

Committee: General Assembly 3

Chair: Araks van Drooge (Chair)

Issue: Implementing measures to prevent modern slavery and human trafficking in warzones



Research report

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Forming a Dome of international peace

Table of Contents

<i>GA 3</i>	<i>Fout! Bladwijzer niet gedefinieerd.</i>
<i>Introduction to the committee</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Introduction to the topic</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Definition of key terms</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Current Situation</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Major Actors</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Previous International Action</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Further Reading</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>17</i>

Introduction to the committee

The Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Committee, also known as the Third Committee or GA3, is one of the six Main Committees of the United Nations General Assembly. All UN Member States have the right to be represented in the committee. GA3 mainly focuses on social and humanitarian issues, as well as the protection of human rights around the world (United Nations, n.d.-a).

The committee discusses a wide range of topics related to human rights. These include the protection of children, the advancement of women, the treatment of refugees, racism and discrimination, and the protection of fundamental freedoms. GA3 also deals with topics such as crime prevention and criminal justice (United Nations, n.d.-b). Because human trafficking and modern slavery are both closely connected to human rights and international crime, the topic falls directly within the work of the Third Committee.

GA3 discusses issues and prepares draft resolutions, which are then submitted to the General Assembly for consideration. Unlike the Security Council, the Third Committee does not have the power to directly impose sanctions or authorise military action. Instead, its role is mainly to make recommendations and encourage cooperation between Member States. Article 13 of the UN Charter gives the General Assembly the responsibility to promote international cooperation and assist in the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms (United Nations, 1945).

Introduction to the topic

The total number of state-based conflicts in 2024 was higher than at any point since World War II, driven by the rise of internationalised intrastate conflict (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2026). As the number of armed conflicts increases, more people are exposed to displacement, poverty and the breakdown of law enforcement, which can make them especially vulnerable to human trafficking and modern slavery.

Slavery and human trafficking have existed for thousands of years, but they expanded on a much larger scale from the 16th century onwards with the rise of the transatlantic slave trade, when millions of Africans were forcibly transported and sold into slavery for many centuries. During the nineteenth century, many countries formally abolished slavery, but exploitation did not disappear (Schooneveld, 2022).

During the twentieth century, human trafficking gradually became recognised as an international problem rather than only a national one. Governments and international organisations began creating agreements aimed at preventing exploitation and protecting victims. However, despite the abolition of legal slavery in most parts of the world, forms of modern slavery and human trafficking continue to exist today in a more profitable and technological form. This problem becomes even more severe in warzones. Armed conflict often weakens governments, police forces and legal systems, while large groups of people are forced to leave their homes in search of safety. This loss of protection makes civilians more vulnerable to traffickers, criminal networks and armed groups, who can take advantage of the unstable situation.

Human trafficking in warzones can take many different forms. Adults may be forced into labour, sexual exploitation, forced marriage or criminal activities, while children can also be recruited by armed groups. Refugees are particularly at risk, as they may be separated from their families, lack identification documents or depend on others for transport, shelter and food. Traffickers can exploit this dependence by making false promises of safety, employment or transportation. War can also make human trafficking more difficult to detect and prevent. Authorities may have limited control over certain regions, borders can become harder to monitor and victims may have little opportunity to report their situation or seek help. As a result, human trafficking can continue unnoticed in areas where governments and humanitarian organisations already struggle to provide basic protection.

Among the groups affected by human trafficking, women and girls face particular risks, especially when it comes to sexual exploitation. According to the UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024, women and girls made up 61% of detected trafficking victims worldwide in 2022. They were especially overrepresented among victims trafficked for sexual exploitation: more than 90% of detected victims in this category were women or girls (UNODC, 2024)

These risks can increase further during armed conflict. Conflict often leads to displacement, the breakdown of social and legal protection systems and the loss of income and housing. UN Women has found that these circumstances can increase women's and girls' exposure to

trafficking, sexual exploitation and forced marriage. In conflict situations, women may also become more dependent on others for basic needs such as food, transportation and shelter, which can create opportunities for traffickers and armed groups to exploit their vulnerable position (UN Women, 2024).

