

Remarks by Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff at the Stop Human Trafficking Symposium



Release Date: September 9, 2008

Washington, D.C.

Secretary Chertoff: Thanks, Paul, for the introduction, and thank you all for the warm welcome. I think this conference is a great opportunity to talk about one of the most important moral and social imperatives facing our country and our society; in fact, the entire world, and that is ending the scourge of human trafficking.

There are few crimes that are more heinous than enslaving a fellow human being, and that's been the case for the hundreds of years that people have struggled against slavery. The essence of human trafficking and human slavery is seeking to profit from another individual by forcing their labor, by abusing them physically and mentally, and by prostituting them, in some instances. Human trafficking is a dehumanizing and depraved crime. And unfortunately, to the surprise of many people in our society, it is a crime that occurs every day in countries all over the world, including this country.

Sadly, we know that the victims of human trafficking in many cases do not realize they are being lead down a path that will lead to their eventual enslavement. Many of them are tricked into believing they're going to come to work or live in the United States and make a better life for themselves. It's not until after they're entered the country that they become subject to abuse, enslavement and exploitation. We also know that many victims will not readily admit that they are victims of human trafficking because of fear or shame, or because they simply don't realize that the conditions to which they've been subjected are in fact slavery.

In some instances, we know that the traffickers may use the victims legal or traffic documents -- may hold them, in a sense, making the victim a hostage; that the traffickers may threaten the individual being enslaved with physical harm or may threaten their family members back home. And all of this makes it near impossible for the victim of human trafficking to escape or to call for help.

These are the sad realities of the crime of human trafficking. And so we're here today to talk about what we can do collectively as members of government, as members of the non-governmental community, and Americans and non-Americans to work together both to focus attention on the problem of human trafficking, and to redouble our efforts to seek solutions.

Now, some of you may know that in 2002, the President established an interagency task force on trafficking and persons in order to unify the federal government's efforts to combat human trafficking. This task force brought together more than 13 federal offices and agents for the sole purpose of linking together our efforts in developing a comprehensive strategy to deal with human trafficking.

To further this agenda, in 2004, the President established the Human Trafficking and Smuggling Center to serve as a fusion center and clearinghouse to broaden information sharing across the country and to share investigative and intelligence leads across law enforcement at every level. These efforts have helped to raise the profile of our offensive against human trafficking and have lead to some very significant successes.

For example, prosecutions of human traffickers have steadily increased. Just within the Department of Homeland Security, immigrations and customs enforcement initiated more the 1,200 cases involving trafficking in persons, and these efforts lead to more than 300 convictions since 2003. The ICE cyber crime center's investigations of U.S. citizens who sexually exploit children overseas also has resulted in 64 convictions. These efforts on the part of immigration and customs enforcement are part of a broader enforcement strategy aimed at targeting the people, money and material that support human trafficking networks at the border, in the interior of this country, and overseas. One element of this strategy includes operation Predator, which is a comprehensive program to protect children worldwide from abuse and sexual exploitation, and to identify child predators in the United States and outside the United States, as well.

When we go after these human traffickers, we want to use all the tools in our toolbox. This involves not only criminal prosecution with jail time and fines, but the issuance of civil asset forfeiture notices to property owners whose properties have been identified as being used to facilitate smuggling or harboring aliens. This is an

important tool, because a lot of people, landlords and employers, turn a blind eye to human trafficking when they are, in fact, facilitating that activity by allowing the traffickers to use their property. And of course, this is not just the work of ICE. ICE's work is supplemented by that of many other agencies, including the department of justice and U.S. Attorney's offices, the 42 human trafficking task forces active nationwide, the work of the FBI and the national Center for Missing and Exploited Children, the Department of State's office to monitor and combat trafficking in persons, and USAID's diplomatic efforts overseas.

Now, within the Department of Homeland Security, of course, we're doing more than just using ICE's investigative resources in order to crack down on those elements that enable human traffickers to sustain their vile business. Part of what we're doing is our secure border initiative, which is aimed at allowing us to get better control of who crosses into our border.

Now, a lot of people think about this as an issue that is just aimed at voluntary illegal migrants -- people who come across the border for economic reasons. What they don't realize is that in that stream of migration are also people coming across the border against their will, or people who will be brought across the border and then find out that they're being imprisoned against their will. So that -- this effort at controlling the border actually strikes a blow against human slavery and trafficking in persons.

For this reason, as you know, we've moved forward, both moving, literally, hundreds of miles of fencing and infrastructure at the border. We're in the process of standing up technological tools, whether its unmanned aerial vehicles or ground-based radar or mobile radar systems, all of which are aimed at stemming the flow of illegal smuggling across our border; illegal smuggling that involves drugs, that involves weapons, and sometimes involves human slavery.

