

Opening remarks

by

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in the

OSCE Seminar on

« Cooperation to prevent trafficking of Human Beings in the Mediterranean Region »

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**Dear Ambassadors,**

**Dear Special Representatives,**

**Dear Deputy Director General,**

**Dear Directors,**

**Excellencies,**

**Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Good Morning. It is a pleasure to be here with you today to take part in this important seminar. I would like to thank the government of Italy for the hospitality as well as the OSCE, the government of Luxembourg and other partners for organising this event and for the kind invitation.

First of all, I would like to say we firmly believe in the need for further international cooperation to more effectively combat the practices of trafficking in human beings. Tunisian citizens in particular have suffered from such crimes, young women in search of work were lured under false pretences and fake employment offers to exploitation in Middle Eastern countries; vulnerable child migrants ended up in forced labour abroad, and some of our migrant workers continue suffer from exploitation in some European countries.

Furthermore, migrants who have transited through our shores in the wave of irregular migration following the Tunisian revolution included third party nationals as well as our own that belonged to sensitive age and other vulnerable categories. They might have been or have become victims of human trafficking.

Following the events in Libya in 2011, our country welcomed waves of hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced Libyan citizens. Going through our own transition and lacking the legal framework and trained personnel, we have been placed under considerable strain to deal with massive amounts of refugees and to mitigate the risks of irregular migration, of exploitation and trafficking. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank our international partners for helping us navigate through these difficult circumstances.

Prior to the revolution, probably not enough effort has been expended to counter human trafficking practices. Today, however, the political commitment to be pro-active in fighting this phenomenon, and to assist its victims, is steadfast. In spite of this good will, we have encountered several difficulties in practice, mainly due to the lack of proper legislation and the lack of adequate training of officials.

Studies show that Tunisia is slowly transforming to a land of immigration as well as emigration. Prospective studies expect that Tunisia soon will need to import significant amounts of labour, especially in farming, construction and domestic work. This is mainly due to the gradual aging of Tunisian society and the highly educated young labour force creating a mismatch between offer and demand in the labour market. Furthermore, the reconstruction of neighbouring Libya, the African Development Bank estimates, is likely to attract hundreds of thousands of Tunisian workers, thereby accentuating local labour shortages.

Given the democratic transition in our country and the demographic changes which make it a potential destination for an increasing number of migrants, and taking into account the current and likely future regional developments, we were compelled to take a deep review of our migration policy in all its dimensions.

Indeed, following the last elections, the Secretariat of state for migration was created to spearhead the efforts of migration policy development and to coordinate its implementation across the various ministries. We have also taken steps towards the creation of a National Observatory for Migrations, which should become the focal point of information repositories, migration profiles, and scientific studies about the various characteristics of migration.

With respect to the topic of this conference, our national efforts in the area of combating human trafficking can be summarised into four key themes: Prevention, legislative reform and effective law enforcement, protection and support of victims, and international coordination and cooperation.

In terms of **prevention**, we “made significant efforts to raise awareness about trafficking and train government officials...The Tunisian Ministries of Social Affairs, Education, and Employment and Vocational Training initiated public awareness campaigns in the primary

school curriculum to dissuade teenagers and young adults from emigrating illegally and potentially becoming victims of trafficking. The government also supported IOM counter-trafficking awareness campaigns for refugee camp residents.”<sup>1</sup> We are also working on an ambitious project to establish migration resource centres throughout the country to prepare and inform potential migrants and immigrants about their rights and the risks of fraud, exploitation, and trafficking.

As you are well aware, human trafficking is closely connected to irregular migration. In terms of significance, irregular migration has subsided in 2012, going down from over thirty thousand in 2011 to a factor of ten lower this year as our security forces regained their full effectiveness. We expect this phenomenon to further subside, in terms of total numbers of migrants, to long-term historical lows by the end of the current year.

Nevertheless, and regardless of actual numbers, we believe that irregular migration is detrimental to our youth by putting them at risk in the high seas and upon arrival. It is also detrimental to our country by depriving it from valuable human capital especially as it rebuilds a free and democratic society and a growing economy. In terms of long-term prevention, we are multiplying public development efforts and private investment incentives in the marginalised regions that traditionally export irregular migrants as a strategy to fight off the root causes of this phenomenon.

In terms of **legislative reform and law enforcement**, the Tunisian government has established a National Commission to Combat Trafficking in Persons, consisting of representatives from the Ministries of Interior, Justice, Social Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Finance, Health, and Women's Affairs. The commission also includes representatives from civil society. The commission's role is to work on draft comprehensive counter-trafficking legislation that prohibits and adequately punishes all forms of human trafficking concurrent with the 2000 UN TIP Protocol, as well as train officials' on proactive identification of victims of human trafficking among vulnerable groups.

In a parallel and associated effort, we have reviewed the practices of employment agencies to avoid the spread of fraudulent employment offers linked to human trafficking rings. "... the Ministry of Employment conducted investigations and began background checks of all recruitment agencies operating in Tunisia; recruitment agencies are now required to sign contracts with the Ministry of Employment before they can recruit workers to work in Gulf

countries.”<sup>1</sup> In parallel, we are building up support for the ratification of the UN convention on the protection of the rights of all migrant workers and their families, which will further provide protection to immigrant workers within our borders. This will ensure that they don’t become vulnerable to human trafficking networks or to the exploitation practices of employers. In this regard, we are working with the trade union and other actors in civil society in the context of a productive working partnership grounded in our shared commitment to the realisation of the values of the revolution especially freedom and dignity for all, be they citizens or migrants.

Despite these efforts, more needs to be done in the areas of **protection of victims** and **international cooperation**. While the topic of this conference is an important priority for us, our country goes through a critical period of its history and is faced with countless other priorities, all equally pressing and in need of significant resources. This is why international cooperation is critical in this area. No single country can alone eradicate the evils associated with the trafficking of exploitation of human beings. But our collective and proactive response can effectively counter these evil practices and lend valuable protection to countless vulnerable fellow human beings.

Let me conclude by noting that we need to focus our efforts on raising awareness and on shifting public opinion to support policies that enhance the protection available to migrants regardless of their status and to combat xenophobic and counter-productive measures that put at risk the vulnerable among them.

In parallel, we need to promote joint efforts to manage migration, such as “mobility partnership programmes”, but in a logic of balance and reciprocity, with the objective of combating irregular migration, promoting the exchange of information and expertise, protecting vulnerable people in transit, and opening avenues for legal migration to ensure a more fluid mobility of people, especially qualified professionals and service providers. This mobility is a natural complement to the increasing free circulation of capital, goods and services, all essential to vibrant and growing regional economies and thereby to mutual development, peace and stability.

Thank you for your attention and I wish you a very successful and productive seminar.

<sup>1</sup> *Trafficking in Persons Report – Tunisia, US State Department, 19 July 2012*