Eradicating modern slavery: tackling the great human rights issue of our time

Good evening ladies and gentleman.

Firstly, thank you to Alex and the Institute for inviting me here today to talk to you about such a crucially important issue. As the UK’s first appointed Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, my role is to spearhead the UK’s efforts to tackle modern slavery, both domestically and internationally. To enable me to do this, I have statutory powers over all law enforcement, border security, local government and health bodies. The legislation also makes clear that the role is about encouraging international join-up, as this is very often a crime that crosses borders.

The role was created by the Modern Slavery Act, which received Royal Assent in March 2015. The Act is the first of its kinds in Europe, and one of the first in the world, to specifically tackle slavery and trafficking in the 21st century. I believe that it will be looked back on as a landmark piece of legislation.

I have the pleasure of being in Australia this week because your Parliamentary Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade is currently undertaking an inquiry looking at whether Australia should enact its own Modern Slavery Act. As I outlined in my evidence to the committee yesterday, the Act has given our criminal justice actors enhanced tools to tackle this crime and has enhanced support and protection for victims and survivors; though we are still at the beginning of a journey, and much more remains to be done.

The Act signalled the intention of the United Kingdom to once again be a world leader in the fight against slavery, as we were in the days of William Wilberforce. The British Prime Minister, Theresa May MP, who pushed the legislation through when she was previously Home Secretary, has described modern slavery as “the great human rights issue of our time”.

But given that we are gathered here this evening at Australia’s leading foreign affairs think tank, rather than just concentrate on the domestic situation in the UK, I want to focus tonight on how we can work better internationally to tackle this crime.

Overview of modern slavery

But first, for the sake of clarity, what exactly do I mean by the term ‘modern slavery’?

Well it’s an umbrella term, covering a number of often related serious abuses, including forced labour, child slavery, and all forms of trafficking in persons, including for sexual exploitation, forced criminality, organ removal and domestic servitude.

The Modern Slavery Act includes two clear offences that cover this spectrum: the offence of slavery, servitude and forced labour; and the offence of human trafficking.

In few other crimes are human beings used as commodities over and over again for the gain of others. Victims endure experiences that are horrifying in their inhumanity, including violence, rape and extreme abuse.
And these are individuals who have often experienced other forms of abuse, exploitation, poverty or poor health prior to being enslaved. Their vulnerabilities are multiplied many times over by their experiences at the hands of traffickers and slave drivers. Stripped of their freedom and often exploited for profit, the damage inflicted on victims is incalculable.

The slavery we see today exists for the same purpose as it has throughout history: to maximise profit for exploiters by minimising or eliminating the cost of labour.

The International Labour Organization estimates that the total illegal profits obtained from modern slavery crime worldwide amount to over 150 billion US dollars per year. This makes it one of the top three most profitable illicit global enterprises.

Slavery has of course existed for thousands of years, but economic and social forces have enabled its alarming resurgence in the past few decades. Population explosion has tripled the number of people in the world, mostly in developing countries. In many places, the population has grown faster than the economy, leaving many people economically vulnerable. And millions are migrating, moving from impoverished rural areas to cities, and from poorer countries to wealthier ones, in search of work. Criminals are able to deceive them by posing as legitimate labour recruiters.

Modern slavery is often a hidden crime, which means that it is difficult to obtain reliable estimates of the scale of the problem. Australia’s own Walk Free Foundation last year estimated that there were almost 46 million victims of modern slavery across the world. And back in 2012, the UN’s International Labour Organization conservatively estimated that there were 21 million victims. I am pleased that the two bodies are now working together to share their data in order to provide a joint estimate, which should be published later this year. As the Walk Free Foundation has worked tirelessly to state, in the year 2017, modern slavery exists in every country across the globe – nowhere is immune.

Commissioner’s four international priorities

So how can we work better together as an international community to tackle this evil trade in human lives? I have four suggestions that I would like to share with you tonight.

