

*(Check against delivery)*

### **Statement of James Kofi Annan, Challenging Heights, Ghana**

Childhood I believe should be the best part of everyone's life. Unfortunately for me it was the most difficult part of my life. As the youngest child of an illiterate family, I was sold into slavery at the age of six. Between the ages of six and thirteen, I worked as a child fisherman in more than 20 villages on Lake Volta. For seven years working as a slave, I experienced torture, hunger, neglect, verbal and physical abuse in various forms on a daily basis. I lived with painful diseases which were never treated as I was denied access to medical care.

I managed to escape from this captivity, took myself through school without any support from anyone and completed high school and university respectively. After school, I got a lucrative job as a banker. Life was good and the hardship subsided but I wasn't satisfied. I wasn't satisfied because I lived with the pain, suffering and agony of my childhood. I thought of trafficked children working as slaves on the Lake Volta every day and even though I dedicated 60 percent of my salary to help these children, I still felt I could do more.

I founded Challenging Heights in 2004 because of this burning fire of dissatisfaction in my heart. I resigned from my banking job and dedicated my whole life to the children. I felt I could revisit and change my childhood by changing the lives of these trafficked children.

From its inception till now, Challenging Heights has developed a holistic model that works. Our mission is to reduce slavery, prevent trafficking and promote children's rights. To reach the place where no more children have to endure what I endured, we need to do all three: bring home those who are already enslaved, stop more innocent children joining them and create a country where children's rights are not just respected but celebrated.

What gives me the right to address you today? To tell you what I think needs to happen? After all, I am one of thousands who could tell a similar tale of their life on Lake Volta. Why invite me rather than them? Well, I believe it is because of the success of Challenging Heights. We have shown that change is possible, that trafficking is not inevitable, that slavery does not have to be a life sentence that children can be happy and fulfilled, not beaten and forced to work.

We have rescued, rehabilitated and reintegrated over 1,500 child slaves from the Lake Volta. Our rehabilitation shelter is adjudged the best in Ghana. We rehabilitate and reintegrate about 100 rescued children each year. And we support hundreds of children and their families in their communities as they stitch their lives back together again.

Less than 1% of those children are re-trafficked. Despite the poverty, the naivety and ignorance and the family breakdown that affects so many of those children. Our work to tackle the root causes of slavery and trafficking does work. It does have an impact.

We believe in the importance of empowering women in the community so that they have a sustainable income with which to support their families. We have provided training and community facilities to over 1,500 women from the most disadvantaged communities. And we help over 200 young people every year to develop their employment skills; lifting them out of poverty, providing their families with more income, giving them hope. In a country where youth unemployment is around 48%, our Youth Empowerment Programme graduates have an unemployment rate of just 12%.

One of my passions has always been, and will always be, education. Children in school do not get trafficked or work as slaves. Children in school have a bright future, no matter what their family or community background. For the third year in a row, 100% of the children who graduated from Challenging Heights School passed their exams. That is the best result in Winneba, a town of over 70,000 people. We give our children hope, we teach them about their rights and we make them believe in their potential; whatever their background.

Not only is our re-trafficking rate incredibly low and our school a huge success. But also 78% of people in my town, Winneba, believe trafficking and slavery have reduced in the last five years. Our approach is working.

I want to tell the world that we are now in touching distance of ending trafficking in the fishing industry in Ghana. I think it will take five years but it is achievable: a light at the end of the tunnel after these years of darkness. I am not an arrogant person so I know that we could never achieve this ambition on our own. It will take partners. Partners overseas, like the United Nations, as well as delivery partners in communities across Ghana. It will also take the government of Ghana to put its weight, and especially its funding, behind the goal of eliminating child slavery in our beautiful country. In my country, we have the laws and the policies; the problem is the government has never prioritized anti-slavery activities. That needs to change.

I have never shied away from talking truth to power and I do not intend doing so any time soon. But I also make sure we work as closely as we can with lawmakers, government agencies, civil society organisations, local and multinational agencies, the media and all relevant stakeholders.

We have achieved so much but there is still such a long way to go. According to the International Labor Organization, there are about 49,000 children working on Lake Volta, 21,000 of whom are engaged in hazardous labor. Children like me.

I want to end child trafficking in the fishing industry in Ghana in the next five years and child slavery within ten years. I know this is ambitious but with your help, we can make it happen.

It is something we believe can be achieved and until we end child trafficking in Ghana, I will not be satisfied.

Thank you for your support.