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Towards an EU Strategy against Violence in Sport

Opening Speech by Sandro Calvani, UNICRI Director

Your Excellencies, Secretary of State and Commissioner Figel, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the European Commission, the Portuguese Presidency of the Council, the European Parliament and the Union of European Football Associations for organizing this conference. I am honored to have been invited and to address the distinguished participants of this Conference.

As the Director of UNICRI, the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, a meeting such as this holds great importance for me, as my Institute is significantly involved in applied research on security at major events.

As a United Nations representative I wish also to present the best wishes by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

Violence, crime and hooliganism at major sporting events continues to be a significant problem. While maybe not regarded as being as serious as certain other citizen security like terrorism and drug trafficking, it still represents a major threat to the European Union's aim to make citizens feel safe within an area of freedom, security and justice.

Conferences such as this one that have a set of very clear and pragmatic objectives, designed to proactively address the problem in all its different forms, are accordingly as important today as they have ever been.

I can see we have assembled in this room a distinguished gathering of very experienced stakeholders and I am sure you can all make a very important contribution, through your willing and active participation in the working groups, to the design of an "EU strategy against violence in sport".

Through the centuries, in different places, sports related violence has been influenced by a range of historical, social, economic, political and cultural factors.

Nowadays, disorder at sporting events, in some places at least, does not seem to be so influenced by the same causal or cultural factors that were perhaps evident in the past. In this regard, I think there is probably a real shortage of reliable quantitative and empirical data to make an accurate assessment of the situation today. This absence of comparable data, makes assessment of the variations and similarities of the problems experienced in different European countries quite difficult. Perhaps the establishment of a common language and a platform for international cooperation and information exchange, supported by an action oriented approach to data analysis may assist.

Whenever large groups of people get together, at times under the influence of alcohol and drugs, there is the potential for crime and disorder to occur. Around the world, different legal instruments and a range of operational policing tactics have been tried to reduce the problem of sport related violence to a manageable extent but unfortunately, many served only to worsen the problem and created an increasingly confrontational attitude between attendees and law enforcement officials, and displace the problems away from the immediate environs of the event.

I would like to propose that perhaps a more proactive, proportionate and graded response strategy may be more applicable in today's complex policing environment. Such a strategy could be characterized through effective information gathering, analysis and dissemination, communication and the publication of parameters, targeted interventions and a commitment to graded reactive response de-escalation.

The media's position may also be worthy of some consideration as it is regularly invoked as contributing to sports related violence. Studies have suggested that the language of war and combat employed by the media in covering incidents of sport related violence, tends to reinforce the aggressive and confrontational perception of sport. Football hooliganism is however a highly visible phenomenon and media coverage of football-related disorder and violence in particular is extensive. Researchers and non-academic observers have argued that this sensationalism, together with a 'predictive' approach, whereby violence at certain matches is anticipated by the media, has actually contributed to the problem.

Safety and security at and around major sporting events is a pro-active process that depends on many factors, but effective co-operation between public service and private sector stakeholders is the best practice, the key strategy I wish to propose. A co-operative approach between the public and private sector, including of course the event organizers, can be very effective if built around the expertise of each partner to best meet clearly defined public safety needs and expectations, through the appropriate allocation of resources, risks and rewards.

I said earlier that in my role as Director of UNICRI, I have a particular interest in the subject of security of major events. UNICRI is the UN lead agency on security at major events, in particular through its International Permanent Observatory, (IPO) Programme. IPO, established in 2003, provides assistance to security planners by facilitating the exchange of knowledge and experiences during major events. UNICRI is also very active in promoting the benefits of public and private cooperation to secure such events and other vulnerable targets.

The IPO Programme has enjoyed significant success since its launch. Most recently, in 2006 and 2007, for instance, UNICRI's IPO experts provided assistance and mentoring services to many UN Member States, including Germany, Japan, the Russian Federation, Peru, Vietnam, Singapore and Uganda. More specifically in the field of sporting events, UNICRI supported the Caribbean Community prepare security for the 2007 Cricket World Cup, and since 2004, we have been working very closely with the relevant Chinese authorities to prepare security for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games.

UNICRI is also the coordinator of the project called "Coordinating National Research Programmes on Security during Major Events in Europe (EU-SEC)" which has been funded by the DG Research of the European Commission. EU-SEC 2, funded by the DG Enterprise of the European Commission has been designed to build upon the main EU-SEC achievements and to further its scope through the enlargement of its consortium from 10 to 22 EU Ministries of the Interior.

UNICRI believes that sporting and other major events bring with them the chance for a security legacy by opening a window of opportunity to enhance cooperation and better develop security policies and strategies. A legacy about the development of methods, ways of thinking, strategies, and practices that are applicable in security governance terms beyond the period of the event.

During his closing speech at the International Conference on Security of Major Events, held at the UN Headquarters in New York last year, then Secretary-General Kofi Annan noted that in classical times, when the Greeks held the Olympic Games, an "Olympic Peace" was observed during the event so that participants and spectators could attend without fear of violence.

I would like to conclude with former Secretary General Annan's words, "The idea of such a truce has been revived in modern times, even if it has not had the desired impact. Still, we must act in that spirit, and do our utmost to ensure that large-scale events, from sporting field to convention hall, can take place in peace".

I will look forward to the outputs of this Conference since I hope that you will develop some principles of great interest also outside Europe.

I would again like to extend my gratitude to the organizers for convening this important event, and for giving me the opportunity to address participants.

Thank you.