

Oral Testimony of Dr. Kevin Bales to the House Sub-Committee on Human Rights and Wellness

Hearings on Worldwide Slavery, 29 October 2003

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, I can't tell you how encouraged I am that this subject has been taken up by the House Human Rights and Wellness Sub-Committee. As President of Free the Slaves, as an American who, like all Americans, loathes the crime of slavery, I am excited that our leaders are taking up the issue of modern slavery. Free the Slaves is the American sister-organization of Anti-Slavery International, the world's oldest human rights group, founded to fight slavery in 1787 - we want to build a positive relationship with government and promise to help in any way that we can. This afternoon I'd like to touch on four points: the nature of modern slavery; how slavery touches our lives; the urgent need for a consistent approach to slavery by the US government, and some practical suggestions about how America can use its influence to end slavery once and for all.

Slavery, real slavery, has increased dramatically across the world in the last 50 years. It has grown rapidly, in part, because of the belief among the public and even governments that slavery was ended in 1865. For years I have travelled the world, meeting slaves and slaveholders, and the people who are fighting slavery at the grassroots. I can assure you that slavery is not dead. My conservative estimate is that there are 27 million slaves in the world today.

Let me be clear that I am talking about slavery in its most basic form – the holding of a person against their will through violence, paying them nothing, and forcing them to work. It is the same basic slavery that has dogged humanity for at least five thousand years, but today it has some pernicious modern twists.

For example, slaves are cheaper today than they have ever been in human history. Rapid population growth, combined with the impacts of modernization and globalization on the economies of the developing world, has generated a bumper crop of people vulnerable to enslavement. When government corruption, particularly police corruption, removes the protection of the state, violence can be used to turn the vulnerable into slaves.

This is happening around the world, and once enslaved, the victims can be transported even to those countries where the rule of law is secure. The State Department estimates that up to 20,000 are brought to the United States each year. In research that we have recently carried out for the United Nations we estimate up to 100,000 people are currently held in situations of forced labor in America. They may be forced to work as prostitutes, in agriculture, or as domestic servants. Moreover, slave-made products flow into our homes. Despite the clear prohibition on the importation of slave-made goods in the 1930 Smoot-Hawley Tariff legislation, which is still in force, a host of slave-made raw materials and products flow into America.

A few years ago we asked a slave newly freed on a cocoa farm in West Africa if he knew what happened to the cocoa he harvested. “No”, he said. Had he ever tasted chocolate? Again, “No”. So we asked him, what would you say to those millions of people who eat the chocolate made from the cocoa you have grown? “Tell them,” he said, “when they eat chocolate they are eating my flesh.” I am happy to say that with the help of Congress, and the active and energetic participation of the chocolate industry through the Cocoa Protocol, we are making enormous progress in the area of cocoa – but this achievement stands alone. Slave-free trade is not yet a reality in the land of the free.

So the picture is a serious one: millions of people enslaved, and both slaves and slave-made goods being bought and sold within the United States. There are, happily, several positive points. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act passed at the end of 2000 is now seen as a model for the world, and when it is amended this session it will be an even stronger instrument against the trade in human beings. The Trafficking Office and US-AID have made sizable grants having real impact in anti-slavery work abroad. Support by the American government to the International Labor Organization for the rehabilitation of freed child slaves is crucial to that effort.

On the other hand, there are several serious problems. Research that we have carried for the Department of Justice delivers one very clear message: that American law enforcement is under-resourced and uncoordinated in addressing the crime of slavery, forced labor, and human trafficking. We must adequately resource our legislation. We have to avoid the situation in India – a country with one of the best and most comprehensive laws against slavery on the books, and many, many slaves waiting for the enforcement of that law.

Confusion exists in other parts of the government as well. We have had courageous statements by members of Congress against slavery in parts of Africa. Meanwhile the State Department asserts that slavery has disappeared in some of those same countries. At times it seems that a succession of American governments has chosen to recognize slavery according to their international political goals.

I travel all over America talking about slavery; I’ve met and discussed our government’s response to slavery with citizens across the country. Let me say very clearly what they would want you to hear: what is morally wrong cannot be politically right. America must not play politics with slavery. If we are to imagine ourselves a bastion of freedom, our foreign policy must apply this principle in a way that is consistent and universal. Our belief in freedom is soiled and diminished when we condemn slavery in one country, while turning a blind eye to slavery in another.

