

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

Statement by Mr. Lambertini, Permanent Mission of Italy to the United Nations

The Council will not be surprised that Italy aligns itself with the statement made by the observer of the European Union and with that by the representative of Switzerland on behalf of the Group of Friends on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict. Nevertheless, we wish to add a few remarks in our national capacity.

The stakes of today's debate could not be higher. The news we hear from several conflict areas is appalling. The involvement of defenceless civilians in armed conflicts seems to have become the rule rather than the exception. Civilians are victims of senseless violence. Neither children nor other vulnerable groups are spared in, for instance, Syria, South Sudan and the Central African Republic from massacres that have ethnic, religious or political motivations. Our first duty is therefore to state loudly and clearly that there can be no justification for those acts and that those responsible, whether individuals or Governments, can be held accountable. The condemnation of the international community and of the United Nations must be unanimous and unequivocal.

The responsibility to protect belongs primarily to States. That is a consolidated principle of international law from which we cannot waver. But there are, unfortunately, far too many situations in the real world where that principle simply does not work because States are too weak or somehow unable to deliver. That is where the United Nations needs to grab hold of the reins, which it can do only if its Members allow it to. Take, for example, the fact that some 75,000 civilians, mostly women and children, are being sheltered in the United Nations Mission in South Sudan camp in Juba. I wonder whether that information is taken into account by the people who so easily criticize this Organization and dismiss its work to mitigate the troubles of the world.

But the protection of civilians in armed conflicts is a relatively new task for the United Nations and its peacekeeping missions. It is a mandate that Italy supports, in the firm belief that, as a world organization, we have a duty to oppose the folly that too often invades the behaviour of human beings. But it is a mandate that requires appropriate tools and fresh thinking about the relationship between peacekeeping and humanitarian actions.

First and foremost, it requires the unity of peoples and nations on the action needed, at least at the humanitarian level. When humanitarian aid is necessary and humanitarian access is requested, we need to think solely about those who are suffering and join forces to provide them with relief.

Secondly, Italy welcomes the most recent developments in peacekeeping operations, notably the introduction of modern technology. The unmanned aerial systems currently used by the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo already seem to have significantly improved the situation on the ground and have enabled the Mission to deliver on its mandate to protect civilians. They have also strengthened the security of the peacekeepers themselves. Without ignoring the precautions those tools require, we strongly encourage the Department of Peacekeeping Operations to continue on this path and to explore the possibilities offered by modern technology for the protection of civilians. Even in the most inaccessible and remote areas, new instruments can help us to identify at-risk groups of civilians, to deliver aid and to prevent attacks against them.

Thirdly, it is essential that the Council strengthen coherence in seeking recourse to the International Criminal Court and helping the Court to fulfil its mandate, including by ensuring appropriate follow-up to Security Council referrals. The effective protection of civilians depends on a culture of accountability in all conflict scenarios. To strengthen the protection of civilians, we must make sure the perpetrators of crimes realize that the Council is serious about enforcing individual responsibility for crimes under international law.

Allow me to conclude with a word about the safety of journalists. It is commendable that the Security Council took up the question in an open debate in July (see S/PV.7003). Thanks to journalists, we know when the world's worst brutalities are taking place. We must remain vigilant on the issues. Protecting a free press means protecting free speech, and a free press is what most threatens the perpetrators of crimes against defenceless civilians.