1: Respond to modern slavery as the serious and organised crime it is

My first recommendation is for all relevant actors – particularly governments and their law enforcement and security agencies, as well as multilateral organisations – to ensure they treat modern slavery in line with the gravity of the crime and the severity of the threat, and that they then deploy commensurate resources against it. This is means ensuring we are fully informed about the nature of modern slavery, and how it feeds into, or off, related serious abuses.

“We need to see this issue for what it is: serious and often organised crime, generating huge profits for transnational crime groups, off of the suffering of millions and millions of people across the globe.”

We need to step up the response.

High potential profits and a historically low risk of punishment has made modern slavery an attractive enterprise for criminals. We need to be clear on the links between modern slavery and
other serious crimes, and the implications for the level of prioritisation we devote to countering it. Modern slavery is intrinsically linked to human security and economic development.

Organised criminals are known to use the profits from trafficking and slavery to fund other illicit activities, including weapons smuggling and terrorism. Terrorist organisations, including Daesh and Boko Haram, now openly advocate slavery as a tactic of war, and use the profits to fund their attacks. Daesh has even established slave markets where women and children are sold with price tags attached. Conflict – in Syria, the wider Middle East, and also in Asia, including Western Burma – has also produced an environment that has enabled slavery to flourish. Men, women and children fleeing conflict are extremely vulnerable to numerous forms of modern slavery, including sexual exploitation, forced labour and even organ trafficking. Long established transnational organised crime groups are also using power vacuums caused by conflict and instability to scale-up their trafficking operations. I will outline one such example – the trafficking of Nigerian women and girls – later in my presentation.

Globally, perhaps the most shocking related crisis is the modern-day slave trade that is now booming in Libya. Current political, military and social conditions have created an environment where traffickers have thrived. Militias are rounding up migrants en masse, placing them in detention facilities, where they are beaten and subjected to forced labour or sexual exploitation until their families pay a ransom to allow passage to Europe. These detention centres are forced labour camps, set up specifically to profit from the organised exploitation of migrants. In October last year the International Organization for Migration reported that over 70% of all migrants taking the Central Mediterranean routes connecting North Africa to Europe had experienced exploitation and human trafficking. Libya is the location where the vast majority of abuses are reported. I met Sarah, an extremely vulnerable 15 year old Eritrean girl, at a reception camp in Lampedusa last year. Sarah had been kidnapped and held for 3 months in Libya in a so-called “connection house”, where she was sexually exploited multiple times every day. And if migrants do reach Europe, Europol have confirmed that traffickers are increasingly targeting vulnerable refugees, including unaccompanied children, in EU countries.

“Indeed, one of my biggest concerns at the moment is the rapidly increasing prevalence of exploitation of refugees.”

Where in the past trafficking and slavery was, in general, a distinct concept to migration smuggling, whilst the two remain legally distinct, the nexus between the crimes seems to be growing ever closer across the globe. Data from Europol – Europe’s policing agency – from 2015, indicates that of the suspected migrant smugglers linked to other types of crime, 20 percent were linked to human trafficking. And the agency has detected that criminal gangs which have previously been known to be involved in human trafficking, and which were logged as such on its Focal Point Phoenix database, are now appearing in the organisation’s files in relation to migrant smuggling.

A paper published by the Lowy Institute last September also stated that in Southeast Asia the line between people smuggling and human trafficking is becoming especially blurred, including with regards to the 2015 Rohingya crisis.

Unfortunately, up until now, tackling slavery and trafficking simply has not been a priority for national or international law enforcement and security services. But given the current context, there can be no doubt that law enforcement and intelligence agencies must prioritise efforts to increase cross border collaboration to investigate, disrupt and dismantle human trafficking networks that are profiting from conflict and human suffering. We need to use the tools and learnings from efforts against other forms of organised crime and terrorism.
In the UK things are now being to change. We now have a Modern Slavery Task Force, which brings together the heads of our intelligence and law enforcement agencies to drive high-level operational action in the UK and in priority countries. We need high profile convictions of the organisers to act as a deterrent to others. This can be achieved through increased use of joint investigation teams, multilateral prosecutions and data and intelligence sharing. We also need to get smarter at debriefing victims and sensitively sharing this information with law enforcement and victim support agencies, to inform both disruption and protection efforts.

