Committee Topics for 2019

TOPIC A: A World Against Violence & Violent Extremism

The United Nations General Assembly has worked hard to combat violent extremism and unite the world against violence. Violent extremism aims to advance ideological, religious or political ends through physical and non-physical violence. Violent extremism includes the violent actions taken by individuals, actions taken to support violence committed by others and the underlying set of beliefs that justify the use of violence to advance ideological ends. While typically associated with religious beliefs of extremists, violent extremism is not limited to religion. Violent extremism is often included as part of a broader discussion of terrorism, though not all terrorism is motivated by violent extremism. The rise of global transportation and telecommunications networks have allowed many violent extremist groups to build global networks. The General Assembly’s work on violent extremism focuses on addressing the root causes of extremism. The underlying argument is that by eliminating the factors that allow extremist ideologies to spread, the acts of terror and support for those actions can be reduced or eliminated.

Terrorism has been a near ever-present phenomenon since the twentieth century. A growing number of major terrorist attacks in the 1970s spurred increased global awareness and action by the United Nations. Many prominent terror groups of the 1970s aimed to advance primarily political objectives, including far-right ideologies, far-left ideologies and political independence. In 1972, the General Assembly established an Ad Hoc Committee on International Terrorism, which worked to identify the root causes of terrorism. This Committee recognized that terrorism often occurred as a reaction to oppressive regimes or other restrictive societies, and thus urged the end of colonialist and racist governments. The Ad Hoc Committee reconvened several times in the following years, supporting the creation of the Declaration of Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism in 1994. The Declaration called for greater cooperation among Member States in counter-terrorism activities and for Member States to end all support to terrorist organizations. Following this declaration, the General Assembly re-established the Committee on International Terrorism in 1996 with the goal of producing a comprehensive convention on international terrorism, however there has been little progress on this issue due to an inability to agree on an acceptable definition of terrorism.

The focus on countering terrorism greatly intensified following the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. In the wake of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, discussions increasingly focused on the perceived root causes of terror and violent ideologies. There was significant disagreement about the root causes, but States and experts regularly pointed at political repression and economic hardship as two major factors. In 2006, the General Assembly adopted the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, which sought to address the underlying conditions that lead to the spread of terrorism, improve efforts to prevent and combat terrorism, increase the capacity of States and the United Nations to respond to terrorism, and to maintain human rights and rule of law. This Global Strategy marked the first unanimous agreement on counter-terrorism efforts, and its first and fourth pillars reflect a desire to address the root causes of terrorism.
The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in the years following the adoption of the Global Strategy indicated that a different approach was needed to prevent the spread of violent extremism. Indeed, the international community realized that addressing the underlying condition that may foster terrorism is a goal separate from the security aspects of counter-terrorism. Further, the inability of the Ad Hoc Committee to progress on developing a comprehensive convention on international terrorism encouraged the international community to devote special focus to attaining a World against Violence and Extremism (WAVE). In 2013, the General Assembly adopted by consensus its first resolution specifically on WAVE. This resolution recognized the importance of education and community engagement in preventing the rise of violent extremism, as well as the utility of upholding freedoms of expression and of the press in fighting intolerance. Additionally, the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) in 2015 brought together over 100 countries and relevant parties to develop an action agenda to prevent and counter violent extremism and raise the importance of CVE for fighting the spread of the Islamic State.

In 2016, the Secretary-General presented the Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism to the General Assembly, which called for incorporating both security-based processes and for preventing the underlying conditions that radicalize and foster violent extremist groups. In particular, the Secretary-General called for Member States to create national and regional plans of action to achieve WAVE, noting that existing plans to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals may fit well with the WAVE goals. Later that year, the General Assembly revisited the topic, passing a resolution which emphasized the importance of calling attention to violence against children and women, educating citizens on the importance of human rights, and promoting and practicing tolerance in life and online. Additionally, the General Assembly undertook its fifth biennial review of the Global Counterterrorism Strategy, which echoed the Secretary-General’s concerns about the impact of radicalization in prisons and the impact of violent extremism on women and youth. Looking forward, the United Nations has increased its emphasis on the importance of women and youth to preventing and countering violent extremism. Secretary-General Guterres spoke in 2017 to the Commission on the Status of Women on the importance of women’s empowerment, noting that peace processes have been shown to be significantly more effective with women’s involvement. The United Nations has been criticized, however, for restricting their attention to women as passive targets of extremism, when women have also actively worked in the leadership and in supportive roles of extremist groups. Increased focus has also fallen on the role of youth in preventing the spread of violent extremism, as they are especially vulnerable to radicalization and recruitment, particularly in conflict-torn regions where their future prospects are uncertain. The 2015 Global Youth Summit Against Violent Extremism adopted an action agenda highlighting this role, placing an emphasis on the importance of social media in the spread of violent extremism. Social media itself is an important aspect of this problem, as the Internet has become an effective tool for radicalization and recruitment. However, recent efforts have attempted to exploit the same qualities that make social media so effective in the spread of violent extremism to help counter and prevent it.

Questions to consider from your government’s perspective on this issue include the following:
• How should the General Assembly address the relationship between women and violent extremism?
• What role do youth play in preventing and combating violent extremism?
• How can the international community combat the spread of violent extremism online?

