

Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security, (Conflict Related Sexual Violence)
23 February 2012, Security Council Chamber

Statement by H.E Mr. Reynders, Permanent Representative of Belgium

Let me begin by thanking the Secretary-General for the report on conflict-related sexual violence (S/2012/33). I also wish to thank Ms. Margot Wallström, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, and her team of experts. It is impossible to remain indifferent in reading the report, for sexual violence in many societies is still a common practice, often invisible and too rarely prosecuted.

Belgium has always been a strong defender of resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security. It formally promises to remain so. Belgium associates itself with the statement to be made on behalf of the European Union.

I would like to address three subjects.

First is the mandate of the Special Representative, which for Belgium is very clear. It allows the Security Council to focus on sexual violence not only in classic conflict situations but also in post-conflict situations or other serious situations, such as political unrest. The Council already regularly takes up such issues in various types of situations. I welcome the reference in the report to instances of sexual violence in situations of unrest and instability, particularly in Egypt and Syria. To reduce the mandate solely to cases of sexual violence in conflict situations would be tantamount to restricting the role of the United Nations in defending individuals and societies that suffer from this terrible scourge. We cannot retreat from the detailed mandate set out in resolution 1960 (2010).

Furthermore, while sexual violence mainly affects women and girls, the Secretary-General's report makes very clear that the situation of men, especially those in custody, as well as children born as a result of rape, deserves greater attention from us. Rather than seeking to lock the mandate into too limited an area of action, we should develop a comprehensive approach to protecting civilians.

My second comment concerns some particular recommendations in the report, first, that concerning initiatives and modalities relating to security sector reform, It is indeed our duty to ensure that those who perpetrate, command or condone sexual violence are excluded from all branches of government, including the armed forces and police. In addition, United Nations mediators and officials also must ensure that sexual violence is included in the definition of conduct prohibited by ceasefire and peace agreements. Indeed, Belgium calls particularly for an increase in the number of women serving as mediators and special envoys.

Finally, the third recommendation that I wish to underline concerns prevention, which is often more effective than reparation. That is why Belgium supports any initiative aimed at adopting early warning systems that could detect risks of imminent sexual violence in regions affected by conflict.

My third and final comment relates to situations in some particular countries. The Special Representative has visited the Democratic Republic of the Congo several times to discuss with top Government officials the issue of sexual violence, often committed by military personnel. Belgium was among the first to provide financial support for the Democratic Republic of the Congo's national strategy to combat sexual violence. We also provided financial support to the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo for military judges to assist with the prosecution of soldiers accused of sexual violence in the eastern part of the country. Belgium intends to remain engaged in this project, in consultation with the Special Representative and with national authorities.

As Chair of the Peacebuilding Commission's Central African Republic configuration, Belgium attributes particular importance to the issue of sexual violence in that country. The Central African Republic is on the priority list for action by the Special Representative. The problem of violence against women and children is discussed during each Commission field visit, and regular contact on the subject is maintained with the Office of the Special Representative.

The reports on the situations in Libya, Egypt and Syria are particularly relevant in the context of the so-called Arab Spring. The issue of sexual violence in countries in transition should not be ignored. I am deeply concerned at reports by the United Nations commission of inquiry to the effect that Syrian armed forces and security personnel have used sexual torture against detainees in various detention centers of the intelligence and political security services. I trust we shall have an opportunity to speak of that tomorrow, in the framework of the meeting of the friends of Syria in Tunis.

In conclusion, I would like to stress the collective responsibility for the fight against sexual violence. The Security Council must act on this report, in particular by transmitting to the sanctions committees the list of parties responsible for sexual violence, which is annexed to the report, for effective follow-up. The development of that list is a first, for which I congratulate the Secretary-General.

I sincerely trust that the team of the Special Representative will continue their excellent work. I believe their report is one stage and that there will be more.