

Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict

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Statement by Mrs. Rosemary A. DiCarlo, Permanent Representative of the United States to the United Nations

Thank you, Mr. President. I'd also like to thank Under-Secretary General Amos, Under-Secretary General Le Roy, and Assistant Secretary General Simonovic, for their valuable remarks today.

Mr. President, let me begin by commending the work of the United Nations and the brave local and international UN staff—from peacekeepers to humanitarian workers—who risk their lives to help protect civilians in harm's way. We should not underestimate the challenges they face. All too many regimes are still willing to use ruthless and indiscriminate force in populated areas, and some deliberately target civilians, humanitarian workers, and journalists.

Last November, this Council debated how to promote and improve methods to protect civilians. Just weeks later, the world witnessed the extraordinary and ongoing courage of people in nations across North Africa and the Middle East, who have found their voices and are demanding to be heard. Many have taken to the streets to exercise their rights of expression despite, in some cases, brutal attempts at repression.

On March 17, this Council acted decisively to protect innocent civilians in Libya. Responding to the Libyan people and the Arab League, the Security Council authorized the use of all necessary measures to protect civilians and civilian areas targeted by Colonel Qadhafi, his intelligence and security forces, and his mercenaries. This new resolution followed up on the unanimous Council vote in Resolution 1970 to refer the situation in Libya to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court.

Resolution 1970 underscored the importance that the international community attaches to ensuring that those responsible for the widespread, systematic attacks against the Libyan people are held accountable. The international community must remain united in the commitment to protecting civilians and civilian-populated areas under threat of attack, to ending violence against the Libyan people, and to defending the universal rights we all share.

The NATO coalition operates within the mandate of the Resolution 1973, to enforce the arms embargo, no-fly zone, and conduct a civilian protection mission. NATO makes every effort to avoid civilian casualties.

In Syria, we are concerned about the continued reports of gratuitous violence against unarmed demonstrators. We therefore welcome the mission by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to investigate alleged violations of international human rights law. We call on the Syrian government to allow journalists and human rights monitors to independently verify events on the ground to include reports of indiscriminate attacks on populated areas by Syrian forces.

Mr. President, we have seen real progress in efforts to protect civilians, but in Darfur and elsewhere, we still face serious challenges. Let me highlight three key areas where this Council plays a crucial role: improving peacekeeping missions, assuring humanitarian access in armed conflict, and ensuring accountability.

First, the role of peacekeeping. Consider the recent crisis in Cote d'Ivoire. The Security Council consistently responded to escalating violence there by urging the UN peacekeeping force to fully implement its mandate to protect civilians under threat of attack, culminating in Resolution 1975. UNOCI responded robustly to neutralize the threat of heavy weapons. We know that these actions saved many lives, based on the substantial weapons caches discovered in and around Abidjan.

We have seen progress—led by member states in concert with the Secretariat—to improve the tools, guidance, and resources to help UN missions identify and address the threats to populations in conflict zones. We must continue to learn from experience and provide better support to missions, including doing more to address sexual and gender-based violence. In difficult environments, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the UN has developed mission-wide protection strategies, including establishing community-liaison assistants and joint-protection teams to better protect civilians. We welcome these efforts.

Second, we must continue to facilitate humanitarian access into areas of armed conflict. Humanitarian personnel around the world all too often work in insecure conditions and lack access to vulnerable populations. There are increasing reports of attempts to intimidate humanitarian workers, impede their movement, and even target them directly. In Darfur, the humanitarian community's efforts to gain regular access to those in need are being stifled by government restrictions on movement, particularly in areas where the Sudanese Armed Forces are engaged in hostilities or aerial bombardment. We must redouble our efforts to end such obstructions to humanitarian access and hold those responsible for these obstructions accountable.

Finally, accountability remains essential to ensuring an effective, transparent process of reconciliation after the guns have gone silent. The recent report from the Panel of Experts created to advise the Secretary-General on Sri Lanka alleges several violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in the final stages of the conflict, which may have resulted in the deaths of up to 40,000 civilians. We urge the Syrian* government to respond constructively to the report. Accountability and reconciliation are inextricably linked. It is in Sri Lanka's interest to take concrete steps to promote justice, accountability, human rights, and reconciliation.

Mr. President, we have a window of opportunity to translate recent Security Council cooperation on civilian protection into lasting improvements in our response to crises. We must seize it—for all of our sakes, and for the sake of the innocent men, women, and children who rely on our collective action to defend them.

Thank you, Mr. President.