

Human traffickers made victims collect clothes for bogus charity

RICHARD POHLE

George Arbuthnott

TWO Lithuanians have been arrested on suspicion of human trafficking after allegedly luring men to Britain to pose as charity workers collecting donations of used clothing.

Jonas Romek says he was paid £2 a day to hand out leaflets to the public in Oxford and Swindon promising any clothes donated would be given to the poor in Lithuania.

In fact, the garments were sold in eastern European shops for profit, he told *The Sunday Times*. The traffickers warned that any attempt at escape would be met with violence.

Romek, in his twenties, fled and alerted the police who raided a property in Swindon where he says he lived in cramped conditions with up to a dozen Lithuanian men and women. The two men, aged 33 and 39, were arrested on trafficking and slavery charges and a second suspected victim was freed.

This type of forced criminality is an emerging tactic for traffickers in Britain. The Salvation Army, which supports adult victims in the UK, said several eastern Europeans had come forward in the past six months reporting similar exploitation and the National Crime Agency confirmed that it had also been alerted.

Such is the concern that Anthony Steen, the home secretary's special envoy combating modern slavery, visited



Romek at his home in a Lithuanian forest on Thursday.

He said the case illustrated how important it was that the Modern Slavery Bill granted victims immunity from prosecution for crimes committed under duress.

"By [us] punishing victims, gang masters get off scot-free," Steen said. "Police are

impotent unless victims speak out to nail the real criminals — their traffickers. Imprisoned, they will never help law enforcement, especially if they are too scared to talk for fear of retribution."

Speaking through an interpreter, Romek described how he was close to sleeping rough in a Lithuanian city last

summer after being made redundant. He spotted an online advert offering a lucrative job in Britain helping a charity raise funds.

He called the number and a man named Ignas convinced him a new life awaited him in Britain. Romek took a mini-van across Europe to Swindon, but it was not long

before he realised the promises were bogus.

"We had to be up at dawn to travel to Oxford to hand out the leaflets. In the evenings we would collect the clothes bags. We were paid just £1 per bag, which barely gave us enough to feed ourselves, let alone pay Ignas rent. But when we protested he would threaten us."



David Williams supports Dreams Come True, which was horrified to discover its name had allegedly been used by traffickers collecting second-hand clothes

Romek was ordered to say that he represented a charity called Dreams Come True. The name is shared by a well-known charity that helps terminally ill children to realise their dreams, such as meeting a favourite pop star or swimming with dolphins.

Peter Newman, its chief executive, said he had not

been aware of the case and was "horrified" that the charity's name was linked to such a crime.

The bogus charity bags would be picked up by vans, which would drive them back to Lithuania, where they would be sold in second-hand clothes shops.

In January Romek fled and

was helped to return home. He says he fears for his life due to his belief that the traffickers, currently released on bail, will return to Lithuania to seek retribution. "They will do all they can to track me down," he said.

Romek and Ignas's names have been changed @arbuthnott

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Bill to protect slaves forced into sex trade

DON BAYLEY

THE SUNDAY TIMES

BRITAIN'S SECRET SLAVES

David Leppard

WOMEN and children who are forced through slavery into prostitution or working in cannabis factories are to be protected from prosecution.

A flagship bill in this week's Queen's speech will seek to end the criminalisation of victims which has deterred many of those forced into slavery from coming forward to bring their slave masters to justice.

The Modern Slavery Bill will aim to provide protection for victims of slavery and trafficking "in circumstances where they have been compelled to commit a crime and should not be treated as a criminal".

Many are illegal immigrants who are forced to work in brothels or cannabis farms or are used for pickpocketing or by other crime gangs.

The move marks a concession to criticism from MPs, anti-slavery groups and prominent campaigners such as the Oscar-winning film director Steve McQueen. They had said the government's draft bill, unveiled last December, was flawed because it put a focus on prosecutions ahead of caring for victims.

The bill has been described by its supporters as the first concerted move against the slave trade since that of William Wilberforce, the politician and philanthropist, two centuries ago.

It will include longer sentences for what ministers call "modern-day slave drivers", those already found guilty of related crimes such as people trafficking, the production and sale of drugs and organised prostitution.

Police will get increased powers to confiscate the overseas assets of people traffickers, with any proceeds passed to victims as compensation. The rights of convicted slave masters to run companies or work with children and young women will be curbed.

The new defence against prosecution is aimed at the thousands of people each year



Women forced into prostitution can expect greater protection

who are trafficked into and around Britain.

Many are penniless migrants from countries such as Vietnam, Nigeria and Albania, who are smuggled into the country in the belief that they will be able to start new lives.

However, they end up trapped, living in appalling conditions and working long hours for slave-masters in illegal brothels, cannabis farms and nail bars.

The idea that Conservative ministers are prepared to give illegal migrants and those who engage in prostitution and the supply of drugs immunity from arrest and prosecution runs counter to the government's tough line on illegal immigration.

Ministers claim, however, that safeguards will seek to ensure the defence of being "compelled to commit a crime" will not be abused.

The defence will apply only to a person who is a victim of slavery or trafficking "who had no other reasonable alternative than to commit the offence as a direct consequence of their enslaved or

trafficked situation". There will be no defence for those accused of crimes of violence, including rape and other forms of sexual assault.

"We want to make sure victims of modern slavery who have been forced to commit an offence through physical or mental abuse are protected by the British justice system," a Home Office source said.

"It is particularly important that extremely vulnerable victims feel able to take the brave decision to come forward and give evidence against their abusers."

The move was welcomed by senior politicians. Frank Field, the Labour MP who chairs the parliamentary task-force appointed to recommend reforms for the bill, said: "This is crucially important in human terms but without such a major move the act would be unlikely to achieve a prime objective of very significantly increasing the numbers of successful prosecutions."

"Victims have to feel safe before taking on the slave masters."

The bill is expected to be introduced this week. The home secretary, Theresa May, wants the new laws to be on the statute book before the 2015 general election.

The latest government move follows a campaign by *The Sunday Times* that highlighted the plight of Vietnamese children who were forced to work in cannabis farms in appalling conditions. Several teenage workers were arrested and prosecuted after they were caught at the farms, but the new law will give such victims a defence against prosecution.

THOSE COMPELLED TO COMMIT A CRIME SHOULD NOT BE TREATED AS A CRIMINAL