

Security Council Open Debate on Sexual Violence in Council, April 2014, Security Council Chamber
Statement by Mr. Drobnjak, Permanent Mission of Croatia to the United Nations.

Croatia is grateful to the Nigerian presidency for convening this important meeting on an issue that Croatia considers very significant.

Croatia aligns itself with the statement delivered by the observer of the European Union, and I would like to make some additional remarks in my national capacity.

We strongly advocate further support for the agenda on women and peace and security at all levels, national, regional and global, and today's debate is a good and valuable step in that direction. As indicated in the Secretary-General's latest report (S/2014/181), sexual violence in conflict is one of the greatest and most persistent injustices in the world today. It is also one of the most neglected.

Viewed in the broader context, sexual violence is one of the symptoms of a distorted social order characterized by conflict, injustice and insecurity. Sexual violence adds to ethnic and other divisions, reinforcing insecurity and instability, and leaves its victims with terrible physical and psychological wounds, pain and humiliation. There is no doubt whatever that the use of rape and sexual violence exacerbates conflicts and perpetuates them long after active hostilities are over. Crimes of sexual violence in conflict inflict lasting scars on individuals, families and societies, making reconciliation and peacebuilding much more difficult. Peace and reconciliation require a firm and consistent process and a lot of determination and patience in order to ascertain the truth, something that is particularly difficult when rape is used as a tool of war against women, children and men.

Sexual violence has been used in all recent wars and conflicts to pursue political and military aims, including in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. It has been used to dominate, to terrify and humiliate opponents, to uproot communities and ethnic groups, and thus to contribute to the collapse of entire societies for generations to come. Based on our own tragic experiences of the aggression to which Croatia was exposed at the beginning of the '90s, in which rape was also used as a method of intimidation and terror, we are convinced that the issue of sexual violence in conflict can be adequately addressed only through a comprehensive approach. The Croatian Government has therefore proposed a new law for the protection of victims of sexual violence in war, with the aim of legislating the rights of such victims, together with an accompanying system of compensation and rehabilitation.

Through the extensive experience of war and post-conflict management that Croatia unfortunately gained on its own territory, we may be able to make a significant contribution to wider global efforts to prevent and combat sexual violence in war and conflict. In that regard, I am pleased to announce that an International Conference on Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict will be held in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, from 29 to 30 May, jointly organized by the Croatian Ministry of Veterans' Affairs and the United Nations Development Programme. The Conference will be titled "Delivering Justice for the Past, Preventing Abuse in the Future", with its main purpose that of sharing lessons learned in addressing the rights of victims of sexual violence in Croatia and other countries of the former Yugoslavia, and of disseminating those lessons around the world through the United Nations and other systems. The Conference can also be seen as a building block for the upcoming Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, to be held in London.

Croatia is of the opinion that more can and must be done to combat the issue of sexual violence in conflict, and particularly to address the prevailing culture of impunity for such crimes. The non-reporting of sexual violence in war and conflict is another key problem, since it affects not only social perceptions of what is in fact a widespread problem, but also the work of all the relevant bodies and institutions. We fully recognize the importance of breaking the silence surrounding sexual violence in conflicts and changing the public consciousness so that the shame and embarrassment become that of the perpetrator. Civil society organizations can play a very important and vital role in that regard.

A book entitled — which means “sunny” in English — published in Croatia in 2011, contains the testimonies of imprisoned women against whom the crime of rape was committed during the war in Croatia. *Sunny* has also become a strong civil movement in Croatia during recent years, with courageous women finally breaking the social and intimacy barriers that occur in cases of war-time rape. Based on the book, the movie *Sunny* was filmed, with the support of the Croatian Ministry for Veterans Affairs, and was recently premiered in Zagreb. It is the first documentary film in which the victims of sexual violence in war, including male victims, have come out to speak of their suffering.

At the global level, there is now increased awareness on the part of the international community about the problem of wartime sexual violence. We have to build on that positive momentum and take concrete action to address impunity and strengthen specific goals — comprehensive reform of legislation on wartime sexual violence and reparation for victims, speeding up the processing of war crimes, implementing the witness-protection programme, changing the societal mentality, and severe punishment for perpetrators, not victims.

Finally, we believe that the Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict provides a solid framework to step up our efforts in preventing and responding to sexual violence and bringing about justice for millions of victims of sexual violence, not only in conflict but also in post-conflict situations and beyond.

As a member of the group of global champions of the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative, Croatia will spare no effort to take a more prominent role in preventing and combating sexual violence in war and conflict and to continue to give its firm support to all areas of the women and peace and security agenda.