**Side Event: *“The rehabilitation and reintegration of women and children victims of sexual violence and other abuses in the context of violent extremism: a case study on women and children affected by Boko Haram violence in Nigeria”***

Monday 13 June 2016, 13:00 – 15:00

Geneva, Palais des Nations, Conference Room XXV

**Background**

This side event was convened by the Special Rapporteurs on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography; on contemporary forms of slavery including its causes and consequences; and on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest standard of physical and mental health; and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. It was a follow-up to the joint visit the Special Rapporteurs conducted from 18 to 22 January 2016 to Nigeria, which aimed at examining the measures taken by the Government and other actors to rehabilitate and reintegrate women and children who escaped or were liberated from Boko Haram captivity.

The objective of the side event was to discuss the recommendations contained in the report on the joint visit presented to the 32rd session of the Human Rights Council on 14 June. It specifically focussed on how rehabilitation and reintegration programmes should include the full range of policies and services that are necessary to ensure the physical, cognitive, psychological, psychosocial and spiritual recovery, and the full social reintegration, of victims thus grounding them in human rights norms and standards.

The expected outcome of the event was to promote a comprehensive, holistic and integrated approach to rehabilitate and reintegrate women and children affected by extremist violence and to raise awareness about the plight of women and children who escaped or were liberated from Boko Haram.

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**Introduction: The Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, Ms. Maud de Boer-Buquicchio**

The Special Rapporteur:

* Highlighted the holistic approach they adopted in the analysis and recommendations contained in the report following the joint mission.
* Underscored how fundamental it is to ensure that all processes of rehabilitation and reintegration are grounded in human rights norms and that the full range of services to address physical, social, spiritual, mental and economic needs and support long-term recovery are available.
* Explained that, during their visit, the Special Rapporteurs visited the north-east region of the country, the most affected by the Boko Haram insurgency. They met women and girls who had been sexually abused and subjected to extreme forms of violence at the hands of Boko Haram insurgents. These women and girls faced extremely difficult situations in their own communities where they were often considered to be “impure” and “contaminated” since they had lived with Boko Haram. Moreover, several women and girls had returned pregnant or with babies resulting of sexual violence. These children are also highly stigmatized and risked to be rejected by their communities.
* Emphasized the importance of listening to victims, in order to understand their needs and contribute to them feeling that they have agency, despite the horrible circumstances and suffering they have endured.
* Underlined that the number of people still in captivity was unknown and in this regard, the Government should accelerate efforts to locate them and keep families informed about such efforts. In relation to this, she urged that these families should have a contact point within the Government with whom they could liaise with in order to voice their concerns and receive updated information.

**Challenges: Ms. Urmila Bhoola, Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery including its causes and consequences**

The Special Rapporteur:

* Expressed her gratitude to the Government for inviting them to visit the country and providing unimpeded access, including to IDP camps.
* Discussed how during the visit the resilience, humbleness and dignity of women and girls stood out.
* Outlined how one of the main challenges remained ensuring the protection of civilians in camps and host communities, while working for the rehabilitation and reintegration of victims.
* Stressed that remedies and justice need to be provided through holistic, long term, comprehensive and human rights programmes. These should include, inter alia, economic measures, peace building processes, building cohesion and measures to support the long term healing of women and children.
* Recalled the story of a young girl, who she met in one of the camps visited. The girl had been abducted, her husband killed and she was then forced to marry a member of Boko Haram. After her child died, she tried, and succeeded, in escaping. She then tried to return to her family but she was not welcomed. For this reason, she had to go living in an IDP camp, where she felt safe, but unhappy.
* Highlighted the need to increase the number of programmes and improve universal access to them, as well as the need to step up programmes for education, skills training, economic empowerment and access to decent work.
* Underlined the lack of disaggregated data and the need to implement a tracking system and develop a database of missing persons. In this respect, she commended the set-up of a specific Chibok Desk.
* Expressed that she pleased to hear about the progresses made by the Ministry of Justice and that she hopes for an increase in the number of prosecutions and convictions.

