

Security Council Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict
25 June 2012, Security Council Chamber

Statement by Ban Ki-Moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations

The report I present today is my ninth on the protection of civilians in armed conflict (S/2012/376). Its essential thrust is clear — too many people are dying in too many places. Sometimes they are caught in crossfire; frequently they are targeted. They are the innocent victims of attacks on their communities and, often, on places that rightly should be sanctuaries — hospitals, schools and places of worship. More and more, we are witness to an appalling catalogue of sexual violence, forced disappearances, torture and other acts that violate — often egregiously — international humanitarian and human rights law.

Let us consider some of the most recent developments. Last year in Afghanistan, our Mission there reported a rise in civilian deaths. Anti-Government forces were responsible for more than 75 per cent of those killings. In Somalia, attacks by Al-Shabaab take place most frequently against unarmed civilians. Ongoing clashes between the Sudan, South Sudan and their proxies have caused many deaths, injuries and large-scale displacements of people. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, civilians are routinely caught up in ferocious fighting between Government forces and various armed groups; too often, they are the targets of reprisals by all sides. In Côte d'Ivoire, seven peacekeepers recently lost their lives defending villagers from armed attacks from across the border with Liberia.

And in Syria, Government forces and armed groups are fighting with no apparent concern for civilian populations. Attacks are growing in frequency and brutality. As we speak, the city of Homs and other areas are being shelled. United Nations observers have risked their lives to report to the world on what they have seen. They have reported armed assaults on civilians, execution-style killings and opposition forces firing from inside hospitals.

Across that geography of conflict, we simply must do more. We must do more to protect women and children, in particular; more to prevent attacks against journalists; and more to save innocent lives.

The Security Council has made important progress over the past year and a half. We saw the power of unity in the Council in halting violence and upholding to democracy in Côte d'Ivoire. In Libya, international forces intervened to prevent a clear threat to civilians in the east after the former regime had demonstrated its readiness to carry out large-scale killings. The Council has also shown greater willingness to use targeted sanctions against those who violate international humanitarian and human rights law.

In recent months, landmark verdicts against Charles Taylor and Thomas Lubanga marked important steps for international justice and accountability. Commissions of inquiry by the Human Rights Council also found serious violations of international law in Côte d'Ivoire, Libya and Syria. I welcome the continuing role of the informal Expert Group on the Protection of Civilians.

And, of course, every day, tens of thousands of civilians continue to depend on our peacekeepers for protection. Our peacekeeping missions have made important advances in tackling this most challenging part of their mandate. They are identifying and addressing threats through political efforts to prevent violence and resolve conflict, immediate physical protection and building a broader protective environment for civilians. This includes assistance for State and local institutions to better fulfill their fundamental responsibility to protect their citizens. Drawing lessons from our experiences, we have developed new tools to improve peacekeeping efforts to carry out missions' protection mandates, including guidance on strategic planning and training.

My report highlights five continuing core challenges for civilian protection. First, parties to conflict must do more to comply with international humanitarian and human rights law. All violations require our attention and action, but some demand particular scrutiny. Among them is the growing use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

This year, my report also spotlights attacks against health-care services. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, that has become one of the biggest yet least recognized humanitarian issues of our time.

Secondly, there is an urgent need for a more systematic engagement with non-State armed groups. That does not presume recognition, but it does require understanding on the part of the groups and their leaders of their responsibilities and the consequences of violating international humanitarian and human rights law.

Thirdly, when United Nations peacekeeping missions are mandated to protect civilians, they must have the resources and forces to do the job. Their work to directly protect civilians must be accompanied by effective political efforts to secure lasting peace and assistance to build State institutions so the peacekeepers can ultimately withdraw.

Fourthly, for civilians trapped in conflict, survival often depends on international aid. We need to do more — much more — to ensure safe, timely and unhindered humanitarian access.

Fifth is accountability. When national authorities fail to take the steps necessary to protect civilians or bring the perpetrators of war crimes and gross human rights violations to justice, I urge the Security Council to exercise strong leadership in guiding the international response.

Meeting these challenges requires political will — the will of the parties to conduct hostilities within the parameters of international law, to refrain from using explosive weapons in populated areas, to allow engagement with armed groups and open access to those in need of assistance, and to enforce discipline and hold accountable those who perpetrate violations. It also implies the will on the part of the Council to deliver on its long-standing commitment to the protection of civilians by consistently using the tools at its disposal, including the imposition of arms embargoes, targeted sanctions and referral of situations to the International Criminal Court. Beyond that, I also urge the Council and Member States to consider new approaches to preventing and responding to violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, and to ensure that the protection of civilians receives the attention it demands.