



Convention on the Rights of the Child

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Committee on the Rights of the Child

Fifth periodic report submitted by the Syrian Arab Republic under article 44 of the Convention, due in 2015*.**

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Introduction

1. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic is pleased to submit its fifth periodic report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child under article 44 (1) (a) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The present report comes in the wake of three other reports previously submitted by the Syrian Arab Republic: its initial report in 1995 (CRC/C/28/Add.2), which was considered during the Committee's twenty-seventh session in 1997; its second periodic report in 2000 (CRC/C/93/Add.2), which was considered during the Committee's thirty-third session in 2003; and the combined third and fourth periodic reports on 4 March 2009 (CRC/C/SYR/3-4), which was considered during the Committee's fifty-eighth session on 22 September 2011.

2. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic has been careful to abide by the treaty-specific guidelines regarding the form and content of periodic reports under article 44, paragraph 1 (b) of the Convention (CRC/C/58/Rev.2), which were adopted by the Committee during its fifty-fifth session. The present report thus covers the period between 2012 to the end of April 2017 and does not include information already given in the aforementioned combined third and fourth periodic reports, although reference has at times been made to that information, when necessary. The report also seeks to reply to the concluding observations adopted by the Committee at its 1668th meeting held on 7 October 2011.

3. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic takes this opportunity to reiterate its commitment to all the international treaties and instruments it has acceded to and ratified. It also reiterates its belief in the importance of continuing to engage in dialogue with the Committee on the Rights of the Child in order to develop a joint understanding, one that is consistent with the obligation to guarantee and respect all the rights under the Convention and that remains within the limits of the reservations entered by the State and the principles and values of society.

4. Armed terrorist groups — and those who since 2011 have supported, financed, sponsored and armed them — continue to trample upon all human and moral values, and upon the exalted ideals that have characterized the Syrian Arab Republic. These terrorist bands commit the most abhorrent crimes against Syrian citizens — men, women and children — including murder, kidnapping, arson, the destruction of schools and hospitals, sexual violence and the recruitment of child soldiers. Furthermore, they prevent humanitarian assistance from reaching the areas they control, commit acts of destruction and sabotage, carry out assassinations and suicide attacks, plunder national treasures and drain the national economy. All this constitutes a blatant violation of human rights in general, and of children's rights in particular.

5. The Syrian Arab Republic wishes to state once again that the chief cause of the current worsening crisis is terrorism, which has received and continues to receive support from the governments of Arab States and of other countries in the region and the world. They have provided armed terrorist groups, in particular Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the Nusra Front, with funds, ammunition, equipment, terrorists and mercenaries, both directly and indirectly, and with media backing to mislead public opinion, in a clear and flagrant violation of international law. The unilateral coercive measures imposed on the Syrian Arab Republic, its Government and people, are one of the chief causes of the deteriorating humanitarian crisis and its growing ramifications, and this has an adverse effect on the human rights of the Syrian people, particularly children.

6. The dangers to which children are exposed have increased as a result of the crisis: they risk being recruited for use in combat operations, trafficked or physically or sexually assaulted. Furthermore, the crisis has spawned new hazards as children risk dropping out of school, child labour, separation from their families and not being duly registered in personal status records. As part of its constitutional responsibilities, the Government has taken a number of steps to promote and protect children's rights, including enacting laws, establishing committees and drawing up national plans.

7. The Syrian Arab Republic fulfils its duty to protect its citizens while at the same time continuing to combat terrorism, thereby exercising a right guaranteed under international law and the Charter of the United Nations: that of defending itself, its people

and its territory against terrorism and aggression. The Syrian Arab Army continues to make advances in its war against externally supported terrorism and has wrested numerous areas from the control of terrorist groups and restored security and stability. This will pave the way for the return of migrants and displaced persons to their native districts and homes.

Methodology for preparing the report

8. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs is responsible for dealing with matters relating to the rights of Syrian children, including the reports submitted to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. For the preparation of the present report, the Commission turned to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers and asked it to involve relevant government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The Presidency of the Council of Ministers duly established a national steering committee to oversee the drafting process, made up of representatives from government agencies and NGOs as well as specialists, other interested parties and children themselves. A drafting committee was also established. In addition, the Commission wrote to all government agencies and NGOs, requesting key data for inclusion in the report.

9. The preparation process also took account of the concluding observations on the combined third and fourth periodic reports, adopted by the Committee at its 1668th meeting held on 7 October 2011, and the steps taken and achievements made in that regard have been explained. Paragraph numbers will be given in the order in which they appear in the concluding observations.

I. Replies to previous concluding observations

A. General measures of implementation (para. 9)

The Committee's previous recommendations

10. The recommendations of the Committee were translated into a national action plan, which was adopted by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers with the various roles being distributed among different departments.

Reservations (para. 11)

11. The Syrian Arab Republic entered a reservation to article 14 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, regarding the freedom of children to change their religion. The State respects freedom of thought and conscience when it is not at odds with law, public order and general customs. It respects children's freedom to practise the same religious rites as their father in a manner consistent with their evolving capacities and under the guidance of their parents or, depending upon circumstances, their legal guardians. The State also respects the right to manifest one's religion and will protect that right so long as the teachings or practice of the religion do not infringe upon the Constitution or the law, public order, public health or morals, the fundamental rights and freedoms of others or any other situations the State must safeguard in order to maintain public safety. If the purport of article 14 is to underline freedom of religious diversity, the Government has no objections; however, if it refers to a child's right to change the religion of his or her father the Government upholds its reservation. In order to eliminate any misunderstandings in this regard, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic hopes that the Committee on the Rights of the Child will issue a general comment clarifying the meaning of the article and explaining how its provisions should be applied.

Legislation (para. 13)

12. In a popular referendum held on 26 February 2012, the citizens of the Syrian Arab Republic expressed their approval for a new national Constitution, with a majority of 89.4 per cent or 57.4 per cent of Syrian citizens at home and abroad. Article 20 of the new Constitution enjoins the State to protect mothers and infants, as well as to care for children

and young people, and to provide conditions propitious to the development of their talents. Act No. 11 of 2013, which amends the Criminal Code, includes provisions that prohibit the recruitment of child soldiers.

13. The committee charged with drawing up a law on children's rights has definitively completed drafting the bill and referred it to the Council of Ministers. It will then be submitted to the People's Assembly in accordance with the legal procedures that regulate the passage of laws. While reflecting the religious and cultural specificity of Syrian society, the bill is in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its two Optional Protocols. Syrian legislation in general, and that regarding children in particular, is applied to all children in the country without discrimination on grounds of ethnicity, gender, colour, disability, religion, political affiliation or social status.

Coordination (para. 15)

14. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs came into being pursuant to Act No. 42 of 2003 with the task of protecting and consolidating families, upholding family identity and values, monitoring and coordinating measures taken to implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and proposing amendments to legislation affecting families. Act No. 42 of 2003 was supplanted by Act No. 6 of 2014, article 2 of which states that a public institution is to be created in the Syrian Arab Republic called the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population. It is based in Damascus, enjoys legal personality and financial and administrative independence and is part of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour. Also under the Act, the Commission was given new tasks: dealing with issues affecting population, setting up family affairs and population departments in social affairs directorates at governorate level and cooperating with Arab and international organizations concerned with family and population affairs. The Act also requires other public institutions to cooperate with the Commission to help it achieve its goals, and increases its staff and its budget to cover the new tasks it has been given. The Government then amended the Act once more, through Legislative Decree No. 5 of 16 January 2017, which gave the director of the Commission for Family Affairs and Population the power to set up independent offices in the governorates, altered the composition of the Commission's board of directors, increased the number of experts on the board to five and gave the board a number of additional tasks. Also under the Legislative Decree, a separate section in the national budget is to be dedicated to the Commission and its governorate liaison offices, as part of the budget allocated to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour.

National plan of action (para. 17)

15. A national commission comprising government and civil society bodies was set up by prime ministerial decree to monitor the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The work of the commission led to a national action plan for the implementation of the Convention, with a particular emphasis on the rights that need to be safeguarded in the current situation. At the same time, the second Care and Development of Early Childhood Strategy has been drawn up. That Strategy has been approved by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, and work is currently ongoing to prepare an early childhood action plan, in which a special section is dedicated to the care and development of very young children in crisis situations. Work is also continuing to draw up an overall strategy for the protection of children generally during the current crisis in Syria.

16. The National-Regional Committee on Monitoring the Rights of the Child in the Light of the Crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic was established under Prime Ministerial Decree No. 2310 of 20 August 2013. It was given responsibility for documenting the violations committed by armed groups against children, preparing national reports on violations suffered by children, establishing a database and conducting a study on the recruitment of child soldiers and the use of children in combat operations. The Committee has developed a national action plan for preventing serious violations against children in Syria.

17. As part of their vision for the protection of children, the Ministry of Social Affairs and its various agencies have drafted a plan of action and an operational matrix by which they seek to build up Syrian society on the basis of unified families and to create broad-

reaching and diverse child protection networks. The Ministry has also promoted family-welfare and empowerment strategies and programmes, particularly with regard to children.

18. The Ministry of Culture has collaborated with other ministries and departments to draft the “National Cultural Strategy for Children, during and after the Crisis”. The aim of the initiative is to create a heedful and vigilant generation of young people, to promote a culture of dialogue that rejects violence and to foster values of positive citizenship in a society that recognizes cultural diversity.

19. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Expatriates and the Planning and International Cooperation Commission — the two bodies responsible for collaborating with foreign organizations — lay great emphasis on services for children when entering into cooperation programmes or drafting memorandums of understanding with international agencies. To that end, they seek to ensure that the necessary financial resources and technical assistance are made available. They also run a humanitarian response plan as well as annual projects with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

Independent monitoring mechanisms (para. 19)

20. On 8 March 2017, the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population set up a family protection unit. The new body, which has a remit to protect women and children, is jointly administered by the Commission, relevant ministries and civil society. The unit is made up of three structures: the first caters for women, the second for children, and the third structure provides services such as physical and psychological therapy, professional training, classrooms for persons wishing to resume regular schooling and sports facilities in addition to a library and a film projection room. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population has provided high-level training on family protection to the multidisciplinary team that works in the family protection unit. Following the training, the members of the team received a specialist diploma from the Ministry of Higher Education.

21. To facilitate the work of the unit a study was carried out on the monitoring, reporting and referral mechanisms available in Syria with a view to strengthening legislation and standards in that field. A strategy document on monitoring, reporting and referral mechanisms for the protection of children was published and a national action plan devised to promote such mechanisms at a national level. An integrated case management and social service system, drafted in collaboration with UNICEF and adopted by the Council of Ministers (letter No. 609/1 dated 17 January 2017), aims to ensure that the targeted cases are provided with social welfare.

Allocation of resources (para. 21)

22. Despite considerable challenges in securing the necessary funding, large sums from the State budget are spent on projects for children, particularly those who have suffered harm as a result of the current crisis. Those challenges are a consequence of terrorism, which has destroyed infrastructure, particularly schools, and of the unilateral coercive measures imposed by the United States of America, European States and others since the beginning of the crisis. Those measures constitute a flagrant violation of the principles of justice, equality and international law, are inconsistent with international treaties and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and have an entirely negative impact on the Syrian people, increasing the suffering of children and hindering their enjoyment of natural rights such as education, vaccination against disease, health care and clean water. In fact, the coercive measures have largely halted the circulation of foreign currency and cash transfers, even those destined for financing humanitarian aid projects. For its part, the Syrian Arab Republic funds various child-related projects in collaboration with a number of foreign organizations, and the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population has just commissioned an expert to undertake a study into Ministry of Finance budget allocations for the protection of children’s rights.

Data collection (para. 23)

23. The Planning and International Cooperation Commission has been working to bring the development database “Dev-info” into line with the demands of the current situation. The system analyses information with a view to producing demographic, social, economic

and other indicators, including Millennium Development Goals indicators. This has been possible thanks to cooperation between the Central Bureau of Statistics, the Planning and International Cooperation Commission and the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population. The latest upgrades to the database were made following the family health survey carried out by the Central Bureau of Statistics in 2011–2012. Efforts are currently being made to ensure that the child data unit can continue its work and remain fully operational. The information gathered is systematically evaluated thanks to coordination between the Planning and International Cooperation Commission and the Central Bureau of Statistics, with the help of international organizations active in the field.

Dissemination and awareness-raising (para. 25)

24. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population annually prints 5,000 copies of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols and distributes them to persons whose work brings them into contact with children, such as the police, judges, teachers and journalists. The Commission has also consulted with young people to produce a version of the Convention in simplified language of which 1,000 copies have been distributed.

25. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population organizes regular meetings with journalists and scriptwriters with a view to highlighting issues that affect children's rights and that need to be brought to public notice. In addition, each academic year it holds regular consultative workshops for interaction and discussion with students of the Higher Judicial Institute.

26. The Syrian Ministry of Information uses all the means at its disposal to address issues affecting children in such fields as upbringing, health, education, leisure, psychological support and awareness-raising about children's rights. The Ministry continues to use all its media outlets to disseminate the Convention on the Rights of the Child and it has held a number of training courses for journalists working in different fields, the main purpose of which is to incorporate the Convention into television, radio and print media programming. The Ministry has also organized a number of open discussion sessions with writers, directors and producers of television soap operas encouraging them to address issues affecting children and the Convention itself, and to introduce them indirectly into their scripts. In fact, that subject matter has been tackled in a number of soap operas.

27. Syrian media outlets seek to promote and disseminate concepts related to children's rights on a number of different fronts:

1. Through specialized training courses and workshops for journalists, which focus on how to tackle children's issues and how to introduce the Convention on the Rights of the Child into media programming, with a view to making the Convention a standard working reference;
2. Through full compliance with the Media Ethics Charter which sets the basic standards for media work;
3. By promoting awareness about children's rights through:
 - Cultural programmes and films including the film *Give me back my Childhood*, which is about violence against children;
 - Studies on the situation of children in shelters carried out in 2013;
 - Weekly inserts on community issues in daily newspapers and monthly investigations into questions affecting children such as violence, education, recruitment as soldiers, etc.
4. Through weekly television programmes (*Children's Post*, *Boys and Girls*, *Cake Kitchen*, *Children's Sun*, *Future Flowers*, *World of News*, *Let's Read* and *Six Hats*).

28. At an institutional level, all audio, visual and print media outlets have children's departments that specialize in producing children's programming. Annual plans are drawn up and implemented in cooperation with the relevant departments. The form and content of

the programmes is constructively and appropriately monitored and the following rules are followed from the moment work begins on production of a programme until its eventual broadcast:

- Ensuring that the script is consistent with the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- Ensuring that the script includes no concepts that are harmful to the interests of children or that incite violence or discrimination;
- Ensuring that children are not exploited by the media;
- Ensuring that children are involved in the production process and participate in presenting the programmes.

29. The Ministry of Education has taken action to make the principles enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols more widely known among both adults and children in the Syrian Arab Republic. Apart from disseminating information and providing training, it incorporates the relevant principles into pre-university educational curricula at all levels in institutions accountable to the Ministry, as well as in other institutions such as sharia schools, which are accountable to the Ministry of Islamic Endowments, and industrial schools, which are accountable to the Ministry of Industry. In addition, the governorate of Damascus has published the Convention in shelters, in collaboration with the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population.

