

ISRAEL

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Statement by

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of the
Ministry of **Labour** and Social Affairs

on the Implementation of
The Program of Action of the International
Conference on Population and Development

(ICPD + 5)

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Mr. President, Distinguished Delegates,

First, on behalf of the delegation of Israel, I wish to extend our congratulations to the President of the General Assembly, on the assumption of this important and honorable role. We offer you our **full** cooperation in making this Special Session a complete success.

The People and the Government of Israel are grateful for the opportunity to express our collective support for the ICPD Program of Action. While we are greatly heartened by the progress that has been reported by the family of nations **from** every continent, we wish to add our voice to those who urge yet greater determination to advance the issues addressed in the report of the Commission on Population and Development. Human life is sacred in the eyes of all Israelis – we all identify with the teaching of the book of Genesis that both male and female were created together in the image of the Creator. We hope this value is reflected in my few words on action that has been taken in Israel since the 1994 Cairo Conference.

Israel is one of the few nations built on an international theme: its founders were themselves refugees, and sought to establish a state whose *raison de etre* would be the welcoming of peoples **from** the far reaches of the globe, who would build a society together that would bridge their different backgrounds. Thus Israel's Declaration of Independence declares that Israel will be open for "immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants."

Indeed, the past decade has seen an extraordinary amount of immigration to Israel, even for a nation of immigrants. The influx of over a million people, coming **from** a diverse range of countries and cultures, from Ethiopia to Yemen, From Argentina to the former Soviet Union, presents Israel with both a unique challenge and an exciting opportunity. Israel's population at the end of 1999 numbered over six million. This is 10 percent larger than at the time of the Cairo Conference and more than seven times the population at the time of Israel's birth. Israel's population growth has been relatively high, averaging over four percent yearly. Immigrants account for over 42 percent of that figure.

Despite the challenges, Israel has been successful, both in absorbing the new immigrants and in integrating them into Israeli society, particularly into the labor force. In fact, thanks to vocational training and retraining programs specially geared to the immigrants, their unemployment has been lowered to just slightly above the national average. Close to 100,000 immigrants have participated in vocational training – day or evening classes – at varying levels. Many have even **left** their old areas of occupation for Israel's well-developed high tech field.

Israel has also opened its doors to groups fleeing violent unrest. In 1977, for example, Israel accepted groups of boat people from Vietnam. In 1995, Israel absorbed a group of Bosnian-Moslems fleeing the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. Most recently, Israel took in two groups of Moslem refugees from Kosovo. These immigrants received significant

benefits and aid packages designed to help them rebuild their lives in Israel. Over the years, these divergent streams of cultures flowing into Israel, from developing countries as well as industrialized nations, have contributed to the unique mix that makes up modern Israeli society.

In this light, Israel also seeks to cooperate with other nations in overcoming demographic and social problems. Thus MASHAV, Israel's Center for International Cooperation, offers hundreds of training courses, attracting 4,500 trainees from some 130 countries across the globe. The courses cover a wide range of topics, from state-of-the-art agricultural techniques to vocational and special skills training. One of the training centers in Israel, the Golda Meir Mount Carmel International Training Centre, has brought in 7,050 participants, from countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, to attend some 300 courses for women engaged in community development.

Mr. President,

Israel has also sought to fulfill another principle it holds dear, as stated in the Declaration of Independence: "Israel...will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants...based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex."

In particular, Israel made recent strides towards bridging the gender gap: For one, Israel's parliament passed a law establishing the National Authority for the Advancement of the Status of Women, as well as a Law Preventing Sexual Harassment in the Workplace. National authorities have also worked to further enforce the Equal Employment Opportunities Law of 1988, ensuring that there is virtually no advertising that uses gender discrimination.

In addition, new legislation has been enacted to protect women on maternity leave. This includes a 1998 amendment to the Employment of Women Law of 1964, as well as the National Insurance Law. For example, during a 12-week maternity leave, women in Israel now receive a full 100 percent of their salary, up from the previous 75 percent, and the couple may decide who will benefit. Legislation has also been enhanced to prohibit the dismissal of women during -- or immediately after -- a maternity leave.

Meanwhile, Israel has been placing special emphasis on investigating and fighting domestic violence. Significant progress was made in the past few years, as legislation was passed to protect women in situations of abuse. For example, a woman may now obtain a protective order to remove an abusive spouse from the home. Marital rape is now recognized as a crime. Police procedures have also been enhanced to better handle domestic violence cases against women and children: Israel is one of the only nations in which a police officer is authorized to continue investigating cases of domestic violence even after a complaint has been withdrawn. In addition, Israel has provided an increased net of shelters, along with improved legal aid, for victims.

Yet an equally high priority must be placed on long-term measures to prevent domestic violence before it takes root. This calls for a broad campaign to educate the public about domestic violence and in particular, to institute preparatory courses before marriage. On the initiative of the Council of Women's Organizations, the Ministry of Education and the authority for the advancement of women have come up with a new project to combat domestic violence by working at the early childhood level. This project focuses on Kindergarten children, so as to identify certain types of violent behavior at this early stage, and begin educating against violence at that level. In this context, Israel launched a separate national project aimed at protecting children's rights, focusing on advanced preventive, emergency and therapeutic care to children in danger of abuse.

Israel is also intensifying its efforts to reduce unemployment, an unfortunate byproduct of the mass-immigration. In this endeavor, Israel has chosen to fight the problem at its roots, and that means education. The wisdom of this approach has already proven itself, albeit on a small scale. The Israeli educational and social authorities recently mobilized their efforts to provide vocational training, and similar aid packages, to areas with an unemployment rate of 10 percent or more. Already, the rise in the potential workforce in these areas has helped to attract investors and prospective employers. This was underscored most recently by the newly elected Prime Minister of Israel, who called for taking special steps to close the social and economic gaps in Israeli society that begin with childhood, and named free higher education as a top priority of his new government.

Mr. President,

We are still coping with basic problems like unemployment, whose effects are clear and measurable. But in the long term, the added value of broadening our education system, and integrating new waves of immigrants, is beyond calculation. We believe that the current strains are, if you will, the growing pains of a new society, just beginning to emerge, from the rich diversity of peoples and cultures that are everyday changing the face of Israel.

Thank you Mr. President.