



UNITED NATIONS OFFICE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM

Statement by Mr. Vladimir Voronkov, Under-Secretary-General, United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism

Briefing to the EU Council Working Group on Terrorism (external aspects) – COTER 24 June 2020

Mr. Chairman,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,

I am glad to attend this COTER meeting. It has become a good tradition of cooperation between the United Nations and the European Union.

It is a pleasure to be on the same virtual podium as Mr. Gilles de Kerchove. I would also like to welcome Director Balfoort from the European External Action Service.

We last met with Gilles in February in Vienna during the Joint High-Level Regional Conference on Foreign Terrorist Fighters. I am glad that many of you were able to attend that important conference, the last one before the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way we live and work.

I hope you, your families and colleagues are safe, healthy and keeping your spirits high in these challenging times.

I would like to express my deepest sympathy and solidarity with all those who have been tragically affected by the pandemic in Europe.

The United Nations Secretary-General, Mr. Antonio Guterres, has called on the international community to work together to effectively respond to what may be the biggest global crisis since the Second World War.

Multilateralism is the only way to overcome the challenge. In this as in many other occasions, the European Union is the fundamental partner of the United Nations.

This is why, as we closely follow the impact of the pandemic on the terrorist landscape, we are focusing on strengthening our partnerships with key actors such as the EU, Member States, civil society and the 43 entities of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire to fight the virus and ensure vital humanitarian support is a unique opportunity to break the cycles of violence and desperation in which terrorism can thrive.

Terrorists are seeking to exploit local grievances, inequalities and conflicts exacerbated by COVID-19 to spread fear, hate and division and recruit new followers.

As Mr. Kerchove commented in recent months, ISIL is seeking to reassert itself and ramp up deadly attacks in Syria and Iraq while governments are distracted with tackling the virus.

I am particularly concerned that the spread of the virus and related fear will further exacerbate the already dire security, human rights and humanitarian situation in the camps and places of detention in Syria and Iraq, where suspected foreign terrorist fighters and associated women and children are being held.

I commend the recent EU Council Conclusions which reiterated that the EU stands ready to further assist priority partner countries most impacted by the returnee's phenomenon.

EU support will be vital to help them bring perpetrators to justice, address radicalization leading to violent extremism and terrorism in prisons, and support rehabilitation and reintegration activities, including of family members, as well as specialized services for returning children.

I appreciate the support from Mr. De Kerchove and the positive signals received from my friend, Ms. Hilde Hardeman, to explore a partnership with my Office and UNICEF on these issues in Central Asia. From our side, we are in the eve of the launch of a new global program on screening, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration of FTFs and members of their families.

This is a top priority for the Secretary-General and for Global Counter-Terrorism Compact entities.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This meeting is a timely opportunity to develop a common understanding on the implications of the pandemic on counter-terrorism efforts.

I know that Mr. de Kerchove will provide valuable insights during his intervention on the new and emerging threats.

I would like to focus my briefing on two key areas: the postponement of the Second UN Counter-Terrorism Week; and key updates on the UN-EU partnership and capacity building efforts.

Following the decision of the General Assembly to postpone its seventh review of the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy to no later than June 2021, we have decided to postpone the remainder of the Second Counter-Terrorism Week, including the first Global Congress of Victims of Terrorism and the Second High-Level Conference of Heads of Counter-Terrorism Agencies of Member States.

We will decide a new date for the Second Counter-Terrorism Week next year in close consultation with Member States.

To maintain momentum, I have decided to organize a scaled-down, virtual counter-terrorism week from 6 to 10 July this year, focused on the “Strategic and Practical Challenges of Countering Terrorism in a Global Pandemic Environment”.

This virtual week will be an opportunity to listen to the counter-terrorism priorities of UN Member States in the COVID-19 environment.

It will be opened by the Secretary-General, and will bring together Member States, Counter-Terrorism Compact entities, civil society, academia and private sector experts. Respect for human rights and rule of law in countering terrorism and PVE in COVID-19 environment will be a topical issue for the discussion.

I hope that High Representative and Vice-President Josep Borrell will be able to participate in the opening session and that Mr. de Kerchove will provide his insights at the closing session.

Now I would like to update you on progress in UN-EU counter-terrorism cooperation.

The recent Council Conclusions on external aspects of counter-terrorism include an important recognition of the strategic partnership between the UN and the EU.

The UN-EU Framework on Counter-Terrorism, adopted in April last year for a two year period, provides the strategic foundation for our collaborative work around the world across all four pillars of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.

I would like to highlight some specific areas of progress in our partnership and our joint delivery of capacity building assistance, including to promote adherence to the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism (ICSANT) and for prevention of violent extremism in Asia through the STRIVE programme.

With EU support, we are also planning how to assist Sudan’s counter-terrorism efforts.

Last week, we celebrated the first anniversary of the UN Countering Terrorist Travel Programme led by my Office, in partnership with CTED, UNODC, OICT, ICAO, and INTERPOL.

The EU is providing critical support to this flagship initiative, for which I am very grateful.

To date, 36 Member States are formally participating in the programme and 40 more have expressed interest in benefitting once capacity allows.

We are also exploring possible collaboration with the International Maritime Organization to add a maritime component to the programme.

Supporting Victims of Terrorism remains a top priority and we must keep up the strong momentum in this area.

Working together with the Group of Friends of victims of terrorism in the United Nations, we will ensure that the topic remains high on the agenda, including during the virtual counter-terrorism week next month.

I am determined to establish more practical cooperation with the EU on this issue, including by linking the EU Centre of Expertise for Victims of Terrorism to the UN Victims Portal to provide a unique platform for victims.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Every crisis brings opportunities. While we continue to understand and mitigate the negative impacts of COVID-19, we must also seize the opportunity provided by the pandemic to review, adapt and strengthen our counter-terrorism work.

For example, in recent weeks, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre organized innovative online trainings for Kazakhstan's penitentiary system on violent extremist prisoners to keep delivering on EU-funded activities.

I would like to sincerely thank the EU for the constant support and flexibility in these difficult times, which enables us to continue our work, and to EU Member States that are financially contributing to my Office.

I am committed to increasing UNOCT's footprint in Africa, including by establishing a regional programme office in Nairobi, to enhance our capacity building assistance to Member States.

The recent launch of the International Coalition for the Sahel was an important development and my Office stands ready to support Member States' efforts in the region, upon their request.

I am grateful for the German government's recent support on digital forensics in Burkina Faso.

My Office has also been active in assisting strategic communications in East Africa, in cooperation with IGAD and UNESCO.

The Secretary-General has underlined challenges facing Mozambique and UNOCT is engaged in discussions on possible support to the country.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to conclude by stressing the importance of remaining vigilant to the continued threat of terrorism in these uncertain times.

We must maintain our unity and solidarity and continue to be guided by all four pillars of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy to build inclusive and resilient societies that can respond to the stresses and strains caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

I look forward to the next UN-EU Leader's Dialogue on Counter-Terrorism with the participation of UN Global Compact Entities.

As Croatia concludes its Presidency, I would like to sincerely thank the Croatian Colleagues for their excellent cooperation. I look forward to working closely with Germany over the next six months, and to the continued partnership with all EU Member States.

Thank you for your attention.