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Consideration of reports of States parties

List of issues in relation to the fifth periodic report of the Syrian Arab Republic

Addendum

Replies of the Syrian Arab Republic to the list of issues*

[Date received: 19 October 2018]

* The present document is being issued without formal editing.



Replies to the list of issues in relation to the fifth periodic report of the Syrian Arab Republic

Part I

Paragraph 1: “Please provide updated information on the status of the children’s rights bill, whether it sets the legal age for marriage for both boys and girls at 18 years and whether, when enacted, the bill’s provisions will supersede the personal status codes of the religious communities in the State party with regard to the minimum age for marriage.”

1. The State agencies assigned to draft the children’s rights bill have completed the process of review and revision, and the bill is now following the legal itinerary prior to issuance. The bill was constructed on the basis of the four basic principles contained in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and does not discriminate between one child and another within the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic.

2. The bill sets the age for eligibility to marry at 18. As regards whether or not it supersedes other legislation, the general provisions of the bill state that, “in all decisions and procedures concerning children, whatever the body that issues or undertakes them, priority is to be given to the best interests of the child”.

Paragraph 2: “Please provide information on the mandate of the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population regarding children’s rights and measures taken to implement the national action plan for the implementation of the Convention in all parts of the State party.”

3. Under Act No. 42 of 2003, as amended by Act No. 6 of 2014 and Legislative Decree No. 5 of 2017, the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population was given jurisdiction to address questions regarding families, children, women, youth, older persons and persons with disabilities and to deal with population-related issues. The Commission is the national coordinating body in those areas and is responsible for proposing and updating legislation, conducting research and recommending policies to promote and empower those groups, in line with national and international standards. The ultimate purpose is to protect families, make them more cohesive, defend their identity and values, and contribute to raising their standard of living on several different fronts.

4. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population has taken prompt action to protect and promote the rights of children, redoubling its efforts to respond to the challenges that have arisen as a result of the situation within the Syrian Arab Republic during the years of crisis. It has worked with the competent State agencies to facilitate the drafting of the children’s rights bill and has developed national plans for the protection of children, including the following:

- An action plan to combat the worst forms of child labour;
- A national plan for child victims of recruitment by armed terrorist groups;
- A national plan for the implementation of the national early childhood strategy;
- A national plan to combat child begging.

5. In addition, the Commission has proposed several laws to govern children’s rights and child protection and has taken action to raise awareness about related issues. It has also established a family protection unit to work with children and women who are victims of violence.

6. Following the interactive dialogue on reports submitted by the Syrian Arab Republic, the Commission publishes the concluding observations of human rights treaty bodies, including those of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. It has developed a plan for the implementation of the concluding observations on the fourth periodic report, issued by the Committee in 2011, and has organized workshops to disseminate and raise

awareness about the Convention on the Rights of the Child at a national level and to build capacity among people working in relevant fields. In order to support those efforts, it has also promoted cooperation with United Nations agencies operating in the Syrian Arab Republic.

Paragraph 3: “Please provide information on measures taken to ensure birth registration and access to nationality for all children born to Syrian mothers and foreign fathers, in particular for children born abroad. Please provide information about the measures taken to ensure birth registration and access to nationality for Syrian child refugees born in neighbouring countries, in particular, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.”

7. Concerning the registration of births of children born to Syrian mothers and foreign fathers, domestic legislation in the Syrian Arab Republic provides for the registration of all births occurring on national territory, irrespective of nationality. This is an obligation and any failure to comply or delay in compliance entails a penalty.

8. Concerning access to nationality for children born to Syrian mothers and foreign fathers, efforts are still ongoing in that regard. However, the crisis affecting the Syrian Arab Republic has delayed discussion on the subject and the enactment of a relevant law.

9. Concerning measures taken to ensure birth registration and access to nationality for Syrian child refugees born abroad, in the light of the fact that many civil registry offices have been put out of service due to terrorist activities, the Government has been taking steps to facilitate registration procedures, particularly with regard to birth registration, including the following:

- Thanks to an amendment of article 20 of the Civil Status Act, under Act No. 24 of 8 December 2015, it is now possible for births to be registered irrespective of the delay, the place where the birth occurred or the place the citizen is registered. Article 20 (13) reads: “All civil status events, irrespective of the delay since their occurrence, are to be registered the place where they occurred or the place of original registration, etc.”;
- Regular civil status certificates (birth certificates or death certificates) issued by the mayor of the place of residence of the party concerned are admissible;
- A number of units have been set up to support the operations of the civil affairs directorates, particularly in governorates and other places that were under the control of armed terrorist groups. Thus, units for the governorate of Raqqah have been set up in Damascus and Hama, and units for Idlib have been set up in in Damascus, Tartus and Ladhīqiyah. Those, in fact, are the governorates to which citizens from Raqqah and Idlib fled when escaping the terrorist groups;
- An integrated service centre has been set up in Damascus to provide civil status services to citizens from all governorates;
- Groups have been formed at shelters and in areas liberated from terrorist groups to provide civil status services in places where registry offices have not been reactivated.

