

The UN Security Council Open Debate on Civilian Protection

November 22, 2010

On Monday November 22, the Security Council held an open debate on the protection of civilians during armed conflict. The debate was convened by the President of the Security Council for November, the United Kingdom, on the occasion of the release of the Secretary-General's report on the protection of civilians during armed conflict. Speakers included Valerie Amos, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Navanethem Pillay, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Alain Le Roy, Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, and Yves Daccord, Director-General of the International Committee of the Red Cross. These briefings were followed by statements on civilian protection during armed conflict from members of the Security Council. Subsequently, states that are not currently member of the Council were invited to make interventions of their own. More than 50 delegations made statements on civilian protection issues and its important role in the international peace and security agenda.

Several themes emerged as points of concurrence among the delegations, including the need to address the use of explosive weapons, the deliberate targeting of civilians during conflict, sexual violence as a tactic of war, the denial of humanitarian access, and the role of international tribunals and commissions of inquiry. The overwhelming majority of delegations made clear that it was the responsibility of states to protect their own citizens first and foremost - ensuring accountability, and ending the culture of impunity.

However, several delegations, including the United States, Canada, and France, emphasized that the international community has an obligation to aid states in meeting their responsibility and that international efforts to fulfill this responsibility must be without prejudice. Emphasis was placed on providing a comprehensive strategy and approach to protecting civilians, which must include a legal, normative, and conceptual framework. The consensus appeared to be that the legal and normative framework is clear, but the concept of civilian protection still needs developing. Furthermore, much discussion focused on improving peacekeeping operations, notably providing more

transparent benchmarks, coordinating responsible draw-down of forces, and closing the gap between a given mandate and its implementation. There was general agreement that peacekeeping mission mandates needed more clarity, with explicit references to civilian protection, and to be both comprehensive in scope and tailored to the situation at hand. Several delegates, such as Gabon and Chile, stated that international involvement should complement national efforts, helping build national capacities and expanding the rule of law. The debate revealed the international community's belief that there was ample normative framework, but a grave lack of implementation and political will. Many States also reiterated the Secretary General's call for the Security Council to move toward a less selective approach and look at countries in conflict not directly on the Council's agenda.

The delegate from Japan gave one of the most comprehensive statements drawing connections between civilian protection, Women, Peace and Security, small arms and light weapons, and sexual violence. The overarching theme from the Japanese was a need for a comprehensive human security approach to protection of civilians during armed conflict. Also noteworthy was the Australia and EU supported policy of the Security Council receiving frequent "hotspot" or "horizon-scanning" briefs from the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs, B. Lynne Pascoe. Several states chose to highlight the importance of the principle of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) as a corollary to protection of civilians, namely Italy, Ghana, and Bangladesh.

Global Action is pleased that the Council has taken up the protection of civilians during armed conflict and hopes the discussion will continue on the tools and capacities needed to properly protect civilians from the ravages of war.

The SG's full report is available at

http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2010/579.

The Presidential Statement on the Protection of Civilians from the United Kingdom is available here:

<http://ukun.fco.gov.uk/en/news/?view=News&id=156440682>