

Speech: “We need a more forceful and unified UN approach to human trafficking and modern slavery and forced labour”

I'd like to begin by thanking all four of our excellent briefers. And by paying particular tribute to our civil society brifer Ilwad Elman for bringing home to us the devastating impact of trafficking and slavery in conflict. She gave voice to the 46 million men, women and children caught up in this tragedy across the world.

I'm glad that so many Ministers are here today to hear that testimony – and I'm grateful to them and to all Council members for their statements. The fullest response from each and every member of the United Nations is needed and I look forward to hearing the views of countries from outside the Security Council shortly.

Because, as we have heard so clearly, modern slavery is a global problem; one that extends far beyond the fifteen countries sat at this table. It exists in nearly all societies, including my own. It does not respect borders or jurisdictions. It does not recognise the dignity or worth of the human person. It just sees opportunities to exploit, lives to destroy.

If we could hear the millions who are being coerced and exploited today, their unwavering message to us would be that we have simply not done enough. That we have shut our eyes and dulled our senses to a crime we hoped had been consigned to history.

And that's why the United Kingdom called this open debate today. It's why my Prime Minister Theresa May first raised this issue at UNGA last year and plans to do so again later this year. And it's why we are taking such strong action in our own country and across the world, so that together we can eradicate it.

We know the root causes. Poverty, conflict and instability lie at the heart of so many victims' suffering. When a state's authority is eroded, when its responsibility to its people is unfulfilled, organised criminal networks thrive, partnering with armed groups and terrorists to prey on the vulnerable, to prey on those who have already suffered far too much.

We know what follows. Sexual exploitation and sexual slavery. Forced labour and child labour. Human rights in tatters. Conflict exploited, conflict sustained.

This should be a familiar tale to this Council. We heard it ourselves in north-eastern Nigeria only last week. We saw it in the hands in the air when we asked the women there whether they'd lost a child to Boko Haram. We saw it

in their tears as they spoke of abducted daughters, of mass rapes, of grandchildren being born only to be enslaved.

And in response, we need a more forceful and unified UN approach to human trafficking and modern slavery and forced labour. We look forward to the Secretary-General's report in November on exactly that. And we encourage him to focus on making existing structures work effectively, including the Inter-Agency Coordination Group Against Trafficking in Persons.

We also need to combine our efforts across the mandates entrusted in us. We in this Council have a responsibility, no a duty, to maintain international peace and security, to end the instability in which modern slavery thrives. And as UN members, we have frameworks for action; the 2030 Agenda commitment to end trafficking, modern slavery and forced labour, and the General Assembly's Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons.

But we also need to take responsibility as individual Member States. This means doing more to disrupt and disband serious organised criminal networks engaged in people trafficking. It means all of us ratifying the 1956 Convention and the ILO Forced Labour Convention Protocol. And it means taking real steps to strengthen our own national systems to identify, investigate and prosecute those committing these abhorrent crimes.

If we take these steps, at home and here in the UN, we will have begun to turn the page. But for us truly to consign this terrible tragedy to the history books, we will need sustained commitment that endures long after this session is over. Modern slavery must become a recurring theme for this Council, and one for other parts of the UN to return to – including at this year's UNGA – so that we can accelerate our efforts to end this abhorrent practice once and for all.

Thank you.