

Mr. Mminele (South Africa): I would like to express my delegation's appreciation for the convening of this important debate, where we are considering what has become a central component of every United Nations peacekeeping mission.

South Africa aligns itself with the statement made by the representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement.

We wish to begin by commending the Secretary-General for his latest report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict (S/2016/447) and the recommendations contained therein. The report is crucial in monitoring and reporting on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. The report paints a gloomy picture as it once again highlights the fact that civilians continue to suffer the most as a consequence of armed conflict. Not only are civilians indiscriminately killed or injured, but they face such severe hardships as violations of their basic human rights, including sexual violence and mass displacement. We stress that the Secretary-General should remain resolute regarding the identification of perpetrators. The protection of civilians must remain one of the core issues on the agenda of the Security Council if we are to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.

We all recognize that States have the primary responsibility to put an end to impunity and to prosecute perpetrators responsible for crimes against humanity and war crimes, including those relating to sexual violence against women and girls. However, the international community today is increasingly being challenged by the changing nature of conflicts, which requires us to adopt new, more holistic strategies in protecting civilians. I wish to focus my remarks today on three aspects in addressing our protection of civilians imperative.

First, our action has to go beyond traditional peacekeeping and the use of force. It must begin with steps to prevent conflicts rather than respond to them after the fact. Addressing the social and economic development challenges facing civilians, as reflected in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (General Assembly resolution 70/1) is also crucial in that regard. The link between economic development and peace requires that the United Nations principle organs and development agencies, within their respective mandates, address the root causes of conflict and contribute towards the realization of the sustainable development goals.

Furthermore, strengthening and investing greater efforts in prevention and finding all-inclusive political solutions to conflicts is necessary. Settling conflict through peaceful means should remain our priority, including by ensuring that our efforts in this regard are impartial and not selective. In this connection, the failure of the Council to address long-

standing challenges in Palestine and Western Sahara will continue to undermine its credibility.

Secondly, steps have to be taken to strengthen accountability for crimes committed against civilians. Ensuring accountability is vital to the credibility of the protection of civilians and is key to delivering global justice.

Thirdly, and coming to the key aspects of today's debate, is ensuring that the peacekeeping operations deployed by the Council are adequately equipped and resourced to address their protection of civilians mandates. The High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations and the report of the Advisory Group of Experts on the Review of the Peace building Architecture (S/2015/490) stress that all United Nations peace operations have an obligation to protect civilians. We welcome steps taken by the Secretariat to ensure that peacekeeping operations develop strategies to protect civilians. That includes the appointment of protection of civilians advisers and the cooperation and use of military, police and civilian elements in carrying out this task. As the Secretary-General has noted, "the credibility of United Nations peacekeepers depends largely on their willingness and capability to act when civilians are threatened" (*S/2016/447, para. 58*).

In order for the United Nations to be effective in its peacekeeping operations when carrying out its mandate to protect civilians, it should also, through the use of Chapter VIII of the Charter, make use of the comparative advantages of regional arrangements in advancing the protection of civilians in conflict situations, as demonstrated in Darfur and Somalia. The African Union (AU) has shown itself to be willing and able to take concrete steps to ensure peace and stability on the African continent. However, the lack of predictable, flexible and, increasingly, sustainable financing for AU operations can undermine the AU's efforts in this regard. The challenges faced by the African Union Mission in Somalia are a case in point.

South Africa condemns sexual exploitation and abuses committed during armed conflict. We believe that protecting the most vulnerable populations — that is, women, girls and children — is central to any protection of civilians mandate. It is for that reason that any acts of sexual exploitation and abuse by United Nations peacekeepers are particularly deplorable. When the very people charged with protecting civilians become the violators, the trust established between these communities and United Nations missions is betrayed and the credibility of the United Nations compromised.

In conclusion, we wish to reiterate that it is important for the Council to periodically evaluate its response to the protection of civilians, as the protection

of civilians from the scourge of conflict is at the core of maintaining international peace and security.