

2021 United Nations Counter-Terrorism Week

Side event

“Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism, and countering violent extremism”

Thursday, 25 June 2021, 12.30–2.00 p.m. EDT

Statement of

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Executive Director, CTED**

Thank you Mr. Chair.

Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

It is a great pleasure to welcome you all to today’s side event on the “Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism, and countering violent extremism.”

I particularly wish to welcome our speakers, each of whom is a valued member of CTED’s Global Research Network, a unique partnership that provides CTED with access to the latest research on key trends and challenges.

We are now a year-and-a-half into the COVID-19 crisis.

Despite the welcome — and remarkable — progress achieved in the development and roll-out of vaccines, the pandemic continues to impact all States, including in relation to their counter-terrorism and CVE efforts.

Today’s event thus offers a timely and welcome opportunity to discuss some of the current challenges and future implications with leading experts.

Before we do so, however, I want to briefly share CTED's own analysis of the impacts of the pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism and CVE.

We have published three reports on this vital topic over the past year, based on our engagement with all our partners (particularly Member States).

Our latest report was published just last week.

I would like to begin by looking at the pandemic's impact on terrorist and violent-extremist activity.

Stringent border-control measures and restrictions have curtailed terrorist movements and activities, reducing the number of terror attacks carried out in non-conflict areas.

However, we have also seen evidence of terrorists and violent extremists seeking to exploit the social restrictions and political instability resulting from the pandemic.

Terrorist groups have integrated COVID-19 into their propaganda and promoted disinformation and conspiracy theories, both online and offline.

And, in several regions, violent anti-lockdown protests have been held, including by vocal, organized groups advocating anti-Government and anti-establishment ideologies.

The protestors have included extreme right-wing (or racially and ethnically motivated) terrorists and violent extremists.

In conflict-affected States, pre-existing trends of significant terrorist violence have continued.

And we have also seen evidence of terrorist groups in such regions seeking to cultivate authority and legitimacy through charity, the provision of food or monetary resources, and other support.

And of course, another key trend for so many of us has been the shift to spending a great deal of our time online.

This major shift from the physical to the virtual space has been accompanied by an increase in the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories online.

These messages have often targeted vulnerable communities and minority groups seeking to exacerbate or exploit pre-existing socio-economic tensions.

Large technology companies have taken further steps to prevent the dissemination of disinformation and violent extremist rhetoric through their platforms.

However, there is a risk that such restrictions may drive terrorists to smaller platforms or the dark web, potentially making it more difficult to detect and monitor their online activity.

This global shift online has also impacted financial behaviours, as reflected in the increased use of remote transactions that make it difficult for financial institutions to conduct customer due diligence and detect potential financial anomalies.

If this trend continues, States may need to develop better tools and techniques, particularly in relation to the abuse of new payment technologies for terrorism-financing purposes.

Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

CTED's most recent analysis also explored the impacts of COVID-19 restrictions on humanitarian access and outreach in several regions.

Some of the affected communities include camps for refugees and internally displaced persons, as well as the detention camps in Iraq and Syria housing ISIL-associated women and children.

The already unsustainable conditions in those camps are worsening, leaving these populations vulnerable to a growing risk of disease, violence (including sexual and gender-based violence), and radicalization to violence.

It is vital that humanitarian action be unimpeded and safeguarded.

Pandemic-related restrictions should contain provisions to ensure that humanitarian and health care workers are able to reach populations in need.

Human rights also featured heavily in our latest report, which was based in part on a survey of CTED's partners.

Seventy-eight per cent of respondents stated that COVID-19 restrictions had created human rights challenges in their region.

Many States have also implemented policies and emergency measures that have been criticized for potential human rights abuses.

Securitized responses, including arrests or detentions using COVID-19 measures, can create fear among vulnerable populations, as well as among human rights defenders and civil society representatives.

These measures have also contributed to a further shrinking of civic space and curtailed freedoms of movement, assembly and speech, often impacting the work of civil society organizations.

They have also impeded the vital work of CVE programmes that involve engagement with communities, youth, women and marginalized groups.

CTED's analysis also notes the gendered impacts of the pandemic, which threaten the hard-won progress of previous years.

Globally, women are facing a greater care burden and greater economic insecurity.

Violence against women has also increased at an alarming rate during the pandemic, both online and offline.

And in some conflict areas, the security situation and disruptions to the delivery of humanitarian aid have had a disproportionately high impact on women and girls.

It is vital that Member States integrate gender considerations into all current policies against COVID-19, as well as into all post-pandemic recovery efforts.

Our latest report also considers the potential long-term impacts of the pandemic.

Of course, one critical challenge will be — and already has proven to be — the detrimental impacts on the global economy.

Economic downturns exacerbate poverty and inequalities and can potentially increase grievances that may fuel radicalization to violence.

Many Member states that face significant terrorist threats also experience fragile socio-political conditions and may face further deterioration and challenges as the economic impacts of the pandemic continue to be felt.

Varying levels of recovery across States can also exacerbate inequalities and grievances, leading to competition between States and terrorist groups.

CTED's analysis has also found that States have already — and justifiably — diverted counter-terrorism resources to aid their pandemic response.

However, this has had the effect of reducing or halting peacebuilding and development interventions relevant to counter-terrorism.

Concerns have also been raised regarding delayed or limited implementation of gender and CVE programmes, owing to resource reallocation.

If these trends continue, and related national or local capacities continue to be reduced, there is a risk that we may lose some of our hard-won counter-terrorism gains.

Many of the States most impacted by terrorism already faced resource and capacity challenges prior to the pandemic.

These States need continued bilateral and multilateral support to effectively combat terrorism and violent extremism.

Excellencies, distinguished delegates,

The pandemic has clearly presented the counter-terrorism community with many obstacles.

The only way to overcome those obstacles is through strong cooperation at the local, national, regional and international levels.

As we all move towards the “next normal”, it is essential that this cooperation continue to include close engagement with a broad range of partners, including women, academia, civil society and the private sector.

We must also continue to develop evidence-based policies in order to ensure an inclusive recovery that leaves no one behind.

I look forward to a fruitful discussion.

Thank you.