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Human Trafficking: not my problem

by Philip Baum

I'm not sure about you, but I sense that the aviation security industry has, over the last year or so, been hijacked by the issue of human trafficking. Every conference programme now has either a paper or a workshop dedicated to highlighting the issue of modern day slavery and the role the aviation industry could be taking to stem the tide of human cargo. We are told that the trade in human flesh is now the second most lucrative, and fastest growing, criminal activity in the world and that vulnerable individuals are being transported upon our aircraft to destinations where they may be subject to slave labour, sexual servitude, debt bondage, forced marriage or organ harvesting. According to the International Labour Organisation, 25 million people are trafficked every year. Staggering.

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) has certainly decided that this is an issue that demands our attention. It has launched its #eyesopen campaign and is urging its members to take steps to educate employees to identify signs that a passenger might be either a trafficked person or, indeed, a trafficker. A powerful video supports the initiative, and guidance materials are being prepared to help airlines develop training modules suited to their route structure.

But this call to action is not being overwhelmingly appreciated by the aviation security departments of airlines and airports. It's not that they are unsympathetic to the plight of the victims, rather that they question whether, as tragic as the human stories behind each individual might be, it is really the role of the aviation industry to police the problem. After all, we have enough on our plates trying to identify terrorists and criminals who have the intent to commit an act of unlawful interference against the industry. Those who are trafficked might not have legitimate reasons for travel, but equally they do not pose a threat to the flights on which they travel. Airports have security agencies on hand – immigration and customs – whose remit it is to identify people crossing international borders for nefarious purposes or as duped victims; their duties are normally performed by government employees. Guilt tripping airline staff into feeling that they are suddenly responsible for saving those being trafficked is not, according to many I have spoken with, reasonable. It is often viewed in the same way as making airlines culpable for transporting passengers with incorrect travel documentation or malafide passports – just another thing we can bash the industry over the head about and a way to generate additional income from the fines levied.

I have sat through numerous presentations on modern day slavery and my conscience has been pricked numerous times. I had the good fortune to meet Petra Hensley in Cardiff-by-the-Sea, California in September 2013. Petra was the founder of The Sojka Foundation, a non-profit organisation providing help to survivors of human trafficking and working to raise awareness of, and prevent, trafficking in persons (TIP). Petra had herself, as a teenager, been abducted in the Czech Republic and subjected to horrendous violent and sexual abuse, yet had managed to escape. In 2013, by then living in the US, Petra dreamt of becoming a flight attendant (a dream later realised) and introduced me to the work of Airline Ambassadors International (AAI).

AAI, also a non-profit organisation, and one now comprising of some 16,000 airline employees, provides for vulnerable communities

by leveraging partnerships with the airline industry. Aside from their involvement in disaster relief and running humanitarian missions, they are at the forefront of the United States' aviation industry's efforts to combat TIP and are forging international partnerships. Cue correspondence with the formidable Nancy Rivard and our invitation to AAI to present at our unruly passenger conference (DISPAX World) in London in 2014, and then later at our Inflight Emergency Response event in Riga in 2016 and, again, at Airport Security 2017 in Vienna. AAI has since been asked to present at conferences in Dubai and, this May, at IATA's Cabin Operations Safety Conference in Bangkok. So, I must hold up my hands and admit my guilt in promulgating the issue...one which is not, on the surface, about aviation security.

There is little doubt that my meeting with Petra Hensley had a huge impact on me, even though she had not been trafficked in the literal sense. Likewise, anybody who has listened to Donna Hubbard – also a survivor of sexual servitude – present on behalf of AAI will attest to the impact of her own story of how she became ensnared by a 'loved one' and dragged down into the murky world of prostitution, before emerging and, like Petra, joining the airline industry and becoming a human trafficking awareness trainer. But it was my meeting with Timea Nagy that was the game changer. She had been trafficked. By air. From Hungary to Canada. From freedom to slavery. And we could have stopped it.

