

**UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict
Concludes Five-Country Visit to the Middle East**
Rape, Sexual Slavery and Forced Marriage Used as Tactics of Terror

(New York, 7 May 2015) SRSG Zainab Hawa Bangura conducted her first scoping mission to the Middle East from 16 to 29 April 2015, visiting Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan.

Discussions with survivors and witnesses affirmed that sexual violence is being committed strategically, in a widespread and systematic manner, and with a high-degree of sophistication by most parties to the conflict. All parties in Syria and Iraq, both State and non-State actors, have an obligation under International Humanitarian Law to prevent and punish such crimes.

Women and girls are at risk and under assault at every point of their lives and along every step of the way – in the midst of active conflict, in areas under control of armed actors, at check-points and border crossings, and in detention facilities. Forced, temporary and early marriage including to fighters is part of the Jihad (Jihad Nikah) or encouraged as a “protection” mechanism where families have no other means of providing for or ensuring the safety of young girls. The sale and transfer of women and girls among fighters and groups is part of the political economy of the conflict. In the countries that are hosting ever larger numbers of refugees, women and girls are also at acute risk of sexual violence and exploitation for prostitution by criminal elements.

ISIL have institutionalized sexual violence and the brutalization of women as a central aspect of their ideology and operations, using it as a tactic of terrorism to advance their key strategic objectives. This includes increasing recruitment by promising male fighters access to women and girls; fundraising through the sale of women and girls in slave markets and through ransoms paid by relatives; the transfer and trafficking of girls among fighters and armed groups; use of sexual violence to displace populations; use and threat of sexual violence to extract information for intelligence purposes; to control women’s reproductive capacity; to dismantle social, familial and community structures in order to construct a new “Caliphate”; to punish, humiliate and demoralize dissenters and enforce compliance with their radical ideology.

In Iraq, the Special Representative met with women and girls in Erbil, Dohuk and Lalish, some 60 kilometers from ISIL-held Mosul. The staggering sexual violence and torture being committed by ISIL are crimes against humanity and an affront to Islam. The international community must therefore ensure that the protection and empowerment of women is at the heart of its counter-terrorism response.

It is also clear that the Syrian crisis has cross-border dimensions and requires a concerted regional response, including improved information-sharing across countries. Other countries in the region need to provide greater support to frontline states that are under enormous pressure financially and in terms of institutional capacity and the provision of services for refugees.

Conflict-related sexual violence in the region will require a security and political response, combined with a justice and service response. There can be no security in the Middle East or elsewhere without women’s security.

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