

September 14, 2023

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Wild, and Members of the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee, it's an honor to present this statement. Human trafficking is real, it's tragic, and I am grateful this Committee is willing to bring attention to how human trafficking is the largest and fastest growing criminal enterprise in the world, how United States actors have played a role in that growth, and what we can do to end trafficking in our time.

Human trafficking is a global humanitarian crisis, with the U.S. State Department estimating that there are over 27 million global victims of human trafficking at any given time.

Tragically, some people in the media and Washington D.C. have tried to minimize the impact of human trafficking and the destruction it creates, especially in the lives of innocent children.

But regardless of ideology or party label, I believe every member of this committee, and good people everywhere, can agree that human trafficking is a plague and an evil that must be eradicated.

Evidence of this can be seen in the response to the new movie SOUND OF FREEDOM—based on my life story—that has been a surprise box office success, and is sparking a national conversation on child sex slavery and trafficking, the fastest-growing criminal enterprise on earth.

The American people, on all sides of the aisle, are realizing that ending human trafficking is not a political debate, it is the moral imperative of our time, and our nation is not alone in this mindset.

In my career I have traveled extensively around the globe, most recently for the international release of the movie SOUND OF FREEDOM. I have met with heads of states and government officials in countries we count as close allies who share with great sadness the impact that the scourge of human trafficking is having within their own borders.

They understand the magnitude of the evil that trafficking represents and share their strong conviction to work with the United States in bringing powerful solutions to the fight against human trafficking.

The conclusions I offer today in this testimony are based on my professional experience as an anti- trafficking operator, both as a U.S federal agent and the leader of an anti-trafficking NGO.

After starting my professional career with the CIA, I transferred to the Department of Homeland Security. At the DHS, I spent 12 years as a special agent and undercover operator for Homeland Security Investigations. For 10 of those years, I was combating sex trafficking on the southern border and became one of the country's foremost experts on the issue of trafficking through years of undercover work, research and investigation.

After leaving the federal government, I have continued the fight against human trafficking. First, as the founder and CEO of the anti-trafficking organization Operation Underground Railroad(O.U.R.), and now as a Senior Advisor for the SPEAR Fund, an organization that funds and collaborates with a coalition of experts, organizations, and concerned citizens from around the globe to end human-trafficking in our time.

Through my experience as a federal agent, CEO of O.U.R., and Senior Advisor for SPEAR Fund I have worked closely with the heads of every U.S. agency whose job it is to find and rescue children being trafficked across our border, as well as working with government officials and law enforcement agencies from around the world.

Both our federal agents and local law enforcement, along with anti-trafficking agents around the globe, work with professionalism and dedication. Their tireless efforts result in not just disrupting the flow of human trafficking but rescuing those who have become victims of trafficking.

I would like to share two recent experiences that highlight the role the U.S. currently shares in aiding human trafficking in the world, while also showing what is possible if we redouble our efforts and lead other countries in the fight against human trafficking.

First, the United States is generally understood to be the #1 consumer of child exploitation material in the world, and a major contributor to the abhorrent sex tourism industry around the world, and policies here at home have a ripple effect throughout the world.

Earlier this month I had heartbreaking conversations with President Castro in Honduras and President Giamatti in Guatemala.

It was clear from my conversation with each president that U.S. policies are forcing our neighbors into crisis. The leadership in these pathway countries are working hard to warn their people against the dangerous practice of submitting to smugglers and traffickers. However, contrary to their pleas, the Biden Administration policies make it too alluring, and the smugglers or traffickers, who can make up to 14MM a day, are too convincing.

So alluring in fact, that the Council on Foreign Relations reported that the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras account for three-quarters of unaccompanied children apprehended at the southern U.S. border in Fiscal Year 2022.

Sadly U.S. government policy is currently reinforcing those numbers, creating havoc and making the anti-trafficking efforts of countries like Honduras and Guatemala more difficult.

In contrast to this, recent operation efforts not covered widely in the news show it was possible with close international cooperation between multiple governments and NGOs.

During the early days of the Russian invasion I was alerted about women and children who were displaced by the war in Ukraine and at risk of being trafficked.

For human traffickers, geopolitical events like war and natural disasters are sickeningly referred to as “harvest time”, because of their ability to easily prey on women and children in the chaos of destruction and conflict.

After recognizing the need in Ukraine, I began looking for an NGO that was on-the-ground, had a legal right to be there, and had a strong working relationship with locals and what was left of the local government authorities.

Little did I know at the time that leads uncovered during our work in Ukraine and Eastern Europe would lead to a rescue operation represented by Operation Underground Railroad, Aerial Recovery, Free a Girl, and other organizations which, because of operational security, can't be named at this time.

This 3-continent operation, which I personally led, began in Ukraine and moved through Holland, the US, Mexico, Ecuador, and locations which are also still too sensitive to be revealed. Together, NGOs and government agencies helped dismantle an international pedophile ring and take down a child sex hotel/brothel in Latin America. Thousands of people—including over 900 orphans—were rescued in Ukraine alone, and hundreds of additional children were rescued in other countries.

All of this was in the short span of just a few months, and defined what was possible in the fight against human trafficking. Numerous organizations and governments, working in tandem around the globe, rescued vulnerable women and children trapped in a war zone.

Make no mistake, the war against human trafficking cartels and their allies is going to be long, difficult, and hard fought, but—ultimately—we can and must win.

The first step in that fight is ensuring U.S. policies make human trafficking more difficult, not easier. I would be remiss if I didn't mention the plight of 85,000 unaccompanied immigrant children that, according to HHS, were in the government's care, handed over to "sponsors" with minimal vetting, and now cannot be accounted for. Congressman Smith's The SECURE Act in particular will help find these kids that this administration claims are not "their problem" anymore, despite being at acute risk of sexual abuse.

Secondly, the U.S. can redouble our commitment in the international enforcement efforts. The presidents of Guatemala, and Honduras both shared the value they see in policies like International Megan's Law, which allows the U.S. to alert our allies when registered sex offenders are entering their countries.

As I shared earlier, the United States is generally understood to be the #1 consumer of child exploitation material in the world, and a major contributor to the abhorrent sex tourism industry around the globe, it is up to us to solve the problem we are creating. We are the demand. We must lead out in providing the solution.

Countries around the world are looking to our nation to lead in this fight, and we are morally obligated to accept that role.

Sincerely, Tim Ballard