

Stockholm Congress: OPENING STATEMENT

José Ayala-Lasso, High Commissioner for Human Rights

Your Majesty, Mr. Prime Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen,

At this very moment, thousands of children around the world are the victims of abuse, trafficking and exploitation. As we reach the close of the twentieth century we are far from witnessing an end to this outrage. Tragically, reports on the commercial sexual exploitation of children -- far from declining -- have been growing.

News over the last few days has shown once again the tragic consequences of the sexual exploitation of children by paedophiles around the world. It has also revealed that child sex abusers may be local or foreign who operate in their own country or abroad and that no country can consider itself exempt from the perpetration of this heinous crime.

To the thousands of Melissas and Julies, I say: "We will never forget you!" Like you, everywhere thousands of anonymous children lose their dignity, their hope and their life everyday... Your tragic death will not have been in vain, however, if it will have served to catalyze the strong re-action of individuals, NGOs, Governments and National Assemblies in a coalition to prevent these crimes from happening ever again.

In the wake of the shock and sadness that we feel, the memory of each and every child victim demands that we do not shrink or falter in our forceful condemnation of the commercial sexual exploitation of children. We cannot afford to do otherwise. The price of ambiguous signals is too high for children. Our determination to halt the commercial sexual exploitation of children must be clearly understood. We must see to it that the best interests of the child are placed center stage and that there shall be no gain for anyone who seeks to profit from the vulnerability of children.

The organization of this Congress is in itself, I believe, an expression of our determination to be guided in all actions by the best interests of the child. This is the first international congress to be organized against the commercial sexual exploitation of children. I believe it is also another first of its kind in having been jointly planned and developed between a government, an intergovernmental organization and non-governmental organizations. I should like to express my appreciation to the Government of Sweden, UNICEF and ECPAT for their efforts.

The issue we are addressing today is one which has long deserved greater international attention. I am convinced that this Congress in raising global awareness of the abuses committed under the name of the commercial sexual exploitation of children will contribute to producing the climate of change necessary to further strengthen solidarity worldwide in order to spare future generations of children from suffering from this abhorrent and intolerable practice.

Attitudes to the issue of the commercial sexual exploitation of children have already been changing and I should like to express my appreciation to those who have publicly spoken out against these practices and have underlined that they are morally and legally unacceptable. Without the media's support, however, important issues of the day would go unnoticed and unheeded. The media have the potential not only to report on public debates and alert public attention to them by also to influence them. It can serve as a leading instrument for necessary change -- and change is necessary.

Why? Because in every instance, the commercial sexual exploitation of a child is a flagrant violation of a child's human rights -- rights which the international community has recognized and, time and time again, promised to uphold. Yet this abhorrent practice continues.

It is said that the commercial sexual exploitation of children like any other form of exploitation can be explained by extreme poverty and other forms of economic and social realities. The truth is that sexual exploitation of children is a crime led by depraved and irresponsible sexual behaviour, generally that of adult males. This crime is compounded by those entrepreneurs -- individuals or

members of national, transnational or international criminal networks -- who have made a business out of it.

Clearly, no economic reason should be accepted or applied when the very lives of children are at stake and there should be no gain for those who wish to make a business out of this crime and profit from the suffering of children. Tackling these and other issues requires, however, that we recognize that human rights violations such as the commercial sexual exploitation of children are often inextricably linked to other violations as well as to poverty and dire economic and social conditions. It is frequently associated with pervasive economic inequalities.

Domestic violence, sexual abuse and the consequences of the fraying fabric of families can be contributing factors in this abuse. The fact that girl children are often held in lower esteem in society is another act which can lead to the continuation of this abuse and is particularly to be deplored. Adults who wish to exploit children for their own criminal purpose may and do play upon the need of children to receive love and be accepted.

But whatever the causes or the reasons, the commercial sexual exploitation of children does not respect at all the inherent dignity of the human person nor affords children in human treatment: on the contrary it leads to continuous abuses. Such abuses can result in children losing their lives through violence under-age pregnancy and from AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases.

So what can be done? How can we achieve change?