**Governmental responses: Ms. Masha, Senior Special Assistant to the President of Nigeria on IDPs**

Ms Masha:

* Explained the different measures and steps that have been taken by the Government, following the joint visit of the Special Rapporteurs.
* Described the context of this crisis, which since 2009 has seen around 2.9 million people displaced, as well as 20,000 casualties.
* Discussed how many children have been separated from their families and much infrastructure has been damaged.
* Stated that in April 2016, the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) declared that 80% (around 1.8 million) of the displaced people in the country were concentrated in the north-east region.
* Explained that many of the initiatives undertaken by the Government are aimed at coordinating ongoing activities. Different agencies, such as NEMA, the Refugee Commission, and the Human Rights Commission, have been working to provide assistance for the population affected by this crisis.
* Discussed how there are a number of initiatives targeting IDPs in the north-east, including a Presidential initiative, a fund for victim support, a Human Rights Protection Monitoring Group, and a Chibok Desk, established to deliver grievance counselling for victims’ families.
* Discussed how hotlines are also available and a Family Tracing Unit had been set up by the Government with the aim of locating children that had been separated from families and reuniting them. Moreover, the National Security Advisor is working with the Ministry of Justice to address the issue of prosecution of perpetrators. The end of impunity is considered as a part of the healing process for victims.
* Underlined that during the last few months, an assessment of damage had been conducted in the region, involving meetings with victims in order to understand their needs and concerns. These field assessments were conducted by the Federal Government with the support of the United Nations, the World Bank, the European Union, as well as members of civil societies and representatives from IDP camps.
* Underscored that engagement at every level was necessary in order to meet the needs of the affected people.
* Explained that the UK Government had taken the lead in coordinating interventions between donors. In relation to this, she underlined that the issue of resources was fundamental and it was important to use available resources well.
* Concluded by outlining the Government strategy which is based on three pillars: infrastructure, economic recovery and peace building. This last point, which includes peace building and the building of social cohesion, involved: a safe and dignified voluntary return of IDPs in their communities, community and local engagement, and the control of small arms and disarmament.
* Emphasized that the country had made important progress since the visit was conducted and that it is important to continue collaborating and learning from one another.

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**Governmental responses: Mr. Nuito, Director of the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA)**

Mr Nuito:

* Emphasized the efforts made to provide comprehensive assistance to all those who have been affected by Boko Haram violence.
* Stressed that it was important to remember that many have boys have been abducted, conscripted, and forced to fight by Boko Haram. He outlined how reintegration programmes need to address the specific needs of this group and that skill acquisition programmes and policies are fundamental in this respect.
* Reiterated that many different institutions and levels of Government were involved and active in in the reintegration and rehabilitation of victims, including the Human Rights Commission, the Ministry of Water, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Women, and the Ministry of Health. Coordination among them is being strengthened, and the Government is acting towards this end also through the support of agencies such as NEMA, which was precisely a coordinating agency.
* Spoke about accountability and impunity, underlining that the Government was aware of the fact that many perpetrators are still free and is working to bring them to justice.
* Discussed how in respect to the lack of psychologists available in the country, the National Society of Psychiatrists and Psychologists have submitted proposals for a possible response to this.
* Concluded by saying that any Boko Haram member responsible of will be held accountable, while those who had been abducted with force, especially the numerous children, would be reintegrated in the community.

**Contextual background: Mr. Martin Ejidike, Senior Human Rights Adviser, OHCHR**

Mr Ejidike:

