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The New York Times

February 4, 2006 Saturday
Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section A; Column 3; Foreign Desk; THE SATURDAY PROFILE; Pg. 4

LENGTH: 1277 words

HEADLINE: A Modern-Day Abolitionist Battles Slavery Worldwide

BYLINE: By JOEL BRINKLEY

DATELINE: WASHINGTON

BODY:

YOU can find Ambassador John R. Miller's office on the second floor of an unmarked, nondescript government office building in downtown Washington, at the end of a very long, empty hall.

There, Mr. Miller, a voluble former Republican congressman who is now a senior adviser to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, waved his arms with a theatrical flourish one recent afternoon as he declaimed about his mission, "to help nurture a 21st-century abolitionist movement against slavery."

Within the State Department, it is virtually a one-man campaign, and Mr. Miller spends much of his time grasping for strategies that bring attention to his cause.

One recent morning he met with his staff to discuss giving the trafficking issue a boost by trying to link it to a more prominent priority of the Bush administration, the international fight against H.I.V./AIDS. Mr. Miller listened as his aides made the case, his tall, lanky frame spilling out of his chair. Trafficking victims often contract AIDS. But at one point Mr. Miller said he chastened his staff: "The research is not that focused. They don't seem to have zeroed in on it." Maybe this will prove to be useful, he said he told his staff at the end, maybe not. In the trafficking office, that is often as good as it gets.

Late last year, though, he did a little better, making up a new award, "abolitionist of the year," and bestowing it on Michelle J. Sison, the United States ambassador to the United Arab Emirates. She earned the little plaque, bought at a local trophy shop, for her efforts to end the practice of enslaving young boys to work as jockeys in camel races.

"Is every ambassador like that?" Mr. Miller asked rhetorically. "No." In fact, cooperation from

embassy staffs around the world remains problematic, he acknowledged, as many Foreign Service officers do not take the issue seriously.

Mr. Miller, a New York native, was teaching high school English in Seattle two years ago, when the State Department called to ask whether he would be interested in running the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons.

Mr. Miller's name came up during a meeting to find a successor to Nancy Ely-Raphel, the former ambassador to Slovenia, the first person to hold the office. Representative Frank R. Wolf, a Republican from Virginia, said he had told members of Congress and representatives of religious and feminist groups -- who together have pushed hard to have the issue taken seriously -- that his friend, Mr. Miller, would be a great choice.

"He is either the most foolhardy or saintly colleague I've ever met," Mr. Wolf said he had told the group. "He fought for human rights in China, even though Boeing was the largest employer in his district."

That was enough for Michael Horowitz, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, who was representing a coalition of religious and feminist groups at the meeting, even though he said he had never heard of Mr. Miller before then. Since then, the religious and feminist groups have been his most enthusiastic supporters.

At that time, Mr. Miller, who grew up in Manhattan, the son of a lawyer, had been out of Congress for a decade and admits that his knowledge of the issue "was damn near zero." He read up, including news reports about the trafficking law enacted in 2000 that set up his office at the State Department. The popular perception of the time, repeated in numerous news articles, was that the office would direct and coordinate disjointed federal efforts to combat modern-day slave trafficking.

But Mr. Miller soon realized that the office had little real authority. As it turned out, perhaps his most valuable tool would be the force of his personality, which is considerable. Mr. Miller, 67, is a near-perfect politician -- personable, infectiously friendly and quick to laugh. With those talents, he plunged into the job with characteristic ebullience.

Slave trafficking, as it manifests itself today, is the transporting of victims under false pretenses from one nation, or province, to another, where they are subjugated to forced labor or prostitution. The Central Intelligence Agency estimates that as many as 800,000 people around the world are enslaved each year, including nearly 20,000 in the United States.

President Bush has spoken out about the problem, most notably in a speech to the United Nations in September 2003 that was largely about the war in Iraq, and Secretary of State Colin L. Powell was openly supportive of the trafficking office's work. As for Ms. Rice, Mr. Miller said, "when we hear there is a trip" to one of the problem countries, "we try to get her to mention it." They have not had much success.

“We’ve got to do better,” Mr. Miller said.

His office is half a mile from the State Department, in a building that also houses low-profile agencies like the Department of Veterans Affairs’ credit union. Some people see that as symbolic, but Mr. Miller said the location “has pluses and minuses.”

This fall the trafficking office did gain a measure of prominence when the State Department was looking for ways to pressure Sudan to end the violence against women in Darfur.

Another important source of influence is a report the office issues each year rating other nations’ efforts to stop slave trafficking. Ms. Rice had shown concern about rapes, assaults and other violence against women in Darfur. So this fall, his department decided to tinker with Sudan’s rating as a means of applying pressure on the government in Khartoum to end the violence.

STRICTLY speaking, of course, violence against women and slave trafficking are different issues. Mr. Miller contorted his hands as he tried to describe how rape “might be a precursor to slavery.” Asked if his office opposed using the trafficking report in this way, he said only, “We are not going to get into internal arguments.”

Those arguments, particularly over the contention by evangelicals and feminists that all prostitution is a form of slavery, made life miserable for Mr. Miller’s predecessor, Ms. Ely-Raphel. “I must confess I was happy to leave,” she said in an interview. The interest groups lobbied the administration to attack prostitution as a core problem, but Ms. Ely-Raphel and others disagreed.

“It was so ideological,” she recalled.

Mr. Miller tries to finesse the prostitution debate. In a letter to the editor of The New York Times late last year, he noted that “in addition to being inherently harmful and dehumanizing, prostitution and related activities fuel the modern-day slavery known as sex trafficking.”

WHILE it has been an uphill battle, he believes he has made a difference, both on the slave trafficking issue and in the State Department’s regard for it. He said he had played “some small role” in Japan’s recent decision to reduce the number of entertainment visas for young women from the Philippines -- to fewer than 5,000, from a high of 80,000 a year.

Mohamed Mattar, executive director of the Protection Project, an antitrafficking office at Johns Hopkins University, said that whatever the limits of Mr. Miller’s office, no one does more.

“I make the argument that they are making a difference, and no one else is making any difference,” he said.

The bane of Mr. Miller’s job, he acknowledges -- only when asked -- is the paperwork, the need to get approval, or “clearance,” from a dozen or more State Department offices before he does anything.

One recent afternoon, an aide recalled with a smile, Mr. Miller charged down the hall, flapping his arms as he exhorted his staff, “Have we saved any victims today, or just done clearances?”