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Statement by the President of Latvia, Ms. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, at the Ministerial Meeting of States Parties to the 1951 Convention and/or Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees Geneva, 12 December, 2001

Madame la Presidente de la Reunion ministerielle,
Vos excellences les ministres,
Monsieur le President de l'Assemblee Generale,
Monsieur le Directeur General de l'ONU Mr. Petrovsky,
Monsieur le Haut Commissaire des Nations Unies pour les refugies Mr. Lubbers,
Mesdames et Messieurs,

J'aimerais commencer ici en ce haut-lieu par rendre hommage à un Genevois qui a peut-être t le premier à s'adresser au problème de la souffrance humaine qui rsulte des conflits entre nations. Je parle bien sûr de Henri Dunant fondateur de la Croix Rouge qui a reçu il y a cent ans djà le Prix Nobel de la Paix et qui avant la cration des Nations Unies a port au monde entier ce message d'humanisme de sa ville de Genève, de cette rpublique genevoise et c'est simplement un message de compassion et de secours qu'il a voulu donner au monde mais qui est peut-être un des instruments qui a aid plus tard à comprendre une institution telle que les Nations Unies, institution qui encore de façon tout à fait pertinente vient de se voir accorder le Prix Nobel de la paix, une paix que nous esprons possible, une paix que nous esprons durable sur les parties du monde qui encore sont dechires par la souffrance et par les conflits militaires.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I stand here in front of you on this high podium not so much as president of a small country which only for ten years has recovered its independence after half a century of repression but I like to think of myself here as a voice of all those who have been displaced from their homeland for a variety of reasons. No one leaves their home willingly or gladly. When people leave en masse the place of their birth, the place where they live it means there is something very deeply wrong with the circumstances in that country and we should never take lightly these flights of refugees fleeing across borders. They are a sign, they are a symptom, they are proof that something is very wrong somewhere on the international scene. When the moment comes to leave your home, it is a painful moment.

My parents had a choice to stay behind and risk the deportations that they had already witnessed and that indeed were to follow in Latvia after the war year after year until 1949, whether to risk being put into cattle cars after having been awakened in the middle of the night and shipped off to Siberia or to just walk out of their homes with what they could carry in their two hands, walk off into the unknown, but with a hope of freedom possibly awaiting them with a hope of saving their lives and with a choice a least that was theirs to make little as it was at the time. It can be a costly choice. Three weeks and three days after my family left the shores of Latvia, my little sister died. We buried her by the roadside, we were never able to return or put a flower on her grave.

And I like to think that I stand here today as a survivor who speaks for all those who died by the roadside, some buried by their families and others not and for all those millions across the world today who do not have a voice who cannot be heard but they are also human beings, they also suffer, they also have their hopes, their dreams and their aspirations. Most of all they dream of a normal life. I remember as a child throughout the hunger, the fear, the cold, the unknown, each day wondering where we would lay our head to rest the next evening and I had to think of that line I had heard in church about the birds having their nests and the foxes their dens and burrows, but where is a child of man to lay down his or her head. It is a painful condition not to know where you are going to lay your head, to look at the lights shining in distant windows, to think of people living their normal lives, sleeping in their own beds, eating at their own table, living under their own roofs. And later when you come to refugee camps and some people spend decades and much of their lives in refugee camps, you are living outside of space and of time, you have no roots you have no past, you don't know whether you have a future, you have no rights, you have no voice, you have nowhere to participate in, you are not a citizen, you have no papers, sometimes you haven't even got your name and you have to pinch yourself to reassure yourself that yes I am alive, I am me, I am a human being, I am a person. Do I count in this world, I don't know, I'll wait until tomorrow.

Ladies and gentlemen,

when I was a child, a refugee of the second world war, this convention of Geneva had not yet been signed, but there were bodies already created, the International Refugee Organization and I'd like to thank all those who participated in that effort as well and I like to think that I speak in the name of all those millions before the signing of this Geneva convention, all those who were fleeing their homes throughout the 50 years that this convention has been in effect and who today 21 million, 22 million, we have lost count, are fleeing their homes and don't know what expects them tomorrow, what their rights are, when they will have a normal life, a normal home, a normal future, what lies in store for them.

Are they human beings, like you and I and everybody else who is a citizen of a country and who has rights, or do they stand outside of space and time and rights. What are they? Who are they? It is up to bodies such as this to make the decision. It is up to the governments sitting here represented by you ladies and gentlemen holding high office in your countries. Their fate lies in your hands. They are out there in the tents, by the roadsides, starving, freezing, waiting, hoping for someone to extend a helping hand. They are out there waiting on your decisions, on your actions, on your creativity, on your ability to find a way of extending that helpful hand which can make the difference between life and death, between having a future and having none. Between being a human being with dignity or being less than the beasts of the field, trodden under into the dust of this world. I entreat you ladies and gentlemen when you think about the problems of refugees, think of them not in the abstract think of them no in the bureaucratic language of decisions and declarations, and priorities in a sense that you normally think of things. I entreat you think of the human beings who are touched by your decisions, think of the lives who wait on your help.

I thank here all those who throughout the decades of my life have extended a helpful hand to their fellow man, near or far, with large help or small. Big interventions and projects, small gifts from very ordinary people, very plain people, used clothes from their homes and from their backs, thank you to all of you, I have worn those worn clothes, I have survived because somebody sent a parcel when we were starving, thank you to all of those who have helped in the past and who are helping today and you ladies and gentlemen who hold high office, thank you too for your understanding. I wish you well at this conference; I wish you and your countries well in your understanding of the problems facing this world. We will not have refugees today when the world does follow the principles of the United Nations. Do let's work together to see that we can bring this change about. I don't know

whether we can do it in the next 5 years or 50 or a 100, but I do know we have no choice, we must act, we must do something and we must start today.

Thank you.