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COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Twenty-ninth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 30th MEETING\*

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva,

on Tuesday, 12 November 2002, at 10.05 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. BONOANIDANDAN

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\* No summary record was prepared for the 29th meeting. This record is subject to correction. Corrections should be submitted in one of the working languages. They should be set forth in a memorandum and also incorporated in a copy of the record. They should be sent within one week of the date of this document to the Official Records Editing Section, room E.4108, Palais des Nations, Geneva. Any corrections to the records of the meetings of the Committee at this session will be consolidated in a single corrigendum to be issued shortly after the end of the session. GE.02-45654 (E) 141102 151102

The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.

**CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS (agenda item 6)**

REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES IN ACCORDANCE WITH ARTICLES 16 AND 17 OF THE COVENANT

Initial report of Slovakia (C/1990/5/Add.49; E/C.12/CA/SLO/1; E/C.12/Q/SLOVAKREP/1; HR/CESCR/NONE/2002/1; HRI/CORE/1/Add.120)

At the invitation of the Chairperson, the members of the Slovak delegation took places at the Committee table.

Mr. PETŐCZ (Slovakia), introducing Slovakia's initial report (C/1990/5/Add.49), said that his delegation looked forward to a constructive dialogue with the Committee.

In order to allow more time for discussion, he would merely make a number of general comments on his Government's position with regard to article 2 of the Covenant. More detailed information could be found in the report.

As could be seen, a real effort had been made to maintain a degree of gender balance among the members of the delegation, in keeping with article 4 of the Covenant. He was pleased to note that the percentage of women in the delegation was higher than in the Committee itself.

Slovakia was a party to all six international human rights treaties currently in force, including the Optional Protocols to the Covenant and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. It had been one of the first European countries to ratify all eight Fundamental Conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the first to ratify the latest two ILO Conventions on Maternity Protection and on Safety and Health in Agriculture. To date, Slovakia had ratified 67 ILO conventions, 64 of which were in force. It was a party to the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and the European Social Charter of the Council of Europe, as well as to the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, and it was one of the few European countries to have ratified the European Charter on Regional or Minority Languages. It had signed

Protocol 12 to the European Convention and was preparing to ratify it.

As part of the former Czechoslovakia, Slovakia had enjoyed a high level of certain economic, social and cultural rights, especially in the areas of social security, full employment, free access to education and health care, even before 1989. However, the way in which those rights, as well as a wide range of civil and political rights, had been implemented had been a function of the geopolitical and domestic political framework of that period.

The former Czechoslovakia had been active in providing assistance and aid to developing countries, although that too had been selective and politically and ideologically motivated. During the 10 years of transition of the economy, Slovakia had become a recipient of international assistance. With its accession to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Slovakia had reformulated its development and humanitarian assistance strategy and, together with its three neighbours of the Visegrad Group, had become so-called emerging donor countries. In the past three years, his Government had adopted a policy of increasing its official development assistance (ODA) to 0.125 per cent of GDP over the coming years. In 2001, Slovakia had ranked first among all Central and Eastern European countries in terms of voluntary contributions to UNHCR and first among Central European countries, as a proportion of the population, for the number of troops sent on United Nations peacekeeping missions.

Slovakia had retained parts of the former Czechoslovakia's extensive social security system. Given current economic and political circumstances and new challenges such as ageing, unemployment, migration and the deterioration of the situation of the Roma, however, that system had been - and would continue to be - subject to significant changes. Slovakia had faced political instability over the past 10 years and that had led to shifts in economic and social policy and had had an adverse impact on reforms.

In the general elections held in September, Slovakian citizens had voted for a continuation of the reformist government elected in 1998. Equally important, they had re-elected a government in which the Hungarian Coalition Party, representing a national minority, was a stable and reliable partner. That political continuity improved the chances of carrying through the necessary social and economic reforms. In October, the European Commission had included Slovakia in the list of 10 candidate countries recommended for accession to the European Union in 2004. That showed the stepped-up pace of reforms, despite the delay of more than two years owing to political problems in the mid-1990s.

