

Mr. Parham (United Kingdom): Allow me to begin by thanking the Under-Secretary-General for his briefing, the Secretary-General for his report (S/2009/277) and you, Mr. President, for convening this meeting. I would also like to confirm our support for the statement that will be made by the representative of the Czech Republic on behalf of the European Union.

The tenth anniversary of the Council's first decisions on protecting civilians is an important moment to take stock and to identify the current obstacles to work on this issue. We welcome the fact that humanitarian access is given particular profile in the report's annex, as well as the quality of the evidence presented. We hope that the report's five core challenges will provide a coherent framework for the consistent inclusion of information on protection issues in the Secretary-General's reports on country situations.

We share the Secretary-General's view that there is still insufficient accounting and redress for violations of international humanitarian law. We believe that this Council should be ready to address flagrant and widespread violations committed against civilians, even when they take place in situations of internal armed conflict.

Allow me briefly to mention a few of our concerns in the context of specific country situations.

In Burma, civilians are caught up in the conflict between the Government and ethnic groups. This was most recently highlighted by the flight of thousands of Karen people to Thailand, following the violence along the border. The Burmese Government must fulfil its responsibilities under international humanitarian and human rights law and begin an inclusive political dialogue that can lead to national reconciliation in its country.

In Sri Lanka, the priority now is to ensure that the immediate needs of internally displaced persons in the camps are met. While we recognize the steps that have already been taken by the Government, there must be unhindered access for the United Nations and international humanitarian aid agencies. Further efforts are also needed to ensure steady progress in the political process towards national reconciliation. We welcome the commitments entered into by the Government of Sri Lanka to address a number of post-conflict issues, including the need for an accountability process to address violations of international humanitarian law and the grievances associated with them. We expect these commitments to be fulfilled.

The Under-Secretary-General and some delegations have mentioned the situation in Afghanistan. Let me be clear that we deeply regret incidents in which civilians are killed as a result of actions by international forces. We have strict procedures and training regimes, frequently updated in the light of experience, intended both to minimize the risk of civilian casualties and to investigate any that do nevertheless occur. We intend to remain at the forefront of United Nations discussion and activity to ensure that the protection of civilians in Afghanistan remains high on the political agenda.

As we noted in the debate on international humanitarian law held in January (see S/PV.6066), the Security Council must find new and better tools to follow up on our decisions and ensure that international humanitarian law is fully implemented and enforced in specific conflicts. The report rightly underlines the importance of supporting accountability measures at the national level. But we must also consider international accountability mechanisms to combat impunity, including referral to the International Criminal Court where appropriate. United Nations engagement with non-State actors presents an opportunity to embed an understanding of obligations under international humanitarian law without granting recognition or status to those parties. This is an opportunity that is too often missed.

We look forward to seeing the results of the independent study which has been commissioned by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs on the implementation of protection mandates. It will be important for this Council to consider that report carefully as part of continued consultations between now and November. We sincerely hope that the General Assembly will consider that report too. We also support the Under-Secretary-General's suggestion of an Arria formula meeting focused on the experience of engaging armed groups. These meetings can be very valuable, as was, we believe, the Arria formula meeting we held earlier this week on the harrowing and pressing subject of sexual violence.

Deployed military contingents are just one part of a larger equation when it comes to peacekeeping missions fulfilling their protection mandates. To date, we have relied on the flexibility of military actors, but no military in the world has a comprehensive doctrine on how to undertake the protection of civilians. Nevertheless, the outstanding protection work that United Nations peacekeeping personnel are creatively doing in the field provides many examples of good practice. Where individual missions have protection strategies and plans of action, we would like to see more detail about them in country reports.

We should also make use of existing mechanisms to deal with these substantial issues. Like Ambassador Mayr-Harting, we are encouraged by the work of the informal Security Council Expert Group on the Protection of Civilians thus far. We have some ideas on how to enhance the format, for example by improving the timeliness of the Group's inputs to Council deliberations and the format and quality of documentation for the Group.

An inherent part of the initiative on peacekeeping, which we are pursuing with our French colleagues, is the improvement of the information upon which the Council bases its decisions on mission mandates. We acknowledge that there has been at least a perceived disconnect between protection language in mandates and what is realistically achievable in the field. We must work harder to achieve consensus on the extent and feasibility of protection activities.

Finally, we would like to see the Council show genuine readiness to engage at the prevention stage of the conflict cycle, rather than at the resolution stage. As our Chinese colleague, Ambassador Liu Zhenmin, said earlier, it is important to tackle these issues upstream. This will require the Council to be more receptive to information, more willing to become seized of threatening situations and more ready to take appropriate early action. The United Kingdom stands ready to play its part in this.