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**Statement by Louise Arbour, Special Representative
of the Secretary-General for International Migration**

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Special event to mark the observance of the
World Social Justice Day – 20 February 2018
Theme: Workers on the move: the quest for social justice

20 February 2018, New York

Ambassador Moldoisaeva,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic and the International Labour Organization for inviting me to this special event today. It is a great pleasure to be here with you on this World Day of Social Justice, a day when we collectively recognize the ongoing need to promote equitable development and human dignity for all.

Social justice remains an elusive dream for a large portion of humanity, including many migrants. I therefore welcome the theme of this year “workers on the move: the quest for social justice”.

This theme is also very timely since Member States began today the negotiations to develop a global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration. The global compact will be the first, inter-governmentally negotiated agreement to cover all dimensions of international migration in a comprehensive manner. It is a once in a generation opportunity to strengthen international cooperation to better manage migration, including labour mobility, for the benefit of all – States, migrants themselves, and their host and home communities.

Well-managed migration is a driving force in achieving sustainable development by reducing inequalities between and within countries, as agreed in Goal 10 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

When people move, regardless of their motivations for doing so, the majority will eventually enter the labour market to support themselves. In fact, most people who migrate find jobs: according to a study by the International Labour organization more than 150 million of all international migrants work, 44 per cent of them are women.

Migrant workers make positive economic and social contributions to both their host and home countries, despite often facing exploitation, low pay, and abusive working conditions.

To increase decent work opportunities for migrant workers it is crucial to extract them from the informal economy, where they are disproportionately represented, and ensure that minimum labor standards are applied and enforced, both in the informal and formal economy. In turn, this requires expanding legal pathways to ensure a transparent and well-regulated labour market, including for foreign workers.

While most governments support the entry of high-skilled migrants, only a few have well-regulated systems in place for migrants in low-skilled jobs, even when there is a structural demand from the private sector to recruit migrant workers to fill these jobs. Migrant workers in low-skilled jobs are thereby even more vulnerable and encounter often numerous problems in the migration process and in destination countries.

Policies and laws should be developed to enable these workers to migrate through regular channels into formal sector jobs. The scarcity of regular entry channels will induce migrants, attracted by existing job opportunities, to put themselves in situations of irregularity, either by entering the country illegally or by infringing the terms of their legal entry, in order to access jobs in the informal sector.

Expanding access to regular migration channels, especially for low-skilled immigration, will not eliminate entirely irregular migration but should contribute to reducing it significantly.

We need to recognize however that the demand for access through immigration to the wealthier countries is unlikely to be fully accommodated. The supply of labour from developing countries with large working age populations far exceeds the demands of developed economies, even without assuming all in the former wish to migrate to the latter.

Whatever the realities of tomorrow's demographic and labour market trends and pressures, it is in everyone's interest, today, to recognize the need to do more to formalize our informal economies. This transformation will reduce the pull factor for irregular migration and help confront the issue of exploitation in informal labour sectors. Latest estimates suggest that 23 per cent of the 24.9 million people in forced labour worldwide are international migrants while they constitute only an estimated 4.4 per cent of the world's global workforce.

There is a large set of relevant legal frameworks theoretically available to protect migrant workers, but in reality, few migrant workers especially those working in low-paid jobs, enjoy any of these rights. International instruments entrenching such protection are poorly ratified, and poorly reflected in national legislation or law enforcement.

There is no better example of this disconnect between theory and practice than in the field of recruitment of foreign workers. There are international labour standards and guiding principles related to fair and ethical recruitment of migrant workers, but in reality, migrant workers, especially low-skilled ones, tend to pay high costs out of their own pockets and are often victims of unscrupulous employment agencies, informal labour intermediaries and other operators acting outside the legal and regulatory framework.

Both governments and employers have a responsibility to improve recruitment practices. Governments should adopt and enforce appropriate legal and regulatory frameworks to make sure that regulation is effective, transparent and well-enforced. Migrant workers should have access to free, comprehensive and accurate information regarding their rights and the conditions of their recruitment and employment. They should be provided with reliable means to have these rights enforced. Needless to say, employers from their side should comply with recruitment regulations and should be made accountable when they don't.

Improving the lives of migrants is not a mere moral imperative. As a feature of social justice it benefits all of society, fostering social cohesion through the pursuit of equality and fairness.

The months ahead provide us with a unique opportunity to take some important, concrete steps in improving the lives of migrant workers and making migration work for all.

Thank you.