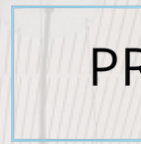




SOVEREIGN ORDER OF MALTA
AMBASSADOR
AGAINST HUMAN TRAFFICKING



PRAEVENI
PREVENTING MODERN SLAVERY



PONTIFICIA
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*Institute of
Anthropology*

Report of the Rome Conference Against Human Trafficking

25th Anniversary of the Palermo Protocol *A Call to Action*

December 10, 2025
Pontifical Gregorian University
Rome



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This Conference has been a **meaningful contribution** to the **global movement to end human trafficking and all forms of modern slavery**, helping to **mobilise additional resources** and engagement from governments, civil society, including faith-based organizations, academia, businesses, media, local communities, and NGOs, as well as victims and survivors.

This is only the beginning of a **renewed and strengthened collective effort** to make the prevention of, and fight against, contemporary slavery a **priority in the protection of human life and dignity**, at the **very heart of contemporary policy and moral responsibility**.

• Introduction - Purpose and Rationale of the Conference.....	p.3
• Panel I - Structures.....	p.4
• Address by His Eminence Cardinal Fabio Baggio.....	p.5
• Panel II - Processes.....	p.6
• Panel III - Law Enforcement and Rule of Law.....	p.7
• Panel IV - Persons.....	p.9
• Panel V - Content.....	p.11
• Conclusion.....	p.13
• Next Steps and Planned Actions.....	p.14
• Special Thanks from the Organizers.....	p.15
• Additional Resources.....	p.15





Introduction – Purpose and Rationale of the Conference

The Rome Conference commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Palermo Protocol was convened at a moment of both symbolic and strategic importance. While the Protocol represents one of the most widely ratified and influential international legal instruments for combating human trafficking, the persistence and expansion of human trafficking and modern slavery worldwide raise serious questions about the effectiveness of current responses. The conference was therefore conceived not merely as a celebratory event, but as a critical reflection on implementation, impact, and future direction.

From the outset, the conference was framed as a call to action. As noted by several speakers, including H.E. the Most Reverend Archbishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, the fight against human trafficking cannot be reduced to legal compliance alone but must be understood as a moral, social, and spiritual imperative. In his opening prayer and remarks, Archbishop Sánchez Sorondo recalled that trafficking constitutes a “grave violation of human and Christian dignity”, urging participants to recognise Christ in the suffering of victims, in the spirit of Matthew 25. This ethical framing set the tone for discussions that consistently emphasised dignity, responsibility, and solidarity.

The Grand Chancellor of the Sovereign Order of Malta, H.E. Riccardo Paternò di Montecupo, underlined that human trafficking is not a mere crime but also a symptom of deeper societal fractures, including poverty, armed conflict, discrimination, and institutional collapse. He emphasised the Order of Malta’s holistic engagement, combining humanitarian action, medical assistance, diplomatic advocacy, and field presence in over 115 countries.

H.E. Stefano Pizzicannella, Special Envoy of Italy on Human Trafficking Issues, reaffirmed Italy’s commitment to the Palermo Protocol, emphasising its enduring normative impact, Italy’s national and international coordination efforts, and the necessity of sustained multilateral cooperation to address the evolving and transnational nature of human trafficking.

Likewise, the Rector of the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rev. Mark A. Lewis, S.J., highlighted human trafficking as a grave and ongoing global challenge, emphasising the crucial role of academic institutions, churches, and local communities in combating indifference through awareness, recognition, and prompt, concrete action in support of victims.





Panel I – Structures

The first panel addressed the structural foundations of the global response to human trafficking, asking whether existing national, regional, and international architectures are adequate to confront an increasingly complex and adaptive crime. Chaired by H.E. Dr. Josef D. Blotz, Grand Hospitaller of the Sovereign Order of Malta, the discussion moved beyond a descriptive review of institutions to consider their future viability and adaptability.

The recurring theme was the paradox between the strength of the normative framework and the weakness of its implementation. Participants widely agreed that the Palermo Protocol, together with complementary UN, European, and national instruments, provides a solid legal basis. However, these structures are undermined by fragmentation, uneven political commitment, and chronic underfunding.

