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Advancing the rights
and needs of victims
of terrorism

Highlight Report

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A. Introduction

On 8 and 9 September 2022, the United Nations Global Congress of Victims of Terrorism (the Global Congress), was hosted by the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, under the overarching theme of “Advancing the Rights and Needs of Victims of Terrorism.”

The Global Congress marked a critical milestone towards strengthened global solidarity and unity in support of victims and survivors of terrorism. Bringing together over 400 attendees, the event provided an unprecedented opportunity to promote dialogue and engagement between Member States, victims of terrorism, civil society, academics, experts, and the private sector on the rights and needs of victims of terrorism. The outcomes of the Global Congress, as reflected in the Chair’s Summary¹, aim to chart a way forward for renewed national and international efforts to promote and protect the rights of victims and survivors of terrorism and enhance support for their needs.

The Global Congress was designed with, by and for, victims of terrorism, underscoring the importance of collaborative victim-centric approaches to promoting and protecting their rights and needs. While the challenges for supporting and protecting the rights of victims and survivors of terrorism are significant, the Global Congress gave participants space to discuss opportunities and recommendations that Member States and societies can seize to move forward, improve the lives of victims and survivors, contribute to building more harmonious and peaceful societies, and defeating terrorism.

Prior to the Global Congress, UNOCT organized on 7 September 2022 a dedicated session for victims and survivors of terrorism, which sought to provide them with a space for reflection, networking and advocacy. Victims were briefed on the themes to be discussed during the Global Congress and the support network and mechanisms that would be available to help them with psychosocial and mental health issues, including secondary trauma, that may be experienced during the duration of the Global Congress.

The Global Congress was held on 8-9 September and featured a high-level ministerial opening, as well as plenary and panel sessions. An exhibition of the “Memories” campaign was launched on 7 September 2022, displaying the resilience of 22 victims of terrorism from across the world. One of the sessions at the Global Congress screened the ‘Memories’ short film, followed by a discussion between the filmmaker and two victims of terrorism featured in the campaign. This session helped to give more depth and context to the stories featured in the campaign.

The Global Congress highlighted the resilience, contributions, and critical role of victims and survivors of terrorism in wider societal efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism conducive to terrorism. Similarly, the Global Congress delivered important recommendations on how to strengthen rights-based and needs-responsive systems to enhance support for victims and survivors of terrorism. The significant impact of international solidarity, memorialization and remembrance was also acknowledged, highlighting in turn the importance of raising awareness on the long-term and detrimental impact of terrorism. As the global community continues to grapple with evolving threats posed by terrorism and violent extremism, the Global Congress reaffirmed the imperative of ensuring that victims’ rights are upheld, and their needs are met through holistic, responsive and “whole-of-government” and “whole-of-society” approaches.

¹https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/220909_chair_summary_usg_congress.pdf

FIGURE 1



B. Highlights from the plenary and panel sessions

The Global Congress was developed in consultation and collaboration with victims and survivors of terrorism, victims' associations and civil society organizations. Throughout the event, victims' voices drove discussions and inspired action, which revolved around a set of key priority themes on recognition and remembrance; access to justice; institutional support; support to victims and survivors of terrorism with specific vulnerabilities and needs (including children and cross-border victims); defending the privacy of victims and survivors in the aftermath of an attack; and recognizing the specific challenges of victims of terrorism in violent conflict contexts. These topics were explored across different thematic plenary, panel discussions and side events, and are summarized below.

The Global Congress consisted of a high-level opening, four panel sessions, two plenary sessions, and a closing ceremony dedicated to the memory of all victims and survivors of terrorism across the world.² In addition, side events were held across relevant thematic areas explored by the Global Congress itself.

C. High-Level Opening

The Global Congress of Victims of Terrorism opened with a collective “Call to Action” by ten victims and survivors of terrorism from across the world to seek national and international support on the rights and needs of all victims of terrorism. Victims and survivors of terrorism called for all participants to the Global Congress to maintain momentum and progress on victims’ issues, whilst recognising that more needs to be done and that counter-terrorism and preventing and countering violent extremism efforts must remain victim-centric.

