

*Statement by William Brentick, U.S. Mission to the United Nations Minister-Counselor for Political Affairs, on the thematic debate “ Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict” in the Security Council, on June 28, 2006*

Thank you, Mr. President. In April of this year, the Council produced a resolution recognizing the threats faced by civilians in armed conflict and condemning all acts of violence committed against unarmed and vulnerable populations in violation of applicable international law.

Unfortunately, the world continues to be plagued by violent conflicts. The Council has primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security; DPKO currently supports 18 peacekeeping and political missions where conflict has erupted. Many of these PKOs have as part of their mandate the protection of civilians under imminent threat of violence. In these situations of violent conflict, we must work quickly and efficiently to repair the damage already done and to do everything within our means to ensure such conflict does not occur again. Nations emerging from conflict need our support in order to become fully functioning democratic societies, but we must also be cautious that they do not become completely dependent on the international community. The primary responsibility for protecting civilians lies with these nations and their governments and international efforts should only complement government efforts. Protecting civilians from the devastating effects of armed conflict depends largely not on what we say or do here, but on what governments do to protect their own people.

We must also continue to focus our efforts on the prevention of conflict itself. Civilians are now the major category of casualties in conflict worldwide. Even more critical are the signs that an unrepresentative and corrupt government is in place—demonstrated disregard for rule of law, human rights, and basic democratic values such as freedom, equality, transparency, and free and fair elections—are clear indications that political unrest may be festering. We are all aware of countries exhibiting these traits. What we as a Council choose to do about it in its earliest stages can make the difference between life and death for countless innocents.

Mr. President, let me now turn to some specific cases of concern. We continue to be gravely concerned about the ongoing crisis in Darfur, and especially the impact of conflict on civilians in that region. While in some areas the scale of the violence has decreased, civilians continue to be directly targeted and more than 2 million remain displaced from their homes. In addition, humanitarian workers and peacekeepers have been increasingly targeted. This continuing insecurity has a direct, detrimental impact on the international community's ability to deliver assistance and provide basic services for the victims of the conflict. The situation in Darfur illustrates the urgent role that states must play to safeguard civilians, including those who are internally displaced. It is also important to reiterate that internally displaced civilians living in camps are not always protected from serious human rights violations. Several other countries, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo face delicate situations of transition, where protection challenges exist. UN peacekeeping and assistance missions, together with support from NGOs, help ensure that civilians in these regions are not denied the dividends of peace.

We are encouraged that the Security Council has been more consistent in addressing the regional dimensions of civilian protection. Security Council Resolution 1674 and recent mandates have highlighted key issues that affect civilians in armed conflict, including: the deliberate targeting of civilians; forced displacement; sexual exploitation and abuse; gender-based violence; the recruitment and use of child soldiers in violation of international law; the need for unimpeded access by humanitarian personnel to civilians in need of assistance; and the need to promote the safety of United Nations and associated humanitarian personnel.

Mr. President, as we once again reaffirm our commitment to strengthening and reinforcing the protection of civilians in armed conflict, let us ensure that our words and intentions become action. Thank you.