

Security Council Open Debate on Sexual Violence in Council, April 17th 2013, Security Council Chamber

Statement by Archbishop Chullikatt, Permanent Observer of Holy See to the United Nations.

My delegation wishes to congratulate the President on Rwanda's presidency of the Security Council this month and on convening the present open debate on sexual violence in conflict. We would also like to thank the Secretary-General for his report on sexual violence in conflict (S/2013/149). I also take this opportunity to thank Ms. Zainab Hawa Bangura, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, for her very useful briefing.

Since the adoption of resolution 1325 (2000), the international community has followed closely the role of women in the context of war or post-war situations, not only as victims but, more important, as agents and important contributors to the prevention and resolution of conflicts and in peacebuilding, while stressing the need to increase their role in decision-making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution.

My delegation commends those efforts and is convinced that there is ample room for the greater involvement of women, especially in the prevention of war, in the reconciliation, rehabilitation and reconstruction of societies in post-war situations, and in avoiding relapses into armed conflict. Women can and should play greater roles as allies of peace.

In that context, the continued episodes of sexual violence, as the report describes, including, inter alia, rape, forced sterilization, abduction for sexual purposes and sexual slavery, to name just a few of the egregious acts of violence against women, are even more frustrating and saddening. As is recognized, women and girls are those predominantly affected by sexual violence, although men and boys are also victims of such heinous acts. The underlying reasons are varied; in some cases, it is done as a strategy to displace populations in order to gain access to natural resources or to facilitate drug trafficking, while in other cases it becomes a way to vent hatred for a certain race or ethnicity, or as political or economic retaliation. In that regard, it is disappointing that the report fails to highlight the targeted attacks against victims based on their religious beliefs, despite the persistence of such acts in nearly every region of the world. Also, the perpetrators, too, are varied and can be found in both legitimate State actors, such as those in a position of trust — members of armed or security forces, for example, or even United Nations peacekeepers — and in non-State actors.

The violent domination of a human being constitutes an egregious form of degradation of his or her dignity, but also of the aggressor, who, in so doing, disfigures himself or herself as a human person. Such heinous crimes are yet another consequence of the destructive power of war. All States and the international community as a whole must therefore do their utmost to stop those barbarous acts, which have been properly labelled an outrage to the conscience of humankind.

My delegation wishes to focus its remarks on the following three aspects, namely, prevention, criminal responsibility and assistance to victims.

With regard to prevention, it seems not unfitting to recall how one of the first forms of prevention used in connection with crimes of sexual violence was our own intense and timely intervention in crises using various peaceful means for which the international community is well equipped, such as mediation, international measures and a commitment to tackling the underlying social and economic causes of conflicts. Alongside those broader protection efforts there should be specific prevention measures, for example, educating members of armed forces in the areas of discipline and moral fibre and undertaking awareness campaigns to promote values that offer a proper view of women in society.

Secondly, with respect to the notion of criminal responsibility, the report is at pains to address the duty to prosecute those culpable for the commission of crimes of sexual violence. In that regard, my delegation expresses the importance of adopting and implementing action plans and legislation aimed at protecting victims from violence and holding perpetrators accountable. In cases where the Security Council is called upon to intervene, appropriate measures should be taken to reaffirm the outright interdiction of those crimes and the criminal liability of those responsible for their commission. It is imperative that the work of monitoring and prosecuting crimes of sexual violence be characterized by justice and equity and not political interests, which could undermine noble motivations and efforts to combat such crimes.

The third issue — assisting victims — seems to receive less emphasis in the report. Indeed, in order to ensure that reprisals or retribution undertaken in the pursuit of justice do not become an end in themselves, it is necessary to keep the focus on reparation for victims. It is essential that victims be afforded every assistance,

whereas, on the contrary, all too frequently victims of sexual assault become ostracized by their communities, especially those who report sexual violence or those who have become pregnant as a result of rape. Particularly disturbing in that context is the revictimization of a woman or girl who has been raped when she is forced to live with her aggressor as a so-called wife.

Obviously, sexual violence leads to devastating physical and psychological consequences, sometimes even fatal ones. Of concern to my delegation in that regard is the euphemistic reference in the report to “access to services that would allow [girls or women] to safely terminate a pregnancy” (*S/2013/149, para. 12*). In that sentence, concealed behind a veil of words, lies the stark reality of the suppression of human life — the death of an innocent unborn child — which only visits further violence upon a woman already in difficulty. Rather, the woman with child should be offered care, support, education, counselling and assistance to meet her material, social and spiritual needs during and after her pregnancy, including, if necessary, the possibility of finding a family to adopt her child.

In the final analysis, peace is more about people than it is about particular structures. People who foster peace first of all in their own hearts give rise in turn to innumerable gestures of peace and advance respect for the right to life and security of all persons, especially women and children.