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UN Global Congress of Victims of Terrorism

Break-out session 7A:

Safe participation of victims of terrorism in criminal justice processes

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Both at the moment of the crisis as in the aftermath of the terrorist attack, reaching out to victims is of utmost importance. For this, coordination is key. Drawing on the lessons from the terrorist attacks of 2016, Belgium has created a One Stop Office for victims of terrorist attacks and major disasters, which will play the role of a national and international contact point, housed in the Division for Victims of the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office. This one stop office is the cooperation hub between all the services involved to assist victims at the national level or at the federated level, Belgium being a federal State, be it for financial compensation, psycho-social care or judicial victim support.

As far as the criminal justice processes are concerned, let me share with you four practices put in place to better involve the victims, in the wake of the 2016 terrorist attacks in Brussels:

- First: the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office has taken the initiative to assign its Division for Victims to organise meetings between families of the deceased and the pathologists and the Disaster Victim Identification Team of the Federal Police. These meetings were an opportunity for the relatives to ask specific questions to pathologists who performed the autopsies on the circumstances and cause of death of their relatives. For the victims not residing in Belgium, similar exchanges were organised via Skype, with the help of the local police services and the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office and within the limits of linguistic possibilities.
- Second, as it might take years before a next of kin and victims get access to the case file, information was shared with them by the investigation judge, the police officers and the experts involved in the case during two information sessions. These were held behind closed doors and strictly for the victims being civil party/plaintiff in the Belgian procedure. The Federal Public Prosecutor's Office and the relevant services involved to assist victims, which I mentioned above, act now as intermediaries between the victims and the various judicial bodies. They relay the victims' questions and concerns and are also present alongside the victims at all stages of the judicial procedure and will therefore play a key role in the trial of the Brussels terrorists attacks of 22 March 2016, which will start next week. Despite the very important costs that it entails, a translation of the most relevant documents of the judicial inquiry on these attacks was done into several languages, based on the languages spoken by the majority of foreign victims (e.g. Spanish, Italian, Polish etc..). The houses of justice – which are services from the federated entities called “The Communities”, have a particularly active role with the judicial authorities which is to inform, assist and accompany victims throughout the judicial procedure, both in Belgium

and abroad. The intervention is free of charge and these services are attached to the judicial districts of the country.

- Third. Following a specific demand by the victims, a website was launched dedicated to Belgian victims of terrorist attacks which occur abroad (<https://www.attentatsetranger.be/> www.aanslagenbuitenland.be). This website contains also useful information for other categories of victims. This website was elaborated in close cooperation with victims of terrorist acts and will be guiding the elaboration of the main website of One Stop Office.
- Four and lastly. In terms of financial support, I want to mention that the Belgian law of 2019 provides for an “almost immediate” financial assistance, whatever the nationality of the victim, but on a subsidiary basis (meaning: it is only be provided by the Belgian State when there is no other means of compensation or financial support). This financial support can be used to support victims during experts examinations of insurance companies and during the reconstruction of the facts.
