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JUSTICE NEWS

Attorney General Eric Holder Speaks on Human Trafficking for the Frank and Kula Kumpuris Distinguished Lecture Series

Little Rock, Ark. ~ Tuesday, April 24, 2012

Thank you, Stephanie [Street]. It is a privilege to be with you – and to be among so many friends, colleagues, and critical partners. I want to thank you and Dean [Skip] Rutherford, as well as the faculty and students of the Clinton School of Public Service, and the Clinton Presidential Center's staff, board members, and ever-expanding network of supporters – for inviting and welcoming me to Little Rock, and for providing a forum for this important discussion. As a proud alum of the Clinton Administration, I am especially grateful for all that you do to honor the extraordinary achievements of our nation's 42nd Commander-in-Chief, and to build upon his historic – and ongoing – efforts to ensure the strength of our democracy, and to fulfill America's most fundamental, and most sacred promises - of security, of liberty, and of justice for all.

Because of you, the Center not only stands as a monument to the achievements that marked the Clinton Presidency, it also serves as a meeting ground for essential learning and thoughtful debate, for advocacy and action, and for discussion about issues of national urgency – and of global consequence.

This evening, we have come together to focus on such an issue; and contribute to an important national dialogue – about how we can advance our nation's long struggle for fairness and freedom; and, specifically, how we can more successfully identify, assist, and seek justice on behalf of the millions of human trafficking victims who have been trapped in some form of slavery, bonded labor, or forced prostitution.

This conversation could not be more important – or more urgent. And it's fitting that we've gathered for it during National Crime Victims Rights Week. For more than two decades, this annual observance has provided an opportunity for Americans to reflect upon – and recommit ourselves to meeting – the needs of those whose lives have been shattered by violence, abuse, exploitation, and modern-day forms of peonage and bondage.

It is alarming, and almost unfathomable, to consider that – 150 years since President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation; more than six decades after the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights prohibited the practice of slavery on a global scale; and nearly a dozen years from the day that, with President Clinton's approval, the landmark Trafficking Victims Protection Act became law – today, in communities across and beyond this country, slavery persists. In fact, according to the U.N., there are up to 27 million people worldwide who currently toil in bondage – more than at any other time in human history.

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Without question, this problem has reached crisis proportions. But, in many ways, the challenges now before us are anything but new.

I was reminded of this fact earlier today, as I toured the Clinton Center, where a statue of our nation's most famous – and, I would argue, most courageous – abolitionist, Harriet Tubman, now stands. It is inscribed with one of her most eloquent, and enduring, directives. If you are tired – it reads – keep going. If you are hungry, keep going. If you are scared, keep going. If you want a taste of freedom, keep going.

Those words – first shared during one of the darkest periods in American history – remain relevant today. They were issued as an assurance – and received as a promise – that, in this great country, justice may be delayed, but it will not be denied; and that those who are willing to cling to hope, to move toward progress, and to follow the North Star of freedom will be met with assistance – and bestowed with the rights and opportunities that every person, everywhere, deserves.

Today, this promise is ours to fulfill. And I am convinced that we can no longer tell those who suffer in the shadows – trapped by fear and trapped by force – to keep faith in this pledge, and to keep going, unless we are willing to lead the way forward.

This work must begin now. And it must start by being clear about what – exactly – we are up against.

Today, a growing number of Americans are aware of – and concerned about – human trafficking. But many assume it is a problem only beyond our borders. And this belief, quite simply, is false. In communities nationwide, human trafficking victims often are hiding in plain sight: the young woman who traveled to America for the promise of a new life, but finds herself enslaved and sold for sex. The child who was born here, but ran away from home and, in desperation, accepted help from the wrong person. The migrant worker who is deprived of identification, transportation, health care, and access to money in order to ensure complete dependence on his employer. Or one of the many young girls regularly shuttled to truck stops along I-40 – who is filled with shame and empty of hope, living in fear of incarceration and in doubt of her ability to survive on her own.

