

Mr. Loulichki (Morocco) (*spoke in Arabic*): I am speaking on behalf of the Arab Group, which would like to thank you, Mr. President, for your initiative to convene this open debate on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. I would also like to thank Under-Secretary-General John Holmes for the valuable and comprehensive briefing he gave during this debate.

Today's six-monthly debate coincides with a painful event that highlights its importance and places it in a special light of practicality and everyday life. At a time when the Council is meeting to discuss the content, mechanisms and goals of the concept of protection of civilians, we are witnessing the tragedy of the Palestinian people in Gaza, which is of direct relevance to the issue at hand today.

For the past 19 days, Israel has invaded Gaza using the full potential of its war machine, spreading terror and destruction, assassinating innocent children, annihilating entire families and destroying homes, schools and places of worship. The toll of this aggression has exceeded 1,000 dead and 4,500 injured, not to mention the tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians who have been forced to flee their homes. Where are we in terms of protecting civilians in times of war?

Israel has not stopped at this point. Rather, it has tightened its siege on Gaza and its residents. It has deprived them of the most basic requirements of life. It has prevented them from seeking their daily living and has obstructed the fuel and electricity needed to power public facilities, including hospitals. It has also prevented humanitarian aid from reaching those in dire need of its assistance. What precisely are we doing in terms of protecting civilians in times of conflict?

Moreover, Israel has attacked a school run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, in which families had sought refuge from the Israeli war machine. Instead, they were met with death. Medical teams and international staff have also been targeted by the Israeli military machine. In addition, the occupying forces, in their vindictive military campaign, have used white phosphorous bombs, as well as weapons that have been banned internationally. What, then, are we doing to uphold our duty to protect civilians in times of conflict?

The catastrophic situation of civilians in Gaza is a painful reminder of what the Palestinian people are suffering every day throughout the occupied Palestinian territories as a result of Israel's illegitimate occupation, its illegal settlement policies, its inhuman siege and its efforts to annihilate the Palestinian identity and punish Palestinian civilians. The occupying Power has become more oppressive and tyrannical as it flouts the principles of international humanitarian law and the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, which includes clear provisions pertaining to the protection of civilians in times of war, clearly stipulates the responsibilities that Israel as an occupying Power must uphold and obliges it to implement and respect those provisions. This was reaffirmed strongly by the Human Rights Council in the resolution adopted at its special session of 9 January 2009. The Council called "for immediate international protection of the Palestinian people in the occupied Palestinian territory in compliance with international human rights law and international humanitarian law". (*A/HRC/S-9/L.1/Rev.2, para. 9*)

The Secretary-General has repeatedly condemned the Israeli aggression and has called for its immediate cessation. Moreover, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has described the Palestinians' plight as the only conflict in the world in which people are not even allowed to flee. Recently, the Council adopted resolution 1860 (2009) calling for an immediate ceasefire in order to put an end to the bloodbath, whose price the unarmed Palestinians are paying more dearly than anyone else. However, instead of responding to or heeding the call of the Council, Israel has pursued its aggressive policies and even escalated its aggression, claiming the lives of dozens every day with no concern for international appeals, regardless of their source. What, then, are we doing to uphold our duty to protect civilians in times of war?

What awaits the Palestinian people, the rest of the Arab countries and the international community as a whole? They expect the Council to work to ensure Israel's implementation of resolution 1860 (2009) immediately and its immediate declaration of a ceasefire. Every hour that passes jeopardizes the lives of hundreds upon hundreds of innocents and increases the desperate humanitarian situation of the rest of Gaza's residents. Is this not one of the duties of protecting civilians of times of war?

The aide-memoire prepared for this meeting indicates the need for the Security Council to take into consideration the situation of most civilians, as well as the responsibilities of parties to a conflict to protect civilians and to respond to their basic needs. It also condemned all the aggressor's actions and called for an immediate end to those and any others that would harm civilians in situations of armed conflict, in accordance with international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law and the relevant conventions.

Therefore, if there is a way to translate those good intentions into concrete implementation by matching the Council's words with actual deeds, and to gauge their feasibility by their impact on the ground, then civilians in Gaza and the rest of the occupied Palestinian territories must be protected. That would end the bloodshed and the aggression that has targeted them, thus preserving the credibility of the Security Council and enhancing the effectiveness of its efforts.

In conclusion, the protection of civilians in armed conflict, despite its importance, is part of a larger challenge related to the need to peacefully resolve conflicts and to positively and effectively address their underlying causes. That challenge lies at the heart of the responsibilities of the Security Council, which, under the Charter of the United Nations, is the principal organ responsible for the maintenance of international peace and security.