

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

Thursday, June 19, 2008

Statement by H.E Major General Patrick Cammaert, Division Commander of the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the United Nations

First of all, I would like to thank Ambassador Khalilzad and the Security Council for inviting us here today and for taking the time to reflect on sexual violence in conflict and post- conflict situations.

My name is Patrick Cammaert. I retired last year as a major general after 39 years of service. My last job was general officer in command of the eastern division of the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC). I spent a large part of my military career operating in conflict zones, including the years I served with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO).

I have witnessed that violence directed at women and girls can be a particularly potent tool of war. Armed groups persecute communities by dehumanizing women and girls, which is considered to be an attack against the values or honour of a society. Even when a war is formally over and a United Nations peacekeeping force is deployed, women and girls remain targets for violence.

The current climate of impunity in most of the post-conflict contexts allows the many forms of gender-based violence, including sexual violence, to flourish. Often the political will to end the vicious cycle of impunity does not exist. Impunity thus remains an important impediment to the prevention of sexual violence.

It has probably become more dangerous to be a woman than a soldier in an armed conflict. Testimonies of survivors of sexual violence reveal shocking brutality. Many of them suffer from grave long-term psychological and physical health consequences, including traumatic fistula and HIV. They remain disabled for life

Survivors of sexual violence face enormous barriers in securing justice through the courts or through more informal, community-based mechanisms. Given the lack of adequate and responsive law enforcement, women in particular are reluctant to seek justice and to file complaints against attackers. Survivors usually prefer to suffer in silence, fearing stigma or ostracism. Today, several armed groups continue to use sexual violence as a weapon of war in Africa in various forms, including sexual slavery, kidnapping, forced prostitution and rape. The scale and brutality of the sexual violence faced by women and girls in armed conflicts amounts to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Sexual violence must be perceived as a threat to peace and security in the entire world, and in Africa in particular.

The Security Council has an important role to play in fighting sexual violence against women and girls. The United Nations and the international community need to continue their campaigns to intensify actions to end violence against women and girls. Peacekeepers can play an important role in preventing and addressing sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict zones.

It is important that the Council continue to provide modern and multidimensional United Nations peacekeeping missions with a mandate to protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence. Visible United Nations military presence on the ground proved to be effective in preventing sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in Darfur.

To be effective in the protection of civilians, a United Nations peacekeeping force must have a clear mandate, strong rules of engagement, sufficient robust armament and well-trained and well-equipped troops. However, equally important is the willingness of United Nations commanders to take swift decisions when the presence of armed groups is reported.

The deployment of female military and police personnel has proven to be effective. A critical mass of women in peacekeeping missions can enhance confidence-building with the host community by presenting an organization that looks more like a civilian society than a military occupation force. Local women who already live in fear of men due to repeated sexual violence, often perpetrated by men in uniform, may feel more

confident talking to other women.

You seated around this table are the United Nations, and you play an important role in ensuring that the United Nations and the international community continue to intensify actions to end violence against women and girls. We understand how many issues are before you at this moment, each needing great care and attention. However, woman and girls around the world are suffering. You have the responsibility to protect them and to take real and effective measures to put an end to this.