

**Presentation by Alexander  
The Santa Marta Group  
Ghana, Elmina Castle 16/9/2024**

*Disclaimer: For participants of the International Workshop for "Dealing with the aftermath of slave trade and slavery." Elmina (Ghana) 10 – 17 September 2024*

My name is Alexander DesForges. I work as the communications director of Santa Marta and the press secretary of Cardinal Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster in London. This afternoon I will give a brief overview of the current situation on human trafficking and modern slavery and explain how the Santa Marta Group, set up with the mandate of Pope Francis, aims to tackle this evil.

But first of all, thank you to the organisers, our hosts and indeed all of you for the past week. It has been visceral and moving, both yesterday in Princesstown and our time here. The walls of Elmina echo down the centuries bearing testimony to the shockingly cruel savagery inflicted on innocents in this region over the past 400 years. The modern world has been shaped by this evil trade and millions continue to suffer the trauma in so many different ways, as so ably expressed by previous speakers.

I was struck by the plaque here in Elmina, between the death cell and the entrance: "In everlasting memory of the anguish of our ancestors. May those who died rest in peace. May those who return find their roots. May humanity never again perpetrate such injustice against humanity. We the living vow to uphold this."

Never again! Never again is the mantra. In 1815, the Declaration Relative to the Universal Abolition of the Slave Trade was the first in a series of international agreements, conventions and protocols in a bid to ensure it would never happen again. Between 1815 and 1948 around 300 international agreements were implemented to suppress slavery. However, many of these agreements lacked adequate institutions and procedures to ensure that they were enforced.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" (Article 1) and that "no one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms" (Article 4).

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (UN drafted in 1954 and became effective in 1976) states in Article 8:

- No one shall be held in slavery; slavery and the slave-trade in all their forms shall be prohibited.
- No one shall be held in servitude.
- No one shall be required to perform forced or compulsory labour.

Article 16 states that "Everyone shall have the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law." Article 26 similarly says "All persons are equal before the law and are entitled

without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law." These provisions outlaw many of the discriminations faced by slaves and ex-slaves.

The Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions Similar to Slavery (1956) goes into considerable detail on institutions that are similar to slavery and should be abolished, such as:

- (a) Debt bondage, serfdom,
- (c) Any institution or practice whereby:
  - (i) A woman, without the right to refuse, is promised or given in marriage on payment of a consideration in money or in kind to her parents, guardian, family or any other person or group; or
  - (ii) The husband of a woman, his family, or his clan, has the right to transfer her to another person for value received or otherwise; or
  - (iii) A woman on the death of her husband is liable to be inherited by another person;
- (d) Any institution or practice whereby a child or young person under the age of 18 years is delivered by either or both of his natural parents or by his guardian to another person, whether for reward or not, with a view to the exploitation of the child or young person or of his labour.

This is important as it recognised the huge discrimination against women and for the first time children – it was notable that children weren't counted in the numbers of slaves or those who died as a result of the transatlantic slave trade.

These conventions culminated in the United Nations' Palermo Protocol in 2000, which was adopted internationally. In the preamble it states, "Taking into account the fact that, despite the existence of a variety of international instruments containing rules and practical measures to combat the exploitation of persons, especially women and children, there is no universal instrument that addresses all aspects of trafficking in persons"

The protocol is generally recognised as the internationally-accepted legal definition of human trafficking and the definition is as follows:

"The "Trafficking in persons" shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs."

And finally in the Sustainable Development Goals of 2015, SDG 8.7 states: SDG 8.7 is a target under Goal 8 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. The target aims to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking, and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers (eliminating all forms of child labour by 2025). Not many months left to meet the agreed deadline.

So where are we, 200 years after abolition, vows that this would never happen again, and the agreement of hundreds of international agreements? Put simply we are failing and the situation is getting worse.

Over 200 years after the abolition of slavery, there are over three times as many slaves in the world today as at the peak of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade (12.5m transported across the middle passage, with around 1.8m dying on the voyage; with many others dying or killed before being forced onto the boats). The UN agency, the International Labour Office, estimates there are 50 million slaves today (of whom 71% are women and one in four are children) generating criminal profits worth at least \$240bn a year, making it one of the most lucrative crimes in the world and the fastest growing. It is estimated there are over 10 million more slaves since 2015 when the SDGs were agreed.

