

> World

Saturday, Feb 16, 2008

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Posted on Wed, Feb. 13, 2008

Celebs rally against human trafficking

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VIENNA, AUSTRIA -- Human trafficking is a modern form of slavery that must not be tolerated, a senior U.N. official and celebrities said Wednesday. Pop star Ricky Martin, Oscar-winning actress Emma Thompson and Egyptian first lady Suzanne Mubarak were among dignitaries who urged action at a three-day U.N. conference on trafficking.

"Two hundred 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," said Antonio Maria Costa, head of the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime.

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

Some 2.5 million people are involved in forced labor as a result of trafficking, and 161 countries - on every continent and in every type of economy - are affected by the crime, the U.N. said.

Most victims are between the ages of 18 and 24, and an estimated 1.2 million children are trafficked each year, U.N. figures show.



Hans Punz — AP Photo

Austrian Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik, right, talks to Egypt's First Lady Suzanne Mubarak, left, during the Vienna forum to fight human trafficking, on Wednesday, Feb. 13, 2008, at Vienna's Austria Center.

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"How can we allow so many children to be kidnapped and exploited?" said Mubarak, president of the Suzanne Mubarak Women's International Peace Movement.

Martin said he first witnessed the horror of human trafficking during a trip to India several years ago.

"My hope is to secure every child the right to be a child," said Martin, a five-time Grammy winner who has set up a foundation for children. "Human trafficking has no place in our world today and my slogan is: 'React. It's time.'"


Thompson, who chairs the Helen Bamber Foundation, told the story of a young victim from Moldova lured to England by a local woman she befriended and trusted. Once she got to Britain, she was forced into prostitution.

Costa said governments aren't doing all they should.

"Our girls are beautiful ... it's only prostitution,' high-ranking officials have told me," Costa said.

Estimated annual profits from trafficked, forced labor is around \$31.6 billion, the U.N. Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking said.

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