



UNITED NATIONS OFFICE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM

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

Twelfth “Report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da’esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering the threat”

10 February 2021, 10 AM

Mister President,

Excellencies, Dear Colleagues,

Allow me to begin by expressing my sincere condolences to the governments and people of Afghanistan, Austria, France, Iraq, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, and all other Member States which have recently suffered terrorist attacks.

My heartfelt thoughts and sympathy go to the survivors and families of the victims.

I thank the Security Council for the opportunity to present the twelfth report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL to international peace and security, and the range of United Nations efforts in support of Member States in countering this threat, as mandated by Security Council resolution 2368 (2017).

I am pleased that Assistant Secretary-General Coninx, Executive Director of the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, is joining me to present this report, which our offices prepared jointly with the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, led by Mr. Edmund Fitton-Brown.

Mister President,

The threat posed by ISIL to international peace and security is on the rise again.

It is crucial that Member States remain focused and united to counter it, despite the strains and competing priorities brought by the COVID-19 pandemic.

While ISIL has not developed a purposeful strategy to exploit the pandemic, its efforts to regroup and to reinvigorate its activities gained further momentum in the second half of 2020.

Its core in Iraq and Syria and its affiliates in other conflict zones have continued to take advantage of the disruption caused by the virus to step up their operations, with a number of high-profile attacks.

ISIL fighters have maintained the ability to move and operate, including across unprotected borders.

As ISIL's regional affiliates entrench themselves and gain in autonomy and strength, they could provide the group new capabilities and options to conduct external operations.

Member States warn that ISIL could regain the capacity to orchestrate attacks in different parts of the world in the course of 2021.

Outside conflict zones, the risk of exposure to ISIL propaganda and incitement has continued to grow as people – especially young – spend more time at home and online.

This could lead to a sudden rash of attacks in some countries, when COVID-19-related movement restrictions ease.

Meanwhile, the socio-economic toll and political fallout of the pandemic could further aggravate the longer-term threat posed by ISIL and other terrorist groups by widening the pool of individuals receptive to radicalization and recruitment.

Madame President,

ISIL's primary focus remains resurgence in Iraq and Syria, where the international community continues to grapple with the legacies of the group's so-called 'caliphate'.

Some 10,000 ISIL fighters, including foreign terrorist fighters in the low thousands, remain active in the region, the majority of them in Iraq, pursuing a protracted insurgency.

These sizable remnants are assessed to pose a major, long-term and global threat. They are organized in small cells hiding in desert and rural areas and moving across the border between the two countries, waging attacks.

More tragically, the international community has made hardly any progress in addressing the situation of the thousands of individuals, mostly women and children, suspected of having links with ISIL and held in precarious conditions in the region.

The already dire humanitarian and security situation in the detention facilities and displacement camps is deteriorating even further, especially in Al-Hol camp.

The most basic of human rights are undermined. Many instances of terrorist radicalization, fund-raising, training and incitement have been reported.

Nearly two years after the territorial defeat of ISIL, some twenty-seven thousand five hundred foreign children are still in harm's way in the camps in northeast Syria, including about 8,000 children from some 60 countries other than Iraq. 90 per cent of them are under 12 years of age.

The significant challenges faced by Member States in ensuring the protection of vulnerable individuals, accountability for terrorist crimes, and security, are not becoming any less urgent or complex with time. Quite the contrary.

These challenges and risks are growing more serious with neglect and could have a long-term impact not just in the region but globally.

In October last year, ISIL reiterated that orchestrating jailbreaks and assisting escapees was a priority. The group is also aware of the propaganda value of any potential outbreak of COVID-19 and associated unrest in holding facilities.

Beyond the humanitarian urgency, the moral imperative and the legal obligations, taking action is a strategic security imperative.

So, I would like to reiterate the Secretary-General's call upon Member States for the voluntary repatriation of adults and children stranded in Iraq and Syria, with the consent of relevant governments and in line with international law.

The efforts of several Member States in this regard are commendable, especially Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation, and Uzbekistan which have repatriated hundreds of affected children from northeast Syria.

A number of other states, especially European countries, have conducted fewer repatriations. I hope they will actively step up their efforts.

I encourage them all to share data with the United Nations and their experience with other Member States, so that collectively we resolve this untenable situation.

