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A Pathway to Freedom: Rescue and Refuge for Victims of Sex Trafficking

U.S. Rep. Chris Smith (NJ-04)

Excerpts of Remarks

May 14, 2015

*Subcommittee on Africa, Health, Global Human Rights,
and International Organizations*

Good afternoon. It is an honor to be here with you today, focusing on the fight against human trafficking—an insidious human rights abuse that thrives in an environment of secrecy, of silence, and of a mindset that says that it is somebody else’s problem.

The truth of the matter is that combating modern-day slavery is everybody’s business. We are all in this together. Cooperation and coordination are key to mitigating—and someday ending—this pervasive cruelty.

Today’s hearing will concentrate on rescue and refuge.

Let me tell you a little story about rescue.

In January of 2000, I received actionable information that eight Ukrainian women were being exploited by sex traffickers in two bars in Montenegro. The women had been lured there with promises of legitimate work, then forced into prostitution. One desperate victim, however, called her mother for help using the phone of one of the men exploiting her.

When informed, I immediately called the Prime Minister of Montenegro, Filip Vujanovic, who personally ordered an immediate raid on the bar. As a result, seven of the eight women were rescued and returned to their families in Ukraine. Tragically, the eighth woman was trafficked to Albania prior to the raid.

We know that organized crime, street gangs, and pimps around the world have expanded into sex trafficking at an alarming rate. It is an extremely lucrative undertaking: a trafficker can make hundreds of thousands of dollars a year off just one victim. Unlike drugs or weapons, a human being can be held captive and sold into sexual slavery over and over again. Pornography and the devaluation of women are helping to drive demand.

And while our Department of Justice and Department of Homeland Security works with law enforcement abroad in sting operations to catch American pedophile sex tourists and rescue victims where there is a nexus with the United States, they cannot conduct rescue operations or run investigations that fall outside their jurisdiction.

Nevertheless, there still are victims – someone’s young son or daughter being cruelly exploited. Into this gap steps non-governmental rescue operations. Some of the best are staffed by former Navy Seals, ex-CIA agents, and even the occasional sitting member of State government. That is what we will hear about today – from witnesses that include a former CIA agent now involved in rescuing the most vulnerable, and a sitting state Attorney General.

We will here from a former member of Mexican Congress who has fought trafficking her entire career. And we will here from a victim of trafficking, who will also tell us about the importance of Refuge and Rehabilitation following Rescue.

Operation Underground Railroad has made it their business, literally and figuratively, to identify children being sex trafficked in other countries, and then to partner with the relevant foreign government entities for the rescue and rehabilitation of these children.

Operation Underground Railroad members frequently pose as American sex tourist who enlist traffickers to host sex parties for them—it is such a common occurrence in many Latin American nations that it provides the perfect cover for Operation Underground Railroad to lure the traffickers with the children for sale to a preset location, and then have the local authorities ready to bust the traffickers as well as rescue the children. Operation Underground Railroad also trains the local governments in how to conduct stings on traffickers, and on the rehabilitative needs of the trafficking victims.

Yet the magnitude of the problem is great.

Worldwide, in the past two years, 80,000 trafficking victims have been identified— a small percentage of the estimated 20.9 million victims in the world, but evidence that with a combination of encouragement, plus some persuasion and sustained pressure via sanctions imposed by the United States, countries are moving in the right direction.

Significant progress has been made since I authored landmark legislation—the Trafficking Victim’s Protection Act of 2000, or TVPA—to combat sex and labor trafficking in the United States and globally. When I first introduced the TVPA in 1998 however, I was repeatedly told by detractors that it was a “solution in search of a problem.”

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, and its 2003 and 2005 reauthorizations, which I also authored, launched a bold new strategy that included sheltering, political 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 prescribed in the TVPA.

And for the first time ever, the law recognized the exploited as victims—not perpetrators of a crime. Since 2004, the TVPA has resulted in Anti-Human Trafficking Task Forces in 42 cities across the U.S. These task forces identify potential victims of human trafficking, coordinate local and federal law enforcement to rescue victims, assist with referrals for victim care, and train law enforcement.

Child traffickers cater to child predators—a crime that thrives on secrecy. In 1994, a young girl in my hometown was lured into the home of a convicted pedophile who lived across the street from her. Megan Kanka, seven, was raped and murdered.

No one, including Megan Kanka’s parents, knew that their neighbor had been convicted of child sexual assault. The outrage over this tragedy led to enactment of Megan’s Law—public sex offender registries—in every state in the country.

I got the idea for International Megan’s Law to Prevent Demand for Child Sex Trafficking (H.R. 515), already passed by the House and now pending in the U.S. Senate, in a conversation with a trafficking in person’s delegation from Thailand during a meeting in my office in 2007. I asked what Thai officials would do if we were to notify them of travel by a convicted pedophile. Each of the dozen officials said they would bar entry into their nation of such a predator.

A primary way to fight child trafficking is to fight demand created by sex tourists, which is what International Megan’s Law does. We know from other official data that registered sex offenders are traveling disproportionately to countries where children are trafficked for sex. A deeply-disturbing 2010 report by the Government Accountability Office entitled “Current Situation Results in Thousands of Passports Issued to Registered Sex Offenders” found that at least 4,500 U.S. passports were issued to registered sex offenders in fiscal year 2008 alone.

International Megan’s Law seeks to protect children from sex tourism by notifying destination countries when convicted pedophiles plan to travel. And to protect American children, the bill encourages the President to use bilateral agreements and assistance to establish reciprocal notification—so that we will know when convicted child-sex offenders are coming here.

International Megan’s Law also directs the President to include guidance in diplomacy, training, and technical assistance abroad on how other countries can create their own public or private sex offender registries similar to what we have in the United States.

I expect International Megan’s Law to be marked-up in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in the next month—and eagerly await a long-overdue Senate vote.

It is a primary duty of government to protect the weakest and most vulnerable among us from harm, but it also falls to each of us to watch for those who need the help of government, NGOs, and the faith community.

Combatting trafficking is everybody’s business, and we will hear from witnesses involved in the war against trafficking, but, first, I turn to my friend and colleague Ms. Bass for her remarks...