

## 35th European Regional Conference

Speech by INTERPOL Secretary General Ronald K. Noble  
17 May, Minsk, Belarus

Mr. Naumov, Minister of Internal Affairs for Belarus,  
*Mr. Boustani, Chairman and Executive Committee Member,*  
*Heads of delegation from INTERPOL's European region,*  
*Heads of INTERPOL National Central Bureaus,*  
*My fellow police colleagues,*  
*My dedicated staff from INTERPOL's General Secretariat,*  
*Dear observers and international organizations,*  
*Distinguished guests,*  
*Ladies and gentlemen,*

Good morning. Welcome to [INTERPOL's 35th European Regional Conference](#).

I have been asked quite frequently as of late, why is INTERPOL holding its 35th European Regional Conference in Minsk, Belarus? My answer is quite simple. Police heads of delegation from INTERPOL's member countries in the European region voted to hold this year's regional conference in Minsk, Belarus. The vote was transparent and the vote was in accordance with INTERPOL's Constitution and Rules and Regulations.

In order to hold a regional conference in any one of INTERPOL's [184 member countries](#), the country offering to host the conference must assure us that [INTERPOL's Constitution](#) and Rules and Regulations concerning the essential requirements for holding a conference will be satisfied. Belarus has satisfied these requirements.

Ordinarily, INTERPOL's regional conferences attract very little public attention. Technical meetings of police professionals rarely are considered newsworthy. We have had regional meetings in countries that were at the time of the meetings going through difficult domestic crises or other problems. We have had meetings in countries where there were claims of corruption raised against the highest elements of government. We have had meetings in countries where the police have been accused of brutality. We have had meetings in countries where revolutions were thought to be underway or necessary, depending on with whom you spoke. Some of our meetings have taken place in countries right here in Europe (such as Georgia and Ukraine) which had revolutions and overthrows of government in the months or years following our meetings.

The location of these meetings depended not on what was going on internally in the country at the time of the meeting; it depended on the democratically expressed will of our membership.

On each of those occasions when meetings were held in countries experiencing controversy, not one country or group of countries ever tried to interfere with our holding a conference there, and no country or group of countries ever violated our Constitution in trying to prevent us from having INTERPOL [Executive Committee](#) members or staff participate in the meeting.

No country or group of countries should ever try to prevent us from doing our work. INTERPOL is the world's largest international police organization, the world's only global police organization and the world's

most effective international police body. Our work helps to ensure the security and safety of citizens nationally, regionally and globally.

INTERPOL has a one-country, one-vote democracy. If you want to lead this organization, you must be elected, and when your term ends, you must leave. Our organization gives no country or group of countries the right to veto anything that our body has democratically decided to do. This is one of the things that makes INTERPOL special.

This year is the 50th anniversary of [INTERPOL's Constitution](#). Our Constitution sets out the framework for everything we do. One of the most important provisions of our Constitution is [Article 3](#), which makes clear that 'it is strictly forbidden for the organization to undertake any intervention or activities of a political, military, religious, or racial character'.

An important example of the challenges faced in this area is illustrated by the fact that certain countries instructed INTERPOL officials to not attend this conference. These instructions were issued to officers who have been seconded to INTERPOL, and they were also issued to our [Executive Committee](#) members. Now, it is one thing for a country to decide not to send a delegation to the conference – that is problematical enough – but it is quite another to interfere with the work being done by INTERPOL officials engaging in their statutory duties on behalf of the organization.

As with most other politically neutral international organizations, INTERPOL officials are supposed to function on behalf of the organization itself, rather than on behalf of any particular country. This is a fundamental principle. It is reflected in INTERPOL's Constitution and other basic documents, as it is in those of most other neutral international organizations, such as the United Nations.

[Article 30](#) of our Constitution states that 'in the exercise of their duties, the Secretary General and the staff shall neither solicit nor accept instructions from any government or authority outside the organization'. And it goes on to state that 'each member of the organization shall undertake to respect the exclusively international character of the duties of the Secretary General and the staff, and abstain from influencing them in the discharge of their duties'. It is on this basis that countries agree to second their officers to the organization. Unfortunately, a number of our countries' police agencies were forced to violate this agreement based on orders given at the political level to instruct certain staff members not to come to this conference.