So what is Modern Slavery? Modern slavery takes many forms including: 28m in forced labour and 22m in forced marriage. Sophisticated international criminal gangs prey on those made vulnerable by war, poverty and environmental degradation (NOTE that trafficking is forced, involves losing all agency and is an internationally-recognised crime; many of the socio-economic problems we have heard about this week are a challenge, but they do not qualify as trafficking) Often masked by wider migration patterns, trafficking is also increasingly facilitated by digital technology. Modern slavery, enforced by criminal networks that treat human beings as commodities, damages everything it touches – whether by degrading societies and corrupting politics and business, or by fracturing families, often irreparably. As well as the violence against the individual, modern slavery presents a fundamental danger to the stability of the international community, as the United Nations recognised when it made ending modern slavery by 2030 one of the Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDG 8.7), a commitment that the Santa Marta Group played a significant part in establishing.

**But the victims of slavery are not merely numbers; statistics in a book.** Each and every one are individual people with a story, a family, from a specific place. So who are these people?

*Some of the people I have met and worked with include:*

- Sophie Hayes – a young woman from Manchester in the North of England. She was wooed by an Albanian man who became her boyfriend. They went on a romantic city break to Barcelona and again to Milan. Only this time she had her passport removed and was passed on to another group who forced her to work as a prostitute in Italy until she eventually escaped after 18 months and went to the police.
- Alhassan Bangura – born in Freetown, Sierra Leone. He was trafficked to France and then London by a Frenchman who forced him to work as a prostitute having promised to fulfil Al's dream to play football and get a trial in Europe. He managed to run away and claimed asylum in the UK going on to have a successful football career with Watford.
- Podborka (not her real name) from Romania joined Santa Marta Group at its first conference in the Vatican. She had learning difficulties and had been trafficked by her sister to the UK via a Romanian gang. The sister claimed Podborka had chosen to go and was therefore shunned by her own village in Romania for becoming a prostitute. Eventually she was rescued and is trying to rebuild her life in the UK.

**Why did Sophie or Podborka or Alhassan not contact their family?** Why did they not go to the police earlier? All valid questions, but threats, fear, shame, and powerlessness are part of

the prison created by human traffickers for their victims. Often victims have themselves broken the law; they don't possess legal documents and are frightened of the police and authorities in the countries to which they have been trafficked (despite the principle of non-prosecution of victims). Often they will feel they have no choice, if they are aware they are being trafficked at all.

There were no chains, no dungeons, no visible signs of enslavement. They were hidden in plain sight, coerced into modern slavery through blackmail, threats of physical violence, emotionally vulnerable from threats against their family. They were ashamed, frightened not knowing who to trust and at the mercy of the ruthless criminal gangs who ran them. But modern slavery is not limited to prostitution. Sexual exploitation is one aspect of human trafficking, but 12 million of the 50 million are children. Small children are forced to work in cobalt mines in the DRC, to provide cheap cobalt for lithium batteries in electric cars, computers and mobile phones. Children in Mozambique are kidnapped, organs removed for illegal surgery in the Gulf and the children then disposed of. In parts of Africa children are forced into militias. In Colombia, as we heard this week, huge numbers of children were forced into armed militias during the civil war.

Forced labour forms the bulk of trafficking – sex, garment industry, the extractive industries. The raw materials at the start of long supply chains are often susceptible to human trafficking and that end of long international supply chains are poorly monitored. Forced labour in major building projects such as in the building of the stadia for the world cup in Qatar, despite extensive media coverage has not led to any prosecutions, encouraging criminals to continue with this exploitation. If you seek, you shall find and the more we seek, the more slavery we find.

The crude economic logic of human trafficking is humans are treated not merely as a commodity, but a commodity that can be used again and again. You can only use a drug once, but a slave can make criminal profits over and over again.

To give an idea of the scale of the problem: 7m in Africa (3m in forced marriage, 3.8m in forced labour. The countries with the highest prevalence of modern slavery are Eritrea, Mauritania and South Sudan, but it exists throughout Africa with children forced to work in the cobalt mines in the DRC, people deceived by traffickers to work in the Gulf States, organ trafficking to the Gulf states, domestic servitude in cities (eg in Togo under the confiage system where children go from rural areas to the cities and often end up in domestic servitude) and then sex trafficking to Europe and the Middle East. In Berlin the highest number of women trafficked come from Nigeria and over 90% from Edo State. Data is difficult to collect in Africa so the number is probably higher.)

### **What drives this criminality?**

Again put simply – a lack of will and insufficient resource (as a comparison \$100bn is spent on the war on drugs every year and less than \$1bn on countering slavery). Since President Nixon announced the war on drugs in 1971 the USA has spent over \$1trn on this endeavour and yet the drug problem in the US is worse than ever before.

