

Security Council Open Debate on Sexual Violence in Council, April 17th 2013, Security Council Chamber

Statement by Mr. Bangura, the Special Representative of the Secretary General the United Nations.

I wish to thank the Government of Rwanda for convening this debate on sexual violence in conflict. I am also grateful for your presence, Madam Minister, to preside over the debate, as well as for this opportunity to address the Security Council.

I should like to start my statement by thanking the Secretary-General for his personal leadership in advancing this agenda, which has made a huge difference for me in carrying forward that agenda.

Three weeks ago I visited Somalia. In Mogadishu, I met Luul Ali Osman, who, three months ago, faced the terrible weight of censure, arrest and imprisonment for having dared to speak out about her rape by security forces in a camp for internally displaced persons. Her case reminds us of the tremendous risks associated with reporting sexual violence, not only for the survivors themselves but for their families, the staff of non-governmental organizations who provide vital services and the journalists who try to shed light on such crimes.

For too long, war has been waged on the bodies of women like Luul. For too long, women have borne the crippling consequences — physical, psychological, social and economic — of wartime rape. They have been ostracized by their communities, cast out by husbands and families, left destitute with their children.

With sexual violence women lose everything, and in the process communities themselves are lost, because women are the life force of their communities. They are mothers and caregivers to the next generation; they are the healers, the economic backbone, the peacemakers and the peacekeepers.

That is why today we lift our voices in unison and once again join hands around this high table to renew our pact to break the silence and turn the tide on war's oldest and least condemned crime. In so doing, we stand in solidarity with the many thousands of victims and survivors around the world — not only women, but also children and men — to say to them that they are not forgotten, that their plight is of the highest priority, at the highest level of the international system.

Over the course of five years we have witnessed progress towards eradicating this crime. The Council has led from the front, ushering in a paradigm shift that has fundamentally altered our approach to dealing with sexual violence in conflict. Crucially, the Security Council's engagement has challenged long-standing myths that sexual violence is cultural, private, inevitable, or simply the random acts of a few renegades.

Resolutions 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009) and 1960 (2010) affirm that sexual violence, when committed systematically and used as a tool of war, is a fundamental threat to the maintenance of international peace and security, and as such requires an operational security and justice response. It is an affirmation that there can be no credible security approach that does not take into account the security of women as part of its central calculus. Practically, it requires us to expand the circle of stakeholders beyond gender experts to also engage uniformed peacekeepers, mediators, ceasefire monitors, war-crimes prosecutors and the full range of civilian-protection actors.

Notwithstanding the progress that has been made as a result of the engagement of the Council, the report of the Secretary-General (S/2013/149) before members today paints a grim picture. In total, it covers 22 situations: conflict, post-conflict and other situations of concern. It also lists 32 parties in the annex to the report. Of those, six are State actors, while 26 are non-State actors.

The report highlights some critical themes such as the nexus between sexual violence and the illicit extraction of natural resources; sexual violence as a driver of the displacement of civilian populations; forced marriage, rape and sexual violence by armed groups; sexual violence as a tactic in the context of detention or interrogation; and the plight of children born out of wartime rape, about whom there is little or no information available and therefore no meaningful programmatic interventions.

The report emphasizes the urgency of ensuring that sexual violence considerations are explicitly and consistently reflected in peace processes, ceasefires and peace agreements, and in all security-sector reform and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration processes in which the United Nations is involved. The report also stresses the acute lack of services for victims. It is absolutely essential that we continue to meet our obligations to the survivors — the critical health, psychosocial, legal and other interventions that they must have to rebuild their lives. At the same time, we also have to throw a more concerted spotlight on the perpetrators, that is, those who commit, command or condone sexual violence in conflict.

The continued engagement of the Security Council must serve as an unequivocal statement of intent: sexual violence in conflict will not be tolerated, and the full force of international order will be brought to bear to ensure accountability for such crimes. The perpetrators must understand that there can be no hiding place, no amnesty, no safe harbour. They must know that they will be pursued by any and all means at our collective disposal. In the process, we will begin to transfer the stigma of this crime from the survivors to the perpetrators.

The main promise of resolution 1960 (2010) is prevention. It sets us on the path of accountability and deterrence. In that respect, it marks a political commitment to bring all of the Security Council's tools to bear in preventing the atrocity of wartime rape. The purpose of the 1960 (2010) accountability regime is to influence the conduct of perpetrators and would-be perpetrators.

Going forward, we must reinforce that regime. An effective compliance system can, for the first time, raise the cost and consequences for those who would commit such crimes, where until now the price has been borne by their victims. Today it is still largely “cost-free” to rape a woman, child or man in conflict. Sexual violence has been used through the ages precisely because it is such a cheap and devastating weapon. We can and must reverse that reality, making it a massive liability to commit, command or condone sexual violence in conflict.

Since taking office in September 2012, I have placed particular emphasis on engaging national stakeholders in order to foster national ownership, leadership and responsibility. While actions by the Council or the work of international justice mechanisms such as the International Criminal Court are essential to send a zero-tolerance message to perpetrators, ultimately they complement the measures that must be taken at the national level. It is at the country level that the political will is most required to strengthen national laws, institutions and capacities to prosecute sexual violence crimes, and to care for survivors.

This cannot be only a United Nations issue. It belongs first and foremost to Member States, who bear the primary legal and moral responsibility to ensure the protection and well-being of their citizens. The role of my Office, of the Team of Experts on the Rule of Law and Sexual Violence in Conflict, and of the United Nations Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict network, which is composed of 13 United Nations entities working together to address this problem, is to support national authorities so as to strengthen their responses.

However, I cannot overemphasize that the commitment of the United Nations system, however great it may be, can never substitute for the political will and action of national authorities.

