

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

Statement by H.E Mr. Ban Ki-Moon, Secretary General to the United Nations

I thank the United States for having taken the initiative to convene this important debate. I congratulate Secretary of State Rice for her leadership. It is critical that the Council devote its full attention to this issue. I look forward to hearing its views on the way forward.

Almost eight years after the Council adopted its landmark resolution 1325 (2000), an increasing and alarming number of women and girls are falling victim to sexual violence in conflict. Sexual violence poses a grave threat to women's security in fragile post- conflict countries and undermines efforts to cement peace. It strikes women who are already struggling to survive and to keep their families together in a generalized climate of fear. The breakdown of law and order makes women all the more vulnerable to attacks and leaves them with virtually no recourse to justice. Survivors are often so badly stigmatized that they can hardly even hope for a normal life. Cast out by their societies, they rarely seek redress. Even when they do have the courage to come forward despite the humiliation that that can bring, the justice system too often fails, and perpetrators go free. That fuels a culture of impunity that does nothing to discourage more attacks. So, the vicious circle rolls forward.

But we can and must push back. This March, I launched a global campaign to end violence against women. The aim is to tackle all of its manifestations, including the abominable practice of sexual violence in armed conflict. I will soon appoint a Messenger of Peace tasked entirely with advocacy for ending violence against women.

Around the world, United Nations peace missions are making a difference by monitoring the programme, helping the victims and advocating an end to impunity. The United Nations Mission in Liberia has built a safe house for survivors and victims of sexual and gender- based violence. In Haiti, our peacekeepers are organizing meetings on women's rights for members of the judiciary and police. Our Rule of Law Unit in Afghanistan is helping the country draft legislation to eliminate violence against women. The United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo has created a special unit to ensure that victims receive help when they seek justice.

All of those initiatives are based on Security Council mandates. When the Council adopts resolutions with strong language on sexual and gender- based violence, the United Nations can respond more forcefully. Let us ensure that all future mandates have clear provisions on protecting women and children in conflict situations. When the Council authorizes multidisciplinary missions, we can produce results. When Member States send us qualified female personnel, we can demonstrate the central role of women in restoring stability to war-ravaged countries.

The concept paper before the Council cites the all-female Indian civil police unit in Liberia as a possible model. I believe that successful initiative serves as an excellent example of the unique contribution that female personnel can make. Through their sheer presence, the members of that Indian contingent are showing Liberian women that they, too, can play a role in law enforcement. We have the numbers to prove it. Since the female Blue Berets were first deployed, there has been a marked increase in the number of women applying for jobs with the Liberian police.

I am eager to deploy more women worldwide, not just as police, military and civilian personnel, but also at the highest levels of mission leadership. Therefore, I need Member States to come forward with more women candidates. Send me your female troops, your police, your civilian personnel and your senior diplomats, and I will ensure that they all are considered, that qualified candidates are placed on rosters and that the maximum number are deployed to the field as quickly as humanly possible.

The troop-contributing countries are already moving in that direction, and I appreciate all of their contributions to United Nations peacekeeping. But at the same time, I urge them to do more to provide predeployment training for preventing and responding to sexual violence. The Department of Peacekeeping Operations is revising its standardized materials on that project, and we look to the troop-contributing countries to help ensure that United Nations personnel are part of the solution and not the problem.

Let me be clear. The United Nations and I personally are profoundly committed to a zero- tolerance policy against sexual exploitation or abuse by our own personnel. That means zero complacency. When we receive credible allegations, we ensure that they are looked into fully. That means zero impunity. When allegations are found to have merit, all personnel, whether military, police or civilian, are held accountable on the basis of the applicable national jurisdiction. I will strengthen the current code of conduct by upholding the strictest discipline, whereby not only the individual concerned but also supervisors up the chain of command are held accountable in a system of collective responsibility.

Violence against women has reached unspeakable and pandemic proportions in some societies attempting to recover from conflict. Responding to the silent war against women and girls requires leadership at the national level. National authorities need to take the initiative to build comprehensive strategies, while the United Nations needs to help build capacity and support national authorities and civil society.

Responding to calls from women's groups, rape survivors and non-governmental organizations, we are bringing together a dozen United Nations entities in a concerted effort called the United Nations Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict. The initiative brings together experts on issues such as peacekeeping, development, HIV/AIDS, reproductive health, human rights, humanitarian relief and gender concerns to help stop rape and other sexual crimes in conflict-torn countries.

We know what it takes for a strategy to succeed. It takes awareness-raising. It takes effective security measures, including training for national military and police forces. It takes close monitoring of human rights, and it requires prosecuting all perpetrators to the full extent of the law.

At the same time, we must view this problem in the broader context of women's empowerment. That means revising not only laws that deal with violence, but also laws that affect women's rights with respect to other issues, such as poverty, inheritance or divorce. It means creating conditions where justice can flourish, because the best laws in the world will mean little if they are not enforced through strong judicial and penal systems.

Above all, we must do far more to involve women in conflict prevention, peace negotiations and recovery after the guns fall silent. We must have more women participating in the process of seeking justice, fostering reconciliation, supporting disarmament and demobilization, shaping development policies and rebuilding institutions. By creating a culture that punishes violence and elevates women to their rightful role, we can lay the foundation for lasting stability, where women are not victims of violence but agents of peace.