30. A working group was created at the end of 2014 specializing in publication and training related to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The working group, which includes representatives from all relevant ministries as well as civil society organizations, raises awareness about children's rights and monitors compliance with the Convention when any State institution drafts plans, allocates budgets, publishes directives or takes administrative measures.

31. The Ministry of Culture (Syrian Public Agency for Books) publishes the children's magazine *Osama*, which has a permanent focus on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The number of copies of the magazine distributed each month has reached 6,300 while the number of child readers stands at around 20,000. In addition, an average of 5,000 children consult the online version of the magazine on Facebook. Between 2011 and 2016, as part of its activities at a national level, the Children's Culture Directorate sought to make the Convention more widely known among children and adolescents via a number of different workshops focusing on art, play and leisure activities. The initiative included interactive theatre (6,000 workshops) and puppet theatre (3,000 workshops) and benefited some 33,000 children and adolescents.

Training (para. 27)

32. The Ministry of Education has provided training on the Convention on the Rights of the Child to persons working in the field of education and psychological guidance. More than 5,000 psychological and social counsellors have so far benefited from the initiative. Resource-room teachers, coordinators for the integration of persons with disabilities, administrative and educational staff, specialized teachers and classroom teachers have also received training to enable them to work with the new curricula. However, some staff face difficulties in completing the training as they reside in areas that remain under the control of armed groups.

33. The Ministry of Higher Education has introduced a module on child legislation and children's organizations into kindergarten programmes, while master's degrees and doctorates on children's rights have been permanently introduced into the College of Education.

34. As part of its youth development and partnership project and life-skills programme 2011–2016, the Ministry of Culture (Children's Culture Directorate) collaborated with UNICEF to run training courses on development and partnership, life skills, communication, youth initiatives and community dialogue. The aim was to empower young people and to help them enjoy recreational activities, discover their gifts and hone their abilities. The

initiative also sought to promote their role in society in association with their peers, to encourage them to frequent youth-friendly cultural centres and to involve them in the development of their local communities. Between 2011 and 2016, some 18,000 young people received training in life skills, planning and organizing initiatives, and community dialogue. At the same time, 1,200 administrators (directors of cultural centres, children's librarians, child culture officials and cultural directors) and young people specializing in culture and sports received training in life skills and in how to promote youth development and partnership and to provide psychological support through art, sport and play.

Cooperation with civil society (para. 29)

35. The Syrian Arab Republic is keen to ensure the participation of civil society in issues affecting children. An increased number of authorizations have been granted to groups active in that field, particularly those involved in providing the following services: psychological and social support to the child victims of the crisis, alternative care, family reunification, education, registration for children and assistance in the acquisition of identity documents, and health care. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour has encouraged child-support initiatives in all fields.

36. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population contacted civil society associations and groups operating in the field of children's rights and provided them with a copy of the Guidelines for the preparation of reports issued by the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Commission then invited those groups to participate in the drafting of the State party report and explained the mechanism for submitting an independent parallel report by civil society. At the same time, it emphasized the importance the parallel report has in helping to produce appropriate recommendations that will help to advance children's rights in Syria. The Commission has pledged to submit the current report to civil society groups in order to enable them to comment on it in their own parallel report, which they will submit independently to the Committee on the Rights of the Child after the submission of the government report, at a date to be determined by the Committee.

37. With reference to the Committee's recommendation, the Government wishes to assert that Syrian law does not target political activists. Both the Constitution and Media Act No. 108 of 2011 guarantee freedom of opinion and expression; in fact, the new Media Act abrogates custodial sentences in all forms. It should be noted, moreover, that there is no internationally agreed definition of a human rights defender, as mentioned in the recommendation

B. Definition of the child (para. 31)

38. As the Committee recommended, the Ministry of Justice — by Ministerial Decree No. 914 of 1 April 2013 — formed a commission to amend all provisions in Syrian law that discriminate against women. One of the commission's recommendations was that the marriageable age for both boys and girls be raised to 18. In order to put that into effect, the Ministry of Justice organized a workshop entitled "Underage Marriage" to which it invited professionals working in the relevant sector, including lawyers, doctors and judges, as well as directors of State institutions and civil society groups operating in the field of children's rights. The Committee had recommended that the marriageable age of girls be raised to 18 and that the provisions in the Personal Status Code admitting marriage under that age be reviewed and, out of a desire to raise awareness on this and other issues, the Ministry of Justice signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Culture under which a series of monthly legal lectures will be held in cultural centres across all governorates.

39. It should be pointed out that the children's rights bill, which was drafted by experts and is currently in the course of being issued, defines the child as "any male or female below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier". The bill also equates capacity to marry with attainment of majority; i.e., the age of 18 years.

C. General principles

Non-discrimination (para. 34)

40. Under the 2012 Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic all citizens are equal, there is no discrimination on the basis of gender, origin, language, religion or belief, and the State guarantees equality of opportunity among citizens (article 33 (3)). The Syrian Arab Republic has sought to ensure that all children — Syrians or persons of equivalent status as well as non-Syrian residents on national territory — have access to primary school education and receive the same treatment and care, irrespective of their background or social class. The State has acted to adopt updated school curricula that take account of new ideas and avoid stereotypical representations of women. The Syrian Arab Republic also provides all children of both sexes equal access to basic educational and health-care services, in both urban and rural settings.

41. School health departments formally assess and certify the ages of *Maktoumeen* children and enrol them in primary education, in accordance with established procedures, taking due account of the recommendation regarding the right to non-discrimination in school curricula.

42. Under current legislation, children born outside wedlock may be registered in civil records under the name and surname of the mother.

Best interests of the child (para. 36)

43. According to article 20 (2) of the 2012 Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, the State must protect mothers and children and provide care for small children and young people, as well as suitable conditions for the development of their talents. In line with the Constitution, national legislation and State institutions both seek to ensure that the principle of the best interests of the child is upheld in law and in practice.

44. The legislative, administrative and judicial proceedings set forth in the Juvenile Act are entirely different from those contained in the Code of Criminal Procedure, which is applied in the ordinary courts. In particular, the make-up of the court itself is different, being composed of a judge specializing in juveniles who is appointed by decree, a representative of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour and a representative of the Ministry of Education. Moreover, the proceedings are held in camera and the sentences are not entered on the child's judicial record, whatever offence might have been committed. Children in conflict with the law are treated as victims and the actions taken in their regard — such as physical and mental care, rehabilitation and reintegration into society and their family — are always taken in the best interest of the child.

45. In many cases involving guardianship, the judge rules who is the best guardian in accordance with the best interests of the child.

46. The Ministry of Education has taken account of the best interests of the child in all the measures it has taken in response to the current circumstances. It has facilitated the enrolment of students who have lost their official documents and has acted to overcome the problems caused by school dropout by adopting an alternative education system (Model B), introducing intensive courses, self-learning programmes and online classrooms.

Right to life, survival and development (para. 38)

47. Allegations that Syrian government forces have been involved in killings and injuries are entirely groundless and undocumented. It should also be borne in mind that, in the period between 15 March 2011 and the date this report was compiled, large numbers of children have been killed and hundreds injured as a consequence of attacks by terrorist groups using mortars, gas, explosive devices and snipers. There is no truth to the stories put about by certain paid groups and dishonest media outlets, which publish fabricated pictures of children claiming that they have been targeted by government forces. The Government can state that the Syrian Arab Army targets only terrorist groups and terrorist bases and is very careful to protect civilian lives, particularly those of children.

48. The Syrian Government reiterates its commitment to international treaties and laws that aim to protect and satisfy the needs of children. In that context, the Government has itself taken numerous steps to protect Syrian children and meet their wants since the beginning of the current crisis. Those steps include:

- Act No. 11 of 2013, which prohibits the recruitment of child soldiers and their involvement in combat operations;
- Legislative Decree No. 20 of 2013, which criminalizes the abduction and detention of persons, including children;
- Prime Ministerial Decree No. 2310 of 20 August 2013, which includes provision for the creation of the National-Regional Committee on Monitoring the Rights of the Child in the Light of the Crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic with responsibility for documenting violations and preparing the relevant national reports;
- Article 489 of the Criminal Code, which has been amended to increase the punishment for aggression and rape when the victim is a child under the age of 15 and when armed force is used. This shows that the State is eager to protect the lives of children and to impose stricter penalties against anyone who threatens their well-being.

49. Ever since the beginning of the crisis, the Syrian Arab Republic has been collaborating on child-related issues with United Nations agencies, organizations and delegates, and has provided documented information and data to the Security Council and the General Assembly. In addition, it has made every possible effort to record the truth of the violations and terrorist acts to which Syrian children have been subjected. Nonetheless, those agencies and organizations have blatantly continued to ignore dozens of letters and documented evidence disproving allegations contained in successive reports by the Secretary-General. In addition, the Government has provided the office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism Technical Reference Group with hundreds of documented cases — including dates, places and names — of crimes committed by armed terrorist groups against Syrian children since the beginning of the crisis. Yet, despite all the documents and evidence, not one of those cases has been taken up and it must be concluded that the decision to ignore them is a deliberate one.

50. The Syrian Arab Republic reaffirms that it remains entirely committed to its responsibility to protect its citizens, particularly children, while the Syrian Army continues to fulfil its constitutional duty to protect those citizens and to counter various armed terrorist groups such as Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham, Army of Islam, Free Syrian Army, etc. As confirmed by well-documented United Nations reports, including the report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, those groups have descended upon Syria from more than 100 countries and have committed terrible crimes against children including, recruitment abduction, torture, detention, physical violence and murder.

51. As part of its efforts to prevent suicide among children and young people, the Government has, with the support of United Nations agencies, rolled out psychological and social support programmes to combat negative feelings and prevent suicide among the young. This matter will be considered more closely in the paragraph devoted to health.

Respect for the views of the child (para. 40)

52. Through its child-related programmes and action plans, the Syrian Arab Republic promotes and facilitates respect for children's views on all matters affecting them within families, schools and the community at large, in line with article 12 of the Convention. It has created training programmes in community settings for parents, teachers, social workers and local officials to help them encourage children to express their opinions and to ensure that those opinions are taken into consideration.

53. The Ministry of Education's new school curricula focus on dialogue and respect for others, the development of a sense of responsibility, respect for freedom of thought and of religious belief and practice in accordance with a child's level of mental development, the

development of an awareness of human rights as well as children's and women's rights, and capacity to exercise rights and duties.

54. The Ministry of Education also makes educational television programmes on cooperation between schools and families and the impact of positive treatment within the family on a child's ability to adapt to school and community life. At the beginning of each school year, the Ministry circulates guidelines to schools on how to welcome children into the educational process while respecting their views, and how to establish parent councils and seasonal clubs. The engagement of social researchers at all levels of education and the focus on the development of children's talents has continued to produce tangible results and to help consolidate the right of children to express their opinion on matters affecting them.

55. Between 2011 and 2016, the Ministry of Culture (Children's Culture Directorate) devoted itself to a number of innovative, interactive, dialogue-based activities and programmes. They included annual activities and projects such as open dialogue between a child and an official, interactive theatre and interactive literary and artistic workshops to develop communication skills, teamwork, self-confidence and self-expression. They also included the life skills and self-reliance programme, which focused on tapping into energies, building confidence and empowering children and adolescents with life skills. Art, games and sport were used as ways to provide psychological support and promote emotional discharge. Opportunities were made available for participants to choose their own cultural field and foster a culture of dialogue. These initiatives took place in shelters and cultural centres across all the governorates. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population has drawn the attention of civil society groups working with children to the need to involve the children themselves in the preparation of the parallel report to the fifth periodic report on the Convention of the Rights of the Child.

D. Civil rights and freedoms

Birth registration (paras. 44 and 45)

56. The Syrian Arab Republic makes great efforts in this regard, particularly in view of the fact that many civil registration offices and municipalities are out of service after having been targeted by armed terrorist groups. For that reason, the Government has taken all possible measures to ensure that all Syrian citizens, and newborn children in particular, are duly registered and issued with identity documents. The Ministry of the Interior has taken a number of steps to facilitate the registration of births, marriages, divorces and deaths in cities where displaced families reside. In addition, the Ministry has designated alternative centres and set up new centres where official documents may be obtained. Other government departments have issued decrees and implemented measures to facilitate the registration of civil status events, both at home and abroad, including Act No. 25 of 2015, concerning the registration of births. On 26 November 2019, the Ministry of Justice and the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population signed a memorandum of understanding under which the Commission is to monitor all cases of marriage, divorce and birth within shelters. The purpose is to facilitate their registration, once the status of the persons involved has been settled by the courts and the necessary rulings have been issued and sent to the Ministry of the Interior to be duly recorded.

57. Births are registered in accordance with Legislative Decree No. 26 of 2007 as amended by Act No. 20 of 2011. The Decree sets forth the procedures for registering births, both in cases where the father is a Syrian Arab and where he is a non-Syrian residing on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic. In addition to the aforementioned measures, the Ministry of the Interior (Civil Affairs Department) has taken various steps to facilitate the registration of *Maktoumeen* (Decree No. 404/4/8 dated 6 February 2012). Persons of Syrian origin who are registered in the records of Arab Syrians but have a different nationality may be registered on the basis of their Syrian ancestor, even if their father died while holding a different nationality, following the same procedures as those followed for non-*Maktoumeen*. The relevant decree is issued by a central committee for the registration of *Maktoumeen*.

58. Act No. 4 of 2017 was issued with a view to protecting citizens' interests when registering civil status events, particularly those that took place outside Syria, and to

facilitating access to civil status documents. The Act serves to amend certain provisions of Legislative Decree No. 26 of 12 April 2007, which concerns civil status. The principal amendment provides as follows: “Any civil status event affecting an Arab Syrian in a foreign country shall be deemed valid if the relevant legal procedures in that foreign country are duly followed and are not in conflict with Syrian law. The party concerned must register the event at the Syrian embassy or consulate, or at the embassy or consulate charged with protecting the interests of Syrians in his or her place of residence or the place where the event in question occurred. The consulate shall then send a copy of the registered document to the Civil Affairs Department via the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Documents sent in that manner shall have the same force as documents endorsed in Syria.” If the Syrian citizen concerned is unable to register the event at the Syrian embassy or consulate in the place where the event occurred, article (b) of the Act provides that he or she may obtain a certificate of the event, or a certified copy thereof, from the competent authorities in the place where it occurred and present that to the Civil Affairs Department in the place where the person concerned is registered. The objective of these provisions is to facilitate the registration of Syrian children born outside Syria.

59. The Ministry of Justice collaborates with the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population to register unregistered children in a number of governorates, particularly children in shelters. This is an ongoing process which is being undertaken in cooperation with civil society organizations on the basis of laws regulating legal aid and exemption from fees in the registration of births, marriages, divorces and deaths.

60. Private associations also play an important role in registering children. On the basis of a 2014 agreement with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, the Syrian Association for Social Development has provided legal support in Damascus, Rif Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, Hama, Hasaka, Daraa and Tartus. Legal-support programmes have included awareness-raising sessions about the importance of registering births and of providing evidence of marriage and lineage, and about the need to preserve official documents and to obtain replacements for lost ones such as identity cards, family record books, etc. Another aspect of the awareness-raising activities was to provide guidance on the rights of women following divorce or in cases of early marriage, as well as on testamentary guardianship, maintenance and custody. In addition, legal support has included interventions before courts, police stations and government offices for such things as establishing lineage and registering births, representation before juvenile courts, corroborating marriage, obtaining individual and family status records, death certificates or identity documents, as well as testamentary guardianship and certificates of succession.

