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United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, which complements the report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture submitted to the General Assembly at its seventy-sixth session, provides information on the activities of the Fund and describes, in particular, the recommendations for grants adopted by the Board of Trustees of the Fund at its fifty-fourth session, which was held remotely from 4 to 8 October 2021.



I. Introduction

A. Submission of the report

1. The present report was prepared pursuant to General Assembly resolution 74/143 and complements the report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture submitted to the General Assembly at its seventy-sixth session.¹ It contains updated information on the activities of the Fund, in particular the recommendations adopted by the Board of Trustees of the Fund at its fifty-fourth session, which was held remotely from 4 to 8 October 2021.

B. Mandate of the Fund

2. The Fund may receive voluntary contributions from Governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and individuals. In accordance with the mandate of the Fund outlined in General Assembly resolution 36/151 and the practices established by the Board of Trustees since 1982, the Fund provides grants to established channels of assistance, in particular NGOs, associations of victims and of family members of victims, private and public hospitals, legal clinics and public interest law firms that submit project proposals aimed at the provision of medical, psychological, social, financial, legal, humanitarian or other forms of direct assistance to victims of torture and members of their families.

C. Administration of the Fund and composition of the Board of Trustees

3. The Secretary-General administers the Fund through the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), with the advice of the Board of Trustees, which is composed of five members acting in their personal capacity and appointed by the Secretary-General with due regard for equitable geographical distribution and in consultation with their Governments. The Board of Trustees is currently composed of Sara Hossain (Bangladesh), Vladimir Jović (Bosnia and Herzegovina/Serbia), Juan Ernesto Méndez (Argentina), Lawrence Murugu Mute (Kenya) and Vivienne Nathanson (Chair, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland).

II. Management of grants

A. Admissibility criteria

4. Project admissibility criteria for applicants and grantees are outlined in the guidelines of the Fund.² The guidelines require a project proposal to be presented by an established channel of assistance, in particular NGOs, associations of victims and of family members of victims, private and public hospitals, legal clinics and public interest law firms. The beneficiaries must be victims of torture and/or their family members. Grants are awarded to projects providing direct assistance to torture victims, which may consist of medical or psychological assistance, help with social or financial reintegration and various forms of legal assistance for victims or members of their families, including support in seeking redress or applying for asylum. As a general rule, grants are awarded on a yearly basis, for a maximum of 10 consecutive years, subject to a satisfactory evaluation of the project and the availability of funds.

¹ [A/76/301](#).

² At its fifty-first session, held remotely on 7 July 2020, the Board of Trustees adopted the “United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture: guidelines for the use of applicants and grantees”, as amended intersessionally (1 October 2020), available at www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Torture/UNVFVT/Call/Guidelines_UN_Torture_Fund_2020_EN.pdf.

5. Subject to the availability of funds, the Fund also supports projects seeking to organize training or capacity-building activities for health-care professionals or other service providers, with priority given to applicant organizations that have already received a grant from the Fund. These projects may take the form of training, workshops, seminars and conferences, peer-to-peer training and staff exchanges aimed at increasing the capacity of grantees to deliver professional care to victims. They are to be conducted primarily for the benefit of the professional staff of the applicant organization. Grant requests for projects involving investigation, research, studies, publications or other similar activities are not admissible.

6. Outside the regular grants cycle and subject to the availability of funds, the Fund also provides emergency assistance to projects submitted through the emergency intersessional procedure of the Fund, as outlined in the guidelines of the Fund. Emergency grants may be awarded in exceptional circumstances, such as a sudden increase in the number of victims of torture to be assisted owing to a humanitarian crisis, including armed conflict, war or natural disaster. Emergency grants may also be awarded when such a crisis results in a grave situation that makes it impossible for an organization to continue to provide assistance to beneficiaries (for example, destruction of premises or offices), for the purpose of enabling the organization to resume its activities.

