

Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict

10th May 2011, Security Council Chamber (GA-TSC-01)

Statement by Mayr-Harting, Permanent Representative of Austria to the United Nations

I thank you, Mr. President, for having organized this very important debate.

I should also like to thank Under-Secretaries- General Amos and Le Roy and Assistant Secretary- General Šimonovič for their interesting presentations. Let me add that we have always felt it particularly important that the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights be associated with this debate. Austria aligns itself with the statements made on behalf of the European Union and the Human Security Network.

Members of the Council and others present will not be surprised that this is the first debate for which my country has decided to return to this table since our term as member of the Council came to an end. This is an issue to which we have been particularly attached, including during our presidency in November 2009, which saw the adoption of resolution 1894 (2009). Austria remains strongly committed to this issue and will continue to work with interested Member States and the Secretariat to enhance the United Nations protection capacities.

I would also like to say that we welcomed the initiative under the presidency of Brazil to address all three protection clusters on the Council's agenda in one set of consultations. Recent years have seen substantial improvements in the United Nations ability to prevent and react to serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. Comprehensive consultations, such as those held in February, can enhance the coordination between the existing protection frameworks and mechanisms.

The events in Libya and in Côte d'Ivoire over recent months have shown how challenging the issue of the protection of civilians remains. The Security Council has a core responsibility in ensuring the compliance of all parties to a conflict with international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law. With the adoption of resolutions 1970 (2011) and 1973 (2011) on Libya, as well as resolution 1975 (2011) on Côte d'Ivoire, the Security Council has sent a strong signal that serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law cannot and will not be tolerated by the Council.

As stated in resolution 1894 (2009), the Security Council also has an important role to play in ending impunity, as the representative of Canada has just said. We call on the Council to consistently use the tools at its disposal, which include referring situations to the International Criminal Court, as was recently done with the situation in Libya; mandating commissions of inquiry, as proposed in the Secretary-General's latest report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict (S/2010/579); or imposing targeted sanctions. We welcome the Secretary-General's announcement that he will undertake a review of the United Nations experiences in establishing commissions of inquiry in order to identify how such mechanisms might be used more consistently.

We also share the concern of the Secretary- General over the threat posed to civilians by explosive weapons, as outlined in his 2010 report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. Deployed in populated areas, these weapons cause unacceptable suffering for women, children and men, even years after their initial use. Austria urges all States to accede to and strengthen relevant international instruments, such as the Mine Ban Treaty, the Convention on Cluster Munitions, and Additional Protocols II and V to the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons.

United Nations peacekeeping operations are among the Organization's most effective tools to protect civilians affected by armed conflict. We therefore welcome the efforts made by the Secretariat pursuant to resolution 1894 (2009) to improve the implementation of protection mandates by peacekeeping operations. The finalized strategic framework for drafting comprehensive protection strategies provides a solid basis for a coordinated and coherent approach. In addition, the resource and capability matrix can serve as a useful tool in the planning of missions and help to ensure that protection mandates are matched with adequate resources. Appropriate predeployment and in-mission training is key in order to increase the awareness and responsiveness of peacekeepers to protection needs.

The events in Walikale in August 2010 and other incidents of widespread sexual violence in situations of armed conflict show that peacekeepers need to have the capacity to interact closely and communicate effectively with local communities and the host Government in order to carry out their mandate and prevent an escalation of violence. We would like to reiterate the importance of taking gender sensitivities into account and making full use of all components available to mission, including civil affairs officers and community liaison interpreters.

A consistent approach by the Council to the protection of civilians includes an accurate assessment of the achievements and remaining challenges in the field. We therefore strongly support the Secretary-General's recommendation that peacekeeping and other relevant missions develop specific benchmarks against which to measure and review progress. In this regard, lessons learned from the United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad could serve as a very useful basis.

We also welcome the development by the Secretariat of guidance for United Nations peacekeeping and other relevant missions on protection of civilians reporting. We support the Secretary-General's intention to develop indicators in relation to the monitoring and reporting of achievements in protecting civilians in armed conflict. This will be an important tool for measuring progress and, as a consequence, adjusting the Council's actions.

Finally, we would like to underline the importance of the Secretary-General's recommendation that pressing protection issues be consistently and comprehensively dealt with by the Council, even in cases where they are not formally on its agenda. I think that the experience we have had with such innovative formats as informal interactive debates can also help the Council to deal with these challenges. Discussions and briefings in the informal expert group on the protection of civilians should be used in a continuous manner to ensure that the Council's deliberations are informed and comprehensive