The Call to Action was followed by introductory remarks from the Under-Secretary-General of the UNOCT, a keynote address from the Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations and opening remarks from the President of the General Assembly of the United Nations. Ministerial-level speakers from 12 States delivered statements, namely: Belgium, Cuba, France, Hungary, New Zealand, Pakistan, Palestine, Portugal, Sudan, Syria, Uganda and the United States, and were joined by other high-level speakers from China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Ukraine. This was followed by remarks from Parliamentarians from the African Parliamentary Union, the Arab Parliament, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the German Federal Government Commissioner for Persons Affected by Terrorist and Extremist Attacks. All speakers acknowledged the devastating impact of terrorism and expressed their commitment to increasing international solidarity, recognition and support to victims of terrorism.

*“I would like to send a specific message to the victims themselves. Your voices matter. We will continue to listen to you and to tell you that you are not alone. Sharing your testimony can bring up painful memories, but it helps to raise awareness of the impact of terrorism and our duty to eradicate it. We learn from you, draw inspiration, and strengthen our resolve to tackle the root causes of terrorism and prevent future attacks. This Congress is a reaffirmation of our commitment to action.” -- Ms. **Amina J. Mohammed, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations***

The high-level opening concluded with interventions from Iraq and Spain in their capacity as co-Chairs of the Group of Friends of Victims of Terrorism. Speakers underscored the urgent need for collective action and national mechanisms to protect the rights of victims and survivors of terrorism, and emphasized the particular importance of commemoration, psychological support, and access to justice for victims and

² Please see the online [Programme](#) for the full list of panel and plenary sessions. This report seeks to summarize and highlight key issues based on the discussions of the Global Congress. As many of the discussions were cross-cutting in their nature, this Highlight report consolidates discussions of the Global Congress along five thematic areas that reflect the discussions from the panel discussions and plenary sessions.

survivors worldwide. The Manchester Survivor’s Choir, consisting of victims from the Manchester Arena attack perpetrated in 2017, closed the opening session.

D. Access to justice for victims of terrorism

Participants reaffirmed that **respecting victims’ legal rights and their access to justice is integral state responsibilities, as well as important steps in the healing process for many victims and survivors.** Discussions on the theme of access to justice focused on aspects such as the ability of victims of terrorism to observe — and more importantly, to attend and participate - in trials as a fundamental and foundational right. The ability to participate in justice responses to terrorism is restorative for victims and survivors and is an important element of reparations. The right to timely access to information about the trial and the means to meaningfully participate in it are critical aspects of victims and survivors’ access to justice.

In parallel, **the legal recognition of victims of terrorism as such is a crucial first step to accessing justice,** as well as psychosocial support, protection from physical and psychological threats, and respect for privacy, particularly by the media. In some cases, this would mean balancing the rights and needs of victims of terrorism, who might otherwise be prevented from receiving information about a trial or attending hearings at counter-terrorism trials. In several countries, terrorism cases may be heard by a military court, which can also be difficult to access for victims.

“Despite some progress, we still see much more focus on alleged perpetrators and the fight against terrorism than on victims and their families... As rights holders and agents of change, victims of terrorism must be both the central subject and active partners of any process or measure involving or affecting them.” -- Ms. Ilze Brands Kehris, Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights, United Nations

Mr. Drissa Traoré, Senior Consultant on the Sahel and Projects Coordinator, International Federation for Human Rights in Mali, highlighted the unique challenges faced by the Sahel region, particularly Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, due to recurrent terrorist attacks and evolving tactics of armed groups, which result in severe human rights violations, including sexual violence at the hands of terrorists. Unlike other regions where terrorist activities may be sporadic, in the Sahel, such incidents are a daily and systemic occurrence, demanding a context-specific and multifaceted response. Mr. Traoré stressed the need for a holistic approach to support victims and survivors of terrorism, who often come from impoverished rural areas and lack resources to seek justice and reparations. Other barriers to justice for these victims include a lack of understanding of the legal system or their rights under existing legislation, as well as practical means to travel to locations where criminal proceedings are taking place. Lack of medical and psychosocial support for victims of terrorism in the region was also raised as an aggravating factor.

