

# GEOPOLITICS CONFERENCE DISCUSSES **HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

By Davidson Ndyabahika



PANELLISTS EXPRESSED WORRY OVER THE TROUBLING TRENDS IN HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN UGANDA DESPITE THE GLOBAL ACHIEVEMENTS REGARDING A UNIVERSAL UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN RIGHTS.

**H**uman trafficking was one of the topics discussed during the 2019 Kampala Geopolitics Conference. The two-day public event dealing with geopolitical problems in the globalised world funded Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. A great amount of time was spent discussing how trafficking can be managed on the continent.

Panellists expressed worry over the troubling trends in human trafficking in Uganda despite the global achievements regarding a universal understanding of human rights.

Since the abolition of slave trade, trafficking of persons has been illegal. Incidentally, it has become a more lucrative trade, generating roughly \$150 billion annually, according to the 2014 report of the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

With an estimated 24.9 million victims trapped in modern-day slavery globally, the majority – 16 million (64%) – are exploited for labour, 4.8 million (19%) are sexually exploited and 4.1 million (17%) are exploited in state-imposed forced labour.

Analysts say this level of exploitation ranges from slave-like working conditions, often affecting children and migrant workers, to the complete loss of freedom and self-determination, a context of de-facto imprisonment and forced labour.

Mr Ivan Bwowe, a lawyer and research fellow at the Great Lakes Institute for Strategic Studies (GLISS), says that the destination for human trafficking, especially by external labour companies is mainly in the United Arab Emirates, and that it is impossible to turn a blind eye to such modern-day slavery.

He notes that trafficking in persons is a mutating crime and that it sometimes involves high-level corruption. He states that, for example, some of the external labour recruiting agencies are owned by high-profile government and security officials, making it difficult to fight human trafficking.

‘Most of the trafficking through the labour recruitment agencies is to the Middle East. So how do we deal with it? There is a deliberate effort. And I want to tell you that one thing stands out almost all African countries is that there is high-level corruption

facilitating this trade. Particularly for Uganda, government officials, including those in security organisations, own these rackets,’ observes Mr Bwowe.

He adds, ‘I am not saying that people should not move outside the country. But when they do, our respective governments all over should not only care for the remittances they get from those people because to me, it’s not worth any life. We should seek to protect our citizens and also protect humanity.’

The 2019 Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP Report) by the U.S. Department of State indicates that the Government of Uganda does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking, despite making significant efforts to do so. It further shows that traffickers have previously exploited Burundian refugee girls in child sex trafficking rackets via prostitution in Uganda after the children transited through Rwanda in 2015. Some of these girls have reportedly been subjected to forced labour by way

of domestic work in Uganda.

The report also indicates that human traffickers disguising as external labour recruitment companies exploit victims in Jordan.

There was a reported increase in Ugandan trafficking victims following the implementation of a 2016 bilateral labour agreement between the Ugandan and Jordanian governments. Jordan relies on foreign migrant workers in several sectors, including construction, agriculture, textiles and domestic work.

‘Some recruitment agencies fraudulently recruit victims from labour-source countries to Jordan, using false promises of money or other benefits. Forced labour victims in Jordan experience withheld or non-payment of wages, confiscation of identity documents, restricted freedom of movement, unsafe living conditions, long hours without rest, isolation, and verbal and physical abuse,’ says the report.

Whereas Uganda and Kenya have maintained bans prohibiting their citizens from working as domestic workers in Oman, the TIP report shows that during the reporting period both Uganda and Kenya simultaneously engaged in negotiations with Oman on bilateral labour agreements that would provide a legal basis for Ugandan and Kenyan domestic workers to return to their home countries easily.

Jakob Christensen, the Programme manager of Awareness Against Human Trafficking (HAART) in Kenya, says that modern-day slavery is increasingly reaching dramatic dimensions. He calls for more integrated partnerships between countries and organisations involved in the fight against trafficking

“ Igoye, who is also a senior immigration officer in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, underscores the need for the government to increase its funding towards supporting investigations and prosecution and other counter-trafficking work since the trafficking business is the most lucrative business, with traffickers reaping billions of dollars annually.

to be able to support some of the countries that might not have enough resources to crack down on the vice.

‘If you don’t take care of the victims, you won’t have proper court cases. You are not going to hold the traffickers to account and this is difficult in countries where the police and prosecutors continue decrying underfunding because this area requires complex investigations,’ says Jakob Christensen.

Agnes Igoye, the commandant, Uganda Immigration Training Academy, says there is need to have rehabilitation centres for the survivors of trafficking such as herself, having escaped human traffickers at 14 when the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) raided her village.