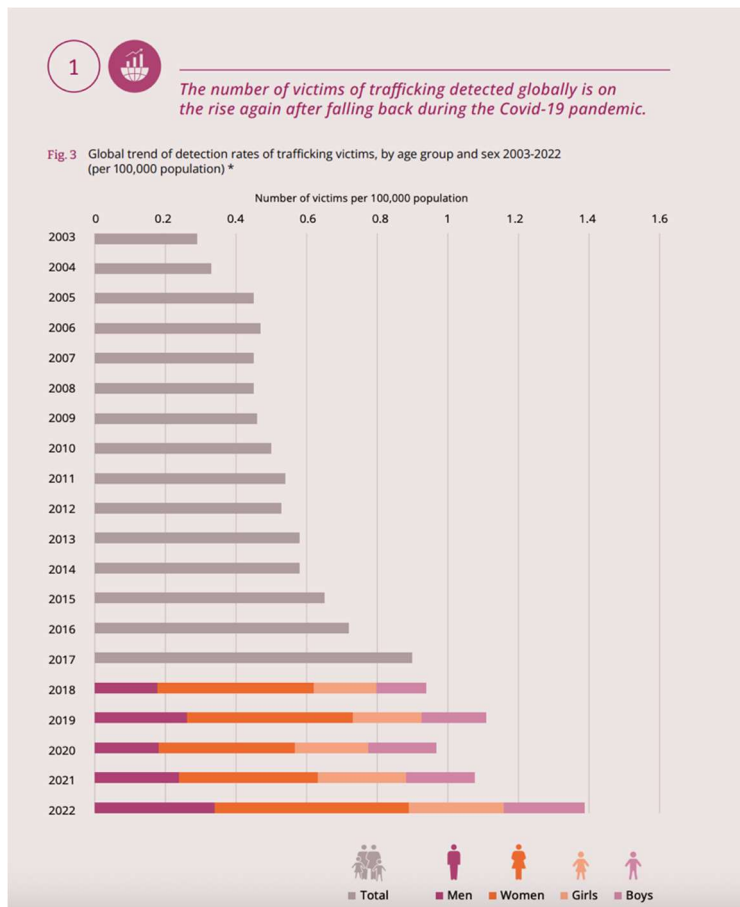


Figure 1: An infographic from the UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024, showing that 61% of detected victims were women or girls.¹

Definition of key terms

Human Trafficking / Trafficking in Persons

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, coercion, deception, abuse of power or abuse of vulnerability for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation can include sexual exploitation, forced labour, slavery, servitude and organ removal. In the case of children, force or coercion does not have to be proven for a situation to be considered trafficking (UNODC, 2019).

Modern Slavery

Modern slavery is an umbrella term used to describe situations in which a person is exploited and cannot freely refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception or abuse of power. It commonly includes forced labour and forced marriage, but can also overlap with human trafficking and other slavery-like practices. Modern slavery itself does not have one single legal definition in international law (ILO, 2022).

Slavery

A situation in which a person exercises powers over another person similar to those connected to ownership. This can include controlling where someone lives, works or goes and preventing them from leaving freely (ILO, 2017).

Forced Labour

Work or services that a person is forced to perform under the threat of punishment and which they have not voluntarily agreed to. Coercion can include violence, threats, withholding wages or identity documents and creating debts that a person cannot escape from.

Sexual Exploitation

The abuse, or attempted abuse, of someone's vulnerable position, unequal power or trust for sexual purposes. This can include obtaining financial, social or other benefits from the sexual exploitation of another person.

Sexual Slavery

A form of slavery in which one person exercises severe control over another person and forces them to engage in sexual acts. Sexual slavery can occur during armed conflict and can constitute a serious violation of international law.

Forced Marriage

A marriage in which one or both people have not freely and fully consented to the marriage. Force may involve physical violence, threats, emotional pressure, deception or financial pressure.