H.E. Dr. Josef D. Blotz emphasised that future protection architectures must be designed to evolve in tandem with the crime itself, rather than responding belatedly to emerging threats.

Italy's national anti-trafficking system, presented by H.E. Stefano Pizzicannella, illustrated both the potential and the limits of structured coordination. Italy's model integrates governmental authorities, law enforcement, the judiciary, local administrations, and civil society, supported by state-funded victim assistance projects and a national helpline. Yet even this comparatively advanced system faces increasing strain due to growing migration flows, digital exploitation, and reduced international funding.

International perspectives reinforced these concerns. Ms. Chiara Cardoletti, UNHCR Representative to Italy, the Holy See and San Marino, highlighted how forced displacement, family separation, and limited legal migration pathways create environments in which trafficking thrives, particularly along migration routes.

Prof. Medlir Mema, Founding Director of the AI Ethics and Governance Institute for Existential Risk, emphasised that artificial intelligence and digital tools have radically transformed trafficking dynamics, allowing perpetrators to operate at scale while legal and institutional responses remain largely technology-neutral.

Ms. Carlotta Santarossa, IOM Project Coordinator and Senior Focal Point for Counter-trafficking, underscored that, despite a robust international and EU legal framework, anti-trafficking systems remain only partially effective due to shortcomings in early victim identification within migration contexts, stressing that timely intervention, full implementation of existing tools, and the central role of victims' voices are essential in ensuring access to protection.

Prof. Tomoya Obokata, UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, outlined the independent role of UN Special Procedures in combating contemporary forms of slavery through fact-finding, dialogue, and engagement with States, highlighting both their added value in identifying gaps and good practices and the serious challenges posed by limited resources and insufficient State cooperation.

The panel concluded that existing structures are necessary but insufficient. Without sustained investment, technological adaptation, and genuine coordination across sectors and borders, institutional frameworks risk remaining formally robust but practically ineffective.



Address by His Eminence Cardinal Fabio Baggio, C.S., Under-Secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development

His Eminence Cardinal Fabio Baggio, conveyed greetings from the Dicastery's leadership and gratitude to the organisers for their commitment against human trafficking. He reaffirmed Pope Francis's strong condemnation of trafficking as a grave wound in contemporary society and highlighted the Dicastery's role in prevention, rescue, and the accompaniment and reintegration of victims. Grounding his remarks in a theological and pastoral perspective, he presented victims as the suffering body of Christ and framed anti-trafficking work as a mission of care, dignity restoration, and liberation, inspired by Christ's redemptive sacrifice and the Jubilee call to free the oppressed.

Recognising trafficking as a global challenge beyond the capacity of any single nation, Cardinal Baggio quoted Pope Leo XIV's reminder that our mission should be to offer even our own bodies in place of prisoners, thus literally fulfilling the commandment: "No one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends". He also stressed the need for coordinated action across Church institutions, governments, and civil society, expressed appreciation for all engaged in these efforts, and called for renewed determination and solidarity to eradicate trafficking.





Panel II – Processes

Chaired by the Rt. Rev. Bishop Dr. Alastair Redfern, Chair of the Clewer Initiative and the Global Sustainability Network of the Church of England, the discussion focused on the gap between legal commitments and lived realities.

Several speakers highlighted that, despite decades of policy development, victim identification rates remain alarmingly low, while prosecutions lag even further behind.



Ms. Reem Alsalem, UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls, stressed that women and girls continue to be disproportionately affected, and warned against enforcement-driven approaches that prioritise prosecution at the expense of prevention and protection. She recalled that the Palermo Protocol explicitly requires action to discourage demand, particularly for sexual exploitation, yet this obligation remains politically sensitive and inconsistently implemented.

Ms. Mama Fatima Singhateh, UN Special Rapporteur on the Sale and Sexual Exploitation of Children, emphasised that trafficked children are frequently misidentified as irregular migrants rather than recognised as victims of serious crimes. She argued that effective processes must be child-centred, trauma-informed, and designed to build trust rather than fear. Without such trust, victims are unlikely to come forward, and justice systems are deprived of the cooperation necessary to dismantle trafficking networks.

