

**Statement by President of the 72nd Session of the UN General
Assembly**

H.E. Miroslav Lajčák

**Opening of the High-Level Event on Combating Sexual Exploitation
and Abuse**

Trusteeship Council Chamber

United Nations, New York

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Heads of State and Government, Distinguished Ministers, Mr. Secretary General, Excellencies, Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I will start by saying that I don't want to spend all my time today condemning the sexual exploitation and abuse that has already been carried out by UN personnel. Not because I don't think this crime is heinous and inhuman. I do. In fact, I feel sickened when I think about people's hope for help and protection from the UN turning to horror. I'm sure it is the same for many of you here.

However, my condemnations, here, in this room, won't help those who have experienced this pain. They won't achieve accountability. They won't stop future incidents from occurring. The only thing that can help and can prevent is action.

And this leads me to thank you, Mr. Secretary-General, for taking action here today. I hope you can see from the amount of people in the room just how much support you have.

I also want to thank the Member States who have signed - or have expressed willingness to sign- the Voluntary Compact. This demonstrates commitment to take action.

In the past two years, we have picked up the pace of our action against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse by UN personnel. Both the General Assembly and UN Security Council have acted, through the adoption of resolutions. Various steps have been taken to ensure the UN can mobilize quicker when allegations are first reported. More focus has been put on supporting and engaging national authorities, as they carry out their duty to pursue accountability. Credible allegations are now disclosed in a more transparent manner. And we have also recently welcomed the first UN advocate for the rights of victims of sexual exploitation and abuse to New York.

Ms. Connors, we are very glad to have you here with us today.

I also want to say, here, that we are very grateful to Ms. Jane Holl Lute, for her work as Special Coordinator on improving the UN response to sexual exploitation and abuse.

However, it is clear that we haven't yet done enough. We need to see these actions not only continue - but accelerate. I hope we will hear commitments and ideas today on how to do this. In my capacity as President of the General Assembly, I will outline three principles I think should guide us in taking our next steps.

First, I want to draw our attention to the issue of conflict prevention.

The UN deploys people around the world in response to conflicts and humanitarian crises. While we must focus on ensuring that UN principles and standards are upheld, we cannot lose sight of our overarching goal: to prevent the need for these deployments in the first place.

We do need technical discussions. We do need to talk about discipline, and pre-deployment training, and oversight, and investigations. In parallel, however, we must scale up our efforts to improve the UN's capacity to prevent – and not just respond – to conflicts. This will be a key priority of my Presidency.

The second issue I want to highlight is women's participation.

The problem of sexual exploitation and abuse by UN personnel disproportionately affects women. Women must therefore be at the core of efforts to find a solution.

Just as important, however, is the role of women in preventing the problem from occurring. This means better implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. This means women participating fully in mediation and peacebuilding. This means deploying more women blue helmets, and ensuring gender mainstreaming is part of the everyday work of UN peace operations.

I am confident that we can accelerate our efforts in this respect. This will be important as we approach the October Security Council debate on Women, Peace and Security. It should also help to drive our implementation of the Secretary-General's Roadmap on Gender Parity in headquarters and the field.

And finally, I want to stress that, although sexual exploitation and abuse represents an institutional problem, it is about people.

Meeting the needs of people – victims - who have already been harmed must be our top priority. I want to echo the thanks of the Secretary-General to all those delegations who have made pledges to the Trust Fund so far. And I hope that we can strengthen efforts to put the rights and dignity of people at the center of actions in this area.

Although the gravity of the crimes we are talking about today is significant, the size of the group of people who have committed them is not. I have met many UN peacekeepers and workers. They, and their colleagues, willingly put themselves into situations of high risk – sometimes even open conflict. They show great bravery, and carry out their duties with honor. I want to take this opportunity today to thank them all for their service.

To conclude, I would like to stress that sexual exploitation and abuse by UN personnel should be condemned in the strongest terms. But we should also remember that condemnation, alone, is not enough – what we need now is action.

Thank you.