



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jack M. Martins

From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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By now, I'm sure you've seen or heard the phrase, "Bring Back Our Girls." It's the rallying cry of a movement to pressure the international community to rescue the 280 teenage schoolgirls who were brazenly kidnapped from their Nigerian classrooms on April 14th. The words have been tweeted over one million times across the internet and have generated numerous Facebook pages that count hundreds of thousands of followers. Even the "old" media has joined in as 24-hour news outlets vie to be the first to flash photos of celebrities holding the words emblazoned across their chests.

These kidnappings are just the latest in a long list of atrocities perpetrated against the Nigerian people by the deadly extremist group Boko Haram who further outraged the world with a video broadcast threatening to sell the girls into slavery. New Yorkers in particular, always leaders in social justice, were enraged at this blatant human trafficking. Today, with this column, I hope to tap into that rage to bring your attention to a problem we have right here at home.

I'll begin with an uncomfortable fact -Human trafficking takes place here in New York State. It also takes place every day on Long Island. And yes, it happens on the main streets and shopping centers of your town - where you and your families eat, shop, work and live. Let me emphasize that point: As you read this, human-trafficking is taking place throughout the great State of New York. How big is the problem? One study from Hofstra University conservatively puts the number of trafficking victims that have come forward here at more than 11,000!

And you know what's worse? Our pitifully feeble and politicized response. You see, last year the New York Senate passed the Trafficking Victims Protection and Justice Act which gives our law enforcement authorities a fighting chance to take down abusers. The bill makes engaging in human trafficking a B felony, with stiffer penalties of up to 25 years in prison, while also making it easier for prosecutors to build cases against suspected human traffickers. And while the bill has clear bi-partisan support in both houses, a group of dissenters in the Assembly have kept the bill tied to expanding abortion provisions within the State. As a result, it's been at a standstill for more than a year.

We can all appreciate that true debate and discussion are what makes our political system work. No one side has a lock on the truth and we're certainly not expected to agree on everything. But continuously tying this much needed bill to one that is unrelated and explosively divisive simply for the advantage of political leverage is despicable. We can do something to fight human trafficking and we can do it right now. Instead, the effort (and the victims) are being held hostage. It troubles me and it should trouble you too. I am working with Senator Andrew Lanza (R-Staten Island) and Assemblywoman Amy Paulin (D-Scarsdale) to have this bill stand alone and we need your support. If we come together maybe we can save the human trafficking victims right here at home.