- Firstly, I believe that the participation of children themselves in any campaign to end their exploitation is vital. I am convinced that children must be taught about and made aware of their rights. They must understand when demands made of them are abusive and exploitative. They must comprehend that they can say no to their exploitation and should be taught when and how to assert their rights. Without such an approach we deprive children of vital information and tools to respond effectively to violations.
- Secondly, it is important that all adults, parents, families, law enforcement officials, border guards, traditional leaders, community leaders, judges, members of the tourism industry, etc. should be made conscious of the need to cooperate in protecting the rights of children.
- Thirdly, I believe that high priority should be attached to the undertaking of legal reforms. Certain governments have already begun examining their laws and their enforcement in the area of preventing and combating the commercial sexual exploitation. Such initiatives I believe should be commended and further supported. Procurers, customers and intermediaries involved in child trafficking, child prostitution or child pornography must not be permitted to escape penalization through legal lacunae. Criminal responsibility must be established to permit the prosecution of those who commit such crimes against children whether in their own or another country. Laws must, therefore, be adopted to up-hold international human rights standards and thus ensure that national jurisdiction can cover such offenses no matter where they are committed. Offenses relating to the commercial sexual exploitation of children must also be considered as extraditable. Mutual judicial assistance procedures for the sharing of information between States in relation to investigations into sexual crimes committed against children should also be set in place. We must also criminalize the production, sale and possession of child pornography.
- Fourthly, we must work together in order to harness the benefits of closer cooperation and strive for the universal enjoyment of children's rights. I should like to assure the Congress that my office will be vigorously advocating for the mobilization of all our partners at the international, regional, national or local level, who have a role to play in this task.

My Office shall continue to encourage the maximum cooperation with the UN human rights treaty bodies, particularly the Committee on the Rights of the Child; the various mechanisms of the Commission, the thematic and country rapporteurs, the working groups, and particularly the Special

Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. I will emphasize the importance of the establishment of human rights education programmes and need -- where necessary -- to consider undertaking legal reform. My office, therefore, will be doing its utmost to consistently support such initiatives at the national and regional levels and ensure that technical cooperation by the United Nations human rights programme be made available to those governments requesting and needed assistance in these tasks.

As High Commissioner for Human Rights, I attach the greatest importance to the fundamental rights of children as enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In this connection, I also recognize the important work made by the members of the Committee on the Rights of the Child which is already a major catalyst for practical action in the field of the rights of the child and I am convinced that the impact of the Convention would be maximized and would lay the foundations for real progress in each country if it were to be implemented in the way sought by the Committee. As a means of supporting the Committee in its task, I have prepared a plan of action which provides for greater assistance to the Committee.

I believe the implementation of this plan would contribute on a wide front to combating the abhorrent practices which are the subject of this Congress. I should like to use this opportunity to express my appreciation to those Governments which have shown a particular interest in contributing to this plan's success, especially to our host today, the Government of Sweden. Further support for this plan is warmly welcomed.

The importance of the undertaking of further legal and other measures to eradicate the sexual exploitation of children is being addressed by various other human rights organs of the United Nations. The Commission on Human Rights is playing a leading role in such efforts. The Commission established the mandate of a Special Rapporteur on issues relating to the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. The Special Rapporteur in carrying out her mandate has been assessing the situation of children, identifying problems, submitting suggestions for remedial action and offering durable solutions for consideration. The Commission on human rights has also adopted a programme of action for the prevention of the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography which details a range of legal, educative, informational and other measures which States are required to take and report on. I believe these initiatives have been of great value to the work of this Congress.

The Commission is also considering the question of improving and strengthening laws and their enforcement for crimes related to the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. It is doing so through the drafting of an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. I should like to stress that the urgency of the matter facing children demands that work on this Protocol be brought quickly to a successful conclusion.

Through the various mandates given to the United Nations human rights programme, we must give high priority to the task of preventing and combating the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

The drafters and contributors to the declaration and agenda before us have devised a checklist for action to complement and strengthen the tools which are already in existence or under preparation and are aimed at halting this violation of the human rights of children. The recommendations contained in the agenda for action, which offer practical solutions for dealing with the crime of the commercial sexual exploitation of children, are a concrete expression of our commitment to the rights of the child. We must all carry out our part of this agreement for the good of our children and our future generations.

This Congress is already a great success in so far as it has placed this issue on top of the international agenda. I am convinced that it will mark a watershed in our efforts to combat and eventually prevent these blatant violations of the rights of the child if individuals, groups, governments, national and regional institutions and international organizations are all fully involved and actively participating.

For my part, I solemnly pledge the support of the United Nations human rights programme to join wholeheartedly all efforts at this Congress and to do all we practically can to eradicate this contemporary scourge by mobilizing our partners, both Governments and NGOs, the mechanisms and procedures available within the UN in our everyday work. Together we can make a difference!

Thank you.