

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

Statement by Ms. Amos, Under-Secretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator

The Secretary-General's latest report (S/2013/689) on the protection of civilians takes stock of the current, very bleak state of affairs in this area of work and also provides an update on progress in responding to the five core challenges. It makes recommendations for strengthening protection, addressing new weapon technologies, explosive weapons use in populated areas, casualty recording, non-State armed groups, peacekeeping operations, humanitarian access and accountability.

In today's briefing, I will focus my remarks on the general deterioration in the protection of civilians in the past year, the impact of key developments in peacekeeping operations on the issue and the pressing need to strengthen the protection of civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas.

I regret to inform the Council that, despite the extensive human rights and humanitarian law that has been put in place and the widespread availability of social media, which is now used to track atrocities against civilians, civilians continue to be killed, injured and maimed in conflict by targeted or indiscriminate attacks on a regular basis. They are arbitrarily detained, tortured, raped or forcibly recruited. They are displaced to an uncertain fate, often with no or only limited access to basic necessities.

The recent examples of Syria, the Central African Republic and South Sudan bear that out, with parties to conflict failing, sometimes deliberately, to respect and protect civilians pursuant to their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law. In many respects, we seem to be going backwards as international exhortations, including from the Council, go unheeded.

In Syria, civilians have been subjected to brutal violence for almost three years, and there appears to be no end in sight. We all hope that the current talks in Geneva will deliver a positive result. As the violence intensifies and the situation on the ground becomes more complicated, people are becoming even more desperate. There are reports and allegations of the systematic targeting of communities with specific religious affiliations. And the use of siege as a weapon of war is particularly heinous — the deliberate denial of humanitarian assistance to people in desperate need. As a world community, we had all hoped that we had moved beyond that, and yet we are witnessing it in Syria every day. There are 250,000 people in areas of the country that are besieged. They cannot leave, and we cannot get aid in.

The recent and desperately needed humanitarian pause in Homs has enabled United Nations and Syrian Arab Red Crescent workers to evacuate more than 1,000 civilians and to deliver some food and medicines to people in the Old City. It was a heroic effort, as people waiting to leave and humanitarian workers trying to get aid in were being deliberately targeted. We will learn the lessons from that operation and seek to replicate it in other parts of the country.

Atrocities continue in the Central African Republic, including against those fleeing violence. There are 100,000 people seeking refuge at the airport, and thousands have fled into the bush. The conflict is complex, and all communities are affected by the violence. I am gravely concerned by reports of reprisals against the minority Muslim community. In many towns, Muslim groups are currently isolated and threatened by anti-Balaka forces, and tens of thousands have already left the country for Chad or Cameroon. Many local religious leaders are doing all they can to bring communities together, but the trust has gone.

In South Sudan, thousands of lives were saved when the United Nations Mission in South Sudan allowed people into its bases after violence erupted on 15 December. Nearly 75,000 people are still receiving protection and assistance in eight United Nations bases, crowded together in unsustainable conditions and too fearful to return to homes and communities, which have been razed to the ground. However, the majority of the displaced, 85 per cent of them, are in open areas where access is difficult and insecure. We continue to receive reports of ongoing clashes, despite the cessation of hostilities agreement, leading to

further displacements. People are exposed to physical and sexual violence, the destruction of their property, separation from their families and psychosocial trauma.

In all those situations and in many others, humanitarian workers face significant challenges as they seek to protect and assist those in need. That is often done at great personal risk, as we saw four days ago in Homs. They, too, must be protected and respected by parties to conflict. In 2013, 120 humanitarian workers were reported killed, 105 injured and 113 kidnapped.

Let me now turn to peacekeeping operations.

Mandating peacekeeping missions to protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence remains among the most significant actions taken by the Council to enhance protection, and it has undoubtedly saved lives. In many countries, we are constantly asking our peacekeepers to do more, as their numbers are not necessarily commensurate with the task at hand. We have seen that in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and elsewhere. But we also recognize that the implementation of a robust protection mandate by peacekeepers can lead to tensions for missions and humanitarian actors. We have sought to address some of those challenges. But there are three specific areas where our continued engagement is essential.

