



KINGDOM OF BELGIUM

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STATEMENT

H.E. Didier Reynders, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Affairs

at

Side-event:

“The fight against impunity – bringing Daesh to justice” – Monday, 19 September 2016

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a real privilege to welcome you today to this side-event on fighting impunity and bringing Daesh to justice. Allow me first to address a special word of gratitude to all panelists who have offered to share with us their knowledge, experience and expertise in this matter. For some of you this experience is very personal and hard-won, and I salute your courage in being here with us today.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Only a few days ago we commemorated the attacks on the Twin Towers, just a few miles from here. Six months ago, my own country, Belgium, suffered grievous attacks. **In the last two decades, innocent people have fallen victim to terrorist attacks by violent extremists throughout the world:** in America; in Africa; in Asia; and in Europe. This scourge concerns all of us. It must be fought, and is being fought, with the full might of our intelligence, police, and justice systems to bring the terrorists to justice. It must also be fought, and is being fought, with respect for our core values, against this ideology of hate that we are facing.

With the rise of Daesh, the al-Nusra Front, and other extremist movements **in the Middle East, however, the threat of violent extremism has taken another dimension, even beyond terrorism.** Armed conflicts are always ugly, but we have witnessed horrors on an unprecedented scale. The crimes committed are extreme in their numbers: millions of civilians in Syria and Iraq are at the mercy of Daesh, thousands have fallen to their crimes. They are extreme in their cruelty and violence, and in their willingness to attack innocent people indiscriminately and deliberately, not hesitating to target specially the most vulnerable, including women and children. They are extreme in their drive to destroy the cultural heritage of a region where civilization was born.

There is little doubt that crimes have been committed that fall in the category of the “most serious crimes of international concern”, to use the terms of the Rome Statute, which establishes the International Criminal Court: War crimes. Crimes against humanity. Maybe even genocide. Indeed, while most victims of Daesh in Iraq and Syria are Sunni and Shia Muslims, certain ethnic and religious minorities, like the Yazidis, Christians, Shabaks, Kaka’i and others in northern Iraq, have suffered particular persecution at the hands of Daesh. The situation of Yazidis in Iraq is probably the most dramatic, with evidence strongly suggesting that Daesh sought to destroy the Yazidi group, in whole or in part. I am very grateful to Ms. Mourad for accepting to speak here today, to give a voice to the victims.

The international community could not remain indifferent to such abuse. By adopting **Security Council resolution 2249** last November, it has clearly expressed its unanimous rejection of Daesh and Al-Nusra and other Al-Qaeda-related organizations, rightly describing them as a threat to international security – a threat to all of us. Such movements must be stopped. This is why Belgium is actively taking part in the political-military coalition against Daesh since the summer of 2014.

Stopping Daesh militarily, however, is not sufficient, nor are crimes in the region limited to Daesh. The Middle East has a long history of peaceful co-existence of different religions, communities and various ethnic groups. **To rebuild a resilient society in the region on solid foundations, fighting impunity is indispensable.** If we want to give reconciliation a chance, we need to ensure that those responsible for atrocities committed in Syria and Iraq are held accountable. We urgently need to identify options and concrete steps to be taken in this regard.

Obviously the first priority is to support the countries concerned to ensure justice on their own territory. The Government of Iraq has demonstrated its commitment to fighting impunity and deserves our full support in this effort. In contrast, in the absence of any credible criminal proceedings in Syria, Belgium continues to call on the Security Council to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court.

Ensuring accountability for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide is, however, a **shared responsibility of all States**. And here, we need to recognize that **we often lack the proper instruments**. Most of our countries have in place, and are strengthening, their legal arsenals to confront terrorism. In contrast, there is much work to be done yet to enable our legal systems to confront together major crimes committed in the course of armed conflicts:

- **We need to include special provisions against those crimes in our legal orders.**
- **We need to work today to preserve evidence** that may be used even far in the future, since there is no statute of limitations for such crimes. Much information is available. It should be collected and made accessible to the judicial authorities that need it, in a systematic way.
- **We need to work together better.** Belgium, together with Argentina, the Netherlands, and Slovenia, has proposed a multilateral treaty on mutual legal assistance and extradition, to facilitate practical cooperation in investigating and prosecuting war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. This initiative is already supported by a cross-regional group of over 50 States.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to conclude my intervention with the following thought. Daesh must be stopped, the war in Syria must come to an end. It is essential to bring criminals to justice. There is no doubt in my mind that we will achieve this eventually. It is an ideology that we are fighting. An ideology of hate, of denial of the absolute value of every human being. We are coming together around a universal message of tolerance, respect, equal dignity for all. And that message will win in the end.