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Communication essential for mobilising public opinion against modern slavery

Christian anti-trafficking network looks at ways to raise understanding of human trafficking

Some 50 representatives of churches, governments, police, the judiciary, diplomatic corps and NGOs from some 15 European countries met in Vilnius from October 11th to 15th 2006 for an international conference and workshop on trafficking in human beings. The workshop, which looked at ways to make a broader public understanding of the issue of trafficking, was another event of the European network “Christian Action and Networking against Trafficking in Women” (CAT) which has been operational since 2002 and coordinated by the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe. Until early 2007, the network will look at newly emerging challenges in human trafficking and promote coordinated responses by the different stakeholders across Europe.

During the official opening conference on October 12th, which was hosted by the Lithuanian Parliament, the Seimas, the importance of continued cooperation between governmental and non-governmental actors was underlined. In his opening address Raimondas Sukys, Minister of the Interior of the Republic of Lithuania, presented the country's experience in connecting different stakeholders for joint action against trafficking. Expert speakers, such as His Excellency Colin Roberts, ambassador of the United Kingdom in Lithuania, stressed the need to translate existing national and international legislation against trafficking into practical cross-border cooperation.

During the following three-day workshop participants discussed how the shocking new forms of slavery, which trafficking represents, can be brought to the attention of a broader public. Participants learned about successful national anti-trafficking campaigns of the agencies of Protestant Churches in Norway and Germany, the later using the Football World Cup this summer as a starting point. Particular attention was given to the question of how all forms of trafficking can be accurately communicated to a broader audience and how sensationalist and stereotypical reporting can be minimised in combating trafficking for sexual exploitation. The conference in this area learned from the experiences of “set all free” in the UK, which tries to link the issue of contemporary forms of slavery to next years bicentenary on the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade.

The second focus of the workshop was the question how internal communication can become a tool for organisational learning. Representatives from police training institutions as well as NGOs from various countries explained how an internal communication strategy was an essential part of developing responses to trafficking in human beings in their organisations. Participants agreed that internal organisational learning needed to be coherent with external communication messages on the issue of trafficking and needed to be evaluated on an ongoing basis.

“Trafficking has in the last years more and more become an issue in public debate, particular within churches” explained Torsten Moritz, co-ordinator of the CAT project “while this is a good basis to mobilise support against this modern form of slavery, it is now important to avoid sensationalist or stigmatising reporting. With our meeting we hope to strengthen the competence of stakeholders across Europe to raise and influence awareness of trafficking in a non-stereotypical way.” he added.

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