

**Address by Mr. Gary Lewis
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at the
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Friends,

There can be few worse things in modern times than human trafficking. The fact that this form of slavery exists in the 21st century shames us all.

I believe that the first thing in confronting this evil is to recognize its many dimensions. To get a sense of its tentacles, we can look at dry statistics. Or we can regard the faces and hear the stories of the victims.

In terms of the numbers, we know that India is a source, transit and destination state for human trafficking. According to recent findings, at any one moment in time, it is estimated that up to 20,000 people – mainly women and girls – are in transit somewhere in India being trafficked. It is also estimated that over 90 per cent of those trafficked in India are trafficked within the country’s borders.

And what of the faces? What of the young lives whose purpose and hope has been crushed by this violent and most dehumanizing of human undertakings?

Many of you in this room will have encountered the consequences of the evil of human trafficking. Like me, among other places, you will have visited the shelter homes. There you will have found the little girls – often aged between 8-10 years – who will forever live with the unimaginable mental and physical scars of the violations which have been visited upon them by human beings untethered by the norms of civilized living. Human beings who have lost any sense of reciprocal obligation. Human beings without a sense of decency or sympathy or respect – those qualities which are quintessentially human and which ought to separate our behaviour from that of other animals.

When I meet and speak with these little girls and those who offer them protection and care, what continues to amaze me is the resilience of the human soul. The fact that these homes and places of safety still ring with the chirpy, shrill sounds of little girls at play, little girls recovering a small part of their lost childhood.

Friends, when I see this, I am convinced that there is purpose in what we do. Purpose, yes, and even a degree of nobleness. That is why I congratulate all those among you who

go the extra mile to bring shelter and love to those little ones who have been rescued. That is why I congratulate those officials among you who forgo the inducements of the traffickers to bring the perpetrators to book and to stop them from committing more heinous crimes.

For us in the UNODC, human trafficking is a matter of grave concern. It is simply unacceptable in this day and age that children and women have to live lives of servitude whether for sexual purposes or for labour-related exploitation.

The world community has not been silent. In the year 2000, the United Nations constructed the Convention Against Transnational Organised Crime. As part of this Convention, two protocols, one against human trafficking and the other against smuggling of migrants were also framed. Our office is the custodian of this Convention which is the principal international instrument in the fight against human trafficking.

UNODC has historically also worked very closely with our local partners in the North Eastern states especially on drug demand reduction and HIV/AIDS issues. We have two offices: one here in Shillong and the other in Aizawl. Now, thanks to our association with Impulse, our work in the North East extends to anti-human trafficking as well.

We decided to work with the Impulse NGO Network because of the sterling work which it has done in recent years to countermand human trafficking in the North East of India. Their team is led by the capable and very energetic Ms. Hasina Kharbhui. The project on victim support is actually a part of a much wider initiative to build NGO support structures for the victims of violent crimes including human trafficking across the globe.

As part of this project we are working with 15 NGOs from as far apart as Mexico and Uganda and Ukraine. Eight of the NGOs we support are located in India and the Impulse NGO network is one of them.

We work with full cooperation from the Union and local authorities and with the solid financial support of the United States Government which funds this technical assistance project. I take this opportunity to recognize the support of the US which, aware of the pernicious influence of human trafficking across the globe – including within the US itself – has assumed a prominent role in organizing the world's response to this threat.

As part of her proposal, Ms. Kharbhui sought to improve coordination between NGOs and local law enforcement. Another part of the project was to develop a technical support training manual for the North Eastern states to combat trafficking. It is the first part of this proposal which has brought us all together here today.

In 2003, the Impulse NGO Network organized a regional workshop for all North Eastern states to showcase the experience and expertise that it had gained in anti-trafficking work including rescue, rehabilitation, laws, networking and working with various government agencies. This, Impulse very proudly called the “Meghalaya Model” and wanted to replicate it in other North Eastern states. UNODC appreciated this important idea and decided to support it. The rest, as you can see, is before all of us.

Impulse very successfully and with the full support of the Government and Police leadership as well as the partner NGOs organized in Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Sikkim state level consultations involving all stakeholders. My office was represented at most of these meetings and I can say with confidence that such consultations had many firsts to their credit.

In most cases, they were the first formal workshop on human trafficking that had ever been organized in those states. For the first time, a platform was offered for several agencies – especially the Government, Police and the NGOs – to discuss the issue of anti-human trafficking. The success of these consultations can be gauged by the fact that several police chiefs from these states have asked Hasina to come back for a more detailed training programme for their officers. What is even more laudable is that in each state at least two state NGO partners have been selected to continue with the process of building on the gains of the consultation and continue in close cooperation with the Governments' counter-trafficking initiatives.

Today is a culmination of this process. It is a consultation for the state of Meghalaya along with a gathering of key stakeholders from each of the other states, and additionally, some friends from the region whom I am very happy to welcome. Our purpose is to take stock of the gains and perhaps forge a strategy for the times to come.

The work of the Impulse NGO Network may also touch another important initiative in Indian counter-trafficking which has just been launched, again with financial support from the Government of the United States. Based on recognition within the Indian government that the capacity of law enforcement ought to be strengthened to fight trafficking, my office along with the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, recently launched a project on the Training of Law Enforcement Officers and prosecutors in four priority states – Maharashtra, Goa, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. This training plus the associated strengthening of anti-human trafficking units, will emphasize the need – indeed the imperative – for close police / civil society collaboration.

Though none of the North Eastern States are being covered, there are a large number of knowledge products being developed under this project including training manuals and standard operating procedures which we would be glad to share with interested parties. My office will also be happy to receive requests for other forms of technical assistance required by our stakeholders. Finally, we would hope that the manual currently under preparation by Impulse may play a role in this enhanced training.

I would like to conclude that, in many respects, our fight against human trafficking has only just begun. We hope that these state-level consultations are followed-up with concrete strategies as for the three P's (Prevention, Protection and Prosecution) and the three R's (Rescue, Relief and Rehabilitation).

Only in this way can civil society initially contain, and then reverse, the blot on the landscape of human dignity which trafficking represents.

Thank you all.