In submitting its initial report to the Committee, Slovakia had completed the first round of its reporting obligations under United Nations human rights treaties. In August 2003, it would begin the second round with its periodic report to the Human Rights Committee, which had already been submitted in accordance with the rules of that treaty body.

Paragraphs 1 to 10 of the list of issues

The CHAIRPERSON noted that Slovakia had submitted written replies (HR/CESCR/NONE/2002/1) to the list of issues.

Mr. RIEDEL said that, in its reply to question 2 asking whether the Covenant could be invoked in the internal legal order and what case law had been, Slovakia had cited a number of judicial decisions directly referring to that instrument. He enquired what type of cases had been involved and how the citing of the Covenant had affected the decision. He also asked what information on the Covenant had been provided to judges and lawyers.

He would like more details on the problems in enforcing the act establishing the National Centre for Human Rights, to which reference had been made in the reply to question 3, as well as on the degree of independence of the National Centre. Was it part of a government department or was it free to choose its subjects? He also asked what was done with its recommendations and what progress had been made with the bill currently under consideration, which the reply also cited.

Mr. GRISSA said that the information on minorities provided by Slovakia in its reply to question 1 suggested that the minority populations had declined between 2000 and 2001. He asked whether that had been due to migration or to a higher mortality rate. The Committee had received many complaints of discrimination against the Roma in employment, education and housing. He asked the delegation to explain Slovakia's policy towards the Roma.

Mr. SADI said that he would like to know how relevant the Covenant was for Slovak policy makers. To what extent did Parliament take it into consideration when formulating policy related to economic, social and cultural matters? Did ministries which dealt with issues that fell under the Covenant take it into account?

He also asked to what extent the Covenant was of relevance in the process of negotiating aid packages from international institutions such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund.

Mr. CEASU said that he wished to know what factors impeded the implementation of the Covenant. He asked that question because the head of the Slovak delegation had referred in his introductory remarks to political instability in recent years which had impeded the reform process. To what extent had the period of transition to a market economy affected the implementation of the right to work, the right to health care and the financing of social programmes?

With regard to the reply to question 5, he asked for more information on how non-governmental organizations (NGOs) had been involved in preparing the report. Had they made contributions in writing or taken part in oral consultations?

Mr. WIMER ZAMBRANO wondered whether any minority problems had developed in areas where Slovakia had new borders.

Mr. AHMED said that, as the Roma minority accounted for 10 per cent of the total population, its status should be of great concern to Slovakia. The gap between good intentions and actual improvement continued to be very large. Articles 33 and 34 of the Slovak Constitution were specifically devoted to the rights of minorities and ethnic groups, but little legislation had been produced in that area. There was a marked lack of anti-discrimination law in the fields of education, employment and housing. The concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination had cited decrees issued in two municipalities in Slovakia

banning Roma from their territory which had remained in force for some time before being rescinded. The European Romany Rights Centre had referred to explicitly anti-Romany statements made by a number of Slovak politicians. How were such deeply rooted discriminatory attitudes being tackled?

Mr. MARTYNOV asked whether the office of the ombudsman, created in March, had filed any complaints or undertaken any investigations of alleged human rights violations. Had any cases involved discrimination against the Roma community? If so, what had been the outcome?

In the reply to question 7, it was stated that 30 million Slovak koruna had been allocated in 2001 for improving the situation of the Romany community. Had all those allocations been used and could the delegation inform the Committee how much that amount was in US dollars? What was the allocation for 2002?

Mr. MARCHAN ROMERO asked whether the rights set out in the Covenant could be directly invoked in the courts and, if so, whether any case law existed on that question and what decisions had been taken.

Ms. BARAHONA RIERA asked what prevention policies existed in respect of the treatment of women and children and whether resources had been allocated for prevention programmes.

Mr. HUNT noted that Slovakia had become an emerging donor country and that ODA stood at 0.125 per cent. Were the promotion and protection of human rights features of ODA policy?

