



94-09-09: Statement of Latvia, H.E. Mr. Andris Berzins

ISO: LVA

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DELEGATION OF THE REPUBLIC OF LATVIA

ADDRESS BY

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STATE MINISTER OF LABOUR

REPUBLIC OF LATVIA

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

8 SEPTEMBER 1994, CAIRO

Please check: against delivery!

Mr. Chairman,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Delegation of the Republic of Latvia I would like to congratulate you, Mr. Chairman on your election to this high post and to assure you of our full assistance and cooperation. The Delegation is deeply aware that under your able leadership the conference will become a significant achievement in the history of international cooperation on the problems involved. I also would like to express my appreciation to the members of the Preparatory Committee and Secretariat of the Conference for their contribution in the preparation of the Draft Programme of Action and the excellent organization of the work.

As this is the first time when Latvia has the opportunity to participate in the United Nations high-level conference on the problems regarding population and development I would like to provide the Delegations with some general information about the history of Latvia so as to better understand the current demographic and ethnic situation of the country.

Latvia has been an independent country since 1918. In 1940 the country was illegally annexed and occupied by the former Soviet Union. This period of Soviet occupation lasted for fifty years until 1991 when Latvia reestablished its independence and sovereignty. In August 1991 the country was internationally recognized and became a Member State of the United Nations in September 1991.

After 50 years of occupation Latvia has been left with many

remnants of the Soviet legacy. The economy was in a disastrous state, the democratic traditions which existed prior to the occupation had been destroyed and replaced with centralized authoritarian rule, the previously-existing ethnic and demographic balance had been deliberately destroyed. From an economically- developed independent country, as it was prior to World War II, Latvia has become a country that needs to completely restructure its economy from a component in the Soviet Union's centrally-planned system to a free-standing market economy.

Irreversible changes have occurred in the national composition of Latvia's population. Currently, 2,56 million people reside in Latvia. Before the 1940 Soviet occupation, approximately 75% of all inhabitants were Latvians. According to the last census data from 1989, the number of titular nationality had decreased to 52%. Since 1990 the situation has marginally improved and currently the Latvians constitute 54.96%.

The changes in Latvia's national and demographic composition were the results of a special deliberate policy carried out by the Soviet authorities. After 1940 a wave of repression took place in Latvia. In several years close to 200 000 persons, or over 10% of the country's population, were deported to Soviet Union's prison Gulag in Siberia where a significant number perished. To escape the Red terror at the end of World War II over 200 000 people fled to the West as refugees and settled there to reestablish a new life via Displaced Persons Camps. The relative loss of population in Latvia in the 1940's was one of the highest in the world. Due to this reason the number of Latvians has decreased by 200 000 as compared with the beginning of the 20th century.

Simultaneously, a large-scale population transfer into the country was carried out by the Soviet authorities. Latvia was flooded with

foreign settlers, primarily Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians. As the result of this policy the intensity of immigration in Latvia after World War II was the highest in all of Europe, and in total the population of Latvia has increased approximately by 800 000 people. Taking into account the loss of population due to deportation, war and displacement of individuals to the West, the actual percentage of this transferred population who settled down in Latvia is significantly higher. In the post-war period the increase of net migration in Latvia has constantly surpassed the natural growth of the population until 1991.

Latvia has acceded to over 50 basic international conventions and declarations concerning human rights. The Latvia Government is conscious of the obligations and responsibilities which it has undertaken as a member of the international community. Before World War II, Latvia was also a multinational state, however, the incomparable flood of foreign settlers transferred into Latvia has created serious threats to the survival of the titular nationality.

One means to improve this situation is an assistance program for voluntary repatriation. Under the leadership of the State President, a Repatriation Fund has been established with the function to support the natural desire of Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians and other ethnic groups to return to their ethnic homelands. They were brought to Latvia by the USSR Russification policies and the erroneous economic policies of the USSR. The Latvia Government is cognizant of its obligations in cooperation with other interested governments to support the voluntary repatriation of these people. Although the Russian Federation army officially withdrew from Latvia's territory by August 31 of this year, approximately 20 000 retired Soviet/Russian military personnel plus their family members still remain in Latvia. Their continued presence

poses an issue for the state security of Latvia.

We turn to the Member States of the United Nations and to the UN specialized agencies for their understanding and support to the Latvia Government's efforts to resolve, in a civilized manner, those population problems which we have received as a legacy of the former Soviet Union and its antidemocratic policies.

