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COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Thirty-eighth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE FIRST PART (PUBLIC)* OF THE 16th MEETING

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva,
on Wednesday, 9 May 2007, at 3 p.m.

Chairperson: Mr. TEXIER

CONTENTS

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS:

- (a) REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES IN ACCORDANCE WITH
ARTICLES 16 AND 17 OF THE COVENANT (continued)

Initial report of Latvia (continued)

* The summary record of the second part (closed) of the meeting appears as document
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The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS

(a) REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES IN ACCORDANCE WITH ARTICLES 16 AND 17 OF THE COVENANT (agenda item 8) (continued)

Initial report of Latvia (continued) (E/1990/5/Add.70; E/C.12/LVA/Q/1 and Add.1; HRI/CORE/1/Add.123)

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, the members of the delegation of Latvia resumed their places at the Committee table.

Articles 10 to 12 of the Covenant (continued)

2. Ms. REINE (Latvia) said that residents who did not meet the conditions required for obtaining Latvian citizenship could apply for the status of non-citizen, which provided them with protection compared to foreigners, who did not have any status. The Latvian Jewish community defined itself as a national minority community and not as a religious community; thus, it was considered in the same way as the Roma community by the public authorities.

3. The special division of the police did not have any statistics on the cases before it. Trafficking in human beings posed special problems for the Latvian authorities, since Latvia was merely the starting-point of that evil. Criminal procedures could be instituted in Latvia, but they must be followed through in other countries. Victims of trafficking were cared for by the State, which gave them financial assistance, as well as by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which provided them with psychological support and legal aid. Latvia also conducted information campaigns on trafficking in persons, in close cooperation with the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

4. Although domestic violence was not in fact the subject of a specific law, it was referred to in several provisions of the Criminal Code. Domestic violence was treated as aggravated assault, and marital rape as rape with aggravating circumstances.

5. Homosexuals did not have the right to marry in Latvia, but could conclude a civil agreement. With regard to former members of the KGB, their retirement pensions were not calculated on the basis of their old ranks, but as a function of their years of contributions and their salaries. No former member of the KGB had received preferential treatment.

6. Ms. TARE (Latvia) said that the minimum age for admission to employment was 15 years. According to the statistics for 2006, wage earners had accounted for 65 per cent of household income and 18 per cent of social benefits. Information on unemployment benefits would be included in the next periodic report. The first national plan of action for social integration, which had covered the period 2004-2006, had concerned single-parent families, the elderly, persons with disabilities, the unemployed and the homeless. For greater effectiveness, a more targeted plan had been introduced for the period 2006-2008 with two main objectives: ensuring that more children went to school and improving access to the labour market for young people, and making public services more available to large families, single-parent families and the elderly.

7. With regard to gender equality, the delegation did not have any statistics on cases of indirect discrimination, which had not been included in criminal legislation until very recently. In 2005-2006, a programme to promote gender equality had been launched with the following objectives: encouraging education for girls at all levels, heightening the awareness of the population of inequalities between men and women, reconciling work and family life, and helping institutions to deal more effectively with questions relating to gender equality. A new programme would be implemented shortly with two additional objectives: enhancing the capacity of institutions to combat violence against women, and working to change attitudes in order to overcome traditional gender roles. Lastly, she pointed out that labour inspectors conducted inspections in both multinational and national companies.

8. Mr. SKUDRA (Latvia) said that he did not have any statistics on street children. Studies were being conducted, and a plan of action would soon be elaborated. In any event, no effort was spared to encourage children to return to school, and there was a remedial programme of one and two years for those that did. In respect of orphans, the members of the Committee were asked to refer to the Government's written reply to question 23 of the list of issues. As part of its 2004-2013 family action plan, the State intended to introduce policies to combat violence against children and promote their well-being. Police officers, social workers and teachers would be trained to better recognize victims of acts of violence. It was also planned to promote family reunification and employment for parents who had gone to work abroad but had left their family behind.

9. Mr. ŠTOKENBERGS (Latvia) said that, pursuant to the housing assistance act, in certain circumstances the Government could help the poorest families acquire housing. The Government also funded the construction of low-income housing: in 2003-2006, 1,000 new housing units had been built in Riga.