Law enforcement perspectives, including those from INTERPOL, reinforced the importance of victim-centred approaches. Chief Superintendent Mark Beavan, Head of Crimes against Children Unit, noted that successful investigations depend on early identification and sustained victim support, and that prosecution outcomes improve when victims are protected from retraumatisation.

Across interventions, panellists converged on the conclusion that processes must be redesigned around victims' needs rather than institutional convenience.

Don Benedetto Barberini and Dr. Luca Aragone, President and Vice-President of CISOM, the Italian relief corps of the Order of Malta, highlighted CISOM's long-standing humanitarian engagement in migrant assistance and anti-trafficking efforts, including daily medical teams of 25 doctors and nurses across five Italian operational areas, assisting over 30,000 people in 2024 and 22,000 in 2025, with a cumulative impact of more than 400,000 lives saved since 2008.

Mr. Rosario Maria Gianluca Valastro, National President of the Italian Red Cross, emphasised the Italian Red Cross' expanding role, leveraging over 160,000 volunteers in frontline activities, pre-identification, and survivor-centred protection, supported by specialised tools, EU-funded projects, and integrated humanitarian responses that adapt to evolving trafficking patterns.



Panel III – Law Enforcement and Rule of Law

The panel examined the role of criminal justice systems in preventing human trafficking, dismantling trafficking networks, prosecuting perpetrators, and protecting victims. The discussion emphasised that trafficking is a transnational, profit-driven crime requiring coordinated efforts among states and local authorities, as well as collaboration with civil society, faith-based organizations, and international partners, to strengthen the rule of law and ensure accountability.



The Honorable Pamela Bondi, Attorney General of the United States, opened the panel by framing human trafficking as a global issue with profound social, economic, and security implications. She highlighted the growing danger of trafficking, including the repeated exploitation of unaccompanied children, referred to as “recycled children”, and its links to drug trafficking, particularly fentanyl. She outlined the US’s comprehensive approach, including border enforcement, targeting organised criminal groups such as MS-13 and TDA, and expanding Joint Task Force Alpha and the Homeland Security Task Force. She emphasised victim-centred measures, including \$95 million in funding for anti-trafficking programs across 46 states, the establishment of safe houses, and the use of asset forfeiture to support survivors. As Attorney General, she stressed inter-agency collaboration, prevention during major events, and the necessity of integrating law enforcement, medical, advocacy, and community services to ensure holistic support for victims.

Chairing, the Honorable Lynn Fitch, Mississippi Attorney General, reinforced the centrality of partnerships in anti-trafficking efforts. She highlighted multi-jurisdictional cooperation in Mississippi and at events such as the Super Bowl, resulting in the rescue of approximately 380 individuals, including 23 minors, through integrated services encompassing medical care, advocacy, shelter, and reintegration. She underscored the value of knowledge sharing and collaboration through networks such as the Attorney General Alliance, emphasising that effective strategies depend on coordinated action and maintaining the dignity and safety of survivors.



The Honorable Todd Blanche, Deputy Attorney General of the United States, focused on strategic prosecution and the critical role of community and faith-based support in assisting victims, particularly vulnerable populations such as foster children and undocumented individuals. He highlighted the importance of task forces and the Homeland Security Task Force in coordinating expertise and intelligence, as well as the need for long-term planning to dismantle trafficking networks effectively.



Mr. Andrew Bailey, Co-Deputy Director of the FBI, presented the investigative perspective, detailing the FBI's 90 Child Exploitation and Human Trafficking task forces and their collaborative, multi-level approach. He emphasised victim rights, early engagement to build trust, and the work of NGOs and faith-based organisations in providing lifelong support. Mr. Bailey highlighted tangible outcomes, including nearly 500 arrests and 350 victim rescues over the past year, and noted the growing prevalence of labour trafficking domestically and internationally, including cases involving forced labour in multinational corporations. He stressed the importance of evolving strategies, cross-task force collaboration, and continuous vigilance to adapt to new methods used by traffickers.

The second session of this panel expanded the discussion to European and international perspectives. H.E. Frances Fitzgerald, former Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of Ireland, emphasised that trafficking affects all communities and that gender equality and economic progress alone have not reduced exploitation. She highlighted recent EU legislative advances, including the revised Trafficking Directive and the Directive on Violence Against Women, as well as Ireland's adoption of the Nordic Model to reduce demand. She stressed the need for criminal justice agencies to prioritise trafficking, allocate adequate resources, and implement EU directives effectively.