I first met Timea in October 2014 at a conference in Toronto organised by Peel Regional Police. For an hour she held the audience – primarily consisting of macho law enforcement officers – spellbound as she told her tale of her fall from being the gregarious daughter of a Hungarian policewoman to a prostitute working cheap tricks in Canadian motel rooms. The story is all too familiar: an advertisement attracting her attention leading to a financed trip to Canada, followed by abduction and years of working to pay off her ever-increasing kidnappers' costs whilst being threatened with tales as to what would happen to her family back home if she did not comply. In many respects it was just another tragic story of naivety, but the lines that hit home were not the detail of what happened once she had arrived in Canada, but her highlighting the number of times during her journey there that somebody could have intervened...but didn't.

Timea Nagy exemplifies the problem that IATA and a host of charities and governmental institutions are trying to address. Human trafficking is our problem. Not just because of the guilt trip or our social responsibility, not just so that we can pat ourselves on the back or be the one to save a life, but because trafficking is a criminal activity taking place at our airports and on board our aircraft. We may not be the intended target, but it is our responsibility to ensure that we operate in a crime-free environment with zero tolerance for transporting anybody who does not have a legitimate reason to travel.

Yes, immigration officials should take the lead, but they do not need to work in a silo. The reality is that all airport-based roles of a static nature have their limitations; they can only observe a passenger at a single moment in time. Flight attendants, on the other hand, have

the potential to monitor passengers over an extended period. Whilst I am cautious about stereotyping, they also find it easier to buy into the fight against human trafficking than they do counterterrorism. In part, it's because they do tend to be 'people people' who can empathise with the human stories bubbling away beneath the façade, but it's also because, such is the scale of the human trafficking industry, they know that there is a more than reasonable chance that they might encounter a victim of trafficking in the course of their careers, whereas few actually believe that they will encounter a terrorist.

As an ardent proponent of non-racial profiling, I'll happily accept any way we can get frontline staff to pay closer attention to passenger behaviour. If the issue of human trafficking engages crew, that's fantastic news not only in the fight against modern day slavery, but also in our counterterrorist endeavours. If we can start reporting deviations from baseline behaviour, it means we are taking note of the absence of the normal and the presence of the abnormal.

From an airport perspective, the security checkpoint also offers the victim of human trafficking the opportunity – and perhaps a final one – to alert officials as to their plight if they are travelling under duress. But that also requires screeners to be alert to such action.

In May this year, airport screeners in Gothenburg were told to look out for girls who might be trying to signal that they were travelling against their will. Girls fearing that they might be being taken overseas for a forced marriage or female genital mutilation have been advised to conceal a metal spoon in their underwear in order to set off the archway metal detector and then to request a private search to resolve the cause of the alarm. The advice being given in Sweden follows a similar initiative in 2013 in the UK led by British charity Karma Nirvana. Concern is at its highest in the school holidays when young women are more likely to be taken on sudden trips. Whilst family

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members often present themselves together at immigration counters, the checkpoint is the one place where a girl might be able to speak free of parental interference.

And if none of these arguments convince you to play your role in tackling human trafficking and you really do wish to remain fixated on the terrorist threat, then just remember that terrorism is financed by a host of criminal activities, including trafficking. On a frighteningly regular basis, arrests are made of individuals with links to terrorist groups, including Islamic State, who are actively financing their activities through the trafficking of asylum seekers and the exploitation of other vulnerable individuals.

At the outset, I said that the industry had been 'hijacked' by the issue. If that's true, then for once I'm happy to be hijacked. We can complain about whose budget it comes out of and that, however important the issue, awareness training should not come at the expense of training in other core security subjects. Airline CEOs that embrace the call to arms must also find and finance the additional time necessary to provide adequate instruction. But we cannot ignore the issue. And speaking of hijacking, if ever there was a topic that has hijacked our agenda, it's 'explosive detection'. We complain about one paper on human trafficking surfacing at every meeting yet allow entire conferences to become fixated on the detection of explosives at our screening checkpoints, almost to the exclusion of all other challenges. But that's a story for another day... ■

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