

Keynote statement by Ms. Makiko Tanaka, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan

(Original: Japanese)

Your Majesty, Your Imperial Highness, ladies and gentlemen,

May I first of all extend my most sincere welcome to all of you, as the Chair of the Congress, and on behalf of the Government of Japan.

Japan's Goodwill Ambassador for UNICEF, Ms. Tetsuko Kuroyanagi, who is my close friend, told us of her impressions following her visit to Afghanistan this past July.

“Seen from the viewpoint of adults,” she said, “there is nothing but despair in Afghanistan. A three-year-long drought. No food, no water. The civil war is still going on. Despite these difficulties, children cheerfully say, ‘I want to become a school teacher!’ A boy shepherd who had his leg blown off by a landmine is given an artificial leg and says, ‘I am so happy! I can now walk and live with the sheep again!’” Ms. Kuroyanagi thought to herself, “Children are wonderful. They never lose hope.”

I myself also met those hopeful children when I visited an Afghan refugee camp in Pakistan last month.

Not all children are born into this world under equal conditions, as you know. Some are born into affluence and happiness, others into poverty or war. Some are born with grave illness. Even so, newborn babies are entirely innocent and lovely, and fully trust the adults around them. Children are helpless; they have no choice but to accept at birth all the irrationalities of the world. Nevertheless, how much hope and happiness they bring to us!

When we turn our eyes to this world, there is no end to the terrible acts of commercial sexual exploitation of children throughout the world. Children in developing and developed countries alike are suffering from this problem, which takes various forms and has many causes.

Five years ago, we gathered in Stockholm to bring an end to these hateful criminal acts. Today, despite our efforts, the situation is getting even worse. Many children are still forced to work in the sex industry and exploited through child prostitution and pornography. The crime rings are getting more and more crafty, and the development of the Internet is posing an increased threat. Many countries including my own are struggling with these social diseases.

Child victims often find themselves in misery. Besides physical problems such as sexually transmitted diseases, mental trauma can leave children in agony for the rest of their lives. Social prejudice often makes the social reintegration of child victims difficult. Poverty deprives children of access to education. As a result, they have no choice but to turn to prostitution as a way of life, and they are then trapped. This is a vicious circle. How many girls are engaged in prostitution to support their families despite the threat of AIDS!

Commercial sexual exploitation of children is a grave violation of their human rights. Dignity of children as individuals must be respected. Neglecting children's rights and dignity and exploiting them is equivalent to denying our own future. Adults should bear this in mind. Toward the elimination of this unforgivable act, resolute and immediate action needs to be taken in every country, every region, and all over the world.

The first thing to do is to further promote cooperation among governments, international organizations and NGOs, in order to strengthen the network of international collaboration. The Declaration and Agenda for Action adopted in Stockholm raised awareness in every corner of the world and worked as a guiding principle in many countries, leading to the introduction of various legislation and policies.

In Japan, parliamentarians took the initiative in developing the Law for Punishing Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, which took effect in 1999. In addition, Japan concluded

ILO Convention No. 182 concerning the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour in June this year. As an important pillar of 'human security', Japan will seriously tackle this issue, work with international organizations including UNICEF, and construct close cooperative ties with Japanese and overseas NGOs.

A society always sensitive to the needs of children, I believe, is a society that can fully develop their rich potential. We bear responsibility for building an environment in which all children can grow up with abundant love and free from fear, and thus develop their possibilities to the fullest extent.

Children are our future. Children are the common fortune of all humankind, a fortune that knows no national borders.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Here in Yokohama, let us declare to the world our firm resolve to fight against the commercial sexual exploitation of children!

Thank you for your kind attention.