10. As regards births outside the Syrian Arab Republic, with the closure of a number of Syrian embassies it became necessary to amend the Civil Status Act in order to enable citizens abroad to register civil status events. As a consequence, Legislative Decree No. 26 of 2007 has undergone various amendments the purpose of which is to facilitate the registration of such events. The most important amendments, contained in Act No. 4 of 2017, include the following:

- Civil status events may now be registered in the place they occurred, the place of residence, Syrian embassies or consulates, or in the embassy or consulate charged with protecting the interests of Syrians;
- If the citizen concerned resides in an area far distant from the embassy or consulate, it is sufficient to send the relevant certificate (such as the birth certificate or death certificate) or a true copy thereof to the civil affairs directorate in the place where

the citizen is registered, either via relatives or a legal representative, in order for the event in question to be recorded;

- Act No. 24 of 2015 amended paragraphs (b) and (c) of Legislative Decree No. 26 as follows:
 - Embassies are allowed to register births of persons up to the age of 18, whereas they had previously been prohibited from registering the birth of anyone over the age of 14;
 - All civil status events, irrespective of the delay since their occurrence, may be registered at embassies and consulates;
 - The period during which events that occurred outside the country may be registered has been changed from 60 days to 90 days thanks to an amendment to article 14 of Legislative Decree No. 26 of 2007, under Act No. 20 of 2011.

11. A guide on civil status procedures in the Syrian Arab Republic has recently been published, thanks to cooperation between the Ministry of the Interior and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The guide is part of an initiative to help citizens understand the procedures whereby they may obtain civil status documents and register events in a simplified way. The guide will be distributed to embassies and consulates in order to make it available to Syrian citizens abroad.

12. At the level of civil society, the Syrian Trust for Development and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent are also involved in a number of projects to help citizens in such circumstances.

Paragraph 4: “In relation to the ongoing crisis, please provide information on: (a) Steps taken to investigate, prosecute and punish all perpetrators, both State and non-State actors, of civilian casualties, enforced disappearances, torture and ill-treatment of children, and sexual violence and abuse of detained children; (b) The access of independent monitors and humanitarian organizations to all places where children are detained; (c) Plans of action to rebuild infrastructure and ensure the availability of potable water, electricity and sanitation.”

13. Firstly, the questions raised in this paragraph are interrelated, generalized and not legally precise. It is not clear what the issues are that require an answer. Moreover, they appear to contain implicit accusations levelled at the Syrian Government. The following points should be noted:

14. The competent authorities take the legal steps necessary to respond to any civilian casualties. The first thing they do is write a report on the circumstances of the incident, which is then referred to the competent judicial body for it to investigate in accordance with the law.

15. The Syrian Government has submitted dozens of documents to the United Nations Secretariat regarding victims of attacks carried out daily by armed terrorist groups from the areas they occupy against cities and villages under government control. And it has repeatedly called for the States that, openly and in the light of day, support those groups to be held to account. Alongside this are the human and material losses that have resulted from actions carried out by the so-called “international coalition”, whose airstrikes have been responsible for repeated massacres in different areas against civilians fleeing Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which the coalition claims to be fighting. Targets have included schools and groups of internally displaced persons, and the majority of victims have been children. The Committee should examine the documents that the Syrian Government has deposited with the United Nations Secretariat as they paint a clear picture of the human and material losses that have resulted from terrorist attacks and ferocious massacres, which have left a deep impression on Syrian children. Furthermore, the Committee should raise its own voice to call for the States involved to be held to account and made to face their international responsibility for violations against the rights of Syrian children, either through direct interventions on Syrian territory or through proxies in the terrorist groups.

16. Enforced disappearances and abductions are clearly and unambiguously defined as crimes in Syrian domestic legislation: the Counter-Terrorism Act No. 19 of 2012, the Criminal Code of 1949 as amended, and Act No. 21 of 2012 concerning crimes of abduction.

