

Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security (Sexual Violence)

23rd February 2012, Security Council Chamber

Statement by H.E. Mr. Kohona, Representative of the Sri Lankan Permanent Mission to the UN.

Mr. Kohona (Sri Lanka): We thank you, Mr. President, for convening this important meeting under your leadership.

The adoption of resolutions 1820 (2008) and 1888 (2009) were seminal steps towards enhancing the protection of women and girls from sexual violence in conflict situations. The widespread abuse of women and children in conflict situations has caused much revulsion in civilized minds. Humankind had to take action to deal with this appalling reality. Sri Lanka is particularly thankful that the Security Council has adopted those proactive measures. Even though the devastation accompanying armed conflict does not discriminate along gender lines, it has been our common experience that certain conflict situations subject women and girls to a disproportionate share of violence, degradation and deprivation. Their vulnerability has been ruthlessly exploited by armies and armed groups consisting mainly of men.

In post-conflict environments also, the challenges faced by women remain formidable. Often they are forced to contend with family dislocation, shattered livelihoods and being the sole breadwinners. Many face the everyday reality of being single mothers and, in some contexts, that increases their vulnerability to sexual harassment, exploitation and violence. Gender parity and equity continue to elude women in many parts of the world in post-conflict contexts.

Sensitive to the vulnerabilities of women in postconflict situations, the protection of war-affected women and children is a priority for the Government of Sri Lanka. Every effort is being made to ensure that their lives are returned to normalcy, as far as possible and as speedily as possible. Although resource constrained, Sri Lanka has set up special women's protection units with female police officers and women's centres in the camps for internally displaced persons, and is continuing to provide psychosocial counselling services in the formerly conflict-affected north and east. Many women in those areas were psychologically devastated by the conflict and the attendant terrorism that lasted over 27 years.

With the end of the 30-year struggle against terrorism in May 2009, Sri Lanka has now entered a post-conflict phase that is challenged by many issues. They include resettlement, rebuilding livelihoods, the rehabilitation and reconstruction of dilapidated infrastructure, and bringing normalcy to the conflict affected areas. Many of the economic rehabilitation activities implemented in the north and the east have women at the centre.

In addition, as an incremental step to enhance the mechanisms to safeguard the rights of women that are already in place in Sri Lanka, the Government has developed a national action plan for the promotion and protection of human rights, which has been approved by the Cabinet of Ministers. The national action plan contains a specific section dedicated to the rights of women, covering a plethora of issues. The priority area on women in this new mechanism focuses on enhancing and strengthening the rights of women through proactive measures. Currently, the national action plan is at the implementation stage. It characterizes the Government's commitment to promoting and protecting human rights, especially those relating to women. In addition, His Excellency President Mahinda Rajapaksa appointed the Commission of Inquiry on Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation in May 2011, which heard testimony in many parts of the island, especially in the former conflict-

affected areas. The Commission submitted its report in November 2011 and, subsequently, it was introduced in Parliament on 16 December 2011. It is now a public document. The report offers detailed observations and recommendations on international humanitarian law issues and on grievances, in particular those of women, relating to the final phase of the conflict.

While the Government will continue to adopt social, economic and security measures relating to women and children, which also have relevance to the Commission's findings, courses of action will also be taken in response to the Commission's recommendations. The Government finds the Commission's suggestions regarding institutional mechanisms to deal with land documentation and user right issues to be valuable, as the resolution of competing equities of land titles in the former conflict affected areas is strikingly complex.

Sri Lanka has had a very constructive engagement with the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict. We appreciate the open and transparent manner that has been adopted by the Special Representative's Office in working with Sri Lanka on this important issue. In this area, too, reporting from the field must contain verifiable information that would enable Governments that are committed to sincerely addressing issues of sexual violence in post-conflict situations to investigate and provide redress to the affected. It is equally important that monitoring missions do not confuse common criminal activity with such gender-based violence. Such a distortion would smack of politically motivated targeting of Member States.

Sri Lanka stands ready to extend its support to achieving gender parity in United Nations peacekeeping activities and in carrying out gender-related mandates of the peacekeeping missions. Necessary predeployment training has been completed to deploy an all-female battalion comprising 855 personnel and 28 female officers, at any time.

Sri Lanka is happy to note that the issue of women and peace and security continues to receive the attention it deserves in the Security Council and in the Secretary-General's reports. We congratulate Ms. Margot Wallström and her staff on the effective work that they are doing to assist women and children in conflict situations. It is unquestionably our collective responsibility as Member States to ensure a world free, safe and fair for all women and girls.