

Security Council Open Debate on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Resolution 1820

Thursday, June 19, 2008

Statement by H.E Ms. Rama Yade, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Human Rights of France to the United Nations

The history of men has long been the history of their violence. In that intermarriage of blood and history, the war of men has all too often also been the story of violence against women.

This year, we are celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which drew its inspiration from one man and one woman, one Frenchman and one American woman, René Cassin and Eleanor Roosevelt. Before man's baffling and barbaric violence, before such inhuman acts, the Declaration affirms the inviolable dignity of human beings, of men and women. That is the principle that we are reaffirming today in this public debate on sexual violence in armed conflict, and I thank you, Madam Secretary of State, for taking the initiative of holding this meeting.

Doubts have at times been raised: should a debate on the issue of sexual violence in armed conflict be included on the agenda of the Security Council, which debates issues of peace and war? For France, that debate has been decided. One cannot establish peace while remaining silent on the subject of rape and the violence done to women.

While such violence has, in the recent past and even today, reached shocking levels — in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Sudan — and while entire populations are being hunted down and massacred, we continue to witness the unbearable procession of mutilated and sexually tortured women and hear the endless and appalling litany of eyewitness testimonies, which sear our conscience. When sexual violence becomes a weapon of war, when rape is carried out in a planned and systematic campaign of terror and subjection, our Council is right to intervene. Not to do so would be a crime against conscience. We must act urgently.

The figures alone do not give the complete picture of the terror and horror that each violated and battered woman experiences in her innermost being, but they do, in their grim tally, show the extent of the tragedy.

I have just returned from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where I travelled to the Kivus. In 2007, over a period of six months, nearly 30,000 women were raped in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. I met several of them in Bukavu and Goma. I listened to their raw, tragic stories, from which any trace of humanity seemed to have been erased. The testimonies are unbearable. One's spirit is overwhelmed with pain.

One of the women I spoke with was a 15-year-old girl from a village near Bukavu. She had been in Panzi hospital for several months. She had gone out to buy bread when several armed attackers fell upon her. She was raped by several of them in front of her family. They then took her with them into the woods, where for several months she was gang-raped, until she became pregnant and was infected with AIDS. After being kidnapped and brutalized a second time, she returned with a second child. Her life has been destroyed, especially since her family and community have ostracized her. That young girl is afraid to go home because she is afraid that the army could capture her again and the same thing would happen again.

When I saw those women and their distress, I wanted to let them know what we, the international community, are doing about this. In terms of the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC), for example, which is the largest United Nations presence in the world, those women are asking: what good is that presence to us, when we continue to be kidnapped and raped? I spoke about the establishment of the International Criminal Court, which has brought about the arrest of Jean-Pierre Bemba. These women who had been raped welcomed that news, but asked: why are the armed groups still at large? You see, the 200,000 women who have been raped in the Democratic Republic of the Congo are expecting more concrete and timely results. They are asking me to present their petition to you. We must therefore take action. What can we do? For the Congolese women, the answers are simple.

First of all, we must disarm the armed groups and put an end to the illegal trafficking that provides them with weapons. Secondly, we must ensure that those armed groups are kept away from the Kivus, so that they do not

cross paths with their victims again. Thirdly, we must make sure that they are punished, so that impunity does not encourage other men to rape, knowing that they will never be punished. We must also find work for those who have not yet become criminals. That is what Congolese women are proposing. It sounds simple, but it is crucial. Let us therefore heed their cry.

What have we done so far? As there is no peace without justice, we welcome the progress achieved in the field of international justice, which has made sexual violence a crime against humanity and, in some cases, an act of genocide. France also welcomes in that regard the investigation that has just been opened by the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court into the atrocities committed in the Central African Republic, including sexual violence on a massive scale. By charging Jean-Pierre Bemba with acts of rape that constitute, by their magnitude, war crimes and crimes against humanity, the International Criminal Court sent a strong signal to perpetrators of such crimes. Any perpetrator of such crimes, regardless of rank, will have to answer for his actions.

At the political level, the post of Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences was established in 1994. That mechanism has played a significant role in sounding the alarm and increasing awareness. That is why I wish to pay tribute to the work of the current Special Rapporteur, Ms. Erturk. We also welcome the work of the United Nations to increase awareness on the issue and the remarkable work of non-governmental organizations on the ground.

All of that, however, is not enough, and we must scale up international mobilization efforts. First of all, as I said, we must intensify the fight against impunity more than ever before. That is how we will be able to bring peace and redress to the victims. Without real punishment, there will be no prevention or deterrence.

Of equal importance is the need to include a detailed examination of the issue of sexual violence in reports by peacekeeping operations and in a comprehensive report of the Secretary-General. We need detailed information on this scourge in order to methodically attack the issue, particularly by integrating the consideration of this question in peacekeeping mandates, based on the example set by MONUC. Of course, we must make sure that peacekeeping forces themselves set the example.

Finally, we must strengthen the practical implementation of resolution 1325 (2000). There will be no effective fight against sexual violence if women are not represented in sufficient numbers in peacekeeping operations, in security forces such as the army and police, and among the ranks of judges in States directly affected by those crimes.

Forty per cent of women raped in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo are minors. With that knowledge, we believe that we should take advantage of the opportunities offered by the Working Group of the Security Council on Children and Armed Conflicts, expanding its mandate to include sexual violence perpetrated against children, regardless of whether or not there are child soldiers in the country in question. We must also continue to develop victim treatment programmes and strengthen rehabilitation services, while working with local communities so as to avoid stigmatization of the victims.

Lastly, the European Union will continue to make this issue a priority. That is why France will seek the adoption of guidelines on violence against women, including sexual violence, during its European Union presidency, which begins on 1 July. Such guidelines will enable our embassies to take action and to directly finance rehabilitation programmes.

I am hoping that a robust resolution, incorporating as many of our suggestions as possible, will be adopted after this debate. Sexual violence, in particular rape, is unacceptable, whether it takes place today or tomorrow, no matter who commits it or what continent it is committed. That is my profound conviction, and I have no doubt that everyone in this Chamber shares it.