

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

Thursday, June 19, 2008

Statement by H.E Mrs. Olubanke King-Akerele, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Liberia to the United Nations

I bring you warm greetings and felicitations from Her Excellency Mrs. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, President of the Republic of Liberia, the Government and the people of Liberia, who are exerting all of their collective energies, pride and national resources towards consolidating, nurturing and sustaining our hard-earned peace.

We would be remiss if we did not take this opportunity to express once again our deepest appreciation to the United Nations, our multilateral and bilateral partners, the Economic Community of West African States and the African Union for standing steadfastly with us through our darkest hour. Indeed, as we move ahead, those same partners are with us even now and continue to stand with us in partnership as we slowly but surely persist in building a society of sustained peace, stability, freedom, justice, economic recovery and prosperity.

We are here today to address the very serious issue of sexual violence in situations of armed conflict, a matter that this body first addressed some eight years ago through the adoption of resolution 1325 (2000). What progress have we made since then? We are here to add the voice of my country in expressing the seriousness of this matter and to appeal to the collective conscience of the United Nations to move expeditiously in addressing this matter, which has a serious negative impact on our common humanity. Let us reflect for a moment on this.

In adopting that resolution, the Security Council recognized that protecting women and securing their engagement in peace processes dramatically increases the likelihood of success in peacemaking and peace consolidation.

Much remains to be done to implement the vision of resolution 1325 (2000) on women and peace and security so as to ensure that women are protected from the worst abuses in times of conflict and to empower them. The resolution requires accountability — a measurement mechanism; it needs benchmarks and targets for implementation, with institutional structures and focal points identified within the United Nations system dedicated specifically to resolution 1325 (2000), along the lines, perhaps, of Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) on children and armed conflict.

Women continue to be raped and trafficked with impunity. Female genital mutilation is widespread. Injuries and the medical and psychological consequences of such violence, including depression, post-traumatic stress syndrome, fistulas, HIV/AIDS infections and unwanted pregnancies, are often ignored.

In my own country, Liberia, widespread violence against women and girls continues to be a major concern. Rape remains at the top of the list of crimes reported to the Liberian National Police. The majority of rape cases reported involve children under the age of 18. Assessments carried out on the issue of rape and other forms of sexual violence have indicated that these are indeed embedded in cultural beliefs, practices and behaviours that will have to go.

The maternal mortality rate in Liberia is a source of great concern, as the latest data from the 2007 Liberian demographic survey reveals a significant increase in maternal mortality: from 528 per 100,000 live births in 2000 to 994 per 100,000 live births in 2007. That alarming increase is the result of a lack of access to quality reproductive health services and information, as well as the scarcity of skilled birth attendants. Recent interviews conducted with 150 women and girls who sought treatment for fistulas at the fistula unit at John F. Kennedy Hospital in Monrovia, established with the support of the United Nations, revealed that 24 per cent of those women and girls had developed fistulas between the ages of 11 and 16 and 54 per cent between the ages of 17 and 20, and that 74 per cent of those who were married had been rejected by their community.

In response, the Government of Liberia established a special unit in the Ministry of Gender to address the increasing incidence of gender-based violence. Also, at the Ministry of Justice, in her annual message earlier this year to the National Legislature, President Johnson-Sirleaf sounded the alarm, noting that the number of incidents of rape involving young children continues to increase at an alarming rate. In her own words, “We

must prosecute all such criminals without mercy. We must name and shame them. We must help parents to expose them.” The Association of Female Lawyers is working with us in Liberia in that regard.

With the assistance of the United Nations family, we recently signed — last week, on 12 June — a two-year United Nations joint programme to address gender-based violence in the country using multidimensional and holistic approaches. We will need funding for this programme. We also introduced a rape law, enacted in early 2006. Adopted in November, the national plan of action on gender-based violence is also in the preparation stage.

With the support of the United Nations system, the Government will soon have a special court in the Temple of Justice that meets international standards and that is dedicated to the prosecution of sexual offences, including rape. This special court will undoubtedly contribute to responding to the backlog of sexual offences with which we are faced. It is time to tackle this item very seriously, as we are doing in Liberia. Together, with our partners, we are working assiduously in that regard. The issue of geographical accessibility and the other problems that confront us are being addressed.

Yet the challenges are enormous: restoring the rule of law, protecting human rights and ending impunity for crimes committed against the people of Liberia.

We are convinced that the situation of gender- based violence in Liberia is a microcosm of current conflict-ridden environments, as well as post-conflict environments.

At this point, we are indeed calling for fundamental changes if resolution 1325 (2000) is to be translated into effective action worldwide. We must review the progress made under that resolution, including field-based research on what has and has not worked in key situations. We must identify constraints, form partnerships, establish systematic funding and bring together advocates of the forceful implementation of the resolution.

We would like also to convey our special appreciation to the Secretary-General for having appointed a woman Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Liberia in response to the resolution. We are working extremely well with her and with the United Nations system at large. Mr. Secretary-General, you mentioned the Indian special peacekeeping force. Indeed, it is having a significant effect in Liberia. We will be using that force as a model to encourage Liberians, and Liberian women in particular, to serve as peacekeepers worldwide. We are, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example, within the context of the Foreign Service Institute, looking into how we can link up experiences with peacekeeping. We want to thank the system at large, as well as the Office of the Assistant Secretary- General and Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, and the Assistant Secretary- General herself, for their support. Indeed, we have no alternative; we are morally obliged to support this draft resolution. We want to commend most highly the President of the Security Council for this initiative.