

Mr. Buffin (Belgium) (spoke in French): Belgium supports the statement made by the observer of the European Union, as well as the statement made by the representative of Switzerland on behalf of the Group of Friends on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict.

I would like to address more specifically the implementation of resolution 2286 (2016), on the protection of health services in armed conflict.

First, on behalf of my country, I would like to express my indignation at the number and intensity of attacks on health services around the world. We are all familiar with the situation in Syria, where, according to various United Nations and non-governmental organization (NGO) reports, there is a sustained and targeted campaign against medical facilities and personnel. But that intolerable practice of targeting those who put themselves at risk to come to the aid of victims is not limited to that country; on the contrary, the phenomenon is much more widespread.

We welcome the project undertaken by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement — Health Care in Danger — to combat the problem of violence against patients, health workers, medical facilities and vehicles, and to make access to health care and the provision of health care in armed conflict and other emergency situations safer. The Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition — a group comprising of more than 30 NGOs — has published a report on the subject, which was recently presented to the Permanent Mission of Belgium to the United Nations at a seminar on Syria and Yemen. The Coalition has compiled a list of attacks perpetrated on health care personnel and facilities in no fewer than 23 countries. We must all support this vital effort to list and document such incidents.

Attacks on health services are not just an ethical or moral issue; their scope is much broader. We must not forget the doubly devastating effect of such attacks on already fragile health-care systems and, by extension, their effect on vulnerable people such as the elderly, the sick, the pregnant women and the children who depend on those systems. There is also an adverse effect on international law, which we have all pledged to uphold. International humanitarian law is slowly being eroded because of serious repeated and often unpunished violations of the obligations it imposes on all parties to armed conflict. It is our shared responsibility to reverse that trend, by making tangible commitments and by taking concrete action.

I would like to make the following three points on resolution 2286 (2016).

First, although the adoption of resolution 2286 (2016) is a good starting point, it is by no means the end result. More must be done, starting with the implementation of the resolution itself. We call on the States Members of the United Nations to work individually and collectively to implement the Secretary-General's recommendations in a consensual manner.

Secondly, we must make better use of existing instruments to monitor, document and investigate serious violations of international humanitarian law. In that regard, Belgium fully supports the initiative of the International, Impartial, and Independent Mechanism for Syria, both politically and financially. We encourage Member States to do the same. Investigating, prosecuting and punishing serious violations of international humanitarian law — in short, combating impunity — is crucial to deterrence and to preventing the commission of new crimes, which is essential to sustaining peace. States have a central role to play in that regard.

Thirdly, I would like to recall the plight of children and young people and on the devastating impact of conflict on their education. It is estimated that 246 million children live in conflict zones. Like attacks on health services and personnel, attacks on schools are on the rise in many conflict situations. But attacks on schools not only claim the lives of innocent children and young people, they also jeopardize the education and the future of those who survive.

Therefore, Belgium has endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration and invites other Member States to do the same. In that regard, we would like to call on the members of the Security Council to consider the possibility of drafting and adopting, along the lines of resolution 2286 (2016), a resolution with a specific focus on attacks on the education sector.

In conclusion, I would like to commend Human Rights Watch, as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross, on their professionalism, courage and the tireless efforts of their staff, and all local health-care workers who undertake remarkable work, despite the risks and challenges they face. It is essential for all parties to a conflict to respect at all times the impartiality and neutrality of such actors.