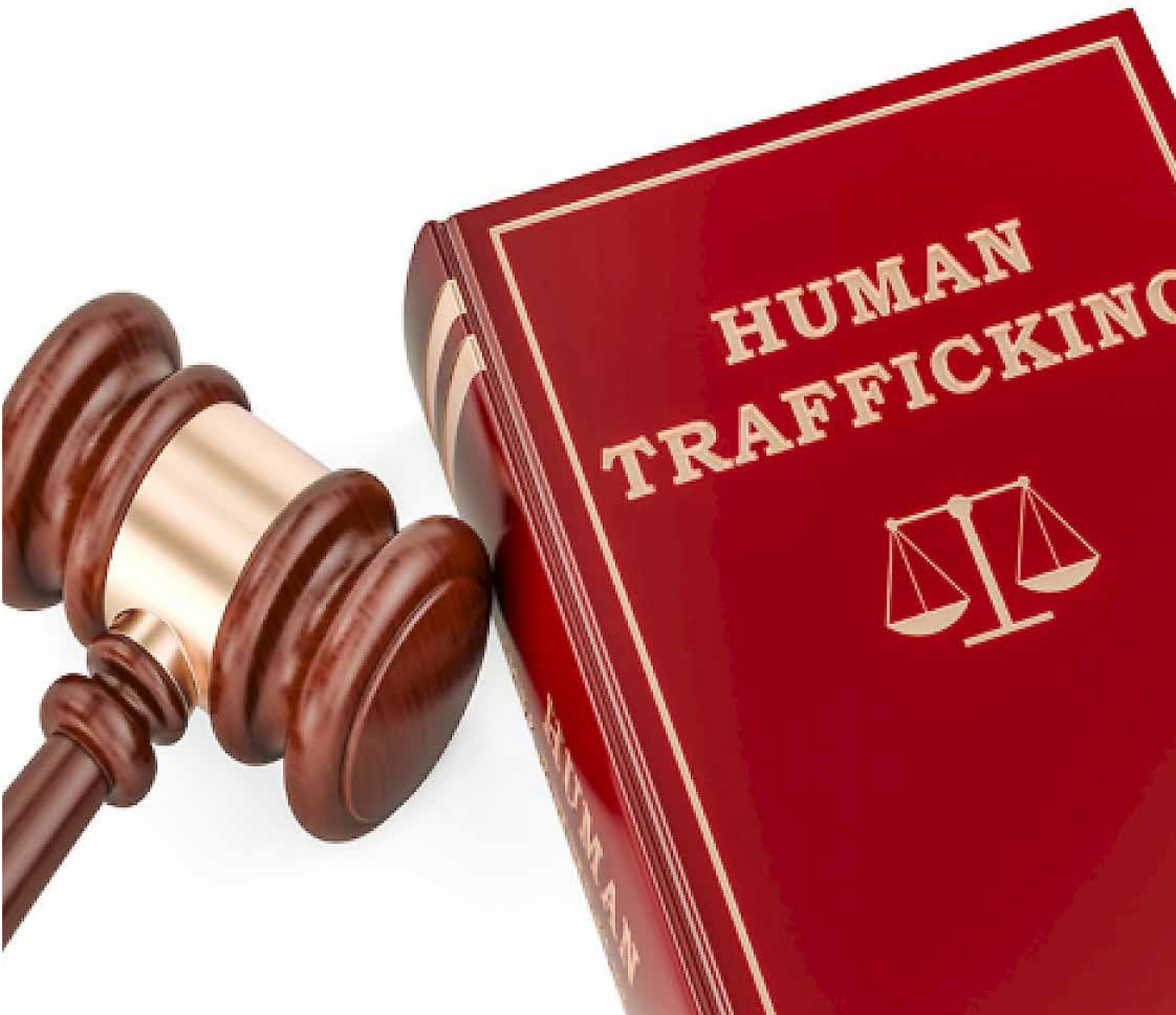
‘Awareness is very key because traffickers are now moving to villages, to people who don’t even know what is happening. Not everybody watches TV. I have met survivors who have told me that their attraction of being trafficked was just the excitement of

boarding an aeroplane. The trick is that there will be an air ticket, you will pay us when you start working. So the excitement alone! Some of the survivors of trafficking sell land, pay a lot of money that they could have invested here and made it, but they go out. So you have to prevent it from happening and when people are trafficked, you need those centres for rehabilitation,’ Igoye says.

Igoye, who is also a senior immigration officer in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, underscores the need for the government to increase its funding towards supporting investigations and prosecution and other counter-trafficking work since the trafficking business is the most lucrative business, with traffickers reaping billions of dollars annually.

According to Igoye, despite making the people trafficked aware of the likely challenges, they remain vulnerable owing to the deception built into the ‘lucrative’ deals promised by the traffickers.

‘I have interacted with officers who say, even when they see you, they try to advise against you going. Because right from passport office, our officers advise these excited people but they ask, “Is it your body?” but what they don’t know is the deceit they are in, because they are going to return damaged. Therefore, we have to look at the underlying causes of why our people are moving in the first place. If you do not sort out the issue of unemployment, in this country or anywhere, it’s going to be a challenge because people are going to move,’ she observes.



The Hon. Herbert Edmund Ariko, the Soroti Municipality MP, says that in order to address the ongoing attack on humanity, the government should devise mechanisms for repatriating Ugandan victims trapped in foreign countries.

Having been actively involved in the Modern Slavery Project, the Hon. Ariko says he is working on a Private Member's Bill that will strengthen and consolidate the existing laws in Uganda related to modern slavery.

He says the new law, which is only awaiting a certificate of financial implication, will provide individual

penalties for each of the facets of modern-day slavery, including commercial sex exploitation, debt bondage, forced labour and child sexual exploitation.

'Currently we do not deal with the issue of repatriation of victims. We do not deal with the element of witness protection in prosecution. We are not dealing with creating direct penalties on companies, or external labour recruiting agencies that take people as a consequence of deception. We have not provided for the element where contractual terms of employment before people leave Uganda should actually be embedded

as far as the Uganda Employment Act is concerned,' the Hon. Herbert Edmund Ariko remarks.

He adds, 'We are bringing in a law, because we feel the other one does not deal with all the facets of all modern-day slavery. Whereas trafficking in persons is criminalised under the Anti-trafficking of Persons Act and has its penalty, the other ones can only be punished when you prove trafficking as a crime,' he argues.