17. Such acts have always been part of the methodology employed by armed terrorist groups in areas under their control. Abducted persons are then used for a number of criminal purposes such as digging tunnels, acting as human shields, becoming pawns to force their families to pay a ransom or bargaining chips to exchange for other terrorists in custody. There are numerous examples of such practices but perhaps the most recent is the series of acts perpetrated by the so-called “White Helmets”, a terrorist organization that employs the practices described above. For example, terrorists working for the group abducted dozens of children from the area around Idlib in order to use them in staged chemical attacks, which were then attributed to the Syrian Government in order to create a false pretext for attacks against it.

18. Regarding the torture of children and sexual violence and abuse against detained children, first and foremost the Committee should recall that Syrian domestic legislation envisages severe penalties, mostly criminal penalties, for all forms of physical and sexual violence and abuse. That legislation provides protection for children in line with the provisions of the Constitution. Moreover, all cases in which children have to be questioned or detained are covered by the Juveniles Act No. 18 of 1974. The form and purpose of the Act are aimed at reformation. It envisages special procedural rules and courts to reform children, achieve their best interests and reintegrate them back into society. The Act states that no child under the age of 15 may be held in detention but must be placed in special reformatory institutions for juveniles. Children between the ages of 15 and 18 who have committed criminal offences are tried before juvenile courts and are subject to mitigating measures that also aim at their rehabilitation. In any case, the number of such cases within that age group is extremely small.

19. Attempting to raise questions that convey the impression that such practices are carried out by the Syrian Government amounts to an accusation which the Government rejects entirely. The Committee too should distance itself from such attempts. How many times have the promulgators of such allegations been asked by actors within the United Nations to provide information to back their claims, in order for it to be verified and investigated, but without response?

20. As regards the request to allow independent monitors and humanitarian organizations to access places where children are detained, the Syrian Arab Republic — while reaffirming the information given earlier about the detention of children — would like to make it clear that it has facilitated regular visits to prisons by the delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Damascus. Such visits serve to verify conditions of detention and to ensure that judicial guarantees are being duly applied and that adolescents are being held separately from adults.

21. On the subject of plans of action to rebuild infrastructure and ensure the availability of potable water, electricity and sanitation, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic is making efforts to reconstruct infrastructure and provide basic services, which were destroyed by the activities of armed terrorist groups. This will help people to return to their places of origin, which they had abandoned when fleeing from the terrorists, and create conditions to assist the population in rebuilding their lives and regaining a stability which terrorism had taken from them. Standing action plans and budgets have been devised to that end.

22. Over the last three years, the Syrian Government has been allocating the necessary financial resources for the annual investment plans of companies operating in the water, electricity and health-care sectors, in order to ensure the continuity of those services in all parts of the country. In the period 2015 to 2017, average investment expenditure in those sectors was around 30 per cent of the overall expenditure on investment budgets.

23. It should be emphasized at this point that the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic has called on all Syrians whom the crisis has driven from the country to return to their homeland following the liberation of most of the areas that had been overrun by

terrorists. The Government has made it clear that the decision to return should be voluntary and has highlighted the importance of conserving the dignity of the returnees. It has also reaffirmed its own responsibility to ensure the safety and security of citizens and to provide them with the elements they need to live a dignified life. In fact, the Government constantly reviews its legal protocols and does everything in its power to remove obstacles hindering the return of Syrian citizens, simplifying return procedures and concentrating on fundamental requirements such as housing, appropriate job-creation programmes and improvements in living standards.

24. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic welcomes the opening of a door to dialogue with United Nations agencies in order to develop concepts about the return of refugees and internally displaced persons, and about the possible role of and assistance to the Government in that regard, particularly following the establishment of the coordinating authority for the return of Syrian migrants abroad. The Government has asked the agencies, through their offices in the Syrian Arab Republic, to shoulder their own responsibilities vis-à-vis the needs of returning refugees and to support the voluntary return of Syrian citizens to their country in cooperation with the Syrian Government. That support should be provided within the mandate of the agencies concerned and unrestricted by conditions imposed by political donors, and within a framework of constructive cooperation founded on the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

Paragraph 5: “Please provide information on measures taken to protect children from sexual violence, including in internal displacement camps, to implement screening procedures to identify child survivors of sexual violence, to provide child victims with physical and psychological rehabilitation services and measures taken to address sexual violence against, and enslavement of, children, especially those from ethnic and religious minorities.”

