



Statement

Visit to the Maldives of the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children, Marta Santos Pais, 3-8 May 2013

1. Introduction and context of visit

At the invitation of the Government, I visited the country from 3-8 May, to lend my support to national efforts to address concerns about a young girl, a victim of sexual abuse, whose case has received national and worldwide attention, and whose protection remains my concern. I welcome the expression of condemnation by the President and other Maldivian authorities, as well as civil society, of the sentence issued against this this girl.

Her case is in fact paradigmatic of the wider situation of violence against children, and provides all of us with an important opportunity to push for change to prevent similar cases from happening again. In this regard, I welcome the decision of the President to set up a Child Protection Committee to identify loopholes in the child protection system, and to present recommendations to overcome existing challenges.

I would like to commend the leadership of the Maldives in the area of human rights at the international-level, including in the framework of the United Nations Human Rights Council. Regionally, the Maldives assumes an important role, including through the South Asian Initiative to Eliminate Violence against Children (SAIEVAC), where the commitment to prevention and elimination of violence is a fundamental goal.

At home, human rights are a cornerstone of the Maldives' Constitution, which explicitly provides guidance to state institutions, including courts, to act in line with international treaties ratified by the country, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

The CRC requires all states to prohibit, prevent and address all incidents of violence against children occurring within the home, in schools, state and justice institutions, or when used as a form of criminal sentencing.

During my visit, I have had very positive discussions with Government officials, Parliamentarians and other political actors, members of the judiciary, as well as national institutions and civil society organizations working in the area of child protection. Throughout, there was a strong reaffirmation of the international commitments undertaken by the Maldives to safeguard the rights of the child and ensure the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other international

human rights conventions ratified by the country. The Maldives has now before it a critical opportunity to translate these commitments into tangible legal, policy and programmatic action.

2. Reality

Over the recent past, significant tools and studies have been developed in the country to understand and address cases of violence, abuse and exploitation, similar to the experiences of the 15-year-old girl. These include important pieces of legislation recently adopted, such as the Domestic Violence Act. Moreover, a comprehensive mapping and assessment of the child protection system in the Maldives has been conducted with the support of UNICEF, and a 2009 study provided insightful information about Maldivian children's exposure to violence in the country. Similarly a child protection database has been promoted.

All of these elements together form a sound foundation to effectively prevent and address incidents of violence against children in the Maldives.

Nevertheless, incidents of violence remain hidden and concealed, are sensitive to be raised as a public concern, and difficult to report.

Despite the many institutions with the responsibility to intervene when children's protection from violence is at stake, due to geographic distance or insufficient institutional collaboration it becomes a challenge to promote mutually supportive actions and avoid piecemeal interventions.

3. Recommendations

As we look ahead we see promising avenues to secure a protective environment for all children in the Maldives to grow and develop to their full potential without any risk of violence, abuse and exploitation. But steady action becomes of essence.

Firstly, it is crucial to prevent social acceptance of violence against children by investing in awareness raising about children rights amongst the public-at-large and supporting families in their child-rearing responsibilities to protect children from violence.

Similarly, it is urgent to promote capacity-building and training initiatives for teachers, social workers, law enforcement officials, judges, prosecutors and other child protection actors who have a unique potential to safeguard children's protection from violence and to intervene in case incidence of violence occurs.

Secondly, it is important to institutionalize a high-level platform where all leading departments and institutions responsible for child protection concerns meet periodically to shape a long-term strategy to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence against children, and to identify critical goals to be achieved within the next few years, and to mobilise resources for implementation. This close cooperation between child protection

actors will equally be needed at atoll-level to effectively address and respond to incidence of violence against children.

Thirdly, building upon the Maldivian Constitution, progressive legislation for the protection of human rights and children's rights, it is urgent to further consolidate the national normative framework for the protection of children from violence. It is imperative to improve in the legislation a clear legal prohibition of all forms of violence against children, including in the home, in care and justice institutions, as well as a form of criminal sentencing.

It is urgent to promote submission to Parliament of strategic laws, including the Education Act, and important bills on juvenile justice, state custody, foster-ship and legal guardianship. Special attention should be equally given to Child Rights and Child Protection Law and ensuring full conformity of current initiatives, including the Draft Penal Code with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights treaties ratified by the Maldives to protect children from any form of inhuman sentencing.

The Maldives is approaching a very important period in the consolidation of democracy with the holding of national elections. In this strategic moment of the country's history, it is fundamental to keep children above politics. Children represent the most precious value of any nation and a fundamental indicator of social progress. Children are a unifying factor and bridge across every political, ideological or economic divides. I am confident that the unique opportunity to promote a lasting consensus around children's well-being and protection will be seized by Maldives, and this vision will inform the future of this country. The forthcoming National Children's Day on 10 May is an opportunity to move in this direction.

About the mandate of the Special Representative

On 1 May 2009, the United Nations Secretary General announced the appointment of Marta Santos Pais (Portugal) as his Special Representative on Violence against Children. Marta Santos Pais took her position on September 1st, 2009. The SRSG reports directly to the UN Secretary General, chairs the United Nations Inter Agency Working Group on Violence against Children and collaborates closely with a wide range of partners, within and beyond the UN system.

Marta Santos Pais was the Director of the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, a position she held since 2001. She joined UNICEF in 1997 as Director of Evaluation, Policy and Planning. Previously, she was the Rapporteur of the Committee on the Rights of the Child and Vice-Chair of the Coordinating Committee on Childhood Policies of the Council of Europe. She was a Special Adviser to the UN Study on Violence against Children and to the Machel Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children. She was a member of the UN Drafting Group of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and of its two Optional Protocols.

For more information: <http://srsg.violenceagainstchildren.org>