

Speech: “Let us stand together in our commitment to end the exploitation of human beings and safeguard the dignity of those who are most vulnerable”

Thank you Mr President. The United Kingdom welcomes this debate and resolution 2388. They are further steps towards more robust Security Council action against trafficking. And thank you, too for your presence Minister at the debate, and thank you to all of our briefers.

It was just last week that we discussed the security challenges in the Mediterranean and their consequences, and the trafficking of humans is one of those most devastating of consequences, not only to those involved, but also to all of us who value the most basic of human rights. It was also last week that so many of us were outraged by that shocking video footage on CNN of modern slavery in Libya.

As we know too well, the nature of today’s conflicts has encouraged the growth of armed groups, terrorists and powerful criminal networks. They all thrive in the absence of the rule of law, and they profit on an unprecedented scale from the chaos of ungoverned spaces. These groups prey on the most vulnerable, many of whom have already lost their families, their homes, their livelihoods, to steal the one thing they have left: their freedom. Such exploitation takes on many forms in conflict zones, including child labour, slavery and slavery-like practices, forced labour and sexual exploitation.

Two issues Mr President raised in Secretary-General’s recent report on trafficking in conflict stood out to me.

The first, as others have noted, was the call for improved data gathering, evidence collection and information sharing. Improved data is central to deepening our understanding of the problem, evidence gathering allows us to prosecute perpetrators more effectively, and information sharing means victims are identified and supported faster.

The second issue was the report’s call for a more coordinated UN response. Human trafficking cuts across all of the UN’s pillars: it is a security threat, a human rights violation and a development problem. So, rather than competing with one another over resources or territory, we need UN agencies coordinating and each working to their comparative advantage. We strongly support the Secretary-General’s efforts to resolve this persistent challenge.

After several debates, the Security Council is now well informed of the problem of trafficking in conflict situations. And with resolutions 2331 and 2388, we are now well equipped to act. I’d like to draw your attention to three issues that merit greater attention.

First, violent extremists profit financially from this trade in human misery. It is vital that we integrate this understanding into efforts to combat terrorism. Without the robust use of the full range of existing mechanisms to counter-terrorist financing and impose sanctions, it will be impossible to eradicate the use of slavery as a means to resource, and further the aims, of terrorist groups.

Second, we must act to ensure that global supply chains, which often reach into conflict zones, do not fuel the crime of trafficking. We welcome that resolution 2388 calls on the UN to enhance transparency in its procurement and supply chains. The whole international community can go further in this area.

And third, just as we understand how trafficking drives conflict, we should acknowledge how efforts to address trafficking contribute to peace. Measures to address trafficking by field missions – whether through human rights monitoring or capacity building of police – should not be seen as “add-ons” but as core to efforts to build stability. More broadly, we should consider how anti-trafficking features in the Sustaining Peace agenda, which is all about using a cross-section of UN tools to prevent conflict and build peace.

Finally Mr President, let us not lose sight of who it is that we are working for – the victims and the survivors. Those images on CNN shocked because they showed that this most degrading form of exploitation is tragically not a thing of the past. It is happening today, and it is happening on our watch. No matter how we choose to describe it – human trafficking, modern slavery, forced labour – let us stand together in our commitment to end the exploitation of human beings and safeguard the dignity of those who are most vulnerable.

It is only by doing so that we can hope to succeed in the maintenance of international peace and security.