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Canadian Statement on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict

Statement by Ambassador John McNee

Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations

To the Security Council Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict

New York, 14 January 2009

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Mr. President,

On behalf of the Government of Canada, I would like to extend my thanks to France for convening this important debate.

This year's debate coincides with the upcoming 10th anniversary of landmark achievements in advancing the protection of civilians in the Council stemming from resolution 1265 in 1999 – a resolution that was groundbreaking in proposing actions to both legal and physical protection concerns. Since this issue was first brought onto the Council's agenda, important progress has been made and we applaud efforts to ensure that protection becomes part of our collective consciousness. Nonetheless, critical gaps remain between key principles and the daily actions taken to respond to protection challenges – gaps keenly felt by civilians in conflict situations around the world.

Civilian populations caught in armed conflict often account for the majority of casualties – as indirect victims, and more sobering still, as deliberate targets. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the recent escalation of fighting has led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people as well as a serious increase of sexual and gender based violence. In Sri Lanka, civilian populations continue to face unending displacement as they move ahead of shifting frontlines to avoid the crossfire.

In Afghanistan, over a quarter of a century of conflict has taken a heavy toll on the population and serves as a potent reminder of why our support for the Afghan government is so important. Needs-based humanitarian action remains a key priority for Canada. Working with international partners, we remain focussed on saving lives, alleviating suffering, and building self-reliance among the most vulnerable of Afghanistan's population.

A Forward Looking Approach

Mr. President,

Looking forward there is much we can do.

We have at our disposal a sophisticated normative legal framework based on international law and Security Council resolutions which lay out a set of mutually reinforcing commitments on the protection of civilians and responsibilities for the maintenance of international peace and security. But we must move from Council commitments to practical action.

We can do this by bolstering our monitoring and reporting mechanisms which will assist in responding to given situations with the right tools in a timely and effective manner. We are particularly interested in progress on efforts to report in a timely manner to the Council when humanitarian access is denied or deliberately hindered. We applaud efforts to bring such instances to the Council's attention more systematically.

Humanitarian workers are also increasingly targeted, as we have seen in Somalia, the DRC, Sudan and Afghanistan – acts that we strongly condemn. Ensuring their safety is vital. We call on all parties to conflicts to respect the neutrality, impartiality and independence of humanitarian workers who undertake critical life-saving work, often at great personal risk.

It is important to strengthen the capacity of the international humanitarian system to address protection issues through mechanisms such as the protection cluster. Humanitarian and Resident Coordinators, as well as UN staff, must be confident and steadfast in raising protection concerns with relevant parties to conflict. The deployment of protection experts through the UN Protection Standby Capacity project has become an important and successful element in filling capacity gaps in the field.

The Council and the broader UN membership have a role to play in ensuring that those who commit serious violations of international law are brought to justice. Here, the work of the International Criminal Court is very important in fostering accountability. It is also vital that protection issues are translated into clear and achievable operational guidance for military and civilian actors. Those upon whom we entrust protection responsibilities must have the knowledge and training required to effectively fulfil this role.

The *Aide Memoire* on the protection of civilians serves as an important framework to assist in defining threats that arise to civilian populations. Practical tools such as this facilitate effective responses to protection challenges. We support efforts to revise this important document.

Conclusion

Mr. President,

For those affected and displaced by conflict, our actions matter far more than our words. Protection of civilians must be a priority. It is no easy task to address these issues or translate international legal norms into practical and realistic commitments – nothing that is valuable in life is ever easy. But it is our collective duty to ensure that civilians everywhere will be afforded the basic human dignity each individual deserves.

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