B. Monitoring and evaluation of grants

7. As a general rule, as part of the evaluation of project applications, visits to organizations are undertaken before a grant is awarded for a new project proposal. Regular monitoring visits to ongoing projects for which the renewed support of the Fund is being sought are also conducted to assess the implementation and impact of the projects funded. Internal guidance on the conduct of visits to projects that have been funded or are to be funded was developed by the secretariat of the Fund to ensure coherence in the evaluation process.

8. Travel restrictions related to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic have continued to limit the conduct of on-site visits in all regions worldwide. Following the precedent set in 2020, and in order to ensure a consistent approach that would not disadvantage organizations in countries hardest hit by the pandemic, where the needs of victims of torture tend to be highest, no visits were conducted in 2021. The secretariat continued verification through its thorough review of financial and narrative reports and audits, as well as the use of improved evaluation tools that take into consideration the merits and needs of each application. Additional means of desk verification were reinforced, including through remote contact with applicant organizations, the active involvement of OHCHR field presences, where relevant, and reference checks with donors and partners.

III. Financial situation of the Fund

9. In 2021, the Fund received contributions and pledges from 20 Member States, in addition to public donations, amounting to a total of \$10,526,415, which represents a relatively stable income stream in relation to 2020, when the Fund secured funds totalling \$10,413,467. During the past years, the Fund has received an average yearly amount of between \$8 and \$9 million. The Board of Trustees welcomed all the contributions and pledges made.

10. The Board, in close coordination with the secretariat of the Fund and the Donors and External Relations Section of OHCHR, seeks to secure a more satisfactory level of contributions from donors in order to respond to the current realities of victims of torture and their family members worldwide. It is estimated that a yearly income of at least \$13 million is necessary to respond adequately to the requests for funding received by the Fund from rehabilitation centres and other civil society actors each year, an amount that represents only a fraction of the estimated needs for torture survivors worldwide. The table below shows the contributions and pledges received by the Fund up until 10 December 2021.

Contributions and pledges received from 1 January to 10 December 2021

<i>Donor</i>	<i>Amount (United States dollars)</i>	<i>Date of receipt</i>
<i>Contributions</i>		
Andorra	11 627	12 October 2021
Austria	17 835	17 August 2021
Canada	46 699	22 April 2021
Czechia	9 138	6 October 2021
Denmark	799 098	24 March 2021
France	116 279	5 October 2021
Germany	465 116	8 October 2021
Germany	48 824	6 December 2021
India	50 000	21 June 2021
Ireland	154 816	18 November 2021
Italy	30 266	10 May 2021
Liechtenstein	80 558	28 October 2021
Luxembourg	17 201	11 October 2021
Norway	343 104	16 July 2021
Portugal	6 134	31 December 2020
Qatar	30 000	3 June 2021
Saudi Arabia	80 000	5 October 2021
United States of America	8 000 000	3 August 2021
Public donations	4 090	
Total contributions	10 310 785	
<i>Pledges</i>		
Mexico	10 000	
Portugal	5 630	
Switzerland	200 000	
Total pledges	215 630	
Total contributions and pledges	10 526 415	

IV. Fifty-fourth session of the Board of Trustees

11. The Board of Trustees held its fifty-fourth session from 4 to 8 October 2021. Although the United Nations Office at Geneva had authorized in-person meetings due to an easing of COVID-19 restrictions, the Board decided unanimously to meet remotely in the light of the different and evolving travel restrictions in the countries of origin of the trustees. The authorization to use an online videoconferencing platform, which was more accessible for persons with disabilities and with insufficient Internet connection, facilitated the conduct of the session. In order to mitigate the inherent limitations of meeting online, Board members reviewed background documentation, including information on each grant application, which was provided by the secretariat in advance.

12. At its fifty-fourth session, the Board examined proposals for funding and made recommendations on grants to be awarded to beneficiary organizations for activities to be implemented during the period from 1 January to 31 December 2022. The Fund had a net of \$11,072,376 available to be awarded, mainly for grants to support critical services to victims of torture and their family members in the course of 2022. The amount available for distribution to projects (90 per cent) was calculated after deducting programme support costs, the operating cash reserve and expected expenditures for non-grant activities (10 per cent).