We've seen tremendous impact in that each successive quarter; apprehensions across the border have declined. And other metrics of success, including reductions in activity south of the border that are meant to stage smuggling, have also indicated we are achieving real success. Likewise, increases in the cost of cocaine and narcotics in this country have indicated that, again, this effort to get control of the border is yielding real, measurable results.

As part of this overall effort, we are all working to make sure that our frontline agents are aware of the particular challenges and involved when they encounter the victims of human trafficking. As you'll hear later today, customs and border protection has created new training programs to help frontline agents detect behavior that might indicate that someone they encounter crossing the border is, in fact, a human trafficking victim. And in particular, CDP has established an office of alien smuggling interdiction to identify human traffickers on both sides of the border, and they've trained officers in particular to look for signs of human smuggling.

Let me be clear about this: the line between so-called voluntary migration and human trafficking is not a very bold line. It is often the case that people who begin the movement across the border in a voluntary way, because they want to come across in order to get work for themselves, quickly turn into victims when they are held for ransom, or when they are required to work off the cost of the smuggling by paying off the vast majority of their wages to the smuggling organizations. Therefore, by cracking down on illegal migration, we are actually cracking down on the kind of network activity, which actually facilitates human trafficking and victimization, as well.

Now, a critical element of this is not just work at the border or work through law enforcement, but it is sensitizing the public to what human trafficking is about. As I said earlier, one of the greatest challenges we face in human trafficking cases is getting victims and witnesses to come forward. In many instances, in too many instances, these victims are hidden in plain sight. They live in our midst, sometimes in communities that are very prosperous and upscale, and no one is aware of the fact that living among them, families that, you know, have an ordinary existence are people who are quite literally, in 2008, human slaves. Let me give you an example.

In December 2007, as part of an ICE-lead investigation, an affluent Long Island couple was convicted by a jury for holding two Indonesian women captive in their home against their will. These women were physically assaulted, threatened, and paid the equivalent of 20 cents a day for working up to 17 hours a day. One managed to escape, and after wandering the neighborhood in ragged clothing, finally reached a doughnut shop where she sought help.

The 12-count federal indictment against the Long Island couple included charges of forced labor, peonage, document servitude, harboring aliens, and conspiracy. Quite literally, on Long Island, the kind of slavery that you would have expected to see abolished 100 years ago is still going on.

To bring further and greater awareness to this problem, ICE has embarked on a national public awareness

campaign. Those of you who took metro to get here today may have noticed some of the posters on train platforms, with the heading "Hidden in Plain Sight," either located in the transportation areas or on billboards around the city. CBP has also implemented a human trafficking awareness campaign in its primary and baggage areas at airports, and has developed a human trafficking awareness card that it can give to suspected victims at our nation's ports of entry to warn them of the risks they may face, and of what assistance is available.

Now, when we do find victims of human trafficking, we want to make sure that they get the help and support they need. Within the Department of Homeland Security, citizens and immigration services has established regulations and policies to provide continued presence and immigration relief to victims of human trafficking so that they are not immediately deported, but allowed to remain in the country on certain kinds of visas, including T and U non-immigrant status. We're working with our colleagues to craft interim final rules to provide lawful permanent resident status to T and U non-immigrants who have assisted in the prosecution of criminal perpetrators of human slavery, and we've been working on this with our colleagues in the Department of Justice, Department of State, and the Department of Health and Human Services. We hope to have those regulations out very shortly.

Now, this problem of human trafficking is a global problem. It's not going to end overnight, but it is something that ought to be very much front and center in the 21st century. It is simply too late in the day to be facing the kinds of problems of slavery that we tend to think about as having happened centuries ago and that reflect one of the greatest stains on modern civilization.

I believe we can crack this issue. I believe we can crack it in the same way that we've cracked other organized criminal activity, whether it's been narcotics activity, organized crime domination of economic activity, or a whole host of other criminal enterprises that we have fought over the years.

What it requires us to do is to work together as a team, to use all the tools in the toolbox, and to think about best approaches and practices we can share with each other so we can attack this problem. It's one that has global implications; it's one that requires a global, unified effort. I was pleased about a month ago when I was out in California at a border governor's conference to see Mexican governors and American governors from the Southwest working very hard to focus on this problem as well. It would be a great tribute to the advance of civilization if, in the years to come, we can say we have stamped out this problem of human trafficking not only overseas, but here in this country, as well.

So I appreciate your attendance at the conference, and I'm happy to take a few questions.

Yes.

Question: Hi, two quick things. First, if I could go off subject for just a quick minute to talk about hurricane Ike, perhaps including border issues, in Texas. But then could you tell us a little bit about relationships with Mexico, security (inaudible) in partnering on human trafficking?

