

European Remembrance Day for Victims of Terrorism

Friday 10 March 2017

Venue: Centre Albert Borschette

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for being here today to the 13th European Remembrance Day for Victims of Terrorism. I appreciate that for many of you, it must have taken a lot of courage. It is both an honour and a privilege for me to join you to remember together the victims of terrorism and to share some of your experiences.

Since the Madrid bombings on 11 March 2004, the European Commission has marked this commemoration of all victims of terrorism. Unfortunately, since that terrible day 13 years ago, we have witnessed too many atrocities. Sadly their frequency has increased significantly in the last couple of years as the terrorist threat to Europe has continued to rise.

Just 11 days after last year's commemorative event Brussels came under attack, at Zaventem airport and Maelbeek metro station, a short walk from this room. 32 were killed and hundreds more were injured, both physically and emotionally.

We sometimes have a tendency to focus on the 'jihadist' threat, but I am equally appalled by the frequency of attacks by violent right-wing extremists. In the past 12 months, we have seen an increasing number of attacks against mosques – often when young children are inside. There was also the brutal murder of the British Member of Parliament, Jo Cox. At the start of this year, a bomb was detonated at an asylum centre in Gothenburg, following two similar attempted attacks also aimed at refugees. Remarkably, only one person was injured.

It is abhorrent that refugees who have fled the barbarity of terrorist groups in Syria, seeking safety and security here in Europe, are once more exposed to fear, pain and suffering.

Nor do we forget our citizens whose lives were taken or shattered by attacks overseas, In some cases turning holidays of a lifetime into the worst imaginable nightmare.

Today is about remembering the victims of all terrorist atrocities, regardless of nationality or religion, and regardless of when or where they happened.

The fight against terrorism is primarily for Member States. But, as Commissioner for the Security Union, I firmly believe that the EU has a valuable role to play in terms of our ability to prevent and disrupt terrorist activity and in bringing the perpetrators, instigators, backers, recruiters and financiers to justice.

A huge amount of work is underway, as I speak, to improve our counter-terrorism capability so that we can better protect our citizens and prevent others from coming to harm. One vital piece of that effort is to ensure that victims of terrorism are better supported, that their rights are strengthened, and to ensure that their voices are heard.

Immediately following the Paris attacks the Commission proposed a draft Directive on combatting terrorism. It included important measures to support, assist and protect victims of terrorism. I am grateful to all those involved in making sure that the proposal was supported and adopted only a few days ago.

It is thanks to the testimonies of the bereaved and survivors and first line responders that we are able to better comprehend the specific needs of victims of terrorism; what helps the victims and what does not; what should be done and at what stage, as well as what the weak points are in cooperation between national and cross-border organisations. I am delighted to see several of those who helped us in this work here today.

The aim is to mitigate the suffering inflicted as far as possible and to ensure the best and most appropriate care and support not just in the short term for victims but also in the longer term, recognising that the emotional scars remain for much longer.

The new Directive obliges Member States to ensure that the necessary services are available as soon as an attack has happened and for as long as necessary. This support includes medically trained emergency staff as well as psychological support and trauma assistance. We will hear more about this later.

In order to achieve this, the arrangements need to be in place, as part of emergency response arrangements, to ensure the immediate activation of the appropriate support services. Ensuring this level of preparedness can make a

massive difference. After the attacks in Paris and Nice for example, we saw effective cooperation of the relevant services – including victim support groups working closely with the emergency services, the Red Cross and other NGOs with clear command and control measures in places from the national level down to the operational level.

Getting timely, accurate and reliable information to the families and loved ones of victims of terrorism is crucial. One of the challenges here might be that the victim might not reside in the country where the attack has happened. So the new provisions require that all Member States concerned talk to one another and pass on information swiftly to ensure that victims are in no way neglected immediately following an attack, nor forgotten about once they return home.

And finally, the new provisions also cover access to justice for victims of terrorism - including to lawyers, legal advice and assistance in claiming compensation. With the adoption of the Directive, we now need to start working on its swift and effective implementation.

In addition, and within the EU's Radicalisation Awareness Network, a dedicated working group for the Victims of Terrorism is responsible for maintaining the network of victims' organisations. The two working group leaders, Cat

Wilkinson and María Lozano [NOTE: both present], have organised today's commemoration ceremony, with the help and support of the RAN Centre of Excellence. On behalf of everybody, I'd like to thank them.

I think it is only right that the organisation of this Remembrance Day is in the hands of those working with victims of terrorism, to be certain that it faithfully reflects their views and wishes.

Meeting survivors of terrorist attacks and those who have lost loved ones - some of you are in this room today – makes me even more determined to work for a safer, more secure Europe. Through your words, by your witness, we are all reminded of the duty to do everything in our power to avoid such horrendous acts taking place, to bring those responsible for them to justice and to support you in overcoming your suffering.

Let me conclude by noting the great value your voices carry in the struggle to prevent further violence. Victims of terrorism can be powerful agents of change.

I am sincerely moved by the courage you have shown in being here today. Thank you.