Mister President,

Over the past six months, ISIL was particularly active in a number of African states affected by conflict.

Its affiliates in West Africa conducted numerous attacks against the military and civilians at the end of 2020 in the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, and in the Lake Chad Basin, demonstrating determination and adaptability.

The Islamic State Central Africa Province is emerging as a strong regional affiliate, employing sophisticated tactics and capabilities, emboldened by recent operational successes in Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In Europe, a string of attacks in France, Germany, Austria and Switzerland, partly inspired by ISIL, provided a stark reminder of the diffuse threat from homegrown terrorist attacks by lone actors.

The attacks also revived debates in Europe on how to address terrorist radicalization in prisons, ensure effective rehabilitation and reintegration programmes and monitoring of terrorist offenders upon release from prison.

Turning to Asia, ISIL's affiliate in Afghanistan is assessed to still have between one thousand and two thousand and two hundred fighters spread across several provinces. Despite degraded military capabilities, it has continued to exploit difficulties in the Afghan peace process, and claimed a number of high-profile attacks.

ISIL also remains resilient in South-East Asia, with a number of factions. The involvement of women in suicide bombings has continued, with two such attacks in the Philippines in August 2020.

Mister President,

Assistant Secretary-General Coninx will brief you on the continued support provided by the United Nations system to Member States in addressing the threat posed by ISIL during the COVID-19 pandemic.

My Office has continued to innovate and to work closely with all our partners under the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact, to ensure business continuity, expanding our support toolbox.

I would like to briefly highlight a few key examples:

First, in August 2020, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre in my Office launched a new Global Framework to coordinate with UNICEF the provision of support from 15 United Nations entities to requesting Member States with regard to individuals returned from or remaining in northeast Syria and Iraq.

United Nations entities have already developed a number of field-driven project proposals to implement the Global Framework in Central Asia and Iraq, which recent contributions from donor States are making possible.

In September 2020, the Centre also launched a Global Programme on Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration, in close cooperation with CTED and UNODC, under which we have developed projects to assist Indonesia, Burkina Faso and Lake Chad Basin states. If so requested, we are also ready to support Mozambique in this area.

These efforts fully conform to the requirements of relevant Security Council resolutions, the Madrid Guiding Principles on foreign terrorist fighters and the related addendum.

Second, we made significant progress in the implementation of the United Nations Countering Terrorist Travel Programme led by my Office to support Member States in implementing Security Council resolutions 2178 (2014), 2396 (2017), and 2482 (2019).

The Programme used an online assessment methodology developed with CTED to conduct virtual deep-dive assessments to Botswana, Djibouti, The Gambia, The Maldives and Sierra Leone. We also delivered the programme's first two online training courses, in October 2020 for Botswana, and in January 2021 for Sierra Leone.

Third, we pushed ahead with the implementation of the Global Capacity-Building Programme on Countering Terrorism Financing launched by the Centre in June last year, in response to Security Council resolutions 2462 (2019) and 2482 (2019).

Virtual training workshops on protecting the non-profit sector from terrorist misuse were successfully organized for Bahrain and Tajikistan.

And fourth, last month we launched a new Global Programme on Countering Terrorist Threats against Vulnerable Targets, including from Unmanned Aerial Systems, with our partners from CTED, INTERPOL, UNICRI and the Alliance of Civilizations. This responds to Security Council resolution 2341 (2017).

The Programme will assist beneficiary Member States in the development of national strategies and action plans to protect vulnerable targets and provide operational training and mentoring services to support their implementation.

Mister President,

In this year of milestones, including the 20th anniversary of Security Council resolution 1373 (2001), the time could not be more relevant for Member States to recommit themselves to multilateral action against terrorism, under the auspices of the United Nations.

The Security Council has already led the way. The Presidential Statement of 12 January stresses the need “to further strengthen the unified and coordinated international response” to the scourge of terrorism.

We must defeat ISIL in the cyberspace.

We must be prepared to disrupt new attacks by ISIL in different parts of the world.

We must tackle the threat posed by its regional affiliates, especially in Africa.

And we must urgently solve the protracted issue of ISIL members, and especially associated women and children, stranded in Syria and Iraq, lest our failure enables the group’s resurgence.

The United Nations system, working through the Global Counter-Terrorism Coordination Compact, will continue to stand by Member States as they rise to these challenges.

Thank you, Mister President.