Sir Stephen Kavanagh, former UK Chief Constable and Interpol Operations Director, noted the persistence of child exploitation 25 years after the Palermo Protocol and underscored that arrests alone are insufficient. Using the Eritrean trafficker Kidane Zekarias Habtemariam case, he illustrated the transnational, polycriminal nature of trafficking and called for strengthened international cooperation, standardised reporting, and network disruption. He highlighted Interpol's Liberta 2 operation, which involved 116 countries, safeguarded over 3,220 potential victims, and led to 2,500 arrests, as an example of effective multinational action.

Detective Chief Superintendent Colm Noonan, from An Garda Síochána (Ireland's National Police Service), outlined Ireland's victim-centred approach, in which police lead investigations while prioritising survivor welfare. He detailed the National Referral Mechanism, which provides medical care, legal support, and safe accommodation while fostering trust by avoiding immigration prosecution. DCS Noonan emphasised the importance of specialised expertise in fraud, economic crime, and digital investigations, as well as international cooperation with agencies such as Interpol and Europol. He underscored that human trafficking is a high-profit, low-risk crime driven by societal demand, requiring financial investigations, asset recovery, and systemic deterrence.



Panel IV – Persons

Shifting the focus from systems to people, examined why, twenty-five years after the Palermo Protocol, fewer than one percent of victims worldwide are identified and supported.

Chair Father Leonir Chiarello, Superior General of the Scalabrinian Missionaries, highlighted collaboration among civil society, governments, and international organisations, contrasting traffickers' profit-driven motives with human-centred support. He stressed on the “five Ps” (protection prosecution, partnership, prevention, and planning) and the importance of precise language in addressing trafficking, pornography, and sexual exploitation, citing examples from France where multi-actor initiatives enhance advocacy and victim protection.

Ms Tatiana Kotlyarenko, Expert on Violence against Women and Girls and Human Trafficking, emphasised survivor engagement, framing trafficking as a global security issue, rejecting language that normalises exploitation, and advocating for the Nordic equality model and effective exit strategies. She highlighted emerging forms of exploitation and the critical role of faith and community in supporting resilience.

Ms. Geneviève Colas, from Secours Catholique (Caritas-France), described coordinated NGO and shelter efforts, including victim identification, survivor-informed training, comprehensive legal, health, and social support, advocacy, and networking.

Sr. Patricia Ebegbulem, Sister of Saint-Louis (SSL), Founder of Bakhita House, Lagos, Nigeria, agreed with Geneviève Colas and stressed the importance of trauma-informed care, anti-corruption measures, safe immigration practices, and sustainable funding for shelters and reintegration programs.





Dr. Maria Mercedes Rossi, MD, Representative of Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII (APG23) to the UN, highlighted APG23's international work, focusing on prevention through awareness campaigns, education, and outreach, alongside intersectional, personalised victim support covering legal, psychological, health, and professional needs. She emphasised addressing root causes, combating demand, and fostering long-term social inclusion through integrated intercultural care.

Complementing this perspective, Dr. Rafał Szepietowski, Director for International Cooperation, Maltese Aid - Maltese Medical Service Poland, focused on community-led prevention, noting that volunteers and ordinary citizens often act as first responders during displacement crises such as the Russia–Ukraine conflict. He highlighted the importance of embedding safeguarding, psychological first aid, and risk awareness into volunteer and humanitarian training to strengthen trust, social resilience, and the practical effectiveness of legal frameworks.

Ms. Sendrine Constant from ECPAT International focused on child trafficking, noting systemic failures, fragmented adult-centric protection systems, and the need for cross-border coordination, child-centred referral mechanisms, and trauma-informed long-term support.

Audience discussions highlighted reducing demand through the Nordic/equality model, societal education, and empowering survivors as anti-trafficking leaders.

The panel concluded that combating human trafficking requires holistic, victim-centred strategies, combining survivor engagement, trust, cross-sector collaboration, trauma-informed care, and systemic reform. Civil society, faith-based organisations, and community networks are central to complementing institutional efforts, ensuring victims are recognised, supported, and empowered, while consistent funding and policy integration remain critical to preventing further exploitation.



