Mr. Muita (Kenya): I have the honour to participate in today’s debate. At the outset, let me express my appreciation to you, Mr. President, for organizing this important gathering. I also wish to thank Mr. John Holmes, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, for his comprehensive briefing this morning.

The Security Council’s continued consideration of this agenda item is an indication of its commitment to protect civilians in conflict situations. It is civilians who are always severely and negatively impacted by war and other conflicts. That has become a constant problem — for instance, in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes region, where hundreds of thousands of civilians have been uprooted from their normal daily lives by the effects of conflict. I believe that we must continue to make concrete and specific efforts to ensure the dignity of those distressed by war. That need is echoed in the words of former Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who said:

“As human beings we cannot be neutral, or at least have no right to be, when other human beings are suffering. Each of us. . .must do what he or she can to help those in need, even though it would be much safer and comfortable to do nothing”. The protection of civilians in armed conflict is a humanitarian as well as a human rights issue and is in conformity with international humanitarian law. There have been some achievements in that area during the past decade. Those include increased engagement by the Council through the adoption of resolutions, especially resolutions 1738 (2006) and 1674 (2006), combating impunity at the national and international levels and prioritizing the protection of civilians in peacekeeping mandates. However, there still remain considerable challenges ahead. I wish to highlight just two of them, first humanitarian access.

Humanitarian access during conflict is life-saving, and thus the importance of providing a secure environment for humanitarian workers to access civilians in need, including displaced persons. We support current efforts to enhance the capacity of peacekeeping missions to provide protection to humanitarian providers, but there are still significant challenges at the operational level, where peacekeepers lack capacity to reach the entirety of a threatened population. There is therefore an urgent need to address and streamline that aspect to avert large-scale population displacements and widespread human rights violations in future conflicts.

Secondly, gender-based violence has been used as a calculated tactic of war, apparently to dehumanize and instil fear in civilian populations. The adoption of resolutions 1325 (2000) and 1820 (2008), which concern civilians in conflict zones, was a step in the right direction, but much is required to enhance their implementation. We need to move from words to deeds to ensure the protection of the sexually vulnerable in armed conflict, as those acts destroy individuals, families and communities.

As the Council may recall, early last year was a particularly difficult period for my country, with the violence following the December 2007 election. Civilians were the primary target of attack. Many were displaced from their homes and denied access to life-saving nourishment, medicine and shelter. As the State has the primary responsibility for the protection of civilians in conflict, the Government of Kenya, with strong support from
international and regional partners, stepped in to avert a further worsening of the crisis and provided protection to its civilians. The displaced were provided with accommodation in camps for the internally displaced in the affected areas. Government security forces were used to open up supply routes and highways to enable the continued flow of humanitarian support to affected areas. That ensured that civilians in conflict areas were afforded basic human dignity throughout the crisis.

In conclusion, my delegation reaffirms my country’s commitment to the protection of civilians in situations of armed conflict. Together, we need to address the root causes of conflicts in order to reduce their occurrence.