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United Nations Documents
TOPIC B: Human Rights to Safe drinking water and sanitation

Water is one of the most fundamental human needs, yet 884 million people lack access to safe drinking water. This poses a serious threat to human health and human dignity, as well as presenting a barrier to economic and social development. Industrial contamination, climate change and infrastructure neglect create increasingly urgent problems for millions of people. Lack of proper sanitation is one of the largest causes for drinking water contamination. Forty percent of the population worldwide lives with insufficient sanitation procedures, primarily in the form of living without bathrooms or latrines. This population is one of the poorest and most vulnerable and risks disease and death due to drinking water contamination.

As a health issue, lack of infrastructure is one of the key contributors to insufficient access to clean water and sanitation. Waste and garbage leach toxins and spread dangerous bacteria like cholera, dysentery and E. coli. They can also cause parasitic infection in populations. Existing infrastructure is often worn down, made with potentially hazardous materials like lead and often vulnerable to natural disaster. Increasing the number of sanitation facilities and the quality of infrastructure has been a long-standing goal of the United Nations. However, the costs of replacing, installing and updating infrastructure is extremely expensive and without much return on investment. This leads to prolonged use of worn systems and can place a disproportionate amount of the costs on low-income users who are at the highest risk, including cost per use or increased service costs and taxes that low-income users simply cannot afford to pay. As a result, even when facilities for clean water and sanitation are in place, many are forced to still use old systems or to make hours-long trips to wells or springs, or to use insufficient sanitation facilities. Once in place, getting people to use the infrastructure and facilities is difficult as well. Public awareness about how waste can spread illness to drinking water and how to access potable water is a key to effectively increasing access to both. The first actionable plan to address clean water and sanitation was developed at the United Nations Water Conference in 1977. The Conference aimed to assess the status of water access and water usage, avoid a global water crisis, and monitor water use with regard to natural hazards, health and pollution control. The Conference laid the base framework for global water policy and water management, and is still used as a starting point for State policies. The Conference resolutions and final report committed Members to improving water quality and sanitation standards by 1990. This led directly to the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade of 1981-1990. The decade focused international attention on ensuring reasonable access to safe water supplies and focused on areas without adequate sanitation facilities. These policies still allowed for Member States to charge users for access to clean water and for infrastructure development.
The 1992 Dublin Statement laid out four guidelines for Member States at the local, national and international levels. These guidelines include: States should use a holistic approach to water management; development should be participatory and include members of relevant communities from the bottom up; women are integral to the safeguarding of water; and though water is a human right, it should also be recognized as an economic good. The Dublin Statement contributed to the move toward sustainable usage of water and the related actions that helped to reverse trends of over consumption, pollution, and rising threats from drought and floods. Sustainable water and sanitation systems were also included in the Agenda 21, the outcome document of the 1992 Earth Summit.

In 2003, the United Nations declared the International Year of Freshwater, increasing awareness and changing individual behaviors in water use, sanitation and hygiene; mobilized participation of communities; set national targets and plans to generate investment; and increased regulatory framework enforcement for water management that take into account both public health and ecosystem needs. In 2005, the United Nations began the International Decade for Action ‘Water for Life’ 2005-2015. Its goal was to promote efforts to fulfill international commitments in policies on water. The campaign helped to bridge cooperation between governments over international water disputes and for commitments made between diverse internal groups, but has only begun the steps to bridge economic interests and public need. The cooperation balanced economic interests, the needs of the ecosystem and the needs of people in poverty.

In 2010, the United Nations General Assembly declared access to safe drinking water and sanitation a human right. This was a direct result of a 2008 United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights initiative that examined safe drinking water and sanitation as a human right and that called for a Special Rapporteur on the issue. Declaring access to safe drinking water and sanitation a human right ensures that States are obligated to provide clean drinking water and sanitation to their citizens. Legally, this should include providing equal access to both and preventing unreasonable barriers to access. The legal precedent for this set forth in the Dublin Statement, however, does not define affordability; the United Nations has a suggested limitation of less than three percent of household income going towards water and sanitation. Because utility companies have significantly more political power than citizens, particularly among low-income persons, policies have not caught up to this standard. While some areas have found community-led sanitation projects effective, they are not universally available or practical.

Currently there is more than enough fresh water on the planet to adequately provide for water needs but, due to unproductive economies and poor infrastructure, millions of people die from inadequate water supply, sanitation and hygiene each year. Since 1990, 2.1 billion people have gained access to improved sanitation facilities, but many are still under threat from drought and water shortages, inadequate infrastructure, environmental contamination and natural disaster. While the United Nations has focused on public awareness, the infrastructure investments, public education campaigns and open access to water all require vast amounts of money and urgently need to be completed. Some Member States, however, are reluctant to spend that money, are unable to complete these projects independently or are simply unable to focus on the issue due to geopolitical conflict. Eighty percent of human water waste is discharged into rivers or the sea without any pollution removal. This contamination and climate change create increasingly
expensive projects to which many cannot afford access. Without legal systems to fix these barriers, both physical and financial, people worldwide will be denied the water they need to live.

Questions to consider from your government’s perspective on this issue include the following:
• What policies and programs can States implement to ensure the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation?
• With safe drinking water and sanitation as a human right, what responsibility do States and the private sector have to protect the natural environment and their natural water supplies?
• How can States best address issues of natural water scarcity?
• How does the privatization of water supplies and infrastructure impact the human right to safe drinking water?

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