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Examining the 2024 Annual Trafficking in Persons Report: Progress over Politics

*Excerpts of Opening Remarks by Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ)
Chairman of the Subcommittee on Global Health,
Global Human Rights and International Organizations
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This hearing of the Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations will come to order.

Today, we will turn our attention again to the evil of human trafficking and discuss ways the U.S. government—both Congress and the administration—can combat this abhorrent crime more effectively.

This is the 43rd congressional hearing I have chaired on human trafficking. Unfortunately, there is much more work to be done.

Across the globe, an estimated 28 million people are enslaved in labor or sex trafficking, with traffickers profiting at about \$236 billion annually.

Today, we will specifically examine the 2024 Annual Trafficking-in-Persons (or “TIP”) Report, which the Department of State released just two weeks ago on June 24th.

More than twenty years ago, I authored—and the President enacted—a historic, bipartisan bill called the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000.

Once again, the TVPA is up for reauthorization, and Ranking Member Wild and I have a House-passed bill—HR 5856 Frederick Douglass Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act of 2023. It passed the House just this February by an overwhelming margin of 414 votes to 11.

I call on my friends and colleagues in the Senate to take up and pass this vital legislation without haste to let governments, civil society, and especially victims and survivors know that we have not stopped fighting—or caring—about this issue.

The reauthorization of key domestic and international programs and funding, including the State Department’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, the role of the Ambassador-at-Large, and the continuation of the annual TIP Report are all in this bill.

It is time to get this bill to the President’s desk.

The TVPA is a whole-of-government initiative to combat sex and labor trafficking in the United States and around the world.

It puts forward a comprehensive counter-trafficking in persons strategy that integrated the “three Ps”: *protection* for victims of trafficking, *prosecution* of traffickers, and *prevention* of human trafficking in the first place, and sometimes we add a fourth “P” for partnership since we cannot act alone if we want to be successful—civil society organizations, governments, and of course survivors of trafficking are key to this fight.

Among the law’s many provisions was the creation of an annual Trafficking in Persons Report. The TIP Report is written by the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons at the State Department and analyzes countries’ efforts to meet certain minimum standards for the elimination of human trafficking.

The Tier ranking system in the TIP Report is a vital tool for the U.S. Government to fight human trafficking. It is the gold standard for pushing governments to reform their laws, prosecute criminals, and take strong measures to end trafficking in their countries.

The TIP Report only works when it judges governments strictly based on the minimum standards for fighting human trafficking, as laid out in the TVPA, as amended. Political considerations cannot seep into the Report.

Countries must be graded objectively. We can’t pull punches for politics.

I was glad to see that in this year’s TIP Report, the world’s top violators of human rights—countries such as China, Cuba, North Korea, Iran, Belarus, Russia, and Nicaragua—rightfully remain ranked in Tier 3.

I was also glad to see that the TIP Report highlighted [Cuba’s](#) and [China’s](#) role in state-sponsored forced labor, but we can still take this a step further by having the tier rankings take into consideration the countries who participate and purchase this forced labor, including from Cuba’s foreign medical missions.

Likewise, Laos was rightfully downgraded to the Tier 2 Watch List in part due to a human trafficking threat rapidly emerging out of Southeast Asia, where Chinese transnational organized crime syndicates operate scam centers with impunity. Bordering Laos, both Burma and Cambodia remain in a tier 3 designation.

These criminals traffic innocent people from all over the world, luring them to prison compounds with fake job advertisements and offers. Only once these victims arrive—at apartment blocks surrounded by armed guards and barbed wire—do they realize they can't escape.

Victims are forced to work in these compounds conducting elaborate online cryptocurrency scams known as 'pig butchering.'

Forced by their traffickers to communicate digitally with unsuspecting scam victims—including in the U.S.—scam center workers attempt to strike up a text, often through WhatsApp, or even through phone conversations, to gain trust and build a relationship.

Victims are then tricked into depositing money into fraudulent so-called "crypto investment platforms" controlled by the scam center.

