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Statement of the Holy See to the U.N. at the 28th Session of the Human Rights Council: Item 4 - Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (Geneva, 17 March 2015)

Here below the Statement by H.E. Archbishop Silvano M. Tomasi, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva, at the 28th Session of the Human Rights Council: Item 4 - Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (Geneva, 17 March 2015):

Statement by H.E. Archbishop Silvano M. Tomasi

Mr. President,

Conflicts forced a staggering 5.5 million people to flee their homes in the first six months of 2014. This represents a major addition to the record of 51.2 million worldwide who already were forcibly displaced by the end of 2013.[1] The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic recently informed that, since the start of the crisis, “more than 10 million Syrians have fled their homes. This amounts to almost half of the country’s population, now deprived of their basic rights to shelter and adequate housing, security and human dignity. Many are victims of human rights violations and abuses and are in urgent need of protective measures and support.” To compound this tragedy, more than 3 million people, most of them women and children, have fled the Syrian Arab Republic and are refugees in neighboring countries.[2] Violence continues to produce victims in the Middle East in particular, but elsewhere as well, where hatred and intolerance are the criteria for inter-group relations. The human rights of these forcibly displaced people are systematically violated with impunity. A variety of sources have provided evidence on how children suffer the brutal consequences of a persistent status of war in their country. Children are recruited, trained and used in active combat roles, at times even as human shields in military attacks. The so-called Islamic State (ISIL) group has worsened the situation by training and using children as suicide bombers; killing children who belong to different religious and ethnic communities; selling children as slaves in markets; executing large numbers of boys; and committing other atrocities.[3] In camps throughout the Middle East, children constitute approximately half of the refugee population and they are the most vulnerable demographic group in times of conflict and displacement. Their life in exile is full of uncertainty and daily struggles. “Many are separated from their families, have difficulties accessing basic services, and live in increasing poverty. Only one in two Syrian refugee children

in the neighboring countries is receiving education.”[4] Beyond the specific conditions faced by internally displaced children and those in the refugee camps of the region and beyond the enormous tragedies affecting them, it seems important to envision their future, by focusing on three particular areas of concern.

First, the world must deal with the situation of millions of stateless children, who as such according to the law, were never born. The United Nations estimates that approximately 30.000 of these children can be found in Lebanon alone. Moreover, due to the Middle Eastern conflicts and massive uprooting of families, several thousand unregistered children are scattered in camps and other asylum countries.[5] These are “phantom kids” whose parents have escaped from Syria but whose name and date of birth were never registered at any office. In fact, UNICEF reports that 3.500 children “officially” do not have a family or an identity. This occurs because all personal documents have been destroyed under the rubble of war or, at times, simply because their parents did not have the time or the money to certify their birth. Stateless children cross international borders alone and find themselves completely abandoned. The number of stateless persons in the world reaches 10 million. While all face grave difficulties, those fleeing Syria face challenges that are even more dramatic: a child below eleven years of age and without documents has no access even to the most basic services. These children obviously cannot go to school and they are likely to be adopted illegally, recruited in an armed group, abused, exploited, or forced into prostitution. Every child has the right to be registered at birth and thus to be recognized as a person before the law. The implementation of this right opens the way for access to the enjoyment of other rights and benefits that affect the future of these children. Simplifying mechanisms and requirements for registration, waving fees, advocating for refugee inclusive registration legislation, represent steps to solve the plight of stateless children.

Second, another key component that shapes the future of uprooted children is education. Both in Syria and in refugee camps in the region, provision of education has become extremely problematic. Some 5,000 schools have been destroyed in Syria[6] where more than one million and half students no longer receive an education and where attacks against school buildings continue. The extremists from ISIL already have closed a great number of schools in the zones under their control. The dangerous condition of the country does not permit children to attend school nor to have access to a proper education. The international community as a whole seems to have misjudged the extent of the Syrian crisis. It was thought by many that the Syrian refugee flow was temporary and such refugees would leave their countries of asylum in a matter of months. Now, after four years of conflict, it appears likely that these refugees will remain and the locals have to learn to live side by side with them. As a result of the conflict, children are behind in their education and are missing the enjoyment of their childhood. In the camps, there are only 40 teachers for more than 1.000 students, aged 6 to 17. Most of the teachers are volunteers, and often refugees themselves. Classes focus on drawing and music to help ease the trauma; writing and mathematics are taught when books are available. In Turkey, children face additional problems because of the language barrier. These refugees speak Arabic or Kurdish so, they cannot attend public schools where only Turkish is spoken. For different reasons, whether in their home countries or in the refugee camps, children find an inadequate education system that jeopardizes their future. Everywhere there is an urgent need for an education system that could absorb these children and bring some normalcy to their lives.

Third, another disruptive consequence of the continuing violence that torments the Middle East is the separation of family members, which forces many minors to fend for themselves. The root of the destabilization of society is the generalized violence that leads to the breaking down of the family, society’s basic social unit. To prevent the further exploitation of children and to protect them properly, an additional effort should be made to facilitate the reunification of minors with their respective families.

Mr. President,

The right to a legal identity, to an adequate education and to a family are key elements and specific requirements in a comprehensive system of protection for children. Such measures require the close collaboration of all stakeholders. Access to quality education and psycho-social care, together with other basic services, is extremely important. However, children cannot benefit from such services unless they are registered at birth and their families and communities are supported to protect them better. If the violence does not stop and the normal pace of education and development is not resumed, these children are at risk of becoming a lost generation.

Peace in Syria and the Middle East is the priority for healthy growth of all children. With conviction, during his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Pope Francis stated: "May the violence cease and may humanitarian law be respected, thus ensuring much needed assistance to those who are suffering! May all parties abandon the attempt to resolve issues by the use of arms and return to negotiations. A solution will only be found through dialogue and restraint, through compassion for those who suffer, through the search for a political solution and through a sense of fraternal responsibility." [7]

Thank you, Mr. President.

[00497-EN.01] [Original text: English]

[B0222-XX.01]

[1] UNHCR, Mid-Year Trends 2014, pg. 3.

[2] *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, Human Rights Council (Twenty-seventh session). 5 February 2015.

[3] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Concluding observations on the combined second to fourth periodic reports of Iraq*, pg. 5, point 23 (a), 4 February 2015, Geneva.

[4] A. Guterres speech at the opening session of the "Investing in the Future" conference in Sharjah, 15th October 2014.

[5] UNICEF *Monthly humanitarian situation report, Syria Crisis*, 14 Oct – 12 Nov 2014.

[6] *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, Human Rights Council (Twenty-seventh session). 5 February 2015.

[7] Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Meeting with refugees and disabled young people, Latin Church, Bethany beyond the Jordan, Saturday, 24 May 2014.
