

Testimony by  
James Kofi Annan  
Founder, Challenging Heights

To the Hearing Before the  
United States Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations  
Ending Modern Slavery: What is the Best Way Forward  
February 4, 2015

Thank you, Chairman Corker, Senator Menendez, and other members of the Committee for holding this important hearing to consider how fight modern slavery, a most horrific human rights crime.

I am the founder Challenging Heights, an organization that for nearly twelve years has served children who have been trafficked into modern slavery in the Lake Volta region of Ghana. Our organization delivers social justice interventions to children, women, and underserved communities in coastal and farming communities. Our work includes rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration of children who have been trafficked in the fishing industry, as well as creating community awareness on these issues in order to prevent trafficking and re-trafficking of children.

Challenging Heights also contributes to policy and awareness creation and the public discourse on issues affecting Ghanaian children. Additionally, the organization runs a school for more than 700 children who are survivors of child trafficking or who are at-risk of child trafficking.

The question you are asking today: What is the best way forward to ending modern slavery? That is a very big and important question. I believe the answer has many facets, just as human trafficking takes so many forms.

In fishing communities along Lake Volta, Ghanaian children are being sold into a life of forced labor, malnutrition, abuse and no schooling. Traffickers prey on poor families in communities along the country's coast. Typically, the families are told by the trafficker that if they let their children come to the lake they will live with relatives who will care for them and send them to school in exchange for a few hours' work after school. In reality, the children are forced to work long hours on the boats in dangerous conditions. A typical day might begin at 3 am and end at 8 pm and include challenging tasks such as casting nets, diving, and hauling, with only one meal served. Children often get stuck in the nets at the bottom of the lake. If a child is caught escaping, the consequences can be brutal. Often the families do not hear from their children again.

I formed Challenging Heights because I was a child slave myself who was forced to work in the fishing boats on Lake Volta as a young boy. I understood the challenge of surviving such a trauma, and I also saw the tremendous potential to change things in my country, to prevent child labor, to rescue children from slavery and to give those survivors a chance for a good life.

Today, Challenging Heights supports hundreds of children and their families each year. We help prevent human trafficking from taking place by helping vulnerable children go to school, creating awareness and building community capacity to stand up against trafficking. We also have a 65-capacity survivors' rehabilitation center, and a child trafficking survivors support network aimed at providing protection for children.

I feel proud of our accomplishments, but I know that there is so much more we need to do to stop trafficking in Ghana and throughout Africa. The United States government plays an important role.

First, the U.S. State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report issued each year is a useful tool for Ghana and other governments, helping to keep them accountable for continuing to do better work to stop trafficking. Each year I contribute to the Report so it reflects the most up to date reality facing trafficking survivors in Ghana. I host U.S. government officials, showing them firsthand the dire situation facing children at risk of exploitation.

The United States' diplomatic pressure is very important in helping to persuade the government of Ghana to act. It is critical that these efforts continue and are properly funded. In particular we would like to see a renewal of commitment to the National Plan of Action, and money allocated to the Human Trafficking Board released for immediate use.

The Department of Labor's Bureau of International Labor Affairs (ILAB) also plays an important role. The bureau does a number of important things that affect trafficking in Ghana and other countries:

- 1) It conducts research on international child labor, forced labor, and human trafficking and publishes very valuable reports on the worst incidences of child labor, and lists of goods produced by child labor and forced labor;
- 2) The bureau funds projects for organizations engaged in efforts to eliminate exploitive child labor around the world; and
- 3) It assists in the development and implementation of U.S. government policy on international child labor, forced labor, and human trafficking issues.

One thing I am concerned about is that this important bureau retains its resources and expertise to address the most intractable forms of child labor and exploitation. Even as gains are made in reducing the prevalence of child labor worldwide, real and complex problems remain. I believe Congress should consider legislation that would secure permanent resources for the Bureau of International Labor Affairs and insulate it from political shifts.

I also believe that the U.S. government can improve the implementation of all its development programs by integrating an anti-trafficking lens. Whether it is building a school, constructing a highway, or distributing food aid, the U.S. government must integrate strategies for preventing, identifying, and responding to trafficking. It is especially important that development programs fund projects that focus on prevention of slavery. Ideally, the government should target resources towards grass roots organizations, as Ghanaians themselves – and those in other countries struggling to end human trafficking – are the only ones who can do the difficult work of changing attitudes in their own communities.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to share my perspective, and for this committee's work to find a way to end modern slavery.