2. Focus on the root causes

My second point is to be clear, however, that prosecution-focused efforts alone will not be enough.

We need to focus on the victims, both post-exploitation, and also before it actually takes place – i.e. to understand the vulnerabilities that cause people to become susceptible to exploitation, and working to help increase their resilience. This means, where possible, looking at the root causes.

In line with increased law enforcement-centred resources must also come increased resources to ensure a victim-centred response. This is a crime that destroys lives, and morally there can be no doubt that the well-being of those affected must be at the very heart of our response. But effective support for victims will also help increase the numbers of prosecutions. When made to feel safe, victims will be more inclined to come forward and share their accounts, which helps build a better picture of the criminality and feeds into an improved law enforcement response. And until we work more strategically to tackle slavery at its root, including focusing on the vulnerabilities that traffickers target, we can at best only ever hope to apply band-aid solutions.

This means focusing on modern slavery as an international development priority. Human development and slavery have of course always been closely linked. Victims endure experiences that are horrifying in their inhumanity, including violence, rape and extreme abuse. But modern slavery also has wider negative implications for human development. It results in a huge loss of remittances to developing countries, because remittance flows are taken from victims, who are forced to pay off debts, which become profits for the criminals. And there is the impact on the families and communities left behind. Victims cannot care for their children or the elderly. Many are young, so modern slavery robs communities of those that could economically contribute most to local development.

Modern slavery is an economic problem, as many victims are seeking to escape poverty and are lured into trafficking and slavery by the false promise of economic gain.

It is a health problem, as trafficked women and children are most at risk of HIV infection and related harm.

It is a gender problem, as unequal power relations reinforce women’s secondary status in society.

And it is a legal problem, as victims are stripped of their human rights.

In spite of all of this, until very recently modern slavery and development have been largely treated as separate policy areas.
While modern slavery crime worldwide is estimated to generate over $150 billion US dollars per year in illegal profits, OECD countries spend just 0.08 percent of this amount on anti-slavery development assistance. So as an international community, we hadn’t really given ourselves a chance.

An opportunity to change this arose during the drafting of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. These were of course the targets that now set the international community’s sustainable development efforts – and associated funding commitments – up until the year 2030.

Unfortunately, initially there was no clear target on tackling modern slavery. Working with a number of partners, including the Vatican, where Pope Francis’ moral leadership on this issue has been extraordinary, I worked to secure an explicit targeted to eradicate slavery – Goal 8.7 – which all Member States have signed up to. This now places the fight against slavery exactly where it should have always been: as part of the strategy to promote sustainable and long-term development.

Through the adoption of the SDGs, Member States have now made an unequivocal global commitment to take immediate and effective measures to eradicate modern slavery by 2030. Following adoption of SDG 8.7, I am pleased that the UK has now made tackling modern slavery an international development priority. A £33.5 million pound international modern slavery fund has been established to fund prevention efforts in counties of origin. It is also for the first time a core priority for our Department for International Development, which will be developing new programming in endemic areas of the world. I have been working with the Government to focus on targeting the best opportunities for prevention.

On such example is through targeting the trafficking of women and girls from Nigeria to Europe. This is in fact one of the most urgent trafficking flows currently taking place across the globe. Since we began recording the figures in 2009, Nigeria has consistently been one of the top countries of origin of victims of modern slavery identified in the UK. Indeed, for decades, transnational traffickers have operated from southern Nigeria, deceiving victims with false promises of better lives in Europe. But these criminals are now taking advantage of conflict and instability in the Lake Chad Basin and in Libya and have massively scaled up their trafficking operations by utilising these now ungoverned routes. In 2016 just over 11,000 Nigeria women arrived in Italy from Libya. This is an eightfold increase from the numbers arriving in 2014. The International Organization for Migration, which has counter-trafficking experts based at disembarkation points in Italy, believes that 80% are trafficking victims, destined for exploitation in brothels across Europe, including the UK.