In the Vienna Declaration and Plan of Action, it had been anticipated that States would draw up a national plan of action for human rights. Did Slovakia have such a plan of action?

With regard to Slovakia's reply to question 8, he asked whether equality between men and women had been achieved not only in law, but in practice. Referring to the observation by Mr. Petócz that the percentage of women in the delegation was higher than in the Committee itself, he wondered whether the Committee could conclude that Slovakia would actively work to ensure that women were equally represented in all United Nations treaty bodies in the future.

Mr. PETÓCZ (Slovakia), referring to the situation of the Roma minority, said he disagreed with any suggestion that there were deeply rooted discriminatory attitudes towards that population. He did not deny that there were serious problems, but the situation of minorities in Central Europe could not be compared with that of minorities in the Balkans. There had never been open clashes between ethnic groups in the recent history of Central Europe.

It was important to distinguish between two categories of minorities. The first category was that of "historical" minorities, for which there were no substantial differences in culture, habits or way of life. He had in mind the Slovak, Hungarian, Czech and other "historical" ethnic groups in Slovakia. The problem there was political and administrative in nature.

The case of the Roma was different, the problem being one of differing cultural traditions, which both sides must acknowledge and deal with. Since the Roma had been deemed a national minority, they were entitled, as other recognized minorities, to rights such as education in their own language, but the risk was that measures to that effect might be viewed as a form of segregation. The Government's main focus was on problems of social and living conditions; strategies were being developed in those fields, but were not easy to implement. With regard to census figures, it had been difficult to obtain reliable statistics for a number of reasons, including the seeming reluctance of some persons to be regarded as Roma.

The latest census showed that the figure for the Hungarian minority had declined by some 40,000, doubtless because of natural assimilation and emigration. The Statistical Office could be asked for more detailed information if the Committee so required. Figures relating to other national minorities remained fairly stable.

Mr. GURÁŇ (Slovakia) said that Slovakia had ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and, in May 2002, had signed the respective Optional Protocols. It was seriously committed to implementing those instruments' provisions and taking measures to incorporate them into domestic legislation and raise public awareness of them. Other government measures included the recent adoption of a national plan of action for children, which would provide, inter alia, for monitoring by government agencies. Non-governmental organizations were widely involved in drafting such plans.

Ms. MIKLOVIČOVÁ (Slovakia) said that, with regard to the Roma, the Government's policy included support for specific programmes and projects aimed at incorporating the Roma into general society. The measures included the creation, in 1999, of the post of Plenipotentiary of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Roma Affairs, as well as the continuing development of a range of measures as part of the Government's strategy aimed at involving the Roma in all economic, social and cultural activities. The need for an even more comprehensive approach to the Roma problem was recognized in the establishment of further major projects, involving the participation of the Roma themselves and relating in particular to housing, unemployment and social integration. The measures envisaged would include State support for municipal rented housing, the development of Roma settlements and the creation of a special office to promote contacts between the Roma and the majority population.

Article 12 of the Slovak Constitution banned all forms of discrimination. Further anti-discrimination legislation, criminal and civil, was nevertheless being drafted. The Government was also promoting housing development measures, including a project administered by the Ministry of Construction and Regional Development and involving a system of credits and subsidies. The project would be funded from municipal and other sources, with direct support from the State budget, possibly up to 80 per cent of the property value. The most important aspect, however, would be to involve the Roma themselves, especially in the work of the municipalities, with the overall aim of their integration into society. In that connection, NGO inputs would feature largely in the work. Social workers, too, would share the task of developing everyday contacts between the Roma and government authorities.

The Government had already adopted a plan of action against racism, xenophobia and other forms of intolerance. A revision of the plan would, inter alia, involve NGOs, as well as government agencies. There was also the above-mentioned post of Plenipotentiary, whose office cooperated closely with NGOs, as well as a newly established cross-sectoral committee to serve as an advisory body to the Government and promote the exchange of information. In a declaration promulgated only the previous week, the Government had formally recognized the status of the Roma as a national minority, thus signifying its commitment to improving the economic infrastructure and social welfare of Roma communities.

