

International Underground Railroad a Modern Necessity

By Peter H. Michael

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The Underground Railroad and Civil War ended most but not all slavery in the United States. An estimated twenty-seven million people worldwide live in slavery today, 40,000 of them in the United States, mainly in agriculture, sweatshops and prostitution.

This modern horror has prison slaves in China producing goods at zero labor cost for world markets, Saharan children "bonded" into slavery at birth because their parents are slaves, Indian bridal slaves, Brazilian charcoal slaves, Pakistani carpet weavers, 1.4 million sex slaves, and 8.4 million enslaved children.

Free Press was invited to host a recent international antislavery conference but deferred when the White House Historical Association offered to host at Decatur House in Washington, DC. On November 14, 2011, a televised debate, *Slavery: A 21st Century Evil*, was held with panelists Kevin Bales, president of Free the Slaves; David Batstone, president of Not for Sale; Luis C. d'Baca, US State Department Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons; and Joy Ezeilo, UN Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons.

The remainder of this editorial is adapted from Bales' conference article, "Slavery: Standing on the edge of extinction?" available at aljazeera.com. Kevin Bales is president of Free the Slaves, Professor of Sociology at London's Roehampton University, and Pulitzer Prize nominee for his 1999 book *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*.

The public often believes slavery ended with nineteenth-century campaigns that brought an end to legal slavery but nothing could be further from the truth. The new slavery that emerged after 1945 is crucially different since slaves are cheaper today than at any time in history. While slaves were major capital purchases in the nineteenth century, today their acquisition is so inexpensive as to be throwaways. In the American South in 1850, an average slave cost about \$1,000, equivalent to \$40,000 today, a major investment. Modern slaves are either costless or inexpensively bought by their enslavers and therefore disposable.

Tripling of world population since 1945, globalization, war, environmental destruction and urbanization have driven Third World people into cities and desperation, a bumper crop of potential slaves. Turning the vulnerable into slaves happens only with government corruption or sheer indifference.

Slaves today are found in agriculture, brickmaking, mining, quarrying, textiles, leather working, prostitution, gem working, jewelry making, weaving, carpet making, domestic work, clearing forests, making charcoal and working in shops. Most of their work ends up for local sale, but slave-made goods make their way through the global economy. Slave origins of carpets, cotton, shrimp, fish, sugar and jewelry are clear. Slave-produced cocoa from the Ivory Coast, and rugs made by slave children in India, Pakistan and Nepal are mainly exported to Europe and the United States.

But there is hope. Today's twenty-seven million slaves are the smallest fraction of world population ever to live in slavery, and the \$40 billion they generate as profits for enslavers is the smallest proportion of the global economy ever represented by slavery, so small that no national economy or industry would suffer if slavery were ended. With universal agreement on the human right of freedom and slavery now illegal in every country, the stage is set for complete eradication.

Today we know how to get people out of slavery. The cost of liberation for all of the world's slaves is estimated at \$11 billion over twenty-five to thirty years, the cost of the bridge Hong Kong is building across the Pearl River or what the city of Seattle has budgeted for its light-rail system.

What is now spent by governments on eradication of slavery ranges from pathetic to insulting, nowhere near what is spent on less serious crimes. The United States spends more on prosecuting recreational marijuana use than on eradication of slavery. We stand at a moment in history when economies, governments, understanding, moral beliefs and hearts are aligned to bring slavery to an end.