61. The Syria Trust for Development has also set up a legal support programme for cases involving children. The programme provides free legal assistance to children’s families, the aim being to extend the educational and preventive aspects of legal and social work. Part of the programme involves interventions before civil registry offices and the judiciary for recording births, providing evidence of marriage and lineage, requesting child maintenance and custody, protecting child victims of violence, sexual abuse or trafficking, and placing unaccompanied children in social care centres capable of providing them with an appropriate environment. The programme also focuses on obtaining official identity, education and health-care documentation for children. There have been 1,228 interventions before courts and civil registry offices regarding birth registrations, 1,627 legal consultations, also on birth registration, 1,602 awareness-raising sessions on the importance of registering children, 4,724 sessions on children’s rights and 350 on the dangers of early marriage.

62. The General Women’s Federation has contracted lawyers in the governorates to act as counsellors in administrative offices that provide free legal advice, particularly for children and their families who fled their homes. They receive help in matters regarding official documentation such as marriage certification, and in obtaining documents that were lost or destroyed such as family cards and identity cards, property deeds, etc.

Name and nationality (para. 42)

63. There are no stateless children in the Syrian Arab Republic, where conferral of nationality is regulated by Legislative Decree 276 of 1969, as amended. According to

Legislative Decree No. 49 of 7 April 2011, “Syrian Arab nationality is bestowed upon persons registered in the registers of foreigners in Hasaka”; i.e., Kurds. Under the Decree, Syrian Arab nationality has been granted to all Kurdish citizens who were registered in the registers of foreigners in Hasaka: a total of around 122,000 persons in addition to members of their families. All of them of an age to receive an identity card have done so, for a total of more than 70,000 cards.

64. According to article 1 of Legislative Decree No. 26 of 2007 as amended by Act No. 20 of 2011, a “*Maktoum*” is “anyone whose father or both of whose parents are registered in Syrian civil records, or whose origins lie in the Syrian Arab Republic, but who was not registered within the registration deadline”, which is one year from the date of birth. Thus, *Maktoumeen* does not refer to Kurds, as is stated in the Committee’s concluding observations to the previous periodic report.

65. The Ministry of the Interior (Civil Affairs Department) has taken various steps to facilitate the registration of *Maktoumeen* (Decree No. 404/4/8 dated 6 February 2012):

- *Maktoumeen* unable to prove their Syrian origins must fulfil the following conditions:
 - (a) They were born on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic;
 - (b) They reside on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic;
 - (c) They have not obtained another nationality.
- In cases where the *Maktoumeen* belong to families who are registered in civil records, the identity of the registered family will first be verified.

66. Under Legislative Decree No. 69 of 2012, a person of unknown lineage may be granted the lineage of his or her adopted family upon a request by the head of that family and with the approval of the person concerned, if over the age of 18. The person concerned shall then be certified as belonging to the lineage of that family.

67. As regards granting nationality to children of Syrian mothers married to non-Syrians, article 3 of the Nationality Act is currently being reviewed and great efforts are being made to ensure that children of Syrian mothers may obtain nationality. The General Women’s Federation has drafted a bill for the amendment of that article under which women would pass on their nationality to their offspring. The bill is currently being examined.

Early childhood

68. In line with the general comment of the Committee on the Rights of the Child regarding rights in early childhood, the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population — in collaboration with relevant government agencies, civil society groups and UNICEF — has developed its second strategy for the development of early childhood. The Commission has also published the general comment and disseminated it among specialists, carers and parents, and it has produced an early-childhood care guide, which is aimed at parents and persons working in the care and development of infants, from policymakers to service providers. The Presidency of the Council of Ministers has assigned the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour to regulate child custody matters. As a consequence, a committee was formed which defined working mechanisms and internal guidelines for custody issues in both the public and private sectors. A training guide has also been produced for persons who work in that field. For its part, the General Women’s Federation has produced a guide for babysitters in coordination with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour and it is coordinating with UNICEF on the publication of a two-part care guide, to which end it is holding meetings with mothers in kindergartens. The guide addresses such topics as: child development, natural breastfeeding, child protection, children’s rights, etc.

Freedom of thought, conscience and religion (para. 45)

69. It should be reiterated, in addition to what was stated at the outset of the current report, that in no legal system in the world are children permitted to conduct financial or personal business, or even to choose a partner in life. These are not matters to be elevated to the status of a conviction. To allow children the freedom to change or choose their religion

as they wish would be incompatible with article 18 (4) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations, which allows parents to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions. The same principle is articulated in the International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights. For those reasons, hopefully the Committee will appreciate why the reservation to that article stays in place. It should be stressed, moreover, that the reservation is limited to the right of the child to choose his or her religion, and the Government is keen not to undermine the freedom of parents or guardians with respect to their children's religious education. However, it believes that such a right would weaken family ties, the solidity of which is one of the bulwarks of Syrian society, thereby harming children and giving rise to conflict between them and other members of their family.

Freedoms of expression and of association and peaceful assembly (para. 47)

70. Freedom of opinion and expression for all citizens, young and old, is guaranteed under the 2012 Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic. For its part, the Associations Act No. 93 of 1958 allows students to form associations, irrespective of age requirements.

Access to appropriate information (para. 49)

71. Children in Syria receive information appropriate to their age, education and maturity with a view to realizing their best intellectual and moral interests. Children have access to various kinds of information and ideas, a process that involves the family, schools, news media, cultural centres, musical academies, institutes of popular culture, schools of figurative art, ballet schools and clubs, as well as public and private libraries, which are open to all children and hold large quantities of children's books.

72. The new Media Act No. 108 of 2011 guarantees freedom of opinion and expression. The Act, which regulates all matters relating to freedom of expression in print, visual and audio media, states that the media are independent and their freedom may not be restricted save in accordance with the Constitution and the law. Article 3 of the Act sets forth the basic principles underpinning media activity, which are as follows:

- Freedom of expression and the fundamental freedoms set forth in the Constitution, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the international treaties signed and ratified by the Syrian Government;
- The right of citizens to access information;
- Respect for the privacy, dignity and rights of individuals;
- A requirement that no programme for children be broadcast unless the media organization concerned obtains approval. Such approval is confined to the contents and technical format of the programme and its adherence to certain conditions such as not containing scenes of violence, hatred, incitement to crime or discrimination, as stipulated by a specialist media committee made up of academics, educators and psychologists;
- A prohibition on the publication of any form of commercial advertisement unless it adheres to certain rigorous standards such as that of not exploiting children for commercial purposes. Advertisements affecting children are monitored and withdrawn if they are found to infringe the rules laid down by specialist media committee made up of journalists, academics, educators, doctors and others;

73. The Ministry of Information undertakes to provide children with appropriate information while fully respecting the Media Charter of Honour, which states that media professionals must:

- Respond to children's need for information while protecting their interests;
- Respect the wishes and knowledge of children;
- Provide correct information;
- Involve children in the production and presentation of programmes;

- Allocate sufficient media space for informational material and activities;
- Respect children's privacy;
- Not broadcast or publish anything that would incite violence, hatred, racism or discrimination. The Ministry of Information has issued guidelines and decrees, and taken administrative measures, with a view to protecting children's private lives and reputations.

74. At the institutional level, each media organization (television, radio, print media) has a department dedicated to issues affecting children. Those departments, which are specialized in programming for children, have their own rules of procedure in accordance with which they formulate and implement annual plans in cooperation with other competent bodies. They also undertake constructive monitoring of the content and format programmes. The following rules must be followed from the time production starts on a programme until it is broadcast:

- The ideas expressed must be in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child;
- It must not contain any ideas harmful to the interests of the child, or incite violence, discrimination or sectarianism, and it must impart simple, intelligible and clear information to the child;
- Children must not be exploited in the media;
- Care should be taken to involve children in the production and presentation of media programmes.

75. Through its various directorates, the Ministry of Culture disseminates information and knowledge of interest to children. The Adult Education Directorate runs a number of programmes designed to combat illiteracy among children over the age of 14 who have dropped out of school, thereby also facilitating their access to information. Similarly, the Theatre and Music Directorate annually produces between 16 and 20 theatrical shows for children in Damascus and most other governorates. In addition, among its other activities in the governorates, the Directorate produces an average of 300 shows a year that are put on during annual theatrical festivals for children.

76. The Children's Culture Directorate runs a life skills and psychological support programme in shelters and cultural centres in the governorates of Damascus, Rif Damascus, Latakia, Tartus, Suwayda, Homs, Hama, Idlib, Aleppo and Deir al-Zor. The programme seeks to impart information in an entertaining way through art, play and games using workshops, interactive theatre, puppets, story-telling, interactive reading, arts and handicrafts. Regular activities are also held periodically to encourage children to participate and benefit from information. They include the following:

- Interactive discussion seminars on multiple subjects concerning science, the environment, literature, education, rights and health;
- Children's book fairs that include both publications of the Ministry of Culture and of private publishing houses.

77. As part of a project to foster the development and encourage the participation of young people, the Children's Culture Directorate is working with UNICEF to equip children's libraries with multipurpose rooms for theatre, cinema, drawing, exhibitions, Internet, etc. The goal is to ensure that child- and youth-friendly areas are available in cultural centres in Damascus, Homs, Latakia, Yabroud in Rif Damascus and Mahardah in the governorate of Hama, as well as Rajab Basha and Manbij in Aleppo. In the past, most of those places had been targeted by armed terrorist groups and some of them had been put out of service, as happened in Rajab Basha and Manbij. In addition, the Ministry is working to develop and expand children's libraries — at the rate of two a year — in cultural centres across the country.

78. At the institutional level, the Ministry of Culture has appointed a specialist in child culture at each cultural directorate in the governorates. The appointee will monitor the activities organized for children in all the cultural centres run by that directorate, as well as in musical academies, institutes of popular culture, schools of figurative and applied art and

ballet schools throughout the governorate. Among these, mention may be made of the Solhi Al-Wadi Institute for Music Teaching, the Adham Ismail Centre for Visual Arts, the ballet school and the children's theatre.

79. The Public Agency for Books, part of the Directorate of Children's Publications in the Ministry of Culture, regularly publishes the magazine *Shama*, which is intended for very young children; the magazine *Osama*; the *Osama* monthly book; the book series *Eminent Figures and Innovators*; the book series *Childhood Library*; the book series *Our Children* (paperback); and the book series *Creative Children* (writing and drawing). These publications give children the opportunity to write material such as stories and poems, to share general information and to submit drawings by post, email and social media. As a form of social support, space is also given to responding to questions raised by children and solving their problems, under the guidance of trained psychologists. The magazines have also begun running regular activities for children in their own local areas. The aim is to create a space in which they can participate directly, make proposals that reflect their own desires and learn more about the magazine and its contents.

80. In addition, the Directorate of Children's Publications produces other books for children such as stories and novels, as well as theatrical and scientific works. The goal is to improve children's cultural knowledge. No fewer than 12 titles are published each year; in other words, around one book per month. Furthermore:

- Seminars have been held in cultural centres on children's literature and the effect it has on the formation of personality;
- Innovative workshops for children have taken place;
- Works by children and children's authors that have won prizes at literary competitions organized annually by the Children's Culture Directorate are printed then presented at children's book fairs;
- Children's books and magazines published by the Public Agency for Books are presented at book fairs.

Torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (para. 52)

81. Domestic law punishes torture and ill-treatment against all persons, be they children or adults. According to article 53 of the 2012 Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, no one may be arrested, except by order of the competent judicial authority; no one may be tortured or treated in a cruel or humiliating manner; persons who commit such acts are liable to a penalty defined by law; and no one may be held in detention by the administrative authorities except by order of the competent judicial authority. Likewise, article 391 of the Criminal Code states that anyone using violence to extract a confession or information about an offence shall be liable to imprisonment for between 3 months and 3 years. If the violence inflicted leads to illness or injury, the minimum prison term becomes 1 year rather than 3 months. What this means is that no cruel, inhuman or degrading punishment may be inflicted on a child, as it is punished by the law in the same way as that inflicted against an adult.

82. In order to raise awareness about harmful practices and to highlight activities to combat torture against children and the relevant penalties, the Vanguard Group has organized exhibitions to expose the harmful practices to which children have been subjected as a result of the current crisis. It also organizes a competition called "I was Born in Such a Place", in cooperation with the Ministry of Education.

Corporal punishment (para. 54)

83. Domestic law prohibits beatings or torture of any kind against children. If children suffer violence within their families or at school, the perpetrator will be held liable under the Criminal Code, which stipulates severe penalties for such actions particularly if they cause the child severe injury or lead to permanent disability. The use of the term "to discipline" in article 170 of the Personal Status Code has educational overtones. It does not refer to beating or torture but to instilling children with morals, values and good manners.

84. The Ministry of Higher Education has introduced a new module on strategies to protect children from violence. The course — which is taught in the third year at the faculty of education for all specializations: classroom teacher, kindergarten teachers and psychological counsellors — covers the legal, educational and media aspects of strategies to protect children from violence of all kinds. In addition, the Ministry includes child-protection courses as part of the activities of the faculty of education's vocational unit, and it has introduced a Master's on psychological and social protection. It should also be mentioned that the Baath University in Homs recently held a workshop which came up with a specific definition of violence against children.

85. The Ministry of Education issues decrees and publishes circulars banning corporal punishment in schools, and any child who suffers aggression or violence within school may file a complaint in that regard. In addition, the child, a parent or anyone with responsibility for the child may submit a complaint against either of the parents if they use violence against their offspring. Within schools, teaching, counselling and administrative staff use seminars, publications and school outreach programmes directed at children and parents to raise awareness and protect children from torture and violence.

86. The Ministry of Awqaf (Islamic Endowments) also contributes to child protection through the guidance it gives to parents via Friday sermons, religious education, the Women's Call Directorate and programmes on Nur al-Sham Television. That guidance focuses on the importance of bringing up children soundly in terms of their mental, moral, academic and physical development, of encouraging children to read, of supporting them psychologically and of protecting them from violence and from discrimination on the grounds of sex.

87. The Revolutionary Youth Union uses youth-oriented media — television and radio programmes, the newspaper *Al-Masira* and the magazine *Aghla Shabab* — as well as social media sites to discuss the phenomenon of violence against children and how it can be tackled through awareness-raising, guidance and the sound education of children in society. From 2011 to the present, around 50 workshops and training courses have taken place to provide psychological and social support to children and young people, particularly those in shelters.

88. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population has drawn up a simplified guide that offers alternatives to certain erroneous practices that involve physical violence towards children and provides tips on how to deal with children in care centres, schools and kindergartens.

E. Family environment and alternative care

Family environment (para. 56)

89. Chapter I of the Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic enshrines certain social, educational and cultural principles and sets standards for the physical, academic, psychological and social upbringing of children. On the basis of those constitutional provisions and of domestic law, Act No. 9 of 2011 was issued, for the establishment of a national social assistance fund. The aim of the fund is to provide care and protection for specific individuals and families through the provision of regular or emergency assistance. It also seeks to promote and invest in human capital, and to empower beneficiaries economically, socially and educationally. To that end the fund, acting within standards that ensure transparency, has established its own programmes and institutions, which cater for both Syrian and non-Syrian families. The fund receives allocations from the general budget, in addition to which it also accepts gifts, aid and legacies.

90. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour has directorates in the governorates to follow up on the needs of families in general and, in particular, those residing in shelters. The support provided, which covers financial, social and psychological requirements, also has implications for child development. In fact, those families receive support programmes tailored to their particular circumstances (material needs, training and rehabilitation, loans for families and special provisions for families with female breadwinners).

91. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population has prepared a guide for persons intending to marry. The volume covers health, social and legal aspects, which it explains in a simple and intelligible way.

Alternative care (para. 58)

92. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour provides protection and care services — health care and education as well as moral, social and psychological guidance — to children who are deprived of care within their own families, on either a temporary or permanent basis. It supervises numerous social-care institutions designed to serve such children throughout the country. The care can take two forms: internal care within the institution or external care within the child's natural or extended family. Which of the two forms is most appropriate and best serves the child's interests is decided following a comprehensive study of his or her circumstances.

93. The Ministry is working to implement the Alternative Care Act, which also covers children who have been deprived of family care, such as orphans, children of unknown parents, vagrant children, child victims of violence, unaccompanied children and children separated from their families. Under the Act, they receive care and protection in accordance with relevant national domestic legislation and international treaties and standards. The ministry has also developed a training manual for people who work in that sector and it has adopted quality standards and designed a special questionnaire for children who have been placed in centres.

94. In addition to the foregoing, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour also offers guidance to families and parents. To that end, it collaborates and coordinates with civil society organizations to transmit information about childcare to parents, such as the importance and specificity of each stage of development, also focusing on early childhood and its effect on a child's subsequent growth and character formation. The Ministry also runs social-care institutions that look after children, including child victims of violence and ill-treatment. They are monitored by sociologists and psychologists and the condition of each child is examined to determine the most suitable support and recovery programmes to offer. In addition, numerous activities are on offer, tailored to the differing situations and desires of the children (such as computer skills, drawing, handicrafts, electronics, general skills) the aim of which is to develop their capacities and to assist their subsequent reintegration into society.

95. Mention should also be made of the role played by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour in protecting the children of persons in prison, in cooperation with civil society groups like the Federation of Associations for the Care of Prisoners and their Families. The Ministry also enjoys ongoing cooperation with other associations, such as SOS Children's Villages which, in collaboration with the European Commission for Refugees, has set up a year-long training programme for foster mothers.

96. A "child flexibility" programme has been rolled out, which is a global programme of psychological and social support that includes regular sessions for foster mothers and children. The course has been run twice and has been attended by 50 children. Other initiatives include a psychological support programme that uses puppets and the training of 40 young girls in life skills. Individual cases in need of specialized psychological care have been followed up by the Psychological Guidance Division.

97. The Ministry of Awqaf (Islamic Endowments) is particularly concerned about the family environment and seeks to raise awareness among the public about the importance of preserving the family, caring for children and protecting their future. The Ministry has a special portfolio for families, women and children and it participates in all relevant discussions with other departments of State. The Personal Status Code affords protection to the family, women and children, while the Ministry provides psychological and spiritual support to displaced families and their children in mosques and shelters, running psychological support courses in cooperation with other concerned groups and promoting activities that nurture the family environment. The Ministry also provides alternative family care in the form of material, educational and academic aid for orphans in orphanages under the Ministry's control. As regards the current crisis in the country, Ministry-run

associations have been offering remedial classes to children in grades 1 and 2 who have been deprived of an education.

98. Directorates within the Ministry of Culture, particularly the Children's Culture Directorate, have been focusing attention on children deprived of a family environment. Artists and writers have been running special activities and workshops for them and, in addition, there have been displays of popular art, theatre, film screenings and open days to exhibit works produced during the workshops, all in a festive and recreational atmosphere. The children are also able to participate in all the other activities the Ministry organizes during the course of the year. In fact, throughout the year the Ministry of Culture, in collaboration with UNICEF, runs daily programmes in shelters, cultural centres and schools for the children of martyrs. The programmes, which are aimed at children in need of family care, psychological support or life skills, make use of art, games and sport and are noteworthy for their cultural, interactive and recreational qualities. Moreover, since the beginning of 2013, the Children's Culture Directorate has been organizing artistic and literary completions, as well as an annual festival, for the children of martyrs. The initiative is intended to nurture their talents, exhibit the results of their work (printing literary works and displaying drawings and photographs) and honour the winners, of whom there have been 400 so far.

99. The General Women's Federation looks after 50 children per governorate — including Aleppo, Damascus, Suwayda, Latakia, Tartus and Quneitra — who have been deprived of parental care, involving them in sports programmes and providing psychological and material support.

Empowering families during the crisis

100. In the light of the current situation in Syria, the family empowerment programme has, in addition to its existing status as a development programme, contributed to efforts to meet the nutritional, educational and medical needs of the families involved. The family empowerment programme undertakes the following activities:

- It helps to enrol the children of the families involved in the programme in school (144 children from primary to secondary school) and it provides them with school bags and all the other school supplies they need;
- In collaboration with the aid programme run by SOS Children's Villages, it provides food parcels, which have been designed on the basis of advice from nutritional experts;
- It provides treatment and medical support in cases where surgical procedures are necessary;
- Civil society plays a prominent role in this area; in fact, a number of civil society groups are running projects and programmes to support and assist children; they include:
 - The relief programme run by SOS Children's Villages.

101. Beginning in 2013, SOS Children's Villages-Syria officially launched a wide-reaching relief project in Syria, during the first stage of which (2013–2014) it assisted more than 200,000 Syrians in Damascus, Rif Damascus, Aleppo, Daraa and the coastal region. The second stage (2014–2015) involved assisting and protecting 26,000 Syrian children via a project which received funding of US\$ 255,883 and provided 17,000 beneficiaries with food baskets. SOS Children's Villages-Syria, in collaboration with SOS Children's Villages-Switzerland, has also helped to support 180 Syrian families with food baskets, as part of a six-month aid programme. Large numbers of children affected by the crisis in Syria have been taken in by SOS Children's Villages-Syria and provided with care and support to overcome their fears and trauma. A psychological support team has held regular sessions to help children address their insecurities while their mothers have sought to help them adapt to their new and stable situation. In many cases, SOS Children's Villages has also managed to reunite children with their parents.

102. In addition, SOS Children's Villages-Syria spares no efforts to support children and young people and to ensure that they are successful in their studies. First, in cooperation with the Syrian Ministry of Education, it checks the children's personal information and fill out their identity documents in order for them to be duly registered. It then provides specialized teaching staff to monitor academic performance, as well as administrators and a team of psychologists and sociologists who follow the children closely to help them integrate into their communities and face up to their new circumstances.

Reuniting children with their families

103. The Children's Rights Society provides comprehensive support to families by organizing family visits, protecting children, guaranteeing their right to live within a single cohesive family even if the parents separate, and caring for their mental state. To this end, it has adopted an action plan covering the following areas:

- Its rehabilitation centre has been repurposed and equipped with toys to create a welcoming atmosphere in which children can see one of their parents;
- It runs awareness-raising sessions for the parents (father and mother) to help them not to drag their children into their personal problems or to use them to obtain some legal advantage;
- It runs reconciliation sessions for parents who have not yet separated in order to diagnose their problems and provide solutions with a view to reuniting; the sessions are run by qualified staff and always take account of the child's best interests.

104. With a view to supporting families and protecting them from the effects of the current crisis, a number of associations are running community protection initiatives. For example, the Syrian Association for Social Development is providing training for volunteers working in shelters in various governorates such as Damascus, Rif Damascus, Hama, Homs, Aleppo, Al-Hasakah and Tartus, and for persons working with children within the "Tomorrow is Ours" project, which seeks to recreate a family atmosphere.

105. The Syrian Association for Social Development also monitors the situation of children who have been separated from their parents, through observation by its own volunteers working in shelters, through referrals from other organizations and through local communities in which the Association and its goals are known. The Association then goes to visit the host family in order to acquire information about the child and the reason for the separation from his or her parents. The Association also seeks to determine the child's needs and, if possible, meet them, and to monitor the economic situation of the host family and its relationship with the child. In 449 cases, it has also provided in-kind assistance to the child to meet his or her personal requirements and reduce the economic burden on the host family. Furthermore, financial help has been given to the host families to help them continue to support and nourish the child they are looking after. The Association has also been able to reunite a number of children with their families and to provide others with identity documents, and it has given economic and moral support to host families and run guidance and awareness-raising sessions for them.

106. With reference to the recommendation to eliminate the segregation of orphans of unknown parents in institutional care facilities, there are certain psychological considerations concerning the integration of such children that have to be taken into account. Children of unknown parents have no relatives and, consequently, no one to accompany them or to visit them, whereas the children of known parents have relatives and families who come to see them on a regular basis. This factor could cause psychological damage to the child of unknown parents. For that reason, a residential complex of eight buildings has been set aside for them, under the supervision of the Raja' Charitable Organization. There they receive educational and medical support at a location that acts as an epicentre for the local neighbourhood; in fact, the complex has a cultural centre, gardens and playgrounds all of which are open also to local residents. A periodic review takes place, in which the children themselves are fully involved, with a view to placing them in alternative care centres, and a special questionnaire has been drawn up to help evaluate the possibility of placing the children with foster families.

107. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour undertook a review of the legislation applicable to children born out of wedlock with a view to ensuring that they were not deprived of family care and institutionalized. The review concluded with the proposal for the Alternative Care Act, the provisions of which take full account of the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children contained in General Assembly resolution A/RES/64/142, adopted on 20 November 2009. In addition, the Ministry also issued operational instructions and quality assurance standards for the provision of alternative care for children, whether within a family or an institution.

108. With reference to provisions contained in the Personal Status Code concerning the freedom of women to travel outside the country accompanied by their children, it should be pointed out that the Code does not prevent women from travelling with their children altogether. It merely places certain conditions thereon, in the best interests of the child, by requiring the approval of the father or the guardian. Conversely, the father may not travel with a child while it is in his care without the consent of the mother. Moreover, under article 48 of the Personal Status Code, a mother who is custodian of her child may travel to her home town with her infant after her 'idda (prescribed period of waiting), without the consent of her guardian. In addition, she may travel with the child inside the country to the town where she resides or has employment, provided that she has a relative there in a degree of consanguinity that precludes marriage (mahram). These provisions are applied in most normal circumstances. In exceptional circumstances, such as the present crises and catastrophes, Syrian women may — if the father is absent or missing — travel with their children with the approval of a sharia court judge, and judges have shown themselves to be extremely cooperative in that regard.

F. Violence against children, including abuse and neglect (para. 60)

109. The Ministry of Education has implemented a series of actions aimed at protecting children from violence. They include lectures in primary and secondary schools, Ministry-run institutes and Vanguard Group camps to raise awareness about the importance of rejecting and combating violence. The Ministry of Education has also launched a raft of measures to promote the physical and psychological rehabilitation of child victims of violence and their reintegration into society. They include:

- Helping children acquire motorial skills appropriate to their age using organized and directed play;
- Helping children acquire sound habits to maintain their physical health and imbue them with confidence in their physical abilities;
- Satisfying children's physical and material needs through games that reflect their desires and their talents, and bring them a sense of fulfilment;
- Helping children live balanced, active and healthy lives by introducing them to a series of physical activities they can carry out with their peers; this will strengthen their group relations, promote a sporting culture, bring them to appreciate physical activity and health, improve their decision-making and problem-solving capacities and help them to express their views and ideas through play, overcoming challenges, etc.; thus, free time is used in such a way as to give the children a sense of enjoyment and to prevent them from drifting into social delinquency;
- Promoting welfare and recreation by developing a sense of curiosity, helping children discover the world of sports, promoting a sense of belonging through participation in sports camps and instilling beneficial social characteristics such as service in the school or community.

110. With a view to providing psychological support and fostering social reintegration, the Ministry of Education and a number of international organizations have come together to run workshops and training courses on various different subjects. The courses are aimed at administrative and teaching staff in schools, as well as at students who may face difficulties or psychological and social problems or may have suffered injury or trauma as a result of the current crisis. The Ministry has engaged both psychological and social

counsellors to run the support programmes, which involve awareness-raising seminars and training courses in such areas as: psychological first aid, expressive techniques to unburden the mind, stress-relief techniques, nightmares and how to deal with them, post-traumatic stress disorder, emotional problems in adolescents, abandoning school, learning difficulties, active learning, remedial learning, health education, how to be an effective trainer and child protection.

111. The Children's Culture Directorate in the Ministry of Culture — as part of the life skills and psychological support programme it runs in collaboration with UNICEF in shelters, cultural centres and schools for the children of martyrs in 11 governorates — seeks to help children and adolescents, relieve the suffering they are experiencing as a result of the current emergency, and to help them to express their thoughts, feelings and concerns. To that end, numerous workshops were held in the period between 2011 and 2016: there were 14,000 workshops based on games (such as sports and popular, traditional and intellectual games), 800 theatre shows and dance performances and 2,800 film screenings, in addition to other artistic workshops. More than one million children and adolescents participated in these initiatives.

G. Disability, basic health and welfare

Children with disabilities (para. 62)

112. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour oversees institutions for persons with disabilities, which exist in most governorates. Those institutions provide children with various services such as social and psychological care, education and habilitation, and vocational training, in a manner consistent with their needs and their disability (such as visual, hearing, motorial or intellectual disabilities). The students' progress is monitored in collaboration with their families, who are given all the information they need. In addition, institutions run by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour provide physical therapy to students, teach them life skills, self-help and personal cleanliness, and develop their capacities and skills to help them reintegrate into society. The Commission for Family Affairs and Population has also taken steps to disseminate the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities among persons who work in the sector.

113. Efforts are currently being made to amend the national classification of disability (No. 992 of 2008) in order to maximize access to health-care services for children with disabilities of various kinds. Cash subsidies have been disbursed to poor families caring for children with cerebral palsy to help them provide care and treatment for their offspring.

114. At the beginning of 2015, the Ministry of Health opened four clinics for newborn infants in three governorates: Damascus, Homs and Tartus. As part of this pilot project in the early detection of disability, the newborns are examined for hearing and sight disabilities, and for hip dysplasia. Any disabilities are then recorded in the national register. The Ministry is working to expand the initiative to all other governorates.

115. The Ministry of Health seeks to guarantee the educational rights of persons with disabilities with a view to integrating them into the school system and improving their access to inclusive education. It does this in line with its own vision, which includes promoting the overall quality of education and interacting more effectively with the requirements of comprehensive development. In that regard, it undertakes the following actions:

- Removing the obstacles hindering children with disabilities from exercising their right to education;
- Using differences and distinctions between children as a source for promoting education;
- Improving the educational environment to make it more welcoming for children with disabilities;
- Encouraging schools and civil society to cooperate with and assist one another;

- Recognizing that educational integration is part of integration into society as a whole.

116. The Ministry began by drafting a charter on the educational integration of persons with disabilities, which reflected national principles. It then opened integrated schools in all governorates where there were children with mild or moderate disabilities. Before the current crisis broke out, there were 1,453 students in 75 schools and, although the crisis has undoubtedly led to some schools being damaged or put out of service, the Ministry of Education has opened new ones to replace them. The Ministry has also sought to adapt the school environment for students with disabilities, applying a building code for integrated schools and supplying them with resource rooms adequately equipped with assistive devices for the integration of persons with disabilities. The Ministry's Research Directorate has developed brochures on educational inclusion as well as a mechanism for defining and dealing with disabilities. These tools, which help to improve the knowledge and skills of individuals who work with persons with disabilities, include a guide to educational inclusion, a theoretical guide to learning difficulties, a resource room training manual and a guide on designing school buildings to accommodate persons with disabilities.

