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Address by H. E. Dr. Vaira Vike-Freiberga President of Latvia, at the conference: Stop Child Trafficking: Modern-Day Slavery, Helsinki, June 2, 2003

Madam Ambassador (McElveen-Hunter),

Madam Prime Minister (Jtteenmki),

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am truly honoured to address such a distinguished audience of legislators, government officials, diplomats and high-level professionals about an issue that remains a troubling concern in the entire world and certainly in the Baltic Sea Region that of child trafficking and abuse. I extend my sincere thanks to Ambassador McElveen-Hunter for her initiative in organizing this most important conference, as well as the Finnish Foreign Ministry and the Embassies of Canada and Sweden.

Since child trafficking by its very nature is an underground and clandestine activity, officially available statistics only reflect a small part of its actual extent. We can really only guess what it can be. Child trafficking is extremely lucrative to the well-organized criminal groups that run this modern-day form of the slave trade. In most cases, children are bought, sold, and transported out of their native countries for one specific purpose, and that is to fulfil the sexual desires of pedophiles in the countries to which they are brought.

In the Baltic Sea region, the relatively less affluent countries namely Russia, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as Belarus and Ukraine further inland are deemed as supply and transit points for the traffic of children to the regions more wealthy countries further West particularly Germany, Sweden, Denmark, and the Netherlands.

There is one form of child trafficking that sometimes occurs in complete accordance with the law, through child adoption. While in large majority of cases the benefits of being adopted by a loving family in a new country greatly outweigh those of living in an institution or orphanage at home, there have been cases of adoption being used as a covert avenue for the sexual exploitation and trafficking of children. The adoption of children from Central and Eastern Europe by potentially abusive families in Western Europe or elsewhere is one area that social and law enforcement agencies in the receiving countries should monitor very closely.

During the last few years, the Internet has become a widely used tool by pedophiles seeking to establish contacts with children from Central and Eastern Europe. In Sweden, for example, two pedophiles offered riding lessons in a healthy country atmosphere to teenage boys from the former Soviet bloc countries. As it later turned out, that was only part of what they were offering.

The Internet is also widely used for the dissemination of child pornography, in what could be considered as an extended form of child trafficking. In most cases the children are sexually exploited in their home countries, but the filmed pornographic materials are exported electronically. The continual update of detection and infiltration methods, as well as closer cooperation among our countries police forces, will be required to effectively combat this insidious form of cybercrime.

In 1999, Latvian law enforcement agencies succeeded in disbanding a pedophile ring that had specialized in exporting pornographic images and films of Latvian teenage boys over the Internet. Among this rings organizers were former KGB agents, whose specialty had been filming people in compromising situations during the Soviet era for blackmailing purposes and they have now recycled their skills.

In other well documented cases of child exploitation, the trafficking occurs in the opposite direction. Pedophiles from the wealthier demand countries travel to the less affluent supply countries to engage in sexual acts with child prostitutes. Here again, organized crime rings have been using the Internet to draw prospective clients to both the Baltic countries and Russia for brief sexcapades, as well as to other parts of the world, including Asia.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In this day and age, child pornography has well and truly become a lucrative international business. If the sexual exploitation and trafficking of children are to be curbed to any significant degree, then they will have to be dealt with seriously on an international level at both the supply and the demand end of the chain.

At the supply end, there are several groups of children who stand the greatest risk of falling victim to sexual exploitation and child trafficking. The largest single source of abused and exploited children in many countries, including Latvia, comes from emotionally dysfunctional families, where there is an overuse of alcohol or narcotics, and where the parents fail to look after their children properly. Such children rarely receive the love and emotional support that they require, resulting in low self-esteem, and a greater vulnerability to enticements from adults.

More often than not, such emotionally dysfunctional families are also economically deprived, which creates an additional risk factor. Children living in such families are usually poorly fed, poorly provided for, and poorly educated, and thus more vulnerable to economic enticements by pedophiles.