Recommendations for **Member States** on improving access to justice for victims of terrorism included:

- Addressing systemic challenges such as legal status recognition of victims of terrorism and ensuring that legal practitioners and other agencies are trained in victim-centric approaches and sensitised and responsive to victims' needs.
- Investing in the legal system, ensuring state funding and sustainability to ensure justice systems are approachable, accessible, and capable of providing support to victims throughout legal proceedings.

Recommendations for **Member States, the United Nations, and civil society** on improving access to justice for victims of terrorism included:

- Providing comprehensive assistance beyond traditional legal advice. This could include psychological and medical support to victims, as well as travel and accommodation support, to ensure their safe and active participation in the justice process. Victims of terrorism also require guidance on how to navigate different justice systems, including criminal, administrative and civil cases. Stakeholders should provide tailored support to victims to ensure there are no barriers to accessing the justice system or information about cases, including for victims based overseas.

E. Coordinated support at national and international levels

Strong coordination at the national level is frequently evoked as a necessary pre-condition to provide strong support to victims and survivors of terrorism. Coordination is not only between law enforcement and other counter-terrorism bodies, but also state agencies not traditionally associated with counter-terrorism efforts, such as psychosocial services, departments providing access to justice to all state citizens, healthcare services, and civil society organizations specializing in victims' rights, among others.

A coordinated approach to supporting victims and survivors of terrorism is a way to prevent secondary victimization, particularly if institutions can share information and reduce the times that a victim is called upon, particularly when requested to retell their story multiple times to access the support they need. The highly traumatic nature of terrorist attacks creates long-term, complex needs among victims, which require special consideration due to the nature of their attack. Support in the immediate aftermath, medium-term, and long-term, therefore, should meet the needs of victims and survivors of terrorism seeking to overcome trauma and heal.

International cooperation and coordination are also integral to supporting victims of terrorism, particularly cross-border victims caught up in attacks outside of their country of origin, or victims who have become displaced across borders by acts of terrorism. Cooperation is essential between national ministries, embassies, and consulates to help cross-border victims and survivors to access the required support, as well as assistance and care in their country of origin. To promote this coordination, states should engage in proactive discussions around roles, responsibilities, and available services to foster efficient collaboration in the aftermath of an attack.

Cross-border victims of terrorism represent a microcosm of the wider swath of victims' experiences. During a dedicated panel on addressing the rights and needs of victims of terrorism with specific needs, it was repeatedly emphasized that these victims share the same core needs of all victims of terrorism, but due to increased interactions with authorities, their risk of secondary

victimisation is particularly high. Two subsets of cross-border victims of terrorism were noted: victims of singular or one-off attacks outside of their country of nationality, and victims who had become displaced across borders by acts of terrorism by non-state groups. Despite their distinct experiences, both subsets of victims are in pronounced need for enhanced international cooperation and coordination.

Ms. Nancy Valle Salazar, Member of 13Onze15: Fraternité et Vérité and a victim of terrorism, from Chile, shared her profound personal experience of losing her son in the Bataclan concert hall attack in Paris, and her struggles as a Chilean national engaging with the French justice system. She emphasized the critical need for access to information and meaningful participation in legal proceedings for foreign victims. She acknowledged the challenges posed by geographic, cultural, and language barriers, underscoring the need for external support from civil society organizations and journalists to navigate the legal processes and find a sense of closure.

Specific concerns were raised in the case of victims displaced by terrorism to ensure that any return is safe, voluntary, and dignified. In addition, solutions may be needed to allow long-term displaced victims of terrorism to receive refugee or other protection status, a specific challenge for victims of acts of indiscriminate terror, as the 1951 Refugee Convention requires applicants to demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution on grounds related to specific personal characteristics.

Recommendations **for Member States, the United Nations and civil society** on improving coordinated support to victims of terrorism included:

- Conducting country-by-country mappings of available services, agencies, and organizations, which could be used to promote Member State collaboration and serve as a resource for all victims of terrorism, including cross-border victims and survivors of terrorism.

