

Security Council Open Debate on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Resolution 1820

Thursday, June 19, 2008

Statement by H.E Ms. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, Minister for Foreign Affairs of South Africa to the United Nations

We commend the United States for organizing this open thematic debate on sexual violence in conflict situations, and we thank Secretary Rice for presiding over the meeting today.

Since its creation, the United Nations has grappled with the issue of sexual violence committed against women and girls in conflict situations. As a result, an international framework specific to women and girls was established and strengthened over time to protect women and girls from all forms of violence, including sexual violence in armed conflict. But, of course, we recognize that violence against women, including rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization and many other forms of sexual violence, still remains today. Sexual violence constitutes a war crime and a crime against humanity when committed as part of a widespread and systematic attack on a civilian population by State or non-State actors. It was for this reason that, when the International Criminal Court was created, South Africa recommended that sexual violence be among the crimes to be referred to the Court, which is a tool against impunity.

Yet, despite these milestones, more work still needs to be done to support and protect women and girls in conflict and post-conflict societies. Women and girls continue to make up a disproportionate number of the victims in situations of armed conflict. Those who survive conflict are traumatized, stigmatized and victimized yet again, just because they are women. As a result, women and girls are afraid to speak out about their ordeal or even to believe that there could be any recourse for their suffering.

The silence around sexual violence in conflict situations must be broken. During South Africa's presidency of the Council in March 2007, we adopted a presidential statement (S/PRST/2007/5) expressing the need for specific measures to be taken to ensure protection against sexual violence and to put an end to impunity. We further recognized that, while the situation of women and girls, particularly in conflict areas, remains desperate and unacceptable, the silence around sexual violence can be broken when we resist seeing women and girls as passive victims. While women may be the first casualties of war, they remain active agents of change and play a meaningful role in the recovery and reintegration of their families and communities. Where women are policymakers, they have been instrumental in bringing about democracy and reconciliation in post-conflict societies.

Sexual violence in conflict situations is inextricably linked to gender inequality, and we therefore need to advocate more strongly for the equal participation and full involvement of women in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. In that regard, Member States must continually look at measures to strengthen full and effective implementation of resolution 1325 (2000), particularly by forming partnerships with civil society, the private sector and community-based organizations.

Equally important is the need to ensure that the mandates of United Nations peacekeeping operations include clear guidelines for the protection of civilians from sexual violence. Gender-sensitive training, the deployment of more women peacekeepers and the appointment of more women special representatives and envoys of the Secretary-General should be implemented. There is practical evidence that the deployment of women enhances the impact of peacekeeping, especially for women and children in conflict areas. The deployment of women facilitates engagement with local women through the setting up of women's desks in camps for internally displaced persons and refugees, which assist women to talk about their needs and traumas, including information-sharing on sexual harassment, abuse and rape.

Furthermore, the presence of women peacekeepers has a positive transformational impact in terms of redefining the roles that women can play in all aspects of peace processes and of national reconstruction and development. South Africa is proud of its contribution to the representation of women in United Nations peacekeeping operations in Africa, which is rooted in our mainstreaming of gender and human rights in predeployment training.

The security sector of conflict and post-conflict countries must be reformed to prevent and better respond to

sexual violence. In order to build effective, non-discriminatory and representative security institutions, it is essential to provide personnel with effective and sustainable gender training and capacity- building. Women's access to justice and their participation in the legal system would also contribute meaningfully to a well-functioning and gender- sensitive security framework.

We are pleased that the United Nations system has become more coordinated in its efforts to address all forms of violence, including sexual violence against women and girls in armed conflict. A better- coordinated United Nations system would ensure that adequate information collection and management systems would be in place in conflict situations to collect data on sexual violence and feed it to the Secretary-General.

Finally, we note with satisfaction that the draft resolution before us reaffirms the primary responsibility of the international community to ensure that adequate resources are made available to address the immediate and long-term needs of women and girls who have endured sexual violence. Perhaps even more important, the draft resolution reaffirms the implementation of the obligations of Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Optional Protocols to both conventions, aimed at addressing discrimination against women and girls.

We must work for a non-discriminatory and non- sexist society in which all women and girls are treated as equal citizens. The end of discrimination against women will go a long way towards addressing the root causes of sexual violence. This is the least we can do for women and girls everywhere.