Child Trafficking

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a person under the age of 18 for the purpose of exploitation. Unlike trafficking involving adults, it is not necessary to prove that force, deception or coercion was used when the victim is a child (UNODC, 2024).

Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups

Any person under the age of 18 who has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any role. This includes not only children used as fighters, but also children used as cooks, porters, messengers, spies or for sexual purposes (UNICEF, 2022).

Conflict-Related Sexual Violence (CRSV)

Sexual violence that is directly or indirectly linked to an armed conflict. It can include rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced marriage and trafficking in persons for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

Armed Conflict

A situation involving armed confrontation between two or more States, or between government forces and organised armed groups, or between organised armed groups themselves. International humanitarian law distinguishes between international and non-international armed conflicts.

Refugee

A person who has been forced to leave their country and cannot safely return because of persecution, conflict or serious threats to their life or freedom. Refugees cross an internationally recognised border and receive specific protection under international law.

Internally Displaced Person (IDP)

A person who has been forced to leave their home because of factors such as armed conflict, violence or human rights violations, but who remains within the borders of their own country.

Migrant Smuggling

The facilitation of a person's illegal entry into another country in exchange for a financial or material benefit. Migrant smuggling is different from human trafficking because exploitation is not a required element of smuggling. However, a smuggled migrant can later become a victim of trafficking or exploitation.

Exploitation

The unfair or abusive use of another person for someone else's benefit. Within the context of human trafficking, exploitation can include sexual exploitation, forced labour, slavery, servitude and the removal of organs.

Current Situation

Human trafficking and modern slavery continue to occur in many ongoing conflicts, and recent United Nations reports show that exploitation is increasingly connected to the actions of armed groups. In some cases, trafficking is not simply a side effect of war, but becomes part of the violence itself. People can be abducted and exploited through sexual slavery, forced marriage, forced labour or recruitment by armed groups. The United Nations has also documented trafficking for sexual exploitation as part of broader patterns of conflict-related sexual violence. In its 2026 report, the UN identified such patterns across 21 conflict situations and reported particularly high numbers of verified cases in countries including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan and the Central African Republic (United Nations, 2026).

Another important current development is the exploitation of children. Globally, children accounted for 38% of detected trafficking victims in 2022, and the number of detected child victims had increased by around 31% compared with 2019 (UNODC, 2024). In conflict areas, children can face additional forms of exploitation, including recruitment and use by armed forces or armed groups. This may involve children being used not only as fighters, but also as messengers, porters, spies or for sexual purposes. These different forms of exploitation often overlap, making it difficult to clearly separate human trafficking from other violations taking place during armed conflict.

A clear current example can be found in Sudan, where conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces has continued since April 2023. Recent United Nations investigations have documented widespread conflict-related sexual violence, including cases of forced marriage and sexual slavery. The UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for Sudan found that members of the Rapid Support Forces were implicated in many documented cases and confirmed cases in which women and girls were subjected to forced marriage and sexual slavery (United Nations, 2026). Sudan demonstrates how modern slavery and trafficking can become closely connected to an ongoing conflict. Exploitation may be carried out by individuals or criminal networks, but it can also be committed directly by parties to the conflict. This makes prevention especially challenging, as measures against trafficking must address both organised crime and violations committed by armed actors.

An additional example can be found in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Ongoing fighting in the eastern part of the country has created several forms of exploitation connected to the conflict. In 2024, the United Nations reported that mass displacement in North and South Kivu increased the risk of trafficking for sexual slavery and sexual exploitation, particularly in and around displacement sites. At the same time, UNODC has documented links between armed groups, illegal mining and forced labour. Children have been recruited from villages and exploited in gold mining sites, while others have been recruited and used directly by armed groups (UNODC, 2024).

The situation remained serious in 2025. The United Nations verified the recruitment and use of 1,397 children in the DRC, as well as more than 1,000 cases of child abduction. Sexual violence against children also remained widespread. These figures show how different forms of exploitation can overlap during conflict: a person may be displaced, abducted, forced to work and recruited by an armed group within the same conflict environment (United Nations, 2026).

