

Presentation to the Pan African Parliament

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Distinguished Honourable President, Members of the Bureau and Honourable Members of Parliament,

All protocol observed,

It is a great honour to be invited by the Pan African Parliament.

The courageous founders of the liberated African continent had a dream for a united Africa, from which the scars of European colonisation could be erased.

I am here today, with humility. I am invited to speak of the plight of the sons and daughters of this great African continent, who are today, entrapped in enslavement.

Europe and Africa have a long history together in which Africa received the European explorers, and our European ancestors did not shy away to enter African soil, rich resources and establishing a colonial empire on which much of its current wealth is built.

My country, The Netherlands, particularly excelled in these new endeavours of international trading. This included a global trading empire, but also the transport and facilitation of people from the African continent, uprooted, captured, enslaved, dehumanised, sold and kept in conditions of forced labour and slavery for generations.

Not sufficiently do we realise today, the responsibility that this history brings, nor have we, as European people, really accounted for the crimes committed in this context.

It is in light of this history, that it is shocking to see Europe emerging as a new fortress, investing political, financial and military capital in putting up barriers, stopping the entry of brothers and sisters from the African continent.

Because, we must recognise, it is Europe, which is unashamedly seeking the closure of borders, not its own borders - but seeking to close borders from Africa and in Africa. In doing so it is extending its own borders , externalising, well into the African continent.

And in so doing it excludes African people from the right to free movement, the right to seek protection from political persecution, the right to flee conditions of natural disaster and climate change and the right to seek economic opportunities.

Europe has much soul-searching to do.

It must begin to recognise the dark side of its history, the extractive economic practices on which Europe built its wealth, the political domination it has exerted, the lack of respect with which it viewed the African continent and spoke about its people. I speak in the past, but... has it really passed?

The reality is that instead of reaching Africa the hand, Europe has strengthened its military positions, backed up with digital innovation and data-centers over which it holds much control, and exerts control over the African continent.

With such new ways of control, enters new speak: new ideas of security and safety and European concepts of border-protection have been introduced to sell high-tech security as the new flavour of the day.

Security walls and high-tech borders conceal vulnerabilities; the greatest of which is the unfreedom, caused by the barriers erected, for the people living in bordered places.

The unfreedoms are not caused just by this or by that, these emerge and persist through social systems, when a spirit of community is undermined.

This is what colonisation has done. It has violently undermined the spirit of togetherness, the spirit of 'ubuntu', the spirit of knowing that we are one and that as two continents, we belong together in one world.

And so, let me state unequivocally that Europe is as imprisoned in the tragedy of modern-day enslavement, as are all of those suffering in captivity today on the African continent.

And we must therefore talk about modern slavery. A problem which has many faces.

Concretely, I would like to talk about the situation in Libya.

Thousands die in their attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea. European countries have closed their harbours to ships who carry refugees and migrants, whilst criminalising those who are willing, able and even obliged by the laws of the Sea to offer assistance to people in hazardous situations.

The policy of building an invisible wall South of Europe over the Mediterranean Sea means that large numbers of refugees and migrants are pushed back into Africa, especially Libya and Tunisia.

Many of those, who are being pushed back, have already been victims of the terrible situation of trafficking in human beings. They have been subject to inhumane conditions and have been sold as slaves from one place to another. As they are pushed back into the situation they are trying to escape from, they are left with really no hope.

They are held in places without a possibility to participate in a community, or to support a family, or to enjoy the right of movement. People are held in heart-rendering conditions, in

small prison-like camps, without access to hygiene, lack of food and lack of clean drinking water. Many become ill and die of TB.

In these places, the refugees and migrants are subject to violence, to rape, to degrading sexual violence, cruelty and torture. Many have died. And those remaining, often live among the corpses as a not so subtle reminder of their plight.

They live a life in which everything tells them, they are not worth anything.

While they are made to feel worthless, others see value in their misery and greedily make money out of it.

This is where human trafficking and enslavement begins.

People are being sold for ransom from one place to another. Prices in Libya have now hiked to 20.000 US\$, and once such ransom is paid, people are still sold on and on and on.

