

Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians During Armed Conflict
Monday, 22nd November 2010, Security Council Chamber (GA-TSC-01)

Statement by H.E. Mr. Meron Reuben, Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations

I thank you, Mr. President, for convening this important debate. I also wish to thank Under-Secretary-General Amos, Under-Secretary-General Le Roy, High Commissioner Pillay and Director-General Daccord for their informative briefings.

Today's debate raises some of the most complex and challenging issues facing the international community. Israel's deep commitment to protecting civilians in armed conflict is reflected by our extensive cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations in this area and at all levels. It is also shown by the extraordinary efforts that we take to avoid causing civilians harm during combat operations.

Israel is encouraged by the continued efforts of the Security Council and the Secretariat in this area since July's briefing (see S/PV.6354) and welcomes the latest report of the Secretary-General (S/2010/579). We note the considerable progress on this issue. However, it remains clear that the international community continues to face major challenges and difficult operational, humanitarian and moral dilemmas in ensuring that civilians are protected in armed conflict.

Foremost among these challenges is the new and complex phenomenon of asymmetric warfare, which blurs the important distinction between combatants and civilians under the laws of armed conflict. In our region and in many other corners of the world, regular armies are increasingly finding themselves fighting terrorists or guerrilla organizations that deliberately operate within the vicinity of civilian populations.

This phenomenon produces a horrific transformation of the civilian landscape: religious institutions becoming launching pads for rockets and artillery; schools and hospitals becoming storage facilities for weapons and terrorist infrastructure; and residential neighbourhoods becoming combat zones.

Recognizing that there are no simple solutions, the Security Council must seriously consider the many dilemmas inherent in asymmetric warfare. While upholding the central value of protecting civilians in conflict, the Council and other international bodies cannot ignore the tragic reality in which terrorists deliberately put innocents in harm's way.

Israel's experience illustrates that terrorists' blatant disregard for protecting human life is not restricted to the civilians of their adversary; it often extends to their own people. In the Gaza Strip, Hamas launches rockets and mortars at Israeli towns from densely populated areas and cynically places its arms and munitions in installations inside and adjacent to mosques, hospitals and schools. Only last week, we witnessed yet another series of rocket attacks from Gaza designed to target and terrorize Israeli civilians.

In Lebanon, Hizbollah deploys weapons and builds its military infrastructure within the fabric of civilian life, endangering the Lebanese population. For example, within the past 16 months, three Hizbollah weapons caches have exploded in the villages of southern Lebanon. The last such explosion took place in the Lebanese village of Shehabiyya on 3 September, causing the injury of five individuals.

Given the threats it faces on its borders, Israel — in full conformity with its international obligations — has sought to protect civilians while it pursues the terrorists who hide among them. Israel's Supreme Court has addressed the significant challenges inherent in balancing these two objectives during active warfare and at times has suspended military operations to this end. In pursuit of this goal, my country also employs many independent oversight mechanisms and places a humanitarian affairs officer in every combat unit above the battalion level with the goal of minimizing casualties and damage to civilian property.

Israel also wishes to express its continued support for the work of humanitarian agencies that provide essential services on the ground. In considering the protection of civilians in armed conflict, we all must remember that, under international humanitarian law, the right to free movement of humanitarian personnel is subject to military necessities and security considerations. These considerations include the safety of the humanitarian personnel themselves and the need to prevent the abuse of humanitarian channels. We cannot ignore the fact

that terrorists such as Hamas often abuse such access privileges, which can endanger humanitarian workers and obstruct the movement of aid.

The subject of today's debate calls for careful consideration about how to best protect civilians in the face of terrorism and within the complex reality of asymmetric warfare. For its part, Israel will continue to share its experience in this critical debate as part of our nation's commitment to the rule of law and to the fundamental value of protecting civilians.