

Security Council Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians in Conflict
November 9th 2011, Security Council Chamber

Statement by H.E. United Nations Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-moon

I thank Portugal for convening today's debate on the protection of civilians. I very much welcome the presence here today of His Excellency President [Aníbal António] Cavaco Silva — a clear sign of the commitment of Portugal to this very important issue.

All of us share a fundamental responsibility to do more to protect civilians caught up in the horrors of war. In conflicts throughout the world, women, girls, boys and men continue to be subjected to blatant and frequent violation of international human rights and humanitarian law. The violations include killing, torture, kidnapping, rape and mutilation.

We see forced recruitment, including of children, and the denial of access to medical care and life-saving assistance. And we see displacement, which is so often the precursor to lasting dependency, destitution and lost opportunities.

Let us remember that civilians suffer such horrors not because they are in the wrong place at the wrong time and become what is still euphemistically referred to as “collateral damage”. Civilians suffer more and more frequently because they are deliberately targeted. My past two reports to the Security Council on the protection of civilians sought to guide the Council, Member States and parties to a conflict on the steps they could, should and must take. The five core challenges I identified remain painfully relevant today.

First, we need to see enhanced compliance with international human rights and humanitarian law. Violations must be met with appropriate action from the Council, including strong condemnation where clearly warranted. Moreover, demands for compliance should be backed by the threat of targeted sanctions and intense scrutiny, including through commissions of inquiry or referrals to the International Criminal Court.

Second, we need to more consistently and effectively engage non-State armed groups in order to improve their compliance with the law. Member States need to recognize and accept the fundamental necessity of this engagement.

Third, we need proactive, well-trained and appropriately resourced peacekeepers who can use a full spectrum of tools — military, police, justice, corrections and human rights — in cohesive fashion. Additionally, peacekeeping missions and other partners must continue to strengthen national institutions so that they are able to discharge their primary responsibility for enhancing security and the rule of law by the time the mission leaves.

Fourth, we need improved humanitarian access to affected populations. That means refraining from attacks against humanitarian workers and eliminating excessive bureaucratic requirements on the entry and movement of assistance and workers. It means cooperation between humanitarians and parties to conflict. And it means action against those who systematically obstruct assistance.

Last but not least, we must see enhanced accountability. Those in breach of the law must be held to account. Perpetrators must be able to see that we are serious about this. I urge the Council to closely study the recommendations that emerged from last week's workshop on accountability convened by Portugal and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Protection is essential. Yet we must not lose sight of the need to address the causes of conflict, not just its symptoms. Humanitarian actors can contribute to the survival of affected populations. Ultimately, though, only political solutions can end and prevent the vast majority of conflicts and ensure the safety and well-being of those who would otherwise bear the brunt.