Major Actors

Human trafficking and modern slavery in warzones involve many different actors. Some are directly responsible for exploiting victims, while others make trafficking possible through recruitment, transportation, corruption or financial support. At the same time, governments, international organisations and humanitarian groups are responsible for preventing trafficking and protecting victims. Understanding these different actors is important because human trafficking in conflict areas is rarely carried out by only one individual or organisation.

Armed Groups and Militias

Armed groups and militias are among the most important actors involved in exploitation during armed conflict. They may abduct civilians, recruit children, force people to work or subject women and girls to forced marriage and sexual slavery. These practices can provide armed groups with fighters, labour, money or control over local populations.

This can currently be seen in several conflicts. In Sudan, the United Nations has documented sexual slavery, forced marriage and forced labour involving members of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and allied armed militias. Women and girls have been abducted from their homes or while fleeing violence and, in some documented cases, were transported to other regions and held by fighters (United Nations Human Rights, 2026).

Similar patterns occur in other conflicts. In Somalia, Al-Shabaab continues to abduct and recruit children. The United Nations reported that the group was responsible for a large share of the verified grave violations against children in the country, including abduction for the purpose of recruitment (United Nations, 2025).

Organised Criminal Networks and Traffickers

Human trafficking is also heavily connected to organised crime. Trafficking networks can be responsible for recruiting, transporting and exploiting victims, sometimes across several countries. According to UNODC, most traffickers analysed in recent court cases operated as part of organised groups or networks rather than completely independently. Around 74% of traffickers included in the cases studied by UNODC operated in some form of organised group (UNODC, 2024).

Conflict can create new opportunities for these networks. Large movements of people and the disruption of normal institutions can make it easier for traffickers to approach people who are searching for employment, transport or safety. Trafficking networks may also work with other criminal organisations involved in activities such as migrant smuggling, illegal mining, arms trafficking or document fraud.

Recruiters and Employers

Not every person involved in trafficking is part of an armed group or large criminal organisation. Recruitment agencies, informal recruiters and employers can also contribute to forced labour and trafficking.

Workers may initially accept what appears to be a normal job but later discover that the conditions are completely different from what they were promised. Exploitative recruiters may charge extremely high recruitment fees, confiscate passports, withhold wages or threaten workers if they try to leave. These practices can eventually create situations of debt bondage, forced labour or human trafficking.

In conflict-affected areas this can be especially relevant because displaced people may urgently need employment and therefore accept jobs without being able to properly check the employer or working conditions.

Criminal Networks and the Exploitation of Natural Resources

In some conflicts, forced labour is directly connected to the exploitation of natural resources. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is an important example. Armed groups operate in areas containing valuable resources such as gold, coltan and other minerals. UNODC has identified links between armed groups, trafficking for forced labour and mineral extraction in eastern DRC.

People, including children, have been recruited or forced to work at mining sites. Armed groups can then profit from the minerals extracted from these areas and use this income to support their activities. Criminal networks can also become involved by transporting and illegally selling these minerals. This creates a cycle in which conflict, forced labour and criminal activity can strengthen each other (UNODC, 2024).

Corrupt Officials and Complicit Actors

Corruption can also play an important role in making human trafficking possible. Not all government officials are involved in trafficking, but corrupt individuals within government institutions can help traffickers avoid detection.

For example, officials may accept bribes to ignore suspicious border crossings, provide false documentation or fail to investigate traffickers. UNODC has found that corruption can facilitate trafficking at almost every stage, from recruitment and transportation to exploitation and prosecution. Private-sector actors can also knowingly assist traffickers, for example by

providing transportation, accommodation or employment while being aware that victims are being exploited (UNODC, 2025).

This can be particularly damaging in warzones, where government institutions may already be under pressure and accountability may be limited.

Smugglers and Intermediaries

Migrant smugglers are not automatically human traffickers, and migrant smuggling and human trafficking are legally different crimes. However, the two can become connected. People fleeing conflict may pay smugglers to help them cross borders or reach safer areas. During or after this journey, they may become victims of trafficking.

