

Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict

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Statement by Mr. Messone, Permanent Representative of Gabon to the United Nations

My delegation welcomes this debate on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, and we thank you, Mr. President, for having convened it. This debate is taking place at a time when the world, in particular Africa and the Middle East, is in a state of upheaval as a result of crises whose humanitarian and human rights consequences are of major concern to the Council.

We would like to thank Ms. Valerie Amos, Mr. Alain Le Roy and Mr. Ivan Šimonović for their respective contributions to our debate. We wish also to express our deep appreciation and full support for the work that they and their teams are carrying out on the ground.

During the most recent debate on this issue (see S/PV.6427), the Council emphasized the need to strengthen the aspect of the protection of civilians in peacekeeping operations. Today we have an opportunity to deal with the question in a comprehensive manner, focusing on two key aspects: in the framework of peacekeeping operations and in emergency situations.

The situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in Côte d'Ivoire and in Libya, as well as other crises, has shown that the vulnerability of civilians in crises continues to be marked by violence of increasing intensity as a result of clashes and confrontations between armed groups. Be it continuing, unpunished violence and sexual abuse, violence related to the exploitation of natural resources or violence resulting from terrorist acts, Gabon has consistently condemned all violence against civilians as well as all acts whose victims are civilians. Such acts must not go unpunished.

With respect to the protection of civilians in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, one of the longstanding problems in that respect has been insufficient funding and a lack of means of communication, which has hindered the effectiveness of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) on the ground. We welcome the progress made recently in that area, which has enabled MONUSCO to ensure better protection for vulnerable peoples.

With respect to the systematic violence carried out against women and girls, we welcome the investigations that are under way in the country, which reflect the determination of MONUSCO and of the Congolese Government to combat impunity.

The Ivorian crisis raised legitimate concerns given the heavy price paid by civilians during the postelectoral situation. The implementation by the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) of resolution 1975 (2011) made it possible to reduce the scale of the massacres and to avert a widespread civil war.

In the case of Libya, beyond Gabon's support for resolution 1973 (2011), we would like to reaffirm that the objective of setting up a no-fly zone in the country was the protection of the civilian population. We remain concerned at the deterioration of the humanitarian situation, which has an impact on civilians. We remain convinced that the establishment of a ceasefire and the initiation of a concerted political solution are important prerequisites for improving the humanitarian situation and for more effectively protecting civilians on the ground.

Recent crises make clear that we must continue to seek effective solutions so as to face the immediate challenges involved in ensuring the security and physical protection of the most vulnerable civilians: the need to ensure that the most vulnerable have access to humanitarian aid, and the need to induce armed groups to spare civilian populations. I should like here to highlight our concern as to the increasing use of explosive munitions in heavily populated areas.

I should like also to highlight two key elements, which have already been mentioned by other delegations.

First, there is a need to reaffirm the norms of responsibility. It must be reiterated that the protection of civilians in conflict is the responsibility of the States and parties to the conflict, even if other actors are also involved. Law alone cannot put an end to a crisis, make it possible to emerge from such crisis or even ensure the protection of civilians. It is first and foremost our determination to enforce the law that will make a difference. That where our responsibility as members of the Security Council comes in, as was the case recently with respect to Libya and Côte d'Ivoire.

The second element is the need to maintain the impartiality and neutrality of humanitarian action. The implementation of resolution 1973 (2011) shows how difficult it is to carry out humanitarian work at a time when a military operation aimed at protecting civilians is under way. In such a context, it is important that humanitarian actions remain neutral and impartial.

As we have highlighted in the course of previous debates on this issue, the protection of civilians requires new approaches that focus on awarenessraising and prevention. It is important to make agreed norms and principles widely known and to ensure that everyone is aware of the consequences of failing to respect such norms and principles.

In conclusion, we cannot address the issue of the protection of civilians without linking it to the causes of conflict, which are often connected to issues related to the democratization of States, good governance and the establishment of the rule of law. Prevention of conflict and mediation are the peaceful solutions to which we should accord priority in our actions, so as to create an environment that, in the end, will reduce the risk of armed conflict and its disastrous consequences for civilian populations.

Finally, I should like to stress the need to adapt the mandates of peacekeeping operations to the realities on the ground, and, above all, to ensure that commensurate resources are made available for their implementation.