By their traffickers, these victims are viewed – and treated – as nothing more than commodities. And they are driving an illicit – and thriving – economy that is based on the sale of human beings – and, primarily, on the enslavement and exploitation of women and children. As incomprehensible as it seems, trafficking in girls is an increasingly prevalent part of gang activity. These crimes are seen as “low risk and high reward.” They bring in more profits – and often result in less prison time – than dealing drugs. As one journalist – who was covering instances of human trafficking here in Arkansas – explained it: “You can only sell a drug once, but you can sell a human being over, and over, and over.” Today, these transactions can be executed quickly, conveniently, and anonymously over the Internet – and many of them involve young children.

According to the Justice Department's recent estimates, more than 40 percent of all human trafficking incidents opened for investigation were for sexual trafficking of a child. And the overwhelming majority of these victims – more than 80 percent of them – were identified as U.S. citizens. Make no mistake – human trafficking is not just a global problem. It is a national crisis – one that every parent, every teacher, every policymaker, and every law enforcement official must work to understand – and must help to address.

Of course, many of you already know this. And some of you have learned about the prevalence and impact of this problem in the hardest of ways – by experiencing it in your own life, or by working directly with victims. You've seen how, in too many of our communities and businesses, the poorest and most vulnerable among us are being robbed of basic rights to

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dignity, security, and opportunity.

But instead of despair, you've responded with dedication – and with the resolve necessary to fight back. I'm especially grateful for the work being done by leaders like United States Attorney [Chris] Thyer, Attorney General [Dustin] McDaniel, Sheriff [Doc] Holladay, and Chief [Stuart] Thomas, whose commitment to aggressive enforcement, to increased collaboration, and to victim assistance is making a meaningful, measurable difference here in Arkansas. And I stand in awe of advocates like Kathy Findley, the founder of Safe Places and a Justice Department grantee, who is bringing hope – and essential services – to abused and exploited women and children across this city; and of Louise Allison, a former trafficking victim and the founder of Partners Against Trafficking Humans – known as "PATH" – who transformed her own painful experience into a powerful effort that is helping women and girls here in Little Rock find healing – and the support they need to rebuild their lives.

These dedicated public servants – and so many of the other allies and partners here today – are doing invaluable work to bring human trafficking crimes to light and to justice – and to stand up for the rights and interests of victims. I want each of you to know that I am proud – and the Department of Justice is proud – to stand with you.

As Attorney General, and as the father of three teenage children, advancing current efforts to identify and prosecute human traffickers – and to support those who serve and assist victims – is both a professional and personal priority. For today's Justice Department, our commitment to this work has never been stronger. Our approach has never been more effective. And our message that – in this country, and under this Administration – human trafficking will not be tolerated – and that a "zero-tolerance, one-strike" approach has taken hold – could not be more clear.

By adopting this approach, over the last three years, we've achieved significant increases in human trafficking prosecutions – including a rise of more than 30 percent in the number of forced labor and adult sex trafficking prosecutions. And in just this past year, we charged nearly 120 defendants – a record number – in human trafficking cases.

Much of this work is being led by the Department's Civil Rights Division and its specialized Human Trafficking Prosecution Unit, which was established five years ago. Under the leadership of its Director, Hilary Aham, who I'm glad is here with us this evening, this vital prosecution unit has been on the front lines in enforcing the Trafficking Victims Protection Act.

But it isn't working alone. It is supported and strengthened by the Criminal Division and its Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section; its Organized Crime and Racketeering Section; its Offices of International Affairs, and of Overseas Prosecutorial Development Assistance and Training; and its International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program. Our Office of Justice Programs – and its Office for Victims of Crime and Bureau of Justice Assistance – also plays a key role. In addition, the FBI, the Executive Office for U.S. Attorneys, and U.S. Attorneys' Offices across the country are providing critical leadership in bringing human traffickers to justice. And the Department is now working to bring even more partners together to advance our human trafficking efforts.