* Explained that the visit to Nigeria made by the Special Rapporteurs in January was very significant for two main reasons. Firstly, it was the first visit by UN human rights mechanisms undertaken to evaluate and assess the consequences of Boko Haram violence. Secondly, it was the first joint visit to Nigeria and the second visit by a UN special procedures mechanism since 2006.
* Highlighted that the timing and context of the visit symbolized the progress of Nigeria in its engagement with the UN human rights mechanisms.
* Discussed how Boko Haram is considered the most deadly terrorist group in the world according to the 2015 Global Terrorists Index. As a result of their actions, the number of terrorism related deaths in Nigeria increased by 300% in 2014. Around 15 million people were affected by the Boko Haram insurgency, involving six states in north-eastern Nigeria.
* Underlined that the presentation of the report to the Human Rights Council was an occasion for Nigeria to deal with longstanding human rights issues.
* Stressed it is important to acknowledge that poverty and exclusion in Nigeria are also root causes of the situation in the north-east of the country and these issues needed to be addressed effectively.
* Discussed how the report of the visit has helped in many ways, including through advocacy and programming done by civil society groups with UN and Government support. Different programmes had been put in place, including a psychosocial and trauma support programme for victims of sexual violence, a UNFPA programme to provide support for victims, a UNICEF programme to provide assistance to women and children associated with Boko Haram, including victims of Boko Haram perpetrated sexual violence.
* Explained that according to a UNICEF/International Alert report ‘Bad Blood’, between 2000 and 7000 women and girls lived in a condition of sexual slavery under Boko Haram. Chibok girls are the most famous case internationally but the real number of people involved is much higher.
* Stressed that the report of the Special Rapporteurs following the visit would therefore be important for many actors who were working to help these victims, including the UNCT and civil society groups.

**Responses by other stakeholders: Ms. Rachel Harvey, Chief Child Protection, UNICEF Nigeria**

Ms Harvey:

* Spoke of the complexity of the situation and the needs of the people, and how different types of support are needed.
* Outlined how the scale of violence and human rights violations are enormous and often not perceived by the outside world, with only the story of the Chibok girls having garnered international interest. Unfortunately, they were only a fraction of the real number of women and children affected.
* Cited that 1985 children had already escaped or were rescued from Boko Haram captivity.
* Discussed the triple victimization of those affected consisting of when they were abducted, when they were raped and forced to marry, and when they return to their communities. At this latter stage, they often face rejection, discrimination and stigmatization.
* Highlighted that this discrimination and stigmatization is partially linked with the general stigma associated with sexual violence but is also a result of fear and distrust. Despite returning girls and women being screened and cleared of any involvement in the conflict by the military, communities are still fearful that they may have been radicalised while in captivity and therefore are a threat to their communities.
* Stressed that it is important to remember that these communities have faced several years of fighting, with many abducted girls used as suicide bombers by Boko Haram against civilian targets. 21 girls under the age of 18 years were used in 2015 alone.
* Discussed how children born out of sexual violence are at a high risk of rejection and violence. There is a belief among many communities that the blood of the father runs in the veins of the children. For this reason, communities often think that if the father of a child was a Boko Haram fighter, the child himself is likely to pose a threat to the community in the future.
* Underscored that reintegration in this context was extremely challenging but there was also hope that with the right package of support in place, reintegration is possible. UNICEF and International Alert, with funding from the UK Department for International Development and the Government of Sweden, supported the Government in Borno to pilot a reintegration programme for girls and women affected by Boko Haram-related sexual violence, which his currently being scaled up.
* Outlined how a multi-pronged approach is critical. Firstly, support needs to be provided to the girls and women to help them to recover and to meet their basic needs. Secondly, economic empowerment is essential to restore a sense of worth and to see oneself and be seen by the community as a contributor rather than a burden.
* Highlighted the insufficient number of counsellors and psychologists in the country and how therefore, the reintegration programme focused on creating as an environment that is as supportive and as protective as possible for returning girls and women.
* Underlined how work with families is essential to support reunification and reintegration. Families themselves need support to enable them to in turn to support their wives, sisters and daughters.
* Discussed how critical addressing the negative perceptions of women and children within communities is. Religious leaders or strong respected voices within the community are best placed to engage communities, drawing on religious texts, and providing positive role models to their communities.
* Highlighted that there is not a one size fits all approach for effective reintegration as every family and community’s experience of the conflict is different and how interventions need to be tailored accordingly.
* Underscored that interventions that are seen to be favouring one group, instead of addressing the welfare and recovery of the communities to which they are returning risk heightening tension, discrimination and community divisions. In order to avoid this, it is fundamental to increase the wellbeing of the entire community, not only of the direct victims of terrorism.
* Discussed how the reintegration of boys is generally harder and bleaker than reintegration of women and girls. There is a more acute refusal to allow the return of these boys to communities. Failure to reintegrate may lead to further community destabilization and fuel drivers of violent extremism and criminal activity. As an example, she mentioned the existence of six youth gangs who have already emerged in Maiduguri.
* Highlighted how reintegration is fundamental and there is a need to think about long-term solutions, helping women and children born out of sexual violence with long-term support. Peacebuilding within the community is also paramount.
* Concluded by mentioning that the extreme lack of resources today constitutes the main obstacle to achieving goals relating to reintegration and peacebuilding in Nigeria.