117. The Baath Vanguard Group takes a close interest in persons with disabilities, and their integration into society has been one of the fundamental goals of recent habilitation programmes. To that end, the Group has been holding workshops in schools to demonstrate inventions by children with disabilities in the field of health care and treatment.

118. Between 2011 and 2014, the Revolutionary Youth Union organized 35 training workshops across a number of governorates. The aim was to prepare 350 volunteers to work in teams caring for children with disabilities and seeking to reintegrate them into society. The General Women's Federation also works to integrate children with disabilities into its own kindergartens, in line with standards set by the Ministry of Education, and to impart lessons in life skills, self-help, capacity-building and social reintegration.

119. Civil society also plays an important role in this field. For example, the Syrian organization Aamal provides special care services for children with autism in educational institutions for persons with intellectual disabilities. In addition, the Syrian Association for Social Development keeps tabs on children with disabilities through friendship groups, visits by specialist teams to the families concerned and observation by volunteers. The aim is to collect information about the child and the cause of the disability, to investigate and satisfy the child's needs, and to provide services such as in-kind assistance. Up to the present, 608 cases have been monitored, 521 of them children.

120. The Ministry of Culture has re-equipped a number of cultural centres and adapted their infrastructure in order to enable children with disabilities to participate in their activities. In addition, the Ministry's printing service has been equipped with machines for producing texts in Braille. At the same time, the Children's Culture Directorate is developing a policy to integrate non-disabled children and children with disabilities, depending on the type of disability, through the following activities:

- Involvement of children with disabilities in the Directorate's annual activities;
- An annual celebration for children with disabilities including theatrical performances and film screenings as well as workshops on art, acting and story-telling;
- Production of a play in which 75 per cent of participants are children with disabilities, and the involvement of children with disabilities in all other activities organized by the Directorate;
- Annual photo, video, drawing and story-writing competitions;
- A life skills and psychological support programme.

Health and health services (para. 64)

121. The Ministry of Health has embraced the concept of primary health care as a way of improving health outcomes and the delivery of basic services. It has set itself the goal of establishing one health centre for every 10,000 people in rural settings, and for every

20,000 people in cities. In 2013, the number of health centres stood at 1,988; however, due to the current circumstances, a number of public health facilities, as well as private clinics and hospitals, have been put out of service. In addition, the movement of the population has also affected medical personnel, many of whom have emigrated while those left behind are ineffectively distributed.

122. In the light of current national circumstances, the Ministry of Health has worked with the World Health Organization (WHO) on the development of an early warning and rapid response system in order to improve readiness to deal with and react effectively to epidemics. The system involves early and weekly reporting on a priority group of communicable and inoculable diseases capable of provoking epidemics (including nine principal diseases and eight secondary diseases) as well as the reporting of any deaths. It also covers new health-related occurrences and the emergence of diseases of unknown origin. The system was launched in July 2012, at which time it involved 104 health units across various governorates. Other health centres, public and private hospitals, private clinics, shelters and Red Crescent centres were co-opted until, at the beginning of 2015, the number of health units involved stood at 650. Thanks to the system, 35 cases of poliomyelitis were discovered at the end of 2013 as well as increases in the incidence of measles in areas in north and east of Syria, which had been overrun by armed groups. In 2014, under its national inoculation programme, the Ministry of Health ran campaigns to provide oral polio vaccine and vaccination against measles for 5-year-olds in health centres and shelters. This led to a halt in the spread of poliomyelitis.

123. The Ministry of Health has run a number of awareness-raising campaigns in schools, shelters and health centres on water- and food-borne diseases, and respiratory infections, and how to prevent them. Health centres offer care services for mothers and children, including free vaccinations in line with the national inoculation programme. There are also national vaccination campaigns against polio, measles, mumps and rubella.

124. The Ministry of Health undertook the following initiatives between 2011 and 2016:

- Training courses on programmes to combat diarrhoea for doctors and nurses in the governorates;
- Training courses on inoculable diseases for investigation and monitoring teams in the governorates;
- Training courses on the Integrated Management of Childhood Illness (IMCI) programme for doctors and nurses in the governorates;
- Centralized and decentralized training courses on neonatal resuscitation for doctors, midwives and anaesthetists;
- Centralized and decentralized training courses on rapid health assessment in emergency situations for directors of care centres and children's health departments, and officials responsible for vaccinations;
- Ongoing efforts to investigate cases of flaccid paralysis;
- Training courses on the monitoring of rotavirus and streptococcus pneumoniae at the Children's Hospital and other hospitals in Damascus;
- Campaigns to clear up pockets of poliomyelitis using the oral polio vaccine;
- Vaccination days at the regional level for children under 5 who have not yet been vaccinated;
- Work has also continued to extend vaccination coverage to all governorates and difficult-to-access regions.

125. The inoculation programme, just like other health programmes, faces enormous challenges:

- Health centres have gone out of service and trained staff have fled;
- As a consequence of the security situation and of population movements, trained medical workers are poorly distributed;

- There are difficulties in delivering vaccines to health centres;
- Parents are failing to pursue inoculations due to difficult living conditions;
- With a view to overcoming those difficulties, monthly meetings are held with national partners and international organizations.

126. Since 2011, despite difficult circumstances, the Ministry of Health has uninterruptedly continued to provide routine vaccinations under the State budget, in order to safeguard children's health.

127. With a view to meeting nutritional requirements, the Ministry has:

(a) Distributed baby milk to children most in need, in cooperation with civil society groups, orphanages and shelters;

(b) Established the National Breastfeeding Committee in preparation for the introduction of the Syrian Code on Breast Milk Substitutes. The following measures have been taken:

- A monitoring and evaluation system has been set up in child-friendly hospitals, including training and supervisory visits;
- Companies that market breast milk substitutes have been requested to make a written pledge to abide by the Syrian Code on Breast Milk Substitutes;
- Information and educational briefings have been held for health workers and associations on how to follow the Code, particularly in emergency situations;
- Training on nourishment for infants and small children has been integrated into training on the community management of acute malnutrition;
- Breastfeeding is promoted at health-education seminars and via the distribution of appropriate printed materials; such initiatives are particularly aimed at women in shelters;
- Working in collaboration with UNICEF, the Ministry of Health has launched a child nutrition project and has delegated the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population to undertake awareness-raising activities in the community.

128. The concept of child-friendly hospitals has been reinstated:

(a) Hospitals that are still operational and have obtained a child-friendly certificate have been identified;

(b) Retraining has been offered:

- Trainers have been trained, both at governorate level and in individual hospitals;
- All health workers involved in maternity care and delivery have received training.

(c) Educational materials have been designed, prepared and produced;

(d) The necessary equipment has been provided.

129. The Ministry of Education has also sought to address the most pressing health challenges, to promote the physical and mental well-being of children and to prevent and deal with communicable and non-communicable diseases. The Ministry's School Health Directorate provides health and educational services, promotes a healthy environment, seeks to improve the health of students and others in the community and helps to resolve health-related problems. School health programmes aim to curb the health problems that commonly arise in schools and, at the same time, to improve the effectiveness of the educational system. The following services have been provided in schools: inoculations, comprehensive medical checks, detection of communicable diseases, monitoring of the school environment, early detection of disability, promotion of oral and dental health, school health education, school health curricula and school nutrition.

130. Concern for health is not limited to nutrition and vaccinations, it also covers mental health. In fact, with a view to providing psychological support and fostering social reintegration, the Ministry of Education and a number of international organizations have come together to run workshops and training courses on various different subjects. The courses are aimed at administrative and teaching staff in schools, as well as at students who may face difficulties or psychological and social problems or may have suffered injury or trauma as a result of the current crisis. The Ministry has engaged both psychological and social counsellors to run the support programmes which involve awareness-raising seminars and training courses in such areas as: psychological first aid, expressive techniques to unburden the mind, stress-relief techniques, nightmares and how to deal with them, post-traumatic stress disorder, emotional problems in adolescents, learning difficulties, active learning, remedial learning, health education, child protection, how to be an effective trainer and out-of-school activities.

131. The Ministry of Culture (Children's Culture Directorate) runs an interactive health-education project entitled "A Sound Mind in a Sound Body", which uses a variety of activities to promote the psychological, bodily, moral and intellectual development of children, and to impart them with healthy habits:

- Discussion seminars are held with children on the culture of health and the role children can play in preventing the spread of communicable diseases;
- Health-education seminars take place at cultural centres in all governorates;
- There is an annual event, "Children and the Environment", which involves various health- and environment-related activities;
- In addition, the Ministry of Culture (Children's Culture Directorate), in cooperation with the Syrian Public Agency for Books, has produced a number of simplified illustrated cultural health booklets on how to identify and prevent the major communicable diseases such as hepatitis A, scabies, lice infestations and poliomyelitis. The booklets are printed then distributed in shelters, schools for the children of martyrs, orphanages and homes for children with disabilities.

132. Civil society is also active in the field of children's health. With funding from WHO, the Syrian Association for Social Development is running a project to provide medical support for families adversely affected by the current crisis in the governorates of Damascus, Rif Damascus and Aleppo. The project aims to serve people who have suffered harm as a consequence of the crisis, require health care and reside in shelters or host communities. It offers medical examinations, the distribution of medicines, diagnostic procedures (tests, X-rays, etc.) and surgical operations or assistance therein. This form of health care has had a positive impact on the target groups. The project covered the governorates of Damascus, Rif Damascus and Aleppo where 1,341 people underwent medical examinations, 1,516 received medicines and 139 persons benefited from surgical or diagnostic procedures.

133. Medical equipment has been provided for some patients, and the health awareness of persons in shelters has been improved. Networking has taken place with other groups, such as the Aamal organization for persons with disabilities and the Red Crescent, for the purposes of planning and medical analyses. As a result of the project, many communicable and chronic diseases have been avoided.

134. The Syrian Association for Social Development is running a project to provide medical support for families adversely affected by the current situation in Damascus and Rif Damascus. The Association has also held a number of meetings on health and environmental awareness, including guidance on the importance of hygiene and its role in prevention and protecting against disease. It has also liaised with government departments with a view to providing improved health services through such initiatives as the "I My Home" festival, a health and hygiene promotion programme and a programme on nutrition during Ramadan.

135. From 2013 to the present, the Children's Rights Society has been working in collaboration with the Health and Welfare Directorate to provide polio vaccines in parts of

Rif Damascus, including the more turbulent areas. Furthermore, it has provided volunteers for all vaccination campaigns aimed at children.

Adolescent health (para. 66)

136. The Ministry of Health provides quality health-care services to adolescents in schools, particularly those affected by the current crisis. To that end, specialized centres have been set up in each governorate, delivering a package of health-care services and seeking to respond to adolescents' health needs through consultation, prevention and health advice. There is a particular emphasis on reproductive, sexual and psychosocial health, and on traumas resulting from the crisis. The services are delivered by qualified health-care professionals who possess the necessary skills. The centres are connected to shelters and schools via a system of feedback and referral reports. Awareness about adolescent health is disseminated among health-care workers in other centres and shelters so that they can provide frontline counselling and advice, and refer people to the specialized centres in case of need.

137. As a way to empower adolescents to look after their own health, they are imbued with life skills to promote self-realization and awareness, help them make informed decisions regarding their well-being and deal with any traumas arising from the current crisis. To that end, workshops for young people have been held in shelters, as well as in schools for those who do not reside in shelters, while certain adolescents have been designated as coordinators for the health of their peers in each specialized centre.

138. Despite the crisis:

- A total of 1,220 consultative meetings have been held in shelters on the reproductive, sexual and psychosocial health of adolescents;
- Eighteen courses have been held for health-care workers to promote the skills necessary to serve adolescents who have been adversely affected by the crisis;
- Sixty psychological and social counsellors in schools have received training in how to help pupils deal with traumas resulting from the crisis;
- Doctors, both specialists in family medicine and general practitioners, have received training on how to provide consultations and medical services regarding the reproductive and sexual health of adolescents, and on how to deal with adolescents in clinics;
- Studies have been carried out to evaluate the health needs of adolescents at shelters in Damascus.

139. The School Health Directorate is seeking to build a strong and sound generation of young people who have faith in themselves and care for their health. It has organized health-education classes in schools and lectures for parents. Specifically, the Directorate has undertaken the following activities:

- It has included the subject of AIDS and AIDS prevention in its school health training programmes at the basic and secondary levels;
- In coordination with the Union of Teachers, it has published articles relating to the disease in the Arab Teachers' Journal, which is issued by the Ministry of Education, and in the magazine *Bunat al-Ajyal*;
- It has organized seminars at the local level with school health educators, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health;
- It has distributed information brochures on AIDS and AIDS prevention to school health departments, clinics and schools themselves;
- It has monitored the inclusion of the subject of AIDS and AIDS prevention in educational television programmes, in collaboration with satellite educational television channels;

- It carries out various activities in schools — such as seminars, meetings with parents, wall displays and school broadcasts — for the occasion of World AIDS Day;
- Activities and lectures on AIDS prevention and the dangers of the disease have been held in schools by education counsellors, specialists and teachers who have followed training courses;
- Under the supervision of specialized teachers, wall displays on the subject of AIDS and AIDS prevention have been set up in schools;
- Steps have been taken to ensure that protocols to prevent the spread of the disease are duly applied in school health clinics, particularly dental clinics;
- Through coordination with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Information, a sound culture towards AIDS is disseminated in society;
- AIDS prevention activities have been organized, particularly in summer camps, in coordination with the Revolutionary Youth Union, in order to promote awareness about the disease and how to avoid it;
- In coordination with the General Women's Federation, awareness-raising seminars have been organized on the subject of AIDS and AIDS prevention;
- In collaboration with the Ministry of Health, training courses have been held for school health workers: dermatologists, dentists, health auxiliaries, counsellors and teachers;
- A teachers' guide on the subject of AIDS has been prepared as a cooperative project involving the National Programme to Combat AIDS and WHO;
- Posters prepared by the Ministry of Health have been used to disseminate health awareness among school health workers, teachers and pupils.

140. The School Health Directorate takes measures to promote healthy lifestyles through a variety of different programmes. The aim is to improve the health and behaviour patterns of young people, promote self-reliance and develop life skills such as decision-making, communicating with others, understanding human sentiments, thinking rationally and coping with crises. The overall goal is to promote healthy and sound behaviour and a life free from tobacco, obesity, etc. The Ministry of Education seeks to disseminate a culture of health, both inside and outside school. It draws attention to the dangers of certain negative aspects of social and cultural traditions such as early marriage, marriage between blood relations and behavioural differences between males and females, to help promote a sound understanding of such practices.

141. In order to promote awareness among adolescents about matters related to reproductive health, particularly pregnancy, childbirth, family planning, and sexually transmitted diseases, the Ministry of Education has systematically introduced those subjects, particularly among students in secondary schools, Ministry-run institutions and elsewhere. It has devised a training plan for technical and administrative staff working in the School Health Directorate and school health departments (dermatologists, dentists, health auxiliaries, etc.) on how to teach such sensitive topics, also by making appropriate use of teaching aids.

