

Security Council Open Debate on Sexual Violence in Conflict, June 24th 2013, Security Council Chamber

Statement by Ms. Vallaud-Belkacem, Permanent Mission of France to the United Nations.

I would first like to thank you, Mr. President, for organizing this debate on sexual violence, which, as we understand it, is too often the tragic fate of women in conflict situations. I would also like to express our deep appreciation for the briefings by the Secretary-General, by Ms. Bangura, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Sexual Violence in Conflict, and by Ms. Jolie and Ms. Anywar.

We live in a world today where rape is used as a weapon of physical, psychological and social destruction, a world where in some places where women's bodies have become a real battleground. Such sexual violence committed in conflict should in no way be forgotten or go unpunished, and that is what we have come here to say today. The international community, of course, has been dealing with this question for some 10 years now, through the Council's adoption of resolution 1325 (2000) and succeeding resolutions, and that has led to commendable progress — condemning such violence unanimously, calling for the intensification of efforts aimed at better protecting women and, of course, at combating impunity, but also by establishing an important principle that I would like to recall here, that of women's equal participation in the reconciliation and reconstruction process. We must not forget that the best way of protecting those women is by making them stakeholders, rather than only subjects.

Significant progress has been made since then, above all political progress, due in particular to the efforts of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict. I would like once again to commend her commitment, as it has strengthened international awareness on the subject. I also thank Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for the zero-tolerance policy that has been set forth here against all forms of exploitation or sexual abuse attributed to United Nations staff, in particular forces deployed on the ground. That policy must continue with the same determination and firmness, because the United Nations must be nothing more than exemplary in that context.

There has also been judicial progress. The ad hoc tribunals established by the Council and the International Criminal Court (ICC) have gradually included sexual violence as crimes under their jurisdiction. The recognition of sexual violence, in particular rape, as a war crime, crime against humanity or possibly genocide represents a major step forward; it is an effective tool in the fight against impunity and a deterrent, which is exactly what we are seeking.

There has also been legislative progress, with the recent adoption of the Arms Trade Treaty as the first legally binding treaty to regulate arms transfers. It recognizes the link between the international arms trade and gender-based violence, which France has strongly supported. We very much hope that such analysis will continue to prevail in our future discussions.

Nevertheless, we are far from done with our work. The scale and intractable nature of sexual violence in current conflicts are intolerable. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, despite the mobilization of the international community, sexual violence remains ubiquitous. Committed by all parties, it is carried out by the Mouvement du 23 mars and by the Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo (FARDC). The Minova tragedy in South Kivu, where more than 130 women were raped in November 2012 by soldiers of the FARDC who were tasked with their protection, reminds us of that brutal reality. France will pursue its efforts to ensure that the perpetrators of those crimes and their commanders are prosecuted and punished.

I am extremely concerned by the humanitarian tragedy affecting Syrian women. Women have played a leading role in peaceful demonstrations; they have mobilized on the ground to rebuild a new Syria and to play an important role within the Syrian National Coalition. They represent a key element of the solution that we must urgently seek for the country.

It is known that the regime and its militias have used sexual violence to terrorize the population since the crisis began. Today, given the militarization and radicalization of the conflict, Syrian women are being silenced, whether in Syria itself, where they continue to be targeted by the Syrian regime, or in refugee camps, where forced marriages continue and their vulnerability is magnified.

We should like to see United Nations reports, particularly that of the independent international commission of inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as the information conveyed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, which contains tangible information on the crimes I have just described, to militate for a swift referral to the International Criminal Court. The perpetrators of those crimes must understand that they will be punished in a manner commensurate with their savagery. France also supports the principle of women's participation in terms of the Geneva II discussions on Syria.

In Mali, the President of the Republic has underscored that the French intervention was in fact also based on the need to defend the rights of female victims of violence. The deployment of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, the political process currently under way and the elections to come will, we hope, assist in re-establishing peace and stability in the country. However, the sexual violence committed by armed groups in the north in 2012 has traumatized Malian society. Justice must be pursued for all victims of sexual violence. They must be provided with psychological and legal assistance. The Malian authorities, with the support of the United Nations and the ICC, cannot avoid that issue.

In my opinion, and in conclusion, four actions must be continued in the fight against sexual violence. These four actions seek four goals, the so-called "four Ps" rule: preventing violence, protecting victims, prosecuting perpetrators, and women's participation in the peace and reconstruction process.

Those four actions consist of, first, strengthening protection on the ground. Women's protection advisers play a key role. France wishes to see their deployment in peacekeeping and political missions extended beyond the missions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in Mali, and, above all, that they be provided with appropriate resources to carry out their work.

Secondly, there is a need to ensure victims' access to services, particularly sexual and reproductive health services. Young girls, adolescents and women victims of sexual violence can suffer, above and beyond psychological trauma, serious physical harm from violence. Adolescents and women are exposed to early, unwanted pregnancies. We must therefore fully consider all aspects of that reality.

Why do the sexual and reproductive rights of the victims of sexual violence continue to be contested? Restricting access to sexual and reproductive health care is an infringement of a woman's right to control her own body. Substantial progress was made in the recent session of the Commission on the Status of Women, in forging consensus to affirm those rights at the global level. We must consolidate those achievements and ensure that victims of sexual violence have access to effective sexual and reproductive health care.

Thirdly, we must take to the fight against impunity with earnest; stigma and shame must switch sides so that the victims are no longer those who suffer the consequences of the crimes. That task falls above all to Governments, which have the responsibility to prosecute and punish. However, as has been said, if the State is unable to so act, the International Criminal Court, which is universal, must

and should play its role.

Finally, the participation of women in conflict resolution efforts is, I believe, the only sustainable response. The international community's implementation of resolution 1325 (2000) must continue uninterrupted. Since its adoption, awareness of such results has increased, but is slow in having an impact on the ground. In Mali, Syria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Afghanistan, Côte d'Ivoire, the Central African Republic, the Sudan and Libya, women must fully contribute to their country's stabilization. I believe that no transition will be sustainable unless we take into consideration and ensure the participation of one half of humanity.

In that respect, national action plans on the implementation of resolution 1325 (2000) are a crucial instrument and must be broadened. As part of its plan of action, France, in partnership with UN-Women, has undertaken cooperation programmes aimed at combating violence against women in Africa and the Arab world. Recently, we allocated specific funds to programmes in Mali implemented by local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), in particular to support women's participation in political processes. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, more than €2 million have been earmarked since 2012 to support Congolese NGOs combating sexual violence and strengthening women's participation in decision-making processes. Along those lines, the President of France recently announced the convening of a summit on peace and security in Africa in Paris in December.

In conclusion, I wish to underscore that, in addition to the indescribable savagery of sexual violence that has been addressed here, it is also important to recall the tragic observation made recently by the World Health Organization that one in every three women worldwide has been subjected to domestic or sexual violence. No region has been spared from the violence. However it is true that, like ignorance, it behaves as an epidemic that can reach epidemic level in some countries. It is therefore absolutely crucial to continue to work unfailingly on all of those issues, because women's rights, like human rights, are universal and indivisible.