13. During the session, the Board reviewed a total of 236 admissible project proposals received and evaluated by the secretariat for annual grants for 2022: 221 applications were aimed at providing direct assistance to victims of torture and their families; and 15 applications were intended to provide capacity-building in the field of rehabilitation. The total amount for the proposals reviewed amounted to \$13,298,974.

14. In line with the established grants procedure adapted to the remote environment, project proposals were reviewed by the Board on a competitive basis, taking into account the merit and documented needs of each proposal, as outlined in the evaluations provided by the secretariat. The complementarity of applications with other initiatives, the number of years of continuous support from the Fund for the same project and available income were also taken into account.

15. The Board recommended a total of 188 annual grants for projects to be implemented in 92 countries in 2022, for a total amount of \$9,075,000. Of those projects, 181 are for the delivery of direct assistance services to victims of torture (\$8,824,000) and 7 are for capacity-building and projects (\$251,000) aimed at strengthening the capacity of the beneficiary organizations to deliver such services. With the vital financial assistance of the Fund, it is expected that over 46,000 victims and their families worldwide will have access to rehabilitation and other forms of concrete assistance in the course of 2022.

16. In order to maintain a satisfactory level of accountability for each grant, rather than approve a higher number of grants, the Board decided to increase the average grant amount for 2022 to \$48,271, in comparison to the average amount of \$41,244 in 2021. The Board maintained a geographic balance, as follows:

- 27 per cent in Asia-Pacific States
- 24 per cent in Western European and other States (noting that the majority of project beneficiaries are persons on the move from other regions)
- 19 per cent in African States
- 15 per cent in Latin American and Caribbean States
- 15 per cent in Eastern European States

17. The Board also recommended setting aside an additional \$775,000 to respond to emergency assistance requests that may be received in the course of 2022 through the intersessional emergency grants procedure of the Fund.

18. In 2021, the Fund, through its emergency procedure, was able to provide financial support in the amount of \$470,300 for eight projects in the five regions of the world, bringing immediate relief to over 2,000 victims of torture. Grants under the emergency procedure were awarded to support vital rehabilitation services meeting the following criteria: sudden change of circumstances, leading to a surge of needs for torture victims requiring an immediate response.

19. The Board continued to take into account the impact of the global pandemic on the incidence and risk of torture worldwide; the vulnerability of particular victims of torture, such as persons deprived of their liberty, of exposure to the virus; and the limited access to medical treatment, humanitarian aid and other essential services. The capacity of organizations to continue to deliver assistance remotely or through other means, as required, was also taken into consideration when monitoring grant implementation and in decisions about future grants. The Fund continued to apply a flexible funding approach, allowing for justified budget adjustments³ and non-cost extensions⁴ to permit organizations to adapt to evolving circumstances while ensuring business continuity to reach survivors despite the above-mentioned restrictions.

20. The Board took note of the requirement that all entities of the United Nations Secretariat, including the Fund, process grants through the Umoja grantor management module, introduced in 2020. The Fund has managed grants through a customized grantor

³ Ibid., para. 101.

⁴ Ibid., para. 53.

management system, which was created specifically for its requirements in 2013. The new management module has yet to develop an interface accessible to organizations external to the United Nations, language versions other than English, and repository or tracking functions. In order to continue to receive applications in French and Spanish and to produce analytical reports to assess the impact of grants, among other functions, the Fund will continue the parallel use of its management system. In addition, as of 31 August 2021, all potential United Nations partners, including the Fund's grantees, must register in the United Nations Partner Portal, a new mandatory platform allowing for a due diligence assessment common to all entities of the United Nations Secretariat. The Board recommended the allocation of additional staff resources to address the practical implications of the migration process to the new system and to pre-empt possible payment delays during the transition year.

