

Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security
Tuesday, 24th October 2000, Security Council Chamber (GA-TSC-01)

Statement by Mr. Ileka, Permanent Representative of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the United Nations

My delegation is very pleased to see presiding over the Security Council the leading diplomat of a friendly country, Namibia, with which the Democratic Republic of the Congo has excellent, long-standing relations marked by mutual confidence and esteem.

I congratulate you, Mr. President, on having devoted today's meeting of the Council to the issue of women and peace and security. I also sincerely thank the Secretary-General, the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women and the Executive Director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) for their significant contributions this morning to the discussion, which is part of the momentum generated by the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century".

That special session was a unique opportunity to marshal the efforts to reaffirm and ensure implementation of the commitments made at the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995. These commitments were strengthened by the adoption of the Political Declaration and new measures and initiatives to implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, through which the General Assembly, as part of its effort to achieve a more just society, stressed in particular that peace is indissolubly linked to equality between women and men, as well as to development.

My delegation is pleased that during the celebration of International Women's Day, the Security Council, in its presidential statement of 8 March 2000, stressed the complex links between peace, gender equality and the need for women to participate fully in all efforts to prevent and resolve conflicts. This recognition of women as an equal partner in the prevention of war could be considered a very significant step. However, a great deal remains to be done to recognize fully the role of women in peacekeeping and peace-building.

My delegation supports the Windhoek Declaration and the Namibia Plan of Action, adopted last May, because they are valuable documents that should be applied, particularly in the implementation of the Brahimi report, in order to enhance effectiveness.

It is absolutely essential that initiatives aimed at resolving conflicts and consolidating peace take into consideration women's concerns, experience and perspective. My delegation dares to hope that the organs of the United Nations will be able to incorporate these concerns and work to promote increased awareness of the capacities of women, in particular those affected by armed conflicts, as well as their ability to contribute to the promotion of a gender perspective in all peace-building activities. Women must be involved in the conflict-prevention and conflict-resolution mechanisms so that they can give humankind the benefit of their ability to build consensus, resolve conflicts and build peace. There can be neither equality nor development without peace and justice.

Here I should remind the international community, through the Security Council, the principal United Nations body charged with the maintenance of international peace and security, that my country is the target of aggression by a coalition of armed forces from Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi, in flagrant violation of the Charter of the United Nations. This conflict, with its attendant violence, continues to create enormous movements of internally displaced persons and refugees, the vast majority of whom are women and children. One result of these exoduses is to increase considerably the poverty of the civilian population. Women and children are the main victims of this senseless, unjust war, which has done such harm to all aspects of life in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The education sector has been particularly affected. The war has prevented many Congolese from pursuing a normal education programme. However, it has been proved that for a developing country such as ours schooling allows women to preserve their health and that of their families, plan their pregnancies and participate in the political, social and economic life of their country. Therefore, to deprive women of education is to do a kind of violence to them.

Women and children have also been the object of attacks on the civilian population by the regular armies of Uganda and Rwanda during their three ruthless actions against Kisangani to expropriate the underground wealth of this region — not only gold and diamonds, but above all niobium. Though extremely rare in the earth as a whole, this metal is found in relatively large quantities in the eastern province. It is used in some alloys to strengthen armour plating and spacecraft.

This war has destroyed all the country's efforts to rebuild and revive its economy, efforts that could in particular lift women and the whole Congolese population out of the indescribable poverty in which they now find themselves. Today close to 80 per cent of the Congolese population is living in absolute poverty.

Worse than the poverty is the inhuman and degrading ill-treatment of Congolese women by armed elements of the aggressor countries, which have made such ill-treatment a means of waging war. Women have been massacred, as they were last year, during the week of 15-22 November 1999, in Mwenga, where the Armée patriotique rwandaise, assisted by armed elements of the Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie, buried women alive, as ordered by their commander, Kasereka. Those women's crime: trying to resist the mass rape that the aggressors were getting ready to commit. Their punishment: they were bled white, their bodies coated with pepper, which was then inserted into all their bodily orifices — their eyes, their mouths, their noses, their ears and their genitals — before being thrown into a common grave.

In addition to the incident in Mwenga, many cases of violations of women's rights have been recorded and denounced in white papers issued by my Government and in various reports of the Special Rapporteur on human rights in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mr. Garretón, the most recent of which revealed many cases of imprisonment of militant feminists, of the rape and beating of high school students for requesting the validation of their exams, and of rape of women prisoners.

