

**Mr. Jürgenson** (Estonia) (*spoke in French*): I wish at the outset to thank the French presidency for having convened this debate.

(*spoke in English*)

The protection of civilians in armed conflict remains a deep concern for Estonia, as do the particular needs of women and children. As was expressed by my delegation in this Chamber last week (see S/PV.7704), sexual violence in conflict is also a continuing concern. Children are among the most vulnerable in armed conflicts and pay a high price; they are recruited, injured, deliberately killed, suffer sexual abuse and are abducted and maimed. Their schools and homes are destroyed, and they are denied food, water and health care. We are outraged that such suffering continues. As President of the UNICEF Executive Board this year, Estonia is doing its utmost to draw attention to the need for all of us to work together to put an end to these violations and protect children from violence, exploitation and abuse in all its forms.

Mr. President, while I align myself fully with the statement delivered here today by the Deputy Head of the European Union delegation, I should like now to touch upon the areas presented in your concept note for today's discussion (S/2016/503, annex).

It is clear that States themselves have the primary responsibility to protect their citizens. At the same time, it is also the main task of peacekeeping operations. We believe that such operations, in order to be effective, need to be equipped with a clear set of goals, strong mandates and exit strategies.

For protection of civilians, relations with local actors and non-governmental organizations as well as cooperation with regional and international organizations is crucial. Local governments and civil-society organizations have an important role to play in providing United Nations peacekeepers with information that could help prevent and stop violations. Furthermore, a strategy for engaging the local community is important, since this will increase trust in peacekeeping. However, closer cooperation should be tied to an increase in transparency on the part of local and regional actors.

We are greatly concerned that the protection of civilians is challenged by disrespect for international humanitarian law by some States and non-State armed groups, as well as a sense of impunity for violations.

It is of the utmost importance that humanitarian aid organizations such as the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Médecins Sans Frontières be able to help people affected by conflict without being targets themselves.

Estonia strongly supports the training of all troops to improve peacekeeping missions' understanding of the need to protect civilians, as well as the idea of having gender advisers in all peacekeeping operations. Better implementation of the relevant United Nations standards and United Nations-certified training materials on the protection of civilians is needed. Pre-deployment and in-mission training should also include issues such as sexual exploitation and abuse as well as child protection.

In this context, let me once again express serious concern over the significant increase in the number of allegations of sexual exploitation by United Nations peacekeepers. In this regard, Estonia fully supports the Secretary-General's zero-tolerance policy.

In concluding, I would like to reiterate the important role of the International Criminal Court and the necessary cooperation between the Court and peacekeeping missions. Estonia believes that when a peace operation is to be deployed in an International Criminal Court situation country, its mandate should authorize it to facilitate or assist the Court.