25. The attention of the Committee should be drawn to the fact that, during the years of crisis the country has experienced, thousands of Syrians have been forced to flee their homes to escape armed terrorist groups. At the same time, the Government has had to bear immense burdens with rising numbers of internally displaced persons and a shortage of buildings to use as shelters coupled with the immense costs involved in adapting available buildings and limited financial resources. Nonetheless, and despite all those challenges, the Government has not set up camps to accommodate citizens preferring to allocate State-owned buildings for use as shelters, such as sports stadia, schools and educational facilities, places of worship and rural-development and social-care centres. There has been constant cooperation between the Ministry of Local Administration — the body chiefly responsible for this aspect of aid work — and international governmental and non-governmental organizations to adapt State-owned facilities and unfinished buildings for use as shelters and to provide appropriate conditions and meet the basic needs of persons living there.

26. Syrian domestic legislation envisages severe criminal penalties for sexual violence in general, and that severity is increased if the violence is perpetrated against a child. Furthermore, it should be noted that article 489 of the Criminal Code was amended by Act No. 11 of 2011 to introduce the death penalty for rape in cases where the victim is under the age of 15.

27. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population has been examining the situation of temporary accommodation homes in a number of governorates. On the basis of the outcomes of its work, it has launched awareness-raising campaigns on the situation of children in shelters and the importance of shielding them from violence of all forms.

28. Victims of violence are referred to special care centres, which are run by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour or by civil society organizations. There they receive treatment as well as health-care and psychological rehabilitation services with a view to reintegrating them into society. In addition, the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population’s family protection unit also plays a prominent role in treating victims of sexual violence.

Paragraph 6: “Please provide information on the measures taken to protect girls from child marriage, sexual slavery, abuse and violence, and other harmful practices such as ‘honour killings’, including information on whether such practices are criminalized and the applicable penalties.”

29. In this connection, note should be taken of a very recent legislative development: Act No. 24 of 2018, which amends certain provisions of the Criminal Code including article 469. The new provision envisages harsher penalties for anyone who concludes a marriage contract for a minor outside the competent courts.

30. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population has undertaken a study on early marriage and its causes, and is currently developing a new national action plan to deal with the phenomenon.

31. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population is continuing to run campaigns to raise awareness about early marriage and its negative effects on girls and on society as a whole. In parallel, and in view of the fact that the media is the most effective way to deliver this message to the broadest spectrum of the population, the Ministry of Information is working with the Directorate for Development Information to produce 30 advertisements on issues related to children’s rights, including early marriage.

32. As regards sexual slavery, abuse and violence, and other harmful practices, the periodic report already submitted to the Committee provides details about how such actions are criminalized under the Criminal Code and the Anti-Human Trafficking Act promulgated by Legislative Decree No. 3 of 2010. According to the latter, human trafficking is deemed to include any act involving any form of sexual exploitation of children, the photographing of children’s genitals and the use of children in pornography in exchange for direct or indirect remuneration. The penalty for these offences is set out in article 7 of the Decree, with provision for more severe penalties in article 8.

33. Among other legislative changes that have been entered onto the statute books, mention should be made of the amendment to article 548, which deals with so-called honour killings, the penalty for which has been increased from 5 to 7 years’ imprisonment.

Paragraph 7: “Please provide information on the foster care system, and the mechanisms for the oversight and monitoring of orphanages under the control of the various religious communities, including Muslim and Christian sects and Yazidis. Please also provide information on the measures taken to ensure that children orphaned due to the crisis are primarily placed with relatives or in family-type environments.”

34. Articles 137 to 146 of the Personal Status Act include provisions regulating foster care. Under those provisions, the care of children is entrusted to their parents if they remain married. In the event of a separation, care passes to the mother. The period of care ends at the age of 13 for boys and 15 for girls. In certain cases, which are specified in the law, care may be taken from the mother in the best interests of the child.

35. If children are deprived of the care of their own parents, then care services are provided by specialized and duly authorized institutions, which operate under the supervision of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. Those institutions provide an integrated package of services, depending on the particular requirements of each case, in line with international standards and the provisions enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, chief among them the principles of non-discrimination and the best interests of the child.

36. With respect to the Committee’s question concerning measures taken to ensure that children orphaned due to the crisis are primarily placed with relatives or in family-type environments, the first step that is taken if a child’s father dies is to place the child with the mother. If both parents die, the judge appoints a guardian, taking due account of the best interests of the child.

37. Mention should be made of the fact that the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, along with civil society organizations, has made efforts to provide alternative arrangements for children who have lost the care of their own family, including separated and

unaccompanied children. One of the things the Ministry has done in that regard has been to encourage families to take in children under the Islamic system of *kafalah*, particularly in view of the fact that many orphanages have been destroyed, damaged or put out of service by armed terrorist groups, and the surviving institutions have been placed under pressure as the number of children in them has increased.

