



UNITED NATIONS OFFICE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM

Press release

Regional Conference in Vienna calls on countries to address challenges posed by foreign terrorist fighters in respect of international law

VIENNA, 12 February 2020 – A two-day high-level regional counter-terrorism conference jointly organized by the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), the OSCE, and Switzerland, in co-operation with Albania’s OSCE Chairmanship concluded today in Vienna.

More than 438 representatives from more than 50 Member States, UN entities, international and regional organizations, as well as 38 civil society organizations discussed different approaches to address the challenges posed by foreign terrorist fighters returning from Iraq, Syria and other conflict areas, as well as the particularly complex situation of women and children associated with those fighters.

Mr. Vladimir Voronkov, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) delivered his conclusions in the presence of Thomas Greminger, OSCE Secretary General and Wolfgang Amadeus Brühlhart, the Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the OSCE, the UN and other International Organizations in Vienna.

Mr. Voronkov thanked the Government of Switzerland and the OSCE for co-organizing the conference in cooperation with the Albanian OSCE Chairmanship. He also praised those who contributed to the success of this landmark conference through their leadership, participation and financial contributions.

The Under-Secretary-General welcomed the active engagement of the participating civil society organizations and the inputs that they provided following the one-day civil society workshop organized prior to the conference on 10 February. “The conference emphasized the need to engage proactively with civil society organizations in the development and implementation of strategies to address the challenges associated with foreign terrorist fighters and their family members. Civil society actors are seen as credible and trusted members of their communities and are therefore particularly well-placed to engage with them,” he said.

The summary conclusions also stressed the need to further strengthen international, regional and bilateral counter-terrorism cooperation based on international law and reaffirms the centrality of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy calling for the balanced implementation of its four (4) pillars. Mr. Voronkov reiterated the readiness of the United Nations and UNOCT, in particular to continue to facilitate international counter-terrorism cooperation within its given mandate, together with its international and regional partners such as the OSCE, the European

Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, INTERPOL, and the Global Counterterrorism Forum.

“Participants stressed the urgency for Member States to address the needs of children associated with terrorist groups through gender- and age- sensitive programmes,” said Mr. Voronkov. As thousands of children remain trapped in Syria and Iraq, they face a multitude of challenges, including rejection and life-long stigmatization. “Member States have the primary responsibility to address the plight of their nationals, including children trapped in conflict zones. Children should always be seen as victims and efforts to address their plight should be based on the best interest of the child,” he urged, referring to the Key Principles for the UN system, for the protection, repatriation, prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration of women and children with links to United Nations listed terrorist groups issued by the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres in April 2019.

Underscoring the need to further enhance Member States’ capacities to prevent, detect and disrupt the travel of foreign terrorist fighters in accordance with international law, the conference stressed the need to train border and law enforcement officials. Participants recalled that the use of tools and processes to collect, store and share information should comply with international human rights standards, including the right to privacy and non-discrimination.

Mr. Voronkov said that the discussions highlighted the complex evidentiary and jurisdictional challenges faced by Member States to bring ISIL (Daesh) members and their affiliates, including returning foreign terrorist fighters to justice. While the collection, handling, sharing and use of so-called “battlefield evidence” is increasingly relevant in such cases, “these tasks should be performed carefully and conducted in full compliance with international human rights law and international humanitarian law, where applicable”.

Conference participants underscored the need to address the risks of terrorist radicalization and recruitment in prisons and to reduce the risk of recidivism of former foreign terrorist fighters through measures to rehabilitate and reintegrate them into society. They also highlighted the misuse of information and communication technologies for terrorism purposes as a complex challenge requiring a sophisticated response combining precise criminalization and law enforcement, technological awareness and innovation as well as public-private partnerships. Furthermore, a number of speakers also warned against the increase threat of right-wing terrorism among other emerging challenges.

Participants also called for a gender-sensitive approach throughout the lifecycle of terrorist radicalization acknowledging that women sometimes have a combination of roles related to terrorist acts, including as facilitators, supporters and perpetrators, but also as victims of violence and other human rights abuses. They further stressed the need to engage and partner with youth including by pursuing innovative ideas, such as the use of video games and partnership with the entertainment industry.

Finally, Mr. Voronkov recalled that elements of summary conclusions will feed into the Second UN High-level Conference of Heads of Counter-Terrorism Agencies of Member States, to be held in New York in July 2020 and which will include the first congress dedicated to victims of terrorism. He highlighted a number of existing initiatives and reiterated to readiness of the United Nations to support Member States through all-of-UN approaches in collaboration with partners, such as OSCE civil society organizations and the private sector to address the particularly challenging issues related to foreign terrorist fighters and their families.

Background

The conference is one in a series of regional conferences announced by the UN Secretary-General at the UN's 2018 High-level Conference of Heads of Counter-Terrorism Agencies in New York. It is also part of a broader initiative to give new impetus to multilateral co-operation in addressing the evolving threat of terrorism and violent extremism in accordance with international law and human rights. The outcomes of these regional conferences will feed into the Second UN High-level Conference of Heads of Counter-Terrorism Agencies of Member States, to be held in New York in July 2020.

The conference will include panels on key challenges such as: (i) Responses to incitement, recruitment for and facilitation of foreign terrorist fighter activities; (ii) Preventing the travel of foreign terrorist fighters; (iii) Gathering and sharing of evidence; (iv) Prosecution of foreign terrorist fighters; and (v) Repatriation, rehabilitation and reintegration.

For more information, visit: www.un.org/counterterrorism/vienna

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