

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

Statement by Mr. Donoghue, Permanent Mission of Ireland to the United Nations

I wish at the outset to align my delegation with the statement delivered on behalf of the EU and its member States.

In his most recent report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict (S/2013/689), the Secretary-General concludes that the current state of the protection of civilians leaves little room for optimism. His report describes in stark terms the violence, insecurity and human rights violations which are at present characteristic of Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Mali, South Sudan and Syria.

Although those conflicts and insecure environments have their own distinctive features, they have at least one element in common: it is civilians who bear the brunt of the suffering being inflicted and who account for the vast majority of the casualties.

The primary responsibility for the protection of civilians lies, of course, with the parties to a given conflict. There is, however, a crucial role to be played by United Nations peacekeepers. The protection of civilians caught up in war remains at the heart of what the United Nations does and what it stands for. As the statement delivered on behalf of the European Union and its member States put it, the protection of civilians must be the benchmark against which we measure the success of United Nations peacekeeping operations.

In his report, dated 22 November 2013, the Secretary-General urges Member States to ensure that their peacekeepers are given the pre-deployment training they need for the protection of civilians according to United Nations standards and that important resources such as air mobility assets and early warning are provided along with troops.

We have seen the difference made by 3,000 well-equipped South African, Tanzanian and Malawian troops in the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's Force Intervention Brigade. To complement the deployments made by traditional large troop-contributing countries, the Secretariat should make a concerted effort to broaden the base of troop contributors. The Security Council and the Secretariat should work to enhance interaction with all troop contributors, in accordance with presidential note 630 (S/2013/630) of last October.

This year we are marking the twentieth anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda. It is also 15 years since the adoption of resolution 1265 (1999). During this period, we have seen a number of positive developments relating to the role of United Nations peacekeepers in protecting civilians. These include the increased integration of protection of civilians into the mandates for United Nations peacekeeping missions; improvements in the capacity of these missions, including the establishment of women's protection advisers and of mobile human rights teams; and the increased role played by regional organizations in relation to preventing and limiting violations of international humanitarian law.

But significant challenges remain. There has been an alarming growth in the incidence and scale of intra-State conflicts, which are responsible for rising civilian casualties and where we are also seeing — as in South Sudan at present — the increased targeting of peacekeepers and humanitarian personnel.

My delegation welcomes the inclusion of the protection of civilians in Security Council resolutions. We would like, furthermore, to see the capacity of United Nations peacekeeping missions strengthened through standardized in-mission training, through the development of protection-of-civilians mission strategies, and through resources being made available which would permit a greater focus on prevention and early-warning analysis.

Small arms are the weapons of choice in many of today's conflicts. As a strong supporter of the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), Ireland looks forward to the early entry into force of ATT provisions, which will help to stop destabilizing flows of arms into conflict regions. We are also keenly aware of the excellent work being undertaken by the United Nations Mine Action Service, including the steps it is taking in Libya and elsewhere to secure and demilitarize stockpiles of weapons and ammunition. If such work had been possible in the Central African Republic during the course of 2013, significant amounts of weaponry might have been kept out of the hands of militant groups, and civilian lives would have been saved.

It is a truism that the most effective form of protection is prevention. And yet it remains the case that far too little emphasis is placed on peacebuilding and prevention. The United Nations Mission in South Sudan is on the whole a good example of the impact that a United Nations mission can have in mitigating the risks to a local population. Yet there are also clear lessons to be learned from recent events there. In South Sudan and in other fragile or post-conflict societies, the need to build sustained and resilient peace, including through efforts towards reconciliation, has never been more apparent.

Nowhere, finally, is the need for protection of civilians more apparent than in Syria, where more than 3 million people remain trapped in areas of heavy fighting which are besieged by Government or opposition forces. Under-Secretary-General Amos has spoken frequently and eloquently of the humanitarian plight of ordinary Syrian men, women and children.

While the regime bears primary responsibility for the conflict, both the authorities and armed opposition groups must take immediate action to uphold international humanitarian law and to facilitate the safe and unhindered delivery of assistance to those who so urgently need it.