For example, traffickers may demand additional payments, create debts or threaten migrants and then force them into labour or sexual exploitation. Other intermediaries, such as drivers, document forgers or accommodation providers, may also knowingly assist trafficking networks. This means that trafficking networks can include many people who perform different roles rather than one single organisation.

State Armed Forces and Security Actors

State forces can also be relevant actors. Governments are normally responsible for protecting civilians and preventing trafficking, but United Nations investigations have documented situations in which members of State security forces or State-linked armed groups have been involved in serious abuses during conflict.

The UN has documented recruitment and use of children and conflict-related sexual violence by both State and non-State actors in different conflicts. These violations do not automatically meet the legal definition of human trafficking, but practices such as forced recruitment, sexual slavery and forced labour can overlap with forms of modern slavery and trafficking. This makes accountability especially difficult when the institutions that should protect civilians are themselves connected to abuses.

International Organisations and National Governments

On the other side are the actors attempting to prevent these practices. National governments have the primary responsibility to criminalise trafficking, prosecute offenders and protect victims. International organisations such as UNODC, IOM, UNHCR, UNICEF and the ILO support these efforts in different ways.

UNODC focuses largely on criminal justice and international cooperation, while IOM and UNHCR play important roles in protecting migrants, refugees and displaced populations.

UNICEF focuses particularly on children, including children recruited and used by armed groups, while the ILO works against forced labour and exploitative recruitment.

These organisations are important, but their work becomes much more difficult when trafficking occurs in active warzones. This creates one of the main challenges for the international community: the actors responsible for exploitation can operate precisely in the areas where the organisations responsible for preventing it have the least access.

Previous International Action

The international community has introduced several agreements and initiatives to combat slavery and human trafficking. These measures have gradually developed from general bans on slavery into more specific international rules on forced labour, human trafficking and the protection of victims in conflict situations.

Early International Agreements against Slavery and Forced Labour

One of the earliest major international agreements was the Slavery Convention of 1926, which required States to work towards preventing and suppressing slavery and the slave trade. This was followed by the Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery of 1956, which expanded international action to other slavery-like practices.

Forced labour was also addressed by the International Labour Organization (ILO) through the Forced Labour Convention of 1930. These early agreements created an important legal basis for later international action against modern slavery, although they were developed before human trafficking was understood in the way it is today.

The Palermo Protocol

One of the most important developments came in 2000, when the United Nations adopted the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*, commonly known as the Palermo Protocol. It supplements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and introduced the first internationally agreed definition of trafficking in persons.

The Protocol focuses on three main areas: preventing trafficking, protecting victims and prosecuting traffickers. It requires States Parties to criminalise trafficking and encourages international cooperation, information-sharing and measures to protect victims. The Protocol also gives special attention to women and children (OHCHR, 2000).

However, the effectiveness of the Palermo Protocol depends heavily on its implementation by individual States. This becomes particularly difficult during armed conflict, where governments may have limited ability to investigate crimes, protect victims or enforce national laws.

United Nations Global Plan of Action

In 2010, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the United Nations Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons. The Plan was created to improve cooperation between Member States and strengthen the implementation of existing international agreements.

It focuses on four main areas: prevention of trafficking, protection and assistance for victims, prosecution of trafficking crimes and stronger international partnerships. The General Assembly also established the United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund for Victims of Trafficking in Persons, which supports organisations providing humanitarian, legal and financial assistance to trafficking victims (United Nations, 2010).

Security Council Resolution 2331

A major development specifically related to warzones took place in 2016, when the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2331. It was the first Security Council resolution specifically dedicated to human trafficking in situations of armed conflict.

The resolution strongly condemned trafficking in conflict areas and recognised that trafficking can contribute to instability and organised crime. It also called on States to investigate and prosecute trafficking committed during armed conflict and to dismantle the networks responsible. Particular attention was given to trafficking carried out by armed and terrorist groups, including ISIL/Da'esh and Boko Haram, for purposes such as sexual slavery, forced labour and sexual exploitation (United Nations, 2016).

