

*“Things have a price and can be for sale,
but people have a dignity that is priceless and worth far more than things”
- Pope Francis*

Today, the 18th of October 2016, marks the European Day against Human Trafficking. An important moment to reflect on modern slavery. Slavery was legally abolished a long time ago, but in reality many people today are still forcibly enslaved and have had their freedom taken away. While human trafficking may be in a different form than past slavery, the same principle applies; the using of another human being in your own financial favour.

Every form of human trafficking is a violation of human rights. That is why it is crucial that the Netherlands is committed to the fight against human trafficking. What is commitment? Commitment is an irrevocable dedication to fight for something, time and time again. It is unconditional and sustainable. And commitment needs to be heard, seen and felt.

Last year, the United Nations took a big step towards making the problem of human trafficking heard by formulating the seventeen *Sustainable Development Goals*. Three of these goals outline specific tasks to combat human trafficking. Goal 5 asks for countries to eliminate all forms of violence against women, including human trafficking, sexual violence and other forms of exploitation. Goal 8 requests countries to take immediate and effective measures to eliminate and prohibit all forms of human trafficking, especially labour exploitation and child labour. Goal 16 invites countries to end all forms of child exploitation, child human trafficking, child torture and violence against children. Consequently, human trafficking is part of the international agenda until 2030. This is promising.

Prominent leaders are also speaking out against human trafficking. On the 20th of September, Theresa May, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, gave a speech at the United Nations' Assembly in which she emphasized the importance of an international approach to the international crime of human trafficking. Additionally, the Pope has made his voice heard in the fight against human trafficking and thereby inspires large groups of people to join the fight. It is essential that influential figures speak up in order to raise general awareness, but their words cannot be empty. The ambitions of leaders set the bar, but these ambitions have to be translated to the work of the people who could deal with human trafficking every day.

The Netherlands' approach to human trafficking is becoming increasingly visible. In recent years, this has resulted in an integrated approach to combating human trafficking. The fight against human trafficking is increasingly professionalised with the assignment of public prosecutors, the specialisation of judges and the tailored care for victims. However, the recent years have posed great challenges for our country: the threat of terrorism, the influx of migrants and refugees who've sought

safety in our country and the issues this influx presents. Issues so large, that they have demanded all of our attention from our investigation services, media and public debate.

There are always circumstances that could potentially reduce the attention to human trafficking, but there are no circumstances that *justify* weakening the combat against human trafficking. Because every victim is one too many.

That is why I am happy with the promise of the Minister of Security and Justice; he announced on Prince's Day that there will be more money allocated to combat human trafficking and other subversive crimes.

However, we cannot let the government bear all of the responsibility. The urgency of human trafficking must be felt within our society. Anyone and everyone can contribute to the battle against human trafficking. This contribution starts with the awareness that human trafficking can occur anywhere, even within your municipality. Today, the case of a mentally impaired man in Tubbergen will appear in front of the court. For years he was forced to work 7 days a week, 16 hours a day in both the household and the company of his exploiters. Without any reimbursement. In a village where everyone knew each other. Yet no one reported to the police that he was potentially a victim of modern slavery. This story, unfortunately, is not an exception. There are many Dutch citizens who come into contact with a human trafficking situation, but do not recognise it as such or report the situation to authorities. It is very difficult for victims to go to the authorities by themselves. That is why we, as a society, must be alert and look out for this crime, this blatant violation of human rights.

Last Saturday almost 300 municipalities across the globe hosted the *Walk for Freedom*. In the Netherlands people participated in a Walk for Freedom in almost 20 places to show their support for victims of human trafficking. That is how they committed to the fight against human trafficking.

Commitment is a prerequisite, but needs to be translated into concrete actions; we must speak up and act, and the problem must be felt by everyone, so that the dignity and the freedom of people can no longer be compromised.