

Security Council Open Debate on Rule of Law
Tuesday, 29th June 2010, Security Council Chamber (GA-TSC-01)

Statement by Ambassador Parham, Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom to the United Nations

I thank you very much indeed, Madam President, for organizing this debate. Many thanks, too, go to the Secretary-General and to Under-Secretary-General Holmes and High Commissioner Pillay for their comprehensive briefings.

Let me also echo, Madam, your warm comments marking the fact that this is probably the last appearance of John Holmes in the Council. He has greatly improved the Council's understanding of the humanitarian aspects of conflicts and crises and thereby helped the Council to enhance its responses. We should certainly reflect carefully on the points he has made today about ways in which we might try further to close the gap between norms and reality. But above all, we thank him for the leadership and commitment that he has shown to those who would, but for his efforts and the efforts of his United Nations colleagues, often be abandoned to deprivation, devastation, depredation and, frequently, death.

Global events, many of them grimly described by John Holmes just now, since the Council adopted resolution 1894 (2009) have shown that the protection of vulnerable civilian populations remains as important as ever. The forthcoming fifteenth anniversary of the Srebrenica tragedy is also a powerful reminder of why this issue is so central to the Security Council's work. The ground is already being well covered and time is short, but I would just like to make three brief points.

First, United Nations peacekeepers play a vital part in protecting civilians, and it is right that we prioritize that task above others in certain peacekeeping operations. But we should be clear that the parties to an armed conflict bear the primary responsibility for ensuring that civilians are neither affected by that conflict nor specifically targeted.

Following the withdrawal of the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Chad — which has already been raised by previous speakers — the Chadian Government has undertaken to protect its civilian population, particularly **women** and children, and it must fully honour that commitment. The work of the joint high-level working group between the Chadian Government and the United Nations will be important, and the international community should monitor its findings carefully.

Secondly, we must ensure the robust protection of humanitarian space so that civilians who are affected by armed conflict can access essential goods and services. That is primarily the responsibility of States, but when the State is overwhelmed, humanitarian agencies must be allowed to respond to needs for emergency protection and assistance. That is a basic tenet of international humanitarian law, and we must uphold it.

That is why we have long called for an improvement in the unacceptable and unsustainable situation in Gaza. Resolution 1860 (2009) called for the delivery of humanitarian aid and called on States to alleviate the humanitarian and economic situation. As my Foreign Secretary has said and as the Secretary-General said in his statement yesterday, Israel's announcement on 5 July on the easing of some restrictions on the import of goods into Gaza is welcome and marks an important step in the right direction. Those changes must now be implemented swiftly.

On the same grounds, we are concerned about poor access by humanitarian agencies to communities in the north of Sri Lanka. Ensuring freedom of movement for all internally displaced persons who remain in camps and transferring camps to civilian authority are important steps in allowing civilians to return to normal life.

That leads me to my third point. The United Kingdom is greatly disturbed by the continuing growth in the number of people displaced within their own countries as a result of conflict — a record high of over 27 million in 2009. That is an acute problem in Burma, for example, where we remain deeply concerned about the lack of progress towards national reconciliation. The Burmese military regime continues to target civilians, particularly people from ethnic minorities. **The use of rape and other forms of sexual violence** remain a serious concern, as do the use of child soldiers and forced

labour for military use. Protecting civilians wherever and whoever they are is the best way to prevent displacement and consequent deprivation.

Thus, the United Kingdom continues to attach great importance to the protection of civilians in armed conflict. In March 2010, the United Kingdom launched a national strategy on the protection of civilians, which draws together for the first time our efforts to keep the protection of civilians at the forefront of our political, security, human rights and humanitarian work. As Afghanistan has been mentioned by previous speakers, I should just make the point that it is important that the Council recognize the difference between, on the one hand, the Afghan and international forces, which make every effort to avoid civilian casualties and operate under a Council mandate, and the actions of armed groups that deliberately target civilians as part of their attempt to undermine the democratic process. As the Secretary-General's recent reports have made clear, the proportion of civilian casualties caused by the Taliban has grown significantly.

We have seen the valuable role played by the Security Council's informal expert group on the protection of civilians. As its chair, the United Kingdom remains committed to its work. We welcome the appointment of Margot Wallström as the **Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict** — an important step in this area, as John Holmes said. We support the work of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Radhika Coomaraswamy, which has led to much of the progress we have seen on the protection of children in the past year.

The United Kingdom believes that we have made much progress on the protection of civilians since the adoption of resolution 1894 (2009) in November, in particular our discussions in the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations, but we still have more work to do on this important issue.