Recommendations **for Member States** on improving coordinated support to victims of terrorism included:

- Engaging in bilateral, regional, and international discussions to reach agreement about roles and responsibilities when supporting local and international victims of terrorist attacks on their territory and attacks that affect their nationals overseas. In the case of an attack, the relevant governments should have clear processes and cooperation frameworks already in place, which can be communicated to victims in a way that helps prevent secondary victimization and promotes cross-border support.

F. The right to privacy

In media coverage following an attack, victims' right to privacy may be limited due to the public interest in the attack and subsequent media coverage. Media exposure can mobilize popular support for victims and survivors of terrorism, promoting collective solidarity after an attack and playing a positive role in recognizing victims' rights, including the right to truth and information.

However, **victims often face overwhelming attention from the public and the media, which can profoundly impact their long-term well-being.** As a result, journalists should receive training on how to report terrorist attacks. The right of victims of terrorism to choose whether and how to engage with the media, or whether and how information or images of them and their loved ones is circulated, was underscored as a crucial part of respecting victims' right to privacy. Consent, education, and ethical codes of practice are essential to prevent compounding grief and re-traumatizing individuals.

The tendency of the media to intrude on the privacy of victims, their families, and those associated with them, in the aftermath of an attack can be traumatizing. During a dedicated panel on protecting the right to privacy of victims of terrorism, victims described feeling overwhelmed by the media frenzy to find images of them and their families on social media, and by the barrage of invasive approaches faced by themselves and their families. This intrusion is a source of trauma and pain, as well as violation of their right to privacy. Respecting the freedom of victims and survivors of terrorism to choose, and to consent, to how their stories are told, is requisite to guaranteeing their right to privacy.

Ms. Vera de Benito, a freelance journalist and victim of terrorism from Spain, emphasized that responsible reporting – which respects victims' privacy and dignity – must take priority over stories which create further division and fear. Social networks must also work to prevent hate speech against victims, and ensure their platforms are not used to recruit and radicalise new followers.

Recommendations for the **United Nations and civil society** on improving the respect of victims' privacy included:

- Offering specific training to journalists on victim-centric ways to cover terrorist attacks; requesting journalists to respect a post-attack time window prior to approaching families of victims; allowing victims to select and choose the images that can be used rather than taking images from social media; and avoiding sensationalizing the words and actions of terrorist perpetrators, in favour of coverage that focuses on victims and survivors and their stories.

G. Addressing the rights of victims of terrorism with specific needs

Every victim of terrorism is different, both as an individual and in terms of the context that surrounds them. Both **individual and contextual factors can have an impact on their needs and respect for victims' rights.** For example, a female victim of terrorism who lives in a society where significant discrimination against women exists may face additional barriers to accessing support when compared to her male counterparts. Willingness to address the specific needs of female victims, for instance through the construction of secure accommodation for survivors of sexual violence in displacement or refugee camps, or providing access to gender-segregated health, hygiene and recreational spaces, can be linked to broader attitudes towards women and women's rights. In other contexts, a victim of terrorism who comes

from the same minority group as the alleged perpetrator of the attack may experience differential treatment or suffer from revictimization if they are perceived as “guilty by association” or as “less of a victim” by the media or in their interactions with wider society. Pre-existing prejudices and underlying discrimination can impede efforts to protect victims of terrorism, and victims and survivors must receive individualized support that considers their specific circumstances.

Terrorist attacks based on xenophobia, racism, and other forms of intolerance, or in the name of religion or belief (XRIRB) require broader multilateral attention. While not a new phenomenon, it is of increasing international concern, with some Member States suggesting that they consider this to be the fastest growing domestic security threat. As they are often members of minority communities, victims of XRIRB-motivated attacks can have additional vulnerabilities and unique needs, and frequently require additional legal protections and cultural sensitivity on the part of responding authorities and other duty bearers. Underscoring the impact of these attacks on the affected communities, particularly understanding deep-seated fears that its members are being targeted, makes it incumbent on national authorities to put special protections in place to protect those communities from facing further victimization.

