encouraged Interpol to strengthen its understanding of modern slavery and its enablers to better understand international law enforcement challenges and gaps.

We all share a moral duty to end Modern Slavery, a duty that transcends party politics and country borders and which unites us in our determination to root out this dreadful crime from our society.

I welcome the opportunity this summit brings to create a unified, international approach to tackling modern slavery and ensure that victims receive the support and assistance they need to begin the process of rebuilding their lives.

The leadership we show at this summit is therefore important. The task of tackling modern slavery is an urgent one, so we need swiftly to put our words into practice and hold ourselves to account for the progress that can be made.