38. Efforts have also been made to accommodate children's emerging needs and, in particular, their need for psychosocial support programmes tailored to the specific requirements of each case. In fact, via the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population and in coordination and collaboration with other competent bodies, the Ministry has developed normative guidelines on the provision of psychosocial support to children in emergency situations and has organized specialized training courses for the staff of care institutions. The courses are directed in particular at psychologists and social workers working for the State or for civil society organizations involved in the care and protection of children.

39. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour promotes and facilitates the work of civil society organizing involved with children in order to improve the quality of services available in care homes and to ensure that those services reach all children in need. The purpose is to protect children and achieve their best interests, without discrimination.

Paragraph 8: "Please provide information about the measures taken: (a) To promote the deinstitutionalization of children with disabilities, to provide support to families to care for them and to ensure access to inclusive education in community schools; (b) To address the short- and long-term post-crisis needs of children with disabilities, including psychosocial and prosthetic rehabilitation programmes."

40. Steps have been taken to increase the subsidy provided to families caring for children afflicted with cerebral palsy. Depending on the extent to which the disability affects movement, the increase can be up to 40 per cent. In addition, the Council for Persons with Disabilities provides a support grant out of its own budget to families caring for three or more persons with a disability who are not already covered by the cerebral palsy subsidy.

41. On the subject of access to inclusive education in community schools, the Ministry of Education works to ensure that all children in the Syrian Arab Republic have access to schooling that is both free and obligatory. The Ministry has embraced the principle of educational inclusion for children with disabilities and — by applying the concept of comprehensive integration — seeks to realize its vision of high-quality education that interacts more effectively with the requirements of comprehensive development. There are 123 inclusive schools distributed across all governorates, and 20 kindergartens.

42. The Ministry of Education takes a number of actions in this connection, including the following:

- It provides staff qualified to teach children with disabilities, in accordance with its policy of inclusion, as well as assistive devices to facilitate the educational process; it also seeks to raise awareness among families and in society as a whole on the habilitation of children with disabilities and their integration into schools;
- It works to improve the planning and decision-making capacities of persons working in the field of integration by providing training courses on planning, the creation of organizational structures and the drafting of job descriptions for persons wishing to work in the field of special education;
- It provides training to administrative and educational staff, integration coordinators and resource room teachers on how to interact with persons with disabilities from an educational standpoint and on classrooms strategies to follow in inclusive schools;
- It runs an average of two or three workshops a year in all the governorates on planning for inclusive schools and on how to accommodate children with disabilities in such schools; it also organizes courses on the difficulties encountered in inclusive schools by classroom teachers and resource room teachers and on how to deal with blindness and the use of Braille in inclusive schools;

- In collaboration with international bodies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), it runs skill-enhancement courses for persons involved in the integration of persons with disabilities into schools and educational curricula;
- The competent departments of the Ministry cooperate with the media and with civil society to develop awareness-raising courses on the concept of integration;
- It is creating a database on the status of disability across the governorates including information on numbers of integrated schools, resource room teachers, integration coordinators and teachers for children with disabilities;
- It has drafted a building code; i.e., a guide on the design of disability-friendly educational facilities as part of the inclusion plan; this is the first such initiative in the Syrian Arab Republic and the code is to be used as a reference for drafting a national code as part of the national disability plan; training on the code has also been provided while follow-up on its implementation is the responsibility of a national agency for school buildings;
- A number of guides have been prepared for educational and administrative staff in inclusive schools, such as a guide on educational inclusion, a theoretical guide to difficulties in education and a training guide on resource rooms.

43. As regards health-care services for children with disabilities, the Ministry of Health has a unit for the habilitation of children with motor disabilities. The unit, in addition to running habilitation sessions and providing special devices, follows up with the family on the state of the child after the completion of treatment and habilitation sessions.

44. Efforts are being made to open more centres for prosthetic limbs, physiological treatment and rehabilitation in response to needs arising as a result of injuries caused by terrorist attacks. Currently in Syria, prosthetic limb and rehabilitation services are available in centres run by the State, including the Ministry of Health, and by civil society. In addition, there are two centres, one in Damascus and one Homs, run by the Syrian Arab Red Crescent in cooperation with ICRC. They provide services entirely free of charge including injury assessment, the manufacture and fitting of the prosthetic limb, the provision of a place of residence until rehabilitation is complete and the possibility of a grant to enter the livelihood programme.

45. In addition to the above are the centres run by civil society organizations in Damascus as well as a number of private centres. There are plans to set up a physiological rehabilitation centre in Homs and a prosthetic limb laboratory in Aleppo.

