

**Security Council Open Debate on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2014, Security Council Chamber**

*Statement by Mr. Alemu, Permanent Mission of Ethiopia to the United Nations*

I wish to thank the Lithuanian delegation for taking the initiative to convene today's open debate on a very serious issue that has been the subject of a series of debates in the Security Council for almost 15 years, but with little progress to show. Clearly, it is very difficult to make progress on such a complex and difficult issue.

The protection of civilians in armed conflicts is a treaty obligation under international humanitarian law and international human rights law, which States have the responsibility to respect and observe. But few treaty-based obligations are as abused and overlooked as the obligation to protect civilians in armed conflicts. That is a real tragedy, and it highlights how much we have failed as an international community. There can be no higher obligation than protecting civilians — women, the young and the old — during times of armed conflict.

As mentioned earlier, the protection of civilians is also a treaty obligation that all self-respecting nations have a responsibility to scrupulously observe. I am deliberately stressing the role of the State in this context because States obviously have the primary responsibility for ensuring the protection of civilians in times of armed conflict. I do so also because in the various reports of the Secretary-General on the matter there appears to be a yawning gap with respect to the way in which the role of the State is presented. I will come back to that shortly, but first permit me to make a general comment on the five challenges to ensuring more effective protection for civilians that have been underlined by the Secretary-General in his various reports.

While all five challenges — enhancing compliance by parties to conflict with international law, enhancing compliance by non-State armed groups, enhancing protection through United Nations peacekeeping missions, improving humanitarian access, and enhancing accountability for violations — are all extremely relevant, one wonders nonetheless if there are no other challenges that are possibly equally relevant.

From our experience in the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) region, it appears necessary to stress the value of respecting the principles of international law governing inter-State relations. That is critical, including from the point of view of enhancing trust — which is a critical element in this endeavour — between humanitarian agencies of all kinds and their workers, on one hand, and the concerned States, on the other.

Another challenge is the need to enhance transparency with respect to the way in which those who take up the noble task of protecting civilians in armed conflicts as a vocation carry out their activities. It must be emphasized that while indeed there are those who take their responsibility and calling seriously, there are also adventurist types who are there to help what they take to be the underdog and give scant attention to the concerns of State authorities. The result is suspicion directed at the activities of those who carry out their obligation with scrupulous neutrality. The cause of the protection of civilians suffers as a result.

There is also sound justification for objecting to the way in which one of the five challenges mentioned in the report (S/2013/689) of the Secretary-General is supposed to be promoted. This relates to what is referred to as enhancing compliance of non-State armed groups with international law. First of all, that fails to make a distinction between situations where States have collapsed and situations where there are States fully capable of discharging their responsibilities but which might face difficulties with respect to some part of their territories and for a given duration of time. The reports of the Secretary-General rely heavily on the work of the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights to find ways of ensuring compliance by non-State armed groups with international law. In our view, that goes overboard in seeking with incentives with which

to cajole non-State armed groups into offering their cooperation. It seems clear that the result of all of that is the partial undermining of State authority. In the long run, the cause of the protection of civilians also suffers.

That brings us back to what I said at the beginning with respect to the gap in how the role of the State is presented in the reports of the Secretary-General. We in the IGAD region have had a lot of experience in that regard. Of course, based on the latest developments in our region, we would be mindless to ignore the failure of States to provide protection to civilians. That requires extensive analysis, for another day. But different situations should not be conflated, and context matters. Where there are strong State institutions, undue overtures to non-State actors might contribute to the weakening of States, thus compounding the challenge of providing protection to civilians.

Undoubtedly, the protection of civilians in armed conflict is becoming more, not less, complex and difficult. Technological progress and resort to various methods of waging war have made the challenge ever more complicated.

Let us be frank — few States can claim to have fully met their international obligations in protecting civilians. It is very difficult as well to argue that the United Nations record in this area has been sterling. Perhaps what is critical now is to undertake a frank assessment of what we have done over the past 15 years, where we are now and how we wish to proceed to ensure that the protection of civilians in armed conflict is a genuine commitment devoid of the inclination to politicize the issue.