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UN forum aims to end trafficking

The first major United Nations conference on the growing problem of human trafficking has opened in Vienna.

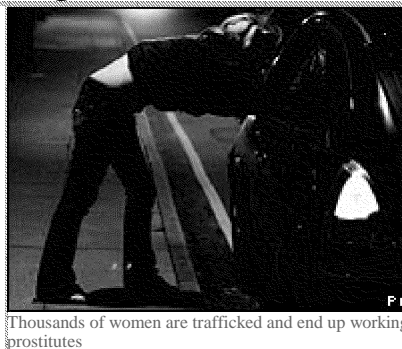
More than 1,000 delegates from over 100 countries are attending the forum to discuss solutions, including techniques to monitor criminal gangs.

There are believed to be millions of victims of trafficking worldwide - in a multi-billion dollar industry.

UN officials say human trafficking is the hidden crime of globalisation and nothing short of modern day slavery.

International celebrities among the delegates included British actress Emma Thompson, Latin pop star Ricky Martin and Egypt's First Lady Suzanne Mubarak.

The head of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, Antonio Maria Costa welcomed their support in tackling a problem that affects both wealthy and developing countries.



Thousands of women are trafficked and end up working as prostitutes

“ Let's call it what it is: modern slavery ”

Antonio Maria Costa,
UNODC

He compared the three-day conference, that ends on Friday, to something between the World Economic Forum at Davos and the infamous 1960s music festival, Woodstock.

"Government statements, expert discussions, along with music, speeches, videos, films and art to inspire us all. I hope, by the end of the forum, a

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roadmap will be developed to guide us forward," he said.

"This is not an inter-governmental conference, nor is it a talk shop. Think of it more as a rally. We march together."

He said that "200 years after the end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, we have the obligation to fight a crime that has no place in the 21st Century".

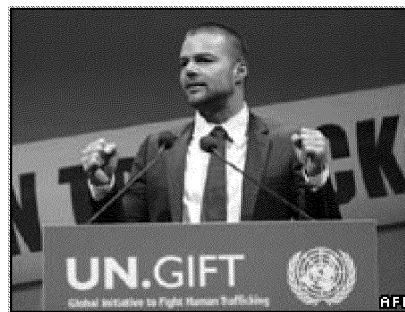
"Let's call it what it is: modern slavery," he said.

Booming business

The UN estimates that about 2.5 million people are involved in forced labour as a result of trafficking.

It says the majority of victims are between the ages of 18 and 24 years and about 1.2 million children are trafficked each year.

Ursula Plassnik, Austrian Federal Minister for European and International Affairs, said national action plans and regional international co-operation was needed.



Ricky Martin says he was moved to take action

She said human trafficking had become a "booming organised crime" with annual profits of up to \$32bn (21bn euros; £16bn) on a global scale.

"It is thus considered an even more lucrative business than trafficking of weapons," she said.

Protocol

Pop star Ricky Martin, who set up the Ricky Martin Foundation for children, told delegates that when he heard about the situation, he had to act.

"I witnessed the horrors of human trafficking on a trip to India, where I saved three little girls from the streets of Calcutta," he said.

"You know what was going on and if you won't do anything, you allow it to happen."

Oscar-winning actress Emma Thompson told the forum the story of a Moldovan woman who was trafficked to the UK and forced to work as a prostitute.

The UN Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking was launched by the UN in March 2007.

Forum organisers hope more countries will be encouraged to ratify a UN protocol on human trafficking and to develop laws to fight the crime. Other issues on the agenda include finding ways of disrupting internet payments for

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