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Trafficking in Human Beings:
Who Does It Hurt, and
Why Should We Care?

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I want to thank the organizers and participants of this conference for all of the work they have done and are doing to eliminate trafficking in human beings from contemporary Europe, in particular from our region of Europe. I also wish to thank the organizers for the opportunity and the forum for some observations that I have long wished to make on this subject. Although much work has been done in the past few years in the anti-trafficking field, in my view this work has only begun to scratch the surface of the problem. Despite all the good work of all of the people at this conference, I believe that unfortunately not enough people – both high officials and the man in the street – not enough people understand exactly what is involved in human trafficking. We have all heard glib explanations that human trafficking, particularly of young women, is just a modern-day manifestation of basic human urges and behaviors that have always been present in human societies, and presumably always will. This is nonsense. I believe there is a particular lack of understanding of the harm that human trafficking does, not just to the victims and to family and friends close to them, but to society as a whole.

Let me start with an effort to describe very bluntly what human trafficking is. To do this, I would like to tell a personal story. Over a decade ago, while my family was living in Cote d'Ivoire, we all had the opportunity to visit the town of Biriwa Beach, in Ghana, halfway between the capitals of Abidjan and Accra. This area is the site of several so-called “slave castles” – fortresses that were used by Europeans to collect and hold Africans whom they had captured or who had been sold to them by other Africans, while they waited for slave-trading boats to come and take the unfortunate captives off to a life of slavery in the new world. Many of these slave castles are still relatively well-preserved. One can experience personally for a few moments the cramped quarters and cruel conditions in which those recently captured were held while they awaited sale and transport forever from their homes and loved ones. You can actually go down into the hot, dark stone cellars in which the prospective slaves were held. You can walk through the narrow stone corridors that led straight to the holds of the slave vessels. The

unfortunate captives never saw the light of day or open air as they were shipped from their homes to a new world of servitude.

The African slave trade, conducted for centuries by states and peoples from Europe and North America, is one of the greatest injustices of human history. A century and a half after the formal abolition of slavery, my country still struggles with the consequences.

The first major point I wish to make today is that trafficking in human beings in Europe today is a slave trade. Some of the circumstances and details may differ from what our European predecessors did in Africa in previous centuries, but nevertheless it is the same thing – human slavery. I sometimes hear explanations for present day trafficking involving poverty, economic transition, and unemployment. Listening to these rationalizations, I can almost see and hear tribal chieftains from the past explaining to me the economic benefits brought to their villages and society by the proceeds from the sale of a few of its members.

We also sometimes hear explanations that some of the victims of today's human trafficking are willing participants. In particular I have heard claims that this is the way that some of the women choose to earn money. I can only shake my head in dismay, and recall similar myths propounded in North America centuries ago about happy African slaves, cared and provided for by more educated and enlightened plantation owners.

Trafficking in human beings is slavery – let there be no doubt about that. It is wrong. There is no society or country on earth that should tolerate it – not as a source country, not as a transit country, and not as a country employing the victims. I don't believe there is anybody from the organizations represented at this conference who does not share that understanding. However, I believe we all must constantly battle against attempts from other quarters to minimize the evils of trafficking, to suggest it is something that has always been with human society, and something that can be tolerated as long as it only bothers "someone else."

The second major point I wish to make is that human trafficking does more than just hurt the immediate victims. Of course, there is the obvious point that victims of trafficking have mothers, fathers, sister, brothers, and sometimes spouses and children who all suffer when the victims inexplicably disappear.

Let me give you some examples of who is hurt by trafficking. We have found that 70 per cent of returning victims have at least two or three children, whom they have usually left behind. There are significant long term social costs in the return and rehabilitation of trafficking victims and their families.

There is also a widespread misconception that modern day trafficking involves only women and children involved in the sex industry. We increasingly find that victims of trafficking are employed as forced labor in a number of industries – construction, restaurants, hotels, greenhouses, and domestic labor. There are also cases of trafficking

for begging and for organ transplantation. The victims include men, women, and children.

There are more fundamental social costs to trafficking. Traffickers do not invest in society or the economy. On the contrary, trafficking produces smaller economic gains for society than normal, legal investment and economic activity. Trafficking is an illegal activity. For it to be maintained, the government and society ultimately become corrupted and criminalized. Colleagues in law enforcement tell me they observe that human trafficking is almost always accompanied by trafficking in illegal narcotics and other illegal trade. A study recently conducted by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs found that in 50 per cent of human trafficking cases studied, the perpetrators were also engaged in illegal trade in drugs or arms.

Moldova unfortunately is no exception in any of this. Human trafficking contributes to the disastrous depopulation of the country. In Moldova, which is a primary source country, the departure of large numbers of young people, especially young women, distorts and damages both the social balance and the labor force. Villages and towns are depopulated, children are left poorly cared for and unschooled, and families are torn apart or left unformed. To be sure, many Moldovans living and working abroad send back substantial sums to relatives at home. But how much more would the economy benefit if victims of human trafficking worked legally in the economy at home? And how much better off would Moldova be without the corrosive effect of organized criminal activities on the fabric of government, the economy, and society?

