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Conference on Child Labour and Child Exploitation

Opening Session Speech Notes

Mr Chairman, the Hon Alastair Nicholson AO RFD QC, Attorney-General the Hon Robert McClelland, the Hon Desley Boyle (Queensland Minister for Tourism and Member for Cairns), patrons, members of the judiciary, academics, representatives of non-government organisations, union leaders, delegates and the Yirrganydji people and their children.

I am proud to represent New Zealand at this important conference. The Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Helen Clark, sends her apologies and has asked me to attend in her stead.

New Zealand fully supports Children's Rights International's initiative to organise this conference to evaluate progress made in eradicating the worst forms of child labour, and to explore the challenges still remaining. We are all here because we know there's a need to discuss this freely and frankly and demonstrate our commitment to take action.

The points I want to stress today are:

- although some encouraging progress has been made, child labour and child exploitation remain serious and pressing problems;

- child labour will not solve itself, so must be tackled in a coordinated and cooperative way, and as a matter of urgency;
- improving access to quality education is a crucial part of eliminating child labour;
- and lastly, tracking these issues not only frees individual children from the prison of child labour, but makes our world a more just and humane place to live.

New Zealand, is a small country of just over four million people. I note this because the International Labour Organisation estimates that in the world today, more than 165 million children - the equivalent of nearly 50 times the population of my country - are subjected to child labour.

The majority of these children are involved in the worst forms of child labour, such as trafficking, debt bondage and other types of slavery, forced recruitment into military conflict, and hazardous work. The psychological and physiological effects of these completely unacceptable forms of child labour are very damaging and can affect children well into their adulthood, if not for their whole lives.

Needless to say, child labour robs children of their childhood itself. But another saddening feature of child labour is that although it often arises because of poverty, it serves only to perpetuate the poverty trap.

In societies where there are large numbers of children available for work, wages for children and adults stay low. Poor families are forced to send as many people as they can – both children and adults - into the workforce, and child labour remains the norm.

Children's lost opportunities add to this self-reinforcing pattern. By preventing them from becoming educated, child labour limits children's prospects for decent work in adulthood, confining them to live in poverty for the long term.

World Bank research suggests that early entrance into the labour force reduces lifetime earnings by 13 to 20 percent.

This alarming situation shows that child labour will not fix itself, and it must be dealt with as soon as possible. New Zealand's view is that real progress on the elimination of all the worst forms of child labour throughout the world can only be made by taking a comprehensive and integrated approach which includes economic and employment policies to alleviate poverty; education to lift peoples' capabilities; and most importantly, the political commitment to actively engage on the issue.

Encouragingly, there is some good news. The International Labour Organisation's Global Report on *The End of Child Labour – Within Reach*, released in 2006, indicated that there was an apparent 11% decline in the number of child labourers worldwide between 2000 and 2004. The ILO's data indicated that the decline was even greater for children engaged in the most hazardous types of work, where the report noted a 33% reduction. It is encouraging to see that worldwide efforts to eliminate child labour are bearing fruit.

There are however still too many children being robbed of their youth and trapped in the world of work through no choice of their own.

By ratifying the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, No. 182, in 2001, New Zealand heralded its international commitment to the effective abolition of child labour, and since then New Zealand has also ratified UN protocols on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and trafficking in persons, especially of women and children. We have signed, and are working towards ratification, of the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography.

New Zealand is fortunate not to face the significant challenges many other countries must confront in tackling the worst forms of child labour within their own borders. However, every country, including New Zealand, has a

continuing responsibility to ensure that our children and young people are protected, their voices are heard, and their rights are upheld.

New Zealand became party to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, or 'UNCROC', in 1993. Domestically, the Government's UNCROC Work Programme has contributed to a range of key achievements across government, including in early childhood education, subsidised primary healthcare for children and young people, the child protection system, and the youth justice sector. Recent achievements of note include greater and improved use of youth participation; which is an underlying principle of UNCROC, and the New Zealand Defence Force's review of the voluntary age of recruitment. Last year, New Zealand also repealed Section 59 of the Crimes Act 1961 in order to remove the defence of using reasonable force against a child for the purpose of correction. This move supports the right of children to live in a safe and secure environment, free from violence.