Secretary Chertoff: Well, let me deal with the second question first. As I said, we were -- we met with the border governors, both within -- in our Southwest border and the Northern border of Mexico. They're very focused on this issue of human trafficking. And part of what we've done, also working with the State Department, is to work hard with countries in Eastern Europe and around the world to deal with the issue of human trafficking. Part of that means we have to get our own house in order. When Americans employ people in a situation that is slavery or enable that kind of activity or, for that matter, when Americans go overseas and sexually exploit children, those Americans are part of the problem, and they ought to be punished, and punished hard, because we owe it to the rest of the world to take a strong stand with our citizens, even as we encourage them to do the same with their citizens.

As far as Hurricane Ike is concerned, we're watching it closely. We feel -- our sympathies go out to the people of Haiti and Cuba who have suffered under the last of this storm. I think in the next 24 hours, we're going to be working with the states, particularly Louisiana and Texas, to make sure that evacuation plans are being reviewed. Finally decisions are going to have to be made as we get a firmer fix on the storm track.

We have reloaded FEMA with supplies, with meals ready to eat, with water, with other capabilities necessary to support a quick and effective response to hurricane Ike. Working with the Department of Defense and with our own assets, including customs and border protection assets, airlift assets and things of that sort, we're ready to assist the states in terms of moving people with medical needs out, and other people who need transportation. So it's been a -- a robust two or three weeks with respect to storms, but we're watching this very closely. And I really urge the public to pay close attention to what your local officials tell you.

There's a little bit of news reporting in the wake of Gustav where some people called it a false alarm. I mean, that is a reckless characterization of a hurricane. A hurricane that comes in as a category 3 or even a high category 2 with a storm surge is a threat to life and limb. And the fact that people prudently remove themselves from the zone of danger is a cause to be encouraged. It's not a cause to feel that they've wasted their time. So again, I -- I really, really urge people to take this very seriously.

Yeah, in the back.

Question: -- Mexico. And I would like to ask you -- you have mentioned before that you are working with the Mexican government in order to find out what organizations are currently using Mexico as a new route to transport Cubans. Do you have something new in regards to that, on that?

Secretary Chertoff: Well, I think in general, we work with the Mexican Government on a whole range of law enforcement issues, including issues -- smuggling organizations, trafficking organizations, drug trafficking organizations. As you know, Congress passed the Merida initiative recently. I was down there, and my counterparts have been down there over the last month or so, working closely with the Mexican government on a joint strategy for dealing with all of these threats, which are threats to the entire region. They're not just threats to the United States or to Mexico. Again, I commend the government of President Calderon for a courageous and effective stand against brutally violent criminal organizations, which I can guarantee you are not going to readily surrender their lucrative illegal activities. And they're going to fight back, and we have to be tougher than they are and more determined than they are.

Question: But do you see an increase in the number of Cubans going out through Mexico to the United --

Secretary Chertoff: We've seen a little bit. We've seen some up tick of people traveling across trying to come up from Cuba into Mexico, and trying to come up as we've seen from other countries. And you know, we monitor all of this closely as part of a larger effort to make sure that we are addressing the issue of smuggling.

Yeah.

Question: -- both Mexico and the U.S. have stepped up efforts against big cartels (inaudible). There's been some issues that some of those (inaudible) might be shifting priorities to people smuggling. Have you found any indications of that?

Secretary Chertoff: We have seen some indications that some of these organizations do take the opportunity to smuggle people. There's also been some indication that part of what they're doing to change their business model is to get into kidnapping for ransom, which I think is becoming a problem, as well.

That's why this issue about these organizations requires striking at the organization itself. It's not just a question of stopping the smuggling, although that's very important. It's a question of smashing the organization so they don't simply move from one type of criminality to another type of criminality.

Question: Secretary Chertoff, my name is Leslie Orlaf (phonetic). I work at legal momentum and have been involved in drafting, actually, the U and the T visas, and really want to -- first, to say thank you for all of the work that both people at ICE, CIS, and border patrol have done on this issue.

I wanted -- I just came back, actually, from Postville (phonetic) where we've been interviewing immigrant victims of rape, sexual assault, domestic violence. We found a 15 year-old girl who was raped by someone at the plant this weekend. And I brought a team of forensic psychologists out there to help the victims and to document the cases. But there is a major hurdle in the way of both T and U visa applicants that I wanted to make you aware of. And there is there -- the fees, the 192 fees, the inadmissibility waiver fees for the 192 -- I192 and the I601s are blocking access and putting victims in a situation that need these visas to be able to cooperate, and are cooperating in criminal prosecutions. In Postville, they're cooperating with the EEOC, the State Attorney Generals. There are a thousand -- over a thousand counts of criminal charges that the State of Iowa's going to be bringing against the plant, and we need those fees exempted or waived.

