

Mr. Cancela (Uruguay) (*spoke in Spanish*): Allow me to begin by expressing my thanks to the delegation of France for convening this debate under its presidency. Allow me also to reiterate the importance of such meetings, which facilitate interaction between the Security Council and non-member States. I would also like to welcome the valuable briefing given this morning by the Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs.

Ten years ago, this Council held its first open debate on the protection of civilians in armed conflict. At the time, it was hailed as a milestone in the Council's work. Since then, the work of both the Security Council and the United Nations as a whole has witnessed some advances and various difficulties in implementing policies intended to ensure the protection of civilian populations in armed conflicts.

As noted by the Secretary-General in his most recent report on this subject, within the Council the normative framework for the protection of civilian populations in armed conflict has been fine-tuned, beginning with resolutions 1265 (1999) and 1296 (2000). This has been reflected in the adoption of a number of resolutions that emphasize the protection of women and children in armed conflict and has been bolstered by the adoption of resolutions 1674 (2006) and 1738 (2006). That normative progress has been complemented by the inclusion of activities pertaining to the protection of civilians in the mandates of existing peacekeeping operations. That illustrates how the Council has gradually modified its focus on the protection of civilians in armed conflict.

Notwithstanding the progress made, Uruguay notes with particular concern that, despite the reduction in the number of conflicts throughout the world, as pointed out in the latest report of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, civilian populations continue to experience acts of brutality and degradation as a result of being in the wrong place at the wrong time or being deliberately selected as victims of atrocities in an environment of almost complete impunity. Unfortunately, in recent days we have witnessed the unfolding of actions whose result has been aggression against civilian populations and the obstruction of crucial humanitarian assistance to the victims of those actions.

Uruguay has demonstrated its unwavering commitment to international humanitarian law, as illustrated by our adherence to and implementation of all the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols; the Rome Statute, which established the International Criminal Court; The Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its Protocols' and the Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques. All those instruments constitute the essence of international humanitarian law.

On the ground, Uruguay, one of the largest troop contributors to United Nations peacekeeping operations, has demonstrated its unequivocal commitment to the protection of civilians. In the various peacekeeping operations to which Uruguay has contributed, including those in which my country is currently participating, Uruguayan contingents have escorted and protected United Nations agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross and non-governmental organizations providing humanitarian assistance. They

have helped refugees and internally displaced persons return to their homes. They have neutralized the harmful potential to civilians of anti-personnel mines. Uruguayan military and civilian personnel have also initiated reconstruction efforts in countries devastated by conflict, including in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Haiti. Uruguayan personnel deployed in the field have also carried out humanitarian campaigns to mitigate the harm suffered by civilians in countries afflicted by natural disasters.

Uruguay's experience on the ground has also led us to voice a crucial concern. On numerous occasions, Uruguayan contingents have warned of the impossibility of carrying out expanded humanitarian assistance and civilian protection efforts due to the fact that destabilizing forces in a given region were several times greater in number than the personnel of peacekeeping operations. We believe that such situations give rise to the need, at the time that a peacekeeping mission is established or renewed, for Security Council mandates to envisage the necessary strategic and logistical provisions to address the implementation of those tasks as best as possible. As pointed out earlier, in addition to clear and specific mandates, it is essential that United Nations forces have at their disposal the essential means and capabilities to effectively protect civilians. That imperative need is both a great challenge and a responsibility for the Organization and all its Member States.

Uruguay shares the Secretary-General's view with regard to the four challenges that the international community must address with regard to the protection of civilians, namely, the need to ensure access to civilians so that they can be provided the assistance they need to survive; combating and eradicating the heinous practice of sexual violence in armed conflict; the need to more systematically address the effects of conflict on homes, land and property; and the importance of putting an end to the unacceptable humanitarian consequences of cluster munitions. In connection with those challenges, Uruguay would like to reiterate its position, which we have previously stated in other forums, that the activities of the United Nations in providing humanitarian assistance must be carried out in accordance with the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, independence, respect for international humanitarian law and security for personnel on the ground — all the while bearing in mind that the primary responsibility for the protection of civilians lies with States.

The twentieth century witnessed atrocities and abhorrent acts of aggression against innocent civilians that had an impact on entire peoples. Sadly, the final years of that century and the early years of the twenty-first century have also produced events that have shaken and disturbed the conscience of the international community. Fortunately, the development of the international community has provided us with an excellent concept by which to make the world a more humane place. In accordance with the provisions of international humanitarian law, the protection of civilians is a legal imperative. However, it is also an ethical imperative that reflects the long evolution of humankind towards civilizing norms that place respect for life and human integrity and dignity at the core of its values.

Lastly, I would like to highlight that, on 27 January, the delegations of Uruguay and Australia will organize an open workshop to address the issue of implementing the

protection of civilians in the mandates of peacekeeping operations. It will be an opportune moment to better define the concept of the protection of civilians as it contrasts with the concept of the responsibility to protect. It will also be an opportunity to analyze the challenges that must be kept in mind from a practical point of view in implementing the mandates of peacekeeping operations that include protection of civilian components, as well as to become aware of the experiences of the main troop contributors and of the Secretariat.