

Mr. António:

Allow me to start by congratulating you, Mr. President, on having assumed the presidency of the Security Council, as well as on the priority your presidency has wisely chosen to give to the issue of conflict prevention in Africa during this month. I wish to thank Secretary-General António Guterres for his inspiring remarks this morning. I also thank the Executive Director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Mr. Yuri Fedotov; the United Kingdom Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, Mr. Kevin Hyland; and Ms. Ilwad Elman, of the Elman Peace and Human Rights Centre, for their respective briefings.

Today's open debate is all the more fitting and timely given that it is taking place this month, during which we mark the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The annual observance of this Day offers an opportunity not only to honour the memory of the victims of that dark chapter of our history, but also to raise awareness about the dangers of what is commonly referred to as modern slavery. It is indeed extremely disturbing that two centuries after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, slavery still exists today in many different forms and continues to claim millions of victims every day. According to the International Labour Organization, there are over 21 million children, women and men living in modern slavery, of whom approximately 3.7 million are to be found in Africa. These figures tell a devastating story of modern slavery that should serve as a wake-up call for the members of the international community to urgently work together to prevent and eradicate this scourge. This sense of urgency has been rightfully captured in the recent resolution 2331 (2016), which urges decisive action to end human trafficking, including against terrorist and all armed groups.

If we are to make a tangible contribution to solving this complex problem, we must go beyond general statements on the need to address its various root causes and take concrete steps in this area. Our efforts should focus also on eradicating the different enablers of these horrific crimes, which notably include protracted armed conflicts as well as the spread of terrorism and organized crime. Equally important is the need to acknowledge the fact that the scope and severity of its causes have been aggravated by the ongoing migration crisis. Many recently published reports point out that criminal networks are taking advantage of the current migration crisis to force more people into bonded labour and other types of slavery. The devastating effects on refugees and asylum-seekers, who are among the most vulnerable people, cannot be overemphasized.

What is needed most is decisive action at the national, regional and international levels to uphold human dignity and strengthen the fight against these shameful practices that are unworthy of humankind. Against that background, in order to foster the implementation of the international legal framework on trafficking in persons, the African Union has adopted a range of policy instruments to prevent and combat human trafficking, namely, the Ouagadougou Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings, Especially Women and Children; the Migration Policy Framework for Africa; and the African Union Commission Initiative Against Trafficking. Those instruments have provided the required push for action, and the number of countries that have enacted anti-trafficking legislation has more than doubled in recent years. Consequently, more and more convictions of traffickers have been made possible and, hopefully, an increasing number of victims are being rescued and protected.

Despite those efforts, human trafficking and the smuggling of migrants have remained a constant challenge on the African continent. We have an estimated 3.7 million African men, women and children still trapped in forced labour and working under extreme coercion, largely in the informal economy. The African continent needs to step up its efforts, in coordination with the international community, to combat and eradicate all of those criminal forms of exploitation of human beings.