

Syria - Statement to the Security Council, Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict
9 November 2011

Mr. Ja'afari (Syrian Arab Republic) (spoke in Arabic): First of all, I would like to stress the importance of the political and legal analysis just given by my colleague, the Permanent Representative of Venezuela.

The international community has understood that the issue of the protection of civilians cannot be dealt with selectively or on a discretionary basis, but is exclusively limited to situations of armed conflict. We therefore believe, along with the majority of the international community, that the protection of Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese civilians suffering under Israeli occupation is part and parcel of this much-appreciated international effort in the context of the full and impartial implementation of the mandate to protect civilians in armed conflict. I say this in particular because the Security Council has long been involved in debating this important matter, while Israel, rightly referred to as the occupying Power, has all the while continued its gross violations against civilian populations in occupied Arab territories.

We are concerned that some of the countries whose representatives have delivered relevant statements on the protection of civilians in armed conflict during today's debate have sometimes espoused their own special and selective views of civilians and armed conflicts. Those views contradict international humanitarian law and international jurisprudence. We are also concerned that some countries are trying to transform the suffering of civilians in some areas of conflict into unacceptable and controversial academic debates, which does not help to alleviate the suffering of civilians.

Jurisprudence has shown that international efforts to protect civilians in armed conflict must be carried out in strict observance of the principles of the Charter of the United Nations — which affirm the need to respect the sovereignty of States, their political independence and their territorial integrity, as well as the principle of non-interference in their internal affairs — and be consistent with the provisions of the Geneva Conventions and international humanitarian law. Every international instrument has affirmed that national Governments bear the primary responsibility for protecting their own citizens, and that such responsibility is exclusive and cannot be substituted for or influenced by any given political agenda.

We must therefore not confuse the issue of the protection of civilians, on the one hand, with threats to international peace and security, on the other. We must also avoid using loose interpretations of the question of the protection of civilians, as well as the use of controversial terminology outside United Nations documents and materials, such as the responsibility to protect and humanitarian intervention. Were that to happen, it would inevitably jeopardize the credibility and neutrality of the United Nations, be it at the level of Member States or the Secretariat. That will, in turn, lead to the undermining of the noble efforts made to protect civilians in armed conflicts. Paradoxically, while concepts of international law — in its two divisions, namely, public law and international humanitarian law — have developed over the past several decades, the suffering of civilians has worsened. Indeed, the number of conflicts has also increased. Those countries that have militarily occupied other countries in violation of international law, and have shown disrespect for the principles of international humanitarian law have benefited from impunity.

Allow me to put the following questions to the Council. Have the occupation and military invasions of Member States of the United Nations and the killing of millions of innocent citizens furthered the goal of providing protection for civilians, while some countries in the Council today, and on previous occasions, have called for regime change in some countries under the pretext of providing protection for the civilians of those countries? Was this call seen as a noble objective allowing for the protection of civilians in armed conflicts? Are such pretexts consistent with the provisions of the Charter? Does the suffering of millions of civilians resulting from unilateral financial and economic sanctions serve the well-being of the citizens? Does it protect them or does it weaken them, jeopardizing their right to live in dignity and development?

How can we explain how some NATO members have killed 130,000 Libyan civilians on the pretext of protecting civilians in that country? How can we understand the explicit call by the spokesperson of the United States Department of State to armed groups in Syria not to turn themselves in or their weapons to the authorities of the Syrian Government, in line with

the Syrian Government's decision to grant amnesty to all those who turn themselves and their weapons in to Government authorities? Does this not mean that the United States is publicly and directly involved in exacerbating discord and violence in Syria? Discord and violence have caused our people — our army, police and civilians — a lot of innocent victims.

Should this incitement to armed groups to continue their criminal acts against the State and civilians not be reason enough to hold those who were responsible for the incitement accountable, at least in the framework of providing protection for civilians? Does the United States policy, supported by some European countries, jeopardize the work of the Arab League and its initiative aimed at putting an end to the crisis in Syria and restoring security and stability for its civilian population? Is remaining silent towards Israel's blatant settlement activities, which jeopardize the principle of peace, not a contradiction of the most fundamental rights of Palestinian and Syrian civilians to live in their homelands in freedom and sovereignty?

We do not know how long we can close our eyes to Israel's continued inhumane practices and its occupation of Arab territories, including the Syrian Golan, Jerusalem, the Sheba'a farm lands and al-Ghajar village. Why do we not see the same degree of enthusiasm expressed in dealing with Israeli acts of aggression by some countries that express their keen interest in providing protection to civilians in some parts of the world? They have used the Security Council, which specializes in international peace and security, to adopt a flawed and erroneous interpretation of the question of providing protection for civilians in armed conflict. That interpretation serves their interest in interfering in the internal affairs of Member States without any accountability. We have not heard any responsible United Nations official who has taken part in this important debate speak about the illegality and illegitimacy of the unacceptable interference in the internal affairs of Member States, pursuant to the provisions of Article 2 of the Charter.

Those colonial countries, particularly France and the United Kingdom, which spoke this morning before the Council and used indecent terms against my country, are wrong to think that human memory is too short to recall the crimes against humanity that they perpetrated during the eras of colonialism and slavery. Is apologizing for these crimes compatible with the concept of the protection of civilians? Or are there different categories and classes of civilians — some from the North, some from the South? Are they not equal as human beings?