

## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **Arab and African Governments agree to accelerate action against the sexual exploitation of children.**

**(Rabat 26/10/01)** Forty Arab and African countries agreed today to accelerate action against the sexual exploitation of children by breaking the wall of silence on the issue and by increasing human and financial resources to overcome the increasing sexual exploitation of children throughout the region.

The Arab-African Forum Against Sexual Exploitation of Children, held in Rabat, Morocco, from 24 to 26 October adopted a Declaration noting that, among the key challenges that face the countries of the region, the subject of sexual exploitation of children remains a taboo in many countries.

Speaking at the closing ceremony, the Minister of Women's Status, Family and Child Protection and Integration of Handicapped, Ms. Nezha Chekrouni, emphasized the common features and causes faced by participating countries when tackling the issue of sexual exploitation of children. This, she said, facilitated settling regional priorities and will enable Arab and African countries to participate more effectively in the 2nd World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, to be held in Yokohama, Japan, 17-20 December 2001. She restated the active participation of civil society in the meeting.

Mrs Rima Salah, UNICEF Regional Director for West and Central Africa, said that the common position adopted will allow all the countries to break the silence on the sexual exploitation of children and ensure that action is taken in the political, economic and social spheres. "We must commit ourselves to ensuring that children's rights to innocence and dignity are restored," she insisted.

The Declaration adopted on the final day of the Forum – which brought together more than 250 delegates representing 40 Arab-African countries – renewed commitment to put an end to child sexual exploitation in the lead-up to the Yokohama meeting.

The Declaration underscored the need for governments to harmonize national legislation with the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and ensure their enforcement. It urged countries to ratify and implement the two optional protocols related to the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography and the involvement of children in armed conflicts, and ILO Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labour.

"The root causes of this calamity are poverty, illiteracy and inadequate educational systems, gender discrimination, cultural practices prejudicing children, such as mutilations," the Declaration stressed.

Discussions highlighted the fact that a great number of Arab and African countries are characterized by armed conflicts, war, military occupation and blockades. These conditions pave the way for the sexual exploitation of children. A critical concern raised by delegates was the close link between the sexual exploitation of children with HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases.

Discussion over the three days recognized some advances made during the past years, including the commitment of political leadership at the highest levels, the existence of outlines of national plans of actions, the growing involvement of national and international NGOs working on the implementation of the provisions of the Convention

on the Rights of the Child, and the progressive harmonization of national legislations with the Convention.

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