Mr. OLEXA (Slovakia) said that preparations for the 2001 population census had been in conformity with the Covenant's guidelines. For example, there had been an intensive public awareness campaign, especially among the national minorities, and census forms had been made available in all languages. The Roma population had previously been put at some 90,000 people, representing 1.7 per cent of the Slovak population. As a result, however, of a new methodology developed by the Statistical Office in collaboration with other government agencies, the figure could confidently be put at about 380,000, representing roughly 7 per cent of the national population. The Statistical Office was also preparing a forecast of the Roma population up to 2025.

Mr. MIKUŠ (Slovakia) said that his country shared borders with Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Ukraine and had satisfactory mutual agreements with all those countries on matters such as cross-border travel for workers. The Slovak ethnic minorities in the border regions were "historic" minorities and the only problems encountered were the customary ones relating to criminal activities in such regions.

The discriminatory decisions against the Roma taken by two particular municipalities, and reported by the European Centre for Roma, had been subsequently annulled by the State authorities. With regard to the funding of projects in favour of the Roma, the figure of 30 million Slovak koruna mentioned by Mr. Martynov was roughly equivalent, at current exchange rates, to US\$ 715,000.

Referring to the ill-treatment of women and children, he said that the Criminal Code was being amended, and new provisions introduced, to deal with violence against groups or individuals, including violence against a member of the family, such actions being punishable by two to eight years' imprisonment. The changes would also recognize new offences such as sex crimes, child abuse and child pornography and would replace certain general categories by more specific offences. As to implementation and enforcement, progress was being made in apprehending perpetrators in areas such as trafficking in women, although much more remained to be done.

Mrs. ILLKOVÁ (Slovakia) said that, following the revision of the Slovak Constitution in 2001, all international instruments ratified by Slovakia formed an integral part of the legislation, prevailed over domestic law and were directly applicable in the courts. Accordingly, regular training and awareness-raising courses were held for judges and other justice administration staff on human rights, including economic, social and cultural rights. The delegation's written replies contained information on five rulings by the Constitutional Court; if the Committee so desired, further up-to-date information could be requested on case law. The Covenant's provisions had been published in the Official Journal and were available to all, at the national and local levels.

The work of the Slovak National Centre for Human Rights included the organization of training and awareness-raising. Ways were being considered to enhance its standing and make it competent to monitor international treaty implementation and to develop public awareness campaigns, as well as to act as mediator and provide legal aid to victims in cases of the violation of any international human rights instruments to which Slovakia was a State party - all as part of the provisions of an antidiscrimination bill not yet approved by Parliament. The delegation was at the Committee's disposal for any further information. Slovakia was also in a position to provide information to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in response to its questions and comments.

Mr. VILINOVIČ (Slovakia) said that his Government was endeavouring to create policies that were socially, as well as economically, acceptable. The Covenant was cross-sectoral and its provisions were relevant in all spheres, including that of environmental policies. For example, the National Strategy for Sustainable Development, which had been financed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and adopted by Parliament in 2001, took economic, social and cultural rights into account.

The CHAIRPERSON said that the delegation should indicate more precisely whether policy makers were aware of the provisions of the Covenant and the State party's obligations under the Covenant.

Mr. PETÓCZ (Slovakia) said that the Ombudsman's Office had been created several months previously. Since its establishment, it had received 1,278 communications, 138 of which had already been settled. The Office currently employed 30 people and it was hoped that the number would increase to 55 in the near future. It was impossible to indicate how many communications had been filed by members of the Roma population, as complaints were not registered according to the ethnic affiliation of the complainant.

Replying to a question about official development assistance (ODA), he said that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was currently reviewing the country's ODA policy. In 2000, Slovakia's ODA contributions had been 0.0033 per cent of GNP (approximately 285 Slovak koruna) and the target was to reach 0.125 per cent in coming years. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was seriously considering how to incorporate humanitarian aspects into future ODA projects.

