

Security Council Open Debate on Protection of civilians in armed conflict, February 12th 2013, Security Council Chamber

Statement by Mr. Parham, Permanent Mission of United Kingdom to the United Nations.

I wish to thank you, Mr. President, for holding this important debate today and for having come to New York to lend your personal weight to this important issue. Let me also warmly thank the Secretary-General, High Commissioner Pillay and the Director for International Law and Cooperation of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Mr. Spoerri, for their valuable briefings.

Civilians continue to account for the vast majority of casualties in armed conflict. That suffering must stop. The protection of civilians is a pressing responsibility that must be discharged and that requires action during armed conflict and in peacetime, and at all stages in between. States bear the primary responsibility to protect civilians, and must act strictly in accordance with their legal obligations and their moral duties. In addition, we, the United Nations, must provide the appropriate political, humanitarian and development support necessary to protect civilians.

Civilians in situations of armed conflict suffer in a multitude of ways, including through deliberate targeting, sexual and gender-based violence and displacement. We must address them all at all stages of the conflict cycle. The international community cannot be a passive bystander and idle witness in the face of gross violations against civilians. It is deeply regrettable that, since our last debate on this subject, in June of last year (see S/PV.6790), there has been limited progress in addressing certain situations of grave concern.

In particular, we remain appalled by the deteriorating situation in Syria. Since June, the crisis has intensified. The depth of suffering of the Syrian people is truly dreadful and worsening daily. More than 60,000 Syrians are now believed to have died, and more than 700,000 have taken refuge in neighbouring countries. Our objective is clear, that is, we want an end to the violence and a process of genuine political transition, and we want to see the Security Council apply its collective weight towards those objectives. That is not just our view; it is the view of the Arab League and the vast majority of States Members of the United Nations. We deeply regret that there is still no end in sight and that the international community has been unable to address the situation.

The impact of conflict on civilians around the world remains unacceptably high. The sad truth is that the perpetrators of appalling, life-shattering crimes still tend to go unpunished. Without accountability there is a culture of impunity for which ordinary people pay the price. Ensuring accountability for the most serious crimes of international concern lies at the heart of protecting civilians and is key to delivering global justice. The International Criminal Court is an essential tool in promoting and ensuring such accountability. The United Kingdom also stresses the importance of international commissions of inquiry and fact-finding missions to verify and investigate allegations of serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. The Security Council must support such mechanisms. Justice must be delivered.

In tackling the culture of impunity, the Council must address the range of crimes committed against civilians in conflict, including rape. We must overturn the old assumption that rape is somehow an inevitable byproduct of conflict, and we must confront it. An effective response to sexual violence should be built into every aspect of conflict prevention, peacekeeping, peacebuilding and development. The United Kingdom is already taking action to tackle rape as a weapon of war and to improve support for survivors through its initiative on preventing sexual violence. That will involve deploying teams of experts to assist survivors and support local capacity in, for example, areas bordering Syria, Libya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Mali.

We are also working in close collaboration with the Office of the United Nations Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict to identify additional countries where our team of experts can helpfully be deployed.

The disproportionate impact of conflict on children, who are among the most vulnerable, is shocking. Children should not grow up in a climate of fear, violence and suffering. The United Kingdom condemns all those who target and recruit children in armed conflict despite international pressure. Civilians both inside and outside conflict zones are affected by conflict; refugees and internally displaced persons fleeing the violence are confronted with a struggle for their most basic needs. Humanitarian access is essential for the protection of civilians. We regret that we continue to see humanitarian access to areas in need blocked or constrained. The continued denial of humanitarian access to the states of Blue Nile and Southern Kordofan in the Sudan has created a crisis resulting in nearly 1 million displaced people. The Council has watched that situation worsen for far too long. Humanitarian access must be protected and expanded, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected States.

The protection of civilians is among the Council's foremost responsibilities. The lives of many depend on the vigilance with which we discharge that responsibility. We must continue to take the steps necessary to protect civilians, and we must use the Council's authority to ensure that States shoulder their primary responsibilities to prevent conflict, minimize suffering and ensure that cycles of conflict and pain are not repeated. I welcome the fact that the Council has united around a strong draft presidential statement — which will be read out shortly — that upholds our commitment to the protection of civilians. We must be guided by the principles and contents of that statement in the months and years ahead.