

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

Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict

12 February 2014

(Unofficial Transcript)

At the outset, allow me to extend my sincere congratulations to you, Madam President, on assuming the presidency of the Council for this month and to highly commend the Lithuanian presidency for convening this important meeting.

Croatia aligns itself with the statement that will be delivered shortly by the observer of the European Union. I should like to add the following in my national capacity.

The fifteenth anniversary of the Security Council's engagement on the protection of civilians in armed conflict and the adoption of its landmark resolution 1265 (1999) provides us with the opportunity to take stock of the efforts made so far and to reflect upon ongoing and emerging concerns. This is also an opportunity to stress once again that the protection of civilians goes hand-in-hand with full respect for international humanitarian and human rights law; one must not be separated from the other.

The hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the First World War is an occasion to reflect on the profoundly changed nature of war, in which civilians are increasingly becoming the primary target. In the First World War the ratio between military deaths and direct civilian deaths was 10 to 1. These days, civilian casualties in conflict often surpass those on the military side. Simply said, victims of modern armed conflict are much more likely to be civilians than soldiers. Civilians are regularly targeted and are subject to indiscriminate attacks and other violations by parties to the conflict. Because of all of that, today's topic is not only timely: we must return to it over and over again when needed.

As stated in the Secretary-General's report (S/2013/689), the current state of the protection of civilians leaves little room for optimism. The conflict in Syria represents a stark example — unfortunately not the only one — of how devastating is the impact of conflicts on civilians and how torn the fabric of civilian society can become. It is a collective tragedy composed of countless individual dramas and misery, so often lost and forgotten in the tide of destruction.

Croatia, remembering too well the horrors of war, strongly condemns the continued widespread, systematic and gross violations of international human rights and humanitarian law in Syria, including targeted killings, arbitrary arrests, torture, sexual violence and the use and recruitment of children to participate in hostilities.

We are appalled by reports of rape and other forms of sexual violence that are being used as weapons of war, targeting in particular women and girls. That is not isolated to a single conflict, nor can it be regarded as collateral damage of war. It is of the utmost importance that rape and other forms of sexual violence in conflict be recognized as war crimes and crimes against humanity and fall under the competence of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

Against that background, we fully welcome the further institutional dialogue between the ICC and the Security Council.

While the increased use of sexual and gender-based violence as a war tactic has already been addressed in the Security Council, most notably through its resolutions 1325 (2000) and 1820 (2008), it is undeniable that this kind of violence continues to occur at an alarming rate. It is therefore necessary for United Nations peacekeeping operations to effectively address the impact of armed conflict on women and children and to support women's participation in conflict resolution and peacebuilding as much as possible. Women should also play an important role in peacekeeping missions in order to enhance confidence-building with the targeted communities.

With all the aforesaid in mind, Croatia joined the United Kingdom's initiative on preventing sexual violence in conflict and supported the elaboration of an international protocol on the investigation and documentation of rape and sexual violence in conflict.

The link between the protection of civilians and peacekeeping operations is crucial. The safety and security of civilians is critical for the legitimacy of peacekeeping missions, which operate in complex and challenging conditions. The success of a peacemaking or peacekeeping mission will largely be judged upon its ability to protect the most vulnerable parts of the population.

One cannot thoroughly address today's topic without mentioning the responsibility to protect — a vital part of the efforts needed to prevent suffering and protect civilians from it. I should also like to use this opportunity to stress that all Croatian civilian and military personnel participating in international missions and operations must go through rigorous training. The Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of the Interior, in their training centres, regularly organize international predeployment courses for all staff, including diplomats, which are selected to be deployed in United Nations, European Union or NATO missions or operations abroad. The Ministry of Defence is also conducting a United Nations protection-of-civilians course based on the official Department of Peacekeeping Operations modules, while the Ministry of the Interior's training is based on the United Nations police officers course.

Croatia is firmly committed to the promotion and protection of international humanitarian and human rights law, as well as their vital function concerning the protection of civilians in armed conflict. We strongly urge all parties in conflict to respect international obligations, bearing in mind that the State and local authorities carry the primary responsibility for the implementation of international humanitarian and human rights law and have to be held accountable for that.

Croatia firmly supports the recommendations from the report of the Secretary-General, especially the one on establishing a common United Nations system systematically to record civilian casualties. We are of the view that a close connection has to be achieved between all the relevant actors — military troops on the ground, fact-finding missions, commissions of inquiry and the staff of United Nations peacekeeping operations.

Finally, we welcome the adoption of presidential statement S/PRST/2014/3 with the updated aide-mémoire on the protection of civilians in armed conflict.