V. Restricted civic space, including reprisals

21. A global climate of shrinking civic space, noted by the Secretary-General in his 2020 call to action for human rights,⁵ has affected the ability of grantees to continue to provide direct assistance to victims of torture, including in emergency contexts. Several grantees have reported that they and their staff have been subjected to undue restrictions and acts of intimidation and harassment, undermining their freedom of assembly, expression and association, along with the rights of project beneficiaries and their staff, inter alia, to liberty and security of person and privacy, often amounting to the human rights violations decried in the Secretary-General's call to action. The four United Nations human rights mechanisms focused on preventing, combating and addressing the consequences of torture noted their concern about this matter through a joint statement issued on 26 June 2021, the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture,⁶ in which they requested States to allow civil society organizations and human rights defenders to continue to carry out their work in providing assistance to victims of torture unfettered by restrictions and reprisals.

22. This restrictive climate has been compounded by an increase in the number of reprisals that organizations face by virtue of their work with United Nations human rights mechanisms, including the Fund. The number of countries in which allegations of reprisals against organizations working with United Nations human rights mechanisms have been recorded has more than tripled since 2016, with most reports showing increases on an annual basis.⁷ In 2021, at least 10 organizations associated with the Fund were subjected to reprisals,⁸ in one case resulting in the issuance of a public statement by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.⁹ Grantees have reported facing difficulties in applying for grants and in implementing projects as a result of their dissolution as well as administrative restrictions, raids on office premises, human rights violations against staff members and other obstacles to their work.

VI. Fortieth anniversary of the Fund

23. The Fund was established by the General Assembly 40 years ago, through its resolution 36/151. In order to mark the anniversary of the Fund, the Board of Trustees

⁵ "The highest aspiration: a call to action for human rights", statement of the Secretary-General on the occasion of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the United Nations, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25603>.

⁶ "Protecting civic space critical to ensuring redress and accountability for victims of torture", 26 June 2021, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27199&LangID=E>; see also "Governments must protect those who help torture victims, say human rights experts", 24 June 2021, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27207&LangID=E>.

⁷ A/HRC/48/28, A/HRC/45/36, A/HRC/42/30, A/HRC/39/41, A/HRC/36/31 and A/HRC/33/19.

⁸ A/HRC/48/28.

⁹ "Israel's 'terrorism' designation an unjustified attack on Palestinian civil society", 26 October 2021, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27708&LangID=E>.

decided to dedicate a full year to commemorative activities, beginning and ending on 26 June, the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture. The fortieth anniversary celebrations were launched through a global webinar in June 2021, entitled “Fostering civic space to obtain redress and accountability for victims of torture”, which was organized jointly by the Fund, the Committee against Torture, the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and the Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The event, which complemented the joint statement issued by the four United Nations anti-torture mechanisms (see para. 19 above), was opened by the Assistant-Secretary General for Human Rights and senior official on reprisals, Ilze Brands Kehris, with the participation of numerous civil society organizations and experts.

24. On 18 December 2021, OHCHR issued social media content to highlight the substantial impact of the Fund over the past four decades: almost \$200 million disbursed through more than 5,000 grants in over 120 countries to assist approximately 1.2 million survivors of torture and their families to access essential services on their road to redress. The social media campaign launched in December 2021 acknowledges the particular support of the Fund’s recent contributors, as well as the members of its Group of Friends: Argentina, Austria, Chile, Czechia, Denmark (co-chair), Georgia (co-chair), Germany, Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Mexico, Norway, Peru, Switzerland and the United States of America.

25. During the first semester of 2022, the Fund will release stories about the journey of torture victims to obtain redress, as well as of the civil society practitioners accompanying them. The anniversary commemorations will include a social media campaign aimed at raising awareness of the continuing needs of victims of torture and of the singular role of the Fund in addressing them. It will narrate the history of the Fund through a compilation of stories and profiles featuring the voices of torture survivors assisted by the Fund in all regions of the world during the past four decades. Campaign materials will include tailored multimedia products, which will be disseminated in the lead-up to 26 June 2022, notably on social media platforms. Donors, Fund grantees and other stakeholders will be invited to take part in the campaign, including by sharing these materials, which will be made accessible in a campaign kit to mobilize further support for victims of torture and the Fund.