While many Member States have real concerns about the rapid increase and growth of their populations, Latvia is concerned about the opposite tendencies of depopulation which are consistently strengthening during the past several years. This depopulation is being created by three factors: low birth rates, high death rates and an overall aging of the population.

For many years a serious problem in Latvia has been the extremely low birth rate. During the 1950's -1970's, the fertility rate was below the replacement level. Despite the short-term increases in the second half of the 1980's, presently the fertility rate has decreased to 1,5 in 1993. It is expected that this year the indicator will be even lower to 1,3. This drop in the birth rate is closely connected with the decline in the economic situation due to the conditions of major economic reforms during the post-Soviet transition period. While 1994 indicates several signs of stabilization in Latvia's economy, such stabilization has not yet been evident as an increase in the birth rate.

An important sphere which Latvia must further develop is family planning. Due to the lack of the knowledge about modern methods of family planning, abortion still has been an important means of fertility regulation. During the past few years there have been approximately 130 abortions for every 100 births . Such statistics are not appropriate for

a modern civilized society.

In the name of Latvia's delegation I am authorized to support the language of Principle 8 of the Draft Programme of Action which still is in the brackets. It is the understanding of Latvia's Government that the inalienable rights of each individual includes his/her freedom to choose those means of family planning which corresponds to the individual's interests and possibilities. At the same time the Latvia Government in cooperation with the Demographic Committee, church, and public organizations is ready to realize effective programs of public education about modern methods of family planning so that more people in Latvia understand the moral and ethical unacceptability of abortion as a method of family planning

In Latvia as in many East European states the mortality rate has been increasing. Currently the average life expectancy at birth in Latvia is 61-62 years for males and 73-74 for females which is one of the lowest in all of Europe. Statistics show that until World War II, the average life expectancy in Latvia was higher than the average in Europe. This indicator has now fallen back to the level reached in the mid-1950's. Of

The death rate among males from the age 20 to 50 has very sharply increased. This increase is mainly due to a rise in unnatural deaths caused by accidents, injuries and poisoning. In 1993 the unnatural death rate reached record levels - for every 100 000 individuals, there were 212 accidental deaths. Among males the number is even higher - 350. It would appear that nowhere in the world during a time of peace has the rate been so high. If the death rate is maintained at the 1993 level, only 62% of the working-age males can expect to live to retirement age,

while for women this indicator is 85%.

A rapid aging of the population in Latvia is occurring. Even though the birth rate among Latvians is marginally higher than for other ethnic groups, none of the major ethnic groups in Latvia comes close to reproduction of the next generation. For example, there were 27 000 births in Latvia in 1993, but 39 000 deaths. The low birth rate and high death rate among working age males results in serious consequences for the age and gender structure of the population. Currently, for each working-age inhabitants of Latvia there is close to pensioners. This indicator has the tendency to further increase. The total proportion of retirees and disabled persons has already topped 25% of Latvia's population.

These and other negative factors have attracted the attention of both society and government to the demographic problems of Latvia.

A special Demographic Committee has been set up by the Decree of the Latvia Government. A decision to develop a national program - Latvia's Population - has been adopted. The Government also encourages the activities of NGOs. With the support of IPPF, the Latvian Association of Family Planning and Sexual Health was founded this year. There are several women's organizations which focus their attention to the promotion of equality between men and women, the protection of mothers' and children's rights, and the defense of the interests of larger families. The Government has also formed a Commission on the Protection of Children's Rights which is comprised of various ministries and NGOs.

Government decrees have established several types of state support payments for pregnant women and for post-birth periods as well as family

support payments. Local governments have also developed their own support systems for socially-vulnerable groups.

Latvia's Parliament is currently reviewing proposed legislative packets about social protection which is especially emphasizing the legal norms for the protection of families and children. We are deeply aware that the measures taken by the Government will have positive effects on the demographic situation.

Latvia is a country with its economy in transition from the Soviet system. Presently the economic situation in Latvia has stabilized: there is a stable national currency and a relatively low inflation rate, the social welfare system has been developed and the reorganization of social protection has been undertaken. The Latvia Government is conscious that the collected problems of the past fifty years is a heavy legacy which cannot be overcome without international assistance. Allow me to express Latvia's gratitude and appreciation to all Member States, international organizations and private organizations and individuals who have already made a real contribution towards the resolution of our current difficulties. I would like to express my conviction that the International Conference on Population and Development will be the forum during which those difficulties which are being experienced by countries with such economies in transition will receive adequate attention in the Programme of Action as well as in the follow-up after the conference.

Thank you.

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