I was recently told that smugglers and traffickers are now reserving spaces on vessels in Libya for Nigerian females, as they are so much more valuable to the criminals than individuals of any other nationality. In reality, many of the Nigerian females registering as adults when they reach Italy are in fact girls. Agencies confirm they deny being children even when clearly underage, because they have been instructed by those exploiting them to avoid the child protection system. If they are placed in an adult centre, it is much easier for them to leave to meet with their traffickers, who at that point they are still likely to trust. Indeed, a very high proportion immediately go missing from reception centres. Nigerian girls who arrive in Italy by sea are mostly aged 15 to 17 years, though agencies have recently noted an increasing proportion of even younger girls arriving, aged just 13.

To avoid violence and extortion towards themselves or their families in Nigeria, the girls are forced to carry out sex work under conditions of slavery, for periods typically ranging from 3 to 7 years. This is one of the most brutal forms of trafficking that I have encountered. The exploitation begins far in advance of reaching Europe’s shores. During the journey over land, the girls suffer abuse and violence at the hands of their traffickers or other people they meet. Again, the exploitation suffered in Libya is often especially shocking.
Those who insist they will not work as prostitutes are tied up in a position called “the crocodile”: their hands are tied to their feet and they are left for days without food or water. Some are left to die as an example to others.

Incredibly, despite the numbers involved, Nigerian victims who are trafficked to Europe for the purpose of sexual exploitation disproportionately originate from just one relatively small area: Edo State, in the south of the country. The UNODC and Nigeria’s anti-trafficking agency together report that over 90 percent of Nigeria females trafficked to Europe for sexual exploitation originate from Edo State. The state’s capital, Benin City, is well established as Nigeria’ trafficking hub. To provide some context, at the time of the last official census in 2006 the population of Edo State was little over 3 million, which represents just 1.8% of Nigeria’s total population of 174 million. Yet there has been no strategic response at source. European countries of destination and international agencies have had little interest in Edo.

Women and girls have been pouring into Italy, quickly disappearing, before being controlled and abused by organised crime groups across Europe, making huge profits for them. The costs to these girls is of course enormous. I have met many survivors, and few have been able to recover from the brutality they have suffered. They often contract sexual infections and HIV. Many actually die whilst under control of the criminals. Perversely, at present the best case scenario is sometimes for them to suffer years of exploitation only to then be taken under the wing of their traffickers, to be groomed to themselves become madams and part of the criminal chain. The cost to European states is also huge, from the costs of care when victims are eventually identified, to the social and economic costs wreaked by the transnational crime groups.

I have visited Edo on several occasions, and the opportunities for strategic prevention there are huge. **Tackling the root causes is complex, but with investments in expertise and working with frontline groups, it can be done.** Prevention is of course always better than cure, and the sums of money involved with working strategically at source pale in significance compared with the current costs of doing nothing and then picking up the pieces in Europe. So I have been working in partnership with development experts and local stakeholders, including the University of Benin, which has completed extensive work identifying the root causes of this phenomenon and the interventions required. Following three visits to Nigeria, last summer I put forward a case for action to the UK Government to support prevention activity in Edo, alongside initial recommendations.

My recommendations focused on strengthening frontline NGOs and faith groups that could access the most vulnerable and hard to reach communities through community mobilisation efforts. My report also looked at how the UK could bolster local rule of law efforts, as criminals at present are operating with impunity. There are clear opportunities to build the capacity of Nigeria’s anti-trafficking agency, as well as wider judicial capacity. **And then we explored how smart investments could support the development of alternative livelihoods for vulnerable young people.**

I am pleased to say that the case for action was accepted, and at least £5 million pounds will be spent in Nigeria to develop solutions at source to prevent exploitation from occurring in the first place. This work is being led by our Home Office, but in addition DFID has been tasked with looking at how it can bring its expertise to bear with regards to community mobilisation and cultural change efforts, as well as livelihoods development. I am also clear that we need to bring a much more professional focus to monitoring and evaluation to this field, so they we can understand exactly which interventions work in which contexts, and how they can be scaled up. Going forward, all UK funded projects will now have a strong M&E component built-in from day one.
3. Galvanise the private sector

My third point – and very relevant here in light of the current debate concerning the possibility of introducing a Modern Slavery Act in Australia – is that we cannot ignore the crucial role that the private sector has to play in international efforts to prevent and address modern slavery, including in relation to development efforts and the provision of alternative livelihoods.

