Remarks of the UNODC Executive Director Inter-Agency Meeting on the Travelling of Irregular Migrants by Sea

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Secretary General of IMO, Koji Sekimizu,

Colleagues from IOM, ILO, UNHCR, UNDP, OHCHR, and UN DOALOS

Ladies and gentlemen,

This meeting is very timely.

We must act to stop the horrific treatment of migrants by criminal smugglers.

Overcrowded boats and makeshift vessels capsizing and sinking; unguided cargo ships abandoned, with migrants left to their fate at sea; women, men and children drowning or dying of hypothermia are part of this global tragedy.

Many of these incidents are the result of smuggling operations organized by cold-blooded criminals with no regard for human life.

Just the first two months of 2015 alone has already seen several such incidents in various parts of the world. These tragedies represent a major global challenge, requiring the urgent attention of States and international organizations.

In this regard, I would like to thank the International Maritime Organization for hosting our meeting today and bringing together concerned agencies to address this issue.

We need to ensure close inter-agency cooperation between our agencies in line with our respective mandates, and in cooperation with the private sector and civil society.

This will enable us to take advantage of synergies and comprehensively address the challenges posed by the different needs of migrants to ensure that our strategies respect their rights, and at the same time confront the criminal networks that prey on them.

In the Mediterranean, the frequency and magnitude of the tragedies involving migrants are unprecedented and unacceptable.
The diverse modus operandi used by smugglers makes clear that this is a highly organized criminal activity, and a highly profitable one.

In a recent incident involving some seven hundred migrants, it was reported that people had paid up to five thousand US dollars each for the journey from Turkey to Italy.

Seven hundred passengers paying five thousand each would equal some 3.5 million US dollars, made from the desperation of migrants.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We cannot allow desperate people, escaping conflict and humanitarian disasters, fall prey to organized crime. We need urgent and resolute action to save lives and punish the criminals.

UNODC is developing a new strategy to contribute to international efforts and address migrant smuggling in the Mediterranean, through an integrated response encompassing five mutually reinforcing actions:

1. 1. Research and analysis to identify trends and flows, and gaps in responses;

1. 2. Strengthening national capacities to bring legislation in line and develop an effective criminal justice response;

1. 3. Promoting regional and inter-regional cooperation;

1. 4. Ensuring alignment and synergies with coordination mechanisms to address challenges at the global level; and

1. 5. Enhancing capacities to protect the rights of smuggled migrants.

Together with other concerned organizations, we issued a joint statement at the High Commissioner for Refugees Dialogue on Protection at Sea in December, calling for concerted action to address the loss of life, injury, trauma and serious human rights violations affecting migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees traveling by sea.
There is an existing international legal framework to combat this crime and protect migrants’ rights, represented mainly by the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocol on migrant smuggling.

These international treaties are nearly universal. One hundred and eighty-five countries are States Parties to the Convention and one hundred and forty-one to the Protocol. What we need is to support more effective implementation of these instruments.

Full compliance with them shall facilitate the needed cooperation and provide us with powerful tools to address these challenges.

To this aim, States Parties have the obligation to respect the internationally accepted definition of migrant smuggling and to criminalize the facilitation of irregular migration for the purpose of making a profit.

This is how criminal justice responses can specifically target organized crime groups.

Consistent implementation of the Protocol among States is also crucial to provide a legal basis for cross-border cooperation.

A comprehensive and balanced approach relies on close and effective cooperation, both informal and formal, between countries of origin, transit and destination to address all stages of the smuggling process.

An effective response to the current situation also requires strengthening the capacity of front line officers, investigators and magistrates so they can carry out their duties effectively, and coordinate action at the national level.

As guardian of the Convention and Protocol, UNODC provides technical assistance and supports the international community in developing comprehensive strategies that encompass prevention, prosecution and protection.

We also help to strengthen responses to migrant smuggling through cooperative regional and inter-regional frameworks, including the Khartoum, Rabat and Bali Processes, as well as through inter-agency initiatives such as the Global Migration Group.

UNODC’s new integrated strategy to address the smuggling of migrants across the Mediterranean further builds on this expertise and experience, and we are seeking the support of Member States to implement this response.

Ladies and gentlemen,
There are no simple solutions to this crisis. Long-term, continuous and comprehensive effort, sustained by adequate resources, is needed.

UNODC remains committed to continuing the dialogue and cooperation with the agencies present here today to ensure that our collective responses to stop this loss of life at sea are as effective as possible.

Thank you.