

**Opening Speech of H.E. Mr. Össur Skarphéðinsson, Minister for Foreign
Affairs of Iceland, International Conference in Reykjavik on UNSC 1325,**

19 June 2009

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me pleasure to open this conference. I would like to extend a warm welcome to our speakers and to the many distinguished international guests. In particular I would like to welcome UN Assistant Secretary-General Rachel Mayanja, who is special adviser to Ban Ki Moon on gender issues. And I would like to welcome you all and thank you especially for coming to Iceland to participate in our discussions here today.

More or less all conferences beg the questions – why now? why here? and why this particular topic?

As for the timing - Today's date has a special significance in the mind of every Icelander, as on this day in 1915 Icelandic women achieved the right to vote. On the 19th of June Icelanders are reminded of the importance of the fight for gender equality, not only in Iceland, but everywhere in the world.

This conference is a contribution to the strong campaign led by a number of individuals, some of whom are here today, and by a number of governments and organisations to make 1325 a reality. The unanimous adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 almost ten years ago was a true watershed in recognising women's rights in peace and security issues and the importance of including women in all processes designed to build, keep and maintain peace.

You might be wondering why Iceland is holding this conference on women and conflict. We are a country as you know with no army, no military and have been blessed with the fortune of having almost no conflict for almost thousand years. Nevertheless women in Iceland, as women elsewhere, have struggled to achieve gender equality. As one of the Nordic countries, we have a long tradition of feminism and women's rights and have also been fortunate in having very strong women leaders, some of which are here today. Just to mention two; our former president Vigdís Finnbogadóttir and my predecessor Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir who will speak to us later today.

Iceland's commitment to resolution 1325 was clearly stated during the term in office of my predecessor, Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir. During her term in office she used every opportunity to advocate for the inclusion of women in peace processes and to promote the importance of a successful implementation of

1325. It was under her guidance that Iceland adopted its 1325 National Action Plan last year.

I am quite resolute in my determination to continue the good work she started in this field. Indeed, her focus on gender equality and conflict resolution is today one of the priorities of the Icelandic government. It is my hope that this conference will be a solid contribution to those particular fields.

And now for the question – why this particular topic? The need for Resolution 1325 is obvious. According to UNIFEM statistics some 70% of the casualties in recent conflicts have been non-combatants, mostly women and children. Women's bodies have become battlegrounds of those who use terror as a tactic in war. Women are subject to terrible sexual and gender based violence and as we know history is littered with the systematic violence of women as a means to demoralise and degrade in actions of war.

I want to stress however, that we should avoid talking about women only as victims, when we talk about conflicts. At such times, women often assume new tasks such as becoming the main bread winner and heads of their particular families. But unfortunately after the guns fall silent, women normally go back to their old traditional roles, sometimes in a society grown more conservative.

We also know that the knowledge and experience of women is consistently ignored and that women remain to a great extent excluded from processes of peace. This undermines the possibility of achieving lasting peace. Let us remember that peace negotiations and post conflict reconstruction are not only about achieving the end of hostilities, but the beginning of a new future. This of course begs the question, how can a lasting and sustainable peace be reached if half of the population is excluded from shaping that future.

As the statistics show, the odds are stacked against societies emerging from conflict – a large number revert to conflict within a few years. It is therefore vital that the knowledge, expertise and not least the resilience of women are utilised to their full potential. Women can and should play a key role in advancing peace and preventing violence, by building bridges between conflicting parties.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today's conference will focus on how to ensure that women are included in all peace processes, both formal and informal ones. How can the voices of women be advanced and made louder in war-affected communities? How can we convince the conflicting parties, world leaders and the international community to take seriously the importance of including women in all the processes needed

to build lasting peace? Why is it that women are sidelined even when they have shown viable ways to promote peace and found peaceful alternatives to conflict?

Today we will no doubt hear from some of our distinguished speakers, about the extraordinary work of the International Women's Commission for a Just and Sustainable Israeli Palestinian Peace, an organisation where Israeli and Palestinian women, work together with women from all over the world on resolving the terrible situation in their respective countries. These strong and formidable women have managed to come up with a joint political vision of the future, in which their two societies recognise each other and live side by side. This is in my mind an admirable initiative that has been and will be supported by the Icelandic government. I am quite proud to say that the IWC is mentioned in the policy statement of the government that I have the honour of serving today, as one of the priorities of our foreign policy.

We will also today be hearing about experiences of women in Afghanistan and the work of UNIFEM in that country. Iceland continues to send experts to Afghanistan convinced that engagement is the best way to bolster and support human rights and democracy. Endorsing women's rights in Afghanistan and implementing 1325 is a challenging and difficult task, not least given the security situation and the strong determination of extremist groups to restrict women to their traditional roles as defined by an ultra-patriarchal society.

In this matter there are no easy solutions. We, the international community, must underline where we can that women are not minor but major stakeholders in the societies they belong to. Heads of states, ministers and people in positions of power can and should take up the importance of 1325 and the advancement of women wherever they can. When I attended the NATO Summit in Strasbourg-Kiel earlier this year I used the opportunity to highlight the situation of women and women's rights in Afghanistan.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

October 31st next year marks the tenth anniversary of 1325. The anniversary will be a very important opportunity to advance and promote the implementation of 1325. It is therefore quite apt that tomorrow Ms. Rachel Mayanja, Special Adviser of the Secretary General on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women, will lead a special workshop devoted to how we can use the tenth anniversary of resolution 1325 for exactly this purpose.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I hope that you will have a very fruitful and good conference and wish you a good stay in Iceland.