

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

*Statement by Mr. Ružička, Permanent Mission of Slovakia to the United Nations*

We salute the initiative of the Lithuanian presidency to bring this important topic, highlighted by the recent crises in Syria, the Central African Republic, Mali and other countries, to our attention. It is worth noting the symbolism of holding our discussions today on the International Day against the Use of Child Soldiers. Slovakia would like to express its appreciation for the work of Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Valerie Amos, High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay, Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Hervé Ladsous and Director-General of the International Committee of the Red Cross Yves Daccord.

At the outset, I would like to align myself with the statement made by the observer of the European Union.

The protection of peace and the prevention of war are among the most important objectives of the United Nations. Not long ago, we discussed in this Chamber the lessons of war and the search for a permanent peace in post-conflict areas (see S/PV.7105). In today's discussion we tackle another question: how to achieve substantial progress in two equally important tasks — the prevention of war and the protection of civilians once a conflict breaks out.

In the event that we fail to prevent wars or conflicts, we must combine our efforts, capacities, means and resources to protect those who are most vulnerable, namely, women, children, older persons and persons with disabilities. Those groups are always the easiest targets in conflict situations and the most likely victims. But we should ask ourselves: can we take immediate and well-focused action to ease suffering and provide effective assistance? Can we protect volunteers, United Nations employees and other dedicated women and men who are providing or trying to provide humanitarian assistance and relief, often putting their own lives in danger? What is the price of overcoming political divergences, national interests and global objectives in situations where we see millions of people suffering, when they are internally displaced, forced to flee their homes or killed in military action? How do we protect children recruited to fight, women used as human shields, girls who are being sexually abused?

Blue Helmets and United Nations symbols are, perhaps more often than we think, the only safe haven they can hope for. By failing to take decisive action, we betray those hopes, the principles of the Charter of the United Nations and the essence of humanity. But above all, we betray ourselves.

The number of civilian casualties in current conflicts is extremely disturbing. According to the report of the Secretary-General (S/2013/689), 1.1 million people remain displaced in Somalia. More than 2.6 million have been internally displaced in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Civilians are also targeted in other conflict and post-conflict zones, such as Mali, Yemen, the Sudan and South Sudan. In those conflicts, even United Nations peacekeepers have been under attack.

In the Central African Republic, it was probably only the swift action of the Security Council that prevented the worst-case scenario from occurring. Nevertheless, more than 1 million people have been forced from their homes, and the humanitarian situation is alarming. The security situation there is still very fragile and, even with the deployment of European Union forces on the ground in the next few weeks, stabilizing the country will be a challenge. To date, the conflict in Syria has cost 100,000 human lives, and, since March 2011, more than 6.2 million have been internally displaced. More than 9.3 million people are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance.

Through various channels, Slovakia has, as an emerging donor, helped to lessen the suffering of refugees from Syria and Mali. Last year, we joined the family of donors in the Peacebuilding Fund, which supports countries emerging from conflict.

Since the first peacekeeping operation was mandated to protect civilians in 1999, we have accumulated substantive information about possibilities and limitations. While the Security Council has the key role to mandate peacekeeping operations, we have to face reality and seriously discuss the way forward.

Numerous challenges and shortcomings impede peacekeepers' capacity to effectively protect civilians on the ground. As Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon recently acknowledged, the relevant actors continue to struggle over what it means for peacekeeping operations to protect civilians, in both definition and practice. The perennial problem of many operations is summarized very well by the Brahimi report from 2000 (see S/2000/809): peacekeepers may not be able to justifiably use force against attackers in order to protect civilians when they feel morally compelled to do so.

In the world of continuous globalization and growing interdependence between national developments and regional stability, we should look more deeply into the concept of national sovereignty when dealing with internal conflicts and should seek the highest possible international legitimacy for our much needed action.

In that context, the role of an international body for post-conflict justice and for taking action against impunity for crimes against humanity should be reinforced. In many instances, attacks against civilian populations could amount to crimes against humanity or war crimes. It is necessary that the individuals responsible for such crimes be held accountable and tried by an independent and impartial court of law. If authorities at the national level are unwilling or unable to adequately address the issue, the International Criminal Court should step in.

There are many areas in which we may improve the situation of protecting the innocent and vulnerable. Let me mention just a few of them.

First, global adherence to the Geneva Conventions should be improved, especially to the Additional Protocols of 1977, as well as to the protocols prohibiting the use of certain weapons.

Second, we need to accelerate the acceptance of the 2000 Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, on the involvement of children in armed conflict.

Third, we must improve the ability of national and international units to reach people living in areas affected by conflicts.

Fourth, the safety of humanitarian volunteers and workers when accessing people in need must be improved.

Fifth, a ban on the use of public facilities in war must be fully implemented. It is unacceptable to tolerate the use of civilian facilities such as hospitals or schools as shields or covers for military operations, not to mention using civilians as human shields. We must stand firm against the recruitment of child soldiers.

Six, more effective mechanisms to monitor the use of explosive weapons in heavily populated areas must be created.

Seven, we should concentrate on the elimination of post-conflict effects on the mortality rate of children and women as an indirect cause of war. In ongoing conflicts, men die more frequently in direct armed actions, whereas women die more frequently in the post-conflict period.

Eight, when appropriate and when on-site developments require it, we must consider taking action in the humanitarian field separately from political, security or military decisions.

In conclusion, as a small step for the United Nations but a leap for the Security Council, we commend France for its initiative designed to limit the use of the right of the veto in cases of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing or crimes against humanity. We suggest that other members of the Council give serious consideration to that initiative.

We welcomed the Secretary-General's proposals for further strengthening United Nations mandates on the protection of civilians, and we call on Security Council members to act consistently across all relevant situations, while using a broad range of tools to improve the actions of the United Nations.