

Speech Minister Asscher

Teamwork! 19 January 2016

Ladies and gentlemen,

Every day we learn. Yet when I watch the news, there are things I would prefer not to have learnt.

News that is so upsetting, that it makes one wonder. Can this be real? Are there actually people who do these kind of things? Do they not have a conscience that stops them from committing such crimes?

Take for example the people who abandoned a truck on a motorway in Austria, with 71 dead refugees inside. The refugees faced a gruesome death. They suffocated because there was not enough oxygen in the truck.

Most people who read the news will know about chilling stories of human smugglers. While the refugee crisis has put human smuggling in the spotlight, the practice reaches much further, and can be closely related to trafficking in human beings. There are countless stories of people lured to richer countries, only to be exploited there as cheap workers. The difference is, you don't hear as much about them.

Human trafficking for labour exploitation takes place within our own borders. In our own town. In our own neighbourhood.

In a commercial laundry, for example. Here in Amsterdam. The illegal employees were forced to work long hours under bad working conditions. No protective clothing. No decent pay. And no freedom! The doors were locked during working hours, so the victims could not leave.

Human trafficking for sexual exploitation also takes place within our own borders. In fact, right around the corner! In the Red Light District. When I was a member of the municipal executive for this city, I took a firm stand on the abuses in the prostitution industry.

Many vulnerable women are enticed to come to the Netherlands under false pretences. Once here, they are sexually exploited by ruthless pimps. These women are promised a better life, but end up in a living hell. Now, I know that prostitution, by its nature, cannot be easily compared to more conventional employment sectors, but the exploitation of the victims is much the same.

Indeed, smuggling refugees and trafficking for labour or sexual exploitation have one important thing in common: they are ruthless crimes that need to be stopped.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I don't say this very often. But to me, human traffickers and human smugglers who abuse the vulnerability of their victims to exploit them are the lowest of the low. The worst type of people you can imagine. Because they reduce people to commodities. Because they undermine their dignity. And because they take advantage of the vulnerability of people who have nothing left to lose.

The truth of the matter is that there is little that can stop them. They are not burdened by moral standards. Not by a nagging conscience or compassion for others. If you have no respect for human life, why should you respect national borders or the rule of law?

It's quite ironic, but the best way to stop human traffickers is to copy their *modus operandi*. We need to let go of the borders and burdens that we have put up for ourselves. Between organisations. Between disciplines. Between countries. We need to foster a culture in which it is normal to look at problems from a helicopter perspective.

Traffickers are excellent team players. Just like relay runners, they know how to transport their target from start to finish. From recruitment, to entry. From housing to work.

The intricate process of human trafficking involves both legal and illegal structures that facilitate these steps.

We need to form a similar chain of relay runners. Indeed, the answer to human trafficking is the trafficking of knowledge. Between local and national governments, the police, labour inspectorates, and all other organisations involved. We need teamwork.

And while we let go of our own boundaries, we need to place some new ones. For the traffickers. We need to put up barriers to make their work as difficult as possible.

We should place the first barrier right at the beginning of the chain. In the places where victims are lured with fake promises via online advertisements or mouth-to-mouth advertising. One way to prevent deceptive recruitment is to make potential victims more resilient and aware. By informing them about their rights and obligations. For example, we have made a special video with tips for mobile workers from Poland who want to work in the Netherlands.

Cooperation is very important. We have made bilateral agreements with Poland, Bulgaria and Romania aimed at strengthening cooperation in the field of labour migration. An extra policymaker has been appointed at each of the embassies of these three countries.

The second barrier we need to place is where victims cross national borders. Of course, I am not talking about a physical barrier here. Embassies and border authorities need to be trained to detect human trafficking for labour exploitation.

This is not an easy task, because intentions are often not clear at this point. The actual exploitation takes place after the victims have reached their final destination. So we need to be keen on any suspicious signals. A great case study, which has also been discussed during one of the workshops yesterday, is that of the Filipino employees working on Dutch barges. During the visa application, the embassy employee smelt something fishy. He discovered a shady construction of double employment contracts by the Dutch mother company and the Filipino subsidiary company. His keen eye should be seen as an example for how we need to work.

The third barrier needs to be placed where traffickers are arranging accommodation for their victims. If you see what some have to pay for housing, you would assume they would be staying at the Ritz-Carlton. On the contrary. They are often forced to stay in overcrowded, dirty apartments. Sometimes they have to sleep in accommodation that is unsuitable to live in, such as caravans and industrial halls.

Here, municipalities can play an important role. Last year we started a pilot scheme to register the first residential address of mobile workers here in the Netherlands. This way, we can signal offences such as exploitation, overcrowding and human trafficking more easily. This approach has proven to be a success, and is planned to be implemented nationwide.

The last barrier should be placed where the actual exploitation takes place. In order to prevent sham constructions and exploitation, we need to promote decent work. Labour mobility is important yet we also need to make sure that the rights of mobile workers are better protected. Only by modernising rules can we protect the free movement of workers and ensure decent work for all. The terms and conditions of employment should be 'upgraded' to improve the remuneration of posted workers. We should also define the duration of a posting period more precisely. It is in the interest of both mobile and domestic workers to make the rules on mobility fairer. Indeed, decent work is of mutual interest to all EU Member States and I firmly believe that it can bring us closer together.

'Decent work' is also about enforcement. That is why we are pushing for an ambitious Platform on Undeclared Work that, hopefully, can begin its work early this year. This Platform will boost the cooperation between the labour inspectorates of different Member States. As pointed out, this cooperation between inspectorates and other organisations is really important.

On 8 and 9 February we will host a conference that focuses on the question of how inspections can promote decent work. This conference will be very much 'hands on'. With inspection officers and policy advisers from various EU Member States, the conference is the perfect setting to share best practices.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In order to stop traffickers, we need to let go of our burdens. Yet there is one burden that we should keep. That of our moral standards and empathy for others. It goes without saying that victims of inhumanity deserve a human approach. By providing them with a safe haven where they can recover from their ordeals. By assisting them in getting monetary compensation. And by helping them go back safely to their country of origin, if they wish to go back.

With so many different organisations, it is quite likely that victims won't be able to see the wood for the trees. Here too, a multidisciplinary approach is needed.

In the Netherlands, we are continuously working to improve our national referral system aimed at providing coordinated support for victims.

The Netherlands is also preparing ratification of the ILO 'Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention, 1930', which aims at preventing human trafficking, protecting victims and offering monetary compensation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank you for your valuable input and constructive discussions during this conference.

Now it's time to put the theory into practice in your country. I am confident that together, we can make an important next step.

Nobel Prize winner Robindranath Tagore once said "*You can't cross the sea merely by standing and staring at the water.*"

Human traffickers have shown us that they are quite capable of crossing both sea and land. It's time that we let go of our own burdens in order to thwart their activities. Let's change their game of play. Instead of a relay race, let's make it for them a match of insurmountable hurdles, in which they are destined to lose.

Thank you.