Because we know these heinous crimes can arise in any criminal context – and because it is not uncommon for traffickers to be involved in a variety of other criminal enterprises, such as the trafficking of drugs or firearms, and financial laundering schemes – we are taking steps to ensure that investigators and prosecutors who work on organized crime, gang, and financial crime cases are fully trained to identify human crimes – and human trafficking victims.

And when the Justice Department engages in procurement, we have an obligation – and will be taking action – to make certain that our management staff and contractors are fully trained to ensure that the Department does not engage suppliers or contractors with questionable or exploitative labor practices. This sort of training has been expertly developed by our partners

at the Departments of Homeland Security and Defense. And the Justice Department will join them in demanding clear and visible zero-tolerance policies among our vendors, contractors, subcontractors, and employees. Victims of trafficking at home and around the world deserve nothing less.

By expanding the scope of our efforts internally, I'm confident that we can build upon the historic progress that's been achieved since last February, when the Justice Department launched a new Human Trafficking Enhanced Enforcement Initiative.

As part of this groundbreaking effort, I announced the Anti-Trafficking Coordination Team – or “ACTeam” – Initiative, an interagency collaboration among the Departments of Justice, Homeland Security, and Labor aimed at streamlining federal criminal investigations and prosecutions of human trafficking offenses. Following a rigorous interagency selection process, we launched six Pilot ACTeams around the country, in Atlanta, El Paso, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Memphis, and Miami – cities with extremely serious, and dangerous, human trafficking problems.

Today, these teams are fully operational. And they're allowing us to develop and advance high-impact human trafficking prosecutions. For example – by bringing federal investigative agencies, like U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and federal prosecutors together – over the last year, we have succeeded in dismantling a large, transnational organized criminal enterprise that held Ukrainian victims in forced labor in Philadelphia. We brought freedom and dignity to undocumented Central American women, and convicted the traffickers who – with threats and violent abuse – compelled them into forced labor and prostitution in restaurants and bars on Long Island. We restored freedom to undocumented Eastern European women, and convicted the trafficker who brutally exploited them in massage parlors in Chicago – and even branded them with tattoos to claim them as his property. We sought justice against members of a violent trafficking group that transported 10 young women, including four minors, from Mexico to Atlanta – where these victims were held captive, regularly beaten, forced into prostitution – and, in some cases, raped by dozens of men in a single night. The ringleader of this group is now behind bars – and was sentenced to 40 years in prison. We also secured a life sentence against a violent gang member in the Eastern District of Virginia for the sex trafficking of a young girl – a 12-year-old runaway who was promised a place to stay, but – instead – was forced into prostitution, regularly plied with alcohol and drugs, and, on a daily basis, made to have sex with multiple men.

In another case prosecuted in Virginia's Eastern District – in which low-level workers were trafficked from Mexico into the U.S. and forced to produce and sell illegal documents – critical enforcement and investigative efforts spanned multiple jurisdictions, including here in Little Rock. Today, I'm grateful for the opportunity to salute – and to personally thank – the members of the Little Rock Police Department, and the Arkansas State Crime Lab, who are here with us and whose contributions were instrumental in securing two consecutive life sentences against the leader of this criminal enterprise.

These convictions, and lengthy sentences, have sent an important and powerful message – that traffickers will be stopped, and they will be punished to the fullest extent of the law.

However, despite these – and many other – recent successes, there is much more work to be done – and far too many people in need of our help. That's why the Justice Department is supporting innovative, collaborative efforts to identify and stop traffickers, and to help victims heal and rebuild their lives. We're working to sustain and enhance support for victim service organizations across the country. And we're providing critical grant funding, technical assistance, and cutting-edge training – that incorporates guidance from trafficking victims – to our state and local law enforcement partners, who are uniquely – and often best – positioned to detect human trafficking crimes.

Over the last year, these efforts have included hosting three regional training forums focused on improving collaboration – as well as the development of a training curriculum to help state prosecutors and judges better understand human trafficking crimes.