Dr. Maysoon Salama, manager and co-founder of An-Nur Child Education and Care and a victim of terrorism whose son was killed in the 2019 Al-Noor Mosque attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, told the audience of the lack of culturally responsive counselors in the aftermath of her attack. She spoke of the sensitivity of people in her community, especially men, to resist mental health support, and the need for counselors who could overcome those sensitivities to deliver the much-needed trauma-informed psychosocial services. Because of the prevalence of refugees among the victims of the Christchurch attack, who already arrived in New Zealand having experienced considerable amounts of trauma in their home countries, this need was particularly acute. She explained how islamophobia in her community exacerbates a loss of confidence in the system, particularly by youth, and causes underlying psychological stress that is detrimental to the health of the community overall.

It was also acknowledged that **much remains to be done to protect child victims of terrorism.** Children and youth who are affected by terrorism perceive violence and death differently than adults and require focused, specialized, and individualized support to address their unique needs in the short, medium, and long term. In conflict settings, international human rights and humanitarian law is unambiguous about the treatment of children associated with armed groups: **even where children are allegedly involved in criminal or terrorism-related acts, including association with terrorist groups, they should be considered and treated primarily as victims** and entitled to security, protection and special assistance, in line with the Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups.

In practice, however, better support is needed, particularly for those who are recruited into terrorist groups, the children of foreign terrorist fighters, and child victim returnees. The proper reintegration of child victims is important and challenging and can be illustrated by victims who return from abduction and who are often stigmatized, marginalised and discriminated against because of their association with terrorist groups. This is true not only for youth returnees, but also for children born in captivity, some of them born to parents who are also minors.

Mr. Zannah Mustapha founded a school in 2007 in Maiduguri – the capital of Borno State and the epicentre of the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria. His intervention emphasized the importance of changing community attitudes towards the survivors of Boko Haram, particularly towards young girls forced into marriage and motherhood, facing widowhood in their teenage years, and experiencing social exclusion from their communities. He believes that the only way to improve their situation is to provide education to the victims of Boko Haram and their communities using a children’s rights-based approach. Empowering victims through education can prevent feelings of disassociation and frustration, reducing the risk of extremism and insurgency recruitment. Trauma counselling followed by education serves as a crucial pathway towards empowerment, emphasizing a children’s rights-based approach within the whole-of-society framework.

“This is not charity, this is a call of duty... the civility of any international system would be measured against how far they support the most vulnerable, and victims of terrorism are the most vulnerable.” – H.E. Mr. Osama Abdekhalek, Permanent Representative of the Arab Republic of Egypt to the United Nations

Survivors of sexual violence at the hands of terrorist groups represent another group of victims and survivors with specific needs. In recognizing sexual violence as a deliberate tactic of terrorist groups, the international community, through Security Council and General Assembly resolutions, acknowledges the obligations of Member States to increase access to justice and reparations. The intersection between relevant international legal frameworks - including counterterrorism frameworks, international humanitarian and human rights law, and frameworks against human trafficking – is important in promoting the rights and needs of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. However, although the international community has acknowledged that sexual violence is a deliberate tactic of terrorist groups, efforts to establish a normative framework have not been translated into concrete action towards preventing, prosecuting, and punishing acts of sexual violence committed by members of terrorist groups.

The use of sexual or gender-based violence as a terror tactic has long-lasting and pernicious effects on victims and their communities, especially women and girl survivors, who tend to be the largest group of victims of this kind of violence. Survivors of sexual violence perpetrated by members of terrorist groups have an added layer of vulnerability, which often leads to stigmatization and secondary victimization, compounding challenges to speak about their experience, and refusal to seek help and access to justice.

A dedicated panel on the linkages between conflict-related sexual violence and terrorism explored the evidentiary and procedural barriers that could impact access to justice for survivors. One example of a problematic evidentiary obstacle is where there is a requirement for medical

corroboration of the plaintiff's claim, even though there may be circumstances where it is very difficult to procure such medical evidence.

