

Security Council Open Debate on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, February 12th, 2014, Security Council Chamber

Statement by Mr. Ladsous, Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations

In two months, we will mark the twentieth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, an event that was horrible beyond words, devastating a nation, a region and the world's collective conscience. But that tragedy also contributed to shaping the United Nations and the international community.

Today's debate is evidence of both how much has changed and how much remains unchanged. Perhaps never before in history have world leaders directed such focused attention on the protection of the defenceless. Yet, all too often, we continue to see civilians' rights violated during conflict. From South Sudan to Syria to the Central African Republic, countless men, women and children are caught in the crossfire, displaced by conflict and even targeted because of their religion, political affiliation or ethnicity.

But it must be acknowledged that lessons have been learned from past experiences, and that nowhere are they more evident than in the field of peacekeeping. Today, it must be emphasized that no less than 95 per cent of peacekeepers work in missions mandated by the Security Council specifically to protect civilians. The Department of Peacekeeping Operations has worked diligently to clarify operational guidelines in that important area, which forms the core of many mandates — nine, to be precise.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, peacekeepers have utilized a clear and robust mandate to respond to the perpetrators of attacks on civilians. In that respect, I believe that the November incident involving the surrender of the Mouvement du 23 mars testifies to the effectiveness of such work.

Over the years, the Department has made a determined effort to develop a consistent operational concept on the protection of civilians in peacekeeping, based on a comprehensive, holistic approach and drawing on the full range of the possible activities of a United Nations mission aimed at enhancing protection. The Council's clear intent and, importantly, the consensus of troop- and police-contributing countries together are of major importance. Protection crises are never times for doubt. In my opinion, it is crucial, in terms of daily operations, that the expectations agreed to by all actors be expressed as precisely as possible.

Last month, the Council faced a very grave decision when violence erupted in South Sudan. I believe that the Council took decisive action, increasing the troop strength of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan by authorizing significant reinforcements. The Mission has met the challenge, providing what I consider to be unprecedented protection and opening its doors to increasing numbers of displaced persons, amounting now to 85,000 civilians.

Yet it must be acknowledged that, despite burdening the Mission's human and material resources, hundreds of thousands of other South Sudanese remain at risk. Clearly, our soldiers cannot impose peace upon the parties to that conflict, and resolving protection challenges ultimately requires political solutions. Peacekeeping is fundamentally a part of those political solutions.

Today, virtually all of our missions not only incorporate civilian expertise in political affairs, human rights, the rule of law, along with, of course, military and police officers, but many are also integrated with our humanitarian partners. In Mali, our peacekeepers are supporting a delicate political process aimed at establishing an inclusive Government. In Haiti, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, our peacekeeping missions are supporting and strengthening the respective Governments' capacities to assume their protection responsibilities.

Supporting host Governments in meeting those protection responsibilities lies at the heart of modern peacekeeping. It is therefore no coincidence that the human rights due-diligence policy grew out of the work of peacekeepers and, more specifically, their work in the Democratic Republic of the

Congo several years back. While our troops may need to stand against rogue Government elements in order to protect civilians, peacekeeping is viable, ultimately, only with the consent of the host Government. The protection of civilians by United Nations peacekeepers should therefore never be confused with non-consensual intervention under the third pillar of the responsibility-to-protect framework.

With the increasing complexity of the situation in the field, peacekeepers are vital actors in improving the protection of civilians in armed conflict, and they play a central role in the Secretary-General's "Rights up front" framework. They support accountability for human rights violations and promote compliance with international human rights and humanitarian law. Peacekeepers are also important in many places for the facilitation of humanitarian assistance while also respecting humanitarian space.

Where applicable, our missions have developed comprehensive strategies for the protection of civilians. Those strategies draw together all mission components in a concerted effort focused on the most critical threats to civilians. They provide for dedicated organizational and leadership structures to facilitate early warning and joint operational response.

The limits of peacekeeping are real. Within their capabilities, missions must do their utmost to protect but, beyond those limits, other means must be found. No peacekeeping mission can physically protect all, or even most, civilians where a serious conflict has broken out. Of course, often our missions are judged by journalists who are seeking headlines or by analysts who emphasize too strongly the use of force. Therefore, the Council has an important role to play in articulating its expectations for the protective capacities of peacekeepers — expectations that will form the basis for clear standards for action. Ultimately, civilians will be fully protected only when there is sufficient peace and there are sufficiently stable national structures to sustain and protect it. That must be the overall goal.

Today, we also face a world that, in many respects, is more dangerous than it was in 1994. United Nations personnel now face threats that were unheard of 20 years ago. Recently, in Afghanistan, the United Nations family lost four of its members in a senseless attack on a Kabul restaurant. In Mali, our peacekeepers face the possibility of terrorist groups that are willing and able and actually want to target Blue Helmets. That makes the job of protecting civilians an extremely challenging task.

In navigating those new environments, we must be more flexible — learning and adapting as an Organization. Exploring new capabilities and adopting new technologies will not be an optional matter in the future of peacekeeping. We must improve our capacities for early warning and rapid reaction, in which gathering, analysing and acting on information will be vital.

Let me take this opportunity to thank the Council for approving the use of unarmed, unmanned aerial systems in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, with the consent of the Government. Clearly, that is already making a difference on the ground.

Now, do not mistake my point. Much has been put into place, but we still continue to face challenges, and we have a great deal farther to go. In too many places throughout the world, civilians suffer in conflict. That situation, whether in countries with peacekeeping missions or without, is a vital issue that requires the Council's continued attention.

Peacekeeping is an expression of the will of the Security Council and, let me say again, of troop- and police-contributing countries. Its success depends upon clear, decisive and resolute direction from the Council. It depends upon the commitment of all those who take part in peacekeeping to fully implement the mandate and the provision of sufficient capabilities and resources to effectively confront the challenges on the ground.

Peacekeeping was born when the Council sought to hold combatants apart. Let us confirm its continued vitality through our permanently reaffirmed determination to protect civilians from violence.