26. Profiles of victims of torture will be featured prominently in all aspects of the commemorations. Events will be organized by the Fund in collaboration with its partners, including OHCHR field presences, other United Nations anti-torture mechanisms, Fund grantees, the Group of Friends, international partners and other stakeholders. The members of the Board agreed to coordinate with Fund partners in the organization of in-region events during the first half of 2022. The anniversary celebrations will conclude on 26 June 2022 with the organization of an event in Chile, highlighting the historic links of the Fund to that country.

VII. Making a contribution

27. Governments, NGOs and other public and private entities are encouraged to contribute to the Fund. It is important to note that only specifically earmarked contributions are attributed to the Fund. For more information on how to contribute and details about the Fund, donors are requested to contact:

Secretariat of the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
United Nations, 1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland
E-mail: unvftv@ohchr.org; phone: +41 22 917 9376.

VIII. Conclusions and recommendations

28. **Since its establishment 40 years ago, the Fund has awarded more than 5,000 grants in over 120 countries for a total amount of nearly \$200 million to assist approximately 1.2 million survivors of torture and their families. In 2021 alone, the Fund awarded grants to 180 civil society organizations, providing direct medical,**

psychological, social and legal services to over 47,000 survivors of torture in 89 countries across the world, including: human rights defenders; political opponents; journalists; student activists; migrants and asylum seekers; persons with disabilities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons; children and women in armed conflicts; and ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples. The Fund continues to play an indispensable supporting role to organizations, providing crucial specialized assistance to victims of torture and their families through the impartial delivery of direct assistance.

29. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to disproportionately affect victims of torture, who are often exposed to intersectional vulnerabilities and discrimination, including, notably, economically marginalized groups, refugees, asylum seekers, persons deprived of liberty and persons with disabilities. Victims of torture are at risk of further deterioration of their fragile physical and mental health, as well as further violence, abuse and economic destitution. The unprecedented challenges generated by the global pandemic have reinforced the need for the Fund to respond swiftly to new and emergency situations, wherever they occur, in a creative and flexible manner. In the current circumstances, the Fund will continue to place particular emphasis on sustaining partnerships with both grass-roots initiatives and rehabilitation centres, with a view to assessing needs and effectively filling assistance gaps for the most vulnerable victims.

30. As stressed by all four United Nations anti-torture mechanisms, reprisals, restrictive and retaliatory measures against civil society organizations and victims of torture seeking redress through the United Nations human rights mechanisms are on the rise in all regions of the world, with detrimental effects on the effective operations of the Fund and, in particular, on the delivery of assistance to survivors of torture by the Fund's grantees on the ground. The Board of Trustees of the Fund, the Committee against Torture, the Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment urge Member States to ensure a safe and enabling environment for civil society, with a view to providing redress to victims of torture. Now more than ever, States must guarantee effective and accessible avenues for redress, including rehabilitation programmes for victims of torture, who have been further burdened by the shrinking civic space and retraumatization in the context of the global pandemic.

31. As it marks its fortieth anniversary, the United Nations Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture needs to enlarge its donor base and to receive a minimum contribution of \$13 million on a yearly basis in order to respond more adequately to the high demands for assistance from rehabilitation centres and other civil society actors worldwide – although, in actual fact, the needs of torture victims worldwide are much greater. In 2021, the Fund received 20 contributions and pledges, as well as public donations, totalling \$10,562,424. The Secretary-General appeals to Member States and other stakeholders to contribute to the Fund, noting that contributions are a concrete manifestation of their commitment to the elimination of torture, in line with the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, in particular its article 14. The Fund continues to play an indispensable role in supporting organizations that provide specialized assistance to victims of torture and their families throughout the world.