It is not a small business. It concerns tens of thousands of refugees and migrants, from many African countries. The financial volume of human trafficking to and in Libya is - conservatively estimated, well worth over 2-3 billion US\$ annually. In the practical situation of a refugee or migrant this means that he or she pays thousands of US\$ to human traffickers, topped up by thousands of US\$ paid in ransoms. These amounts are collected at home and in the diaspora, impoverishing families and enriching those at the top of the trafficking networks.

These criminal payments are bereaving the continent from the finance available to it from remittances and the youth labour of those held in imprisonment.

Like in the old days of slavery, many become party to it, to protect themselves, because perhaps they had no hope left and were thinking they might find some safety. The large proceeds go to the top of these human trafficking networks, who pay those lower down in the system small amounts in commissions. This is a dangerous pyramid in which the lives of refugees and migrants are gambled for money and disposable.

Tragically, many who are held captive are young minors, often unaccompanied or separated from their parents, family and guardians. Many young women are pregnant and traveling with young children and particularly vulnerable.

This is a situation that must be confronted.

As a first step, the European policies to stop the free movement of people should be questioned.

Is it not the open borders that has brought Europe peace and prosperity? And why would open borders not work for Africa? Does the African continent not owe its resilience to the freedom it provides for its people to roam freely, to follow their cattle to greener pastures, without meeting fences, barriers and high-tech walls?

Therefore, firstly, high-tech borders and unnatural barriers and fences which allow goods to pass but stop African people in free movement must be rejected.

And hence, secondly, the condition of human trafficking, reducing people to tradeable goods, allowing slavery to return to the African continent, this must be fought with heart and soul.

And so as a second step, we need to understand the cause of the problem, and in considering this, we must question whether new high tech is part of the solution or part of the problem.

The new digital tools have contributed to the situation of new slavery.

Yes, the new technological tools allow people to stay in touch with their families and to receive support, money and love. This is a good thing. But the high tech also facilitates much uncontrolled criminal activity. They drive people into the hands of traffickers, facilitating the extortion of people, the new tech facilitates collection of ransom payments.

At its core, the new technology provides new gateways, supervised by gatekeepers who have the ability to allow information to get through or not, to allow people through or not, to determine who can travel and who cannot, what others can hear, can know, who can go where and when. The gatekeepers hold power, a little power sometimes and sometimes a lot. Most of the time this power is unconscious and does not have bad intention. In human trafficking new technology has become a perverse facilitator of the entire business. As the technology has developed, new modus operandi in human trafficking have emerged. And this has unsettled the communities who need to find how best to protect themselves in this new digital world.

The digital technology creates invisible walls and new borders determining who may cross and who may not, thereby enhancing the business of human trafficking, helping it to become more valuable, and allowing it to use all of the sophisticated new tools, without impunity. It must be recognised that new tech distributes new powers and sets new controls.

For those held in slavery the gatekeepers of communication are very real. And conversely, one way of getting information out on their predicament, is by using those very new technologies, but they have to pass by the gatekeepers and this often is dangerous to do.

Through new channels, usually unexpectedly established through social media or phone, new bonds are made and sometimes cries of help reach foreign places. And it is in such a moment that a stranger's cry for help will reach you, his suffering becomes your pain, his exhaustion becomes your frustration, and his call for justice becomes your mission.

I am here today to convey the messages of the strangers on the other side of the phone.

The voice of the twelve-year old boy, all by himself, still keeping a small hope to join his sister in Sweden, but who may die before he will ever reach her, as he is weak from TB,

lacking medicine and food. The shame of a young woman, delivering her baby in the midst of a closed camp without privacy, even decency and dependent upon the grace of her fellow inmates to receive the respect a young mother so deserves. The anger of a man digging the grave of a friend he had wanted to help, a friend with whom he shared so much hardship, who perished as a result of torture. And the cry for help of the young man, still strong, determined to make it through, overcoming all fear, and risking his life to speak about all this, while in captivity, bravely, facing danger for his life, speaking for all others.

Slavery has never succeeded in reducing people to goods, and it never will. But it is an unspeakable crime and anyone of us, anywhere, can help in stopping it.

I ask you, please hear the voices of the sons and daughters of the African continent, held in Libya and elsewhere against their will at the hands of traffickers, who beg you to help end their captivity and to ensure they are evacuated, protected and given safe places where they are offered dignity.

Let's join hands. Let us reach out to the hearts of these kids and youngsters in captivity, who need our protection. Let's say: no slavery today, never again.

Thank you, Mr President.