

White House council calls for action on modern-day slavery

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WASHINGTON (RNS) A White House advisory council of religious leaders called for a global fund to address human trafficking and urged a new labeling system to help identify consumer goods that were not created with slave labor.

With a 36-page report released Wednesday (April 10), the President's Advisory Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships hopes to build awareness of the estimated 21 million people worldwide who are subjected to sexual exploitation or forced labor.

"Abraham Lincoln said if slavery is not wrong then nothing is wrong, and we know that sadly 150 years later slavery still exists," said Susan K. Stern, chair of the council and an adviser to the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. "Today with this report we say, 'Enough.'"

The 15-member council made 10 recommendations to the White House, saying what they've learned about the scope of trafficking has driven them to galvanize national action.

One recommendation calls for a "Global Fund to Eradicate Modern-day Slavery," modeled on a fund that combated AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria.

Episcopal Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori said she and other council members think such a fund "would encourage coordination and participation of philanthropists, governments and both religious and secular nonprofits to work toward abolishing modern slavery."

The council recommended a label for products similar to "Energy Star," which identifies energy-efficient merchandise, to counter sales of goods produced with slave labor. That would build on President Obama's executive order last fall that made it harder for federal contractors to engage in trafficking-related activities.

"We are all potentially, likely wrapped in garments that were produced with the suffering of enslaved people," said Rabbi Julie Schonfeld, executive vice president of the Rabbinical Assembly of Conservative Judaism.

Other recommendations include a national summit that could better coordinate the anti-trafficking work already being done by religious and secular nonprofits. Council members also hope a toolkit, an Ad Council campaign similar to Smokey the Bear and a designated hotline will help build awareness and strengthen prevention efforts.

Valerie Jarrett, senior adviser to the president, welcomed the report on human trafficking, which she called "one of the gravest crimes the world has ever known." She said the Obama administration would fight it in "lock step" with faith and community leaders.

Referring to the Bible's Book of 1 Corinthians, the administration's ambassador-at-large for trafficking, Luis CdeBaca, said the White House would be "a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" if it did not execute the group's recommendations.

"We want to make beautiful music with you and we want that music to be music of freedom," said CdeBaca, whose State Department office was recommended for upgrading to "bureau" status by the advisory council.

During a brief comment period, several advocates for human trafficking victims welcomed the recommendations. They included Lisa Williams, a sex trafficking survivor and executive director of Georgia-based Living Water for Girls.

"Thank you for hearing us," she said, "and thank you for understanding we are not invisible."