

News from Lithuania delivered by Mrs. Natalja Kurcinskaja, MPFSC

Natalja Kurcinskaja, Director of the Missing Persons' Families Support Centre, in Vilnius, Lithuania shares her report on the introduction of recent legislation in Lithuania which is intended to combat human trafficking and support victims.

New legislation comprising the *Identification of Victims of Human-Trafficking, Recommendations for the Pre-trial Investigation* and *Inter-institutional Collaboration* was signed into law at the General Prosecutor's Department of the Lithuanian Republic (LR) on the 12th of December, 2015.



Pictured left to right, are the Solicitor-General Darius Raulusaitis, Minister of Home Affairs, Mr. Saulius Skvernelis and Minister of Social Security and Labour, Ms. Algimanta Pabedinskiene, signatories confirming the Legislation.

One of the main aims of the legislation is to define the criteria by which victims of human trafficking are identified, in addition to setting out the specifics of pre-trial investigations of human trafficking. It is intended that the legislation will assist the effective, prompt and reliable investigation of crimes and application of the Law.

Signatories to the Inter-Institutional Declaration on Collaboration which was also signed at the event, are Caritas-Lithuania, Missing Persons' Families Support Centre, Klaipeda Social and Psychological Support Centre, Association Men's Crisis Centre, and delegates from Vilnius branch of International Organization of Migration. In signing this Declaration, the aforementioned institutions agree with the terms and conditions of the recommendations and commit to providing support for the victims of human trafficking.

Despite world-wide acknowledgement that human trafficking is a criminal offence; it continues to expand and remains one of the most organised forms of criminal activities. Lithuania is a source-country mainly because many people are trafficked for exploitation to other countries.

The Solicitor General for Lithuania, Darius Raulusaitis commenced his opening speech with a quotation from Pope Francis; *"Ask yourself, how many times, in fact, do we tolerate situations when humans are*

potential victims of human trafficking or we are seduced into purchasing things produced through the exploitation of others? Some of us close our eyes but others decide to take responsibility and act.” According to Mr. Raulusaitis, the implementation of the new legislation will provide real measures to fight against this modern form of slavery.

In Lithuania, human trafficking is traditionally identified as prostitution and the exploitation of women. However, in Lithuania today there are additional forms of exploitation. For example in 2014, of the total number of victims identified numbered 47; of which 25 were males who were exploited for forced labour and trafficked for illegal activities abroad. In the same year 24 pre-trial investigations of human trafficking were started while there have been 18 in 2015.

In 2014, three investigations related to the trafficking of minors and this number increased to eight similar investigations in 2015. In introducing and welcoming the legislation, Mr. Raulusaitis took the opportunity to further emphasise the importance of investigations and collaboration between different institutions in identifying the criteria for human trafficking and providing the support for victims.

Saulius Skvernelis, Minister for Home Affairs, acknowledged the significance of the legislation which will be enforced, stating that *“Human trafficking exists but unfortunately we are not able to unmask it in due time, to identify persons and to provide the proper support for victims.”* The Minister underlined the importance of the consistent attention of responsible institutions to work against human trafficking and the vital roles of collaboration and unified practice.

According to the Minister, it is not sufficient to sign the act of law, it is necessary to apply it in practice, stating *“We need at least one year to evaluate the results and practicable aspects of these recommendations and to add additional regulations in order to keep our work effective as much as possible.”*

Minister of Social Security and Labour, Ms. Algimanta Pabedinskiene paid special attention to the consideration that usually the victims of human trafficking are people from the lowest social groups, and that it is very sad when victims are children. She said, *“Therefore, it is good to know that so many non-governmental organisations joined this initiative and became partners and supporters for solving these painful problems.”*

Head of Klaipeda Social and Psychological Support Centre Ms. Dalia Puidokiene, who spoke on behalf of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), she shared her happiness about the change of attitude of both the State and governmental institutions towards problem-solving and possible collaboration with NGOs.

Ms. Puidokiene expressed her hope for the future in saying, *“In accordance with how the opinions and experiences of non-governmental organisations are valued, we now believe that the victims will get more help in the future. Also we expect that implementation of these recommendations and guidelines will not only protect existing victims but also protect people who might become the victims of human trafficking. Prevention activities in this sphere are extremely important.”*

Referring to the United Nations Data on Human Trafficking, more than 4 million people are trafficked each year and various other sources state that between 21 and 36 million people live in slavery conditions at the moment.