

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

I thank you, Madam President, for convening this debate. I also thank the Secretary-General, his Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, as well as Ms. Rhoda Misaka, representing civil society in South Sudan. I would also like to align my country with the statement of the European Union.

Sexual violence is a weapon as old as war itself. Thanks to the action of civil society, our Council has been seized of the matter and broken the complicit silence that has surrounded that abominable crime. However, this is not the time to celebrate. We have failed to protect civilians in Syria. Women, men and children are being sexually abused there, even as we speak. France, as is well known, is working on a draft resolution that would make it possible to refer the main perpetrators and instigators of such crimes, whoever they may be, to the International Criminal Court.

Although I have spoken of our failure in Syria, the fight against sexual violence has also had its share of victories. First, we have put an end to silence. From a silent form of evil that was understood to be an inherent part of war, we have made sexual violence an issue affecting international peace and security.

In that regard, the creation of the mandate of the Special Representative has been critical to enhancing the international visibility of the issue. She can speak directly to Governments at the highest level and is able to present problems that they have often preferred to ignore.

That political work is based on mechanisms that provide us with information and awareness, which are indispensable tools for action. Women protection advisers within peacekeeping and political missions are the cornerstone of that endeavour. In the Central African Republic, where the State has collapsed and everything needs to be rebuilt, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission has a strong mandate to protect civil and human rights, including with respect to sexual violence, thanks to the deployment of women protection advisers.

In a second success, shame has changed sides. It now weighs on the executioner and not on the victim. The Secretary-General's list of shame exposes to the whole international community the parties that are using sexual violence in an orchestrated and systematic manner and provides United Nations missions with a solid basis for initiating a dialogue with such groups.

We should draw the logical conclusions from such changes and prioritize the struggle against impunity with respect to sexual violence. That task redounds above all to Governments, which have the responsibility to prosecute and punish. We must be vigilant in that regard; too often, States announce with great fanfare — and development agencies fall into line with support — the establishment of special courts, special prosecutors and extraordinary laws, which serve only to cover up their lack of political will. We have witnessed that over many years in Darfur. When States fail to comply, the International Criminal Court, whose jurisdiction is universal, can and must fulfil its role.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, impunity with respect to mass rapes has long been the rule. There has recently been a degree of progress. That is why we call upon the Congolese authorities to pursue their efforts to prosecute those responsible for the rapes in Minova, including the commanders of the Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo, with the necessary rigour. An exemplary judgement in that affair would send a message to all Congolese troops that the era of impunity has come to an end. We welcome the technical support being provided to the trials currently under way by the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, whose mandate for the protection of civilians has recently been strengthened.

None of those changes can take root if we do not fully implement the mandate established by the resolutions on women and peace and security by ensuring the full and complete participation of women in the settlement of conflicts. In the framework of its national action plan, France has launched programmes of cooperation on the matter of sexual violence and in favour of women's political and economic empowerment in Africa and the Arab world, in partnership with UN-Women, especially in Mali and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Before concluding, I would like to add one point that remains important for France. In peacetime, but even more so during war, access to sexual and reproductive health services is indispensable. We know that women and girls exposed to sexual violence run the risk of premature and unwanted pregnancies. The risk of maternal mortality in such circumstances rises tenfold.

The refusal to provide abortion services represents a violation of one of the principles of international humanitarian law, which covers non-discrimination with respect to the provision of medical services to victims. Such discrimination, which adds a terrible injustice to women who have been the victims of sexual violence, must be brought to an end.