If we look at the figures available, of the more than 21 million people that the International Labour Organization estimated in 2012 to be exploited in forms of modern slavery across the globe, well over half – some 14 million – were estimated to be enslaved within the private-sector economy.

Many products we buy and use every day are unfortunately tainted by slavery.

There is evidence of slavery in different stages of supply chains from the production of raw materials, such as cocoa, cotton, or fishing, to the manufacturing every-day goods such as mobile phones and clothes.

Because of the complexity of modern supply chains, typically a final product has passed through a long chain and it is rarely possible to be certain that a product has or has not been produced using slave labour.

So transparency is crucial.

The ‘Transparency in Supply Chains’ clause of the Modern Slavery Act requires every company with a turnover of more than £36 million operating in the UK – the UK’s definition of a ‘large company’ – to publish an annual ‘slavery and human trafficking’ statement each financial year.

This statement must set out what they are doing to address these issues in their supply chains and business operations.

In this way, the Act has a very global reach, as the provision covers some 12,000 companies. Organisations must include a link to the statement in a prominent place on the homepage of their website.

Through the Act, the UK was the first country in the world to take such a step. Companies have a moral responsibility for taking measures to ensure that no slavery has been used in producing the products they sell – and they must be held to this at the highest levels.

This is why the Act requires statements to be signed off at Board Director level – in my view this in particular has been a very powerful measure.

The Act is now widely recognised as a game-changer. We are starting to see major cultural change across many sectors, in how this issue is viewed and treated. Since the passing of the Act, research by a leading UK business school has found that engagement of CEOs with modern slavery issues has doubled, and 50% more companies are seeking external advice and expertise.

CEOs are realising that addressing modern slavery is becoming a business-critical issue – for credibility with customers, investors and the general public.
4. Demand enhanced coordination

Bringing this all together, my fourth and final recommendation concerns the urgent requirement for much better coordination across the piece, to ensure a holistic and strategic response.

For states, this means developing integrated ‘whole of government’ international strategies, based on fully coordinated activity from our home and foreign ministries, and international development and criminal justice agencies.

In the UK, this is now beginning to take shape. The Task Force that I mentioned earlier – which I am a member of – is actually personally chaired by the Prime Minister.

It brings together the heads of our intelligence and law enforcement agencies, together with Ministers from relevant Departments, and the heads of Interpol and Europol, in order to more drive coordinated policy and operational action in the UK, and in priority countries.

Because we also need to improve coordination between states.

We must focus more on how we can support source and transit countries to develop interventions, as I have outlined regarding Nigeria.

But we also need to be smarter in working with our partners.

For example, Vietnam is a major country of origin of victims trafficked to the UK. Vulnerable young men and boys are brought to the UK to be forced to work in exploitation in cannabis factories; Vietnamese organised crime groups control the UK’s cannabis trade.

So the UK was looking to scale up its activity in Vietnam, including developing new capacity building projects.

But the UK’s footprint and overall influence in Vietnam is relatively limited. Australia, however, has a much larger presence there, and has developed influential relationships over the years.

I went to see a programme in Hanoi run by the Australian Federal Police, in partnership with the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

The programme identifies up and coming young law enforcement leaders from across Vietnam, and provides leadership and technical training on contemporary crime threats, including trafficking and smuggling. It was among the best training related to this crime that I have yet seen.

So rather than the UK try to reinvent the wheel and start from scratch, I have recommended that we invest in the AFP programme, and work with our Australian partners so that additional modules are built in focusing on the smuggling and trafficking threat to Europe and the UK, and identifying young leaders from the relevant source provinces.