In her call to action to the international community, Ms. Iman Abdullah Hamad, a survivor of terrorism from Iraq, related how she was kidnapped at the age of 13 along with around 6,500 other members of her Yazidi community, most of them women and children. Like other girls, she was subjected to serious physical and sexual violence, including sexual slavery and trafficking. She called on the international community to do more for survivors of sexual violence at the hands of terrorist groups, including coordinating at the international level to achieve justice and hold terrorist groups, such as Da'esh, accountable in international courts.

Recommendations for **Member States, the United Nations and civil society** on addressing the rights of victims and survivors of terrorism with specific needs included:

- Improving international and national tools to tackle hate speech and increase the protection of affected communities; increasing peer-to-peer support to build connections and solidarity across communities; and dedicating resources to developing curricula that educates children about the harms caused by stereotypes and prejudices.
- Adopting gender-informed approaches to victims and survivors' support.

Recommendations for **Member States** on addressing the rights of victims and survivors of terrorism with specific needs included:

- Making provisions in their legislation so that the lapse of time since the occurrence of the crime, the lack of immediate access to medical treatment, or the age of the victim – or a combination of all these factors – does not count against any type of evidentiary requirement that may be disproportionately burdensome and may make it difficult for survivors of sexual violence at the hands of terrorist groups to access justice.

H. Support for victims of terrorism in violent conflict contexts

Effective solutions to support victims and survivors of terrorism must be found for States with low institutional capacity, but high rates of violent conflict, including terrorist attacks. Many best practices on victim support come from countries with advanced judicial and rehabilitative capacity and infrastructure, but **most victims of terrorism are found in areas where State capacity is weak and the political and security environment unstable**. In these contexts, large numbers of victims and survivors of terrorism are also victims of other crimes and serious human rights violations and face long-term and repeated victimization. Support and recovery can be significantly hindered if the environments where victims are found are not stable and secure or lack basic services.

In internally displaced persons (IDP) and refugee camps, for example, there are significant fears of repeated sexual violence or abuse against survivors, making recovery difficult. In cases of abduction, forced marriage, sexual slavery, and forced conscription, victims and survivors often face significant

stigma when they return to their communities, hindering the rehabilitation process. Victims living in rural areas may not have access to state services without travelling long distances across insecure areas.

To provide meaningful, sustainable support to victims of terrorism, Member States must be able to provide national stability and strong institutional response. Examples were provided where a survivor of terrorism from Iraq, kidnapped by Da'esh and subsequently housed in a refugee camp, noted the negative impact of ongoing insecurity on her ability to recover. In this case, years of displacement and compounded trauma from sexual violence, human trafficking and slavery, as well as other serious human rights abuses and crimes, made it difficult for her to feel safe. A victim from Cameroon echoed this sentiment, explaining that after the attack they had to travel to a city to access support, only to be attacked again by a terrorist group while travelling. This victim expressed subsequent apprehension to leave the city again, due to the fear of being caught in further attacks.

Recommendations for **Member States, the United Nations and civil society** on improving support to victims of terrorism in conflict contexts included:

- Considering the basic provision of livelihoods assistance and state services as part of the promotion of the rights and safety of victims and survivors of terrorism in violent conflict contexts.
- Providing more assistance aimed at supporting victims to find stable housing, employment opportunities, and local support networks.

I. Conclusions and Outcomes

The Global Congress concluded with concrete action points, detailed in the [Chair's Summary](#), which will help chart the future of the international victims of terrorism agenda. These action points include:

1. Supporting the mandate of the Group of Friends of Victims of Terrorism
2. Developing a Handbook of Best Practices for Member States to Assist Victims of Terrorism
3. Implementing the project on the Model Legislative Provisions to Support Victims of Terrorism
4. Developing and launching the Victims of Terrorism Associations Network
5. Revitalizing the United Nations Victims of Terrorism Support Portal
6. Holding, on a rotational basis, an international conference to review progress towards protecting and promoting the rights of victims of terrorism

During the Global Congress, Spain announced that it would host an international conference in 2024 to follow up on the international community's commitments to victims and survivors of terrorism made at the Global Congress.