Security Council Resolution 2388

The Security Council strengthened this approach one year later through Resolution 2388. The resolution again condemned trafficking during armed conflict and called for better victim identification, stronger law-enforcement cooperation and greater efforts to collect and preserve evidence so that traffickers could later be prosecuted.

It also recognised that refugees and other people displaced by conflict can be particularly vulnerable to trafficking. Importantly, the resolution encouraged States to address related crimes such as corruption, money laundering and migrant smuggling, which can help trafficking networks operate (United Nations, 2017).

Following these efforts, the United Nations also developed more specialised responses, including a Task Team on Anti-Trafficking in Humanitarian Action and improved UNODC data collection on trafficking in conflict situations.

ILO Forced Labour Protocol

Another important measure was the 2014 Protocol to the ILO Forced Labour Convention. The Protocol was created to strengthen the older 1930 Forced Labour Convention and address modern forms of forced labour, including trafficking for labour exploitation.

It requires States Parties to take measures to prevent forced labour, protect victims, provide access to remedies such as compensation and punish those responsible. It also specifically states that action against forced labour should include measures against trafficking in persons for the purpose of forced or compulsory labour (ILO, 2014).

Recent International Action

International action has continued in recent years. In 2025, the UN General Assembly adopted a new Political Declaration on the Implementation of the United Nations Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons. The declaration renewed the international commitment to the Global Plan and recognised that, despite existing international agreements, trafficking remains widespread and continues to change as traffickers make use of new technologies and take advantage of humanitarian crises and other vulnerabilities (United Nations General Assembly, 2025).

Remaining Challenges

Although a large international legal framework already exists, implementation remains one of the main challenges. International agreements such as the Palermo Protocol depend largely on national governments to investigate trafficking, prosecute offenders and protect victims. In an active warzone, these are often exactly the institutions that have the least ability to operate.

Another difficulty is that many existing measures were originally created to deal with human trafficking under relatively stable conditions. Conflict-related trafficking can involve armed groups, child recruitment, sexual slavery, forced marriage and forced labour in territories where governments or international organisations have little access. This means that the challenge for the international community is not simply to create more agreements, but also to find ways of making existing measures effective during armed conflict.

Further Reading

[United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \(UNODC\) – Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024](#)

This report provides recent global data on human trafficking, including information about victims, forms of exploitation and trafficking during armed conflict. It is especially useful for understanding current trafficking patterns and statistics.

[United Nations – Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children \(Palermo Protocol\)](#)

The Palermo Protocol is the main international legal agreement specifically addressing human trafficking. Delegates can use it to understand the international definition of trafficking and the responsibilities of States concerning prevention, prosecution and victim protection.

[International Organization for Migration \(IOM\) – Addressing Human Trafficking and Exploitation in Times of Crisis](#)

This report specifically examines the relationship between humanitarian crises and human trafficking. It includes examples from conflicts such as Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen and discusses why trafficking can become more difficult to prevent during crises.

[United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees \(UNHCR\) – Trafficking in Persons](#)

This source explains why refugees and forcibly displaced people can face increased risks of trafficking. It is particularly useful for researching the relationship between displacement, migration and exploitation during armed conflict.

[Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict – Child Trafficking and Armed Conflict](#)

This study focuses on the connection between child trafficking and violations against children during armed conflict. It discusses issues such as child recruitment, abduction, sexual exploitation and forced labour.

[United Nations Secretary-General – Report on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence](#)

The annual report provides information on sexual violence in current conflicts around the world. It is useful for researching sexual slavery, forced marriage and trafficking for sexual exploitation, as well as the armed groups and other parties involved.

[International Labour Organization \(ILO\), IOM and Walk Free – Global Estimates of Modern Slavery](#)

This report provides global estimates of forced labour and forced marriage and explains the different forms of modern slavery. It can be useful for delegates who want to further research the scale and economic aspects of modern slavery.

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