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# Press Release

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## **PRESS RELEASE ISSUED BY THE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT**

*“We cannot allow the fundamental rights of children to be compromised. The dignity of children cannot be a fairytale or simply a platitude”*

This morning the President of Malta Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, delivered the opening speech at the conference entitled ‘Lost in Migration – Working Together to protect children from disappearance’ – a conference which is being organised by Missing Children Europe and The President’s Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society at Verdala Palace.

*“The Wellbeing of migrant children must be a top priority on our national and global agendas”*

President Coleiro Preca said that everyone must work together on approaches that proactively respond to the realities of migration and that everyone must have one voice which, in turn, needs to emphasize the need for policies and strategies that are “driven by our shared commitment to vulnerable children and their families”.

The President mentioned the fact that thousands of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are getting lost because of failing systems. She said that national and international support systems, where they exist, are struggling to provide effective outreach.

As to what regards European Funds which are dedicated to provide assistance and support to migrant children, the President said that quite a percentage of these funds cannot be allowed to continue being swallowed up by bureaucratic purposes, and stated that these funds must be channeled into direct actions, which respond to the real needs of unaccompanied children.

*“The dignity of children must be a lived reality, experienced by each and every child who forms part of our global family”*

The President said that unaccompanied children are particularly vulnerable to abuses of their fundamental rights as they stand more risk of going missing, because they have no access to parental care.

Unaccompanied children experience intersectional vulnerability due to their age, the uncertainty of their status, and their position as migrants.

Unaccompanied children are also more exposed to harm and exploitation, as well as being targets of sexual violence and contemporary forms of slavery, with the UN office of the Special Rapporteur

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on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography saying that children have been particularly affected by a rise of human trafficking.

President Coleiro Preca called for systems and structures which can meet the material needs of our children, including suitable accommodation, food, and essential medical care, whilst adding that the social and educational needs of every child must also be addressed. This also entails the provision of psychosocial support, alongside crucial information about, and meaningful access to, their rights.

The President stated that the lack of solidarity is at the root of our concern. This is being brought about by the lack of a unified and effective policy or strategy, that is able to consistently provide safety for unaccompanied children who are seeking refuge in European Countries.

*“If a child from our own families goes missing, the world stops”*

If a child goes missing from our own families, we do all that is within our power to secure the wellbeing and the safe return of that child. “Why, then, do our authorities not feel the same sense of urgency when it comes to the unaccompanied migrant child?”, the President asked.

President Coleiro Preca’s appeal is that unaccompanied children, caught up in the migration tragedy unfolding across our borders cannot be ignored or forgotten. She said this whilst referring to the first-hand experience which “we, in the Mediterranean”, continue to have, of the horrors endured by children during migration. The President also appealed to civil society, to supply the social conscience “that seems in increasingly short supply”.

Statistics from Europol, UNICEF, IOM and UNHCR show that disappearances of unaccompanied children are on the increase.

“Europol estimates that 27% of last year’s arrivals, fleeing situations of war, of environmental devastation, and extreme precarity, were children, and that at a minimum 10,000 unaccompanied children are now unaccounted for. This means that we have lost all trace of an estimated 10,000 children.”

The President called the fact that in 2017, even as many as 10,000 refugee children are missing, a source of shame. “Even one single child is too many”, she added.

*“Now is the time for us to make more concrete efforts to work together, as organisations, as nations and as people of good will, to intensify our collaboration across borders, and sectors.”*

The President said that all that can be done, must be done, to prevent vulnerable children from going missing, since unaccompanied migrant children are entirely dependent on our governments, our authorities and our policies – they are entirely dependent on us.

“It is our responsibility to motivate and sustain the necessary political will. It is our responsibility to find collaborative ways to reinforce effective and united strategies that safeguard children’s wellbeing; strategies that respect and enforce their rights, in full accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child”, the President said, whilst highlighting the fact that Article 7 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child enshrines a child’s right to a nationality, which is being denied to vulnerable children by our very systems which should protect their rights.

*“We cannot go on creating a missing generation of young people”*

The President said that the European family of nations must be persuaded to see the benefits and the potential in taking decisions, and promoting policies, that regularize and safeguard the wellbeing of every child. Here, the President appealed for deeper coordination between governments and agencies, at national and transnational level, whilst calling for the securing of a holistic policy, which is based on long-term cooperation between all stakeholders. This will in turn lead to a shared responsibility for the safety of children so that a pan-European policy will be produced and successfully implemented.

Mentioning the current Maltese Presidency of the Council of the European Union, President Coleiro Preca said that she hopes, that Malta’s Presidency shall provide opportunities “for us to commit to a unified European Action Plan, of benefit to unaccompanied migrant children”.

Taking into consideration the fact that Malta shall be the only Mediterranean country to hold the Presidency of the Council for the next few years, the President appealed for continuous visibility to the fact that the Central Mediterranean is the deadliest route for migrants seeking entry into Europe.

Lastly, the President encourages those present to use all the opportunities which they come across, to make sure that the fundamental rights of vulnerable children remain a priority on national and international political agendas.

“We must listen to their voices, taking practical action to secure their best interests”, the President said.

President Coleiro Preca thanked Missing Children Europe and the President’s Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, together with other stakeholders for organising the conference, adding that the synergy brought about when different organisations and groups together to work for one common cause, is the kind of synergy which hopefully shall inspire the work which will be carried out at the conference over the next two days.

“Together,” the President said “we can create a European approach to migration that respects and secures the dignity of vulnerable children. Together we can prove that the love we feel for our children is unconditional, crossing all borders and barriers, to protect and nurture the wellbeing of every child.”

*The recommendations that will be extracted from the conference shall be presented by the President of Missing Children Europe, Ms. Maude de Boer-Buquicchio, and by Dr Ruth Farrugia, Director General of the President’s Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society, at the ongoing informal meeting being held by the European Ministers of Home Affairs and Minister of Justice, as part of the Maltese Presidency of the Council of the European Union.*

*“Lost in Migration” is being attended by over 180 delegates, including representatives from UNHCR, UNICEF, Save the Children, EPIM, Defence for Children [The Netherlands], various organisations from Greece, Belgium, Italy and Germany, Europol, the Migration Policy Institute, IOM and EASO.*