



In Focus

International Day for the Abolition of Slavery, 2 December 2016

Overview

The [International Day for the Abolition of Slavery](#), on 2 December 2016, marks the date of the adoption by the United Nations General Assembly of the [Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others](#).¹ The Convention was approved by resolution of the General Assembly on 2 December 1949.² It entered into force on 25 July 1951. As at 7 November 2016, there were 82 parties to the Convention.³ The United Nations state that the focus of the day is on “eradicating contemporary forms of slavery”, such as trafficking in persons, sexual exploitation, the “worst” forms of child labour, forced marriage, and the forced recruitment of children for use in armed conflict.

International Modern Slavery

Background

The UN states that it has documented the “persistence of old forms of slavery that are embedded in traditional beliefs and customs”, which it argues are the result of “long-standing discrimination against the most vulnerable groups in societies”.⁴ Alongside the traditional forms of forced labour, such as bonded labour and debt bondage, there now exists more contemporary forms, such as migrant workers who have been trafficked for economic exploitation or forced prostitution.

The UN [Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children](#) defines trafficking in persons as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion for the purpose of exploitation.⁵ The Protocol includes not only forced labour, but also prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. The consent of the person trafficked is irrelevant, and if the person is a child it is a crime even without the use of force. The Protocol entered into force on 25 December 2003.

The UN states that the majority of child labour that occurs is for economic exploitation.⁶ This is contrary to the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), which was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 20 November 1989. The Convention recognises the right of the child to be “protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s education, or to be harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development”.

In 2012, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimated that there were nearly 21 million forced labour victims worldwide.⁷ The ILO found that approximately 18.7 million were being exploited in the private economy, by individuals or enterprises.⁸ Within this number, 4.5 million were victims of forced

sexual exploitation, and 14.2 million were victims of forced labour exploitation in economic activities, such as agriculture, construction, domestic work or manufacturing. It estimated that 2.2 million were in state-imposed forms of forced labour, for example in prisons, or in work imposed by the state military or by rebel armed forces. Approximately 5.5 million of those estimated to be in forced labour were below 18 years old.

Recent Developments

On 25 September 2015, the UN's [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) was adopted at an extraordinary summit of the UN General Assembly.⁹ The Agenda addressed the issue of modern slavery. It set out a series of objectives, including the eradication of forced labour, an end to modern slavery and human trafficking, and the prohibition and elimination of the “worst forms” of child labour.¹⁰ The UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, has stated that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development should be used as a “roadmap for stamping out root causes and freeing all enslaved people”.¹¹

Developments in the UK

In 2014, the Home Office estimated that there were between 10,000 and 13,000 potential victims of modern slavery in the UK in 2013.¹² Legislation relating to modern slavery was enacted across all UK jurisdictions in 2015.¹³ The Modern Slavery Act 2015, most of the provisions of which apply to England and Wales only, consolidated and clarified the existing offences of slavery and human trafficking, and increased the maximum penalty for the most serious offences from 14 years to life imprisonment. It also set up the office of the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, whose role is to “encourage good practice in the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecuting” of slavery and human trafficking.¹⁴ On 23 May 2016, Baroness Young of Hornsey (Crossbench) introduced in the House of Lords a private member’s bill, [Modern Slavery \(Transparency in Supply Chains\) Bill](#). It would require commercial organisations and public bodies to include a statement on slavery and human trafficking in their annual report and accounts. The Bill had its committee stage on 7 November 2016. The third reading is yet to be scheduled.

¹ United Nations, ‘[International Day for the Abolition of Slavery](#)’, accessed 8 November 2016.

² United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, ‘[Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others](#)’, accessed 8 November 2016.

³ United Nations, ‘[Treaty Collection: Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others](#)’, accessed 8 November 2016.

⁴ United Nations, ‘[International Day for the Abolition of Slavery: Background](#)’, accessed 8 November 2016.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ International Labour Organisation, ‘[21 Million People Are Now Victims of Forced Labour, ILO Says](#)’, 1 June 2012.

⁸ International Labour Organisation, ‘[Statistics and Indicators on Forced Labour and Trafficking](#)’, accessed 8 November 2016.

⁹ United Nations, ‘[Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#)’, accessed 8 November 2016.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ United Nations, ‘[International Day for the Abolition of Slavery: Secretary-General’s Message for 2015](#)’, accessed 8 November 2016.

¹² Home Office, [Modern Slavery Strategy](#), November 2014, p 5.

¹³ The Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Scotland) Act 2015 and the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 were passed by the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly respectively.

¹⁴ House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, [Oral Evidence: The Work of the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner](#), 8 December 2015, p 3.

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