

Björn Bjarnason,
Minister of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs, Iceland.

Crime prevention
and
Civil Society.

11th United Nations
Congress on Crime Prevention
and Criminal Justice,
Bangkok 18-25 April 2005.

I would like at the outset to thank the people and government of Thailand for their very warm welcome and kind hospitality, and I congratulate the organisers of our congress on their excellent work.

I want also to express my gratitude for the opportunity to visit to the prisons and the Medical Correctional Institution here in Bangkok. It was memorable, not least to see the importance on vocational training and the care for the sick.

Allow me also Mr. President to reiterate my deepest sympathy to the people of Thailand and to all the other people who lost their loved ones in the terrible Tsunami tragedy a few months ago.

Mr. President.

I am certain our Congress will play a key role in strengthening our cooperation to prevent crime. In all our work we must however bear in mind that it is one thing to draft and adopt declarations and another to put them into effect. Translating words into deeds is the most important part of our joint fight against international organised crime and terrorism.

With reference to the draft Bangkok Declaration, I would like to stress four points in particular.

Firstly, I welcome the statement that when implementing the relevant international instruments against crime and terrorism, states will commit themselves to comply with international law, and in particular human rights law, refugee law and humanitarian law.

It is of great importance that states should have clear international guidelines when they undertake to upgrade their national legislation dealing with crime and terrorism.

States are often placed in a delicate position when preventing crime or executing criminal justice, and in this field they are under strict scrutiny by UN and other international institutions.

If the rules of the game are unclear, states risk being accused of restricting people's enjoyment of their human rights.

States need to have some agreed and comprehensive guidelines when discussing and enforcing national prevention policies — we have to find the golden mean between the fight against crime and terrorism, on the one hand, and the protection of human rights, pluralist democracy and the rule of law on the other.

This brings me to my second point about our resolution.

It should stress the important role that civil society has to play in the fight against all the various aspect of crime.

We have to find effective means to enhance cooperation between the general public and governments in the fight against crime and terrorism. The police and other law enforcement agencies should be encouraged to communicate and interact with the public, for the benefit of both.

Our goal of increased security will only be reached by cooperation between states and within states. We have to inform our citizens in order to engage them in this important task and in our support for new international instruments.

My third point concerns the abuse of new telecommunication and computer network systems for criminal purposes.

While new technology can be used effectively and positively to improve communications and the flow of information, it can also be used for negative purposes.

The police should be enabled, by new legislation or instructions, to keep up with new technological trends that might be abused — for example by registering those who buy SIM cards for prepaid mobile phones.

We are only doing our job properly, if we have the strength to find and implement ways to reduce the negative effects of new technology. Here we must also engage the

general public by explaining the necessity of imposing any restrictions, and build up confidence and understanding towards all restrictive actions that may be called for.

My fourth and last point refers to restorative justice.

Restorative justice has rightly been given increased emphasis in all criminal policy discussions in the past few years.

In Iceland we have taken the first steps towards restorative justice by developing mediation through a project based on an American model, called the Restorative Justice Circle.

The purpose is to provide children who have committed an offence with an opportunity to learn from their experience and to make a contribution to the safety of their environment, so making restitution for their conduct. The method employed involves working with the victim, the offender, the offender's family and a representative of the community.

In the light of the good results produced by the project, it has now been decided that mediation is to be adopted into the Icelandic criminal justice system on a trial basis, and the necessary preparations are being carried out.

With our experience in mind, I welcome the attention to juvenile justice in the draft declaration. It is of great importance to ensure that the treatment of children who are victims of crime and children in conflict with the law should take into account their gender, social circumstances and developmental needs.

I should also like to underline how important it is that reforms of this type of the criminal justice system should be based on the active involvement and participation of civil society.

Mr. President, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen.

We should spare no effort in enforcing the conclusions we will reach in our Congress. Let the Bangkok Declaration become a bright beacon in preventing crime and fostering a better criminal justice. Let us translate our words into deeds!