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“Let us feel the heartfelt sadness of victims of trafficking”

Introductory Speech by

Sandro Calvani, UNICRI Director

at the International Conference “Trafficking in Persons:
Ten Years After the Institution of the Ad-Hoc Inter-Governmental Committee
For the Elaboration of the Palermo Protocol”

Palermo, 21 May 2009

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to begin by thanking the University of Palermo, AICCRE and IOM for conveying with us the International Conference on Trafficking in Persons. It is an honour to be here with you all to commemorate the adoption of the Palermo Convention on Transnational Organized Crime and its additional Protocol on Human Trafficking.

On behalf of UNICRI, I would like to welcome you all at this International Conference, and I would like to seize this opportunity to highlight some of the most important issues which will surely be addressed in depth by the high-level experts gathered here in Palermo.

Ten years have passed since the Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Committee for the Elaboration of the Palermo Protocol was created in 1999. It was a historic moment, as this document represents a veritable cornerstone in the fight against human trafficking.

Trafficking in human beings is one of the worst forms of crimes against humanity and against human dignity; it is a crime located somewhere in the intersection between the violation of one's right to mobility and our inalienable human rights, somewhere along the blurred line of consent and coercion.

The adoption of the Protocol a year later in 2000 was also a real turning point. For the first time in history, various States had agreed upon a common definition of the crime of human trafficking. The consensus achieved laid the foundation upon which to structure international cooperation in the fight against this crime along the road of prevention, protection and prosecution. This was not only fundamental for international law in general, but it was also the first step in a long and steep road towards the elimination of this modern form of slavery.

So here we are, ten years down the road, meeting once again in Palermo. We are here to look back on the journey we have undertaken so far, along with the International Community, individual States and various organizations and non-State actors. But we are also here with esteemed international experts, to look forward and to determine together what our next steps should be.

As of now, the “Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children” has been signed by 117 States¹. This means that one third of the UN’s member States has not ratified the Protocol. But an even more alarming fact is that, even among those that have already ratified the Protocol, and which should thus have a national legislature in line with international standards, the concrete implementation of the norms is lacking, and concrete results are yet to be seen. “National laws must not only be enacted, but also enforced.”²

I am referring in particular, on the one hand, to the embarrassingly low number of investigations and convictions of perpetrators. On the other hand, namely on the side of the victims, the small number of reports can be attributed to the difficulties in properly protecting the people and the families of those who come forth from the darkness to report the exploitation suffered at the hands of their traffickers.

Human trafficking is a crime that affects all the States of the International Community. We are all either countries of origin, transit or destination, or a combination of these.

We know that trafficking in persons has frequently an internal dimension within the State, but it is an increasingly international phenomenon orchestrated by transnational organized criminal groups. Victims are recruited in one region, they are transported (sometimes with excruciatingly long journeys in inhumane conditions) to another country where they are detained, abused and exploited. Victims are objectified, sold as commodities and reprocessed, resold and once again repurchased as “chattel,” as remarked last week by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in front of the General Assembly.³

We often hear that organized crime knows no borders. We are also aware of the limits of law enforcement entities in this regard. Nevertheless we should not give up. The awareness of our limits should be a source of motivation to work in even closer cooperation across borders to tackle this phenomenon that affects us all. As Ban Ki-moon recently said, we need “strong laws, broad alliances, concerted action, and zero tolerance.”⁴

¹ Number of signatory States as of 19 May 2009. For updated status of ratification of the Palermo Convention and its additional protocols, please refer to:
<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/treaties/CTOC/signatures.html>

² Miguel d’Escoto Brockmann, President of the General Assembly “No longer possible to turn a blind eye to human trafficking, as world wakes up to scope of scourge, General Assembly hears in thematic dialogue” GA/10827 (13 May 2009) www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/ga10827.doc.htm

³ “Secretary-General and celebrities unite against human trafficking” (14 May 2009)
<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/sg-at-ga-on-human-trafficking-in-new-york-and-gulu-gala.html>

⁴ Assembly “No longer possible to turn a blind eye to human trafficking, as world wakes up to scope of scourge, General Assembly hears in thematic dialogue” GA/10827 (13 May 2009)
www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/ga10827.doc.htm

We need to increase the empathy on the issue of human trafficking. Policy makers cannot just deal with remote reforms and mere costs of the matter; they need to be more emotionally concerned because this is a phenomenon that affects all of humanity. It's one of the worst forms of abuse of human dignity: it is the dehumanisation of a human being whose body is sold, purchased and abused as if it were a mere commodity.

There is an impelling need for collective action to criminalize human trafficking, to prevent victimization by teaching people about their rights, to reduce demand as well as the supply, end impunity and protect the victims. Programmes against trafficking must be incorporated in the bigger picture alongside programmes aimed at reducing poverty, discrimination and inequalities.

Article 2 of the Trafficking Protocol explicitly calls for cooperation among State parties on three different levels: in the prosecution to counter trafficking, in the prevention of this crime and in the protection of the victims.

To counter this phenomenon, there should be more cooperation to strengthen investigation, prosecution and judicial processes. Evidence of the exploitation of the criminal organizations managing this terrible trade has to be collected in both countries of origin and of destination, where the abuse actually takes place.

Cooperation should also address the supply side of this phenomenon by investing in prevention measures that take into consideration the root causes of this issue and include measures related to human and social development, human rights, migration management and mobility of migrant workers.

We need to put in place not only short-term actions (as glamorous media awareness campaigns with famous celebrities). There is a dire need to support medium and long-term programmes that are both sustained and sustainable over time.

We need to protect the victims of this abhorrent crime. The fight against human trafficking is more than criminalization and prosecution; it is a cross-cutting issue: it's about human dignity and human rights, it's about peace and security, freedom from want and freedom from fear, it's about development, family, community and health.

We need to increase the sense of urgency on the issue and focus on the victims of trafficking. Since the damage done to them cannot be fully redressed, there should be innovative and creative ways to minimize the harm inflicted upon these people with a series of measures that may represent something special to the victims themselves. Among these are programmes such as witness protection, family reunification, assisted relocation and scholarships for victims and family members.

Cooperation on regional level is another vital instrument in the international toolbox against this criminal business. Several encouraging examples of these are provided around the globe, such as in Western Africa, in the Balkans, in South-East Asia and in other regions as well. Moreover, to fill some of the gaps left behind by the Palermo Protocol on Trafficking, other regional instruments have been developed, as the recently adopted Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking.

This Conference will also provide other examples of programmes put in place by various international organizations working on the field, such as the International Organization for Migration, the UN High Commission for Human Rights, the European Commission, OSCE and the International Labour Organization. Among these, UNICRI will also present its experience in implementing projects in international cooperation in technical programmes, information-sharing, prevention, victims assistance, rehabilitation and reintegration.

I hope this Conference will be a valuable opportunity to exchange ideas and draw some lessons learnt from practical experiences to guide us in the road ahead.

As Ban Ki-moon recently said⁵ in occasion of the sixty-third session of the General Assembly “We will achieve nothing without uniting and speaking out. We will achieve nothing by offering fine rhetoric not matched by deeds. Moral outrage is all too easy. Real action takes real commitment.”

Ladies and gentlemen, let this, please, be an occasion to build constructively and work in concert to end this modern form of slavery.

Thank you.

⁵ “No longer possible to turn a blind eye to human trafficking, as world wakes up to scope of scourge, General Assembly hears in thematic dialogue” GA/10827 (13 May 2009)
www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/ga10827.doc.htm