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**Conference: “Building Bridges of Freedom:
Public-Private Partnerships to End Modern-Day Slavery”**

May 18, 2011

Excerpts of Remarks by Rep. Chris Smith

It is an honor to be here with so many of you who have played pivotal and innovative roles in the fight against human trafficking. We have made tremendous progress but much remains to be done.

When I first introduced the Trafficking Victims Protection Act in 1998 – a landmark bill that was signed into law two years later in 2000 – the legislation was met with a wall of skepticism and opposition. People both inside of government and out thought the bold new strategy that included sheltering, asylum, and other protections for the victims, long jail sentences and asset confiscation for the traffickers, and tough sanctions for governments that failed to meet minimum standards, was merely a solution in search of a problem.

Others, especially in the U.S. government, strongly opposed naming and ranking nations based on performance in relation to what we dubbed minimum standards – clearly articulated prevention, protection, and prosecution benchmarks – enforced by sanctions and penalties against egregious violators.

The well-informed, passionate voices of civil society, however, enabled us to overcome those who thought such an aggressive governmental response to human trafficking was unwarranted or even counterproductive.

Civil society in the U.S. helped us write the law and all subsequent iterations. As we reauthorize certain sections of the Act, which expire at the end of September, civil society representatives have flooded my office – and I’m sure Ambassador deBaca’s - with a myriad of useful suggestions, replete with legislative text, to improve U.S. policy.

At congressional hearings and briefings and private meetings, representatives from civil society provided wise and incisive commentary on this exploding trade in persons and contributed not only to our understanding of the problem but submitted a range of potential remedies.

For example, it was Gary Haugen of the International Justice Mission (IJM) who insisted that corrupt police worldwide, often underpaid and susceptible to bribes and worse, undermined efforts to end modern day slavery. Such bad actors must be held to account.

Time and experience have shown that bad cops are the Achilles heel of anti-trafficking initiatives. The same is true for sleazy prosecutors, judges, and politicians who enable or act with indifference to human trafficking within their respective jurisdictions.

On the prevention and protection side, civil society advocated - and continues to push for - adequate shelters as well as political asylum for victims and their families - the latter as a means of mitigating retaliation.

Catholic Relief Services and many other effective NGOs continue to push for expansion of shelters - places of refuge and protection, places where victims, mostly women, can begin the arduous process of healing.

I have visited trafficking victim's shelters in countries throughout the world, including Russia, Nigeria, Peru, Romania, DR Congo, Ethiopia, Brazil, Bosnia, and elsewhere.

At one of Sister Eugenia's shelters right here in Rome, I met a woman named Elizabeth, who was trafficked from Nigeria to Rome and forced to work the streets. Raped countless times, Elizabeth heroically gave birth to a child conceived under the most deplorable and violent circumstances.

Yet Elizabeth, smiling and full of enthusiasm, told me that her child - so full of innocence and love for her - had actually saved her life.

Elizabeth credited the selflessness and unconditional acceptance of Sr. Eugenia and her nuns for providing the pathway for God's infinite grace to heal her mind, body, and soul - and for making it possible for her to hope again.

Last night, at Ambassador Diaz's reception, Sr. Eugenia said they now run one hundred shelters throughout Italy, showering love on the victims just as they did on Elizabeth. Elizabeth, by the way, is doing fine, is married, and has had another child.

A report by Shared Hope International a couple of years ago revealed that an estimated 100,000 American minor girls, mostly runaways, average age thirteen, are coerced into prostitution each year.

Working with Shared Hope International and the Center for Missing and Exploited Children, last year a group of us tried to establish federally funded shelters for trafficked minors in the U.S. Although the legislation passed both chambers, the versions were different and the clock ran out before they could be reconciled.

Civil society has the unique ability to mobilize the grassroots - and cause countless people to lobby their lawmakers. When constituents demand action, politicians oblige. So I can assure you we will try again this year.

As we all know, traffickers prey upon those in poverty and those lacking even the prospect of a job.

In Moldova, Catholic Relief Service's documented that high-school age girls were disappearing into human trafficking in large part due to the extreme lack of job opportunities. CRS created the Moldova Employment and Training Alliance, which encouraged private sector companies to expand in rural villages.

“Employers developed vocational training and then guaranteed job opportunities after successful training. The Project, which directly benefited 3,300 young women (and close to 4,000 indirect beneficiaries), also offered support services to address social factors such as domestic violence, substance abuse in families, and lack of financial services. These factors are all cited as high-risk factors. The project created opportunities for young women to obtain dignified employment within Moldova, and the option to remain in and contribute to their communities. It therefore reduced the need to seek employment outside of the country.”

In my work as the Special Representative for Human Trafficking in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE PA), and as Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee's subcommittee on Human Rights, I often find that my role is to facilitate the innovations of civil society. For example, Airline Ambassadors and Innocence at Risk took the fact that the airlines were being used by human traffickers to move victims and created a strategy to combat it. Flight attendants noticed suspicious circumstances, but had no idea what to do and would just move on to the next row. Airline Ambassadors subsequently launched the Child Trafficking Initiative, which provides flight crews with the essential information they need to discern a trafficking situation and to notify law enforcement on the ground for appropriate action once the plane has landed.

Last year I and other members of Congress hosted a briefing on the Hill to highlight the transport of victims on our airlines and civil society efforts to stop it. I was also able to raise this in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. The response has been very encouraging. Norway and the Netherlands have both subsequently taken up the issue with the airlines, and I understand from Airline Ambassadors that Delta has become the first U.S. airline to formally incorporate this training. Guatemala and El Salvador have requested the training. Mexico has also taken an active interest.

The training is simple, it is responsible – it in no way turns a flight attendant into a vigilante – and every airline should implement it without delay or excuse. I understand that Airline Ambassadors is also developing a similar training for hotels, and that Hilton has agreed to train its staff. Why not trains and busses? The potential here is tremendous, and it is all thanks to concerned civil society groups offering their expertise and insight.

Civil society can, and often successfully does, influence the private sector. Take Craigslist, the forum for placing free online classified advertisements, for example. Young women were sold on Craigslist, several NGOs swung into action to publicize and demand that such evil be ended. In a matter of months, Craigslist's immoral facilitation of sex trafficking was removed from the website.

Finally, and this might sound obvious, but we must also ensure that the various government and civil sectors dealing with trafficking are actually communicating with each other in a meaningful way. U.S. funding for anti-trafficking efforts abroad have brought together labor inspectors, police, prosecutors, NGOs, and faith-based organizations.

Major challenges, however, remain. It falls to us – and like-minded people everywhere – to meet those challenges head on and wage an unceasing campaign to eradicate human trafficking from the face of the earth.