

Ms. Plowmen (Netherlands): I thank France for putting the protection of civilians on the agenda of the Security Council. This extremely important topic is at the heart of the work of the United Nations. While the Netherlands aligns itself with the statement to be delivered by the observer of the European Union and with the statement by the representative of Switzerland on behalf of the Group of Friends on the Protection of Civilians, I would like to make some remarks in my national capacity.

In his report (S/2016/447) on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, the Secretary-General presents us with a shocking truth, that is, more than ever before, warring parties are targeting civilians, and too many perpetrators are still getting away with it. The international community cannot let such crimes go unpunished. It must provide justice to the victims, and it must issue a credible warning to those considering

violence against civilians: war crimes will be punished. That is why the recent conviction of Hissène Habré for crimes against humanity, war crimes and torture by the Special Tribunal in Senegal is such an important step. That is also why the Netherlands fully supports the legal institutions in The Hague and elsewhere that help achieve justice.

The report confirms our worst fears about conflict-related sexual violence. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable, especially when they are displaced and seek refuge in another country. They can fall victim to human trafficking, abuse and forced prostitution. That includes women and girls in Europe. I fully support the Secretary-General's call to redouble our efforts to prevent conflict-related sexual violence and take action to stop it.

That is no easy task. In South Sudan, for instance, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) is fulfilling an almost impossible duty. A small number of troops and police are having to protect around 200,000 displaced persons at designated sites near UNMISS bases. During a visit to Malakal less than two years ago, I had an opportunity to witness at first hand the challenges that peacekeepers were up against. I saw that people faced the greatest dangers, including sexual violence, when they had to move around — when searching for water, food and firewood, for example. But UNMISS was already struggling to secure the designated site, mainly due to limited capacity. The mandate to protect civilians was translated into physically securing the area, even though the biggest threats to people's safety were just outside that area.

The tragic incident at Malakal in February 2016 proves once again the need for proactive actions by peacekeepers, based on prudent intelligence. We look forward to the outcomes of the special investigation by the United Nations. Those responsible for making fatal mistakes should be held accountable.

United Nations missions around the world face similar dilemmas, namely, how to give civilians sufficient freedom of movement while at the same time offering sufficient

protection. Although the protection of civilians is part and parcel of mandates, peacekeepers often have to make do with very limited resources. Partly as a result of that, the protection of civilians risks becoming merely protection of sites — a necessary but clearly insufficient condition for keeping people safe and secure.

The gap between principle and practice is still too wide. I want to suggest four ways of closing that gap.

First, we have to be realistic. Blanket mandates to protect civilians are often neither credible nor achievable. All too often, expectations fail to match a mission's capabilities. A protection-of-civilians strategy and a specific plan of action should be in place after a mandate is adopted and before the mission is deployed. Furthermore, they should be updated regularly. The strategy should include close cooperation with actors on the ground, because that is the only way to protect civilians, both inside designated areas and beyond. It means working with partners — often non-governmental partners — that provide basic services. And it means joining forces with organizations that promote reconciliation and dialogue.

Secondly, implementation is key. The Security Council's Informal Expert Group on the Protection of Civilians should meet on a more regular basis to discuss specific missions. It should proactively advise the Council and offer proposals to improve protection. The Expert Group needs to be regularly briefed by protection-of-civilians advisers working on missions.

Thirdly, we also need a stronger link between the actors on the ground and the actors in New York. The Security Council should adopt a new system for more regular and more transparent briefings by troop-contributing countries and non-governmental organizations. Those briefings should take place well in advance of mandate renewals.

Fourthly, the Kigali Principles on the Protection of Civilians deserve our full support. They constitute a political commitment by troop- and police-contributing countries to better train and equip their peacekeepers, to avoid caveats on protection-of-civilians mandates and to hold accountable those who do not carry out their mandate as they should. On 11 May the Netherlands held a high-level event, which resulted in 20 countries joining the original 9 countries that had endorsed the Kigali Principles. I am pleased that today several countries expressed their support for the Kigali Principles.

Along with Rwanda and United States Africa Command, the Netherlands is going to organize a training centred on the protection of civilians, with special attention to preventing and addressing sexual abuse and exploitation. We support the Secretary-General's zero-tolerance policy when it comes to such horrendous practices.

As a partner for peace, justice and development, the Kingdom of the Netherlands wants to contribute to further improving peacekeeping missions. That is a major reason for which we are a candidate for a non-permanent seat on the Security Council for the 2017-2018 term.

Let us not forget that, in the end, peacekeeping missions are about all those vulnerable men, women and children in conflict situations who depend on us, the United Nations, for their protection. Their concern should be the Council's main concern.