At the same time, while the problem we confront is large, the obstacles are not insurmountable. Three key battles are already won. We do not have to win the moral argument, everyone agrees that slavery is wrong. Second, we do not have to win the economic argument, ending slavery does not threaten the economic well being of any state or industry. Third, we do not have to win the basic legal argument – laws exist in virtually every country against slavery.

And because this is truly an international crime, our government needs to press for more action within international agencies. This is not a problem of just the United States or any other single country – it is a global problem needing global cooperation. Eradicating slavery is a challenge shared by all humanity. We all know about the UN teams that searched for biological weapons in Iraq, or international efforts to protect minorities in the Balkans. But where are the UN Slavery Inspection Teams? Where are the contingents that protect freed slaves and help them toward reintegration? Working together we can verify, assist, and ensure that nations are doing all in their power to find, liberate, and rehabilitate enslaved people.

Our own government's law enforcement policy suggests other tools we could use to confront the problem of slavery worldwide. Our Department of Justice has located their anti-slavery work soundly on the 13th Amendment, they are extremely expert, and that expertise can be shared. The cooperation, funding and training of foreign law enforcement could be extended to help end the police corruption that supports slavery. Assets confiscated from slaveholders and traffickers could help provide desperately needed resources for the rehabilitation of freed slaves.

We must remember that liberation is only the first step to freedom, it must be followed by helping ex-slaves achieve a decent independent life. In many ways our country still suffers from a botched emancipation. Shelby Foote, the historian of our civil war, put it this way: "Slavery was the first great sin of this nation. The second great sin was emancipation, or rather the way it was done. The government told four million people, 'You are free, hit the road.' Three-quarters of them couldn't read or write. The tiniest fraction of them had any profession that they could enter." We must not allow that mistake to be made again anywhere in the world – or our children and grandchildren will still be dealing with the ugly legacy of slavery.

Of course, there is not a single solution to slavery. Slavery is embedded in both local cultures and the global economy. But our government has a marvellous collection of both sticks and carrots that could be tailored to specific situations. We must coordinate the sticks and carrots that already exist in the hands of the State Department, the Department of Labor, and the Department of Homeland Security to maximum effect. Many governments want to maintain ties and build a more positive image in the US. We need to make it clear that a positive image is one that includes working actively to reduce slavery. And as our government brings its influence to bear, the rapidly growing public movement calling for action on slavery will support it.

After 5000 years, if there is coordinated and integrated leadership and effort, the eradication of slavery is possible in the 21st century. Founded upon the primacy of individual liberty, and given its role of leadership in world affairs, the United States can reasonably mobilize an international consensus to eradicate slavery. There is historical precedence for this. In the 19th century, the British government led an international movement to abolish legal slavery. Britain deployed, from 1819 to 1890, a sizeable naval force devoted to the interdiction of slave ships. The fleet peaked in size at 36 vessels and

the operation to free slaves cost the lives of nearly 2000 of Her Majesty's sailors and marines.

Compared to that grim sacrifice, the human and financial cost of eradication would be miniscule. Recall that while 27 million is the largest number of slaves to ever live at one time, it is also the smallest proportion of the world population in slavery in human history. Note that the extremely low cost of slaves worldwide means that criminal slaveholders do not have large investments to defend. In our work with partners in Northern India, we find the costs of freeing, rehabilitating, and reintegrating slaves average about \$30 per family – and this does not involve paying criminals to set their slaves free.

The American people and the American government must ask this question: Are we willing to live in a world with slaves? If not, we are obligated to take responsibility for things that connected us to slavery, even when far away. Unless we work to understand the links that tie us to slavery and then take action to break those links, we are puppets, subject to forces we can't or won't control. If we don't take action we are just giving up and letting other people jerk the strings that tie us to slavery. Of course, there are many kinds of exploitation in the world, many kinds of injustice and violence to be concerned about. But slavery is exploitation, violence, and injustice all rolled together in their most potent combination. If there is one fundamental violation of our humanity we can not allow, it is slavery. If there is one basic truth that virtually every human being can agree on, it is that slavery must end. What good is all our economic and political power, if we can't use it to free slaves? Indeed, if we can't choose to stop slavery, how can we really say we are free?

Thank you.