

Mr. Vrailas (*spoke in French*): I have the honour to speak on behalf of the European Union (EU) and its member States. The candidate countries the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia; the countries of the Stabilization and Association Process and potential candidates Bosnia and Herzegovina; as well as Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, align themselves with this statement.

I would like to thank Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon; the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Peter Maurer; the Executive Director of UNICEF, Mr. Anthony Lake; and the President of the Central African Republic, Faustin Archange Touadera, for their briefings.

(spoke in English)

The protection of civilians in armed conflicts remains an acute and urgent concern for the EU and its member States. We concur with the Secretary- General, as expressed in his report of June 2015 (see S/2015/453), that prevailing disrespect for international humanitarian law by some States and non-State armed groups and pervasive impunity for violations have become one of the most critical challenges for the protection of civilians. Upholding the norms that safeguard humankind was at the heart of the recent World Humanitarian Summit and we must take forward the commitments that were made there to enhance the protection of civilians in armed conflict.

The specific protection needs of women and children require special attention. Similar attention should also be paid to the phenomenon of sexual violence and the use of rape as tactics of warfare, affecting women, children, but also men. Children are disproportionately affected by armed conflict, and grave violations against children continue to increase. The situation of children in many places, such as Syria, the Central African Republic and Mali, among others, is of most urgent concern.

National authorities have the primary responsibility to provide protection for their citizens. However, the protection of civilians is also a main task of peacekeeping and is often decisive for the success and legitimacy of United Nations peacekeeping operations. Today, 10 out of 16 peacekeeping missions have mandates encompassing the protection of civilians.

However, many challenges remain in terms of the effective implementation of protection mandates, and we need to continue to address them. For example, effective implementation requires better planning support to missions, capturing lessons learned effectively and improving the understanding of how to support host States in protecting civilians. Missions need to be equipped with the tools to address both the root causes of crises and their most visible consequences. Peacekeepers must protect civilians under

threat of physical violence consistent with the requirements of their mandates. Different levels of threat must be met with the appropriate and commensurate use of force, as necessary.

Clearly, local actors and non-governmental organizations, as well as regional and international organizations, have a key role to play in supporting national authorities in their protection-of-civilians responsibilities. Key areas to advance in the protection of civilians, such as a political process, conflict prevention, early warning and partnerships, which were all emphasized in the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (see S/2015/446) and the Secretary-General's reports, would require the active involvement of all those actors. The EU and its member States are providing support and capacity-building to partners in all those areas. Local ownership is an important factor in protecting civilians. Regional and subregional organizations play an increasingly important role in international peace and security. Better coordination of efforts between the United Nations and such organizations should be pursued to ensure that the distribution of objectives and tasks among organizations maximizes the impact on the ground.

Peacekeeping operations need to be equipped with clear, coherent, concise and achievable mandates that include a strong human rights component when relevant, and protection mandates must be translated into solid concepts of operations and operational guidelines. We call on all peacekeeping operations with a protection-of-civilians mandate to put in place protection-of-civilians strategies by the end of this year. Transition arrangements between different operations or distinct organizations and exit strategies should be explored early on. From an early stage onwards, transition arrangements should take into account elements that will contribute to the assessment of the overall efficiency of the missions once they are terminated.

We agree that, in many ways, training is the cornerstone of improving the carrying out the protection of civilians by missions. We need to improve cooperation in the area of training in order to better implement relevant United Nations standards, ideally by offering United Nations-certified training on the protection of civilians, as some EU member States have been doing. Such training should also include predeployment and in-mission training on child protection, as well as issues on sexual exploitation and abuse. The EU supports the United Nations zero-tolerance policy in that regard. There is nothing more damning for the legitimacy of international peacekeeping and for efforts to regain the trust of local populations than peacekeepers abusing those they are mandated to protect. The EU has, for its part, provided training on the protection of civilians, atrocity prevention, gender, child protection, human rights law and international humanitarian law as an integral part of the training curricula to its missions in Somalia, Mali and the Niger.

United Nations peace operations should also play a critical role in assisting the host States in the implementation of the responsibility to protect, as they are often in the front line when a State is unable or unwilling to protect civilians from the risk of atrocity crimes. In that context, United Nations peace operations need to be staffed and equipped in a way that allows United Nations personnel to better interact with the local population and civil society organizations, including women's rights-based groups, with the overarching aim of responding to warning signals and reducing the risk of atrocity crimes. The implementation of the Human Rights Up Front Initiative should make a positive contribution in that regard.

In cases where international efforts fail and atrocity crimes are committed, accountability is crucial. Where mandated or when the host State has consented thereto, United Nations peace operations should be equipped and staffed with the capability and expertise to assist in transparent investigations and support the collection of evidence in a professional manner. The EU is committed to assisting States in strengthening their national judicial and correctional systems in order to enable them to investigate and prosecute perpetrators of atrocity crimes. Furthermore, closer cooperation between the International Criminal Court (ICC) and missions in the field is of vital importance. When a peace operation is to be deployed in an ICC-situation country, its mandate should authorize it to facilitate or assist the ICC, including by assisting authorities in the protection of witnesses and the arrest and surrender of individuals subject to arrest warrants issued by the Court.

The EU finds it deeply disturbing that civilians continue to account for the vast majority of casualties in today's armed conflicts. The Council can count on our support for reinforcing the protection of civilians in armed conflict, including through support to United Nations peace operations and through our own missions. We will continue our support for the promotion of compliance with international humanitarian law and strengthened accountability for serious violations thereof.