

Ms. DiCarlo (United States of America): Let me begin by thanking you, Mr. President, for organizing this meeting. I would also like to thank Under-Secretary-General Holmes for his briefing, as well as the Secretary-General for his comprehensive report (S/2009/277).

As other speakers have noted, this year marks the tenth anniversary of the first Security Council debate on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. In his report, the Secretary-General cites some encouraging actions that the Council has taken over that decade, but he also lays out the many challenges that still lie ahead if the international community is to take the steps necessary to protect civilians and translate the Council's actions into concrete improvements on the ground. The Secretary-General has made several recommendations that the Council should review carefully in order to be able to better promote the protection of civilians in armed conflict worldwide.

Civilian protection must be a core principle in all military operations. The United States understands that protecting civilians is a vital priority. In Afghanistan, while Taliban and Al-Qaida forces deliberately employ tactics designed to increase the number of innocent civilian deaths, the international coalition continues to fight those Taliban and Al-Qaida forces with as few civilian casualties as possible. We deeply regret every innocent civilian life that is lost. United States forces serving in Afghanistan operate under rules and orders designed to minimize civilian casualties. We will continue to review them to improve their effectiveness. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said recently, we are making reduction of civilian casualties in Afghanistan a priority. The new commander of the International Security Assistance Force has made it clear that he will move quickly to implement that priority.

The United States believes that all nations must abide by international humanitarian law. We are determined to act to prevent violations of international humanitarian law and committed to working with the international community to defeat violence in a manner consistent with our values, legal obligations and ideals.

At the 2005 World Summit, Member States reached a mutual understanding that all nations have the responsibility to protect their civilian populations and that the international community has the responsibility to protect civilians when States are unwilling or unable to do so. The Security Council reaffirmed that commitment in resolution 1674 (2006). The Council has taken that principle into account, in part, in its actions on the Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Resolution 1674 (2006) also reaffirmed another principle, namely, that ending impunity for violations of international humanitarian law is essential if a society is to come to terms with its past, prevent future abuses, establish accountability and promote reconciliation. International and hybrid tribunals have been successful in prosecuting crimes that involve violations of international humanitarian law. But as the Secretary-General rightly points out in his report, to truly end impunity we must help to establish functioning national judicial systems so that criminals may be tried locally and senior leaders can be held responsible for atrocities committed in their own countries.

We must take special note of the most vulnerable populations in conflicts, including women and children. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, sexual violence is widespread and sometimes used as a weapon of war. We must redouble our efforts to address the issue in all of its aspects, from prevention measures that include efforts to change attitudes about the status of women, to the treatment of victims and to better accountability for perpetrators. In that regard, we look forward to the Secretary-General's report on the implementation of resolution 1820 (2008), which deals with women, peace and security. The Council must ensure that the provisions of that resolution, especially those related to sexual violence, are implemented and that there are clearly understood consequences if individuals, including peacekeepers and relief workers, are themselves found guilty of such crimes.

The compulsory recruitment of children as soldiers is, sadly, still a reality. In armed groups such as the Lord's Resistance Army and in a number of countries, children continue to be exploited in that awful manner. Now that the fighting has ended in Sri Lanka, we are beginning to identify children who were forcibly recruited into the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

We have witnessed too many instances in recent months in which Governments and armed groups have not allowed sufficient access to vulnerable populations. The Secretary-General's report makes 15 specific recommendations to address this issue. It includes an annex detailing constraints on humanitarian access. We are certain that the recommendations and annex will become a useful tool in helping to ensure civilian well-being.

In several instances, peacekeeping operations have been asked to take on more robust mandates that include the protection of civilians as a priority. But we must ensure that peacekeepers have properly defined and realistic mandates and the appropriate skills and resources to fulfil their missions.

The Secretary-General's report states that a protection-of-civilians mandate in peacekeeping missions remains largely undefined, as both a military task and as a mission-wide task. Given that conclusion, we look forward to the upcoming study by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations on how best to put into actual practice guidelines for protecting civilians. We hope that the study will also provide guidance that will help the members of the Security Council when we consider renewing the mandates of specific missions.

Finally, let me thank and commend the men and women of United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations whose dedication to the cause of protecting civilians amid crisis and strife is critical to our ultimate success.