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Statement of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva, at the 29th Session of the Human Rights Council (Geneva, 30 June 2015)

Here below the statement by H.E. Archbishop Silvano M. Tomasi, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva, at the 29th Session of the Human Rights Council - Panel on the Effects of Terrorism on the Enjoyment by All Persons of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Geneva, 30 June 2015):

Statement by H.E. Archbishop Silvano M. Tomasi

Mr. President,

The Holy See is grateful to the Human Rights Council for devoting a special panel of this 29th Session to discuss the effects of terrorism on the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms. In particular, we acknowledge the thorough and enlightening report of the Special Rapporteur. Terrorism is a terrible reality that is affecting all parts of the globe, destroying countless lives, threatening societies and annihilating cultures and their histories. Sadly, one must admit that the international community has not always been effective in preventing and curbing terrorism, especially in the Middle East and different parts of Africa. Since 2000, the world has witnessed a staggering 500% increase in the number of victims of terrorists attacks. In particular, the past two years have seen a startling increase in the body count of innocent victims at the hands of ISIS and Boko Haram groups, among many others. In 2013, for example, 82% of those victims were killed in just five countries: Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria and Syria. While considering the negative effects of terrorism on the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms, we should also be clear in our reasoning that these effects will continue, and indeed will become worse, if the causes of terrorism are not clearly and swiftly addressed by the national States concerned and the international community.[1]

Mr. President,

The Holy See Delegation would like to denounce most especially terrorist acts carried out in the name of religion. As Pope Francis states, "Religious fundamentalism, even before it eliminates human beings by perpetrating horrendous killings, eliminates God himself, turning him into a mere ideological pretext." [2]

Terrorism is a political means to influence behavior and to reach objectives through fear. Acts of terrorism cause the destruction of human rights, political freedoms and the rule of law. Terrorism is the antithesis of the shared values and commitments which serve as the basis for peaceful coexistence domestically and internationally. Indeed, with the proliferation of terrorism and the impunity which its proponents enjoy, we can say that there is also a "globalization of terrorism". Developing from "a subversive strategy typical of certain extremist organizations, aimed at the destruction of material goods or the killing of people, terrorism has now become a shadowy network of political collusion,"[3] in which antagonistic political powers are tempted to play a role by supplying resources of modern technology, advanced weaponry and financing to these terrorist organizations. A situation is thus created where the positive political will of the major players is required in order to address and resolve the problem of global terrorism and its disastrous effects.

Mr. President,

The tragic humanitarian and social effects of terrorism are already well known. In the first place, the gravest violation is complete contempt for innocent human life, the basic right upon which all other human rights are founded. "As such, there is an obligation on the part of the State to protect the right to life of every person within its territory and no derogation from this right is permitted, even in times of public emergency."[4] Since terrorism does not recognize the dignity of its victims, there remains no other basis or logic by which the other fundamental rights and freedoms of the human person will be respected. As such, we see a sort of "domino effect", namely, once you deny a person his/her right to life, you abuse other fundamental rights, including the right to freedom of belief and worship, the right to expression and freedom of conscience, the right to education and the right to be treated with equal dignity as any other citizen of a nation, despite difference in religion, social and economic status, language or ethnicity.

Due to the violence of new forms of terrorism and the breach of international humanitarian law, the international community faces the challenge of responding to the influx of refugees fleeing these troubled areas to find a safe haven. Those receiving countries must not only be lauded for their willingness to provide protection, but they too need the assistance of the international community to deal with the humanitarian crisis so as to avoid the eruption of further problems on their own soil. Terrorism also facilitates trafficking of persons and weapons, thus creating a black market for human commerce. Where terrorism has effectively taken hold, irreparable social and cultural damage has been done that will resonate through future generations. By destroying the infrastructure of cities and regions, especially by attacking government buildings, schools and religious institutions, terrorism literally brings a society to its knees. In addition the demolition of cultural and ancient sites by terrorists threatens to annihilate the history of cultures and populations. Such destruction creates the breeding grounds for more violent extremism, thus continuing the vicious circle of violence propagating further violence.

Mr. President,

Apart from the devastating social and humanitarian effects which, in reality, are much more immediate and concrete, the ongoing negative political effects of terrorism will continue to resonate, in many ways in an unforeseeable manner for generations yet to come. The political impact of terrorism is multifaceted and the parties occultly facilitating or supporting, financially or otherwise, terrorist activity for ulterior political agendas are not always so clearly identified. Nevertheless, it can hardly be doubted that terrorism has political effects and influences the political process, at least in democratic and partially democratic states. In addition to creating an environment of political instability for the countries and regions which suffer the most from terrorism, the political effect on a global level continues to grow. Governments throughout the world, in some cases using terrorism as an excuse, are preoccupied with national security and counterterrorism efforts, some of which also infringe upon the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms. This shows that the political instability and fragmentation caused by terrorism creates an equal and opposite reaction with serious political consequences. In this sense, collaborative effort on the part of the international community is all the more necessary. Efforts to reach a mutual approach to fighting terrorism must always give priority to the victims of terrorism; financial, political or ideological motives should never take precedence over coming to a unified vision as to how the plague of terrorism should be combatted.

The most obvious way in which terrorism can influence the political process is by bringing about changes in public opinion, which Governments then tend to take into account when formulating their policies. It can be very hard for Governments to resist the pressure from public opinion for a strong reaction in the wake of a terrorist attack. The impact of terrorism on public opinion, however, is not as straightforward or predictable as one might imagine. There is no uniform public response to a terrorist attack. Nor do terrorist attacks necessarily change people's political opinions. The greater people's confidence in their own values, the less likely they are to change as a result of a major event, like a terrorist attack. Finally, the role and the power of media in forming and informing public opinion when addressing terroristic events are of the utmost importance.

Mr. President,

The Holy See is deeply convinced that terrorism, especially those forms that derive from religious extremism, must be confronted with concerted political efforts by all players, especially by all the local and regional parties involved, as well as by the major international players, whose role is indispensable in negotiating and finding a viable solution, diplomatic or otherwise, to protect life and the future stability of the regions touched by terrorism. The response to terrorism cannot be merely by way of military action. Political participation, fair and just legal systems, and cutting all forms of public and private support for terrorism are means not only to respond, but also to prevent, terrorism. It is also important to remember the positive obligation that States have to undertake in order to protect their citizens and, where that is not possible, to collaborate with other regional authorities in order to address the threats posed by terrorist groups.

Thank you, Mr. President.

[1] Cfr., Global Report on Terrorism for 2013.

[2] Pope Francis, Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See, 12 Jan. 2015.

[3] Compendium of Catholic Social Teaching, n. 513.

[4] OHCHR, "Human Rights, Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism", Fact Sheet No. 32, p. 8.

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