

Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict

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Statement by Mr. Amieyeofori, Permanent Representative of Nigeria to the United Nations

Thank you, Mr. President, for having convened this open debate. The briefings we have received from Under Secretaries-General Amos and Le Roy and Assistant Secretary-General Šimonovič add an important practical focus to our discussion of this important matter of principle, and we thank them.

Although the United Nations, and this Council in particular, have been seized of protection issues for several years now, as we have heard today, our actions to date have not reversed the trend towards the disproportionate suffering of civilians in situations of armed conflict. It bears repeating that the primary obligation to protect civilians affected by conflict lies with national Governments and parties to conflict. However, when they are unable or unwilling to fulfil this obligation, the international community, in particular the Security Council, must respond to the plight of civilians in armed conflict.

In this regard, we recall the United Nations efforts to implement resolution 1894 (2009), which called for comprehensive information on protection of civilians to be provided to the Security Council. While improvements have been made, we still lack a coordinated approach to information gathering and monitoring to ensure that the full impact felt by innocent civilians in conflict situations is appreciated. This must be a priority, as forewarned is surely forearmed.

Nigeria supports the use of the full range of protection tools, including the provision of humanitarian assistance, mediation and other diplomatic interventions, arms control and the effective rule of law. A thoughtful approach to understanding the specific vulnerabilities of all civilians in a conflict situation would lead us to the right combination of these strategies, one reflecting the socio-economic context of the conflict.

The protection of civilians goes to the very heart of the Council's mandate. I am therefore proud to note that the international community has not been content to stand idly by while civilians are targeted and caught in the crossfire of conflict.

Our response to the conflict in Libya is using a range of protection strategies in a non-peacekeeping context. Multiple actors are working hard to provide humanitarian assistance in the face of targeted attacks on civilians and aid workers. Blocking humanitarian access is not only a deplorable act, it clearly violates the Fourth Geneva Convention. The dreadful scenes we are witnessing in Misrata and elsewhere in the country demonstrate the disregard for such pre-emptory norms. Notwithstanding the efforts of the multiple international humanitarian actors, the spectre of a major food crisis and refugee crisis now looms. We therefore demand that the Libyan parties take steps to honour resolutions 1970 (2011) and 1973 (2011) and to commit to a comprehensive ceasefire and a viable political track.

In Côte d'Ivoire, the Ouattara Administration has done much to ensure that Ivorian civilians remain protected. However, the circumstances in that country prove that the responsibility to protect survives fullscale conflict. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has reported that armed militias continue to attack the population in the west of the country and that insecurity is hampering humanitarian access to those in need, including internally displaced persons. Nigeria believes that peace can be achieved in Côte d'Ivoire through a process of reconciliation, and we support initiatives in that direction. We also look forward to the outcome of the high-level inter-agency assessment mission on the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire currently in Abidjan. We trust that ongoing protection priorities will be at the forefront of the final recommendations.

We can think of no better way to keep civilians out of harm's way than to prevent conflict before it breaks out. Prevention is infinitely better than cure. We therefore urge the international community to lend greater support to the preventive diplomacy initiatives of civil society and regional and subregional bodies and efforts, such as the Economic Community of West African States Observation and Monitoring System. Such measures encourage stability and thereby reduce the vulnerability of women, men and children caught in conflict. In this way, we might protect civilians beyond those on the agenda of this Council.

Finally, we must challenge ourselves to be objective in our assessment of situations where civilians need our protection. We must try for consistency in our approach to the protection of civilians in all situations of armed conflict and not be held back or propelled by national interest, but by justice and principle alone.