10. In closing, he pointed out that the proportion of Russian speakers was not just 30 per cent, as one of the members of the Committee had put it, but more likely around 90 per cent, and the fact that schooling was in Latvian throughout the territory was the guarantee that all inhabitants could easily communicate. Indeed, one of the great achievements of his country was that it had been able to avoid divisions between the various population groups.

11. Mr. MUCINŠ acknowledged that, like in many other countries, Latvia had a shortage of nurses. There was no immediate solution to the problem, but in the medium term the State planned to resolve it by assessing the exact number of professionals who needed to be trained, bearing in mind the demographic evolution, and by upgrading nursing schools accordingly, as well as by offering working conditions likely to retain personnel. To that end, nurses' salaries had been fixed at 60 per cent that of physicians, which was double the average national income.

12. In connection with the fight against cancer, all women between 50 and 69 years of age were entitled to a mammogram every two years free of charge. Women in other age groups were advised to go for an annual examination to their family doctor, who could prescribe additional tests if deemed necessary. Moreover, all women over 25 years of age were reimbursed for the cost of an annual smear test for cervical cancer. In addition to those preventive measures, information campaigns on sexual and reproductive health were conducted in the media and in schools as part of public awareness initiatives.

13. Health care costs were usually covered to 80 per cent by the State, the remaining 20 per cent being borne by the patient; approximately 900,000 persons with low income (one person in three) had 100 per cent coverage under the national health insurance scheme.

14. With regard to mentally ill patients, under new rules adopted in early 2007, any placement decision must be taken by a psychiatrist or a panel of psychiatrists and must then be submitted within 24 hours to a judge, who had 72 hours to approve or reject it. The initial duration of placement must not exceed two months; placement extended beyond that time period must be reviewed every six months at the latest.

15. Ms. OŠA (Latvia) said that the State granted subsidies to persons who wished to renovate their homes and allocated structural funds to improve the energy efficiency of buildings, but the action of the authorities to enhance housing quality was inevitably limited by the fact that 94 per cent of housing in cities and 97 per cent in the country were privately owned. The municipalities made shelters offering various services available to homeless persons, who had numbered 2,500 nationwide in 2006.

16. Ms. REINE (Latvia) said that new legal provisions prohibited the eviction of elderly persons and families with young children or children with disabilities if other housing was not offered. Not all judges had been informed of the legislation; the Legal Training Centre had begun taking active steps to do so.

Articles 13 to 15 of the Covenant

17. Mr. RZEPLINSKI asked the delegation to tell the Committee exactly how much a primary school teacher with ten years' experience earned as compared to other civil servants, such as police officers, to provide figures on the school enrolment rate of Roma and children with disabilities, to explain the structure of universities and to indicate to what extent their diplomas were recognized in other European Union countries.

18. It would also be useful to obtain statistical data from the delegation to help assess the security situation in schools (assaults, drug trafficking and use, alcohol consumption).

19. Ms. WILSON wondered what measures had been taken to deal with the shortage of qualified teachers referred to in the State party's initial report and to improve the integration of Roma in society in general and in the educational system in particular. A 2004 NGO report had criticized the alarming school drop-out rate in the Roma community. It was to be hoped that incentives had since been introduced to encourage members of that population group to stay in school.

20. Mr. KOLOSOV said that he was still waiting for an answer to the question of whether the State party applied *ius sanguinis* or *ius soli* for granting citizenship. He also sought clarification on measures taken to protect children from scenes of violence in the media and on the Internet and whether the fact that library collections were described as "completely free" meant that it was also possible to find Nazi literature there, for example.

21. Mr. ABDEL-MONEIM said that he would like to learn more about how the public at large was familiarized with the archival documents referred to in paragraph 661 of the initial report, as well as about the nature and functioning of the Foundation of Cultural Capital discussed in

paragraph 608. He also asked the delegation to indicate whether the administration of museums had been centralized or decentralized.

22. On the whole, education in Latvia seemed to be more neglected than culture. The low salaries of teachers gave reason to fear the growth of informal education, which might actually be more costly than salary increases for teachers in public schools.