Turning to the issue of gender imbalance, he regretted that Slovakia, like many Eastern European countries, was still a patriarchal society. However, while the percentage of women in managerial or high-level posts in Slovakia had reached a historical low - there were no female members of the Cabinet and the number of female members of Parliament was lower than it had been for a decade - he did not consider that to be a sign of discrimination. Many different factors contributed to the low representation of women in public life; it was hoped, however, that the situation would improve in the future. One positive development was the recent establishment of a Parliamentary standing committee to address the issue of women's rights. Slovakia hoped to become a member of the Economic and Social Council at some time in the near future and would hopefully contribute to improved female representation within the United Nations system; however, its first priority was to become a member of the Security Council in 2006.

Ms. SENČÁKOVÁ (Slovakia) said that it was difficult to provide specific information about individuals who had invoked the Covenant before the courts, given that the Covenant had been incorporated into domestic law. As to the issue of compensation, she said that, while no specific laws existed to provide compensation for violations of the Covenant, third-party liability legislation had been introduced that could be invoked if a court of law or any other public authority acted unlawfully and recent legislative amendments meant that victims of violent crime were provided with greater compensation. It was hoped that the Government would be able in future to introduce a system of restorative justice to ensure that victims could settle cases involving minor offences.

Mr. KOLOSOV said he would like to know whether there was any form of international cooperation between the Governments of the Czech Republic and Slovakia to address the problems caused by the large-scale migration of the Roma population between those two countries. He would also like to know how it was possible to collect data on the Roma population in view of the heavy migration flows. It would be interesting to learn whether the Roma received any budgetary allocations and whether such assistance was provided directly to the leaders of the Roma population, in kind or in real money. Was there a mechanism to ensure that the money was used to meet the needs of the Roma?

Mr. RIEDEL said that, in addition to the judicial decisions mentioned in the written replies, he would like further information about cases whereby the Covenant had been directly invoked before the courts and the outcome, so that the Committee could judge whether or not Slovakia could be used as an example of good practice, in terms of the domestic application of the rights provided for in the Covenant.

Mr. WIMER ZAMBRANO said that he would like to know how ethnic minorities were differentiated from national minorities. According to the official 1991 census, there were 380,000 Slovak Roma. However, a London-based minority rights group estimated the number to be between 480,000 and 500,000. What was the reason for the huge difference? The Committee needed to have accurate statistics at its disposal in order to be able to assess the real situation of the Roma minority.

Mr. SADI said that he would like to know to what extent the Government had been successful in implementing its policy to integrate the Roma population and whether it had met with any resistance from the Roma themselves. He took the view that the ultimate solution to the problems caused by the Roma population would be to integrate them fully into the mainstream population. He wondered whether the lack of specific information on cases in which the Covenant had been directly invoked suggested that the Covenant was not given sufficient emphasis in Slovakia.

Mr. HUNT said that the Vienna Declaration and Plan of Action had anticipated that States parties would prepare a national plan of action. He would like to know whether the Government had prepared a national plan of action and, if not, whether it intended to do so.

Mr. MIKUŠ (Slovakia) said there was an intergovernmental agreement between the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic allowing citizens to travel between the two countries without a passport. An identification card was all that was needed. The flow of financial resources from the Government to the Roma population took the form of both money and benefits. Unfortunately, the Government and NGOs had become aware that illegal moneylending had become a crucial problem in many Roma communities. Loan sharks were lending money at very high interest rates and keeping identification cards as security.

Replying to a question on measures to combat the ill-treatment of the Roma, he said that the Ministry of the Interior had established a special committee to address racially motivated problems, comprising members from various government departments and NGOs, as well as a member from the Attorney-General's Office. The committee had visited the eastern part of the country in early 2002 to investigate suspected criminal activities and the information it had collected would be passed on to the relevant law enforcement agencies.

Ms. SENČÁKOVÁ (Slovakia) said that information could not be provided about specific cases in which the Covenant had been invoked directly because all legislation had to be in conformity with the international instruments to which Slovakia was a party.

