

UK -- Statement at the UNSC Debate on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflicts

UN Security Council debate on the Protection of Civilians (14/01/2009)

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Thank you very much Mr President and can I join others in thanking the Under Secretary-General for his briefing today. We share many of the concerns that he has raised and the aide memoire we have gathered to adopt today shows the weight of consideration that the Security Council has given over the years to this issue. But I think we do need to apply some perspective - have we really come far enough? And given the perilous situation in which many civilian populations find themselves today, it's imperative that the Security Council proactively ensures that this issue remains at the forefront of our work.

We are very grateful to the peacekeepers who take on the vital protection function, but we should not forget that it is the parties to an armed conflict who bear the primary obligation under law to protect civilians.

Mr President, I want to say at the outset that I have listened very carefully to the debate today and I have also listened to the national experiences that Council colleagues have described and I have to say I don't agree with all the characterisations of situations that we've heard today. But I don't want to turn this session of all sessions into a political debate so I will not go into detail on those, but would just like to place on record we don't share all those characterisations.

Mr President, the Under Secretary-General rightly led off on Gaza and this is very much at the forefront of everyone's minds, as we have heard today. We discussed it also in last week's UNHCR meeting. The civilian population there is all the more vulnerable because it cannot flee and I'd like to join other Council Members in reiterating a call for an immediate and durable ceasefire condemning all acts of violence directed against civilians and condemning all acts of terrorism. What we and others need to see is the full implementation of 1860. But I'd just also like to pay tribute to the UN and other workers who are trying to bring stability and peace and help to Gaza in what are obviously extremely difficult circumstances.

We have seen a number of speakers raise various conflicts, Mr President, which are on our minds at the moment. In addition to Gaza, I'd like to raise the situation in the DRC - events there have emphasised the scale of the task we face. Obligations are not being met and this Council has been very clear that the primary task for MONUC is the protection of civilians. We would like to see its unambiguous mandate in this respect translated into action on the ground, we'd like to see the concept of operations adjusted to reflect the priority the Council attaches to protection of civilians and, in turn, that requires an understanding of the specific activities that peacekeepers can conduct to turn Council language into reality.

A while ago, Mr President, it was incumbent on NATO and other nations to go into Bosnia to uphold the Dayton Peace Agreement and I think that was one of the first mandates in recent times to have had protection of civilians as one of its core tasks and I would just like to take this opportunity to invite all those Council Members who, for one reason or another, oppose robust

language in peacekeeping mandates on protection of civilians and oppose Chapter VII authority to back-up forces who undertake protection of civilian tasks - perhaps those members could reflect as to whether their actions, whatever may be the political justification, are actually overall aiding the Council's work on protection of civilians.

Protection of civilians isn't a role for which many militaries have traditionally trained. Implementation of Council directives on protection has been met with adaptation and flexibility by the UN's peacekeepers. And we now do have good practice on which we can build, but we do need, Mr President, a more systematic approach on this to ensure that protection issues are properly understood and that there is comprehensive UN guidance on how exactly to go about doing protection - what it means to take what sort of decisions on what day on the ground and we do feel that practice is a little bit incomplete here and that more training for troop contributors in the field could be useful in this respect.

Mr President, Afghanistan was mentioned by the Under Secretary-General and by some other speakers. We very much regret the civilian non-combatant deaths and casualties there and we send our condolences to the victims. I want to make it clear, Mr President, that we do not target civilians, we keep under rigorous review our procedures on targeting and we will continue to do so.

Other things that we have been discussing, Mr President, include the informal Council Expert Group and we do hope that we could create such a group to help the Security Council under Resolution 1674 to systematically address protection issues. The aide memoire can be an important instrument in underpinning this expert group's consideration. And in turn, we support the UN's systems on-going work to produce guidance for peacekeepers as I said earlier.

If we had more systematic consideration of protection issues, Mr President, such as through an expert group, this might also provide an opportunity for some creative thinking about how to deal with uniquely difficult situations. We have heard about the Lords Resistance Army today. We are too very disturbed by the recent reports of the high number of civilian casualties that they have inflicted and I think the Ugandan PR has captured the problem well when he talks about the need for the Council to find some way of addressing non-state actors and I hope that could be a theme of ours in 2009.

I'd like to end, if I may, by just mentioning Responsibility to Protect. The World Summit outcome is clear about the responsibility that falls to this Council under Responsibility to Protect. There isn't yet a unified view in the Council or the membership at large about what R2P means in practice, but I hope that recent work that has been done on that, including by representatives of the Secretary-General, can bring us shortly to a common understanding of what needs to be done as part of our work to address the question of enhancing protection of civilians. (...)

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