The Government's Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa and The Agenda for Children both take a responsive approach to the needs of children and young people in the development of policy and services affecting them. These strategies have guided government policy and are now integrated into "business as usual".

However the New Zealand Government does not believe that exposure to appropriate types of work is necessarily harmful to children. Work falling within legal limits that does not interfere with a child's health, development and education cannot be seen as "child labour". As long as there are protections to guarantee children's safety, fair treatment and access to education, work can provide valuable development opportunities and independence for children and young people.

In New Zealand, work is currently underway to ensure that young people experience fair and productive work in safe and healthy workplaces. This work, under the banner of the Children's Employment Work Programme, includes raising young people's awareness of their rights, improving their

ability to enforce their rights, reviewing health and safety regulations relating to young people, and monitoring young people's participation in employment.

But although appropriate work can be of benefit to young people, there are obviously limits, and the world of work cannot be allowed to become a substitute for the world of childhood itself – this is the key issue we face and the focus of our discussions here. While good progress has been made in reducing child labour throughout the world, much remains to be done, and a strong, sustained and coherent effort is required.

We therefore fully support the ILO's important efforts to tackle child labour as a matter of urgency through the International Programme to Eliminate Child Labour, time-bound programmes to implement Convention 182, and through the Decent Work Agenda. These programmes are supported by research to better understand the causes of child labour.

The World Day against Child Labour was marked around the world on 12 June 2008 with activities to raise awareness that education is the right response to child labour.

The ILO understands that efforts to eliminate child labour go hand and hand with improvements in the quality, relevance, and affordability of education. Accessibility of education is crucial and must include both boys and girls - because the majority of children not in school are girls – and children in rural areas that educational systems struggle to reach.

The prevalence of child labour is directly correlated to children not attending school at all, or dropping out before completion of primary education. Not surprisingly, child labour is also linked to the incidence of illiteracy.

The right to free education, at least at the primary or basic level, is enshrined in international human rights law, and through the Millennium Development Goals the international community has set targets of achieving universal primary education, and eliminating gender disparities in education by 2015.

International efforts to eliminate child labour and to achieve education for all children are mutually reinforcing goals.

New Zealand's overseas development assistance supports these international efforts to ensure children are in school, not in work. The overall goal of New Zealand's development assistance, managed by the Government agency NZAID, is poverty reduction, and improving education is a key part of this. NZAID intends to ensure that education makes up around a third of its total overseas development budget, and it is looking to increase funding for basic education to make up around half of its total education spending.

NZAID works closely with partner countries to make sure they have the resources and technical support needed to improve access to quality education.

For example, after four years of conflict that had extremely detrimental effects on education services in the Solomon Islands, participation rates at all levels of education were amongst the lowest in the Pacific region and in many isolated communities there was virtually no access to education services. NZAID has assisted the Solomon Islands Government to rebuild the basic education system. This has involved provision of textbooks and classroom materials, improving infrastructure, and assisting with upskilling teachers. The New Zealand Government remains committed to supporting the education sector, with the next phase of support for the Programme agreed until 2009.

The New Zealand Government continues to support regional initiatives that focus on children's education, health and rights, including prevention of child trafficking and support for children affected by HIV/AIDS. We fully realise that if we do not comprehensively address the rights of children, and do not eradicate poverty, it is unlikely we will be able to end child labour.

About a century ago, the extensive use of child labour ended in the first industrial nations because of efforts to transfer children from the workplace to

schools. These efforts were backed up by changing cultural patterns, economic growth, and legal instruments and their enforcement. We can, and must, do this again.

This conference will look at a wide range of aspects of child exploitation and child labour. We will discuss everything from the legal system's treatment of children, to business and union activities to eliminate child labour; to international instruments on children's rights. We will hear the perspectives of people from around the Asia-Pacific region and further afield, and from non-government-organisations, governments, unions, and the judiciary.

Such a range of perspectives will help us. All of these groups have important roles in today's fight against child labour and child exploitation, and we must work together towards the common goal of complete elimination of child labour and safe and happy childhoods for every child, everywhere.

To achieve this goal would be a major step in the reduction of world poverty and inequality. This common cause is what brings us all together today.

I look forward to discussing these important issues with you over the next few days. Child labour and child exploitation are serious and pressing problems that deserve our attention, our focus and our action.