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Opening session

Remarks by Ivan Šimonović,
United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights

12 April 2015, Doha, Qatar
Mr. Chairperson,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

As a former Minister of Justice – and a Law School professor –
I am very glad to see so many colleagues in Doha, and I sincerely congratulate the organizers on this important event. This is an ideal opportunity to discuss the most effective ways to prevent and fight crime, and I will briefly share with you the views of the United Nations Human Rights Office.

Crime prevention and criminal justice are deeply related to all three pillars of UN action: peace and security, development, and human rights. Lack of respect for civil and political, as well as social and economic rights, erodes social cohesion and the rule of law and facilitates crime. Trying to prevent crime only through increased repression in such situations is like trying to extinguish fire by pouring on gasoline.

In this interdependent world, corruption and organized crime affect not only national, but also global development, and hurt us all. We must do more to exchange information and ensure joint and coordinated action. We cannot afford to see traffickers or terrorists cooperate better than governments and international organizations fighting against them.
There is a vicious cycle between the lack of respect for human rights, crime and conflicts. Just as a lack of respect for human rights is among the root causes of crimes and conflicts, conflict or post-conflict situations exacerbate gross human rights violations, including international crimes, but also provide fertile grounds for common and opportunistic crime.

And if after conflict, its root causes are not addressed, if there is impunity for crimes committed or unequal treatment of their perpetrators, if there is a sense of powerlessness and injustice, it often leads to triggering new conflict, violence and crime.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Whether in peace, conflict or post conflict situations, States have a duty to take measures to protect populations from violence and insecurity and to deliver justice. However, such measures must be anchored in the respect for international human rights law. This is not only more principled; it is also more effective. For example, experience demonstrates that protecting human rights and the rule of law contributes to countering terrorism.

Today, many States are revising legislation and policy to combat terrorism. I urge them to recognize that the commission of human rights violations in the name of counter-terrorism is counter-productive. Arbitrary arrests, incommunicado detentions, torture, and unfair trials, fuel a sense of injustice and may in turn lead to further terrorist recruitment. States in which such human rights violations occur are not only violating international law; they also risk a loss of legitimacy and an erosion of the support of the population.
Ladies and gentleman,

I would also like to raise the issue of the death penalty, especially its increasing use as a response to drug trafficking and terrorism. There is no scientific evidence that the death penalty deters crime any more than, for example, a life sentence without parole. Research has consistently shown that the best deterrent of serious crimes lies in an efficient justice system which ensures that criminals face a high probability of punishment within a reasonable time.

I already mentioned that violating the rights of terrorism suspects may transform them into martyrs in the eyes of communities they belong to. The death penalty may have similar negative effects. In addition, if violent religious extremists perceive the death penalty as a shortcut to heaven, how could its application be a deterrent?

I invite you to our side-event on the ‘death penalty, drugs and terrorism’ on 14 April, to further discuss this important topic.

Excellencies, let me conclude.

A Government that respects human rights at all times and for all individuals, in full compliance with the principle of equality and non-discrimination, will go a long way towards preventing feelings of injustice that may feed violence and crime.
A human rights-compliant response to crime is not only the right thing to do; it is also the most effective thing to do.

Dear colleagues, I wish you all success in your highly important work to prevent crime and ensure criminal justice.

Thank you.