The other driver is increased vulnerability among certain groups (civil war, environmental degradation, political instability etc), power imbalance (we have to acknowledge that women and children are mainly abused by men) and mass movement within an unequal, rigged globalised economy. Of course these two are connected. And finally, again put simply greed

where human beings are not seen as human – and that is not confined to race. Africans traffic Africans, South Americans traffic South Americans and Europeans traffic Europeans and so on.

Countering such a profound challenge means taking radical sustained action if we are to prevent millions more people falling prey to criminal gangs and being forced into slavery. The Santa Marta Group is at the frontline of that response, taking its commission from Pope Francis. “The indispensable service of the Santa Marta Group will be able to free the victims of the new forms of slavery... to unmask the traffickers and those who create this market; a service for the common good, and for the promotion of human dignity, that it may be able to draw out the best of every person and of every citizen. May God bless you all.” Pope Francis.

### **Santa Marta Group’s Role**

For the Catholic Church, the eradication of modern slavery and the pastoral care of victims is a priority. The Santa Marta Group was developed in response; born of the conviction that bringing decision-makers together, building partnerships and co-operation between law enforcement and the Church, brings huge benefits in fighting this crime and caring for its victims (for example: rescued victims of trafficking will often run away scared as they have no documents; they are illegal; they have committed crimes; might not speak the language and often come from countries where trust in the authorities, in the police is difficult if not dangerous. If they are cared for, they will make better witnesses at trial leading to improved conviction rates of criminal traffickers; the Catholic Church has a global moral voice and a local presence across the world making connection with local and world leaders authentic and powerful). When the former head of the UK’s Metropolitan Police was challenged by a journalist on why the police was working with the Church, he said: “Human trafficking is a global criminal network of evil and to combat it seriously we need a global network of good. That is where the Catholic Church comes in.”

The Santa Marta Group first met in Rome in 2014 when police chiefs and Catholic bishops came together, in the presence of Pope Francis, to sign an historic declaration, committing themselves to a partnership to eliminate human trafficking. Named after Pope Francis’ residence, in which delegates stayed, the Santa Marta Group has recently become a registered charity and now works in over 25 countries. At its launch, Pope Francis said this was a priority and personally requested Cardinal Vincent Nichols ensure the work continue and be developed. There are already many impressive and dedicated efforts to tackle human trafficking, especially Religious Sisters who have cared for victims of slavery for decades. However, the role of the Santa Marta Group is different. Rescuing, rehabilitating and reintegrating victims is essential but we can’t wait for the crime to be committed and then try to deal with the aftermath. We have to go upstream and address the crime at source.

The guiding principle of SMG is to bring together decision-makers and leaders from the Church, law enforcement agencies and civil society to create partnerships to eradicate modern slavery. Identifying the right leaders, building trust between the decision-makers, and encouraging co-operation and the sharing of good practice is the Santa Marta Group’s task. Focused energy, absolute dedication, and major resourcing are needed to achieve the transformational change necessary to end modern slavery. Combatting human trafficking and

slavery presents a multi-faceted challenge. The task is not only to tackle supply, but also, to stop demand, cleanse supply chains, and break up criminal groups who profit from this trade, all while caring for the survivors. With its global network, the Santa Marta Group is focused on this challenge. By acting as a catalyst engaging leaders within civil society, law enforcement, and faith groups, the Santa Marta Group plays a unique role in this effort; one recognised by the UN and governments. Building trust between these markedly different groups is challenging but essential, as ending modern slavery will only come through more effective partnerships and committed moral leadership.

Many countries have anti-slavery legislation, yet very few enforce those laws with vigour. Currently, only 1 in 7,000 (0.2 percent) of all estimated trafficking offences around the world result in a criminal conviction. The Santa Marta Group premise – that international trafficking of human beings will only cease when societies and their governments take decisive action against criminal networks (and society involves government, business as well as citizens – remains true. And so we push for agencies of State to fulfil their commitments on ending slavery – and while police need to be given the resources to take on the criminal gangs, police also need to be assisted when investigating vulnerable communities and in following the non-prosecution principle of victims). Supply chains need to be policed, existing legislation enforced and the problem addressed creatively (eg ethnic chaplains are able to reach out to vulnerable communities, such as the Vietnamese in East London and Fr Michael will know the large Ghanaian community in London. In London alone there are over 50 ethnic chaplains able to reach those vulnerable communities that even consulates will struggle to reach; check flight manifests and see who is booking for multiple flights for women from countries such as Nigeria – the major source of women forced into prostitution in Berlin and many other European cities; use technology to uphold human dignity rather than to exploit people. AI, or better described as machine learning could be used to recognise patterns of trade and criminal activity as well as investigate supply chains effectively and quickly). Our role is not to act as a head office with a one size fits all approach.