Furthermore, children living in dysfunctional and poor families are more likely to have suffered from sexual abuse by their own family members, or by older children. Child abuse within the family is a serious problem in many countries, including parts of Asia. In many cases, child prostitution takes place on the spot with the complicity of the victims parents. In the most extreme cases, the child is literally sold off and sent away with his or her abusers by the parents themselves.

Research studies reveal that children who have been victims of abuse are more likely to commit abuse upon others once they grow up, thus propagating the continuing cycle of abuse and exploitation.

With these risk factors in mind, we can attempt to practice prevention at various levels: starting with international organizations, and continuing with the state, with municipalities, with local communities, with schools and with NGOs. This includes the monitoring and social support of disadvantaged families, as well as an increased emphasis on moral values and public awareness within each community. It involves the education of children in schools about their inherent rights, and the fostering a greater community spirit among neighbours. One might watch out more closely what happens next door.

One aspect of prevention is deterrence, and one aspect of deterrence involves the adoption and enforcement of legislation that foresees harsh penalties for the abuse and trafficking of children. Latvia's Law on the Protection of Children's Rights prohibits the abuse and neglect of children, and obliges any adult who has suspicions about such abuse to report it to the police or the local Family Court. Latvia's Criminal Law imposes a maximum sentence of up to 15 years for those who subject children to abuse, sexual exploitation, and trafficking.

Under these laws, a total of 10 criminal investigations have been launched during the years 2002 and 2003, concerning the sexual abuse or exploitation of 17 children or minors. However, according to Andrejs Vilks, the director of Latvian Criminology Research Centre, the true number of sexually exploited children is likely far higher. Dr. Vilks believes that one-fifth to one-fourth of those involved in prostitution in Latvia or abroad are minors, and that about 150 minors per year are transported outside of Latvia for purposes of sexual exploitation. Vilks asserts that the increase in the maximum penalty to 15 years has simply made criminals become more covert and sophisticated in their methods of child trafficking.

Turning to the demand end of the scale, I believe that more research should be conducted to establish why the prosperous, open, highly educated and democratic societies of the West produce such a large proportion of pedophiles within their populations. What is it in the way people are brought up in Europe and in North America that produces such a mass demand for pornography and for children as sexual objects?

This high demand is the root cause of the burgeoning pornographic industry, and of the traffic of women and children from Eastern to Western Europe. I believe that ultimately, it is the consumer who creates this demand and the criminal groups who meet it that share an equal responsibility for this problem.

Any efforts to diminish the scope of child trafficking should therefore be focused on demand reduction to a significant degree. While deterrence must continue to play serious role, preventative measures also need to be put in place.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Until the sexual exploitation and trafficking of children are significantly reduced, therapy programmes for the victims of child abuse must go hand in hand with the punishment of the perpetrators. Currently the Latvian government provides special funding for the rehabilitation of children who have suffered from abuse, as well as funding for the training of psychologists psychotherapists and social workers. Such care puts a great burden on the health and social welfare budget of the country. The creation of international funding mechanisms for rehabilitation is something that should be very seriously considered.

In the longer term, police precincts should have at least one officer who is trained in dealing with cases of abuse, including child abuse. We now have one facility in Latvia where child victims can be questioned in video-recorded sessions, which saves them from experiencing repeated questioning and from the trauma of confrontations with their abusers. Ideally, we should have several. Child abuse and trafficking is a ghastly crime, and no efforts should be spared to fight it.

A great deal still remains to be done in Latvia, as in all of the countries of this region. Special conferences like this one have an important role to play in this context. They constitute an important step towards raising public awareness. They are badly needed if we are to find viable solutions for reducing the exploitation and trafficking of children. I extend my thanks to all those who, in whatever capacity, work towards containing, controlling and reducing this scourge. I extend a special thanks to those who work in rehabilitation with the victims. And I wish you all a rewarding and productive session.