

Excellency president Mohamed Nasheed  
Vice President honourable Dr. Mohamed Waheed Hassan Manik  
Honourable Minister of Health and Family Dr. Aminath Jameel  
Honourable Minister of Home Affairs Hassan Afeef  
Attorney General, Prosecutor General, judges and members of the Human Rights  
Commission of the Maldives  
Dr. Jorge Luna who country representative  
Ron Pouwels UNICEF Regional Advisor for Child Protection  
Distinguished guests, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen

Assalam Alaikum

It is indeed a great honour for me and for UNICEF to be part of this milestone event in a journey that began in the Maldives two decades ago with the passage of the law 9/91 on the protection of the rights of the child to stitch together a protective blanket for all children in the country.

This is also the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the convention of the rights of the child became international law. The articles in the convention refer to the rights of children to survival, development, protection and participation.

The first generation of children born since the convention became international law have reached adulthood. Much has been achieved globally for children during the past two decades, particularly in child survival and development although unevenly across the world. Six million fewer children under-5 die each year now than 20 years ago. Proportionately larger numbers of school age children, both girls and boys attend school and proportionately more households have access to safe water and sanitation. The same cannot be said about the right to protection and participation where progress has been modest at best. this report card is equally applicable to the Maldives.

There is a growing body of evidence that indicate a systems approach is required to achieve sustained advances in child protection. Children as we all know live within families, within communities and spend good many hours in school. as such elements of any system that aims to provide a protective environment for children should interact with each other and be responsive to the dynamic between the child and those who live with her or him at home, in the community and in school.

a systems approach does not mean that everything has to be established simultaneously. since that first formal step to enact law 9/91 there has been a number of other supporting laws that have come into effect such as the family act in 2000, law on sexual offenders in 2009 and the disability act in 2010. Importantly article 35 of the new constitution confers special protection for children, the elderly and persons with special needs.

State institutions, organizations and capacity to manage and deliver child protection services have and are being strengthened. Civil society organizations are beginning to form to complement government actions. The media is beginning to report more on child abuse and neglect. Life skills education is being introduced in the schools and to young adults in the community. To improve monitoring the Maldives child protection data base was launched recently.

to simply put the blanket of protection is being stitched one piece at a time, even as we speak. Unfortunately it does not yet adequately cover all children and the thread that binds the blanket together is weak.

For example, according to the national study on violence against children in the Maldives conducted in 2008;

1. Violence against children exists in all areas of the Maldives: home, school and in the community.
2. 26% of children have been punished emotionally at home and 14% both emotionally and physically.
3. 8% of students reported to have been hit by a teacher, although law prohibits this behaviour.
4. Overall boys and children with handicaps have a higher risk of encountering physical punishment.
5. Girls in the Maldives, especially in male', suffer from a high risk of becoming sexually abused during their childhood.
6. 11% of boys, as opposed to 20% of girls have been sexually abused at least once in their life, underlining the high risk for girls.
7. 2% of female adult caregivers indicated to have been raped as a child.

The aim of this national conference is to both take stock of each element of the child protection system, discuss and identify how to fill gaps and address weaknesses and explore how to strengthen coordination and collaboration between ministries and agencies that are responsible for implementing discrete elements of the child protection system. perhaps there is a need to establish an independent coordination mechanism. this would be the tread that will bind together the protective blanket.

This conference may wish to consider the establishment of an independent child protection agency with responsibility for a) monitoring compliance of all actions taken for prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and reintegration of children in conflict with the law, with existing laws and regulations, b) take necessary actions to ensure the best interest of the child is preserved in all decisions made and c) take necessary actions to promote and improve coordination and collaboration between departments and agencies.

Excellency your presence at this conference today is an inspiration to all of us as it is an indication of your commitment and the priority you attach to the protection of children. Excellency, we in the UN system and UNICEF in particular with our modest human and

financial resources stand ready to contribute towards making the protective blanket stronger and adequate to cover all children at all times in the Maldives.

I wish this important conference all success.

Thank you.