The situation regarding our Executive Committee members is particularly troubling. [Article 19](#) of our Constitution states that 'in the exercise of their duties, all members of the Executive Committee shall conduct themselves as representatives of the organization and not as representatives of their respective countries'. When the countries instructed the Executive Committee members to not come to this conference, they made it impossible for them to discharge this obligation. This is deeply troubling. Our Vice President for Europe, Rodolfo Ronconi, and Executive Committee members Kenneth Pandolfi, Juergen Stock and Francisco Aranda would be here in person with us if they could, but for now they are with us in spirit, as are the Chiefs of Police and Heads of NCB in all of our 46 European region members.

Countries should never interfere with the work being done by INTERPOL officials engaging in their statutory duties on behalf of the organization.

INTERPOL has [184 member countries](#). The governments of these countries are constantly engaging in political issues. But INTERPOL cannot get involved in these issues. INTERPOL must remain independent and politically neutral, completely focused on its international mission of helping the world's police fight serious transnational crime and [terrorism](#). Otherwise, INTERPOL cannot function effectively. Simply stated, politics and police work should not mix.

The location of this conference happens to be in Belarus, but this has nothing to do with its subject matter or its purpose. It is about operational policing matters. Nothing more and nothing less.

The fact that INTERPOL holds a conference in a particular country is not an endorsement of the politics of that country. INTERPOL is prohibited by its Constitution from engaging in politics. So, again, we come back to the basic principle: politics and police work should not mix.

The citizens of the world expect and deserve INTERPOL's complete and undivided devotion to its crime-fighting mission, uncompromised by politics. As with other organizations that deal with matters of public safety or health, INTERPOL's work must continue around the world regardless of the political environment – just as doctors, disaster relief workers and humanitarian aid groups must continue their work around the world regardless of the political environment.

Unfortunately, we have seen too many examples of situations where politics has gotten in the way of the sharing and/or use of cross-border police information and led to tragic events.

Despite political differences, governments continue to engage in diplomatic communication because they recognise the need to keep communication channels open. Similarly, INTERPOL must always work to keep communication channels open among the world's law enforcement agencies.

In fact, despite political differences, countries continue to engage on numerous levels because there remain important matters that must nevertheless be attended to. Law enforcement is one of these important matters. The criminals do not stop operating in observance of political differences. That is why, for example, despite political differences between the EU and Belarus, German police came here to Minsk earlier this month to participate in a seminar on counterfeiting. Crime goes on, so police work must go on.

While INTERPOL must remain politically neutral, this does not mean that it is blind to political realities. In order to avoid situations such as the present, where political bodies take actions that adversely impact law enforcement work, INTERPOL must ensure that political bodies have the benefit of INTERPOL's perspective and balancing arguments.

Toward this end, INTERPOL will redouble its efforts to more actively pursue the communication channels with such bodies. We have learned lessons from this situation, and the need for better communication with the political bodies whose actions might adversely affect our work is one of those lessons.

It is important to actively communicate, not only with political bodies, but also with other international organizations. This is important, not only to avoid problems, but also to generate positive benefits. Our relationship with the United Nations, for instance, has yielded significant benefits to law enforcement. The advent of the [INTERPOL-United Nations Special Notice](#) is but one example of these benefits.

Today, the threats of terrorism and other transnational crime transcend national borders. While countries are segregated by national borders, international criminal organizations are not. These criminal organizations operate across borders. Consequently, police must communicate and co-operate across borders. This means that we, in the law enforcement community, cannot get caught up in political issues if we are to discharge our duties.

And we will discharge our duties. The fact that so many of our colleagues were prevented from joining us here today poses an obstacle for us in ensuring that everyone participates in discussing the important operational police matters we will consider at this conference. But police know how to deal with obstacles. Police adapt. As a result of orders given at the political level, many of our police colleagues were not able to join us here. We will deal with that obstacle. We will adapt. We will meet here with those who were able to attend, and we will find a way to allow our other colleagues' voices to be heard as well.

This organization was created by police, not politicians. Police recognise the need to seek out all possible sources of information and co-operation in the fight against crime and the dangers of excluding any country's police from this exchange. We will honor this fundamental principle by making sure that those of our colleagues who were prevented from joining us here today will nevertheless be heard on the matters we discuss at this conference. We will find a way to make that happen someday soon, hopefully before the end of this year.

Regardless of whether it concerns the [sexual abuse of children](#), [human trafficking](#), [drugs](#), [organized crime](#) or [terrorism](#), police everywhere know that countering these threats is only possible if all countries are able to share information and no countries are excluded from this exchange.

That is why governments should recognise that international police co-operation is essential if we are to keep people safe from dangerous criminals, and we must not allow politics to get in the way of this.

And, on that note, I will end my opening remarks and wish you all a most successful conference.