

Opening Remarks by the EU Ambassador to ASEAN, H.E. Francisco Fontan

Your Excellencies, distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to be part of this event today. The Launching of the first Review on Trafficking in Persons in ASEAN marks an unprecedented milestone achievement for ASEAN, and for the world – the world in which **human mobility** has always existed, but **has never before been accompanied by such a vast amount of illegal trafficking and abuse**.

This first ever Regional Review it is a step closer to regional coordination in ASEAN. I think back on **the day when such an overarching review was done in the European Union** and it was actually not so long ago.

- The process started in **2010** when the EU appointed a dedicated Anti-Trafficking Coordinator, proposed a binding legislation, adopted a Strategy for Eradicating Trafficking in Human Beings in 2012, and – **5 years later**, in May this year – published the **first "Report on the progress made in the fight against trafficking in human beings in the EU"**.

Part of that report also analyses the trends that European countries have been experiencing in the past 5 years. For example, **over three quarters of registered victims were women** – and there are two keywords here that I would like to highlight.

- First, I say '**registered**', because human trafficking is an '**invisible crime**'. In reality, there is so much more that goes on unnoticed and unregistered, and so many victims are not even identified. Assessing the exact scale of human trafficking becomes even more difficult when it is linked with other criminal activities.
- Second, **women and girls are by far the most affected by human trafficking**. 98 % of the registered victims of forced commercial sexual exploitation **are women and girls**. More than half of the victims of forced economic exploitation **are women and girls**. In a long list of reasons from drug smuggling to organ removal, trafficking for the purpose of **sexual exploitation** is still **by far the most prevalent form of trafficking in the EU**. Let us also remember this in two weeks when celebrating International Girls Day on 11 October.

Human trafficking impacts women, men, girls and boys in different ways, and gender imbalances aggravate the degree of their vulnerability to abusive recruitment and exploitation. Human trafficking disproportionately affects persons whose rights may already be compromised, including victims of sexual and gender-based violence, refugees, migrants, and minorities. This is why **the EU's approach to trafficking begins from a gender and human rights perspective.**

- **Gender equality** is at the very core of European values and enshrined into our legal and political framework. With our Gender Action Plan for 2016-2020, we work towards the empowerment of women and girls and eradication of gender based violence, as part of the overarching fight against trafficking in human beings.
- The EU's anti-trafficking policy is driven by a **victim-centred approach** and aims at the protection of their fundamental rights. Human trafficking is a gross **violation of individual freedom and human dignity**. It is prohibited under the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.
- The EU Strategy towards the Eradication of Trafficking in Human Beings provides practical measures for the **prevention of offences, protection and support of the victims, prosecution of the traffickers**, and establishment of national law enforcement units specialised in human trafficking. It also envisages the creation of joint European investigation teams to prosecute cross-border trafficking cases, because implications of this serious crime cannot be effectively addressed by individual countries on their own. **Efforts need to be coordinated on a transnational level.**

Conventions are where this coordination and impact begins. Strategies and Action Plans then make it a reality.

The **ASEAN Convention** against Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, and its Plan of Action were adopted less than a year ago, and already, we see progress being made by **Cambodia, Singapore and Thailand**, who are among the first ASEAN member states who have ratified the Convention.

Before I conclude, I wish to express sincere appreciation of the work of the **ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC)** over the past years, but also of the efforts that have been put into by the many committees and agencies involved in putting together this Regional Review. The Launch

today in itself bears testimony to the **joint effort of all ASEAN bodies and committees working on the promotion and coordination of human rights policies in the region**. It is a textbook example of the progress that can be achieved in ASEAN with the true partnership and support of ASEAN Dialogue Partners. It is also a great pleasure for us to work together with the United States as a joint and global effort to combat human trafficking.

The Review does not only provide a description and assessment of the specific situation on human trafficking in different ASEAN member States, but it also exemplifies some of the best practices on how to meet this challenge that affects the whole region. As such, it is more than a report – **it is a tool to assist ASEAN and its Member States** in their efforts to improve national and regional measures taken in order to assist victims of trafficking.

As I said in the beginning, this is a **milestone** in the global fight against trafficking in human beings in general and in the ASEAN region in particular.

I truly hope that together, we can build on the **momentum that this Launch has created around us today**, and that the joint AICHR-SOMTC Consultation tomorrow will bring further progress towards overcoming the challenges posed by trafficking in human beings. Through the READI Human Rights Facility, the **EU continues to support ASEAN in this endeavour**.

Thank you for your attention.