Once enough money is deposited, the scammer withdraws the money, deletes the fake account, and disappears.

Through this dystopian fraud, innocent Americans are being robbed of their life savings. Estimates of [money stolen from Americans](#) through pig butchering scams are over [\\$3.5 billion](#). And without a whole-of-government effort, the problem will likely only get worse.

Yet, pig butchering is a double crime: it destroys lives in the U.S. by robbing unsuspecting victims of their life savings while it is also destroying the lives of the trafficking victims in Southeast Asia through forced labor.

Most of these scam centers are in Burma, Laos, and Cambodia. These countries' governments need to act to shut down these vile operations—[over 300,000 of them, by 2023](#)—and help free the forced labor victims and bring the perpetrators to justice.

Neighboring countries such as Thailand, Singapore, and Vietnam also do too little to combat the rampant human trafficking occurring on and through their borders, as well as the money laundering occurring through their financial institutions.

Unlike the appropriate tier ranking for Laos, Cambodia, and Burma, I would argue that Vietnam does not warrant an upgrade from Tier 2 Watch List to Tier 2. We cannot reward the Communist Party of Vietnam for repeatedly misleading the U.S. on its weak efforts to combat human trafficking.

[Civil society organizations](#) have reached out concerned about Vietnam's sham upgrade to Tier 2 status due to their lack of transparency and accountability for government officials.

That said, I was pleased to see under the [Topics of Special Interest](#) the mention of trafficking for the purposes of organ removal and forced organ harvesting. My bill HR 1154 Stop Forced Organ Harvesting Act of 2023 passed the House 413-2 in March 2023. This bill imposes property, passport, and visa-blocking sanctions on persons (individuals and entities) involved in forced organ harvesting or trafficking in persons for the purpose of organ removal. The Frederick Douglass bill also contains a provision to permanently include in the TIP Report information about the trafficking in persons for the purpose of organ removal, including cases and steps governments are undertaking to prevent, identify, and eliminate such trafficking.

Before closing, let me mention one more troubling development.

Recent years have seen the rise of a disturbing new normalization of so-called "[sex work](#)," "[intergenerational sexual partnerships](#)", or "[transactional sex](#)." These terms, pushed by certain [NGOs](#), [international organizations](#), and governmental organizations alike, advocate for legalized prostitution.

Not only do these terms subtly undermine U.S. law in the TVPA, which defines "sex trafficking" and "commercial sex acts," they also attempt to normalize sex trafficking and the sexual abuse and exploitation of children.

Let's be clear, the TVPA defines the term "commercial sex act" as "any sex act on account of which anything of value is given to or received by any person." And any commercial sex act in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age, is called "sex trafficking" under the TVPA.

I was shocked and disturbed to see that Belgium was upgraded to Tier 1 after passing a new law in [May of 2024](#) on legalizing the role of third parties—including pimps and madams—and treating exploited women as employees and holding them to account for refusing sex acts.

Congress must stand against this disturbing, ideological trend.

I agree fully with the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls, Reem Alsalem, [who wrote](#) in a June 2024 report to the UN Human Rights Council:

"Prostitution reduces women and girls to mere commodities and perpetuates a system of discrimination and violence that hinders their ability to achieve true equality...Given the immense harm experienced by women and girls in prostitution, it is important to use terminology that aligns with international human rights law and standards. Terms like 'sex work' sanitise the harmful reality of prostitution."

Prostitution is not a liberating job choice. Sex trafficking should not be called “sex work.” Responsible governments, organizations, and advocates have a duty to fight this disturbing and twisted ideological trend.

Today we will hear from Ambassador Cindy Dyer, Ambassador-at-large to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, and from Jason Towers, Burma Country Director at the United States Institute of Peace and an expert in Southeast Asian trafficking scam centers.

I thank our distinguished witnesses for being here to testify before the subcommittee, and I would now like to recognize Ranking Member Susan Wild for her opening remarks.