Mr. OLEXA (Slovakia) said that about 2,000 people had emigrated from Slovakia in 2001 and approximately the same number of people had immigrated. Therefore, the migration flows were low and well balanced. The migrants came from all sections of the population, not only from among the Roma. In fact, the number of Roma migrating between Slovakia and the Czech Republic was negligible.

Regarding the differences in the estimated number of Roma in Slovakia, he said that the Government had conducted a widespread campaign to ensure that the census would be as accurate as possible and had calculated the figure on the basis of various criteria, taking into account the past figures and the birth rate. The figure of 380,000 was generally accepted in Slovakia as being accurate and objective. Any statistics provided by other sources were of a subjective nature.

Mr. PETÓCZ (Slovakia) pointed out that, according to the Slovak Constitution, each individual had the right to choose to which national group she or he wished to belong and no one was forced to profess adherence to any particular group.

Ms. MIKLOVICOVÁ (Slovakia) said that Slovakia and the Czech Republic experienced similar problems with regard to the Roma and a group of experts composed of specialists from both countries had therefore been established to find a solution. So far, there had been a positive mutual exchange.

Some 50 million Slovak koruna had been allocated in 2002 to the Roma population. However, the Roma received funds from other sources as well, including the European Union pre-accession funds. The funds were used primarily to subsidize specific projects and were closely monitored at all levels. The Ministry of Finance was initially responsible for deciding who was eligible to receive such grants and a special committee had been established to distribute funds down to the local level.

Mr. PETÓCZ (Slovakia) said that, although the Government had adopted a number of partial action plans based on the Durban

Declaration and Plan of Action and other international agreements, it had not yet produced a specific plan in response to the Vienna Declaration and Plan of Action. Such a plan was still under consideration. Replying to a question about the practical measures taken by the Government to address deep-rooted attitudes towards minority groups, he said that the focus would be on providing human rights education, a crucial area where much remained to be done. In his view, it was also important that the Government should give positive examples of its own. The fact that a political party representing a minority group formed a stable part of the Government for the second time running was thus the best way to illustrate how the Government at the top level could set a good example to the lower levels of administration or society in general.

Mr. NIEPEL (Slovakia) said that the Ombudsman was responsible for preparing a twice yearly report on the basis of his observations. His first report was due in December 2002. A summary of the report could be provided to the Committee in writing. He pointed out that the Slovak National Centre for Human Rights had received no budgetary funding since 1996.

Paragraphs 11 to 20 of the list of issues

Mr. TEXIER asked what the current unemployment rate in Slovakia was and noted that long-term unemployment was a matter of significant concern in that country. He would also like to know whether, and in what ways, the Government's efforts to reduce unemployment diminished the rights of workers. The Committee would welcome more information on the National Labour Office and on the provision of State subsidies.

The report stated that the minimum wage was set by law and regularly reviewed; it would be useful to know the role of collective bargaining in setting the minimum wage and whether that wage allowed workers and their families to live in decent conditions. The Slovak Government had announced its intention to ratify International Labour Organization Convention No. 81 on labour inspection. He would like to know what role that instrument would play, what powers it would provide and whether the National Labour Inspectorate would be empowered to find physical conditions in workplaces unsatisfactory or dangerous and, if so, whether it could close down a workplace until such time as the conditions of work met certain standards.

He also wondered whether there continued to be significant differences between the salaries of men and women and whether women had access to higher paying positions both in the public and private sectors.

The report indicated that the right to strike was protected by the Constitution and regulated by law. Since, however, according to paragraph 51, strikes could be declared illegal on many grounds, he wondered whether that right was adequately protected. Clarifications would be welcome.

Lastly, he would like to know what the retirement policy was, what measures were taken to ensure that Slovak workers were provided with adequate funds for their retirement and whether the pension system was largely a contribution scheme, a benefit scheme or a combination of both.

