

Security Council Open Debate on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, 12th February, 2014, Security Council Chamber

Statement by Mr. Wittig, Permanent Mission of Germany to the United Nations

Germany aligns itself with the statements delivered by the observer of the European Union and by the representative of Switzerland on behalf of the Group of Friends of the Protection of Civilians.

The latest report of the Secretary-General (S/2014/689), for which we thank him, provides us with a sad truth: the situation of civilians has worsened in most armed conflicts. It is appalling to see that terrorizing the civilian population has become an integral part of the military strategies of many parties to conflict.

In Syria, in the Central African Republic, in South Sudan and in many other conflicts, we are confronted daily with abominable violence against civilians. In Syria alone, more than 10,000 children have already died in the conflict.

Although the responsibility for those atrocities lies with the parties to conflict, the international community needs to do its utmost to improve the protection of civilians in all situations of conflict. The genocide in Rwanda 20 years ago is a constant reminder of that obligation.

On Red Hand Day, let me recall that those who are traditionally the most vulnerable members of society, women and children, deserve our special attention and protection.

We therefore welcome actions such as taken by the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to break the cycle of violence, rape and death affecting thousands of civilians and in particular women and children. While the situation on the ground remains volatile, we also commend the role of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan in providing shelter and protection to more than 70,000 internally displaced persons in South Sudan. It is essential that we build on those examples.

We strongly support the Secretary-General's "Rights up front" initiative and call for its swift implementation. The initiative, if taken seriously, has the potential not only to help peacekeeping missions to better protect civilians, but also to place the overall goal of protecting people at the centre of the Organization's policies throughout the system. The implementation of resolution 1325 (2000) and related resolutions, particularly concerning the need for protection against sexual violence in conflict, is equally important in this context.

We have seen how illegal and irresponsible transfers of weapons can contribute to increased instability, exacerbated conflicts, atrocities, human rights violations and violations of international humanitarian law. We therefore welcome the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) as the first treaty that addresses those risks at a global level by establishing clear and legally binding criteria, also with regard to international humanitarian law. The ATT needs to be swiftly signed, ratified and fully implemented on a global scale.

What else can we do? In his recent reports, the Secretary-General has identified a number of challenges, some of which I would like to briefly touch upon.

First, we need to ensure that those responsible for grave breaches of international humanitarian law, in particular for war crimes, as well as for violations of human rights, are held accountable. Impunity fosters crime. It is therefore crucial that we further strengthen the International Criminal Court. We urge the Council to insist that Member States cooperate fully with the Court.

Secondly, the arbitrary withholding and denial of humanitarian access in Syria cannot be tolerated. Using starvation as a method of warfare constitutes a war crime. We urge all parties to the conflict in Syria to allow unimpeded humanitarian access to all people affected, as the Council demanded in its presidential statement of 2 October 2013 (S/PRST/2013/15).

Since then, the situation of civilians has only worsened, in blatant disregard of the appeals made by Syrians and the international community alike. The Old City of Homs stands as testimony to the fact that the Geneva negotiations cannot in themselves produce even small progress if they are not backed by active international diplomacy.

We look to the Council to follow up on its commitments and ensure that the basic principles of international humanitarian law are upheld in Syria. In that regard, Germany fully supports the Secretary-General's call for a strong humanitarian resolution.

Finally, as witnessed in Syria and beyond, indiscriminate attacks against civilians using explosive weapons with wide impact in densely populated areas remain

an appalling aspect of conflicts to which the international community has to react. We share the concerns expressed by the Secretary-General in that context and welcome the Secretariat's continued engagement with Member States and others to raise awareness of the issue and to provide further guidance on the matter.