

Statement by UK Ambassador and Permanent Representative Sir Mark Lyall Grant at the UN Security Council Open Debate on Protection of Civilians

2011 November 9

Thank you, Mr President for scheduling this important debate today, and let me begin by thanking the Under-Secretary-General for his comments and for his personal and valuable contribution to the Protection of Civilians agenda.

I would like to thank also the High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay, the Assistant Secretary General to Humanitarian affairs Catherine Bragg and the Director of International Law of the International Committee of the Red Cross Mr. Philip Spoerri, for their insights into today's debate.

Mr. President, as Mr. Spoerri has just reminded us, the primary responsibility to protect civilians lies with states. The concept of protection of civilians is firmly embedded in modern military doctrine in many countries and in the thoughts of policy-makers around the world. It is now central to most UN peacekeeping operations and to military operations authorised by the council. But to ensure its practical implementation in conflict situations, the principle needs to be underpinned by enforcement mechanisms at both the domestic and international level, including ultimately the possibility of individual criminal liability. The International Criminal Court is bringing to account those responsible for atrocities against civilians. The ICC is a visible demonstration of the international community's increasing intolerance for impunity.

The protection of civilians in armed conflict is a cornerstone of international humanitarian law. The United Kingdom therefore urges all states to ratify outstanding international humanitarian law treaties and to incorporate the relevant provisions of these treaties into their domestic law. And we agree with the Secretary-General that those Members States, including some members of this council, who have not signed and ratified the Rome Statute of the ICC should be encouraged to do so. We believe that a link exists between international and national efforts to enhance accountability. It is the responsibility of states to investigate and prosecute crimes. But it is important that steps are taken at international level when national efforts fail.

Mr President, The United Kingdom shares many of the of the concerns raised during the course of today's briefings. I would like briefly to mention just three situations.

In Syria, the United Kingdom condemns the brutal repression of peaceful demonstrators and the massive violations of human rights which President Assad and his authorities have been committing for the last six months. As Ms. Pillay has just reminded us, more than 3,500 people have now been killed. The Syrian Government should immediately end the violence, release all prisoners of conscience and allow free, unhindered and immediate access to UN monitors for an independent assessment of the situation on the ground.

In Somalia, Al Shabaab's terrorist campaign continues to have terrible humanitarian consequences. We congratulate AMISOM on their recent successes in Mogadishu. These military gains now need to be followed up by a stabilisation effort to enable the provision of basic services, such as electricity, water, food, hospitals and schools to the civilian population in these areas. We recognise that the Transitional Federal Government has begun to address the protection of civilians and encourage them to continue to do so. We are continuing to explore ways in which we can support the TFG and AMISOM to minimise risk to civilians when they come under attack and to protect the citizens of Mogadishu.

In Burma, we remain seriously concerned for the well being of the civilian population, especially in the Shan, Kachin and Karen States. We call upon the Burmese army and ethnic militia to make every effort to protect civilians and bring to account those responsible for human right abuses against them. Peace and stability can only be achieved through a genuine process of national reconciliation, starting with inclusive dialogue with all ethnic and political opposition groups.

In conclusion, Mr President,

We welcome the mainstreaming of the Protection of Civilians activity with the work of the SRSG on Sexual Violence in Conflict and with the working group of the SRSG for Children and Armed Conflict.

The United Kingdom continues to implement our national strategy on Protection of Civilians and to lead the informal expert group on protection of civilians. This is an important tool for the sharing of information from the field and we look forward to the next Secretary-General's report in May 2012.

I thank you.