23. The terms for student loans were prohibitive. It was unfortunate that the size of the loan could not exceed school fees, that the annual interest rate on such loans was five per cent and that interest was charged starting from the twelfth month following the completion of studies, which raised the question of how those who had not found employment one year after finishing their studies could pay off their loan.

24. Mr. MARCHAND ROMERO welcomed the passage of the act on the free development of national and ethnic minorities, whose aim was to guarantee all national and ethnic groups in Latvia the right to autonomy and cultural self-administration. He wondered, however, how the State party reconciled the principle of the autonomy and cultural self-administration of various ethnic groups with the new philosophy, introduced by the Foundation of Cultural Capital, for the funding of culture on the basis of “competition”. He was also concerned at the emphasis placed on “integration” in the National Programme *Culture*: promoting mutual understanding was a good thing, but the State party must also ensure that the various nationalities living in the territory could preserve their own cultural identity.

25. Mr. KERDOUN drew attention to a contradiction between the increase in the salary of teachers in 2001, 2002 and 2003 and the shortage of teachers due to insufficient salaries and inferior social status.

26. Ms. REINE (Latvia) said that statistics on the security situation in schools would be included in the second periodic report. With regard to the proportion of classes which must be held in the Latvian language, she said that that obligation applied only for public schools, whereas for private schools there were no restrictions whatsoever on the choice of language. The national language act required that a minimum number of subjects be taught in the language of the minority. On the question of the language in which examinations were held, she explained that, under existing rules in public schools, examinations at levels 1, 3, 6 and 9 were held in the language in which the subject had been taught, but a pupil could choose to answer in another language. For language tests for minorities, the Ministry of Education had prepared examinations in Latvian, Polish and Russian. The final examination for the secondary school diploma was held in Latvian, but a pupil could answer in another language. As that examination also served as a university entrance examination, students were not separated on the basis of their language; 70 to 80 percent of secondary school graduates from minority schools continued their studies in the country. A university degree corresponded to four years of higher education.

27. The State granted financial support for private schools (which accounted for one per cent of all the country’s schools), irrespective of the language of study; restrictions imposed by national legislation in that regard had been abolished in a decision by the Constitutional Court. Half of State subsidies to private schools went to schools for minorities.

28. The problem of inadequate teacher salaries had not yet been resolved. The plan of action adopted by the Government could not produce results overnight, and salary increases must be negotiated with the unions. The teaching staff was entitled to housing and transport allowances, as well as social welfare benefits. Teacher training at university was a requirement for becoming a primary school teacher. For the period 2007-2009, Latvia was conducting a special programme to promote the integration and education of Roma, in which public institutions, employers and Roma parents were involved, and which aimed to encourage Roma children to attend school more often, statistics having shown that the number of Roma children enrolled in school was still not stable. With regard to pornography and violence, the media were prohibited from broadcasting programmes of a violent or pornographic nature between 7 a.m. and 11 p.m., and Internet service providers must equip their servers with filters. Lastly, as she did not want to start a debate on the Latvian citizenship of newborns, she referred to the text of the relevant legislation, which was available in English.

29. Ms. MELNBARDE (Latvia) confirmed that libraries could compile their collections without any restrictions and noted that, as Nazi literature reflected a part of the country's history, it could not be removed from libraries. As to the Foundation of Cultural Capital, the budget had risen from 4 million lats in 2004 to 6.5 million lats in 2007, and with the four competitions which the Foundation had organized in 2005, a total of 2,127 projects had been considered. As a counterpart to the Foundation, another foundation – to promote integration – had been established by the Government to support the cultures and initiatives of minorities (five projects funded in 2007), and other bodies and institutions provided assistance to NGOs representing national minorities. On the question of decentralization, she said that after the country had become independent, since all Latvian cultural institutions had still been funded by the State, the municipalities had been entrusted with the administration of municipal museums, because that was more efficient. Lastly, on the question of the link between the National Programme *Culture* and social integration, she said that a new landmark document entitled “Guidelines for a long-term cultural policy” had been produced for the purpose of strengthening cooperation between cultural institutions and bodies responsible for social integration.

30. The CHAIRPERSON thanked the delegation of Latvia and said that the Committee had concluded its consideration of the initial report of the State party.

31. The delegation of Latvia withdrew.

The public part of the meeting rose at 5.30 p.m.
