OFFICE OF THE SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON
VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

OSCE

22nd Conference of the Alliance against Trafficking in Persons

"Protection: upholding victims' rights and strengthening assistance"

4-6 April 2022

Statement by Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children

Dr. Najat Maalla M'jid

Vienna, Austria

15:00

It is a pleasure to be with you all today, and I want first to express my profound gratitude and respect for your work. For a long time OSCE has been at the forefront of international work to end trafficking and this gathering comes at a crossroad moment.

The urgency for an effective protection and assistance to trafficking victims, including children, who are undoubtedly among the most vulnerable and unprotected is evident. Reflections on our successes and failures to effectively protect victims of human trafficking are therefore more relevant than ever.

I would like to stress 3 key messages today:

<u>First, despite our collective efforts, the scale of child trafficking remains an overwhelming concern, as children account nearly one-third of all identified victims.</u>

I draw the attention of the Human Rights Council in my recent report to the damaging impact of the pandemic highlighting how the **Covid-19 has expanded both the supply of** and **demand for trafficking in children**.

As a result of the **socio - economic impact of the pandemic** more children fell into poverty with **increased vulnerabilities to become victims of trafficking**.

The number out of school children and drop-outs increase, with more children drawn into child labour. There is also **more demand for child sexual exploitation and for child recruits to armed and criminal groups.**

Clandestine and lucrative criminal activities are also growing, often underpinned by evolving technologies frequently involved under an existing culture of impunity.

Trafficking of children has shifted even further underground since the start of the pandemic, adding to the challenges of estimating its scale and mounting an effective response.

Widespread **violence, armed conflicts, food insecurity and environmental degradation** have reached such levels that we are witnessing an unprecedented level of **mass human movement around the globe**.

More than 33 million children worldwide had been forcibly displaced by the end of 2020; children, who account for less than one third of the global population, account for almost half of the world's refugees.[1]

Many of those on the move are children - girls and boys under the age of 18, many of whom are unaccompanied compelled to leave their homes and communities to flee violence or oppression or to seek safety and protection elsewhere. **The protection of children from risks of trafficking and exploitation in migratory flows is therefore of paramount importance**.

In Europe in just a few weeks more than 4 million civilians, mostly women and children, have been forced to flee life-threatening attacks on their homes, schools and communities in Ukraine.

Massive, forced migration flows continue we cannot forget from other regions and countries such as Syria, Myanmar, Yemen, Afghanistan, Ethiopia and the Sahel region, among others.

Conflict and displacement heighten the risk of trafficking and the **most vulnerable among the displaced are children** in need of special protection, both as children and as victims.

Children **unaccompanied and separated; children left without parental care, with disabilities, children living in institutions, in foster homes or state care. They all** are most likely to be targeted and exploited by traffickers and go missing along these dangerous journeys.

<u>Second, the ongoing forced displacement and humanitarian crisis has revealed gaps in national child protection systems to rapidly and effectively respond to the specific needs and vulnerabilities of children seeking refuge.</u>

Lack of **identification and referral of victims of trafficking** is a prevailing problem. In many countries in the region immigration and border control authorities, who are the first point of contact for children on the move, are not sufficiently linked to child protection agencies. They often fail to provide necessary protection to child victims of trafficking and are not aware or trained to prevent double victimization.

---

[1] Child Displacement and Refugees - UNICEF DATA

In many cases, **children** who are in search of a safe haven**, lack access to a child protection authority, to a rights-based age- and gender-sensitive determination process, to legal representation, to accessible information about their rights** or about ways of seeking redress for the acts of violence they may have suffered along their journeys.

Too often they are **denied opportunities for family tracing and reunification** and **access to justice for the safeguard of their rights as victims of trafficking**.

Children who often lack documentation and may not speak the local language or a language adapted to their age, are perceived as intruders, **detained and treated as criminals,** while they are in desperate need of protection.

Due to their age, fear of arrest, deportation or retaliation from criminals, they are less likely to report abuse to authorities in transit and destination countries. As a result, they may not be able to benefit from the protection they are entitled to as children and as victims of trafficking.

Third, we cannot miss **this opportunity for a collective action.**

There are **number of critical issues that we need to address to protect children, including amid migratory flows and in crisis situations, from risks of trafficking and exploitation**.

- Preventive efforts must start from **addressing vulnerabilities of children to trafficking and exploitation at the outset**.
- **Spending on integrated, cross-sectoral child- and gender-sensitive violence prevention and protection services**, is a **sound investment with a high return** for all.
- States need to **provide durable solutions** and ensure their **child protection systems and basic services (**education, health and mental health, social protection, housing, psycho-social support, justice, including legal counsel and representation**) are accessible to all children seeking refuge, without discrimination.**
- States need to strengthen **national capacities for timely identification, referral and protection of child victims of trafficking**. This requires strengthening National Referral Mechanisms (NRM), multisectoral, cross-border and transnational cooperation.

- We all must ensure **non-discriminatory protection of all children** and their caregivers and address racism and xenophobia at borders.
- Children must be protected from punishment by the State whenever and wherever their condition to do the unlawful act is related to their trafficking. **The non-punishment principle** should cover **not only criminal but also civil, administrative and immigration offences. States must end practice of immigration detention of children as it is never in the best interest of a child**.
- We need to ensure **accountability for the perpetrators** through **enhanced cross border cooperation and improved capabilities for criminal investigations.** This requires, among others, better use of ICTs to disrupt traffickers who are increasingly using technologies and other developments, such as non-traditional payment methods to expand their "business of trafficking".
- We need to ensure that measures to address trafficking **tackle not only supply but also demand side** and are **integrated in the immediate as well as medium to longer-term response to the crisis.**
- We need to switch from silo to integrated approach ensuring **complementarity between humanitarian, security, peace and development**.
- Most importantly, **all our actions must be** victim centered and **informed and shaped by children's lived experiences.**

The Recommendations of the OSCE Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings on the need to enhance anti-trafficking prevention amid mass migration flows provide a clear guidance on concrete steps that need to be taken and I strongly encourage participating governments to take measures to ensure their implementation.

Thank you!