The third major area I wish to address involves the questions of who is responsible for halting human trafficking and what they should do. Human trafficking is not a simple phenomenon or a simple problem, and there are no simple answers to these questions. Obviously people in source countries should not permit the sale of friends, relatives, and neighbors into slavery. Responsible officials in these countries should do all they can to stop the practice. But people and officials in so-called destination countries bear an equally heavy responsibility for the existence of human trafficking, and they have a commensurate obligation to halt the operations that receive and enslave the victims of human trafficking. And so-called transit countries cannot escape responsibility by explaining that they are neither the source nor so-called “consumers” of this modern-day slave trade.

Since I first came to the OSCE Mission in Moldova in 1999, the organizations and institutions represented in this room have done a great deal in the fight against human trafficking. We have helped create an awareness of the scope and nature of the problem among both Moldovan officials and Moldovan society. We have assisted Moldova in creating a legislative and administrative framework for combating the problem. We have provided aid and support in caring for the victims and protecting witnesses in the fight against trafficking. And we have begun to help law enforcement and court officials to put traffickers behind bars.

We all know there is much more to do, and that is why we are all here. My colleagues from the OSCE Mission to Moldova and I look forward today and tomorrow to exchanging opinions, ideas, and plans for broadening and strengthening our efforts in the fight against human trafficking. As a first step in this dialogue, I would like to offer you a few general thoughts from the OSCE perspective.

First of all, the OSCE has recognized that human trafficking is a severe problem that is present in one form or another in almost all of the fifty five participating states. The OSCE this year has adopted a comprehensive Action Plan against Human Trafficking, which envisions coordinated activities against trafficking in destination, transit, and source countries. Serious discussions are currently underway among OSCE participating states on the possible establishment of a special OSCE Mechanism against Trafficking at this year's OSCE Ministerial Meeting in Maastricht in the Netherlands.

In Moldova, from the perspective of the OSCE Mission, we see the following steps or activities as particularly important:

- We need to carry to completion the drafting and adoption of the legislative, normative, and treaty bases for government and private action against human trafficking. A good start has been made on this, but we cannot rest on our laurels;
- In this respect, for example, Moldova should ratify the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, and its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, in accordance with the decision of the December, 2001 OSCE Ministerial Council in Bucharest;
- We need to continue, broaden, and intensify our efforts to raise the awareness of Moldovan officials and the Moldovan public. In particular we need to make effective arguments to convince the public and officials how trafficking hurts them and to motivate them to real efforts to fight this evil;
- We need to do more to assist the victims of trafficking, to heal their physical and psychic wounds and to facilitate their return to their homes, if they so wish, or to some other safe place. We need to do more to protect witnesses, family members, and friends who testify against traffickers;
- We need to provide motivation and material assistance to police and prosecutors to investigate, arrest, charge, and prosecute traffickers, no matter how important their business or political connections, especially those engaged in large-scale trafficking;
- Trafficking in human beings is a profitable business. Police and prosecutors need to coordinate with tax inspectors and other appropriate officials to investigate the origin of suspicious assets, whether cash, goods, or real estate, in addition to prosecutions for the actual act of trafficking.

All of our institutions and organizations represented here are already trying to do some or all of these things. We must continue and intensify these efforts, but we must also try to address some of the deeper causes of the problem. To paraphrase a common American saying, we can fight off the crocodiles as long as we want, but as long as we are stuck in the swamp, there will always be more crocodiles.

Human trafficking has many causes. One of the most important reasons for the upsurge in the last decade has been the poverty and instability of the transition period in which the states of the Balkans and the former Soviet Union now find themselves. In Moldova, hundreds of thousands of citizens have left the country to seek work elsewhere. High unemployment and poverty produce conditions in which young Moldovan women are particularly vulnerable to deceptive offers of employment.

Those of us assembled here will not fix all of Moldova's economic problems, at least not any time soon. However, I would like to stress, especially for the benefit of our colleagues in the Moldovan government, that improvement of the investment and business climate in Moldova would be an important step toward eliminating the conditions that allow traffickers to thrive. Until there are new jobs in Moldova, Moldovan citizens will continue to leave the country, and some of them will fall victim to traffickers. There will be few new jobs in Moldova until the climate improves for both foreign and domestic investment in existing and new businesses.

Our Moldovan colleagues have worked effectively with us in many specific areas of the fight against human trafficking. I hope we can continue and broaden this cooperation along the lines I have suggested this morning. And I hope we might also see improvements in the economic and regulatory environment that will address some of the more fundamental causes of the depopulation of the country, which in turn allows trafficking to flourish. In other words, we not only need to fight off the crocodiles; we need to start draining the swamp.

The OSCE Mission and I personally are deeply committed to the fight against human trafficking, and we are determined to make a difference. I hope that my remarks today may help galvanize a wider circle of officials and society to action in this fight. And I hope I have provided some food for thought for our discussion of the next two days on specific common initiatives we can take to further our common effort.