141. The Ministry of Education has also sought to take steps to raise awareness about the prevention of suicide among children and to monitor other situations that might affect children's right to life, survival and development. To that end, a series of child-protection measures have been implemented. Psychological and social counsellors in schools, who play such an important role in preventing child suicide, have been trained, and research has been carried out to study the causes of the problem.

142. The Vanguard Directorate in the Ministry of Education has been running a programme to draw children's attention to the dangers of drugs and drug-taking. The programme involves volunteers who operate in first cycle schools throughout the country. They seek to raise awareness about the damage drugs cause and their impact on bodily and mental health, society and the economy. Out-of-school activities are organized in which,

under the guidance of supervisors, children learn how to behave correctly at home and in the neighbourhood, how to avoid activities that may be harmful to their bodily and mental health and how not to acquire bad habits from other children.

143. The Revolutionary Youth Union has set up teams of volunteers in the governorates to run training courses and workshops to improve adolescents' understanding of their own health and to teach them life skills. In addition, the Union runs subsidiary seminars in the governorates on the harmful effects of smoking and, in cooperation with the Ministry of the Interior, it organizes televised discussions in all governorates on the dangers of drug-taking. Furthermore, the Union participates in an exhibition organized annually by the Ministry of the Interior in which members of the Union produce artwork that highlights the damaging effects drugs have on young people and society as a whole. Information posters on the dangers of drugs are also produced.

144. The Ministry of Awqaf (Islamic Endowments) acts to ensure that Friday sermons, lessons in mosques and religious propaganda also draw people's attention to the importance of caring for their own and their children's health. The Ministry issues circulars in which preachers are encouraged to raise matters affecting the health of citizens in general and children in particular, especially regarding hygiene, AIDS, smoking, drugs, national vaccination campaigns and disabilities caused by the war in Syria.

145. The General Women's Federation coordinates with health directorates to organize seminars in the Federation's own branch offices, and in shelters. The initiatives focus on explaining AIDS and its perils, and how to avoid them. Up to the time of writing the present report, 20 seminars have been held and 400 women have taken part.

146. The Baath Vanguard Group takes a keen interest in the health of adolescents and has launched a plan entitled "Father, extinguish your cigarette before you extinguish my life", to teach children about the harmful effects of smoking. The goal is to help protect young generations from things that may endanger their health and to inculcate children with healthy behaviours and habits, which they can then pass on to their families and local communities. The Group has also launched an awareness-raising campaign on tuberculosis and run an anti-drugs workshop.

147. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population has produced a "child-to-child" guide explaining the risks of addiction and encouraging children to adopt healthy behaviours and habits, and to avoid tobacco, drugs and alcohol.

Harmful practices (para. 68)

148. The Syrian Arab Republic seeks to reduce harmful practices such as early marriage, forced marriage and so-called honour killings. To that end, it has taken a number of steps such as amending provisions relating to honour crimes in the Criminal Code and increasing the penalties for perpetrators of such offences. With reference to early marriage, the children's rights bill equates capacity to marry with attainment of majority — i.e., the age of 18 — and there are both government and civil society initiatives highlighting the dangers of early marriage. Cases of forced marriage are very few in number. None have been recorded inside Syria although the practice does exist in camps in neighbouring States and constitutes a serious violation of children's rights. It should be pointed out that, according to the latest family health survey, the average age of marriage in Syria is 29.3 for males and 25.6 for females. According to the same survey, just 4.8 per cent of brides were under the age of 15, which gives some indication of how limited the problem is.

149. The Ministry of Awqaf (Islamic Endowments) undertakes outreach in this field by making the parents of spouses, the spouses themselves and the wider community aware that both boys and girls should gain academic or vocational qualifications and be adequately prepared to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and family.

150. The Ministry of Justice held a workshop on underage marriage and issued a recommendation that the marriageable age be unified for both males and females and that the Personal Status Code be amended accordingly. A committee set up in the Ministry of Justice to amend discriminatory provisions against women recommended raising the

marriageable age and amending article 18 of the Code so that the minimum age of marriage should be 18.

151. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population also acts to make the damaging effects of early marriage and its impact on families more widely known. The General Women's Federation holds seminars for girls with a view to encouraging them to complete their studies and avoid early marriage, and to making them aware of its harmful effects on their health and psychosocial development. The Federation also holds meetings, seminars and training courses to raise awareness and end discriminatory practices.

H. Standard of living (para. 70)

152. The crisis that has beset the Syrian Arab Republic since the middle of 2011 and the unilateral coercive measures that have been imposed on the country by the States of the European Union, the United States of America and other nations have impacted on the lives and rights of Syrian citizens, in particular their right to work, development and a dignified life. There have also been negative repercussions on the lives of Syrian families, who constitute the basic building blocks of national society.

153. Those coercive measures have prevented Syrians from fulfilling such basic needs as foodstuffs, medicines, medical equipment, fuel, and agricultural, educational and cultural necessities. They have weakened resistance, aggravated the condition of most social groups, especially poor people and displaced persons, increased unemployment rates, depressed the exchange rate of the Syrian pound, and boosted hoarding and price inflation. This state of affairs has compelled many Syrian families to seek out new alternatives, one of which has been displacement or emigration at any cost and under any conditions. Many people had great hopes that such a move would improve their circumstances or at least put an end to the state of anguish and frustration they had been experiencing and improve the prospects for their children's future. All of this constitutes a violation of Syrian human rights, as shown by the following figures:

- Food insecurity, which affected no more than 1.2 per cent of the population in 2010, rose to 33 per cent following the crisis and now stands at 51.6 per cent;
- The level of agricultural production has declined significantly, leading to increased levels of inflation, high prices in general and high food prices in particular, reaching 500 per cent in 2015 as against 2011. This has been accompanied by more than 2 million Syrians losing their jobs, jeopardizing the lives of more than 6.4 million people and throwing them into poverty. United Nations estimates of the proportion of people below the poverty line shows it rising to over 80 per cent;
- The exchange rate of the Syrian pound has fallen against the dollar and other convertible currencies, which has led to great inflation and high prices for basic commodities.

154. Since 2011, the Syrian Arab Republic has adopted economic and social policies to address development challenges that have an adverse effect on society. This has taken the form of issuing and amending laws with the aim of creating a legislative climate that promotes the economy and ensures a decent standard of living to all sections of society. The most important measures taken have been:

- Creation of an institution for medium- and small-scale projects, pursuant to Act No. 2 of 2016;
- Creation of an institution to guarantee loans for small-scale projects, pursuant to Act No. 12 of 2016, with a view to strengthening the role of financial institutions;
- Creation of a body to support and develop local production and exports, pursuant to Act No. 3 of 2016, with a view to activating and developing mechanisms for the protection and development of local products.

155. Throughout the crisis, the Syrian Government has endeavoured to pursue social empowerment policies by means of poverty-alleviation schemes aimed at enhancing family

income (humanitarian aid, grants). In addition, programmes, projects and activities (both local and international) have sought to ensure that the poorest inhabitants are able to enjoy their social and economic rights, and to strengthen production sectors in order to generate job opportunities. The most important such policies have focused on:

- Developing the work of civil society through cooperation and partnerships, sponsoring voluntary initiatives and increasing the number of social welfare centres;
- Developing the work of social assistance funds for the poorest, establishing income-generating projects and creating job opportunities;
- Working to enact new investment laws to alleviate the effects of the humanitarian crisis and to promote various types of economic and social activity.

I. Education, leisure and cultural activities

Education, including vocational training and guidance (para. 72)

156. The education sector is the focus of particular concern on the part of the Syrian Government, which seeks to provide facilities to ensure that education of all kinds, including vocational and technical training, is made available to all Syrian children. The Government has made considerable efforts in that regard in order to overcome the harmful and destructive consequences of the systematic targeting of schools in areas overrun by armed terrorist groups. Those groups have subverted education by replacing existing curricula with their own, by which they seek to propagate terrorism, hatred, violence and intolerance. In fact, with tacit international complicity, the armed terrorist groups seek to attract children then give them intense teaching in “jihad” and the founding principles of the so-called Islamic State before taking them to special camps for military training. This is attested in reports by the United Nations including one entitled *Alienation and Violence* jointly produced by the Syria Centre for Policy Research, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Criminal groups have been set up in which children are brainwashed and compelled to witness crimes such as beheadings and stoning of women in order to create a new generation nourished by violence and terrorism.

157. The terrorist organization Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) closed all the schools in the areas under its control and did not allow children in those areas to study. In addition, the armed groups stole the furniture and other contents of the schools they controlled. They also carried out terrorist bomb attacks in schools or used them as military headquarters or bases from which to launch attacks. Even in such circumstances, the Syrian Government has continued to use all its resources and to do everything in its power to protect children from extremist terrorist ideologies and to respond to their needs in record time. In fact, the Government has been able to restore, re-equip and reopen a large number of schools that had previously been in the hands of armed terrorist bands in Hasaka and Aleppo.

158. The Ministry of Education has sought to deal with the challenges affecting the educational system that have arisen during the course of the crisis, challenges that have also threatened the very structure of Syrian society and each of its members. The Ministry has developed plans and programmes to prevent, tackle and raise awareness about those challenges, mitigate their impact on the education sector and curb school dropout rates. Its efforts have focused on building infrastructure, providing an appropriate school environment and rehabilitating and protecting schools destroyed in attacks by armed terrorist groups. It has also sought to limit the use of schools as shelters. Thanks to action taken by the Government in that regard, the number of schools used as shelters has dropped significantly since the start of the crisis. At the end of 2011, 1,994 schools were being used as shelters but, by 2015 after the schools had been cleared in order to be refurbished and brought back into service, that number had fallen to just 205. Measures have also been taken to ensure the continuity and improve the quality of school curricula.

Psychological and social support programme

159. Ministry of Education and a number of international organizations have come together to run workshops and training courses on different subjects. The courses are aimed at administrative and teaching staff in schools, as well as at children and students who may face difficulties or psychological and social problems or who may have suffered injury or trauma as a result of the current crisis. Awareness-raising seminars and training courses have been held in such areas as: psychological first aid, expressive techniques to unburden the mind, stress-relief techniques, nightmares and how to deal with them, post-traumatic stress disorder, emotional problems in adolescents, abandoning school, learning difficulties, active learning, remedial learning, health education, child protection, how to be an effective trainer and out-of-school activities. In addition, the following activities have taken place:

- In cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs and UNICEF, psychological and social support workshops for teachers have been organized in most governorates;
- In cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs and UNICEF, 478 workshops for psychological counsellors have been organized across all governorates. Furthermore, in collaboration with PU and DRC, train-the-trainers courses were held between 2012 and 2017 and, in cooperation with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) a psychological support manual for counsellors was issued;
- Psychological and social counsellors visit schools and shelters to help families and alleviate the effects of the traumas they have suffered;
- A central psychosocial support group has been formed which, in its turn, trains local groups throughout the country;
- Leaflets have been circulated among psychological and social counsellors in schools covering such subject areas as: the importance and the role of the counsellor during crises, the current crisis and its impact on children, the role of the counsellor in caring for persons with disabilities, psychological trauma, addiction and its impact on the individual and society, the role of the counsellor in dealing with aggressive children, the role of the counsellor in dealing with the issue of pupils telling lies, the importance of education in life and the role of the counsellor in providing psychological support to pupils adversely affected by the crisis;
- In collaboration with UNICEF, a psychological support manual has been drafted, and psychological and social counsellors have received training in emergency situations;
- A psychological support booklet has been compiled and presented to teachers working in emergency situations, in cooperation with UNESCO;
- A course to raise awareness about explosive residues has been held for staff of the Ministry of Education and the educational directorates;
- In addition, steps have been taken to ensure a safe environment in schools and to curb truancy and, in cooperation with international organizations, services have been provided with a view to encouraging students to return to school.

The right to primary education

160. The right to education and the appurtenances necessary to exercise that right are a national priority in Syria. Under the Compulsory Education Act No. 7 of 2012, parents or guardians are required to send their children to school and are liable under the law if they fail to do so. That Act complemented Act No. 32 of 2002, which made education compulsory until completion of the primary level. Children in Syria, both male and female, irrespective of religion or any other affiliation, have the right to education and to enter school from the age of 6.

161. With a view to accelerating the education of pupils who return to school following an absence of more than one year, a special remedial educational programme entitled the Group B Module has been developed in cooperation with UNICEF. The Group B Module is

aimed at children and adolescents between the ages of 8 and 15, who have either never been enrolled in school or are returning following an absence of at least a year. This includes children who followed rehabilitation programmes in centres run by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, and those referred to the educational directorates. Those children and adolescents are accepted into special sections within primary schools. Then, depending on their level of education and in accordance with a plan devised by the Ministry of Education, they cover grades 1 to 8 in four years instead of eight. In a single school term, each pupil studies a module containing basic information for a full year. At the end of each term, the pupil sits an exam then moves from one grade to another grade at the same level. The Module began to be applied at levels one and two (level one covers grade 1 and grade 2, level two covers grade 3 and grade 4) at the beginning of the academic year 2015/16. The project has been implemented in 200 schools at the national level.

162. In addition, thanks to collaboration with UNESCO, a complementary learning programme is available in all governorates for pupils who fail their examinations. Under the programme, two workshops take place covering the first and second cycle of the primary level (apart from grade 9) and the secondary level (grades 10 and 11). Pupils who have failed in four subjects have the right to sign up for the workshop, which lasts two months and takes place in the summer once the official term is over in State-run schools.

The right to secondary education

163. The right to free secondary education is guaranteed for all students who obtain the primary education certificate. Secondary education is divided into general and vocational.

Preventing school dropout

164. The Ministry of Education has worked with international organizations on services to encourage students to return to school and to curb dropout rates. A girls' education project has been devised in cooperation with UNICEF, special sections have been opened for the 8–15 age group and intensive curricula have been introduced to rehabilitate girls who have dropped out of school, or never been enrolled. The Ministry has also issued several ministerial circulars with a view to facilitating the return to school, preventing truancy and registering undocumented students in State-run, private, vocational or sharia schools.

165. In order to curb unauthorized absences from school, the Ministry can draw on a number of pieces of legislation under which parents are obliged to ensure that their children complete all levels of their education. These include the following:

- Act No. 32 of 7 April 2002 under which preliminary and preparatory education are brought together into primary education, and all levels of primary education are made obligatory;
- Compulsory Education Act No. 7 of 22 February 2012 and its implementing regulations, which makes education compulsory until completion of the primary level and sets forth measures to curb truancy. It also includes provision for special sections for children who have dropped out of school or never been enrolled (non-formal education). Pupils are enrolled in the sections according to their previous educational achievements and their age group. They then follow an intensive four-part curriculum wherein each part covers two grades: grades 1 and 2, grades 3 and 4, grades 5 and 6, and grades 7 and 8. Pupils cover two grades each year and, having completed the last of the four parts, they are qualified to receive their primary education certificate. The timetable of the section depends on the circumstances of the pupils;
- Decree No. 39 of 20 July 2008, under which teachers in remote or semi-remote areas receive compensation for the nature of the work they do there, the aim being to ensure that children in those areas have access to education;
- Decree No. 433/532 of 15 January 2004, which invests governors with the authority to bring legal action against parents who fail to send their children to school in accordance with the Compulsory Education Act;

- The Ministry of Education has adopted the general principle of educational flexibility in specific areas where schools can start and finish at different times with respect to the rest of the country;
- The Ministry has opened boarding schools for the children of Bedouins in Homs, Rif Damascus, Deir al-Zor, Hama, Raqqah. It has also established a fleet of mobile schools (caravans), which accompany the Bedouin children as they move with their families in search of pasture.

