

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

Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict

12 February 2014

(Unofficial Transcript)

We would like to thank the Lithuanian presidency for the initiative to return to the question of the protection of civilians during armed conflict. We are grateful to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Under-Secretaries-General for Humanitarian Affairs and for Peacekeeping Operations and the Director-General of the International Committee of the Red Cross for their comprehensive briefings.

Despite steps taken by the international community, the situation with regard to the protection of civilians in times of armed conflict leaves much to be desired. From Afghanistan, Syria and other theatres of armed conflict throughout the world, reports continue to arrive of civilian casualties. Naturally, we condemn deliberate attacks on civilians as well as civilian deaths as a result of indiscriminate or disproportionate use of force. We would highlight in particular the very topical problem of civilian casualties resulting from the use of unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones.

There is no doubt that the protection of civilians is a priority for all parties to a conflict. An important role here is played by peacekeepers, whose mandates increasingly include such functions. However, we do not agree that peacekeeping should be viewed exclusively in terms of the protection of civilians and facilitating the provision of humanitarian assistance, notwithstanding the importance of those tasks. The priorities of peacekeepers are the establishment and the maintenance of peace, the facilitation of political processes and ensuring security in countries of deployment.

We view the protection of civilians as an important, but not the only task often assigned to peacekeeping operations. We believe that the modalities for the practical implementation thereof should be tied to specific mandates defined by the Security Council for each country situation.

The modalities assigned to the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) might not work in a different situation; they might even do harm. In United Nations practice, there have been cases, for instance in Côte d'Ivoire in 2010, where peacekeepers, in breach of their mandate and the main principles of peacekeeping, rendered support to one of the parties to a conflict and were therefore dragged into that conflict. That led to an intense armed-conflict phase with well-known serious repercussions.

On the other hand, there are other examples. Although the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) has a very robust mandate on the protection of civilians, it fell well short of accomplishing the tasks assigned to it. In that regard, we believe that we should be very cautious when adopting a one-size-fits-all approach to the protection of civilians. We believe that the critically important benchmarks in this sphere should be the Charter of the United

Nations and the core principles of United Nations peacekeeping: consent by the host country, neutrality and the use of force strictly in line with the mandate.

Of course, operational mandates must be clear, realistic and situation-appropriate, and each peacekeeping operation should have a clear political goal, stabilization strategy and command and should be endowed with the requisite strength and wherewithal, including police and civilian components. Protection-of-civilians tasks should be carried out in a rational manner.

It is not enough today to just put on paper powers for the protection of civilians. It is high time to instil among personnel an understanding of the standards of international humanitarian law. To improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the work of peacekeeping operations, what is necessary is a clear division of roles among their components so as to prevent any duplication in their activities. A priority is also forging constructive daily contact between peacekeepers and the relevant local authorities, who bear direct responsibility for the protection of their own populations.

We believe that we should focus primarily on assisting national Governments in this area. What is important in this regard is to work to prevent and avert conflicts as well as the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of former combatants. It is important that efforts in this area be duly coordinated. Nor should we forget that the protection-of-civilians component in peacekeeping operations should not supplant functions for the maintenance of public order and ensuring the security of the population, which is the responsibility of States.

Actions to protect civilians must be based on a clear Security Council mandate which, in turn, should unswervingly be complied with by those who assume responsibility for such tasks. We condemn any action taken under the guise of the protection of civilians that in practice pursues far-reaching geopolitical goals.