Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Resolving cases of missing persons in armed conflict

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Thank you, Mr President. And I'd like to welcome you formally to the council today and congratulate you on presiding over it and your team of course for the great work they have been doing this month already.

Every year, thousands of people go missing amidst violence and armed conflict. Every one of those missing persons is an individual. A mother. A father. A son. A daughter. A sister. A brother. Their absence is directly felt by their loved ones for a lifetime. Uncertainty about the fate of family members, whether they are dead or alive, can continue for many years after the fighting ends. The trauma this causes can undermine relationships among communities and makes peace-building and reconciliation harder.

The circumstances in which disappearances occur can vary greatly. As armed conflicts create significant mass displacement, many migrants, refugees or internally displaced people go missing because they are afraid or unable to contact their families. Combatants and civilians may go missing as a result of abductions, mass atrocities and forced disappearances, arbitrary detentions and, of course, extrajudicial killing. Women and children may be particularly at risk of being abducted for sexual exploitation or enslavement. And the actions of non-state armed groups pose a particular challenge; in northeast Nigeria, Boko Haram has abducted hundreds if not thousands of women and children, including 274 girls kidnapped from their secondary school in Chibok in 2014. Five years on, more than 112 of those girls are still missing. In Iraq, between five and seven thousand Yazidi women and girls were abducted and subjected to sexual slavery by Daesh in 2014. Today, more than 3,000 Yazidi women and children remain unaccounted for. Given the scale of a phenomenon of missing persons globally, the resolution we adopted this morning provides an important opportunity to review and strengthen international cooperation on this issue.

Mr President, the United Kingdom welcomes Kuwait's leadership on this important and complex issue and we are pleased to vote in favour of the resolution that you presented. This resolution underlines the existing international legal obligations in this area and builds on the work of existing mechanisms. It also underscores that states bear the primary responsibility to protect their civilians and uphold the human rights of all individuals within their territory.

But we need international cooperation in addressing the issue of missing persons, both during and after conflicts. After conflicts, international support to resolve this is frequently an

important factor in promoting post-conflict peace, security, and reconciliation. And I'd like here to commend the work of the International Committee for the Red Cross and the Red Crescent and the International Commission on Missing Persons and providing long-term institutional capacity and technical expertise to governments in the location, recovery and identification of missing persons.

Mr President, as we have heard today, the issue of missing persons is a complex and prevalent problem in Iraq and Kuwait but also in many conflict situations around the world. In Kosovo, we welcome the efforts of UNMIK and the Government of Kosovo to address legacy issues, including investigating cases of missing persons. According to the ICRC, more than 17,000 people are still registered as missing from the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia that broke out in the 1990s.

Justice for all victims and their families is a crucial part of future stability. The United Kingdom calls on both Pristina and Belgrade to support all necessary action, which must include supporting existing domestic war crimes courts to ensure that outstanding war crimes cases are heard. We urge political leaders to focus on these efforts rather than the divisive political rhetoric which only perpetuates antagonism.

The resolution we have adopted today highlights the actions Member States can take to prevent persons going missing in armed conflict. But sadly there are too many examples of states deliberately acting to target civilians in armed conflict, including through arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported in 2012 that enforced disappearances were used by the ruling regime in Syria to eliminate opposition groups and instill a climate of fear. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic estimates that at least 60,000 people have gone missing in Syria since the beginning of the Civil War. Seventeen thousand more are believed to have gone missing as a result of government repression before the beginning of the conflict.

The United Kingdom underlines the importance of the work that the international impartial and independent mechanism is undertaken on accountability and takes note of its plans to develop a system to categorise and classify material which might be relevant to the location of missing persons.

Mr President, long after conflict ends, families and communities are deeply affected by those who remain missing. Since the beginning of my diplomatic career in Cyprus, I have met many families in this position from a range of conflicts. They suffer every day and those of us who have met them cannot fail to be moved by their suffering. They relive conflicts as others are able to move on. Whatever positions Member States around this table take on individual conflict, let us all agree collectively that resolving cases of missing persons should be a humanitarian priority and let us try to remove this issue from the political arena.

Thank you, Mr President.

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