

Archbishop Silvano Tomasi's Address to the United Nations

22nd Special Session of the UN Human Rights Council, Geneva, 1 September 2014

Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the Permanent Representative of the Holy See to the United Nations, called on the international community to take concrete steps to stop the on-going violence and persecution of minorities in northern Iraq at the 22nd Special Session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva on Monday, 1 September 2014.

Mr. President,

1. In several regions of the world there are centres of violence – Northern Iraq in particular – that challenge the local and international communities to renew their efforts in the pursuit of peace. Even prior to considerations of international humanitarian law and the law of war, and no matter the circumstances, an indispensable requirement is respect for the inviolable dignity of the human person, which is the foundation of all human rights. The tragic failure to uphold such basic rights is evident in the self-proclaimed destructive entity, the so-called “Islamic State” group (ISIS). People are decapitated as they stand for their belief; women are violated without mercy and sold like slaves on the market; children are forced into combat; prisoners are slaughtered against all juridical provisions.
2. The responsibility of international protection, especially when a government is not able to ensure the safety of the victims, surely applies in this case, and concrete steps need to be taken with urgency and resolve in order to stop the unjust aggressor, to re-establish a just peace and to protect all vulnerable groups of society. Adequate steps must be taken to achieve these goals.
3. All regional and international actors must explicitly condemn the brutal, barbaric and uncivilized behavior of the criminal groups fighting in Eastern Syria and Northern Iraq.
4. The responsibility to protect has to be assumed in good faith, within the framework of international law and humanitarian law. Civil society in general, and religious and ethnic communities in particular, should not become an instrument of regional and international geopolitical games. Nor should they be viewed as an “object of indifference” because of their religious identity or because other players consider them to be a “negligible quantity”. Protection, if not effective, is not protection.
5. The appropriate United Nations agencies, in collaboration with local authorities, must provide adequate humanitarian aid, food, water, medicines, and shelter, to those who are fleeing violence. This aid, however, should be a temporary emergency assistance. The forcibly displaced Christians, Yazidis and other groups have the right to return to their homes, receive assistance for the rebuilding of their houses and places of worship, and live in safety.
6. Blocking the flow of arms and the underground oil market, as well as any indirect political support, of the so-called “Islamic State” group, will help put an end to the violence.
7. The perpetrators of these crimes against humanity must be pursued with determination. They must not be allowed to act with impunity, thereby risking the repetition of the atrocities that have been committed by the so-called “Islamic State” group.

Mr. President,

8. As Pope Francis stressed in his letter to Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon: “the violent attacks...cannot but awaken the consciences of all men and women of goodwill to concrete acts of solidarity by protecting those affected or threatened by violence and assuring the necessary and urgent assistance for the many displaced people as well as their safe return to their cities and their homes.” What is happening today in Iraq has happened in the past and could happen tomorrow in other places. Experience teaches us that an insufficient response, or even worse, total inaction, often results in further escalation of violence. Failing to protect all Iraqi citizens, allowing them to be innocent victims of these criminals in an atmosphere of empty words, amounting to a global silence, will have tragic consequences for Iraq, for its neighbouring countries and for the rest of the world. It will also be a serious blow to the credibility of those groups and individuals who strive to uphold human rights and humanitarian law. In particular, the leaders of the different religions bear a special responsibility to make it clear that no religion can justify these morally reprehensible and cruel and barbaric crimes, and to remind everyone that as one human family, we are our brothers’ keepers.

Archbishop Silvano Tomasi

Permanent Representative of the Holy See to the United Nations