

**Speech by Dr Jānis Vucāns, President of the Baltic Assembly
at the 135th Inter-Parliamentary Union's Assembly
“Human rights abuses as precursors of conflict: Parliaments as early responders”
24 October 2016, Geneva**

President,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Baltic Assembly, it is an honour for me to address this distinguished audience of world' parliamentarians.

Baltic Assembly is an international organisation for cooperation among national parliaments of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, founded twenty-five years ago with an aim to consolidate resources of the Baltic States for achieving common goals. Agenda of the Baltic Assembly is comprehensive and broad, we concentrate on defence and security, economic cooperation, social and healthcare issues, education and research, energy and transport and crossborder cooperation. We are keeping pressure on our governments to harmonise legislation and to coordinate positions of the Baltic States, as well as, we ourselves are representing our Baltic Region worldwide.

We strongly support strengthening of democracy, respect of human rights, rule of law, increase of welfare and prosperity therefore we provide our support for the European Union Eastern Partnership countries. We - parliamentarians of the Baltic States – assume the role of the bridge by connecting Northern, Western and Eastern regions. We believe that regular maintenance of contacts, exchange of experience and best practices is important for parliamentarians of the European Union Eastern Partnership countries to strengthen foundations of democracy and learning European approach towards human rights and rule of law. A strong and lasting democracy, respect of human rights and the rule of law is the fundament of every society that cannot be achieved in a short time. Stability of these fundaments depends also on improved cooperation and sharing of good practices.

Human rights are strategically important on the agenda of the Baltic Assembly. Jointly with parliamentarians from Nordic and Benelux countries, we focus on the fight against human trafficking that is gross violation of fundamental human rights.

Trafficking in human rights is injustice, which must be called by its true name - modern slavery. It is unthinkable that in the 21st century more than 20 million victims of human trafficking are being deprived of their freedom and dignity, exploited, humbled

and traded as commodities for profit. Women, girls, boys and man are victims. At least 510 trafficking flows have been detected. Victims of 152 different citizenships have been identified in 124 countries across the world. Statistic is ruthless.

National parliaments must act as early responders in regard to trafficking in human beings. Failure to address this human rights violation leads to situation when 49% of women, 33% of children and 18% of men have been cruelly subjected to sexual exploitation, forced labour, armed combat, forced begging, shamed marriages and organ removal.

Baltic Assembly as regional parliamentary organisation has high political commitment to fight against this modern slavery. We took serious steps to implement measures against trafficking in human beings:

- First, jointly with the Nordic and Benelux countries we have improved relevant national legislation, thus eradicating legal imperfections which hindered the fight against human trafficking;
- Secondly, we launched cooperation initiatives, experience and information exchange among legislatures, governments and NGO's of the Baltic States to achieve common goals related to preventing human trafficking;
- Thirdly, we fostered cooperation of law-enforcement institutions of the Baltic States, thus establishing a system of early detection of trafficking routes;
- Fourthly, we aimed to raise public awareness on trafficking in human beings.

We are going to do more to fight against trafficking. In a month, we will gather for a meeting in the capital of Estonia – Tallinn - with parliamentarians from Nordic and Benelux countries to review results, achievements and progress in our fight against trafficking in human beings.

Fight against trafficking is not an easy, but we have no right to fail to address these human rights abuses. Behind every trafficking case - there is child, woman or man with their dreams and hopes. We invite each parliamentarian of this audience to be active in our common fight against trafficking in human beings. Human dignity must be our leading principle. We will inform parliamentarians of the Inter-parliamentary Union about decisions and future steps taken by the Baltic Assembly in our fight for human dignity.

Thank You!