

Security Council Open Debate on Sexual Violence in Conflict, April 2014, Security Council Chamber

Statement by Ambassador Samantha Power. Permanent Mission of the United States of America to the United Nations.

Madam President, I would like to thank the Secretary-General, Special Representative Bangura, and Ms. Misaka for their informative and powerful briefings.

In the past decade, the Security Council has identified the scourge of sexual violence in conflict as a matter of acute and urgent concern. We meet today to assess progress in combating that pernicious form of criminality and to consider next steps. We begin with confidence that the standards we have established are clear and the terrible knowledge that those standards are regularly being ignored. We have made abundantly clear that there should be zero tolerance for rape and zero tolerance for other forms of sexual abuse in all circumstances and at all times. The terror of sexual violence is uniquely horrific and merits our continued and determined efforts to eliminate it. Neither the fog of war nor the associated breakdown of law provide any explanation or excuse for actions that violate the rights and disrespect the fundamental dignity of human beings.

To articulate a zero-tolerance standard is, of course, not difficult. Indeed, we have done it many times. But to endow it with real meaning in real conflicts remains a challenge of great urgency and one of many dimensions. This is not work that should be delegated only to a Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, even one as capable as Special Representative Bangura, or to women's protection advisers in a peacekeeping mission or to UN-Women. Those offices and officials and the United Nations as a whole assuredly have an indispensable role to play, but the key to further progress in reducing suffering and in protecting the vulnerable is action by the parties to conflict. Every Government has a responsibility to establish standards, develop institutions and pursue policies that protect its people from sexual violence, whether perpetrated by the Government's own forces or by others. That responsibility includes, as Special Representative Bangura just put it, redirecting the stigma from the survivors to the perpetrators.

That duty extends to men and boys, who have suffered sexual violence to an extent we have only recently begun to appreciate — in places like Colombia, where boys were turned into sex slaves by illegal armed groups; in Rutshuru, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which was under the savage control of the Mouvement du 23 mars for much of 2013; and in Libya, where the United Nations reported that armed brigades used rape in detention as a form of torture.

In far too many countries, the victims of sexual violence still have little, if any, effective legal recourse. Until that changes, predators will not be deterred, victims will hesitate to come forward and justice will remain beyond reach. In places where Governments are weak, we must help to improve their capabilities while also holding accountable those who commit crimes. Among the most culpable are the ruthless militias in the Central African Republic, whose assaults on civilians have almost literally torn the country apart, and where rape, forced marriage and sexual slavery are widespread; in Burma, where there are widespread reports of soldiers raping women and girls; and, as we have just heard, in South Sudan, where only this week militants have gone on the radio — radio, which my Rwandan colleague has called an evil multiplier — to incite the use of sexual violence against named ethnic groups; in Yemen, where child protection workers have attested to the abduction and abuse of

boys by Ansar Al-Sharia. With all of that in mind, we should express special outrage at the continued and widespread incidence of sexual abuse practised by Syrian Government armed forces as part of the regime's ruthless campaign to terrorize civilians and drive families from their homes.

Despite chronic underreporting and difficulties of access, we know more about the nature and scope of the problem than ever before. The Secretary-General's report (S/2014/181), the information-collection mechanisms on which it is based, and the steadfast leadership shown by Special Representative Bangura are all welcome developments. In addressing sexual violence, the United Nations must set the right example in what it does both here in New York and in places around the world where tensions are high and United Nations peacekeepers or political missions are deployed. Ms. Bangura has shown determination in coordinating United Nations efforts across agencies in order to ensure that the imperative of putting a stop to sexual violence is addressed in training, included in mission mandates and reports, and becomes a central focus of enforcement activities and a major part of holding perpetrators accountable for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

As members of the Security Council, however, we must do our part by exercising proper oversight and pushing for the full implementation of the objectives we set, mission by mission. In that connection, I note that women protection advisers were deployed last year to Somalia and Mali, and are expected this year in the Sudan, South Sudan, Côte d'Ivoire and the Central African Republic. In Somalia, the United Nations has helped to train 12,000 police officers, and the Government has supported the increased recruitment of women police. An improved effort has also been made to strengthen investigative and prosecutorial capabilities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where sexual violence perpetrated by Government and rebel forces has long been a source of chronic and massive injustice.

We must also strive to help the Secretariat achieve its goal of 20 per cent female participation among United Nations police. But for that to happen, each of our countries must themselves increase their recruitment of women police into their domestic forces, so that there is a far broader pool on which the United Nations can draw. We must also insist on enforcing the absolute prohibition on sexual abuse by United Nations peacekeepers. Again, that requires that home countries hold perpetrators of sexual violence accountable once they are sent home.

In conclusion, I would like to voice the strong support of my Government and of the American people for a concerted strategy across the globe to address the problem of sexual violence, both in and outside combat situations. For far too long, such abuses have been treated as part of the spoils of victory or the rewards of physical might. Let us be clear: sexual abuse is among the worst of crimes, because it robs people of the precious and inalienable right to be secure in their bodies, and because it is inflicted out of cruelty. In our efforts to stop it, we have made gains in recent years, but we have a very long way to go.