The criminal, barbaric and inhumane practice of mass rape is also responsible for the spread of HIV/AIDS. This scourge has ceased to be simply a health problem in my country. With its tragic consequences, it now has a worrying effect on development. AIDS is a significant obstacle to progress and national development.

It was estimated at the end of 1999 that 1,100,000 adults and children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo had been infected with this fatal virus. Children orphaned by the disease are estimated to number 800,000, of whom 450,000 are still alive. In the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo — the part occupied by Ugandan troops — in the space of two years the prevalence of AIDS has increased from 4.5 per cent, the national average, to 22 per cent. In other words, it has increased by five times. The catastrophe looming on the horizon is attributed to sexual contacts with Rwandan and Ugandan soldiers, who come from countries where the disease is widespread.

Besides AIDS, it is worth noting here the resurgence of diseases such as malaria, now responsible for 500,000 deaths a year, many of which are of children under five years of age. The national maternal mortality rate is 1,837 deaths per 100,000 births, compared with 3,000 in the occupied provinces, which is one of the highest rates in the world.

On 9 June the American non-governmental organization, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), announced that at least 1,700,000 people, out of a population of 20 million, in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo had died since 1 January 1999 as a result of combat and the breakdown of infrastructures. In the village of Moba, Katanga, alone, 47 per cent of infants under one year of age have died since 2 August 1998. Throughout this area, to escape the violence, people are fleeing into the forest, where, completely neglected, they are dying of malaria.

It would be useful for the international community to get accurate figures of the number of people who have died, directly and indirectly, in the fighting throughout our national territory, and to study the impact of these deaths on the Congolese family. Congolese women have lost their lives, husbands, sons, daughters, brothers and fathers in this absurd war, which for three years now has allowed Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda to outrage the entire world with impunity.

It is obvious that Congolese women are directly involved in the promotion of peace in their country. Their search for a liberating peace should be supported by all the members of the Security Council, because the

restoration of peace in the Democratic Republic of the Congo will help Congolese women to pursue their struggle against poverty and all forms of violence against them. The Council must assist them in achieving this goal by denouncing the war of aggression and discouraging all those countries involved in the war against my country, which dehumanizes Congolese women.

Given that the Council has asked my Government and the other parties to demonstrate their commitment to peace in the weeks to come, it has no right to withdraw from the peace process; rather, it should mobilize as it did so well in Kosovo, in East Timor and, more recently, in the crisis in the Middle East. My delegation can in no way believe that, on 15 December, the international community will decide to withdraw from the search for peace in my country because powerful and differing interests do not wish it to be restored there. If it were to do so, the international community would be abandoning millions of Congolese citizens, men and women, to their sad fate and to the schemes of those who were so recently lauded as a new breed of leader in Africa. Abandoning us would mean not helping people at risk. It is inconceivable and unimaginable that the Governments of people who claim to be steeped in humanism and to respect human rights could even consider taking such an attitude.

In conclusion, let me reiterate what my delegation has continuously stated to a world dedicated to peace and justice. My delegation wants the entire world to understand that the men, women and children of the Democratic Republic of the Congo are tired of a war of aggression that is futile and stupid. My people want and seek peace. They want to live in a Democratic Republic of the Congo that is strong and united, enjoying full sovereignty and territorial integrity. They want to live in understanding with the peoples of the nine States bordering my country.

My Government is open to any proposal or initiative aimed at putting a speedy end to the barbaric bloodshed that has engulfed the entire Great Lakes region. Whether it comes via the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement, as amended by resolution 1304 (2000), in which the Security Council demanded that Uganda and Rwanda, which have violated the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, withdraw all their forces from the territory of the Democratic Republic of the Congo without further delay; via direct negotiations between the Democratic Republic of the Congo and aggressor countries; or via direct negotiations between the Government and our Congolese brothers who have chosen to resolve their differences by violence, the main thing is that we should be able to work together to achieve a lasting peace for the entire region. Such a peace could be guaranteed by the international community through an international conference to address the thorny problems of law and order in the region and to consider what is needed to achieve peace and sustainable development throughout the region, so that the underlying and immediate causes of the disaster overwhelming our subcontinent can be eliminated once and for all.

Given their rich social, cultural and ethnic diversity, the peoples of our subregion deserve such a peace. They are entitled to peace, without which any hope for human dignity, for the advancement of women, for wellbeing and for development would be futile and compromised.