Panel V – Content

Examining the need to shift responses to human trafficking and modern slavery from post-offending measures toward proactive prevention, the discussion highlighted that while victim identification and support are essential, relying primarily on survivors coming forward is insufficient. The panel explored the components of effective strategies to protect vulnerable populations, and promote a sustained reduction in trafficking, emphasising that coordinated, multi-sectoral approaches are essential for long-term impact.



Chairing the panel, Mr. Kevin Hyland OBE, LL.M., Former UK Anti-Slavery Commissioner and Chief Executive Officer of Praeveni Global, opened the discussion by stressing the importance of collaboration between business, civil society, and faith-based actors. He reflected on 25 years of progress, noting that legislation exists in 180 countries, yet technological and economic developments have transformed trafficking dynamics. Mr. Hyland highlighted the complexity of modern supply chains, including child labour in mineral extraction and semiconductor production, and stressed that prevention is achievable if prioritised and integrated into business practices. He advocated treating trafficking profits as criminal, akin to money laundering or terrorism proceeds, to fund victim protection and prevention initiatives without additional public expenditure, calling for urgent action to avoid repeating past inaction.

Mr. Andrea Favalaro, Former President of Christian Brothers Investment Services (CBIS) and Independent Strategic Advisor, addressed the financial sector's role in combating trafficking, framing it as both a humanitarian crisis and a systemic market failure. Referencing the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences' *Mensuram Bonam* framework, he proposed a three-pronged investment approach, engagement, enhancement, and exclusion, to influence corporate behaviour, support ethical initiatives, and avoid investment in exploitative companies. Mr. Favalaro identified high-risk industries, including agriculture, fishing, shipping, logistics, mining, and luxury apparel, and emphasised the power of institutional investors to enforce ethical practices across global supply chains.

Mr. Jean-Benoît Manhes, Deputy Coordinator of the Office of the OSCE Special Representative for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, highlighted trafficking as a multidimensional issue with human rights, economic, and security dimensions. He stressed that prevention is effective only when integrated with robust prosecution and protection systems and advocated comprehensive national action plans addressing all forms of exploitation. Mr. Manhes emphasised private sector engagement, civil society involvement, regional cooperation across the 57 OSCE states, and the importance of data-driven, victim-centred approaches from prevention to reintegration.



Sr. Abby Avelino, MM, International Coordinator of Talitha Kum and member of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), shared insights from over 6,000 Catholic sisters worldwide. She emphasised prevention as the priority, addressing root causes such as gender inequality, unsafe migration, and conflict, and underscored the centrality of trust in holistic survivor support. Sr. Avelino highlighted educational initiatives, including Youth Ambassadors and the “Walking in Dignity” program, and stressed that collaboration across States, civil society, and faith groups, guided by an “economy of care” and survivor leadership, is essential for creating safer communities.

Mr. Karl Racine, Partner at Hogan Lovells Law firm and Former Attorney General of Washington D.C., described his firm’s pro bono support and financial initiatives to assist survivors. He stressed bipartisan collaboration among U.S. attorneys general, prioritising non-criminalisation of victims, prosecuting traffickers, and targeting financial crimes linked to exploitation. Mr. Racine highlighted engagement with financial services and payment platforms to detect and prevent trafficking and underscored that collaboration between law firms, businesses, and governments can deliver practical, scalable solutions while supporting survivors.

Dr. Cristina Duranti, Director of the Good Shepherd International Foundation (GSIF), outlined community-based, person-centred prevention programs across 34 countries, focusing on protecting vulnerable girls, women, and children. She highlighted initiatives such as the “Children Not Workers” campaign in Nepal, intercepting trafficking and reintegrating victims, and the Bon Pasteur Kolwezi Program in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, promoting ethical supply chains in cobalt mining. Dr. Duranti emphasised that effective prevention requires collaboration with businesses, investors, and local communities to address the root causes of trafficking.

Audience discussions reinforced the importance of financial accountability, transparency, and market leverage in combating trafficking. Participants emphasised global registries of compliant and non-compliant companies, shareholder engagement, coalition-building, and the use of public procurement rules to incentivise ethical practices. Over half of the approached companies reportedly welcomed engagement, demonstrating that exclusion combined with constructive collaboration can drive measurable change in supply chains. The panel concluded that proactive prevention requires integrating business, financial, and civil society mechanisms, guided by ethical frameworks such as *Mensuram Bonam*, to ensure both the protection of vulnerable populations and the accountability of perpetrators.





