



UNITED NATIONS OFFICE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM

Statement of Mr. Voronkov, Under-Secretary-General “Ensuring the rights of children of foreign terrorist fighters”

26 September 2018

Excellencies

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am delighted to welcome you to the United Nations General Assembly side event “Ensuring the Rights of Children of Foreign Terrorist Fighters”, co-hosted by the Government of Belgium and the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT). I would like to thank Belgium colleagues for their active engagement. My word of appreciation to the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and all other donors, for their generous support for UNCCT.

It is also an honor to have our special guests here today.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The phenomenon of foreign terrorist fighters, as defined by Security Council resolution 2178, is not necessarily new. In the last half century, there were several waves of individuals crossing borders to participate in armed conflicts.

But, one unique aspect of the latest wave of people who travelled across national borders to join the so-called “Islamic State of Iraq and Levant” (ISIL) is children.

We now know that a significant number of children travelled with their parents to conflict affected areas in Iraq and Syria.

Some estimate that 30,000 children were born in ISIL occupied Iraqi territory, possibly thousands among them are likely to have foreign terrorist fighters as parents.

With the military defeat of ISIL in Iraq and Syria, some of these children have managed to return to their parents’ countries of origin.

Most of these returning children are traumatized by their experiences in the conflict. Many have witnessed horrific acts of violence first-hand.

At the same time, ISIL has required children as young as 8 years old to participate in military training, including the usage of weapons. These children were also a target for indoctrination by terrorists.

Given these experiences, children, especially older ones, are seen by the countries they return to as a potential security risk who may yet hold on to these hateful narratives and may turn to violence in the future.

A larger number of children than those who managed to return to their countries of origin are now stuck in camps and detention places in the conflict affected areas, often in a legal limbo, unable to establish their nationality.

These children also suffer from the lack of access to basic services, including food, water, medical care and education.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the Secretary-General has emphasized, "Terrorism is fundamentally the denial and destruction of human rights, and the fight against terrorism will never succeed by perpetuating the same denial and destruction....at the same time, when we protect human rights, we are tackling the root causes of terrorism."

This was also reflected in the most recent review resolution of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy adopted in June this year.

The resolution stressed "that when counter-terrorism efforts neglect the rule of law at the national and international levels and violate international law, human rights and fundamental freedoms, they not only betray the values that they seek to uphold, but they may also further fuel violent extremism that can be conducive to terrorism".

The Security Council has repeatedly stressed that every counter-terrorism measure has to be in compliance with international law, in particular, human rights, humanitarian and refugee law.

In its latest resolution on foreign terrorist fighters, the Council highlighted FTF families, including children, and called upon States to take measures to rehabilitate and reintegrate these children.

The practical implementation of these resolutions requires consideration of difficult questions that will affect our security in years, and possibly decades, to come:

- How can States rehabilitate and reintegrate children of FTFs while ensuring their human rights?
- How can we ensure that the treatment of children as victims, enable them to fully reintegrate back into societies, when there may remain lingering fears about their future actions, triggered by well-published horrors committed by terrorist groups?
- What lessons can we learn from the different experiences that Member States have had in addressing this phenomenon?

In an effort to address some of these questions, the UN Counter-Terrorism Centre, the capacity building arm of the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism, has focused on the rights of children of foreign terrorist fighters as part of its human rights programming.

We are developing a handbook summarizing relevant international human rights and humanitarian legal standards applicable to treatment of children of foreign terrorist fighters.

To seek advice from experts, UN agencies and civil society organizations, we organized an expert meeting in April. Further, we held two regional meetings in South-East Asia and Europe to consult with government officials to identify good practices and challenges. The last meeting with the Governments in the Middle-East and North Africa region is planned early next year.

We hope that the handbook will raise awareness about relevant international legal standards and assist policy makers and other officials to adopt measures concerning children of FTFs in compliance with Member States' human rights obligations.

I hope that today's discussion will also contribute to efforts to respond to these difficult questions and to ensure that we are fully committed to the fundamental principle of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy as well as the United Nations Charter. Of course, our actions have to be grounded in international human rights and humanitarian law.

Thank you.