46. The focus of efforts is to improve the quality of the services provided by those centres with a view to producing tailor-made prosthetic limbs and providing optimal service to patients consistent with their general state of health.

47. The unilateral coercive measures imposed against the Syrian Arab Republic are one of the main obstacles hindering access to the materials necessary for the manufacture of prosthetic limbs.

Paragraph 9: “Please provide information about the availability and coverage of health services for children, including access to vaccinations in the State party, and children’s access to mental health services to address post-traumatic stress disorder, instances of self-harm, suicide attempts, substance abuse and addiction.”

48. Paragraphs 121 to 135 of the periodic report of the Syrian Arab Republic contain abundant information on the health-care services available to children, including mental- and psychological-health services.

49. There are no recorded cases of suicide among children and registered cases of child substance abuse are extremely rare. In accordance with the provisions of the Juveniles Act, efforts are made to reform children in such circumstances by placing them in clinics to rehabilitate them mentally and physically, and reintegrate them into society.

Paragraph 10: “Please provide information on the measures taken and envisaged to rebuild the education infrastructure, ensure an adequate number of trained teachers, provide programmes to address the needs of children in crisis and post-crisis situations, including those returning from abroad, and ensure access to education for all children in the State party.”

50. Measures taken in the field of children’s education are explained in paragraphs 156 to 191 of the periodic report of the Syrian Arab Republic, while details about measures taken in regard of the questions raised by the Committee about addressing the needs of children in crisis and post-crisis situations are to be found in paragraphs 161 and 162. The Syrian Government’s efforts in that area are ongoing and are continually adapted to changing needs. For example, the Ministry of Education is intervening in regions liberated from terrorist groups to assess numbers of children of school age and enrol them directly into schools under the alternative education system. The Ministry of Education has also taken steps to overcome the obstacles and challenges faced by students due to the conditions in the areas in which they live. It has extended the academic year for more than 40,000 children in eastern Ghouta, Afrin, Deir al-Zor, Raqqah and Idlib. It has also set up support classes for 4,025 ninth grade students in Deir al-Zor and Raqqah. Steps of that kind are continuing with a view to delivering education across the country’s governorates, adapted to the particular situation in each area.

51. Efforts have also been made to ensure adequate numbers of teachers. In that regard, the Ministry of Education has announced competitive examinations and has given permanent appointments to a number of teachers of various categories and specializations. Three hundred graduates from the college of education were appointed as classroom teachers for the academic year 2018/19 in Aleppo and the eastern governorates, while 2,057 classroom teachers were appointed in the governorates of Deir al-Zor, Raqqah, Al-Hasakah, Aleppo, Rif Dimashq and Hama. Teachers’ wages have continued to be paid without interruption.

52. A number of the issues raised by the Committee in this paragraph — and the same is true for paragraphs 9, 8 and 4 (c) — are among those most adversely affected by the unilateral coercive measures being imposed on Syria by a number of States and organizations, and children are one of the categories suffering the greatest impact. Consequently, lifting those measures is a basic condition for the protection and promotion of the rights of Syrian children. The comprehensive nature of the measures has led to negative effects for the entire economy and for the daily lives of the Syrian people, and their prolonged imposition by States and organizations who claim to be concerned about human rights will, in fact, lead only to increased human suffering. It should be noted that the Special Rapporteur on the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights, who visited Syria in March 2018 and submitted a report to the thirty-ninth session of the Human Rights Council, came to the conclusion that the measures were having a destructive effect on the entire economy and on the daily lives of Syrians, particularly on basic services such as education and health care, the quality and continuation of which are so vital for the lives of children.

Paragraph 11: “Please provide information on the measures taken to ensure that children, in particular boys, are not engaged in the worst forms of child labour and to provide support to families in situations of poverty. Please provide information on the status of the national plans of action to combat the worst forms of child labour, child begging and child trafficking.”

53. As regards measures taken to combat the worst forms of child labour, the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population has, on the basis of the outcomes of the survey mentioned in paragraph 203 of the fifth periodic report, drafted a new action plan in cooperation with the competent bodies.

54. A memorandum of understanding to combat the worst forms of child labour was signed in 2018 between the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. The purpose of the memorandum is to foster cooperation with a view to removing children from the worst forms of child labour, rehabilitating them, preventing children at risk from sliding into the worst forms of child labour, building

capacity at local and national level to address the problem of child labour and providing vocational training to young people and the families of working children with a view to eradicating child labour altogether.

