



Second United Nations
**HIGH-LEVEL CONFERENCE
ON COUNTER-TERRORISM**

28-30 JUNE 2021

UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS • NEW YORK

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**Second United Nations High-Level Conference of Heads of Counter-Terrorism Agencies of
Member States**

**Plenary wrap-up of Session IV: Responding to new and evolving counterterrorism challenges
in the new decade**

**30 June 2021
11:20 – 11:40 PM**

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Yesterday, I had the privilege to chair breakout session IV-C on “Protecting, repatriating, rehabilitating and reintegrating women and children with links to United Nations listed terrorist groups.”

When coalition forces completed the final territorial defeat of ISIL in March 2019, they were surprised by the many tens of thousands of women and children who flooded out of Baghouz and into camps intended to take just a few thousand. Their legal status is not clear. They are not prisoners of war. They have not been charged with crimes. Although some of the adults are hard-core ISIL members, many were dragged along, compelled or duped into going. Some went there as minors and reached their majority later. Others are victims of ISIL crimes or witnesses of them. Some are both victims and perpetrators. And then there are the thousands of children who were born in the conflict zone.

2021 COUNTER-TERRORISM WEEK

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More than two years later, local authorities lack the resources or the standing to deal with a group that most of the world seems to have turned its backs on. Although the United Nations has always maintained that repatriation to their countries of nationality is the only defensible solution, the international community has made only marginal progress in getting the children and their caregivers out of harm's way.

Yesterday we heard how Russia, Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states are working to repatriate their nationals from Syria, Iraq and elsewhere. Others unfortunately continue to face multifaceted challenges in this regard. However, these piecemeal efforts by some states are not expected to make real progress in improving the situation.

Ms. Laetitia Courtois, the Permanent Observer of the ICRC to the United Nations, specified that of the 62,000 people in Al Hol camp, two-thirds are children and around 10,000 of these are from countries other than Iraq or Syria. For tens of thousands of these stranded children, living conditions are far below international standards in terms of access to food, water, health care and education. Many have suffered violence, injuries, and psychological distress or trauma.

These conditions can provide fertile ground for violent indoctrination, militant infiltration and terrorist recruitment in the camps.

Our discussion highlighted that the threat to international peace and security grows every minute as this situation remains unaddressed.

SRSR Gherman highlighted how Central Asian states have significantly progressed in addressing repatriation issues of their citizens stranded in Syria and Iraq, in particular women and children. She described how these same states are moving towards a comprehensive approach regarding repatriation and reintegration, with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan implementing relevant programs.

We heard in more detail about the Kazakh experience from Ambassador Ilyassov, who outlined how Kazakhstan, supported by specific United Nations agencies and international organizations, including the ICRC, executed two special operations to repatriate Kazakh citizens from Syria and Iraq.

He stressed that despite the risks and seriousness of reintegrating such citizens, his country made a “responsible and moral decision” to take timely action and not abandon stranded victims.

Ms. Courtois from the ICRC reminded us that the children in the camps are victims and must be treated primarily as victims, regardless of their age, the alleged affiliation of their parents, or their presumed involvement in hostilities. They are entitled to special care and assistance.

Mr. Williams from UNICEF further emphasized the child rights perspective, stressing these children’s right to life, development, nationality, identity, family unity, education, and to be free from arbitrary detention and free from violence.

We also benefitted from a second specific national experience, shared by Ambassador Kuznetsova from the Russian Federation, which continued repatriations even during the pandemic. Ms. Kuznetsova stressed that repatriating these children was “just half the battle”, and in that context elaborated on Russia’s several years of experience in rehabilitation and reintegration, and that research has shown a high potential for rehabilitation for these children.

I expressed encouragement by the increasing numbers of European children being repatriated from Al-Hol camp, who can now benefit from reintegration services in their home countries.

Dear colleagues,

Despite this positive momentum, national responses of some countries to repatriating children remain slow and limited, having been further hampered by COVID-19. I noted that to get the children out of harm’s way, we must move from “retail” repatriations of a dozen or so every now and then, to “wholesale” operations that move scores or hundreds at a time.

We in UNOCT, together with UNICEF, coordinate support from 15 United Nations entities to requesting Member States with regard to individuals returned from or remaining in northeast Syria and Iraq through a new Global Framework.

The Global Framework will be officially launched during an event on the margins of the 76th session of the UN General Assembly in September. Meanwhile Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are already receiving assistance under the “All-of-UN” mechanism. Ambassador Yasseen from Iraq has shared with us his country’s insights in that regard, including the opening of two camps to rehabilitate and reintegrate returnees.

Ms. Moaveni from the International Crisis Group vividly highlighted that abdicating this responsibility comes with a much greater long-term security risk and is deeply troubling from a human rights perspective. But she also noted that the earlier repatriation occurs, the higher the chances of recovery, which as Mr. Williams noted is borne out by UNICEF’s extensive experience with other conflict-affected children.

Ms. Courtois from the ICRC recalled that Member States must handle repatriations and transfers with good preparation, carefully and lawfully. She recommended an individualized, case-by-case approach, with individualized screenings of those being detained or stranded in camps to identify vulnerabilities and to treat them accordingly.

Both ICRC and UNICEF stressed that in the case of children, authorities should respect family unity and repatriate children with their mothers and siblings. They urged states to avoid separating them unless a competent authority considers it in their best interest after an individual assessment subject to judicial review.

The bottom line of all participants was that it is a humanitarian and security imperative to get these children out of there and into an effective rehabilitation programme in their countries of nationality.

I once again would like to thank all panellists and speakers for their valuable insights that allowed us to have a constructive exchange on one of the most pressing counter-terrorism challenges of our time.

Thank you.