We're also taking steps to forge and to strengthen partnerships across international borders – which, as we've seen repeatedly, are essential. For example, under this Administration, and by working with Mexican law enforcement authorities, we dismantled sex trafficking networks operating on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border – bringing freedom to the victims, and securing landmark convictions and substantial sentences against the traffickers in these high-impact bilateral cases. And we're working with our counterparts in Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa, Australia, and beyond, to establish similar partnerships – and to ensure that the global movement to end human trafficking has the attention, resources, and political support it deserves.

Here in the United States, we can all be encouraged by the fact that policy leaders – from both parties – are deeply committed to this effort. Early in his Presidency, President Obama declared January as National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month, calling on our nation to acknowledge modern-day slavery and to recommit ourselves to stopping and preventing human trafficking. This call has been echoed by many other key, committed leaders – from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Congressman Frank Wolf of Virginia; by both Senators [Mark] Pryor and [John] Boozman; and by Governors, Mayors, Attorneys General, and District and County Attorneys nationwide. Let me assure you: the Department of Justice is committed – and I am committed – to answering this call.

As part of this commitment, we are taking our interagency partnerships to the next level. For example, we are working more closely than ever before with the Departments of Health and Human Services and Education to more fully integrate human trafficking awareness and victim assistance into programs serving runaway and homeless youth, abused and neglected children, minors in the juvenile justice system, and other young people who are most vulnerable to trafficking. This outreach will advance federal efforts to locate and assist youth victims, and to prevent trafficking crimes before they occur. Beyond this, we must seek out additional opportunities to enhance our most successful programs – and to engage even more healthcare providers, community leaders, and law enforcement officials in our anti-trafficking and victims' services efforts.

We are also working to increase strategic and operational coordination across a host of Justice Department components – including the Criminal and Civil Rights Divisions, United States Attorneys' Offices, the FBI, and the Office of Justice Programs – that are at the forefront of this fight every day. In recent years, as the volume and sophistication of our anti-trafficking efforts have increased, we've learned that strengthening our unified response to human trafficking crimes will require us to increase awareness and engagement across the Department of Justice; to reinforce partnerships with state, local, and tribal officials; and to bring additional agencies and non-governmental organizations into this work. That's why I am planning to designate a Department employee to oversee our robust internal, external, and interagency efforts. This step will allow the Department to continue to break new ground, and to more quickly develop and implement the most effective possible approaches for meeting our shared public safety goals and moral obligation – of preventing human trafficking, protecting victims across the country, punishing perpetrators, and empowering victims to move forward as survivors.

But I also recognize that we will never be able to make the progress we need on our own – and that our partnerships must continue to expand beyond government. We must work with victims and victim advocates to extend our impact in helping to make lives whole again. We must question – not only why advertisements for the services of young women can be readily found on so many publications and Web pages, but also why some publishers and Internet service providers are still making excuses and providing justifications for business practices that are immoral and support trafficking. And we must do even more to reach out – across the

public, private, and nonprofit sectors – and engage additional local, state, tribal, federal, and international partners in fulfilling the responsibilities that we all share.

Only by working together can the United States continue to be a leader in the global fight against human trafficking. Only by working together can we protect and extend the progress that’s been made – by generations of activists, advocates, and abolitionists. Only by working together can we honor our most fundamental American ideals – that we are inextricably connected to, and must care about, each other; that the strength of our nation and the prosperity of its citizens depends on how we treat, and how well we protect, the weakest and most vulnerable among us; and – as President Clinton, unsurprisingly, may have summed it up best, on the day that the Clinton Center was dedicated in his honor – that, in this great country, “Everybody counts.”

So let us come together – to ensure that these words always hold truth, and to advance our nation’s long walk toward liberty and justice for all. Let us continue this discussion – and keep up our work. And, above all – on behalf of those who are tired, who are hungry, who are scared, and who yearn for the taste of freedom – let us keep going.

Thank you.

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