Conclusion

The conference concluded with a clear and unified message: human trafficking persists not because of a lack of legal frameworks, but because of insufficient implementation, weak coordination, limited political will and a severe mismatch between criminal profits and public investment in the fight against human trafficking.



H.E. Prof. Michel Veuthey emphasised that the conference was intentionally framed as a call to action rather than a commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the Palermo Protocol.

He underlined that while numerous legal instruments exist at national, regional, and global levels, their impact remains limited without effective enforcement and broad societal engagement.

He stressed that human trafficking is a grave violation of human dignity and the rule of law, affecting security, economies, public health, and the environment, and must be addressed as a moral and legal imperative rather than an act of charity. Prof. Veuthey also highlighted the importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships, survivor leadership, training, awareness-raising, and spiritual engagement as essential pillars for reversing current trends and advancing the abolition of modern slavery.

Mr. Kevin Hyland, OBE, LL.M. reinforced this assessment by pointing to the stark gap between the strength of existing legislation and the weakness of its implementation.

Despite comprehensive international conventions and national laws in most countries, prosecution rates remain extremely low and the vast majority of victims are never identified. He underlined the lack of political will and investment, noting the disproportion between the billions generated annually by traffickers and the comparatively modest resources allocated to combating trafficking.

Mr. Hyland called for the full implementation of existing laws, evidence-based action guided by research and standards, increased accountability for traffickers, and sustained investment to empower vulnerable communities and civil society.

In the closing reflections, Fr. Prof. Hans Zollner, S.J., Founder and Director of the Institute of Anthropology (IADC) at the Pontifical Gregorian University (PGU), offered a moral and ethical synthesis of the discussions, recalling the words of St. Ignatius of Loyola that “love is shown more in deeds than in words”. His intervention echoed the shared conviction that commitments, declarations, and legal texts must be translated into concrete action, sustained solidarity, and personal and institutional responsibility.



Next Steps and Planned Actions

The conference was not intended to create a new group or network. One of the outcomes of the event was a clear message that more implementation is necessary and utilising current frameworks and legislation is crucial. The recent Index prepared by Praeveni Global creates a baseline on which to monitor and build political commitment and resourcing by Governments. In addition, the 2026 US Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report requests data on Government expenditure related to anti-trafficking efforts. Both of these data mechanisms will demonstrate commitment and the reality of what is possible.

In addition, planned actions include:

- Delivery of training in partnership between the Order of Malta, UNITAR, the Pontifical Gregorian University and other bodies
- Development of materials and training modules in French with Université Côte d'Azur (Nice)
- Working with Praeveni Global and the G20 Interfaith Forum to advise the G20 members on the importance of responses within their mandate and necessary actions
- Develop work alongside actors such as the Santa Marta Group, utilising their network and model
- Greater collaboration and influencing with UN Member States in Geneva, New York and Vienna
- Cooperation with Talitha Kum and religious sisters in organising a Holy Mass at the Vatican on St Josephine Bakhita Day, 8th February 2026
- Increasing partnership with the Diplomatic Corps of the Holy See and accredited to the Holy See
- Recognising 2026 as a century since the adoption of the Slavery Convention.





Special Thanks from the Organizers

We extend our deep gratitude to the Pontifical Gregorian University for hosting the Conference and to the Grand Magistry of the Sovereign Order of Malta for their invaluable support. We also recognise and thank all speakers and delegates, including representatives from organisations, foundations, academic institutions, civil society, faith-based groups, non-governmental organisations, businesses, legal practitioners, and, importantly, survivors. Their presence and contributions were essential in enriching the Conference experience.

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Additional Ressources

Visit the official website of the Rome Conference to access all additional resources, including session replays, photo galleries, keynote interventions, presentations, and minutes: www.romeconference2025.com

Explore the Praeveni Global Modern Slavery Index here: www.praeveniglobal.org/prevention-index-about.

Information on upcoming online courses, webinars, and events related to human trafficking is available at: www.cuhd.org

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