

Security Council Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict,
November 9, 2011, Security Council Chamber

Statement by H.E. Susan Rice, Representative of the United States

Thank you Mr. President. I'd like to thank President Cavaco Silva for chairing this session of the Council. And, equally, I'd like to thank Secretary-General Ban, High Commissioner Pillay, Assistant Secretary-General Bragg, and ICRC Director Spoerri for their briefings and for your dedication to the protection of civilians.

Mr. President, protection of civilians is at the heart of what we should be doing as a Council. In the past year, we have made significant progress in operationalizing norms on the protection of civilians. This Council played a critical role in protecting the people of Côte d'Ivoire in the aftermath of their election. When Muammar Qadhafi moved to make good on his promises to massacre civilians in his own country, this Council acted.

The U.S. is proud to have taken part in the NATO-led coalition that was authorized without any opposition by this Council under UNSCR 1973. This was necessary and appropriate, given that Qadhafi's forces continued to unleash brutal attacks on civilians and civilian-populated areas and hindered the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Thus, in accordance with Security Council Resolution 1973, NATO and its partners protected civilians for as long as necessary.

Of course, every situation is different, and every solution will be different. But the need to act in each instance remains. The situation most immediately confronting this Council is in Syria. The High Commissioner for Human Rights has warned that the Syrian government's appalling actions might amount to crimes against humanity. Her office now places the likely death toll at at least 3,500. The Asad regime's crimes are condemned more widely every day. The Gulf Cooperation Council has demanded an end to what it called Asad's "killing machine." The Arab League has worked hard to bring a halt to the violence, but, thus far, to no avail. Yet, this Council has not passed a single resolution even to condemn the Asad regime's brutal attacks on civilians. But let there be no doubt, the crisis in Syria will stay before the Security Council, and we will not rest until this Council rises to meet its responsibilities. This Council has also failed to act or even to speak in defense of the thousands of innocent civilians in Sudan's Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile states, where a brutal military campaign by the government has again resulted in horrific loss of life and a dire humanitarian crisis. Our silence is deafening and inexcusable.

Overall, the United Nations and this Council face challenges both of will and capacity. To build our capacity to protect civilians, we believe the United Nations should advance on five fronts.

First, we must strengthen early-warning systems to detect and draw attention to threats against civilians, especially where the UN already has a significant presence on the ground. Humanitarian workers are often the first to sound the alarm bell. UN peacekeeping personnel have an obligation to do so as well. We have seen some recent promising

examples of early-warning and prevention strategies in peacekeeping missions. For example, the UN Mission in South Sudan, with the support of the UN Country Team, mobilized a response to escalating tensions in Jonglei state, including consultations with community leaders and government authorities. This early-warning system may well have helped prevent retaliatory inter-communal violence.

We encourage such early-warning activity in other missions, as part of an overall mission-wide strategy for the protection of civilians. Such strategies can only succeed if they rely on strengthening mission personnel's understanding of and communications with the host communities. A mission-wide strategy also needs to provide peacekeepers with the necessary equipment and training as well as their resolve to use all means at their disposal, including force where necessary and so mandated. My government welcomes the UN's development of training materials focused on sexual and gender-based violence, as well as other tools to help missions improve their protection strategies. The United States helps the UN to survey current practices and has initiated a workshop for missions with civilian-protection mandates.

Second, where prevention has failed, we must bring the evidence of atrocities to light. That is easier to do when human-rights investigators are already on the ground as part of a peace operation or human rights presence. But even where such missions are not present, there are several options available that we can rely upon, such as fact-finding missions, special rapporteurs and commissions of inquiry. And the membership must be ready to take action on such information in this chamber, at the Human Rights Council, and in the General Assembly.

Third, the Security Council can impose targeted sanctions – such as asset freezes and travel bans – on individuals responsible for ordering and committing violence against civilians. Full and effective sanctions implementation can be an extremely useful tool to limit the ability of these individuals to prey on vulnerable populations.

Fourth, we must support societies that have been ravaged by atrocities to strengthen their domestic accountability and, when necessary, to enable international courts to bring those leaders responsible for atrocities to justice, so that all people can live under the protection of law. We have seen firsthand the consequences when those who direct violence against civilians are not held to account –as in the case of Walikale in Congo, where over 350 civilians were raped, but the prosecution by Congolese authorities of alleged perpetrators is still pending 15 months later. Since then, soldiers have continued to commit mass rapes in North and South Kivu, and the number of rapes committed by civilians has increased as well.

Finally, in order to see justice through, from beginning to end, at the international and national levels, we must ensure protection for victims, witnesses, and judicial officers. For example, in the DRC, the U.S. is supporting MONUSCO's witness-protection project for high profile and sensitive cases against perpetrators of rape, as well as providing support for the Mission's Prosecution Support Cells.

The United Nations has learned valuable lessons in all of these areas in recent years and the United States is studying them carefully right now within the context of the Presidential

Study Directive on Mass Atrocities, which President Obama issued in August of this year. We look forward to consulting with our fellow Council members and partners throughout the UN system as we continue our work on it.

In conclusion, Mr. President, I'd like to commend again the brave work of the United Nations and the tens of thousands of local and international UN staff – from peacekeepers to humanitarian workers to human rights monitors – who risk their lives daily to protect civilians in harm's way. We must never take them for granted or underestimate the challenges they face in defense of our shared values and international peace and security.

Thank you.