

Remarks of Hillary Rodham Clinton at the Launch of the International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children on April 23, 1999

Thank you very much. I am delighted to be here and to lend support to this important effort. As I was listening to the previous speakers and looking out at this audience of friends and supporters, I was reminded of how often it takes a lot of education and information to translate personal issues into public issues, and here we have a perfect example of that. It took about twenty plus years to take an issue like domestic violence and make it an issue that we talked about in public, we had centers about, legislation about, and created a comprehensive reaction to the issue of domestic violence.

Well this is an issue - concern about children abducted across national borders - that has a similar moment in time. It has been an issue in which people have personally been effected so painfully, but it is not until recently that that personal pain has translated into public action and now to the creation of this very important international centre. I want to thank the Ambassador and Catherine not only for bringing attention to this issue for inviting us all to be here for this launch but for sharing their personal story and particularly Catherine's personal ordeal. With enough people in enough positions of influence and power so that this issue became one that we could no longer just worry about in private but needed to bring out into the light of day. I also want to thank Ernie Allen and everyone associated with the ICMEC, which is building on the very good work of the National Center here in the United States.

And also to my friend, Cherie Booth. Congratulations for taking on this issue and becoming an international spokesperson for it. There are many causes that come to the attention of people like Cherie and me, and we wish we could take them all on. They are all worthy, and they have people who need help and attention. This issue is one that I am confident Cherie's leadership will make it impossible for anyone to ignore in the future.

I too wish to thank all of the contributors, the corporations and individuals who are helping to provide the technology and the communications facilities so that the International Centre can get the word out. You saw as you walked into this room some poster boards, there are others behind us, that have information about children who have been abducted. We also, through the good work of some very modern technology, are able to show what children look like as they age. And so take a look at some of those posters, the picture of the child at the time that he or she went missing and now what that child likely looks like so that we can try to get information out to law enforcement and concerned citizens wherever we think a child might be.

There are two points that I would just stress about why this is such a timely and important issue now. We do have as we read about and see on our televisions, and in fact as we commemorate today in Washington, increasing globalization and internationalization, not only of goods and services and ideas and values but of people. Therefore we will have more and more marriages and couples having and raising children who have different countries of origin. And as is often the tragic case when a marriage dissolves where children are involved, feelings can be very high. Because

we have so many more of these marriages, and therefore so many more children with parents of different citizenship, and they themselves may be even bearing different citizenship, the likelihood that this kind of terrible problem that Catherine and others in this room have personally experienced is that the numbers of children and victim parents will increase. That is why it is critical we are doing what we do today. And we are fortunate that we have the technology that enables us to do more to track these children and get the information we need to try to bring them back where they legally and emotionally belong.

And that brings me to my second point. We have to do more in all of our countries to enforce the rule of law when it comes to the Hague Convention. There are many reasons, some of them certainly held in good faith or at the very least with a strong conviction, as to where a child belongs. But as part of the international community, we have made judgments about that. We have certain procedures that are judicially enforced in countries that should be recognized across borders. And any country that is party to the Hague Convention, especially because I believe these issues will become more prevalent in national judicial systems, should become well educated and committed to enforcing the provisions of the Hague Convention. Because ultimately these matters are not just about individual children and the pain of victim parents, but they really are a question of human rights and whether or not we will enforce our laws evenly and fairly to anyone who comes within our jurisdictions.

Before I came in, Catherine introduced me to a young woman who identified herself as someone who has personally experienced being a victim of a child abduction, and she made very clear to me, and I would just reiterate her personal words that this is an international issue and it is a human rights issue. So you are supporting not only a Centre and not only individual cases like Catherine's and others represented here, but you are making another effort to ensure that in this complicated, changing world we do not forget that we must, we must, have rules and standards that we follow even if they are personally inconvenient - that is what the rule of law means. And that the Hague Convention should be and must be enforced. And I am very grateful for the leadership that the Ambassador and Catherine and Cherie will bring to this issue and very privileged to be part of this historic event and very grateful that the International Centre will continue on an international scale the excellent work that it has done in this country on behalf of missing and exploited children.

Thank you very much.