

Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict

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Statement by Mrs. Viotti, Permanent Representative of Brazil to the United Nations

We commend the French presidency for holding today's important debate. We are grateful to Under-Secretaries-General Valerie Amos and Alain Le Roy and Assistant Secretary-General Ivan Šimonović for their presentations. We welcome the opportunity for the Council to exchange views with the wider membership on the transformation of the civilian protection landscape over the past few months.

The protection of civilians in armed conflict is one of the crucial challenges of our time. In the Security Council and other forums, Brazil has sought to contribute to the United Nations efforts in that area. Last February, during the Brazilian presidency of the Security Council, we organized a meeting aimed at considering all dimensions of the protection agenda (see S/PV.6479). The protection of civilians is a humanitarian imperative. It is a distinct concept that must not be confused or conflated with threats to international peace and security, as described in the Charter, or with the responsibility to protect. We must avoid excessively broad interpretations of the protection of civilians, which could link it to the exacerbation of conflict, compromise the impartiality of the United Nations or create the perception that it is being used as a smokescreen for intervention or regime change. To that end, we must ensure that all efforts to protect civilians be strictly in keeping with the Charter and based on a rigorous and non-selective application of international humanitarian law.

Whenever possible, the protection of civilians should be pursued through peaceful and preventive means. Those include dialogue with the local populations, compliance with international humanitarian law, coordination with humanitarian actors and diligent monitoring and reporting. In some cases, coercive measures may be necessary to protect civilians. Nevertheless, the use of force must always be a last resort. We must take the greatest care to ensure that our actions douse the flames of conflict instead of stoking them.

When the Council does authorize the use of force, such as in the case of Libya, we must hold ourselves to a high standard. The Council has a responsibility to ensure the appropriate implementation of its resolutions. Force must be used carefully, with due regard for the principle of proportionality and in strict accordance with the terms of the authorization. The use of force to protect civilians does not abrogate international law, but underlines the need for strict adherence to it.

Moreover, just as peacekeepers must be accountable for their actions and omissions in the cause of protection, Member States, too, must be clear on how they are fulfilling the mandate they have received from the Council. In the same vein, the use of force by peacekeepers to protect civilians must be carried out with utmost restraint. This is necessary to ensure that blue helmets are not perceived as parties to the conflict. Avoiding such a perception is crucial for the continued success of peacekeeping. Trust in the Organization's impartiality is indispensable for it to constructively contribute to sustainable political solutions to conflict, which is the ultimate goal of United Nations peacekeeping.

Protecting civilians is one of the most important ways in which the Organization gives expression to its ultimate objectives, as set out in the Charter. The United Nations has made great strides in this area, both in the Council and in other forums. Going forward, we must continue to advance the protection agenda, focusing on the five core challenges identified by the Secretary-General in 2009.

Brazil supports a consensual, non-selective approach to ensure the protection of civilians around the world. In the Council, in the General Assembly and in the field, we remain committed to finding solutions to the dilemmas of protection.