

SYMPOSIUM SUPPORTING VICTIMS OF TERRORISM
UNITED NATIONS, NEW YORK

Just over two months ago I was chained to a tree. My torturers treated me and my companions without compassion. Their daily cruelty showed us the worst of what man is capable of. Since the day of my liberation, I have felt that the miracle of being alive and free, gave me a responsibility towards those whom I left behind in the depths of the jungle, exactly 69 days ago today. This is why it is my duty to speak out for them, for those who have lost their voice.

At this very moment in time, their fate is uncertain, no-one can foresee their day of liberation. The passing of every minute adds to their ordeal. For when you are held captive you only look at your life backwards to sum up the days of your suffering; you do not look to the future, for the future no longer belongs to you.

I was profoundly moved when the Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, invited me to join you here today. I accepted his invitation without hesitation, because, deep down, I know that I can never be truly free until those I have left behind are also free.

I come before you today with much humility, for I know only too well that I arrive with empty hands, loaded with the weight of too many questions, and too few answers. Yet I will share with you my experience and thoughts, in the hope that

together we can work towards putting an end to the suffering of victims of terrorism throughout the world.

When you are a victim of terrorism, you enter a different space, another dimension. In an instant, you lose everything.

For a victim of terrorism, the greatest danger of all is to be forgotten. Trapped within a world that exists outside the law, a world without rights, without protection, your only recourse is moral resistance. And you can only find the strength to resist if you are supported by the voices of those “outside”, those who fight for your rescue.

The families carry the flame and protect the victim against that all so painful “little death” of being forgotten. Their commitment is vital. We must support the wives, husbands, children, mothers and fathers of the victims. We must stand by them, hold them up, give them security – this *must* be at the forefront of all our actions. It is a simple fact that when an individual is sacrificed to the machinery of terrorism, his life stops, he can no longer act or be productive. His disappearance has the immediate consequence of leaving his family in need. You see, the drama of terrorism is a play with many acts. After the sudden blow of violence, comes the loss of a home, the difficulty of obtaining health care, the disruption or complete stoppage of the children’s education, and finally the unending accumulation of debt.

There is no greater suffering for a hostage, already subjected to abuse, despotism and isolation, than to watch, completely powerless, the disintegration of his family. I believe that inside every one of us lies the strength to bear our cross, but the suffering that our situation causes to those we love, is simply unbearable.

It is our duty to recognize the victims under International Law and create an “International Status” for them.

Firstly, this status will enable us to centralize information about each victim so that at any given moment we can know who they are and what they are going through – information that can be made available, for example, on a UN website. As we all know, access to information is strategic. Too many totalitarian states hide the reality of victims of terrorism in their country in order not to be accountable for them to the world. The centralization of data on a worldwide level will mean that significant pressure can be exerted on behalf of the victims. Exposing to the world the reality of their ordeal is the best way to fight against indifference and abandonment.

Secondly, if someone is officially recognized as a “victim of terrorism” by the United Nations, this person could benefit from the sponsorship of a state, of a town, of an organization, to follow his case and support his family. Each country within the United Nations would be able to develop legislation to protect the families and to stir up consciousness.

When I was in the jungle, I had a face and I had a name. I am now asking we do the same for those who stayed behind. I will never be able to thank enough the thousands of people who campaigned on behalf of my release and the release of my fellow hostages. They gave me that face and that name. These people made us - the victims -- a part of their daily lives, relentlessly inventing ways to fight against apathy and resignation. They undertook a thankless and difficult task; they worked like ants in the harshest of deserts: that of indifference.

If I survived, it is thanks to them. In the despair of captivity, I arose every morning at 4 am to listen, on my beat up, old radio, to my mother who sent me messages. Through what I could glean, I began realizing the unbelievable efforts being undertaken by complete strangers on our behalf. Creating an official status for victims of terrorism will help multiply the efforts of all those who, selflessly and generously, want to help others. It will also be a way of reassuring the thousands of anonymous victims that they still belong to the human world, and that their families have the right to speak out and the right to be heard.

For this right to speak out is not always easy to ensure. Victims of terrorism often fall into a difficult category, their struggle is not always “politically correct”.

Since terrorist action always seeks to cloak itself in political or religious justifications, to fight for the victims is – de facto -- to take sides. It means being pulled from the comfort zone of neutrality and being engaged in a struggle that is overwhelming and way beyond them, that they can neither understand nor control.

We must find a way to preserve their independence, to protect them from partisan and/or religious opportunism or fanaticism.

