

23rd Conference of the Alliance against Trafficking in Persons- *It's About People: National Leadership to End Human Trafficking*

High-level opening on anti-trafficking leadership

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Keynote address by SRSB-SVC, Ms. Pramila Patten

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I commend the OSCE for its important contributions in combating human trafficking over the past decades. This conference is taking place at a critical time –when trafficking in persons is flourishing with important deficits in tackling it persisting. Prevention measures are limited and often ineffective, while impunity prevails. A recent UNODC's Global report reveals that the number of victims of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation detected globally fell by 24% in 2020 while the number of convictions fell by 27 per cent.

This global business involving “human goods” has now reached dimensions comparable to those of the illicit trades in drugs and weapons. While human trafficking occurs in almost every country in the world, it takes on particularly abhorrent dimensions during and after conflict. It violates human rights and undermines national and international security through its links to organised crime and corruption. Women and girls, particularly those who are displaced, are disproportionately affected by trafficking in persons for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

The war in Ukraine with its unprecedented refugee crisis both in time and scale, has increased vulnerability to trafficking inside and outside of Ukraine. It is commendable that many governments, regional and international organizations have taken robust initial measures to welcome refugees and offer support and assistance to meet their immediate needs. While the regular migration scheme offered by the EU to Ukrainian citizens, may reduce their vulnerability to trafficking as compared to 2014, the risk that this humanitarian crisis turns into a human trafficking crisis with an unprecedented number of victims remains high, if more risk mitigation measures are not put in place.

Scarcity of data should in no way be taken to indicate a lack of criminal activity, especially for human trafficking, which often deprives its victims of voice and agency and reduces capacity for detection. Earlier migration crises have demonstrated how criminal groups or individuals take advantage of large flows of people to exploit the most vulnerable in transit and destination countries. For traffickers and predators, this war is not a tragedy but an opportunity.

All States have a responsibility to prevent trafficking, to investigate and prosecute traffickers, and to protect, assist and provide adequate redress to the victims, with respect for their human rights at the centre of all such efforts.

I went to Ukraine twice in the past year. I also visited a number of refugee receiving countries- Poland, Moldova, Latvia and Estonia where I saw how the response is uneven. For example, I visited reception and transit centers in Poland and Moldova where the majority of the refugees are living with host communities and saw grave security and protection concerns in these facilities run by volunteers, with only a 'bare-bones presence' of United Nations agencies. The lack of oversight of accommodation offers, the multiplicity of actors volunteering to provide services, with little or no training or experience in supporting victims of trafficking or persons at risk of trafficking are serious concerns.

The reality is that many refugee receiving countries are overwhelmed and need support to be able to allocate sufficient resources for the responses. While primary responsibility for combating trafficking rests with the State, humanitarian actors must also play an important role. A comprehensive and well-coordinated counter-trafficking strategy, involving all relevant sectors and actors, including the authorities, should form part of the protection response.

Given the challenges of this transnational organized crime, and the complex nature and multiple dimensions of human trafficking, the anti-human trafficking response requires an integrated and holistic response- a concerted, cross-border response by humanitarian partners, law enforcement agencies, border forces, immigration officials and political leaders.

I am happy to report that during my first visit to Ukraine last year in May, I signed a Framework of Cooperation with the government of Ukraine, to support their efforts in a number of priority areas including prevention of conflict-related trafficking inside and outside of Ukraine. The technical support being provided includes awareness-raising and training of military personnel, Border Guards, Police and immigration officials, and include engagement with neighboring and receiving countries, as well as regional institutions.

While I welcome the attention given to trafficking in the context of the war in Ukraine, I urge the international community to do more to prevent trafficking in all conflicts. The war in Ukraine is far from the only situation in the world putting women and children at risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking in human beings.

In the Sahel, the trafficking of women and girls, both by armed groups and organized criminal groups and networks, is a well-documented reality. In Libya, an important hub in the migration route to Europe, patterns of conflict-related sexual violence, including sexual exploitation and forced prostitution continue to be perpetrated against women and girls.

In other conflict zones, countless stories of women and girls abducted and raped by parties to the conflict or compelled to exchange sexual services for food, shelter, protection or safe passage are being documented. In the last decade, conflict-driven trafficking for the purpose of sexual violence gained particular visibility as a feature of the modus operandi of terrorist groups like Boko Haram and Daesh. These groups continue to be active in Nigeria and in other parts of Africa, using the threat of, and proceeds from, trafficking to advance their strategic objectives and to finance their operations.

Another trend that is often overlooked is the heightened exposure of internally displaced and refugee women and children, with limited economic opportunities or resources having fled their home and homelands due to conflict, to trafficking and exploitation, leading to alarming patterns of predation in places as distinct as Cox's Bazaar or Ethiopia.

Yet, the normative framework regarding the link between sexual violence in conflict and trafficking for sexual purposes is robust, with the adoption of SCR 2331(2016) which called for decisive and immediate action to prevent, criminalize, investigate, prosecute, and ensure accountability of those who engage in trafficking in persons. Resolution 2331 recognized the extreme trauma experienced by the victims of trafficking and the importance of assistance and services for their physical, psychological and social recovery, rehabilitation and reintegration.

Ladies and gentlemen, the challenge before us is how to close the gap between commitments and compliance and turn resolutions into solutions. SCR 2331 and international law cannot be an empty promise. We must also use this moment to recommit ourselves to the principles enshrined in the OSCE Action Plan.

We must **prevent** trafficking by reducing vulnerabilities.

We must **protect** victims by strengthening identification and reporting mechanisms and provide direct assistance to all victims, in a gender, age and child-sensitive manner.

We must **prosecute** perpetrators and have in place robust anti-trafficking legislation. Trafficking in human beings will continue to be a low-risk and highly profitable business in the absence of proper legislation.

We must **partner** for change. The multi-faceted nature of trafficking in human beings requires political and operational coordination, and cooperation at national, regional and international levels.

Ladies and gentlemen, last but not least, if we are to address the complex problem of conflict-related trafficking, we should not lose sight of the crime itself. Too often, it goes **undetected and undeterred**. To a chilling extent, trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation remains an

underground crime against a perceived underclass of victims. To address it, the issue must be *visible*, and on the radar of law enforcement officials. The *way* we view the issue also matters, and I will leave you with **three critical lenses**:

- **The first is a *gender lens*:** Even if we dismantle the criminal networks and brothels, deter demand, and arrest the perpetrators, *unless there are educational opportunities and viable economic alternatives, women and girls will always be at heightened risk.* The one constant in human trafficking is poverty, which *has a female face.* We will never break the vicious cycle of gender-based violence and exploitation without *prioritizing the economic empowerment of women.*
- **The second consideration is that we cannot be *conflict-blind*:** From Ukraine, to Myanmar, and elsewhere, we see that women and girls comprise the vast majority of civilians forcibly displaced by war, who flee with *nothing more than the clothes on their backs*, and the *belongings they can carry by hand.* Women's *physical security and economic security are indivisibly linked*, with conflict dynamics compounding economic desperation.
- **The third lens is that of the *survivor*:** Survivor engagement is essential, as they know firsthand the tactics traffickers use, including online; the obstacles survivors face; and what works to support socioeconomic reintegration.

Ladies and gentlemen, there are too many victims who are robbed of their basic dignity and rights. Although this historical moment is fraught and complex, I firmly believe that we can change that reality. We must firmly address the ***inequality, poverty, and insecurity that forge the chains of human trafficking and break them through a gender and age responsive, survivor-centered approach.***
