



Last updated at 18:53 (UK time) 17 Jun 2010

Security Council debate on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict

07 July 2010

Statement by Philip Parham, Deputy Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom

Let me begin by thanking the Under-Secretary General for your comments marking the fact that this is, approximately anyway, the last appearance of John Holmes in the Council. He has greatly improved the Council's understanding of the humanitarian aspects of conflict and crisis and therefore helped the Council to enhance its responses and we should certainly reflect carefully on the points he has made today about ways in which we might try further to close the gap between norms and reality. But above all we thank him for the leadership and commitment that he has shown to those who would, but for his efforts and the efforts of his UN colleagues, often be abandoned to deprivation, devastation, degradation and frequently death.

Madam President,

Global events, many of them grimly described by John Holmes just now, global events since this Council adopted resolution 1894, have shown that the protection of vulnerable civilian populations remains as important as ever. The forthcoming fifteenth anniversary of the Srebrenica tragedy is also a powerful reminder of why this issue is so central to the Security Council's work. The ground has already been well covered and time is short, but I would like to make three brief points:

- First, United Nations peacekeepers play a vital part in protecting civilians, and it is right that we prioritise this task above others in certain peacekeeping operations. But we should be clear that the parties in an armed conflict bear the primary responsibility for ensuring that civilians are neither affected by that conflict nor specifically targeted. Following the withdrawal of the UN peacekeeping mission in Chad, which has already been raised by previous speakers, the Chadian government has undertaken to protect its civilian population, particularly women and children, and it must fully honor this commitment. The work of the joint high level working group between the Chadian government and the United Nations will be important and the international community should monitor its findings carefully.
- Second, we must ensure robust protection of humanitarian space so that civilians who are affected by armed conflict are able to access essential goods and services. This is primarily the responsibility of states; but when the state is overwhelmed, humanitarian agencies must be allowed to respond to emergency protection and assistance needs. This is a basic tenet of international humanitarian law and we must uphold it.

That is why we have longed called for an improvement in the unacceptable and unsustainable situation in Gaza. Resolution 1860 called for the delivery of humanitarian aid and called on states to alleviate the humanitarian and economic situation. As my Foreign Secretary has said and as the Secretary-General said in his statement yesterday, Israel's announcement on the 5th July on the easing of some restrictions on the import of goods into Gaza is welcome and marks an important step in the right direction. These changes must now be implemented swiftly.

On the same grounds, we are concerned about poor access by humanitarian agencies to communities in the north of Sri Lanka. Ensuring freedom of movement for all Internally Displaced Persons who remain in camps, as well as transferring camps to civilian authority, are important steps in allowing civilians to return to normal life.

And this leads me to my third point:

- The United Kingdom is greatly disturbed by the continuing growth in the number of people displaced within their own country as a result of conflict - a record high of over 27 million in 2009. This is an acute problem, for example in Burma, where we remain deeply concerned about the lack of progress towards national reconciliation. The Burmese military regime continues to target civilians, particularly people from ethnic minorities. The use of rape and other forms of sexual violence remain a serious concern, as

do the use of child soldiers and forced labour for military use. Protecting civilians, wherever and whoever they are, is the best way to prevent displacement and consequent deprivation.

So, Madam President, the United Kingdom continues to attach great importance to the protection of civilians in armed conflict. In March 2010 the UK launched a national strategy on the Protection of Civilians. This draws together, for the first time, our efforts to keep protection of civilians at the forefront of our political, security, human rights and humanitarian work.

And Madame President as Afghanistan has been mentioned by previous speakers, I should just make the point that it is important that the Council recognise the difference between, on the one hand, the Afghan and international forces which make every effort to avoid civilian casualties and operate under a Council mandate and the interests of armed groups which deliberately target civilians as part of their attempts to undermine the democratic President. As the Secretary-General's recent reports have made clear the proportion of civilian casualties caused by the Taliban has grown significantly.

Madame President,

We have seen the valuable role played by the Security Council's informal Expert Group on the Protection of Civilians. As its chair, the UK remains committed to its work. We welcome the appointment of Ms. Margot Wallstrom as the Secretary-General's Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict - an important step in this area as John Holmes has said. We support the work of the Secretary-General's Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict, Radhika Coomaraswamy, which has led to much of the progress we have seen on protection of children in the past year.

Madam. President,

The United Kingdom believes we have made much progress on the Protection of Civilians since the adoption of SCR 1894 in November, in particular our discussions in the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations. But we we still have more work to do on this important issue.

Thank you.