

Statement by Brazil at the Open Debate of the United Nations Security Council

Protection of Civilians

12 February 2014

(Unofficial Transcript)

I thank you, Madam, for convening this timely and important debate on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. I would also like to thank High Commissioner Navi Pillay, Under-Secretaries-General Valerie Amos and Hervé Ladsous, and Director-General Yves Daccord for their presentations.

Brazil firmly believes that conflict prevention is one of the most effective ways to protect civilians. The international community must be guided, first and foremost, by the objective of avoiding the risks of armed conflict and the human costs associated with it. In situations where conflicts occur, diplomacy should be given priority and coercion should remain a last resort. As the international community has observed in many of the challenges it has had to confront, the mirage of the military solution often degenerates into the nightmare of greater civilian suffering.

Where coercive measures may be contemplated, the use of force needs to be as moderate as possible, in order to avoid harming civilians, who must be protected. That is why Brazil is of the view that the international community should not only abide by its responsibility to protect civilians, but also demonstrate responsibility while protecting civilians.

Furthermore, as highlighted on previous occasions, we understand that, in order to create a more stable environment for civilians, it is crucial to address the root causes of conflict. Social and economic issues can become potential drivers of conflict. A comprehensive approach is of the utmost importance for achieving sustainable solutions and, as a consequence, the long-term protection of civilians. Also, in a world with thousands of nuclear weapons, civilians will be truly safe and protected only when genuine nuclear disarmament is materialized.

As the concept note (S/2014/74, annex) prepared by Lithuania rightly underlines, 2014 marks the fifteenth anniversary of the Security Council's formal engagement with the protection of civilians. The United Nations has made great strides in this area since then, both in the Council and in other forums. Protection mandates are now regarded as an essential dimension of peacekeeping operations. The international community agrees that it is part of our collective responsibility to safeguard civilians from the scourge of conflicts. The commitments that all Member States undertook in the Charter of the United Nations and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights must be upheld.

However, as is pointed out by the Secretary-General in his latest report (S/2013/689), the current state of the protection of civilians leaves little room for optimism, with serious violations being reported in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the occupied Palestinian territory and elsewhere. Clearly in many cases, a military-centred approach to peace and stability, with the aim of providing improved protection to civilians, has not achieved satisfactory goals from either a security or a moral perspective. That only enhances our responsibility in ascribing priority to mediation, diplomacy and negotiation. If we mean what we say when we adopt texts affirming that there is no military solution to a certain situation, we must act accordingly and invest more resources in mediation and preventive diplomacy.

In peacekeeping operations, the protection of civilians should be seen as a multidimensional task to be pursued by all mission components in the field, and by both the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Department of Field Support at Headquarters. Let me also recall that we are currently witnessing new experiments in some pivotal peacekeeping concepts. The authorization for more robust and offensive mandates, which may pose serious risks to the protection of civilians, requires an even higher and more careful degree of planning and training. It is also essential to ensure that peacekeeping missions have the capabilities and resources they need to discharge their protection responsibilities as effectively as possible. Too many missions lack the equipment, personnel or assets that are necessary to properly protect civilians.

The humanitarian imperative that should guide the United Nations requires that the protection of civilians be implemented in a universal and non-selective manner. It is worth recalling, in that regard, that

multilateral efforts must comply with international human rights law and international humanitarian law, including in the context of the fight against terrorism.

We should also reflect on the use of new weapon technologies, particularly the use of drones. As the Secretary-General emphasizes in his report, the use of such technologies raises important concerns over “compliance with international human rights law and with the international humanitarian law rules of distinction, proportionality and precaution” (*S/2013/689, para. 26*). The International Committee of the Red Cross has also underlined that there can be no doubt that international humanitarian law applies to new weaponry and to all new technology used in warfare.

One should not underestimate the complexities that arise from the use of such new autonomous weapons systems and their extraterritorial deployment, which, especially when armed, may violate airspace sovereignty, including in areas outside of conflict zones. Many elements have to be carefully considered, such as the fact that armed drones subject targeted countries, communities, families and individuals to a high degree of asymmetric vulnerability, in defiance of international law, international humanitarian law and human rights.

When discussing the protection of civilians, one should also note that the adoption of sanctions may have a profound negative impact in the lives of the civilian population, while not necessarily contributing to the solution of a crisis. As a matter of fact, the rush to economic sanctions may aggravate situations of concern, instead of resolving them. In many occasions, it creates a logic of punishment and isolation, instead of a dynamic of dialogue and persuasion.

The situation in Syria serves as an example in that regard. The international community has failed so far to reach an agreement to end the provision of weapons to parties in conflict, which would be instrumental in protecting civilians and would send a clear message indicating that there is no military solution to the conflict. On the other hand, some States have decided to adopt unilateral economic sanctions, which, as demonstrated by the Human Rights Council’s Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, end up having a harmful impact on the Syrian civilian population.

Brazil believes that the fifth revision of the aide-mémoire prepared by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and adopted by the Council today (*S/PRST/2014/3, annex*) is a useful and practical lessons-learned guide. We hope that it will further contribute to the concrete implementation of the Council’s decisions on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. The Council can count on Brazil’s support for that goal.