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Session III: Priorities for National PVE Plans of Action

Peggy Hicks,

Director, Thematic Engagement, Special Procedures, and Right to Development Division,

OHCHR

Introduction:

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The Secretary-General has recommended that each State consider developing a plan of action to prevent violent extremism and I'd like to focus on how we ensure that these national plans of action are effective.

To answer this question, we need to recognize that human rights are not brakes, they are tools. Rather than impeding the effectiveness of responses to violent extremism, strategies that fully incorporate human rights are essential to our ability to not only take on, but succeed in this struggle.

Too often, policy-makers see respecting human rights as a burden in addressing violent extremism, and find organizations like mine that insist on upholding both the letter and the spirit of human rights law in this difficult work unrealistic, irritants, or worse.

I'd like to do my best to dispel that belief, not just because we should do what is right, but because we need to do what is effective.

Let me briefly highlight four points in this regard, some straightforward steps to building national plans of action that can make a real difference:

Point 1: Good practices on protecting freedom of expression while countering incitement to violence, hatred and discrimination should be incorporated

In 2012, experts from around the world came together to look at the difficult issue of drawing the demarcation line between freedom of expression and incitement to hatred. In a series of regional consultations carried on across the globe, a practical strategy on how to address incitement to violence, hatred and discrimination was developed, what we now call the Rabat Plan of Action.

The Rabat Plan of Action offers a clear six-part threshold test for when speech can be considered incitement and should be prohibited.

OHCHR is currently working to support State efforts to implement the Rabat Plan of Action at the national level. In Tunisia, for example, our office is advising the Independent High Authority for Audiovisual Communication to develop specific, contextualised guidance that will unpack each of the six elements of the Rabat test. When implemented, this tool will help Tunisian authorities to get this crucial issue right – fully protecting freedom of expression, while addressing incitement to hatred, discrimination and violence effectively as well.

Point 2: Visible steps to build human rights protection and address injustice are central to effective national strategies

A broad range of human rights efforts can make a real difference in countering violent extremism. Some of these links are obvious, and likely to be recognized in national plans. Others though are equally important, but may not be sufficiently integrated or resourced.

On this point, I would differ with some who have questioned the role or capacity of UN agencies to prevent violent extremism or their scope of their efforts to do so. That concern, in my view, reflects a narrow and to some extent inaccurate understanding of what steps will be most effective in PVE. To succeed in this cause, we need to combat social exclusion and marginalization, open up space for dissent, and ensure that our justice and law enforcement systems are scrupulously fair and rights-respecting.

At the same time, enhancing respect for economic, social and cultural rights is vital. Poverty and a lack of economic opportunity fuel violent extremism. By ensuring full and non-discriminatory access to basic services, States can help immunise individuals and communities against this threat.

Understanding and addressing endemic discrimination, particularly within judicial and policing systems, is critical. Disparate sentencing that disproportionately impacts particular racial, ethnic or religious groups, and racial or religious profiling in policing, is not only counter to human rights law, but undermines any preventive efforts.

Empowering women and girls and ensuring full participation of all in political and public life is crucial to foster trust between the State and the people it represents. Action plans should require that CVE impact on women and men is systematically measured.

In all of these areas, UN agencies are mandated to work, and have valuable expertise and experience to offer.

Point 3: Preserving civil society space and ensuring its participation is essential.

National plans should explicitly preserve civil society space and facilitate inputs and participation of civil society actors in decision-making processes.

Effective avenues for civic participation contribute to societal cohesion and give voices to people, including minorities and those at the margins of society.

Preventing violent extremism requires community engagement, and more than ever, we must deploy efforts to preserve civil society space. The Secretary-General's Plan of Action rightly emphasises this role. However, civil society and human rights defenders frequently find themselves caught between repressive counter-terrorism laws, suspicion of the authorities regarding their activities, and intimidation and attacks from non-State armed groups.

Allowing voices to be heard, even when they express criticism or unpopular views, is key to holding decision-makers accountable for their acts, to ensure that policies are reviewed, lessons learned, and improvements made. Countries where civil society space is protected reap significant dividends in terms of long-term stability.

Point 4: Overreaching in an effort to do “everything we can” to prevent violent extremism is counterproductive.

Vague notions of extremism in domestic laws and policies may be – and already have been – used to target specific groups or silence dissent. The Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights has highlighted the adverse impact that broad definitions of “violent extremism” or “extremism” can have on human rights, particularly where legislation creates criminal offences based on these definitions. When efforts to counter violent extremism overreach, when organizations are banned or people are detained based on broad or vague claims, we do the cause of preventing violent extremism no favours. Such steps not only violate rights, they help incubate further violence.

To conclude,

Our discussions here come at a pivotal moment. We must be serious about making respect for human rights the foundation upon which national plans of action, and our strategies on PVE more generally are based. In 1948, when George Orwell presented a terrifying vision of “thought crime” in his novel 1984, the world had an immediate reply. That same year, states endorsed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which presents an antidote to Orwell's nightmarish world. Today, as violent extremism threatens so much and so many, we must not allow fear to push rights aside, and should instead realize that building universal respect for human rights is our best hope for success in this struggle.