166. In the light of the current circumstances, the Ministry of Education has put measures in place to educate children in shelters and to adapt the procedures and legal directives that regulate the learning process so as to open the way for students to pursue their schooling. Despite those measures, however, there has been a perceptible increase in the school dropout rate. This may be attributed to a number of factors such as the family circumstances of the pupils concerned, ignorance and lack of awareness, and the fact that some students have been forced to move house repeatedly. It should also be noted that, before the crisis, the dropout rate had fallen to 1.9. The Ministry of Education has had to make schools across the country available as shelters. Ministerial circulars have been issued to reduce the impact of the crisis on families who live in those shelters, and their children, through support provided by psychological and social counsellors and activities organized by teaching staff such as sport, music, art, etc.

167. The Ministry of Culture plays a complementary role in helping to deal with the effects of school dropout. This consists in combating illiteracy under the relevant legislation: Act No. 7 of 1972 and Act No. 16 of 2002. In addition, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education have signed a memorandum of understanding to share jurisdiction, according to which the Ministry of Culture deals with children aged 14 and above who have dropped out of compulsory education. Persons who have been freed from illiteracy benefit from an empowerment programme that seeks to provide them with knowledge and skills that will qualify them to enter the labour market.

168. Psychological and social counsellors play a vital role in helping to devise guidance, prevention, treatment and development programmes. They help students to avoid dropping out of school, impart the skills necessary for them to adapt to the school environment and provide psychosocial support. In order to make up for the defects in school buildings that have arisen as a result of the crisis, the Ministry of Education has made school refurbishment one of its major priorities. Working in collaboration with international and local organizations, the Ministry has restored a number of schools, focusing its efforts particularly in areas occupied by displaced persons and areas that suffered heavy damage. Restoration work has included the following: restoring the main school buildings, providing equipment and placing plastic film over glass to mitigate the effect of explosions. An action plan in this regard has been devised by a number of organizations: the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the Syrian Association for Social Development, Secours Islamique France, the Guba Association, Action against Hunger Spain and the French Red Cross.

169. In conjunction with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Ministry of Education has sought to provide appropriate aid and support. It has encouraged pupils and their parents to respect school hours, to which end it has distributed more than 35,000 free books to children studying for their secondary school diploma in various governorates. In addition, more than 100,000 school bags have been distributed across the country.

170. With support from DRC, the Ministry of Education has been distributing school bags to children: 300 school bags and a number of health kits were handed out in each school running the remedial education programme in the academic year 2013/14. Stationery has also been distributed: 3,000 exercise books were handed out in each school running the remedial education programme in 2014. In addition, 4,800 school chairs were distributed in the governorates of Damascus, Rif Damascus, Daraa and Suwayda in 2013. Moreover, in collaboration with the Guba Association, 6,000 health kits and stationery boxes have been handed out in Damascus, 8,000 in Rif Damascus and 2,500 in Quneitra.

171. The Syrian Association for Social Development has signed an agreement with the Ministry of Education under which the two bodies will cooperate to reduce school dropout rates and to undertake the following activities:

- Providing psychological and social support to pupils at risk of dropping out of school, and their families;
- Encouraging children who have dropped out to return to school, setting up B Module classes, offering vocational training, and providing psychological and social support to them and their families;
- Training teaching staff to work with children who have dropped out of school;
- Providing schools with equipment to facilitate activities appropriate for such children.

172. The Association also monitors and follows up on children both inside and outside shelters. Pupils who have dropped out of school for whatever reason are monitored by the Association's volunteers at the shelters or community centres in which the Association operates. Contact has been established with schools in different areas, either individually or via the Ministry of Education, with a view to sending the children back to school. The total number of persons who have dropped out of education in the various governorates stands at 2,285. They are distributed as follows:

- 460 in Damascus and Rif Damascus, 97 re-enrolled in school;
- 376 in Aleppo, 97 re-enrolled in school;
- 349 in Homs, 69 re-enrolled in school;
- 427 in Hama, 70 re-enrolled in school;
- 113 in Tartus, 47 re-enrolled in school;
- 560 in Hasaka, 78 re-enrolled in school.

173. The Syrian Association for Social Development has devised an out-of-school teaching programme. The programme, which is discussion- and dialogue-based, provides information and knowledge not on the basis of a predefined syllabus but of the recipient's needs, and its aim is to liberate children and adolescents by helping them develop their critical faculties, creativity and initiative so that they can become responsible members of society. The out-of-school teaching programme covers academic and theoretical subjects such as geography, accounting, reading, writing, drawing, handicrafts, morals, biology, natural sciences, history, theatre and music.

174. The Syrian Association for Social Development has also devised a vocational training programme to empower members of society, especially marginalized groups, by giving them the vocational skills necessary to secure jobs in the current employment market. There is a particular focus on groups who have been unable to find a livelihood due to the present circumstances in the country and the programme is, therefore, fundamentally aimed at young people, including adolescents, particularly those in reform institutions and shelters.

Goals of education (art. 29), its quality and its connection with the needs of life and the job market

175. The principle aim of education in the Syrian Arab Republic is to mould Arab Syrians; to give them a sense of citizenship and belonging; to imbue them with knowledge, skills and values; to enable them to develop, practise democracy and exercise responsibility in all areas of life; to make them capable of thinking rationally and being productive; to render them creative and innovative; to impart to them the ability to overcome and resolve difficulties; and to encourage them to invest in opportunity and achieve progress.

176. The goals of education are achieved through curricula based on national standards, which have been translated into objectives and concepts that are embodied in school textbooks. Using those means, schools seek to impart information, knowledge and skills to students in the light of evolving assessment standards and evolving educational activity in which the student is the pivot of the teaching process and the teacher acts as counsellor and

guide. Large numbers of teachers have followed intensive training courses to be requalified in the new curricula. Those curricula — which also cover the cultural rights of all children, without discrimination — are unified and seek to promote national cohesion and a culture of tolerance and respect for others, while rejecting any manifestations based on ethnic characteristics.

177. Working with international organizations, the Ministry of Education has devised a vocational training programme to develop the capacities of students who have dropped out of school and those who reside in shelters, and to facilitate the process of finding a job that will improve their standard of living. To that end, groups of students who have dropped out of school or reside in shelters are targeted for different professions through the course of the year. This includes practical skills such as dressmaking, hairdressing, cosmetology, weaving, air-conditioning and refrigeration, electronics, electricians, carpentry, etc. A regional child development centre has been established in cooperation with the UNESCO regional office in Beirut to train administrative and teaching staff who work in kindergartens.

Pre-university education

178. The Ministry of Education is looking into how to develop national standards for pre-university education. Committees have been set up within the National Centre for Curriculum Development, which are currently in the process of analysing national standards for pre-university education. The current standards date from 2007. Seventeen committees have been created in all, bringing together academic and educational expertise from the Ministry of Education and the universities. They are in the process of examining the contents of the general pre-university educational curricula for grades 1 to 12. The committees evaluate the origin, scope and interrelation of each subject in the light of the present circumstances and consider the extent to which school textbooks are in line with current standards. They then seek to lay the groundwork for the future development of textbooks.

179. In 1987, in order to ensure that outstanding students received appropriate support and quality education, the Ministry of Education opened a number of special schools for them throughout the country. The Ministry, in fact, had understood that authentic investment is investment in human beings and, for that reason, it chose to concentrate on that vital sector of the student population. The current crisis has affected those schools just as it has affected all other educational sectors throughout the country: students have been prevented from going to school, school equipment has been burned and teachers have been threatened and prevented from carrying out exams. As a consequence, there are now disparities in the numbers of advanced students between one school and another. A number of the special schools have been put out of service altogether, such as the Duma School in Rif Damascus and the school for advanced students in Raqqah. In order to maintain high standards and excellence, new schools for outstanding children have been opened in a number of governorates: Al-Busiri Secondary School in Damascus, Al-Sanamayn Secondary School in Daraa, an extension to the school for outstanding children in Aleppo, Sahnaya Secondary School in Rif Damascus, a secondary school for outstanding children in Suwayda and another in the Jable area of Latakia. The grade for accepting outstanding students had been lowered from 90 per cent to 80 per cent in some governorates as a result of tensions and terrorist activities by armed groups.

National Centre for Outstanding Students

180. The National Centre for Outstanding Students has also been affected by the current circumstances in the country and has been forced to move on a number of occasions: first from its original site in the city of Homs to the University of Kalamoon then to Tishreen University in Latakia. Studies in the Centre, which takes in secondary school students, are continuing well and a number of classes have already graduated.

Private schools

181. Private education is seen as one component in the advancement of education. However, private schools, like State-run schools, have been affected by the current crisis. Due to the fact that some private schools are located in turbulent areas and parents fears for

their children's safety, timetables have had to be changed and the number of enrolled students has fallen. Some private schools have moved to other areas, which has also had an effect on the student enrolment rate.

The balanced development of students

182. The Ministry of Education continues to work closely with the leadership of the Baath Vanguard Group to promote the concept of respect for children's rights. Opportunities for rest, play and guided artistic activities are provided through Vanguard clubs, 621 of which have been set up in the safe governorates: Damascus, Latakia, Tartus, Suwayda, Hama and Rif Damascus. The Ministry of Education has also taken a close interest in supporting children psychologically to which end it has organized a variety of activities throughout the country including artistic festivals, sporting competitions and art exhibitions, all of which help to mitigate the effects of traumas the children may have suffered.

183. As regards cooperation with civil society, the Baath Vanguard Group has coordinated with the Syria Trust for Development (Massar Children's Project) to organize interactive activities under the title "I Can", which involve children between grades 1 and 6 in 35 schools. The aim of the Project is:

- To give the children a positive view of themselves;
- To give the children confidence in their ability to contribute, even in a small way, to marking their surroundings;
- To guide the children to use their hidden talents;
- To understand the identity of the targeted region and to learn the individual values of the children there;
- To identify the values that different communities share;
- To establish psychosocial support teams in the country's governorates.

184. The Baath Vanguard Group organizes "Pioneer" competitions at all levels to showcase children's abilities and to discover young people who possess innovative talents. Then, in order to increase national cohesion among all Syrian children, "Pioneers" from all governorates are invited to stay with families in the governorate of Tartus. In addition, in order to develop the sporting talents of gifted children and imbue them with healthy educational, sporting and social values, the Social Sporting Club was launched. Moreover, in collaboration with the Syrian Inventors Association and the General Association for International Fairs and Exhibitions, the Vanguard Group organized the seventeenth Al-Bassel Fair for Invention and Innovation which encourages and honours children gifted with innovative scientific talents.

185. The Vanguard Group has established the "Robot" centre for children where special tools are available for the teaching of a number of applied sciences: engineering, programming, mathematics, electrics, electronics and logic.

186. Via its various directorates, the Ministry of Culture strives to ensure that all children in Syria have equal opportunities to develop their social, intellectual and cultural talents. Its aim is to build a generation that has a strong national identity and culture, that is active in the community and open to the cultures of others. Skills and talents need to be developed, positive values need to be promoted and children need to be reared intellectually, psychologically, morally and healthily through directed programmes and activities. Various initiatives have been taken in that regard:

- The Music and Ballet Academies Directorate seeks to disseminate a culture of art and music and to train ballet dancers and musicians in musical academies and ballet schools that have been set up throughout the country. There are eight academies and schools in all, taking in around 700 students a year;
- The Theatre and Music Directorate produces theatrical shows for children at the rate of between 16 and 20 a year in Damascus and most other governorates. In addition,

among its other activities in the governorates, the Ministry also produces an average of 300 shows a year that are put on during annual theatrical festivals for children;

- The General Cinema Organization produced five short films for children between 2011 and 2016. It also organizes regular film weeks as well as film screenings for children in schools in all the governorates. In addition, it holds an annual cinema festival for children under the title “Children’s Worlds”;
- The Cultural Centres Directorate has been opening summer clubs for children in the governorates at the rate of 40 a year. The clubs, which specialize in such areas as languages, computers, sketching, drawing, handicrafts, theatre, music, singing and dance, benefited 40,000 children and adolescents between 2011 and 2016. Before the crisis, there were 141 institutes of popular culture imparting cultural, academic and artistic knowledge to people throughout the governorates. Of them, 64 have been put out of service. Similarly, there were 478 cultural centres across the country, of which 239 have gone out of service. In addition, the Directorate regularly supplies children’s libraries with books and magazines produced by the Ministry of Culture;
- There are 14 figurative art centres in the governorates, which run annual summer courses for children and adolescents, 2,000 of whom attended between 2011 and 2016. One of the major centres is the Adham Ismail Centre for Visual Arts in Damascus, which seeks to nurture artistic talent in children and adolescents and to develop their gifts and capacities through drawing and painting courses. The courses, which last two years, attracted around 7,000 students between 2011 and 2016;
- The Children’s Culture Directorate seeks to give children and adolescents opportunities to express their cultural and cognitive sentiments through a variety of activities: theatre, the popular arts, cinema, book fairs, art exhibitions and workshops in various different fields of culture:
 - Workshops: interactive theatre (6,000 workshops); puppet theatre (3,000 workshops); interactive story-telling (6,500 workshops); media and literature (300 workshops); music, rhythm and song (8,000 workshops); arts: drawing, clay modelling and collage (17,000 workshops); handicrafts: reusing materials, wickerwork, weaving, crochet and jewellery making (5,000 workshops); filmmaking (1,900); popular dance and arts (3,700 workshops); sports and popular, traditional and intellectual games (14,000 workshops).
 - Theatre and dance performances (800 shows) and cinema screenings (2,800 shows).

187. The Children’s Culture Directorate is always keen to discover new gifts and talents, which it then seeks to nurture and promote at 12 annual celebrations, as well as through other programmes and projects it runs. These include: the National Children’s Culture Podium, Artistic Spaces, Cinematic Culture, Arabic Heritage and Script, A Sound Mind in a Sound Body, a project to consolidate people’s sense of affiliation to their culture and heritage, a project to support children’s libraries and encourage reading, a life-skills programme and a project to develop the production of children’s books. In addition, the Directorate runs 22 competitions, including one for the sons and daughters of martyrs and another for children with disabilities, and it takes part in international competitions. The Directorate is also working in the governorates to establish teams specializing in different artistic disciplines such as theatre, dance, music and song. So far, 60 such teams have been formed. Around 70 sports teams have also been set up. In all, more than 1 million children and young people have benefited from these initiatives.

188. In accordance with article 30 of the Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic, the teaching of sports is one of the main pillars of society and is encouraged by the State to create a generation that is strong bodily, mentally and morally. The following actions have been taken in that regard:

- Time is allocated for sports teaching at all levels of education: primary and secondary;

- The number of sports classes has been increased in the second cycle of primary level education: grades 7 and 9;
- School sports tournaments are organized at both local and central level;
- Sports centres have been opened in collaboration with civil society groups;
- Sports festivals have been organized and attended by large numbers of students;
- A number of out-of-school activity centres have been opened to serve schools and the surrounding community;
- Courses have been arranged to train teaching staff and to habilitate sports teachers in schools for pupils with special needs.

