



KINGDOM OF BELGIUM

Intervention of

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Deputy Permanent Representative of Belgium to the UN

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

New York, 29 January 2021

Mr. President,

Dear colleagues,

Children are the most vulnerable among us, and acts of terrorism affect them in multiple ways. In situations of armed conflict, some of them are being exploited and recruited by armed and terrorist groups. Others are taken away by their parents who leave their home countries for the purpose of participating in terrorist activities. Others still are born in conflict zones and have never known a place they can call 'home'. When tackling this issue, we always have to differentiate the status of children from those of adults. All policies and actions related to children affected by terrorism should be firmly based on the principle of the best interests of the child, and the affected children should be treated, first and foremost, as victims.

Like many countries, Belgium is faced with the **situation of children associated with Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTF)** and their repatriation. The issue of their safe return is a concern for all relevant partners and actors in Belgium. There are no clear-cut or easy answers and views and policies to address this issue differ among states. Yet there are lessons we can learn from each other.

We believe that in order to address this **complex and multi-faceted problem**, a coordinated and multidisciplinary approach is needed. Psycho-medical attention must be provided at all stages of the process, from repatriation to social and educational reintegration in line with international standards. Throughout the process states must respect their obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its core principle of the best interests of the child.

The Belgian Government remains committed to the **return of children of Belgian nationality** associated with FTFs in the Syrian-Iraqi conflict zone, in particular from the camps in North-Eastern Syria, in line with the recommendations of the Secretary-General's 2020 report on Children and Armed Conflict.

In June 2019, the Belgian authorities organized the repatriation of 6 children whose situation was particularly vulnerable. As recently as 25 December of last year, a month ago, another child was repatriated. **We will continue to work with all parties concerned in order to bring back**

the remaining Belgian children. My government is determined in this regard. Yet this process also faces considerable challenges:

- The establishment of filiation in order to determine the child's Belgian nationality;
- Legal and political challenges resulting from the specific context of a war-torn country;
- The difficult access to the region due to security reasons;
- These difficulties have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the current security and health situation in the camps, Belgium is also working on **improving the living conditions** through our action in the Coalition against Daesh and via the European Union.

As a former **Chair of the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict** and sponsor of the handbook on children affected by the phenomenon of foreign combatants, Belgium reaffirms its strong commitment to protecting children affected by armed conflict. We call in particular for the full implementation of the conclusions of the Working Group on CAAC on the Syrian Arab Republic. We call on all parties to take the necessary measures to fulfill their obligations under international human rights, humanitarian and refugee law. The plight of children would be greatly improved if all actors respected these obligations, in particular with regards to granting humanitarian access and preventing attacks on schools and hospitals.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In conclusion I want to encourage the use of the **practical guidance for mediators** to protect children in situations of armed conflict. These guidelines offer a tool on how to give due consideration to child protection issues from the early stages of peace processes, as well as to peace agreements that put strong emphasis on the best interests of the child, the treatment of children separated from armed groups as victims and a focus on family and community based reintegration.

Thank you very much.