

CommDH/Speech(2020)2

PACE urgent debate on the occasion of International obligations concerning the repatriation of children from war and conflict zones

Speech by Dunja Mijatović

Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Strasbourg 30 January 2020

Mr President,
Mr. Rapporteur,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me first to thank the Parliamentary Assembly for giving me the opportunity to address its plenary on this very important and sensitive issue.

I would also like to congratulate Mr. Schennach on his report, which perfectly highlights the core human rights issues at stake and the emergency of the situation.

The issue that you will be debating this morning is highly sensitive.

I know that the return of these European citizens to their home countries sparks fear and raises legitimate security concerns.

But children stranded in the camps of Northern Syria are not responsible for their parents' decision to join these groups.

Letting the children of suspected ISIS fighters die there will not heal the wounded souls of the victims of terrorism. Nor will it bring more security in Europe, or anywhere else.

Because what we are talking about today is nothing less than saving the lives of these children.

In May last year, I called on Council of Europe member states to urgently repatriate their underage nationals stranded in the camp of Al-Hol in Northern Syria and to consider repatriating their mothers as well so as to safeguard the children's best interests.

At the time of that statement, the camp hosted more than 73 000 people. 90% of them were women and children, many of whom were not older than 6 years. Since then, according to the World Health Organisation, the population has slightly decreased,¹ but the proportion of women and children has increased,² and the living conditions have reportedly further deteriorated. Malnutrition, infected wounds, severe burns and acute diarrhea continue to cause the death of children on a daily basis.

¹ 66,101 as of 13 January.

² 96% as of 13 January.

In the last eight months, I discussed this delicate issue with a wide range of interlocutors: legal experts, children ombudsmen, civil society representatives, security and intelligence people. These discussions have reinforced my deep conviction that repatriating these children is the only way forward.

Clearly this is so from a human rights perspective, which is the part I am mandated to bring to your attention. But interestingly, many in the intelligence and security community also support repatriation, to better exercise any necessary control or implement disengagement or rehabilitation measures.

Things are moving forward, and I welcome the fact that a number of countries have undertaken to repatriate their nationals, in particular children. This shows that, although it is clearly not an easy task, it is not impossible.

As described in Mr Schennach's report, more and more voices are calling for the repatriation of children, from the UN Assistant Secretary General to senior members of the judiciary and associations of victims of terrorism.

Ladies and gentlemen, today PACE has an opportunity to join these voices. I strongly encourage you to take it.