55. A national committee to combat begging, chaired by the Minister of Social Affairs and Labour with members drawn from other competent ministries, continues to operate. Its activities include the following:

- Opening anti-begging offices in governorates, the offices operate patrols to curb the incidence of begging;
- Running voluntary campaigns to monitor and report on cases of begging and vagrancy;
- Increasing the capacity of centres providing services for beggars and vagrants, in which respect the following steps have been taken:
 - Two units for child beggars and vagrants have been opened, one in Bab Masla for girls and one in Qudsaya for boys. The units, which are run by the Children's Rights Society, provide care and habilitation services for child beggars and vagrants who have no place of shelter;
 - Under the supervision of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, SOS Children's Villages International has opened a unit for beggars in Jaramana and is taking steps to open another in Tartus;
 - An employment centre for beggars and vagrants has been opened in Al-Kiswah and the services it provides are now directed at a wider category of persons;
 - A centre belonging to the Beggars and Vagrants' Welfare Association in Aleppo has been reopened.

56. In addition to the foregoing, the case management system is now applied in cases of begging. Furthermore, a technical committee has been set up to examine legislation relevant to begging and vagrancy, and to propose amendments. Currently, there is a proposal for a bill to amend the Criminal Code vis-à-vis the offence of begging.

Paragraph 12: Please provide information on measures taken: (a) To ensure the physical protection of children in areas where the Government has recently established control, and also areas where there are hostilities, including to allow for children to be evacuated from besieged areas; (b) To trace, reunify and reintegrate children separated from their families; (c) To re-educate and rehabilitate child victims of terrorist propaganda and brainwashing; (d) To provide psychosocial support and rehabilitation for child victims of violence resulting from the crisis.

57. The Syrian Government has made the protection of civilians its top priority as it continues to combat terrorism. It takes all the steps necessary to ensure their safety and security and seeks to adapt its own efforts in order to respond to that end. In areas being liberated from terrorists, such as eastern Ghouta, the Government sets up safe corridors to facilitate the exodus of civilians whom the armed terrorist groups use as human shields.

58. In such cases, the first response is for various government ministries, in cooperation with civil society organizations, to implement emergency response plans whereby people are taken in, provided with the necessary facilities then transported to temporary accommodation centres equipped to meet basic needs such as health care, nutrition, personal hygiene and clothing. In that context, priority is given to women, children and older persons. The temporary accommodation centres also have child-friendly spaces to help children overcome the psychological trauma they experienced by living in (then escaping from) areas under the control of armed terrorist groups. Civilians who, thanks to the Syrian State, have managed to leave areas where people spent years under the heel of terrorist groups — such as eastern Ghouta — have testified to the injustices, exploitation and starvation they suffered at the hands of those groups.

59. The High Relief Committee coordinates efforts to rehabilitate those areas with a view to the return of the inhabitants and the launch of the development projects necessary to restore orderly life.

60. In all the cases mentioned above, priority is given to family reunification and tracing separated children. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour takes a holistic approach to dealing with children separated from their families. Its first step is to trace the family in order to enable prompt reunification or to place the separated child in a supportive and protective environment. The Ministry has set up child protection coordination teams whose job it is to develop and implement strategies to trace and reunite families, pursue follow-up measures, confirm the status of the child and uncover any documentation that might help in identification by family members or acquaintances, even after the passage of time. To that end, the clothing in which the child was found is preserved, the child is photographed and other such steps are taken that might help in the subsequent identification of the child's family.

61. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour has cooperated with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), drawing on the latter's experience in tracing families and repatriating family members. This has also led to cooperation with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. It should be pointed out that, in taking measures of that kind, there is no discrimination between children who were separated from their families and children who found themselves alone after an area was liberated from terrorists. Health, social and educational services are provided to all without distinction.

62. The prime mover and main concern behind all anti-terror activities undertaken by the Syrian State is the protection of civilians, and every effort is made to evacuate civilians from areas occupied by armed forces. In such cases, children are among the priority categories: they are taken out and transported to stable areas where their immediate needs are met. In addition, prior warnings are issued not to approach or travel to areas where combat operations might take place. Steps have also been taken to deal with the combat strategies employed by terrorist groups.

63. As for the other two issues raised by the Committee, relevant cases are dealt with within the context of the psychosocial support provided by various national agencies, both government-run and non-governmental, who use various models to deliver their services as outlined in this document and in the periodic report. The Syrian Arab Republic wishes to reiterate that it does not recognize the term "besieged areas", which is used by the Committee in this paragraph.

Paragraph 13: Please provide information on measures taken: (a) To prevent and address the recruitment and deployment of children in combat and support positions by government forces, pro-government militias and non-State armed groups; (b) To ensure that military operations, in particular air strikes, are not indiscriminate and do not target civilians, especially children, and to ban the use of cluster munitions, chemical and incendiary weapons.

