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“Victims: place, rights and assistance”

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“Give victims of terrorism sustained compensation and support”

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Europe has suffered grave onslaughts by terrorists in recent years – in Madrid, Istanbul, Beslan, London and other locations.

Rightly, we have given priority to seeking ways of preventing – including through addressing root causes. We have also discussed thoroughly how to deal with suspects of terrorist acts – within the framework of human rights and humanitarian laws.

A third aspect should now be put high on the agenda: the rights of all those who have been victimised by terrorist acts.

Many of the victims are dead, they were killed. A great number of the survivors have been injured, some of them seriously and may suffer impairment for the rest of their lives.

Many survivors also have got psychological scars and suffer post-traumatic symptoms. Among the victims are also family members, other relatives and close friends who may also be hurt by the trauma imposed on them.

The psychological damage of terrorist acts can hardly be exaggerated. Many surviving victims have testified about a remaining feeling of vulnerability and destruction of the future. The *shock* effect of the violent explosion or attack tends to amplify the trauma.

We know that the intent of the terrorist is precisely to *terrorise*, to provoke an atmosphere of fear. Sadly, this is sometimes the result and affects the victims. A number of them have also described the difficulties to come to terms with what happened as they were targeted in a random manner – though the crime itself was shockingly deliberate. Some one wanted to take the life of yourself or someone close to you in order to terrorise others, indeed the whole society.

The psychological impact of the crime on the victims may be made worse by the intense media attention which often is directed towards surviving victims, including family members.

There are of course also more indirect victims of terrorism. One such category is those who –though innocent– have been targeted by misdirected counter-terrorism actions. Human rights violations have been committed in the so-called war on terror. Such incompetent and unprincipled policies are of course no consolation to the direct victims of terrorist attacks – rather the opposite. However, that aspect is for another meeting.

The Council of Europe ‘Guidelines on the Protection of Victims of Terrorist Acts’ (2005) recognise the suffering of victims of terrorist acts and their close families and says that these persons should be shown material and international solidarity and support.

This more so as the ultimate target of terrorist actions usually is the community in its entirety. Victims represent the nation as they suffer unjustifiable attack on behalf of us all. Therefore, the principle must be clearly established that we all, the community, must do our utmost to limit the damage on the victims of the terrorist act for the rest of their lives.

With this principle in mind, what general principles should guide the assistance to victims of terrorism?

1. Medical, psychological, social and material assistance and reparation must be made available in the short, medium and long term – and not only for the period immediately after the attack.
2. The right to support and compensation should be established in law. Some countries within the Council of Europe have enacted specific legislation on the victims of terrorism, for example, France, Italy, Greece, Spain and the Russian Federation.
3. The granting of assistance should not depend on the identification, arrest, prosecution or conviction of the perpetrator of the criminal act.
4. Victims must have *effective* access to law and justice.
5. Victims witnessing in court need appropriate protection.
6. The security and dignity of the victims should be ensured. Their private and family life should be protected, particularly against media intrusion.
7. The victims should be provided with information about the help available to them.
8. It is important that officials dealing with victims of terrorism receive special training – psychological sensitivity is crucial in this context.
9. Victims, including family members, have the right to be respected in the process of grief. It is essential that official representatives of the community support symbolic manifestations of respect: days and places of remembrance, dignified burial sites and special museums can significantly contribute to express deeper national and international solidarity with the victims.
10. Authorities should relate constructively to victim support groups. They are often set up by surviving victims and close relatives themselves. These civil society initiatives are particularly valuable in these crisis situations. Authorities should listen to them, consult with them and support them.

Such an approach from the governments would help securing that the victims are granted their legitimate rights.