Right now, immigrant victims -- the women in Postville that were humanitarian released that are wearing ankle bracelets have to come up with between \$545 and over \$3,000 per case before they can get legal work authorization and their new visas adjudicated. And it's a major, major roadblock for victims that are going to prevent victims from being able to really cooperate in these cases. It's also making them susceptible to prostitution, because men in Postville, Iowa, see these women with ankle bracelets and they're hitting on them, because they have no way to support their families because they can't file the U and get work authorization.

Secretary Chertoff: Well, that's a -- I'm glad you brought that to my attention. You know, generally, we do have an ability to waive fees for people who are indigent, so let me find out about that. Because I agree with you that if there are people who are victimized, we don't want to have -- you know, my definition, they're destitute. We don't want to have that be an obstacle to getting a visa that will enable them to make -- help us make cases against, you know, very serious criminals. So I'm going to find out about that. Thanks.

Question: Thank you. I have some papers if I can hand them to you.

Secretary Chertoff: Give them to someone back there.

Question: Thank you.

Question: Mr. Secretary, Fernando Pizarro (phonetic), Univision, over here. How extensive -- two questions. How extensive is this training going to be for CBP, ICE, and border patrol agents, and when is it going to start? And second, many immigrations advocates and defense attorneys claim that border patrol agents very often tend to be more focused on deporting quickly rather than identifying victims or potential victims of human trafficking.

Secretary Chertoff: Well, I think I'll let CBP and ICE talk about the specifics of the training. In terms of the issue of being focused on deportation, you know, I think part of what we're trying to do here is to sensitize people when there really isn't evidence of slavery so that we respond appropriately. It's hard for me to react to a generalization about agents. I don't have any reason to believe that's true. But we want to make sure people are alert not just to the obvious signs of trafficking, but to the more subtle signs, and that's why this training is going to go forward.

Moderator: We have time for about one or two more questions, and that's it.

Question: Mr. Secretary, Chris (inaudible), Congress Daily. A little off topic : partnership for a secure America has a new report that's coming out tomorrow where they conclude that the United States is still dangerously vulnerable to chemical, nuclear, biological attack, and I was wondering if I could get your response to that. It does relate to smuggling of the material. How would you respond to that?

Secretary Chertoff: Of course, if the report's coming out tomorrow, I don't know why you're asking me about it today. But let me just say this in general: you know, each of these is separate. We have put into place in the last five, six years, a very robust plan for screening with respect to nuclear materials coming in to the country. We now basically scan about -- virtually 100% of every container that comes into the United States.

There's more to do. We're working on a set of regulations and rules that will require scanning of private aviation that comes into the United States. We obviously also check air cargo that comes into the United States, and we're working a small boats strategy. So we have either completed or are well underway to dealing with a lot of the issue of scanning and screening for what comes into the United States in terms of nuclear material.

Obviously, biological weapons are different, because it's possible to take a biological weapon and have it be so small that it would be impossible to detect. In fact, in theory, you could infect someone and send an infected person in. So there, the emphasis is on being more active overseas, as well as having a better response capability. Obviously, we've put a lot of investment integrating counter measures, and also in integrating our intelligence, with respect to the detection of biological weapons.

The bottom line is that there is more work to be done. I don't think this threat is next week, but I also don't think we have -- we have time to waste, as I have said repeatedly over the last three years. What I hope this report, whatever it says, will do is remind people that when we do come out with further protective measures and start to hear complaining from business and industry, oh, it's too hard, oh, it's going to be inconvenient for me to have my private plane scanned, that we remember that if we don't put people through some screening and scanning measures, we are not plugging these vulnerabilities. So to me, a report like this is -- should energize us to complete the work that we've already -- complete the work we've already made a very good start on.

Yeah.

Question: Mr. Secretary, the (inaudible) exploited and missing persons and all that -- the Department of Justice, their website, if someone's going to report a tip, requires the name, address, and contact information of the reporter. Is there any type of an online reporting mechanism that is through Homeland Security that is a common - a number or common website that somebody can report tips, whether it be anonymously -- because a lot of people are going to be very afraid of reporting with their name and contact information.

Secretary Chertoff: That's a good question. Actually, let me get someone to give you the answer to that. Maybe

one of the further speakers will do that. I can't speak for the Department of Justice, but I understand your point. And let's follow up on it.

Moderator: I think that's all you have time for (inaudible).

Secretary Chertoff: All right. Thanks very much. Thank you for attending this conference.

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This page was last reviewed/modified on September 9, 2008.