

Security Council Open Debate on Protection of civilians in armed conflict, February 12th 2013, Security Council Chamber

Statement by Ms. Mushikiwabo, Permanent Mission of Rwanda to the United Nations.

I would like to commend the President of the Council for convening this important debate on the protection of civilians and for the draft presidential statement which will be adopted today. I also thank the Secretary-General for his informative briefing, as well as High Commissioner for Human Rights Pillay and Mr. Spoerri for their valued contributions and briefings this morning.

The protection of civilians is a very personal issue for my country, Rwanda. In 1994, a genocide claimed the lives of nearly 1 million Rwandans. Rwandans wince in sympathy when they see images of civilians under threat elsewhere in the world today.

My country's core message today is that enhancing the protection of civilians in armed conflict requires action before the conflict starts. The proliferation of non-State armed groups makes civilian protection both more urgent and harder to achieve. In particular, I wish to emphasize the importance of increasing investments in the professionalization of military and police forces, especially adequate training in the protection of civilians. Only when the leadership of armed forces shares the international community's preoccupation with civilian protection will we see decisive progress made.

As a result of the experience of Rwanda, we feel a moral obligation to participate as vigorously as possible in activities, such as United Nations peacekeeping operations, that increase protection for civilians in armed conflict. We also take very seriously all efforts, such as that in which we are engaged today, to strengthen international norms to reduce tolerance for such crimes.

In that regard, I would like to begin my remarks on a note of optimism. Significant progress has indeed been made in the evolution of international norms since the genocide in my country 19 years ago. Normative progress is slow, built year by year and resolution by resolution, almost imperceptibly. It can sometimes seem like we are just repeating ourselves, but the cumulative effect is dramatic. Each year, the consensus grows stronger that the protection of civilians and the prevention of crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity are a fundamental duty of each State, as well as a legitimate and necessary focus of collective action in the international system.

The impetus to rethink international norms comes in large part from the effort to comprehend what happened in conflicts such as the tragedy of Rwanda in 1994. The world's response to crimes has been to withdraw international forces, particularly in my country 19 years ago, and in some cases to refuse outright to provide protection. Yet I believe that the course of action adopted by the international community in 1994 and the concepts used to justify it would not be acceptable today — hence, my optimism. Rwanda would be pleased if the end result of the process of introspection were to be a world that is much more resistant to crimes and mass atrocities. And if we keep working together, I believe that we can get there.

Evidence that progress is possible should encourage us to redouble our efforts, yet we must not neglect the urgent challenges that confront us at this very moment. Civilians are at serious risk today in Syria, the Sudan, South Sudan, Mali and the Democratic Republic of Congo — right in our neighbourhood — and the Council is likely to face new situations of armed conflict in the months and years ahead. My country's experience explains why we are proud to co-chair, together with the Netherlands, the Group of Friends on the Protection of Civilians. Indeed, I would like to take this opportunity to connect our debate on the protection of civilians more concretely to the evolving norm of the responsibility to protect.

Two features of that norm — prevention and the danger of incitement, as set out in paragraph 138 of the 2005 World Summit Outcome (General Assembly resolution 60/1) — have not been emphasized often enough. I believe that the best way to enhance the protection of civilians in armed conflicts is to move from a mindset of conflict management to one of prevention. Moreover, individual States and United Nations peacekeeping missions must become more sensitive to often subtle forms of incitement that lay the groundwork for crimes against humanity, and work to curtail it before it is too late.

I would like to address two further aspects of the core challenges identified by the Secretary-General in his 2009 report (S/2009/277) — first, enhancing the implementation of protection mandates by United Nations peacekeeping missions, and secondly, enhancing accountability for violations of international humanitarian and human rights law.

On peacekeeping, my country Rwanda welcomes the continued development of strategies to protect civilians and operational baselines through the guidance of the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations. Rwanda currently contributes to seven United Nations peacekeeping missions. In line with the lessons we learned about rebuilding after the genocide, we do not approach peacekeeping as an exclusively military task. We believe that early peacebuilding is critical to the success of missions, and that adequate resources should be directed to complement uniformed personnel as they fulfil their mandate to protect civilians.

Effective measures need be neither costly nor controversial. For example, within their areas of patrol with the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur, Rwandan peacekeepers have introduced an energy-efficient stove that was developed in Rwanda back in the year 2000 to protect the environment. Because the stoves use less firewood, women and children do not have to venture as far to collect wood, thereby reducing the risk of brutal attacks and rape that often accompany their search.

Another example is increasing the number of trained female peacekeepers. Female peacekeepers are often better able to intervene in specific situations concerning women and children, particularly in specific cultural contexts. Rwanda is a leading contributor of female police officers to United Nations peacekeeping missions, and we have seen these officers combat gender-based violence and raise awareness in the communities they serve in ways that have made peacekeepers better able to do so.

Ensuring that all necessary capabilities are deployed in support of peacekeepers is critical to their ability to protect civilian populations. In late 2012, Rwanda contributed military utility helicopters to the United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan, extending the Mission's area of influence and contributing to a safer environment for civilians.

We also support calls for peacekeeping missions to work with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to preserve the civilian and humanitarian character of refugee camps.

On accountability for crimes against civilians, I wish to emphasize four important points. First, justice must be timely. Nearly two decades after the genocide in my country, the international judicial process has yet to conclude. Secondly, rendering justice to victims should be the only objective of accountability mechanisms, keeping political considerations out of the process. Justice should not be and cannot be selective or used for political expediency. Thirdly, more careful attention should be paid to the principle of subsidiarity when choosing the most appropriate venue for judicial proceedings. Justice is best rendered at home. Fourthly, and related to subsidiarity, is that the international community should increase investment in strengthening national judicial capacities, which is the best way to make justice relevant to local communities and sustainable.

I conclude by once again restating Rwanda's firm commitment to enhancing the protection of civilians in armed conflict, and we express gratitude to the women and men protecting those in need, especially on our continent, as well as those who have laid down their lives in the name of international peace and security.