

# Human trafficking activists testify about reality of modern slavery

WASHINGTON – Slavery is something most Americans read about only in history books, but British actress and U.N. Goodwill Ambassador Julia Ormond has met the victims of modern slavery – vulnerable men, women and children sold by traffickers for sex or labor.

In her work on human trafficking for the United Nations, Ormond visited Ghana, where she learned that young boys were enslaved on boats to perform the dangerous task of untangling fishing nets. The large number of children's bodies washing ashore alerted authorities to this instance of human trafficking.

With the cheap purchase price of the children, the slaveholders could afford to throw the bodies of the dead or dying overboard, Ormond said.

"We assume that slavery, while horrible, is in the past," Ormond said, but added that in the course of her travels to other countries she saw that human trade is still a thriving business.

Ormond was part of a June 20 panel to discuss what one Congressional Caucus on Human Trafficking co-chair, Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., described as the "cruel business" of the trafficking of humans. The two women were joined by U.S. government officials and representatives of nongovernmental organizations.

Panelists emphasized the need to care for the victims of trafficking while at the same time working to stop the traffickers.

Human trafficking "treats people like they are not human," said Mark Lagon, director of the State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons.

The discussion followed the release of the State Department's 2007 Trafficking in Persons Report and a U.N. report showing an increase in the number of refugees worldwide.

The State Department report is an annual assessment stipulated by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000. This year, the report examined 164 countries and territories for governments' actions - or lack of action - to prosecute traffickers, prevent further trafficking of humans and protect victims.

The report groups countries on three tiers: Tier 1 countries comply with the Trafficking Victims Protection Act's minimum standards; Tier 2 countries do not fully comply but are making an effort; and Tier 3 countries do not comply and make little or no effort to do so. Some countries are put on the Tier 2 Watch List, meaning they risk falling to Tier 3.

Ghana is listed on Tier 2 because, although trafficking occurs, as Ormond observed, the government is trying to eliminate the business.

Sixteen countries - including Cuba, Venezuela and Saudi Arabia - were placed on the Tier 3 list this year. The 32-country watch list includes China, Mexico, the Dominican Republic and Russia.

Mary DeLorey, Catholic Relief Services' strategic issues adviser for Latin America and for the issue of trafficking, said CRS has been impressed by the coverage provided by the reports over the past seven years. Among other projects, CRS - the U.S. bishops' international relief and development agency - cares for the victims of trafficking. It also runs prevention programs to safeguard people who might be vulnerable to traffickers - like survivors of natural disasters or those living in poverty.

A representative of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Migration and Refugee Services also praised the report.

"We applaud the State Department for taking the problem of trafficking seriously," said Julianne Duncan, associate director for children's services. She said the bishops' migration committee will be issuing a statement regarding human trafficking, but she did not specify when.

The previous day at the Vatican, the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travelers released a document that said "sexual exploitation and prostitution linked to people

trafficking are acts of violence, which constitute an offense to human dignity and a serious violation of fundamental rights.” It advocated training courses for pastoral workers “to develop skills and strategies aimed at combating prostitution and trafficking in human beings.”

Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., another co-chair of the Congressional trafficking caucus, said one weakness of the report was the tendency to keep countries on the watch list. He, as well as Lagon, cited India as a country that has been parked on the list for four years. Smith said he hopes to introduce legislation stipulating countries could not remain on the watch list for an indefinite amount of time.

He also said he is also working on legislation that would create an international database of sex offenders to make it more difficult for Americans to travel abroad to engage in sex tourism. He said he hopes other countries will enact similar legislation.

Smith, who is Catholic, talked about visiting faith-based shelters in Rome and witnessing that attending to the spiritual dimension of the victims’ pain can lead to healing.

“The more victims I meet, the more I realize we need to pray for them,” he said.