It is to act as a CATALYST, building trusting networks of leaders to collaborate, to work with police and other authorities. Curbing demand is clearly part of the answer (if a car wash costs a quarter of what it normally costs, something is wrong; sexual exploitation is wrong and on it goes). Awareness raising in vulnerable communities to dry up the supply is another part of the answer. However, as this is a crime hidden in plain sight that we often cannot see or even recognise when we do see, this is not enough. How can we tell if the king prawns at the hotel buffet are not sourced from slaves? How can we tell if the cobalt in our lithium batteries for our phones and computers has been sourced from mines that do not force children to work as slaves? The simple answer is we can't, but governments and their agencies can and that is why SMG seeks to encourage Church leaders to work with business, law enforcement and civil society leaders. Build those trusting relationships. It takes time and often there are diverging priorities, but as Pope Francis call on us: "get your hands dirty". It is in businesses long-term interests to operate legally and it is in government's interests to insist that it is incumbent on all businesses to ensure that their supply chains are slave-free. Indeed, the European Union introduced a supply chain directive earlier this year making it a legal requirement for all businesses operating in Europe to ensure that their supply chains are slave-free. SMG is looking to work with others to push for Tech companies to clean up their act and not put their products at the service of criminals. They can adjust the algorithms that govern the digital world. They have created technology that is not neutral (they have managed to dupe governments across the world that

they are neutral platforms so what would be illegal in print or on the street is legal online. But this is changing – as the EU and the US move to clip their wings with online regulation).

This does require a reset in the way that capitalism operates, moving away from short term profit at the expense of long term development, the environment and indeed people. A point I would add here is that the G20, which accounts for 75% of world trade, collectively imports almost \$500bn a year of at-risk products. The top five at-risk products are electronics (\$240bn), garments (\$150bn), palm oil, solar panels and garments each worth between \$10-20bn.

To fulfil the challenging mission of abolishing modern slavery and human trafficking, the Santa Marta Group has developed and refined its Strategic Plan, focusing on six critical areas:

1. Slave-proofing government procurement, supply chains, and changing business culture (quarterly reporting, profit focused, it should be in their interests to act within the law and have a longer term view.
2. Stopping “Tainted Money”; a commitment that no-one should profit from human trafficking & modern slavery. The Magnitsky act from the USA offers a way forward where individuals and companies and governments involved in human rights abuses can be sanctioned by the US (travel bans and frozen assets making individuals accountable and preventing them from flying under the radar and profiting from slavery). Remember the \$240bn figure (and that is not counting the tainted money profits). That has to be laundered somewhere and the major international banks and legal firms that off-shore shell companies that launder the criminal profits that come from slavery are responsible and should be held to account.
3. Legislating to ensure that the internet serves as a responsible technology upholding human dignity. Big Tech are now the largest companies in the world. Facebook made net profits of \$39bn last year and has been downloaded 5bn times. Apple and Microsoft between them have market capitalisation of over \$6.5trn. Apple made profits of \$170bn in 2022. They can and should pre-moderate posts. Algorithms should promote human dignity and not undermine societies by amplifying hate (based on the simple fact that extreme emotion sells as it attracts more eyeballs in the jargon of advertising). The business model is wrong and must change. Adding a safety app is not good enough. After all, you don’t add brakes as an optional extra when buying a car...
4. Remaking and enforcing international legal instruments to make them relevant for today’s world
5. Ensuring international institutions promote human dignity
6. Resetting the moral compass so that slavery is recognised for the evil we know it to be. This is about moral choices and a culture of indifference needs to change. Our belief is that people are tempted to be good and where there is exploitation we must forge partnerships and demand change.

## **Call to arms**

Ultimately this is a moral choice. Are we willing to live in a world where one man is superior to another and the weak and poor are abused, raped and all human agency removed purely for our benefit? Where AI, Sophie and 50 million other women, men and children are treated as

commodities for the greed of criminals and also our own negligent complicity? Human trafficking and modern slavery remains one of the moral challenges of our time. Ignorance is no defence. Continuing to allow slavery in our midst; hidden in plain sight is a shame on all of us. We cannot claim ignorance. This is a moral choice and the way forward is to build coalitions and partnerships. The Catholic Church is ideally and uniquely placed to do this. We must take the lead.

As Pope Francis said at the launch of Santa Marta, human trafficking is a scourge, a crime against humanity; it is a wound on the body of Christ. We must learn to cry again; to recognise the suffering of the victim and then we will know what to do...

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