Three weeks ago I undertook my first trip to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I visited a community where last year 11 babies between the ages of 6 and 12 months old were raped by elements of Mai-Mai Simba/Lumumba, led by Morgan. It is unimaginable that anyone could have committed such atrocities.

Yet, under the cold light of strategy and tactics, the rationale and purpose is clear. What more effective way can there be to destroy a community than to target and devastate its children? Faced with such horror, we are compelled to turn the despair in our hearts into unshakeable resolve that this will not happen to our children — a resolve that matches the ruthlessness of those who would commit such crimes with our own relentless and unwavering pursuit of accountability, and, ultimately, deterrence and prevention.

I am pleased today to announce a joint communiqué of the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the United Nations to strengthen cooperation in a number of critical areas, signed by the Prime Minister at the end of my visit. It reflects the firm commitment that was made to me by President Kabila Kabange to more effectively prosecute crimes of sexual violence.

The Parliament of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is also committed to establishing a parliamentary working group on sexual violence, and the Senate and the National Assembly will hold a special session on the issue. The communiqué presents an opportunity for renewed action on sexual violence prevention and the response in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Together we must hold the President to his commitments. At the same time, we must support him and his Government — technically and financially — so that they can deal decisively with the problem.

In Somalia, our collective efforts over the past months have freed Luul Ali Osman and those who have dared to speak out in support of her cause. Last week, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, speaking to military cadets in Mogadishu, declared that security forces who raped citizens of Somalia would be fought and defeated like any enemy of the State. I commend the President and his Government for their resolve to address the problem. We anticipate that a joint communiqué outlining a framework of cooperation to address sexual violence will be adopted in early May, when the international community convenes for the Somalia conference to be held in London.

The fact that preventing sexual violence will be one of the central issues discussed at that conference is an important commitment in itself. It signals that the issue does not remain on the margins of the discourse on peace consolidation in Somalia. Addressing sexual violence is an essential prerequisite for durable peace and development. I urge international donors to match their strong political commitment with the necessary financial resources, particularly for the provision of services to survivors on the ground. If we are to break that evil in Somalia and elsewhere, the level of financial commitment must meet the level of political commitment.

As the Council is aware, I also visited the Central African Republic in December 2012. Like all of us around this table, I am distressed by the subsequent outbreaks of conflict that have shredded the Libreville Peace Agreement, costing lives and resulting in sexual violence, child recruitment and other grave human rights violations. A number of commitments were made by the parties during my visit, which were expressed in two communiqués. We must send a clear message to the Séléka coalition and all the parties to the conflict that they are expected to uphold the commitments made. They must immediately identify and release all forcibly recruited children and women from their ranks. They also have to issue and implement clear orders prohibiting sexual violence and investigate all allegations, so as to hold perpetrators to account.

The international community and the Council should insist that no party can be a credible partner in the peace process unless those basic conditions are met. I wish to highlight the fact that the ceasefire

signed by the Séléka coalition in January did include explicit reference to sexual violence as part of the definition of that ceasefire. As a principle, that reference was exemplary and must be carried forward in the Central African Republic process and elsewhere.

Let us therefore make the commitment around this table today that, in situations where sexual violence is a concern, there will never again be a peace agreement, ceasefire agreement or ceasefire verification mechanism that does not explicitly address sexual violence. That includes the agreements that must eventually be concluded in Mali and Syria to bring an end to those conflicts.

I also wish to draw the attention of the Council to the visit to Colombia by my predecessor, Margot Wallström, shortly before she left office. During her visit, the Vice-President, speaking on behalf of the Government, expressed openness to the idea of developing what he referred to as a “framework of cooperation” that outlined key technical areas in which the United Nations and the Government might enhance cooperation to address sexual violence in conflict. The multifaceted response of the Colombian authorities to sexual violence in conflict carries important lessons for our global response. The key challenge in Colombia remains implementation, and it is my intention to follow up on Ms. Wallström’s visit and to offer the technical support of the United Nations, including the Team of Experts, which have already conducted a follow-up visit. In the meantime, I urge the Colombian authorities to ensure that sexual violence considerations are explicitly reflected in the ongoing peace talks with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.

I also intend to take up invitations by the authorities in Syria, Mali and South Sudan to visit as soon as possible. Conducting country visits will continue to be a key aspect of the mandate. Through such visits, we can bear witness to the plight of survivors and carry their voices to those in power. They are intended to open space locally for dialogue and action on sexual violence. They serve as a means to engage parties to conflict to make tangible protection commitments. They aim to foster international cooperation on the implementation of such mandates. The gravitas of the Council and the mandate established by the Council to address sexual

violence in conflict open doors at the highest levels. We will continue to rely on the Security Council to support such an engagement-based approach.

I was also delighted last week to participate in the Group of Eight ministerial meeting in London, which endorsed the historic declaration on the prevention of sexual violence in conflict. The declaration represents important political and financial support. It gives us additional momentum at a crucial moment. The impetus afforded by such support at the highest levels of the international system is key to driving forward the prevention and protection agenda on the ground.

We have an opportunity, unlike at any time in history, to break the back of this age-old evil. We must believe that sexual violence in conflict is not inevitable. To eradicate it is not a “mission impossible”, but will require political leadership and political courage, matched by bold protection initiatives on the ground. It is our hope, therefore, that, on the basis of the Secretary-General’s report and his recommendations, the Security Council will once again show its resolve and unity of purpose and adopt in June a new resolution on sexual violence in conflict — one focused on accountability and prevention so as to further consolidate and institutionalize the sexual violence response in the context of the United Nations peace and security architecture and Council mandates. May this be a decisive moment — our moment to put an end to the crime that is a blight on our collective humanity.