

LAWYERS CAN DO MORE TO HELP TACKLE THE PROBLEM OF MODERN DAY SLAVERY

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Slaves are being sold in Libya, while people are also enduring forced labour, prostitution and the forced removal of organs – lawyers must act to help the victims of such crimes

The UIA (Union Internationale des Avocats), the International Lawyers Association incorporated back

in 1927, has always been heavily involved in the defence of human rights. Usually the focus is on lawyers – in some countries, lawyers cannot freely practise their profession and can sometimes end up in prison without a fair trial. In my role as the UIA's new president, I want to broaden this focus on human rights.

Modern day slavery is a plague that we need to fight and lawyers can make a difference in this respect. I took over as president of the UIA at the end of October. Only two weeks later, an investigation by CNN revealed that people from Africa are being sold as slaves in Libya. CNN is running the "Freedom Project", which aims to highlight the plight of the victims of modern day slavery. Anyone who has a TV can watch this and then try to do something about it.

Make nation states liable

Lawyers have an important role to play in that they could make themselves available to defend the victims of these crimes. In addition to individual members, and law firm members, the UIA has around 150 collective members around the world – including bar associations – and we can raise awareness of this issue and promote legal protection and aid for the victims of modern day slavery. Lawyers should also lobby for nation states to be held liable – even by the United Nations – for the crimes that are committed in their territories. They also have a role to play in the prosecution of traffickers, as well as lobbying for more legal measures for protecting victims.

Slaves for sale

Modern day slavery is a broad term that covers a wide range of crimes. I would never have imagined that, in 2017, slaves were being sold in Libya. And there are a wide range of other types of modern day slavery, including forced labour, forced prostitution, forced marriage and the forced removal of organs. Modern day slavery is also, unfortunately, a problem in Spain and Portugal. A newspaper in Portugal recently highlighted a case in which a group of people from Portugal were promised work in the construction industry in Spain and earnings of €150 per day. However, when they got to Spain, their passports and ID were confiscated and they had the costs of food and accommodation deducted from their pay, so they were receiving only €10 to €15 per day. Fortunately, Spain and Portugal are countries that respect human rights and the perpetrators in this case were put in jail.

Compensation for victims

To a degree, there is a lack of awareness of the issue of modern day slavery. People think it doesn't happen in their country, but it does. What can lawyers do to help tackle this problem? They could contact their local bar associations and form groups of lawyers that could act on a pro-bono basis to represent the victims of modern day slavery and help them to get compensation for the suffering they have endured.

The thinking behind part of our campaign is the more we talk about this plague, we hope that it will work as an incentive for victims of modern day slavery to come forward and talk about the crimes they have suffered. They should not be afraid to come forward – even if they have been trafficked from another country and they are technically an illegal immigrant and are therefore afraid to go to the authorities, there should be procedures in place to ensure they have special treatment.

EU should legislate

Nation states should be liable for allowing such crimes to occur within their borders. When those guilty of such offences are identified, they are prosecuted. However, this may not be the case in some countries where the rule of law is not quite what it should be – in such jurisdictions it may be more difficult to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Sometimes, the European Union is overly concerned about matters that are not really very important. Instead, it should approve legislation that would mean victims of modern day slavery are protected and also given compensation for their suffering.

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