



Statement by Mr. Vladimir Voronkov
Under-Secretary-General
United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) and
Executive Director, United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT)

UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL
OPEN ARRIA FORMULA MEETING

CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT. REPATRIATION OF CHILDREN FROM CONFLICT
ZONES: FROM CAMPS TO HOMES. CALL FOR ACTION.

29 January 2021

Excellencies,

Distinguished participants,

I would like to commend the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation and the Permanent Mission of Kazakhstan for their initiative to convene an open Arria Formula meeting on the urgent and crucial issue on repatriation from conflict zones of foreign children with alleged family ties to terrorist groups.

I am grateful for the opportunity to address you alongside with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Ms. Virginia Gamba – a dear colleague and fellow member of the Secretary-General’s Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact.

We are discussing today a protracted, seemingly intractable issue.

But the premise that should guide us is simple: We need to get children out of harm’s way and into a safe home where their community - their country – can care for them.

And children in camps in north eastern Syria, particularly Al-Hol, are in harm's way, vulnerable to the predations of ISIL enforcers and at risk of radicalization within the camp, and deprived of the basic support that children need.

Their fate should not be contingent on political will.

Ensuring their well-being is an obligation enshrined in international law and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. And beyond the law, it is both a security and a moral imperative.

The horrific situation of the children in Al-Hol is one of the most pressing issues in the world today, and our lack of response will be viewed as a failure by generations to come if we do not address it quickly, particularly in light of the worsening conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first efforts to repatriate children from Al-Hol date back to 2017.

Four years later, 27,000 remain stranded, abandoned to their fate, left to the predations of ISIL.

Excellencies,

Member States that have repatriated their citizens have demonstrated: where there is will, there is a way.

Children who have been rescued from danger and harm in the camps, are now living safely and peacefully with family members.

A number of countries, including the conveners of this meeting, –have collectively repatriated nearly 1000 children and their family members. These countries offer a variety of experiences from which we can learn.

These experiences are being compiled, and the United Nations, including my Office, is supporting Member States to learn from them.

And what we see thus far is that fears of security risks have been unfounded.

We see that a comprehensive approach, based on human rights and responsive to gender and age, mobilizing the whole society, is the best answer.

Member States, the United Nations, especially UNICEF, and child protection NGOs have decades of practice supporting children who have experienced the worst forms of violence to successfully recover and reintegrate into their communities.

Time and time again, history has shown that children are resilient. When provided holistic, community-based, reintegration support, they can recover from experiences of violence and contribute to society.

And there is a strong and clear body of international law and standards to guide policies and programmes to address the situation of these children:

They must be treated primarily as victims.

Children under 14 years old should not be detained or prosecuted. Every effort should be made to ensure children are not kept in institutions but allowed to reintegrate with family members within their communities.

The best interests of the child should be the overarching consideration, to privilege repatriating families together, supporting family tracing, contact and reunification.

Excellencies,

My Office, as the lead entity for counter-terrorism coordination in the United Nations system, has prioritized the plight of these children in partnership with our humanitarian and human rights partners, recognizing that the response needed is primarily protection.

Together with UNICEF, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre in my Office has convened 13 other United Nations entities to develop a Global Framework for All-of-UN Support to Member States on Individuals Returned from Syria and Iraq – including children.

The Global Framework ensures coordinated and human-rights based assistance, working across the humanitarian/protection and security/accountability imperatives, in response to requests from national governments which have repatriated, or are committed to repatriating, their nationals from camps in north-eastern Syria and Iraq, including Al-Hol.

There are children from 60 countries in the camps who are the responsibility of their Member States, not of the Syrian Arab Republic or the non-state authorities who are currently holding them.

The Syrian people should not be made responsible for these children.

I urge all Member States to fulfill their responsibilities, and to ensure the protection and swift, voluntary repatriation of their children.

The United Nations systems stands ready to support you.

I thank you for your attention.