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**Responses by other stakeholders: Ms. Kim Toogood, Senior Advisor, International Alert, Africa Programme, International Alert**

Ms Toogood:

* Underlined the collaborative relationship between International Alert and UNICEF.
* Stressed that it is important to keep in mind that everybody in the country wanted to, and would, return home. This seems more now imminent than originally thought because of recent progress in liberating victims.
* Discussed how two core areas needed to be addressed: support networks for survivors and those for community members, many of whom live in situations of displacement.
* Highlighted how when women and girls have returned to their communities, they have faced high levels of skepticism, mistrust and fear, and have been subjected to further persecution from those living in the camps.
* Provided examples of sessions conducted by her organization with women and girls in camps. Strong female religious leaders were involved and spoke with the victims. Their sense of guilt was addressed and eased. Empathy was created and confidence was rebuilt, so as to reduce the sense of isolation felt by victims in the camps.
* Highlighted the danger, when conducting these types of programmes, of focusing only on some groups and creating inequalities. For this reason, programmes for community members were implemented as well, which took the form of dialogues carried out in the camps.
* Shared the story of a man who said he feared these women and girls because they had been “cursed” by Boko Haram. The terrorists, he said, had put “the evil” in them and it could be activated by Boko Haram, harming the community. Following his participation in the programme for community members, he declared that he was completely free from fear.
* Stressed that the two sides of the programme, for victims and communities, needed to be carried out in parallel, involving members of the communities who worked in and around the camp, including social support, traditional leaders, and religious leaders.
* Reported that services provided so far were not adequate for the needs of affected populations. Many people were now living in the different camps around Nigeria. However, the majority of displaced persons are living in host communities and could be seen as a burden to these communities. It is therefore important to develop long-term strategies as the camps would be progressively closed. Communities were not ready to coexist in some cases and this may lead to instances of violence within them.
* Underscored that lack of resources is a fundamental problem in meeting the needs of those displaced.
* Shared the [story of Aisha](http://www.international-alert.org/stories/life-after-boko-haram-aishas-story#sthash.GJl3Si8l.kVSHVdxu.dpbs), a young girl in the IDP camp who has returned from captivity and was met with violence in the camp, as well as of [Abdullahi](http://www.international-alert.org/stories/life-after-boko-haram-abdullahis-story#sthash.8JSyeKSg.dpbs), a community member who participated in a dialogue and has now decided that he wants to help women and girls in order to stop others from stigmatizing them.
* Shared a [video](http://www.international-alert.org/media/story-khadija-boko-haram-survivor#sthash.OXFoDJc6.dpbs) produced by UNICEF and International Alert on the women and girls and the challenges facing them in the IDP camps in relation to stigma and separate[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Concluding remarks: Mr. Dainius Puras, Special Rapporteur on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest standard of physical and mental health**

The Special Rapporteur:

* Reiterated that a comprehensive approach was needed to address the different issues and it is important to understand that the ongoing crisis exacerbated structural problems, which were present before the rise of Boko Haram. Such issues include poor access to services, such as education and health.
* Stressed that the reintegration of women and children need to be approached in parallel to the strengthening of the wellbeing of the entire system, including ensuring access to health and economic empowerment amongst communities.
* Discussed how malnutrition and outbreaks of diseases were important factors to consider and that they should guide investment in the development of holistic health services. The Special Rapporteur stressed that this is necessary in order to prevent tensions in communities related to superstition and mistrusts, whereby diseases can be perceived as evidence of contaminated blood.
* Outlined that emergency needs have to be addressed together with those relating to recovery,
* Health and educational sectors are crucial for achieving sustainable peace and development.
* Concluded by again thanking the Nigerian Government and expressing hope that the recommendations made by the Special Rapporteurs would be followed up and that the international community would continue helping the country with their rehabilitation and reintegration efforts.

1. The OHCHR is not responsible for the content of external links. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)