Giving a platform to the families provides a veritable lifeline to those who are trapped. The role of the media here is crucial. By calling for a worldwide reflection of our responsibility towards the victims, we are also sounding an alarm regarding the role of the media. There is an urgent need for the media to acknowledge not only their power of mobilization, but also the very real impact they can have in saving individual lives.

This of course gives rise to a fundamental question: is the media exposure of a victim a good thing or a bad thing? My answer on this is unequivocal: media coverage is absolutely essential. Indeed some people think that speaking out about victims is just giving a helping hand to the terrorists. Others think that it is “playing their game”, lending weight and legitimacy to their demands. This is probably true to some extent. But it is not what is truly important. Terrorists, by their chosen methods of action, are already under the media spotlight.

What is, however, essential is to create conditions in which the death of a human being becomes extremely costly to the terrorists. If there is no mobilization, the victim is condemned to becoming another statistic, a unit in a sinister accounting of “profit and loss”. In turn, to speak of the victims, to give them a face, an identity, reduces the population’s passivity – their implicit resignation –towards the terrorists’ crimes. Likewise, to mobilize the population in the victim’s favor

reduces the terrorists' temptation to carry out summary executions, to be careless or trigger happy.

The role of the State is critical in this perspective. Either it protects the victims and seeks to safeguard their survival or it too enters into the game of numbers. Today we should be sending a clear message to the heads of State throughout the world: "Always choose the life of a human being - over all other considerations -, for this is the cornerstone of our civilization – it is our founding principle – and it must be at the heart of each and every one of your daily decisions."

It is clear that our heads of State do not have the capacity to act in all places, at all times. That is why we must not cross our arms and only wait for governments to act on our behalf. We all have a duty. We all, at some stage in our lives, have an opportunity to help someone. Let us be reminded that, wherever we may find ourselves, if we are able to make a difference, even for just one single human being, we have already begun to change the world.

In this war against terrorism which plagues our generation, all of us who protect victims are confronted with the same dilemma: do we choose acts of force, or do we give priority to negotiation. There is no simple answer. But fortunately there exists a rule of thumb, to guide us: we must act, not upon **interests**, but upon **values**.

That which applies to us as citizens, applies - just as much - to our governments. And there is one value we cannot renounce without betraying ourselves: that value is freedom. In the face of terrorism, this absolute imperative must be translated into a precise conceptual framework: no-one can be sacrificed on the altar of the Interest of State.

If the life and liberty of a human being requires opening a dialogue then we should enter a dialogue – even if it is with terrorists. I know that this may seem counter-intuitive in today’s world. But life has no price. The victims cannot be expected to carry the weight of the war against terrorists on their shoulders. It is the terrorists who must carry the weight of their crimes.

It is not by refusing a dialogue that we will succeed in dissuading the terrorists. Instead, by making it an international responsibility to bring them before justice, we will succeed in undermining them. Thus, it must be made loud and clear that dialogue and/or negotiations, *cannot* be a free pass to impunity.

Finally, there is a question ...that, I have to admit, haunts me: how long will we continue to turn a blind eye to the fact that terrorism is a lucrative enterprise that enriches many around the world? How can we continue to ignore the clear structural link between terrorism and drug trafficking, between terrorism and arms trafficking, between terrorism and prostitution and human trafficking, between terrorism and government corruption? You may say that this does not directly concern the victims. But every time we interfere with the financing of terrorism

we are diminishing the terrorists' power to harm and to make more victims. I believe that beyond supporting the victims, we should be working hard to see that there are *no* more victims of terrorism.

Whether we like it or not, one day it will be necessary to bring to light all those "politically correct" decisions that we make every day, decisions dressed in self-righteousness, but that in reality, only enable the inner workings of terrorist networks.

Mr. Ban Ki-Moon, I encourage you to open up this debate, the world is in dire need of it.

It is for this reason that I have come before you today with great urgency. I am certain that there is much we can do to help. We must never accept silence as a strategy for confronting the plight of the victims of terrorism. We must come up with a response today, now, immediately.

The antidote to this cruel deadlock is action. The fate of victims of terrorism is above all a political affair. If there is no political will, there is nothing. The existence of this political will depends upon our ability to reward those leaders who are willing to risk their popularity and pay a political price for acting.

The debates and reflections that begin today must permit us to open the way to a better world, a world where the courage of those who are free and have the power to act, can answer the silent call of those who are suffering.

In the name of those who are still in chains, I implore today that you listen to your heart, that you do not forget that our world is in great need of compassion, tenderness, and generosity. We have to confront the hate and barbarity of terrorism with the supreme values of Humanism and Love. The answer to the devastation and despair caused by terrorism is to be found, not in the abyss of violence and revenge, but in the treasures of the human soul.