Mr. MARTYNOV, noting that the report did not provide aggregated data on social protection which would allow the Committee to assess trends, requested the Government to provide such information in the next report. With reference to the reply to question 18 of the list of issues, he inquired why the unemployment benefit paid amounted to 50 per cent of the basis for the unemployment benefit. That reply also indicated that the maximum amount of the employment benefit was 1.5 multiplied by the subsistence level: it would be useful to know what the average amount paid and what the minimum amount paid were. In addition, he would like to know what benefits were provided after unemployment benefits expired and how such benefits related to the cost of living, what the relationship was between retirement benefits and the cost of living, whether agricultural workers benefited from retirement schemes and how their retirement schemes related to the cost of living.

It would also be useful to know whether the Government intended to ratify ILO Conventions Nos. 117 and 118 in the near future and, if not, what its reasons were.

Although paragraph 63 of the report indicated that women could receive maternity benefits in lieu of wages, paragraph 57 stated that women without sickness insurance were not entitled to such benefits as financial assistance for maternity. He would welcome clarifications in that regard.

Slovakia was soon to become a member of the European Union, a change which would have a negative effect on certain economic sectors. In that regard, he asked how the Government assessed the impact of that transition on the well-being of persons employed in those sectors.

Mr. CEAUSU, noting that some employers set age limits for eligibility for certain benefits, a practice which violated article 2 of the Covenant, asked whether the Government intended to prohibit such discrimination. More information would be welcome on the increase in the unemployment rate. He would like to know whether the Government was taking measures to halt that trend, to create new employment opportunities and to assist young graduates in obtaining work.

The report stated that the Constitution guaranteed equal treatment for men and women; more information on the de facto situation would be welcome, particularly on whether women were paid as much as men. He would also like to know why there were several entities responsible for labour inspections.

The replies to question 15 of the list of issues indicated that investigations were under way of two assaults against trade union leaders. Since more than two years had elapsed since those events, surely the investigations had yielded some results.

The reply to question 19 indicated that persons in material need were eligible for social assistance amounting to one hot meal daily, basic clothing and shelter. Clarifications on whether that meant that destitute persons were provided with hot meals in shelters would be welcome.

Mr. GURÁŇ (Slovakia) said that more recent unemployment figures were currently available. During the first half of 2002, the unemployment rate had been 18.6 per cent, a significant decrease since 2000. That rate was admittedly still high and the entire social system felt the impact. There were, in addition, great regional disparities in unemployment. For instance, the rate in Bratislava was around 6 per cent, while the rate in Eastern Slovakia was 25 per cent. In general, regions where many Roma lived had the highest unemployment rates. Among the Government's highest priorities were lowering unemployment and increasing the effectiveness of the social support system.

The National Labour Office was a public service authority and its funds came not from the State budget, but from insurance payments made by workers while employed. There was a large gap between pay for men and women, mostly owing to the concentration of women workers in sectors that paid less. The challenge facing the Government was to observe the principle of equal pay for equal work. The National Labour Inspectorate had been established in 2000 and was directly responsible to the Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and the Family; it was the primary entity in charge of labour inspections.

The revitalization of the retirement policy was one of the Government's top priorities. The existing system functioned on the basis of contributions by individuals. It was anticipated that a three-part mixed scheme system would be instituted in future. Under the new Government, the three major social targets were completing the pension reform, reducing unemployment and achieving transparency throughout the system.

An employed woman was entitled to maternity benefits one month before the birth and five months afterward; that entitlement applied to women who had been actively employed before their pregnancies. Unemployed women received a benefit amounting to \$82 for each child under three years of age. That was the amount also received by persons whose unemployment entitlements had expired.

About 12 per cent of economically active people, or more than 500,000 people, received benefits on the basis of material need. Under the current system, there was no upper limit on the number of children for whom a parent could receive social benefits; that system encouraged parents to have more children rather than to look for work. Under the new system, an upper limit would be clearly defined.

The new Employment Act, which had recently entered into force, prohibited discrimination on the basis of gender, race, religion or age; any violation was considered a crime.

Mr. OLEXA (Slovakia) said that, under the former communist regime, there had been full employment and even in some cases overemployment. After the transition, unemployment had soared to 12 per cent by 1991 and 1992 and had reached 18 or 19 per cent by 2001. The latest figures, however, showed a marked decrease; he hoped that that trend would continue.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.