

Ms. Sison (United States of America): I thank Deputy Secretary-General Mohammed and Acting Special Representative Dieng for their powerful briefings this morning. We are also honoured by Ms. Jaf's presence in the Security Council today, and we deeply appreciate her moving and inspirational testimony on behalf of the women, men, girls and boys who have suffered from sexual violence in conflict. As a voice for civil society, her voice is important for all of us to hear.

In December 2016, the Security Council adopted resolution 2331 (2016), condemning sexual violence and trafficking in persons committed by terrorists and armed groups. The resolution reflected a sobering truth about conflict today: rape is a weapon of war. Fighters are not just using guns, mortars and rockets in their battles; what we see now is a systematic use of rape to decimate communities and to force them to surrender or to flee. It is a sick and twisted reality.

The reports of rape and sexual violence from conflict zones are shocking, but they have yet to move the Security Council to act in response. That is why reports of sexual violence in conflict continue and even grow year after year. In order to fully implement resolution 2331 (2016) and help end these atrocities, we as a Council should focus on three things.

First, we should consistently recognize and condemn the impact of sexual violence on international peace and security. In South Sudan, for example, in December 2016, United Nations human rights investigators said that rape was being used as a tool for ethnic cleansing and that sexual violence in South Sudan had reached "epic proportions". In January 2017, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported that refugees arriving from the Equatoria region of South Sudan had cited rape and sexual abuse of women and girls as one of their primary reasons for fleeing. There were even reports that militias and armed groups were using rape as a sort of tax to be paid by female refugees fleeing the country.

Where rape is being used as a tactic of war, it is often public and committed in front of mass audiences, including family members and children. One refugee from South Sudan, when describing what happened to her while trying to escape the conflict, said:

"We hired a driver to take us to the Oraba border point. When we reached Kimba, there were two soldiers. They told the women to get out, to remove their clothes and lie down. The children saw their mothers get raped."

Clearly, the motive behind these horrific public rapes is to terrorize entire communities and to traumatize future generations. There can be no doubt that in South Sudan the epidemic of rape and sexual assault exacerbates the threat to international peace and security.

Secondly, in responding to sexual violence, the Security Council must seek to hold those responsible accountable for their actions and call on Member States to ensure that victims and survivors receive comprehensive care, as has been noted by other speakers. Unfortunately, we know that the overwhelming majority of victims and survivors may never receive justice. Just as armed conflict can destroy societies, it can also destroy the very institutions that should hold those responsible to account,

and, in some places, the police who are supposed to investigate sexual violence are actually reported as the perpetrators.

Rebuilding courts and reforming law enforcement are never easy tasks, but we need to give victims of sexual violence access to justice; otherwise the deep scars caused by rape in armed conflict will be difficult if not impossible to heal. We appreciate that, even with a relatively small team, the United Nations Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict has travelled to conflict zones to engage Governments and negotiate agreements intended to curb such attacks. That work, while it may take time, is vital.

We are also encouraged that the Council recognizes that victims and survivors face challenges in accessing the medical, psychosocial and economic support they need to rebuild their lives. In March, for example, our resolution on the conflict in the Lake Chad basin (resolution 2349 (2017)) included a strong call for Governments and humanitarian partners to provide rapid access for medical and social services for victims of sexual violence. Survivors need such access to heal and to reintegrate into society.

Thirdly, and finally, I call upon members of the Security Council to set an example for the international community by advancing the women and peace and security agenda at home and in their engagement abroad. As the President of the Council noted, we know that an essential element of preventing sexual violence in the first place starts with empowering women to be leaders in building and maintaining peace.

For our part, the United States will not waver in its commitment to ending sexual violence in conflict, provide care for victims and hold perpetrators accountable. We will continue to work with our friends and allies to address this scourge, and we call on all States Members of the United Nations to join us in this vital endeavour.

I agree with Mina Jaf that it is not enough to simply condemn acts of sexual violence in conflict; she is right: everyone here today is responsible for ending it and for bringing the perpetrators to justice.