First, ensuring effective coordination between missions and humanitarian actors is essential. We all know that there needs to be a clear distinction between humanitarian action and a mission's political and military objectives, so as to maintain the centrality of the principles underpinning humanitarian work. It is important that the United Nations and other humanitarian actors are, and are seen to be, neutral, impartial and independent. However, that is not always easy to achieve in volatile, fast-moving conflict situations, where communities look to the United Nations for protection but their leaders cite the partiality of the United Nations in support of one side or another, thereby increasing risks to humanitarian workers and limiting their access to people in need.

Secondly, many of the tasks undertaken by peacekeepers to protect civilians rely on their impartiality. But peacekeepers are also sometimes expected to use force. The United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has peacekeeping and peace-enforcement troops under the same command. It may be the only way in which they can protect civilians, but we must remain mindful that, if that impartiality is called into question — in particular if the mission is perceived to have become a party to the conflict — its close proximity to civilians, including in pursuit of its protection activities, could place civilians at increased risk of attack at the same time.

Thirdly, it is important that the civilian contribution to implementing the protection mandate is not overshadowed by a focus on the military role and the physical protection of civilians. The work of human rights, the protection of women and children and security-sector reform staff is just as essential for ensuring protection in the long term. Along with the protection cluster, their work also helps to guide the military component in its approach to the protection of civilians.

Let me now turn to the protection of civilians from the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. As is apparent in Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia, we must do more in that area. According to the British non-governmental organization Action on Armed Violence, almost 38,000 people were killed or injured by explosive weapons worldwide in 2012. Of those, 78 per cent were civilians. When explosive weapons were used in populated areas, 91 per cent of casualties were civilians. Last week, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan reported a 14 per cent increase in civilian casualties in 2013, as compared to the previous year. The indiscriminate use of improvised explosive devices by anti-Government elements increased in 2013 and remained the leading cause of civilian casualties.

In addition to being killed or injured, civilians are also displaced, often for long periods and in precarious conditions. In Syria, 6.5 million people are internally displaced, and 2.5 million have fled the country. Many of those displaced have fled fighting characterized by the devastating and continuing use of explosive weapons in populated areas — all despite the Council's calls for the removal of heavy weapons from population centres.

In the Sudanese states of Blue Nile and South Kordofan, aerial bombardment of civilian areas by Sudanese forces and shelling both by Sudanese forces and by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North continue to result in death, injury and displacement.

Explosive weapons can result in horrific injuries requiring emergency and specialist medical treatment, rehabilitation and psychosocial support services. But often that treatment and support is unavailable, in part because health facilities have been damaged or destroyed. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), from which the Council will hear later, reports that explosive weapons are the leading cause of damage to health-care facilities in armed conflicts.

Explosive-weapon use in populated areas results in damage to, or the destruction of, housing and other infrastructure, such as schools. Approximately one third of the housing stock in Syria has been destroyed by the fighting, while nearly one fifth of the schools are either damaged or being used as shelters.

Livelihoods are also devastated as land and other means of production are rendered unusable as the result of explosive remnants of war, which will continue to pose a threat to civilians until they are removed. Damage to the agricultural sector during hostilities between Israel and Palestinian armed groups in Gaza from 14 to 21 November 2012 is estimated at \$20 million. Moreover, explosive remnants of war remain buried in farmland and in the rubble of damaged buildings, posing a threat to people and those working on rubble-removal and reconstruction.

The Secretary-General has repeatedly called on parties to conflict to avoid the use of explosive weapons with wide-area effects in populated areas. He has asked the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs to continue working with Member States, United Nations colleagues, the ICRC and civil society to strengthen the protection of civilians against such weapons. We will work to promote Member States' recognition of the humanitarian impact of explosive-weapon use in populated areas and their commitment to avoid or limit such use in the future, including by building on good practice in that area. I hope that all Member States will engage in those efforts.

While our humanitarian and peacekeeping work saves lives and can enhance the safety and security of people affected by conflict, it remains the primary responsibility of the parties to conflict to respect and protect civilians and spare them from the effects of hostilities.

Until such time as parties act accordingly, and until such time as they are persuaded or coerced into complying with the law — including by the Council — or held accountable for their failures, the lack of sustained protection for civilians will continue to give little cause for optimism, but considerable cause for despair, outrage and shame.