

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

Statement by Ms. Rice, Representative of the United States of America

I would like to thank the Secretary-General, Under-Secretary-General Valerie Amos, Assistant Secretary-General Ivan Šimonović and Director Philip Spoerri of the International Committee of the Red Cross for their statements. I would also like to commend the thousands of United Nations peacekeepers, observers and humanitarian and human rights workers for their dedication to protecting civilians in harm's way despite great challenges and risks.

Protecting civilians is a fundamental responsibility of the international community, and a priority for the United States. Too many situations still cry out for stronger action. We must redouble our efforts to prevent and confront abuses of civilians. Today I would like to stress three priorities for the United States, namely, ensuring safety and access for humanitarian workers, advancing accountability, and strengthening United Nations capacity.

The United States is appalled by the numbers of reports of efforts to intimidate, obstruct and harm humanitarian workers. This must stop. As stated in resolution 1894 (2009), we must take "appropriate steps in response to deliberate attacks against humanitarian personnel" (resolution 1894 (2009), para. 16(c)).

Secondly, the United States strongly rejects impunity and supports efforts to hold accountable violators of international humanitarian and human rights law. The conviction of Charles Taylor by the Special Court for Sierra Leone and the International Criminal Court's judgement against Thomas Lubanga Dyilo of the Democratic Republic of the Congo represent milestones for international justice.

There has also been steady progress in bringing to justice those responsible for mass atrocities in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. But many perpetrators remain at large, including the key architects of genocide in Darfur. Moreover, justice has not yet been rendered for the Walikale rapes nearly two years ago.

We support efforts to expose and document human rights abuses, and have sponsored resolutions throughout the United Nations system that stressed the need for accountability. We agree with the Secretary-General that the Security Council has not spoken out enough about the failure to prevent attacks on journalists, as called for in resolution 1738 (2006).

Thirdly, the United States remains firmly committed to working with the international community and the United Nations to protect civilians. Over the past year, the United States has conducted a comprehensive review of our own structures and capabilities, in order to develop better tools and processes to prevent atrocities. The recently released United States policy directive supports efforts by the Secretariat and United Nations field missions to review existing capabilities, identify gaps and improve information-sharing and training.

The Secretary-General has encouraged all relevant United Nations entities to brief the Council on the protection of civilians, which is something that we strongly support. In particular, we would welcome a briefing to the Security Council on the implementation of resolution 1894 (2009), and an annual briefing on the capacity of current United Nations-mandated peacekeeping and special political missions with respect to their efforts to protect civilians, particularly to identify lessons learned and resources gaps.

In addition, we would ask that all relevant United Nations entities include in future reports to the Council information on the threats and vulnerabilities facing populations, as well as their strategies to mitigate those.

The Security Council has proved that it can act to protect civilians under threat. The perennial question remains, when will it? Last year, the Council and the broader international community took a principled stand, saving untold lives in Libya. As the Secretary-General said in his report (S/2012/376), the Council's response to the situation in Libya was decisive. The Council first referred the situation to the International Criminal Court, in resolution 1970 (2011). When Al-Qadhafi's regime remained defiant, we adopted, without opposition, resolution 1973 (2011), which contained a strong civilian-protection mandate, well understood by all members of the Council, to authorize the use of force to prevent brutal actions by that regime against the Libyan people. Those actions have given Libyans a well-deserved chance to chart a future where their sovereignty, dignity and human rights are respected.

By contrast, the situation in Syria represents a colossal failure by the Security Council to protect civilians. For over a year, the Council has not been willing to protect the Syrian people from the brutal actions of their Government. During our last debate on this topic, in November (see S/PV.6650), the High Commissioner for Human Rights estimated the death toll from months of violence at 3,500. It has at least tripled since then. The regime's relentless campaign of violence against its own people has grown ever more reprehensible, and ever more dangerous to international peace and security.

The recent suspension of operations by the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria is a testament to the gravity of the situation. It is a shame that the Council continues to stand by rather than to stand up. We must take meaningful steps, including by imposing binding sanctions under Chapter VII, to pressure the Syrian regime to comply with the Joint Special Envoy's six-point plan and work towards a political transition that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people.

In the Sudan, the Government in Khartoum continues not only to fail to protect civilians, but to bomb civilian areas and impede the delivery of urgently needed humanitarian assistance. The United States strongly condemns the violations of international law and the human rights abuses in Darfur and the two areas. We and many others have repeatedly called on the Government of the Sudan to end its indiscriminate aerial bombardments and provide immediate and unrestricted humanitarian access in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile States. The Sudan must also guarantee unrestricted humanitarian access to all of Darfur.

In conclusion, since the Council's presidential statement of 22 November 2010 on the protection of civilians (S/PRST/2010/25), we have witnessed robust international action to protect civilians, including in Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and of course Libya, as I mentioned earlier, but we have also witnessed the failure to help those in dire need. The United States remains committed to the protection of civilians and will continue working with the Council and our international partners towards that end.