

Parliamentary Confederation of the Americas

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Speech by Senator Céméphise Gilles

Dear COPA colleagues,

To me, every assembly or meeting of our Organization feels like coming home. And because I sense such an ease between us, I can tell you it is with a mixture of grief and pleasure that I address this assembly today. Grief, because of the difficult times my country is going through after getting hit by Fay, Gustav, Hannah and Ike—four hurricanes in three weeks—which left 500 dead and hundreds of millions of US dollars worth of damage in their wake. I would like to take this opportunity to highlight the outpouring of active solidarity from our many friends in the Caribbean, in North and South America, and in the rest of the world, especially Asia and Europe, and to say a big thank you to all of you, our brothers and sisters in the region and around the globe.

Pleasure also, because a step has recently been made in the right direction in the struggle by parliamentarians, socioprofessional and grassroots organizations and other sectors of civil society to make gender equity something real in my country and not just something we talk about. For the second time in the history of our people, a woman has been appointed Prime Minister and thus holds one of the country's highest public offices. Three other women will be serving alongside Michèle Duvivier Pierre-Louis in the newly installed government—as Minister of Social Affairs and Labour, Minister of Commerce and Industry and Minister of Women's Issues and Rights. Madam Pierre-Louis will also be serving as Minister of Justice, albeit temporarily. This number may not seem like much out of the total 18 ministerial portfolios, but we should think in terms of the quality of the positions these women hold and the increase, though slight, in the percentage of women among the country's decision makers.

Of all the challenges facing the new government, that of preventing violence against women is of the utmost importance. Efforts to that end should be all-encompassing, including physical, psychological, sexual and financial abuse and aggression. In Haiti, regardless of the form it takes or of the theory behind it (whether a behavioural and psychoeducational, psychodynamic, family systems or other theory), violence against women is directly linked to worsening economic conditions and so to extreme poverty.

All of this brings me to the topic of human trafficking and migrant smuggling. Though different, these two problems are interconnected and we must deal with them in tandem if we want to have a lasting impact. Both are major challenges for today's democratic states. Both are among the greatest human rights violations of our times. And they constitute the third source of illicit gain after drug trafficking and the arms trades. Democratic states must therefore work together to counter this criminal activity.

In my country, those most at risk of falling into traffickers' and smugglers' hands are

- children from destitute families, children working as domestics, and street children,
- destitute women with the heavy burden of raising children as single parents,
- jobless youth in rural and urban areas, and
- landless farmers.

What is the current situation in Haiti as regards human trafficking and smuggling? What efforts are being made to address the problem?

Haiti is known to be a source, transit and destination country for victims of human trafficking and smuggling, and various manifestations of the problem have been observed, including the exploitation of men, women and children who are smuggled out and subjected to forced labour in other countries, the closest being the Dominican Republic; child prostitution; the exploitation of children by armed groups; the exploitation of children as domestic workers; the adoption of children for unlawful purposes; the forced prostitution of women; kidnappings and so on.

A preliminary study conducted by UNICEF and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in 2002 found that, every year, over 2,000 children, mainly from three of Haiti's geographic departments (the North, Northeast and Northwest), emigrate with their parents' or tutor's consent and the help of smugglers to the Dominican Republic to find a job, generally in conditions close to exploitation.

Moreover, the number of children who fall victim to the internal domestic child labour or restavek system, one of the worst forms of child labour in Haiti, is estimated at 173,000 (FAFO, 2002). In general, these children are between 5 and 17 years of age. Close to 60% are girls and about 70% are from very poor rural areas. They often work long hours (14 to 17 hours a day), are given no affection, are physically and psychologically abused, and suffer all kinds of cruel, degrading treatment.

Spurred by declining social and economic conditions and political crises, people smuggling has grown on a large scale over the last 30 years. And so the stream of Haitians crossing the border into the Dominican Republic or heading for the USA and other Caribbean countries on makeshift boats has continued unabated, despite numerous tragedies.

The statistics for 2007-2008 show that over 100 Haitian men and women have died in some dozen serious accidents. They also show that more and more women and children are among those risking the trip, aided by networks of smugglers at exorbitant cost.

The main reasons for the persistence of human trafficking and smuggling in Haiti are economic and social. When women have children to feed, when young people have no employment prospects, when children are hungry or need an education, they are easy prey for traffickers who snare them with false promises.

One of the most effective strategies for eradicating this problem in our society consists in

- (a) combatting poverty first and foremost, with a focus on those most at risk and especially women and children;
- (b) strengthening the institutions working in this area so that they will be better able to coordinate their actions;

(c) adopting national and international laws to put in place legal means of deterring traffickers and protecting victims;

(d) raising public awareness of the risks involved. Many in my country fall into this trap because they are not informed.

Natural disasters like those Haiti experienced in these last three weeks are aggravating factors that boost human trafficking and smuggling, as many must leave their homes to flee life-threatening dangers and look for better living conditions.

But the country has not stood idly by in the face of this reality. A number of civil society organizations have been spearheading a vast awareness-raising and advocacy effort for over 6 years, and the former government introduced a package of economic, social, institutional and legal measures to combat human trafficking and smuggling.

These measures include:

- the ratification of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children;
- the ratification of the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention;
- the setting up a juvenile squad, which does what it can to monitor children travelling through the international airport and certain border checkpoints;
- the development by the Department of Social Affairs of a national child protection plan, which contains a full chapter on the victims of child trafficking and smuggling;
- the creation of an interdepartmental committee on human trafficking and smuggling, which has led to heightened awareness and better coordination of the issue in government departments, especially the Department of Women's Status and Rights, the Department of Social Affairs and the Department of Foreign Affairs;
- the drafting of a bill on human trafficking. The bill is now ready and, according to the former government, had it not been for the political crisis, it would have been put to a vote in Parliament. Also worth noting is that lobbying is underway for another bill to be passed by Parliament, this one on human smuggling;

- the drafting and tabling by the Department of Women's Status and Rights of a bill on responsible fathering to encourage fathers to play an active role in supporting their families and not leave mothers to carry the burden of responsibility by themselves. Single-parent families headed by a woman account for more than 50% of families in Haiti.

Within civil society, numerous efforts have been made to raise public awareness of the consequences of human trafficking and smuggling, and to bring the government to adopt a series of measures. An anti-trafficking and smuggling collective has been up and running for 5 years and has held media-based awareness campaigns and community training workshops. For the last two years, the GARR, the group I belong to, has been drawing attention to the socioeconomic factors that facilitate human trafficking and smuggling. It has been urging the authorities to invest in those areas with the highest migration rates and extend social security to those families most at risk, with a view to curbing the problem.

What lies ahead?

In its general policy statement, the new government announced that social security will be one of its priority areas.

Parliament will play a key role, through the budget bill it will vote on in the coming days, in providing institutions with the means to help at-risk families with such aspects as the basic costs involved in feeding and educating children. At the same time, efforts to bolster social security institutions, to pass the various bills that are already under way and to support the awareness-raising work of civil society organizations will be continued.

Human trafficking and smuggling is a plague that afflicts many countries, so it is crucial that institutions worldwide join forces and work hand in hand to stamp it out.

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