

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

Statement by Ms. Rice, Permanent Mission of United States of America to the United Nations.

I thank Foreign Minister Kim Sung-hwan for chairing this important debate. I also thank Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, High Commissioner Pillay and International Committee of the Red Cross Director Spoerri for their statements. Protecting civilians in armed conflict is a fundamental responsibility of the international community and a core function of the Security Council in carrying out its mandate to safeguard international peace and security.

The United States knows that its security is diminished when masses of civilians are slaughtered, refugees flee across borders to escape brutal attacks, and murderers wreak havoc on regional stability and livelihoods.

Regrettably, history has taught us that our pursuit of a world in which States do not systematically slaughter civilians will not arrive without concerted and coordinated action. Nearly a year ago, President Obama announced at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum new actions that the United States is taking to implement his landmark policy directive on atrocity prevention.

Under the President's leadership, my Government has implemented unprecedented steps to enhance our capabilities and structures for preventing heinous crimes against civilians, from strengthening our early warning and preventive diplomacy to punishing perpetrators and pressing for accountability. Our new Atrocities Prevention Board, a committee of senior officials from across the United States Government, is overseeing this critical work and ensuring that we are focused on emerging situations of concern.

But while national action is necessary, it is not sufficient. International collective action is required, and we look forward to strengthening our cooperation with the United Nations and Member States to that end.

Few are more likely to be the victims of mass atrocities than civilians caught in armed conflict. Time and again, and all too often, the world bears witness to the horror of mass killings, sexual violence and gross human rights abuses of innocents in conflict. Therefore protecting civilians in armed conflict must remain a top priority of the Council and the United Nations as a whole.

Though we must never relent in this effort, we are encouraged that the United Nations has made strides in enhancing United Nations tools to protect civilians. We commend the Secretariat's efforts to help United Nations field missions develop operational guidance and mission-wide strategies to implement their civilian-protection mandates. The recently released United Nations study entitled "Protection of civilians: coordination mechanisms in United Nations peacekeeping missions" highlights several mechanisms for executing protection-of-civilian mandates successfully.

Simple but practical tools, many focused on internal procedures and mission structure, enable mission focal points to integrate mission activities in support of protection mandates. The United Nations Mission in South Sudan, for example, produced an integrated strategy that led to an innovative early-warning system and country support basis that enabled better protection of rural populations.

Mission-wide strategies depend on missions really understanding the threats and violence that civilians face in their area of operation. When peacekeepers know their local environments well, they are better able to protect civilians. Such detailed knowledge requires active and sustained engagement

with local populations. We encourage United Nations missions with protection mandates to assess, in their reports and briefings to the Council, the threats and vulnerabilities facing civilians in their area of operation. We also urge mission-wide strategies to anticipate and outline steps to counter any escalation in violence against civilians that could culminate in mass atrocities. United Nations missions should proactively explain their role in protecting civilians to local communities.

Beyond a sophisticated understanding of their areas of operation, peacekeepers need strong training in civilian protection. The United States invests significantly in peacekeeper training, and we urge all peacekeeping training centres to adopt the United Nations innovative training guidance on the protection of civilians. Such training should be standardized and required for every peacekeeper.

For all that United Nations peacekeepers and field missions can do, let us not forget that national Governments always bear primary responsibility for protecting their own populations. In some countries, Governments are manifestly failing in that responsibility, often because of insufficient capacity or will to address the problem. In some countries, moreover, Governments condone and even perpetrate atrocities against their own people. Through its statements, resolutions and diplomacy, the Council must continue to press Governments to fulfil their obligations.

In that regard, I want to highlight the horrific attacks by the Syrian regime on the Syrian people, including the widely reported targeting of hospitals and health-care centres and the use of ballistic missiles against civilian populations. The carnage unleashed by Al-Assad merits universal indignation and strong action from the Council. When the people of Libya were on the verge of being slaughtered by a brutal dictator, the Council acted, prevented a massacre and saved countless lives. That should remind us that, for civilians in conflict, Security Council action can mean the difference between life and death.

In the 2005 World Summit Outcome document (General Assembly resolution 60/1) and in resolution 1894 (2009), all States Members of the United Nations accepted a shared responsibility to protect populations from genocide, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity and war crimes. While we continue to elaborate the application of that principle, when Governments manifestly fail to protect their civilians, the international community must not dither, but, rather, act decisively to assume its responsibility collectively to protect.

Another fundamental but often overlooked principle of protecting civilians is the ensuring of humanitarian access. No State Member of the United Nations or non-State actor should ever prevent timely, full and unimpeded humanitarian access to populations in need of assistance. Yet the Government of the Sudan has refused, for a year and half now, to permit the safe and unhindered provision of international humanitarian assistance to address the acute humanitarian emergency in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile states, particularly the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North-controlled areas, which is largely of Khartoum's making. Since 2011, more than 214,000 refugees have crossed into Ethiopia and South Sudan, and 695,000 have been displaced within the two areas. That is appalling and unacceptable.

In this and other such situations, we commend the service and dedication of the humanitarian workers, who help the world's most vulnerable, at great risk to themselves. Attacks against humanitarian workers are deplorable and should be condemned wherever committed.

We fully support the Secretary-General's call for the Council to be more active in addressing violations of international law and to strengthen accountability. The United States strongly rejects impunity and supports efforts to hold accountable violators of international humanitarian and human rights law. Our long-standing support for international tribunals and efforts to document ongoing atrocities in places such as Syria reflect that commitment.

Recent events, including the conviction of Charles Taylor by the Special Court for Sierra Leone and the International Criminal Court's judgement against Thomas Lubango Dyilo, of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, show us that accountability for those who commit atrocities and justice for their victims is possible.

Yet too many perpetrators remain free. The Council needs the facts and strong reporting to help bring to justice the perpetrators of crimes against civilians. President Obama has declared that preventing mass atrocities is a core national security interest and a core moral responsibility of the United States. The protection of civilians is a fundamental element of the Security Council's obligation to ensure international peace and security. It is clear that we must keep our attention focused squarely on the practical steps we can take to enhance the protection of civilians in armed conflict and redouble our efforts to ensure that the Council is not sitting on the sidelines when civilian populations are in grave danger.