

25 June 2012

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

Thank you Mr President for holding this important debate today, and let me also warmly thank the Secretary-General for his opening remarks.

My thanks also go to the Emergency Relief Coordinator, Valerie Amos, the Assistant Secretary General of the office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ivan Simonovic, and the Director of the International Law Division of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Philipp Spoerri. I welcome the presence of the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Guatemala in the Security Council this morning, thus highlighting his country's strong support for this agenda, as indeed does Guatemala's recent adherence to the Rome statute.

The Secretary-General's ninth report expresses deep regret that civilians account for the vast majority of casualties in armed conflict and highlights the plight of so many displaced civilians. It is important that the Council hears and acts on this sobering message.

As the report makes clear, ensuring the necessary degree of compliance, and thereby strengthening the protection of civilians, is essentially a matter of political will. The international community must play our part in helping states to fulfil their primary responsibilities under international law.

Mr President,

It is therefore of great concern that we continue to see humanitarian access to areas of need blocked or constrained. Humanitarian access is fundamental to the protection of civilians. We must be clear that impeding this is unacceptable and a violation of governments' responsibilities under international humanitarian and human rights law.

Since the last protection of civilians debate in November we have seen a further sharp deterioration of the situation for civilians in Syria. The Syrian regime has shamefully failed in its responsibility to protect its civilian population. Far worse, it has deliberately targeted its civilian population through the indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force. The regime has now killed around 15,000 Syrian civilians. That is why the Joint Special Envoy's six-point plan and two resolutions of this Council have demanded the withdrawal of Syrian troops and heavy weapons in order to facilitate a sustained reduction in violence. Without this first step, the violence on all sides will continue, the UN Supervision Mission will not be able to resume its operations and the Annan Plan will fail. We have now embarked on a final effort to breathe life back into Mr Annan's plan. But this will only succeed if this Council takes robust action to apply pressure on the regime to meet its basic commitments under the Annan Plan and resolutions 2042 and 2043.

Mr President, as Mr Simonovic has just said, combating impunity is critical. We therefore commend the work of the International Criminal Court and welcome the recent convictions for war crimes. In March the ICC convicted the Congolese militia leader, Thomas Lubanga. In April the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) convicted Charles Taylor. These verdicts are examples of how the international community will continue to challenge impunity and to shine the light of accountability in all areas. It was right that on both occasions Council members publicly welcomed these decisions.

Mr. President,

We remain extremely concerned about the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo where civilians continue to suffer the effects of the ongoing conflict and insecurity. A security vacuum in Eastern DRC has also allowed armed groups to regain territory and commit abuses against the population, including rape. The responsibility for providing security to the population rests with the DRC Government and we encourage all neighbouring states to support these efforts. We are working to ensure that the UN peacekeeping and stabilisation mission to DRC (MONUSCO) supports the government's efforts and responds to the changing situation on the ground, ensuring that protection of civilians remains its first priority while increasing its emphasis on stabilisation activity.

In Yemen, we welcome progress made by President Hadi and his government to move forward with political transition. The government's clear commitment to remove the threat posed by violent extremism, notably in the south, must come with equal determination to protect civilians.

Mr President,

The United Kingdom continues to champion work on the protection of civilians:

- The protection of civilians informal expert group, chaired by the United Kingdom has met regularly this year instituting thematic and ad hoc briefings;
- The United Kingdom has supported AMISOM's work on the casualty tracking and response cell;
- And we have recently launched an initiative on preventing sexual violence in conflict. Our ambition is to bring new energy and focus to efforts to combat sexual violence in situations of conflict and repression by establishing the capability to rapidly deploy a UK teams of experts to investigate and catalogue sexual violence. We shall use the UK's Presidency of the G8 in 2013 to highlight the need to tackle this issue. We look forward to working with Member States and existing UN mechanisms such as the Team of Experts on the Rule of Law, to take this forward.

In addition, we strongly support what Baroness Amos and Mr Spoerri have said this morning about the importance of rapidly moving to a conclusion of the negotiations on an Arms Trade Treaty.

In conclusion Mr President, resolution 1894 of 2009 reaffirms the Council's commitment to the Protection of Civilians. We must continue to act with clarity of purpose and the utmost vigour on this important issue, in all theatres of war and armed conflict.

I Thank you.