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Stars Shine Light On Child Slavery

Posted by [Pamela Falk](#) | [Comment On This Post](#)

This story was written by CBS News foreign affairs analyst Pamela Falk, reporting from the United Nations.

The U.N. Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC) was not a likely international organization to follow Hollywood's lead to expose the horrors of modern day slavery. But this week, there was a red carpet entrance at the General Assembly and the stars mingled in the moonlight facing the East River on the outdoor veranda of the Delegates Dining Room, to showcase paintings by young victims of the rebel war in Uganda.

Actor Nicolas Cage was there to introduce U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. He was accessible and chatty, telling diplomats, stars and journalists that a project like this one brings public awareness to the issue. In addition to Cage were Alec Baldwin, Adam Yauch, Antioce Fuqua, Deborah Roberts, Kat DeLuna, Joy Behar and Rachel Roy.

The unusual glitzy gala was in honor of American painter Ross Bleckner after he was named to be the first artist to be a U.N. Goodwill Ambassador, joining the ranks of Nicole Kidman, George Clooney, Mira Sorvino and Angelina Jolie.

The concept is not new; Danny Kaye started the Goodwill Ambassadors program for UNICEF in 1954 and had Hollywood engaged. But with an economic downturn and the U.N. occupied by major security crises around the world, Hollywood has been at the frontlines of exposing human trafficking with movies like "Taken" and "Slumdog Millionaire."

Thus, the event was a return to the U.N. of the rich and famous. The idea was to shed light on a problem that is vexing the international community and growing. Bleckner was named as the U.N. Goodwill Ambassador to Combat Human Trafficking with the opening of an art exhibition displaying paintings by former child soldiers and abducted girls from Uganda to bring attention to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) "Blue Heart" campaign against human trafficking.

The "Welcome to Gulu" exhibition, which Bleckner curated for the U.N. anti-drug office, UNODC, and the International Criminal Court's Trust Fund for Victims, was set up to add to existing U.N. funding and proceeds going to the victims, who painted the artwork under Mr. Bleckner's supervision in Uganda.

The issue of human trafficking is near to the Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's heart: his wife opened another exhibition two years ago called "Human Trafficking: Images of Vulnerability." The Secretary-General, facing the crowd of stars of stage and screen at what could have been an Academy Award or Grammy event, said, "It is vital that we shine a harsh light on the terrible trade in humans. I recently reported to the Security Council on the extent of this problem. I listed parties that are recruiting children to fight in conflicts, and abusing girls as sexual slaves. We call this 'name and shame.' I urged the Security Council to take action against those guilty of these atrocities."

In Gulu, Uganda, Bleckner worked with 25 children, now aged 13 to 21, who had been kidnapped when they were as young as 9 years old and forced to fight for the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, or to work as sex slaves. The issue of human trafficking is not just in Uganda: around 17,500 foreign nationals are trafficked into the United States from at least 35 countries each year.

"If evil is present in this world, so is good," said Under Secretary General Antonio Maria Costa, the Executive Director of the UNODC. And, along with the Host & Supporting Committees including Alec Baldwin, Joy Behar, Rachel Weisz and Natalie Portman, the pictures painted by the young victims in Uganda did effectively shine some light on an issue that is difficult for the U.N. to tackle without some significant star power.

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