64. The Government rejects the term "pro-government militias", which is used by the Committee. Some of the groups fighting alongside and under the supervision of the Syrian Arab Army are there at the request and with the approval of the Syrian Government, others are individuals who have organized themselves into groups to defend their villages and towns. All of them love their homeland and are convinced of the importance of standing alongside the Syrian Arab Army in its fight against terrorism. It should also be recalled that the families and villages of many of the individuals in those groups were themselves the target of attacks by terrorist groups.

65. At this point it should be recalled that an amendment to the Criminal Code, made under Act No. 11 of 2013, was mentioned in the periodic report of the Syrian Arab Republic. The Act, which criminalizes the recruitment of child soldiers or their involvement in combat operations by any party, considers such children as victims and imposes severe penalties against perpetrators. The Syrian Government, in collaboration with State agencies and national and international partners, continues to take action and to raise awareness with the objective of reaching children who were recruited by terrorists,

preventing them from being exploited and ensuring that they are rehabilitated and reintegrated into society. In that connection, a national committee was set up recently, under the leadership of the Minister of Social Affairs and Labour, to draft a national plan on how to reach and deal with child victims of recruitment. The plan, which has a number of areas of focus, is being implemented by various government agencies. A national committee has also been set up to deal with child victims of recruitment. The purpose of all such efforts is to mitigate the impact of the recruitment of children and their involvement in combat operations, which was the systematic practice of terrorist groups.

66. It should also be pointed out that the laws regulating compulsory military service in Syria clearly state that the minimum age at which a citizen may be recruited is 18.

67. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic reiterates its position, which is one of total condemnation and rejection of the use of chemical weapons under any circumstances, in any place, at any time and against any one. The Syrian Arab Army has not and will not use any indiscriminate or prohibited weapons in its ongoing efforts to combat terrorism. Military operations abide fully by international humanitarian law, particularly the principles of proportionality and of distinction between civilian and military targets. This, in fact, has led to the diversion, delay or even cancellation of some operations in the interests of the safety of civilians who had been taken by armed terrorist groups as part of their combat strategy of using human shields, and to avoid or minimize serious damage to civilian installations, such as hospitals and schools, which in many cases had been occupied by terrorist groups and converted into military bases and arsenals. Efforts are also made to evacuate civilians from areas occupied by armed forces. In addition, prior warnings are issued not to approach or travel to areas where combat operations might take place. Steps have also been taken to deal with the combat strategies employed by terrorist groups.

Part II

Bills and new laws in fields relevant to the report

New laws

68. Act No. 24 of 2018, which amends article 469 of the Criminal Code, envisages harsher penalties for anyone who concludes a marriage contract for a minor outside the competent courts

Bills

- A children's rights bill;
- A bill to outlaw people smuggling;
- A bill that amends the Criminal Code to increase penalties for begging;
- A bill envisaging a fund for orphans.

New institutions (and their mandates) or institutional reforms

- *The coordinating authority for the return of Syrian migrants abroad:* This body was set up for the purpose of undertaking the actions required to ensure that Syrian citizens who left the country because of terrorism are able to return to their towns and villages and to live a normal life.

Recently introduced policies, programmes and action plans

- Work is currently underway to develop a national programme for post-crisis Syria. The programme, which was adopted under Prime Ministerial Decree No. 1/1549 of 8 February 2018, adopts a participatory approach to the creation of a planning

framework and a unified vision for reconstruction, taking account not merely of the economic dimension but of comprehensive development. It is a long-term strategy that embraces both economic and social development, including components such as social services (health care, education and potable water) and a social safety net that provides support and addresses the needs of families. The analytical stage has been completed and attention is currently focused on the next stage, which consists in drafting visions and strategies for policies and plans to implement the various aspects of the programme. All competent national agencies are involved in the process;

- The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population is updating its early childhood strategy to incorporate family development as one area of focus;
- In partnership with United Nations agencies operating in Syria and in cooperation with civil society organizations, the Ministry of Social Affairs has modernized a number of social centres for the empowerment of women and children, and has provided them with various different services;
- At the level of civil action, the Syrian Trust for Development provides support for Syrian families, focusing its efforts on particular members of the family, especially women and children. One of the main services the Trust provides is the restoration of legal documents that have been lost or damaged.

Part III

69. While reaffirming what was stated in the periodic report and in the replies to the list of issues, and drawing attention to the length of the list under this heading, the data, statistics and other information requested will be provided to the Committee if available.