I am pushing for the UK, Australia and the US in particular, to work much more closely together in developing our international anti-slavery strategies, to map out joint areas of concern and our assets and levels of influence in these areas, and to then develop so-called “burden sharing agreements” so that we each take the lead in the areas of the world where we have the necessary knowledge, experience and influence.
This kind of coordination also needs to be developed at the multilateral level.

At present, multilateral efforts against slavery are siloed and fragmented, with little effort made at strategic join-up. Each silo within the multilateral system has its own focus, often overlapping, but rarely talking to one another.

We have the UNODC focused on the criminal justice side. The IOM looking at migration and emergencies. The ILO working on forced labour. But until recently there has been very little integration of these efforts.

Tackling the traffickers and protecting the vulnerable will only be achieved through utilising all levers at the international community’s disposal.

This means deploying the UN’s leverage through development and humanitarian efforts, criminal justice capacity building, political work and peacekeeping operations.

Positively, this is slowly starting to happen. Again, this follows on directly from the adoption of SDG 8.7, which really has been a game changer in terms of international prioritisation.

A coordination group – Alliance 8.7 – was launched at last year’s UN General Assembly in New York. Relevant UN agencies have all now come together under the alliance, and a number of coordination groups have been formed, focused on areas including rule of law, supply chains, migration and humanitarian emergencies.

I have put forward several initial suggestions to the emergencies working group in particular for work that I believe needs to be immediately synchronised.

Protections against slavery and trafficking have, totally wrongly, not been viewed as lifesaving emergency aid. So at present, responses to slavery and trafficking in crises are not systematically integrated into humanitarian responses.

This refers to the absence of proactive identification, lack of training for frontline responders, and the need for effective debriefing and information sharing.

This is urgent. On visits to reception centres I witnessed how the current absence of integrated protections is resulting in potential victims not being identified and protected.

Traffickers view refugee camps as a rich source of new victims.

So proactive responses to protect against slavery and trafficking must be integrated into humanitarian responses to conflicts and related emergencies.

I have seen the positive impact that deployments of dedicated experts can have, including cultural mediators. But unfortunately at present this is the exception rather than the norm.

I am also encouraging suitable training for all UN peacekeepers, as they will often be operating across routes known to be used by traffickers, in places such as Mali and Sudan.

Now is the time for Member States to demand a fit for purpose UN system that delivers strategically coordinated and systemic anti-slavery and trafficking efforts, ideally through a single agreed UN strategy.
Closing remarks

In closing, the scale and impact of modern slavery crime is much greater than we previously had thought.

It is feeding off conflict and crisis, and has become a “crime of choice” for organised crime groups due to the historic levels of impunity available to them. Quite clearly, there’s an urgent need for increased levels of cross-border law enforcement collaboration; for strategic prevention efforts at source; positive engagement with the private sector; and holistic international and multilateral strategies that join these dots together.

The positive note is there is change afoot. The Modern Slavery Act has brought a huge step-change to the UK’s international efforts, and I can now see a similar process taking place here in Australia.

And through the adoption of SDG 8.7, UN agencies and Member States from across the globe are also scaling up their activities, and working to coordinate them.

I recently briefed the UN Security Council, where over 70 Member States spoke very strongly on the actions required. Until last year, the Security Council had never before even had one single debate on trafficking and slavery.

So there is momentum. But this kind of momentum is often fleeting, so we must work together to capture it now, while it exists, and do everything in our power to help translate it into positive and tangible action.

To reiterate once again, through adoption of SDG 8.7, all UN Member States have committed to take immediate action to end modern slavery within the next 13 years. Whilst this is a huge challenge, we must remember that it took William Wilberforce just 20 years to end the British slave trade, and it was less than 30 years more when the global slave trade was abolished. And this was all at a time when slavery was as accepted as birth, marriage and death.

So now is the time to stop talking and start doing, as on this issue like no other we will be judged solely by our actions, not our words.