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I would like to begin by thanking you for inviting me to speak at this conference dealing with a topic that is very close to our hearts. The substantive work that the Belgian Federal Parliament has carried and is carrying out allows for a constantly evolving legislation that adapts to the increasingly complex exploitation mechanisms.

This European conference is an occasion for me to recall that we will win the fight against human trafficking and the violation of human dignity if we coordinate our efforts and our developments, and if we push each other to a higher level of protection, creating a sort of virtuous circle – for the crime related to human trafficking has no borders. Furthermore, this conference presents an excellent opportunity for exchanging ideas and best practices.

The Belgian Parliament has carried out substantive work for many years on the topic of human trafficking, and the Belgian Senate has twice set up an ad hoc Parliamentary Committee on this issue; the most recent one was established in 2009 and concluded its work in spring 2012. The Committee drew up a report offering a number of recommendations following hearings of various actors such as the voluntary sector, magistrates, police officers, and liaison officers. These actors were able to point out the shortcomings in the legislation and in our practices, allowing the Parliamentary Committee to formulate their recommendations.

These recommendations include:

* Raising front-line workers’ awareness including those in social inspection, closed centres, the Immigration Office, medical personnel, and local police forces;
* The protection and care of victims regarding the reliability of the interpreters and also with regard to making the recognition of the status of the victims more attractive; a point that particularly caught the Committee’s attention is that of increasing the protection of victims who are minors (the very low recognition rate of the status as a victim of human trafficking for minors is shocking);
* The improvement of the procedure and the importance of a multidisciplinary approach and of better coordination between and within departments;
* The consideration of the international aspect of human trafficking by organising a more intensive information campaign in both the countries of origin and in the host countries, and by increasing international cooperation between Member States’ labour inspection services to resemble that of the international police and judicial cooperation.

Following these recommendations, a draft resolution was adopted last December by the Senate. It requested the Government include:

* The incorporation as quickly as possible of the content of the Directive 2011/36/UE regarding human trafficking;
* That the money confiscated from traffickers be more often attributed to the plaintiffs as indemnification or otherwise used to protect victims;
* The possibility to adapt the criteria for granting the status of victim of human trafficking for minors as well as for issuing a residence permit upon their arrival in the shelters;
* The official recognition of shelters specialising in the care of foreign unaccompanied minors, victims of human trafficking;
* The official recognition and structural funding of shelters for victims of human trafficking;
* Strengthening the Public Prosecutor’s Office’s role as facilitator in the collaboration between Belgium and other countries as part of international investigations;
* That appealing to the European authorities for the creation of an autonomous European social inspection service that could allow for joint efforts between several Member States to be carried out, including in the fight against the use of false self-employed workers and the posting of workers;
* The need to insist to the European authorities for a modernisation of existing EU legislation with regard to seizure and confiscation of property.

We have also passed a number of legislative changes. These relate to broader powers entrusted to mayors to allow them to close, in an administrative and provisional capacity, those places which are suspected of human trafficking. Yesterday, the Senate approved three new texts in Plenary to complement its legal power. In one of these texts Belgium anticipates a European Directive which will extend the definition of sexual exploitation so that it is not only limited to prostitution. Another proposal that was passed by the Belgian Assembly yesterday concerns extending the special intent for organ harvesting in the current regulations.

Other bills are currently under consideration in the Senate Committee for the Interior, which is particularly aiming to implement the recommendations of the Senate.

One main difficulty is that several departments and ministries are involved in the issue of human trafficking: Department of Justice, Ministry of the Interior, Department of Immigration, Ministry of Social Affairs, among others. It is for this reason that the government adopted a plan of action against human trafficking last June. Furthermore, the Senate is working alongside and sharing tasks with the Parliament; this is a rare cooperation that deserves to be underscored. Also, through its control and its parliamentary right of initiative, the Parliament is ensuring the proper implementation of this plan.

To conclude, I have identified two topics that I believe are either inadequately dealt with at this present time or for which political consensus has not yet been reached.

The first is the issue of those victims of trafficking who are minors. Indeed, through various reports and hearings it was found that there are very few cases of minors being the victims of trafficking, that there is no specific organised and recognised support, and that shelters are insufficiently funded. It is imperative that action be taken regarding this issue, but some fear that introducing incentives would bring about a sort of “magnet effect” resulting in massive immigration to Belgium. This raises the broader issue of immigration and the absolute necessity of having a coordinated policy at the European level.

The second problem I would like to point out is that of sanctions for traffickers. Sanctions remain, in our opinion, too light and are not always dissuasive enough. Involving the voluntary sector has increased the awareness of the judicial authorities but efforts need to be continued.

This was just a quick outline of Belgium’s progress in the fight against human trafficking, which, as you can tell, is a major concern for the Senate and its various political components. Further legislative changes will be made in the coming weeks. We hope that through these changes as well as the challenges that await us, we can contribute to promoting greater human dignity and more respect for human beings. As was the case with the European project, Belgium hopes to be a motor in the merciless fight against all forms of human exploitation.