



UNITED NATIONS OFFICE OF COUNTER-TERRORISM

Remarks by Mr. Vladimir Voronkov, Under-Secretary-General, UNOCT

**Launch of the *Global Programme on Countering Terrorist Threats
against Vulnerable Targets***

High-Level Panel on the protection of religious sites

19 January 2021 – 09:00am

Excellencies, distinguished guests, colleagues, and friends,

Welcome to the launch of our *Global Programme on countering terrorist threats against Vulnerable Targets*, for which I wish to thank Her Excellency Sheikha Alya Ahmed bin Saif Al-Thani and the State of Qatar for the generous support.

Across the globe, terrorists have repeatedly and cowardly targeted public spaces to cause mass casualties, instill fear and generate chaos.

Over the past years, the attacks in Barcelona, Brussels, Colombo, Christchurch, El Paso, Mumbai, Nairobi, Ouagadougou and Paris became stark reminders of this global threat.

According to the 2020 Global Terrorism Index, attacks against civilians increased by 24 per cent last year.

Available data also shows that terrorist killings in urban centres have increased sharply since 2011, and that attacks against religious sites are becoming more lethal.

Most recently in Jolo, Kabul, Koure, Nice and Vienna terrorists targeted again places where people gather. They killed and wounded worshippers, diners, shoppers, tourists, students, and many other civilians just going about their daily lives.

The horrible acts of terror are an attack against our values and way of life.

Protecting transport hubs, markets and malls, touristic venues, sporting or cultural events and religious sites is very challenging, but not impossible.

We can take action to make those targets less vulnerable without fundamentally changing their “open” nature.

Effective prevention and risk mitigation require collaboration and innovation; cooperation between public and private actors; coordination between law enforcement, first responders and local authorities; and information exchange, preparedness and training.

Preventing attacks against vulnerable targets has been identified as a priority in our Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, in Security Council resolutions 2341 and 2396, and in the assessments conducted by the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate.

The Programme we are launching today responds to a clear call by Member States and the Security Council to enhance United Nations support to Member States to address gaps and challenges in this field.

This multi-year Programme is a joint endeavor, which draws on the respective mandates and expertise of key Global Counter-Terrorism Compact entities.

I am thus delighted to be accompanied today by our partners from the Alliance of Civilizations, the UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, CTED and INTERPOL.

Together, we will provide specialized assistance to Member States in developing collaborative approaches to prevent, counter, respond, investigate, and recover from terrorist attacks against vulnerable targets.

First, we will collect and disseminate good practices to assist authorities in the protection of religious sites, urban centres, and touristic venues.

My Office is currently finalizing the *UN Global Guide on the Security of Major Sporting Events*, the first of this kind of thematic guidance materials.

Second, we will assist beneficiary Member States in developing national action plans, frameworks and operating procedures to implement such collaborative approaches.

And third, our Programme will provide tailored operational training and mentoring services to increase Member States' practical risk mitigation capacities.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

The terrorist threat has not diminished with the COVID-19 pandemic. It is continuously adapting and evolving and so must our response.

Terrorists opportunistically seek to exploit our vulnerabilities through "low-cost and low-tech" tactics, including vehicle-ramming attacks, and attacks with knives or improvised explosive devices. We need to address this type of threats.

But we also need to anticipate and counter new and more sophisticated attacks, such as the use of Unmanned Aerial System.

Our Global Programme illustrates a fundamental objective of our counterterrorism agenda: ensuring that our citizens can safely enjoy and exercise their fundamental freedoms and socio-economic rights in their daily life without fear.

The rise in attacks against places of worship of all faiths – from the Sahel to Europe, South-East Asia or North America - constitutes a very worrying trend.

As stated by Secretary-General Guterres, “the right to freedom of religion or belief is firmly entrenched in international human rights law and is a cornerstone of inclusive, prosperous and peaceful societies.”

Attacks on churches, synagogues, mosques and other places of worship aim to sow hatred and division and constitute an assault on the values of peace and tolerance that we all cherish.

The *UN Plan of Action to Safeguard Religious Sites* provides a set of recommendations for action by the United Nations, Member States, religious leaders and civil society. Our Programme will contribute to making operational this important Plan.

Let me conclude by thanking the high-level panelists who will share with us lessons and good practices today.

I look forward to fruitful exchanges of views this morning.

I thank you.