

Statement by His Excellency the President of the Portuguese Republic, Prof. Aníbal Cavaco Silva, at the United Nations Security Council open debate on "Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflicts"

9 November 2011

It is especially gratifying for me to be with you today to chair this open debate of the Security Council on the protection of civilians in armed conflicts. This is a topic on this Council's agenda to which Portugal attributes the utmost importance.

I am grateful to the Secretary-General, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Subsecretary-General for Peace Keeping Operations, the Assistant of the Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and the Director of International Law of the International Committee of the Red Cross for joining us in this Chamber. Your presence demonstrates the interest and relevance of this debate.

I made a point of addressing you in Portuguese. In this way, my words will be immediately understood by more than 250 million citizens of the eight countries and one Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China, where Portuguese is the official language; as well as by the many other millions who have studied or who are studying Portuguese, and who identify with it and see in it an important cultural or economic asset.

I am therefore speaking to you in one of the most rapidly expanding languages in the world. The third most spoken European language worldwide, and the sixth most spoken in general. A language which, for a long time now, deserves to be attributed the status of official language of this Organization.

There are, in fact, two Portuguese-speaking countries sitting in the current formation of this Council, in an expressive sign of those nations' unwavering commitment to the promotion of the values of peace, security and respect for the inalienable rights of all human beings, as embodied in the United Nations' Charter, and reflected in the Founding Charter of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries, CPLP.

Every year, many millions of men, women and children are killed, kidnapped, injured or forced to leave their homes as a result of armed conflicts in different parts of the World. Portugal vehemently condemns all attacks that target civilians, whether in Libya, in the region of the Great Lakes, in Afghanistan or in Iraq, where arms and explosive devices continue to indiscriminately cause suffering, or even in Syria, where intense violence has already caused the death of more than three thousand people.

Civilians have always represented and remain the majority of the victims of armed conflicts. "Victims" are not only those who are party to the conflict; who are killed, mutilated or injured because they form part of a regular army or a group of combatants. It is civilians who on a large scale continue to suffer the direct effects of war.

Distinguished Permanent Representatives,

It is our obligation to learn from the lessons of the past: inaction is never a solution and can never be the response of the United Nations to civilian populations who are the target of indiscriminate attacks by parties to a conflict, otherwise we will be abetting those who violate international humanitarian law and Human Rights. When civilians are a target and the national authorities or the conflicting parties fail in their obligation to protect them, the United Nations - and especially the Security Council - has the duty to speak up and the obligation to act.

The attention that this Council has dedicated to the protection of civilians is part of a long tradition. It has been improving its legal framework to ensure that its actions in this area are more effective and more responsible. A remarkable number of peace keeping missions have been set up with strong mandates with regard to the protection of civilians and the Department of Peace Keeping Operations has been doing very important work in this respect. Local strategies have been created and cooperation with regional structures has been improved. These developments which have had a significant impact on improving the protection of civilian populations.

We agree with the Secretary-General regarding the need for further coordination among all of the parties involved in the protection of civilians, whether in situ / on the ground or in raising international awareness for the need to develop efficient mechanisms for the prevention, monitoring and protection of civilians in armed conflicts.

The European Union has acquired vast experience both in supporting the work of the United Nations and of all the relevant parties involved, and with regard to the missions and operations conducted under the European Security and Defense Policy. We therefore believe that it would be useful to improve and deepen cooperation between the European Union and the United Nations, with regard to the protection of civilians, as well as between the United Nations and other regional organizations such as the African Union.

We share the general consensus on the importance of drawing up realistic mandates for the protection of civilians and ensuring they are adapted to the real situation on the ground and compatible with the capacity and human resources available to the respective peace keeping missions. Whether, in Darfur or in the East of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the safety of thousands of civilians, many of whom are women and children, largely depends on peace keeping missions with a mandate to protect them. We also deem it necessary to closely involve the main troops and police contributing countries in the definition of these mandates.

Another fundamental aspect for the protection of civilians is, without doubt, the need to strengthen accountability for Human Rights violations. Fighting impunity, through national or international institutions, such as the International Criminal Court, is fundamental to the prevention of future violations. As the Secretary-General emphasized in his last report: "in many conflicts, it is to a large degree the absence of accountability and, worse still, the lack in many instances of any expectation thereof that allows violations to thrive".

Some days ago, Portugal, together with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, organized a seminar, on international criminal accountability, the investigation of Human Rights violations and violations of International Humanitarian Law, as well as on the question of reparations for victims. The aim was that of identifying challenges and possible further steps that the Council can take in these important areas.

Distinguished Secretary General,

Distinguished Permanent Representatives,

We believe that today more than ever the Security Council has the capacity to protect civilians: it has more and better regulatory instruments, it has acquired knowledge and skills with previous experiences and has more - and increasingly multifaceted - missions on the ground. Today it is better prepared to act appropriately and effectively, with real time information on threats to civilians.

We Member States have the political responsibility to ensure that the Security Council acts consistently and with determination in order to guarantee the respect for international humanitarian law the protection of all civilians who are directly targeted or who become accidental victims in conflicts.

Before concluding, I would like to reiterate my country's firm commitment to continue working to promote a more effective protection of civilians from the devastating effects of armed conflicts. We will continue to do this in all the international fora in which we participate, whether they be the United Nations, the European Union or the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries, not only due to an evident moral imperative, but also because we believe that in this way we will be helping in a very concrete and objective manner to build a better, more just and peaceful world.

Thank you very much.