

Security Council Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict
25 June 2012, Security Council Chamber

Statement by Sir Mark Lyall Grant, Representative of the United Kingdom

I wish to thank you, Mr. President, for holding this important debate today, and let me also warmly thank the Secretary-General for his opening remarks. My thanks also go to the Emergency Relief Coordinator, Valerie Amos; the Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ivan Šimonović; and the Director of the International Law Division of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Philip Spoerri.

I welcome the presence of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Guatemala in the Security Council this morning, which highlights his country's strong support for this agenda, as, indeed, does Guatemala's recent adherence to the Rome Statute.

The ninth report (S/2012/376) of the Secretary-General expresses deep regret that civilians account for the vast majority of casualties in armed conflict and highlights the plight of the large number of displaced civilians. It is important that the Council hear and act on that sobering message.

As the report makes clear, ensuring the necessary degree of compliance and thereby strengthening the protection of civilians is essentially a matter of political will. The international community must play its part in helping States to fulfil their primary responsibilities under international law.

It is therefore of great concern that we continue to see humanitarian access to areas of need blocked or constrained. Humanitarian access is fundamental to the protection of civilians. We must be clear that impeding this in any way is unacceptable and a violation of Government responsibilities under international humanitarian and human rights law.

Since the last protection of civilians debate in November (see S/PV.6650), we have seen a further sharp deterioration of the situation for civilians in Syria. The Syrian regime has shamefully failed in its responsibility to protect its civilian population. Far worse, it has deliberately targeted its civilian population through the indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force. The regime has now killed around 15,000 Syrian civilians.

That is why the six-point plan of the Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States on Syria and two resolutions of this Council have demanded the withdrawal of Syrian troops and heavy weapons in order to facilitate a sustained reduction in violence. Without that first step, the violence on all sides will continue, the United Nations Supervision Mission in the Syrian Arab Republic will not be able to resume its operations and the Annan plan will fail. We have now embarked on a final effort to breathe life back into Mr. Annan's plan, but it will succeed only if the Council takes robust action to apply pressure on the regime to meet its basic commitments under the Annan plan and resolutions 2042 (2012) and 2043 (2012).

As Mr. Šimonović has just said, combating impunity is critical. We therefore commend the work of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and welcome the recent convictions for war crimes. In March, the ICC convicted the Congolese militia leader Thomas Lubanga. In April, the Special Court for Sierra Leone convicted Charles Taylor. Those verdicts are examples of how the international community will continue to challenge impunity and to shine the light of accountability in all areas. It was right that on both occasions Council members publicly welcomed those decisions.

We remain extremely concerned about the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where civilians continue to suffer the effects of the ongoing conflict and insecurity. A security vacuum in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo has also allowed armed groups to regain territory and commit abuses against the population, including rape. The responsibility for providing security to the population rests with the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and we encourage all neighbouring States to support those efforts. We are working to ensure that the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo supports the Government's efforts and responds to the changing situation on the ground, ensuring that the protection of civilians remains its first priority while increasing its emphasis on stabilization activity.

In Yemen, we welcome progress made by President Mansour and his Government to move forward with political

transition. The Government's clear commitment to removing the threat posed by violent extremism, notably in the south, must come with equal determination to protect civilians.

The United Kingdom continues to champion work on the protection of civilians. The informal Expert Group on the Protection of Civilians, chaired by the United Kingdom, has met regularly this year, instituting thematic and ad hoc briefings. The United Kingdom has supported the work of the African Union Mission in Somalia on the civilian casualty-tracking analysis and response cell, and we have recently launched an initiative on preventing sexual violence in conflict. Our ambition is to bring new energy and focus to efforts to combat sexual violence in situations of conflict and repression by establishing the capability to rapidly deploy a United Kingdom team of experts to investigate and catalogue sexual violence. We shall use the United Kingdom's presidency of the Group of Eight in 2013 to highlight the need to tackle this issue.

We look forward to working with Member States and existing United Nations mechanisms, such as the Team of Experts on the Rule of Law, to take this forward. In addition, we strongly support what Ms. Amos and Mr. Spoerri said this morning about the importance of rapidly moving to a conclusion of the negotiations on an arms trade treaty.

In conclusion, resolution 1894 (2009) reaffirms the Council's commitment to the protection of civilians. We must continue to act with clarity of purpose and the utmost vigour on this important issue in all theatres of war and armed conflict.