

Security Council Open Debate on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Resolution 1820
Thursday, June 19, 2008

Statement by H.E Mr. Ricardo Arias, Permanent Representative of Panama to the United Nations

First of all, allow me to congratulate your Government, Mr. President, for having convened this important meeting. I would also like to acknowledge the presence in the Chamber of the Secretary-General and the President of the General Assembly at the beginning of the meeting. I would like to thank them and the Council's special invitees for their important statements.

The annals of modern history document the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. The conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Darfur and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are but the most recent and notorious examples. The recurring nature and increase in the number of acts of sexual and gender-based violence mean that such violence has gone from being a weapon of war to an epidemic. That is especially true in countries where the absence of the rule of law makes it impossible for the State to provide the necessary protection to millions of women and girls.

Moreover, it is generally accepted today that systematic acts of sexual and gender-based violence are violations of human rights, affect human security and development and represent an assault on international peace and security. As a result, the international community has classified such criminal behaviour as crimes against humanity and given the special courts established by the Security Council and the International Criminal Court jurisdiction in trying and convicting those guilty of committing such crimes.

However, despite those efforts and other normative progress made in this area, in particular the Security Council's adoption of resolution 1325 (2000), women and girls continue to be subject to all sorts of discriminatory violence. It is therefore essential that the Security Council duly consider the use of sexual and gender-based violence as a weapon of war and devise mechanisms to mitigate, eliminate and effectively punish that practice. In doing so, it is imperative to recognize that justice is the main guarantor of human rights. The Security Council must therefore send a clear warning that acts of sexual violence against women and girls in situations of armed conflict will not go unpunished. It must also provide special support for the International Criminal Court to ensure that the perpetrators of such crimes are tried and convicted.

The Council must also establish clear, convincing and viable mandates for peacekeeping operations that ensure the protection of civilians, especially women and girls. Where appropriate, the Council must also reassess the effectiveness and scope of such mandates. In that regard, the Council should also support the Secretary-General's zero-tolerance policy for personnel working in peacekeeping operations.

Likewise, the Security Council and the rest of the Organization should redouble their efforts to provide victimized women and children with adequate health services — including free and confidential testing for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, as well as the appropriate treatment, psychological care and post-trauma evaluation, rehabilitation and social reintegration services and effective and sufficient compensation. Those efforts should be supported by awareness-raising and education campaigns on the human rights of women and children and the impact that sexual violence has both on its victims and on society in general.

In order to improve the ability of the Security Council to react effectively to this challenge, we need credible and relevant information about sexual violence. It is therefore imperative that the Secretary-General provide the Council with periodic reports highlighting the deep-rooted causes of the phenomenon, as well as the most effective strategies to combat it. In relevant cases, the Secretary-General should also include more detailed information about the issue in his reports on specific conflict situations.

In conclusion, allow me to emphasize the need to acknowledge that women and girls are crucial pillars of society. Ending the cycle of violence against them before, during and after armed conflict depends in large part upon their empowerment and active participation in all areas of the political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries. To put it slightly differently, women and girls require peace, and peace requires them.