

Mr. Ramírez Carreño (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) (*spoke in Spanish*): At the outset, we welcome the presence of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of France, Mr. Jean-Marc Ayrault, which reflects the importance that his country attaches to this subject. We also welcome His Excellency Mr. Faustin Archange Touadera, President of the Central African Republic, and thank him for his statement. It is an honour to have him and Mr. Peter Maurer, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, here today.

Venezuela aligns itself with the statement to be delivered by the delegation of the Islamic Republic of Iran on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement.

In many contemporary armed conflicts, civilian populations have become the main victims of the conflict situations that impact different parts of the planet, where the loss of lives and the suffering of civilians far exceed those of the combatants. Punitive military action is taken deliberately against civilians, who have become military targets. That tragic reality is evident in the conflicts that are rocking the Middle East and Africa, where women, children and the elderly have become targets of attacks perpetrated by the actors involved in those bloody wars, particularly terrorist groups, in violation of international humanitarian law. In that respect, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, the Sudan, South Sudan and Palestine, among others, are scenarios in which the civilian population has suffered the ravages of indiscriminate violence.

The recourse to violence and terrorism to undermine societies, civilizations, religions and beliefs is assuming terrible manifestations, such as the recruitment of children, abductions, the destruction of the cultural heritage of humankind, slavery and sexual violence as weapons of war, as well as the use of chemical weapons. Nevertheless, at the very heart of all this is the terrible tragedy that has impacted the civilian population as a result of practices in response to intolerance, violent extremism and sectarianism. Those actions paint a very clear picture of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, the perpetrators of which must be brought to justice.

Those armed conflicts have caused the displacement of civilian populations fleeing war to protect their lives. By late 2015, more than 60 million people had been displaced by conflict, violence and persecution. The number of persons internally displaced by conflict and violence increased by more than 2.8 million people in 2015, and reached an unprecedented total of 40.8 million. In addition, the number of refugees has exceeded 20 million for the first time in 20 years.

Despite the gravity of those challenges, we wish to highlight the important review processes undertaken by the Organization in 2015. All of those processes underscored the need to prevent crises instead of responding to them once they occur, which exacts great

human and financial costs, and to work beyond institutional divisions to address complex problems. Those messages are crucial to strengthening the protection of civilians in armed conflicts.

Civilians who find themselves in the midst of armed conflict require protection. United Nations peacekeeping operations should play a more active and central role in that regard. They must always conduct themselves impartially, in defence of their own security and their mandate, and with the consent of the host State. In that context, non-armed strategies should be at the forefront of United Nations efforts in the protection of civilians. Peacekeeping operations, as inherently political instruments, can protect civilians more effectively by helping to build trust among the parties, ending conflicts and facilitating peace agreements. The quest for a political solution must guide the design, deployment and withdrawal of United Nations peacekeeping operations on the ground.

Humanitarian organizations, such as the Red Cross, play a crucial role to that end. The success of non-armed United Nations strategies for the protection of civilians depends to a certain degree on their ability to forge strong alliances among those players and to work closely with local communities. The United Nations must make due use of those important resources, highlighting the capabilities and practices of local communities and humanitarian organizations on the ground in order to create an environment that is conducive to the protection of civilians. In that respect, it is very important to guarantee humanitarian access so that civilians can receive the assistance and protection necessary to their survival. In that regard, we condemn the siege practices used by actors involved in armed conflicts that prevent the delivery of food and medicine for civilians in humanitarian need.

However, in situations where the civilian population finds itself under imminent threat of attack, peacekeeping troops must always be ready to act assertively. To that end, forces should always have the equipment and training necessary to successfully deal with those situations. At the same time, we reaffirm emphatically that the protection of civilians cannot in any circumstances be used as an excuse to undermine the sovereignty, political independence and territorial integrity of States.

Taking into account the provisions of international humanitarian law and the need to protect civilians in the midst of such bloody conflicts as those in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, we cannot fail to stress the my Government's focus on the situation of violence that continues in the Palestinian territories as a result of the Israeli illegal occupation, and that affects in particular the human rights of Palestinians, who are the victims of the repressive policies of the occupying Power, whose actions inflict indescribable human suffering and represent a protection crisis for the Palestinian people.

Given this very clear picture of systematic violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, the international community must raise its voice in defence of the Palestinian people and take the measures necessary to guarantee their human rights. We therefore reiterate our appeal for a response to the request made by the President of the Palestinian National Authority, Mr. Mahmoud Abbas, for the establishment of a system of international protection for the Palestinian population in the occupied territories, in accordance with the Fourth Geneva Convention and resolution 904 (1994). That is one instance of concrete action that the Council could take to protect civilians.