189. The General Women's Federation has organized a series of cultural and recreational activities in its kindergartens. It also organizes summer clubs which run educational and recreational programmes on language learning, computers, music, Arabic script and theatre. Two thousand children have participated in the initiatives.

190. The Revolutionary Youth Union also runs sporting, artistic, cultural and voluntary activities at shelters in the governorates. Fifty art exhibitions have been held to showcase paintings and handicrafts produced by children, who were rewarded with prizes.

191. The Syrian Association for Social Development runs psychosocial support projects in several governorates to provide children with a range of recreational activities. These activities involve flexible tools that can be used in many psychological and social support programmes for all age groups.

J. Special protection measures

Asylum seekers and refugee children (para. 74)

192. The Committee strongly urged the Government to halt military operations inside and outside refugee camps while allowing humanitarian agencies full access to refugees. The Committee also urged the Government to speed up the process of adopting a national law for refugees and asylum seekers.

193. Over the course of the years, Syria has hosted refugees of various nationalities on its territory and is, according to UNHCR, the third largest refugee-host country. It has always treated refugees as brothers and sisters, it has accorded them numerous privileges and it has not placed them in camps, either inside Syria or on the border. Moreover, it has met the costs of hosting them until they could return to their homes without either requesting international assistance or proclaiming their distress in international forums.

194. Large numbers of Syrians have been displaced from their homes, villages and cities, while others have sought refuge in neighbouring States or in the West. In that context the Government — mindful of its humanitarian responsibilities and international obligations and in close collaboration with international organizations, particularly UNHCR, international and local NGOs, and civil society — is continuing to do everything in its power to find optimal solutions for citizens who have been forced to flee as a result of criminal acts perpetrated by armed terrorist groups. Those groups have practiced methods of forced displacement against peaceful citizens with the aim of shredding the country's social fabric while, in addition, the Syrian Government and people have been subjected to severe economic pressure, particularly through the imposition of unilateral coercive measures. Such measures have been the main impediment to the implementation of development programmes and the growth of local industries, and have led to increased unemployment that has prompted many Syrians to leave the country in search of a better life.

195. Mention must be made of the suffering being experienced by Syrians as a result of the deterioration of the security, social, health and economic situation in refugee camps in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon, and the transformation of many of the camps into training grounds for terrorists to send to Syria. Annual reports by UNHCR, UNICEF and other

United Nations agencies have highlighted increases in the incidence of organized crime, rape, child labour, prostitution and child marriage, as well as the recruitment of children to participate in combat operations with terrorist groups. The majority of the children in the camps do not, according to the reports, attend school and most of the camps have no legal officer to oversee the refugees' affairs. In addition, the phenomenon of the theft or destruction of humanitarian resources within camps is widespread and human trafficking, particularly of girls, takes place in the light of day. These grave indicators are a call to UNHCR and the host governments — if they have a genuine desire to help Syrians in the refugee camps — to act immediately and develop a serious action plan to raise awareness about and protect the people who face those serious problems.

196. The Syrian Government counts on the Committee to urge the relevant international organizations, especially UNHCR, to shoulder their responsibilities towards the refugees, including the responsibility to protect them from all forms of exploitation and persecution. Particular attention needs to be given to protecting refugee children in camps in neighbouring countries, who risk being recruited by armed groups or suffering the worst forms of sexual exploitation and organ trafficking, under the very noses of those responsible for overseeing the camps. Likewise, it is important to demand accurate statistics on the numbers of Syrian refugees abroad, rather than relying on imaginary numbers provided by certain governments and groups.

197. It should be noted that there is absolutely no truth to the allegations made against the Government by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its 2011 concluding observations, to the effect that Syrian military forces raided the El Ramel El Shamali camp in Latakia where numerous Palestinians reside. The Syrian Government sent an objection to the United Nations because the matter was not raised during the Government's discussion with the Committee on the Rights of the Child and because the incident did not, in fact, take place at all. It should also be made clear that there are no camps exclusively for refugees on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic and that the Government has made shelters available for all families who have been forced to flee their homes, on an equal footing with Syrian families and without discrimination.

198. The Government remains open to collaboration with United Nations agencies, including special rapporteurs, with a view to finding optimal solutions to enable internally displaced Syrian citizens to return to their areas of origin while securing their livelihoods and maintaining their safety. However, it should be noted that whatever efforts are made at the national or international level, the Government will fail to achieve its objectives if certain States continue to support armed terrorist groups operating on Syrian soil and to impose illegal unilateral measures, which have had a negative impact on the livelihoods of all Syrian citizens, both those who have been displaced and those who have remained.

199. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population has held a number of meetings to discuss UNHCR guidelines on refugee children. It should also be pointed out that the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons, during a visit that lasted from 16 to 19 May 2015, welcomed the efforts made by the Syrian Government and the steps it had taken to provide aid, care and shelter to internally displaced people. The Special Rapporteur also welcomed small-scale initiatives to build resilience among internally displaced persons and the measures put in place to help them secure a livelihood and earn an income, and he expressed shock at the fact that United Nations agencies had funded just 18 per cent of urgent humanitarian needs.

200. The Government remains ready to cooperate with the governments of the countries hosting the Syrian refugees in order to establish procedures that will encourage them to return to their homeland to become an active part of the process of reconstruction.

Unaccompanied children

201. In cooperation with UNICEF, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour has launched a family tracing and reunification project for separated and unaccompanied children. Special questionnaires have been developed and contact has been established with all competent government and civil authorities to help ensure that such children have secure places to stay and the care they need.

Forms of exploitation (art. 36)

202. Children who are in conflict with the law are placed in juvenile reform institutions where they are treated as victims not criminals. There they are provided with all necessary services, such as education, and social and health care, from the time they arrive until, by order of the competent court, they can leave to rejoin society as upright and productive citizens.

Economic exploitation including child labour (para. 76)

203. In cooperation with the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population and all other relevant stakeholders, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour has drafted a national plan of action to combat the worst forms of child labour. In addition, the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population has worked with UNICEF to conduct a survey on the worst forms of child labour in two industrial cities: Hassia in Homs and Hawsh Balas in Damascus.

Children in street situations (para. 78)

204. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour has drafted a national plan of action to eradicate the phenomenon of child begging and has set up a special rehabilitation centre for such children in the region of Al-Kiswah. In addition, the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population has developed an action plan to promote the work of civil society in this field.

Sexual exploitation and abuse (para. 80)

205. In the six years the crisis has lasted, Syrian children have been subjected to the worst forms of terrorism, violent extremism and sexual exploitation. Armed terrorist groups have methodically kidnapped and exploited Syrian girls and subjected them to the most egregious forms of sexual violence, including mass and systematic rape, and sexual slavery. Furthermore, there has been a wide dissemination of Wahhabi and takfirist religious precepts that validate the sexual exploitation of women and, especially, girls, under various names such as jihadi marriage and *sitra* marriage, and forcible marriages take place in the camps on the borders of neighbouring countries such as Turkey and Jordan.

206. It was with a view to protecting children from sexual violence that Syrian legislators enacted Act No. 11 of 2013. The Act amended article 489 of the Criminal Code and increased the penalty for anyone using violence or threats to coerce someone other than their spouse to undertake intercourse. Such a person is now liable to hard labour for life, a sentence that can be increased to death if the victim is under the age of 15 or if the offence was committed at gunpoint. This underscores the Government's commitment to punishing offenders with the most severe penalties.

Sale and trafficking of children (para. 82)

207. The Syrian Arab Republic is making strenuous efforts to prevent and suppress trafficking in persons, especially women and children, and to punish perpetrators in accordance with the Anti-Human Trafficking Act. In that regard, a number of measures have been taken:

- A national committee has been set up to combat human trafficking and protect victims, with the participation of civil society;
- A national plan to combat human trafficking has been prepared, with four basic areas of focus: prevention; measures to protect, care for and provide full guarantees to victims; prosecution before the courts; and building partnerships and cooperation locally, regionally and internationally;
- Capacity-building workshops have been held for staff in relevant ministries involved in the fight against human trafficking (the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, and the Ministry of Health, as well as civil society groups), organized in cooperation with the International

Organization for Migration (IOM), UNICEF, UNHCR and the Syrian Bureau for Family Affairs and Population;

- A number of psychological, social and legal care programmes have been developed for victims of human trafficking. This includes the ensure meticulous application of laws relating to protection, psychological and social care and assistance, access to appropriate care, confidentiality and privacy, counselling and legal aid on demand;
- The women and children welcome centre, located within the Department for Combatting Human Trafficking, has been refurbished in cooperation with the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population. In addition, a psychological support manual has been produced for women and children who have been subjected to human trafficking, particularly children who have been recruited into armed groups;
- Amendments are being introduced into the Anti-Human Trafficking Act to provide additional protection for women and children, in line with observations made by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women;
- As regards temporary marriage, there are no provisions in Syrian law that allow such a practice; in fact, anyone who stipulates such contracts is acting outside the framework of the law and is liable to punishment.

K. Follow-up under the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict (para. 84)

208. In order to abide by its commitments under the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, the Syrian Arab Republic enacted Act No. 11 of 2013, which added article 488 bis to the Criminal Code. The article prohibits the recruitment of children or their involvement in combat operations of any kind, and it envisages harsh penalties for anyone perpetrating such crimes. Furthermore, a national plan to combat the recruitment of child soldiers has been drafted, thanks to cooperation between relevant government agencies, UNICEF and UNHCR. The plan covers legal aspects, training, psychosocial support, rehabilitation, awareness-raising and outreach to the child soldiers, who are treated as victims. In addition, a manual has been developed to raise awareness among persons who are working to prevent the recruitment of children as soldiers.

209. The phenomenon of children being recruited as soldiers in Syria has become widespread in areas controlled by armed terrorist groups and in camps in neighbouring countries, where the socioeconomic conditions of children and their families have been exploited for that purpose. Armed battalions have been formed under various names, such as *Ashbal al-Zarqawi* (al-Zarqawi Cubs), *Ashbal Jabhat Al-Nusra* (Nusra Front Cubs) and *Ashbal Al-Khilafa* (Caliphate Cubs), made up of children ranging in age from 5 to 15. This constitutes a violation of their rights, makes them armed combatants and throws them into the thick of terrorist operations, in violation of all relevant international instruments on the rights of the child. It should also be noted that the laws that regulate compulsory service in the armed forces in Syria clearly define the minimum age for conscription as 18.

210. The political department of the armed forces seeks to make an effective contribution to raising awareness among civilians through leaflets dropped from aeroplanes and text messages (SMS) that encourage people to care for their children and to ensure that they complete all levels of their education.

L. Administration of juvenile justice (para. 85)

211. The administration of juvenile justice in the Syrian Arab Republic is regulated by the Juveniles Act No. 18 of 1974 as amended by Act No. 51 of 1979 and Legislative Decree No. 52 of 2003, which raised the age of criminal prosecution to 10 years of age. The criminal responsibility of children is graded progressively between the ages of 10 and 18, in the light of the best interests of the child, and such children are subject to precautionary and correctional measures and to mitigating penalties, in accordance with article 29 of the

Juveniles Act. There are special courts for children in conflict with the law, presided over by judges specialized in dealing with children.

212. Children who are in conflict with the law and need to be placed in detention are held at special locations appropriate to their status. In fact, they are placed in specialized institutions overseen by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour and the Ministry of Justice.

213. In partnership with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, civil society works actively to help children in correctional institutions. It runs support and psychological counselling courses for children in such institutes and training courses for staff who work there. The Syrian Association for Social Development has run a number of courses for staff in the Khaled ibn al-Walid Correctional Institute for Juveniles, as well as for its own staff, to ensure that children in the Institute receive effective services. The programmes include:

- Psychological counselling and family counselling;
- Training for case managers;
- Out-of-school education;
- Friends Programme;
- Quick searches for partnership;
- Sexual culture;
- Interactive theatre;
- Raising therapeutic awareness about the effects of crime;
- The logical framework for social work;
- Psychological first aid;
- Children in difficult circumstances;
- The psychotherapy of Carl Rogers.

214. The Association has also undertaken a fourfold SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunity and threat) analysis to evaluate the needs of the Khaled ibn al-Walid Correctional Institute for Juveniles in Qudsaya and, beginning in early 2011, an institutional database began to be developed, which was due to be ready in 2012. The database was to serve as a model that would later be disseminated and used by all juvenile correction institutions. Its purpose is to identify the number of children (remand and convicted) within the Institute; the activities and training in which they participated; legal information regarding their detention or conviction; recidivism; and information concerning their family and education. One special feature of the system is the issuing of reports detailing activities, year and name, in accordance with the principle of the best interest of the child. Thanks to its activities, the Association managed to reduce the average number of juveniles by 30 per cent in the period prior to the crisis.

215. In coordination with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, the Children's Rights Society has provided support for the Ghazali Correctional Institute for Juveniles, supplying it with the equipment necessary for the care of the children held there. It has also helped to put the children through literacy and computer courses, and vocational training (in hairdressing, sewing, etc.), and it has organized recreational programmes.

216. The Ministry of Culture (Children's Culture Directorate) conducts various activities to educate and enrich the knowledge of children and juveniles. These include workshops on clay modelling, drawing, handicrafts, painting on ceramics, Arabic script and reading, as well as theatrical performances, film screenings, seminars and dialogues to raise awareness about legal, social, cultural and psychological issues.

M. Protection of witnesses and victims of crimes (para. 87)

217. Syrian domestic laws — chief among them the Criminal Code, the Anti-Human Trafficking Act No. 3 of 2010 and the Anti-Abduction Act — protect children against violence of all kinds, and punish any form of violation, be it bodily abuse, sexual exploitation, abduction or trafficking. The Labour Code also protects children from the worst forms of child labour, while the children's rights bill currently being considered by the Government comprehensively addresses concerns raised by the Committee. The allegation made by the Committee about crimes perpetrated by the State during the protests of March 2011 are baseless. The Syrian Government explained the circumstances of that incident during its dialogue with the Committee in 2011, when it also pointed out that all the names of children supplied to the Government by the Committee were incorrect.

N. Ratification of international and regional human rights instruments (para. 87)

218. The Syrian Arab Republic was among the first States to accede to core human rights treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Despite the current circumstances it is experiencing, it remains committed to submitting reports to the relevant committees. Accession to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance is currently under consideration.

O. Follow-up and dissemination**Follow-up (para. 88)**

219. With the help of UNICEF, the recommendations have been printed and an action plan for the implementation of the Convention has been drawn up.

Dissemination (para. 89)

220. The Syrian Commission for Family Affairs and Population has translated the recommendations and sent them to government ministries and civil society associations. The Commission has also convened a large number of meetings to discuss the recommendations and has had them disseminated via its own television programme, *Hamzat Wasal*, and on its website.

P. Conclusion

221. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic looks forward to fruitful dialogue and constructive cooperation with the Committee, within the latter's mandate and with full respect for the sovereignty and independence of the Syrian Arab Republic and its freedom to make its own political choices within the framework of its national and international human rights undertakings and commitments. The Syrian Arab Republic believes that dialogue and constructive cooperation are conducive to promoting human rights, as part of development and comprehensive social progress. The Syrian Arab Republic urges the Committee on the Rights of the Child to support its efforts to achieve the shared goal of promoting children's rights in such a way as to ensure human dignity and to preserve the right of children to life, survival, development, the enjoyment of public rights and freedoms and access to protection and care, while always respecting their best interests.
