

Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict

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Statement by Mr. Goledzinowski, Permanent Representative of Australia to the United Nations

Australia welcomes the opportunity to address the Council on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, a subject which should be at the centre of our collective efforts in the field of international peace and security.

I would like to thank you, Mr. President, for having convened this debate and all of the speakers for their contributions today.

Discussions about the situation in Libya and in other places quite rightly have occupied the attention of Governments and peoples from around the world. Australia is firmly on the record as a supporter of the strong action taken by the Council on Libya through its resolutions 1970 (2011) and 1973 (2011). Recent debates have highlighted the importance of the concept of the responsibility to protect and the seriousness with which Governments must take their responsibilities in relation to their populations.

However, given the broader topic of this debate, I would like to focus today on a separate subject: the distinct body of work on the protection of civilians in armed conflict that has been developed in the United Nations over recent years.

The protection of civilians during times of armed conflict is firmly rooted in international law. Our efforts towards this objective have come a long way, but there is still much more to be done.

Australia has worked closely with others on concrete steps and actions to enhance the protection of civilians by peacekeeping operations. We would like to highlight four aspects of this work which continue to require sustained attention from all of us.

First, peacekeepers need to know how to protect civilians in increasingly complex operational environments. Guidance and training are key. Australia is very pleased at the progress made this year by the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations, which recognized the need for guidance for peacekeepers on the protection of civilians and noted the important work under way to develop training modules for peacekeepers on this issue. To assist in supporting these broader training efforts, Australia has been pleased to partner with the United Nations Institute for Training and Research to develop a documentary on the protection of civilians in peace operations.

Secondly, engaging local communities, including women, in discussions on protection requirements is key both in the planning stages and while peacekeeping missions are deployed in the field. Engaging the community builds trust and lines of communication; it assists in ensuring consistency with efforts which communities already have under way, and can help manage expectations about what peacekeeping missions are able to do, which can assist in preserving their credibility. The development of community alert networks in the Democratic Republic of the Congo is a good example of local engagement that allows isolated communities to contact local authorities and bases of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo when under threat.

Thirdly, a coherent and comprehensive approach by peacekeeping missions to protection of civilians is critical. This includes the clear articulation of roles and responsibilities within a mission and with other relevant players. The Strategic Framework for Drafting Comprehensive Protection of Civilian Strategies, which was also recognized by the Special Committee on Peacekeeping Operations this year, is an important tool in that regard.

Fourthly and finally, peacekeeping missions are there to support the host Government in building capacity to protect its civilians. This requires a clear understanding of the longer-term needs of the host Government. We would argue that it is important to work towards defined benchmarks that can, in the long-term, assist transition planning. Events in Côte D'Ivoire have demonstrated the need for the use of force in response to imminent threats to civilians. The challenge now in Côte d'Ivoire is shifting towards supporting the Government on longer-term protection challenges, such as security sector reform.

After a decade of mandating explicitly for the protection of civilians in peacekeeping operations, there has been considerable progress, but it is important that undertakings made in New York flow through to the field. The establishment of a new United Nations mission in southern Sudan provides an important opportunity to ensure that we draw on the lessons we have learned and the best practices we have developed in the field from the very beginning.

Ultimately, the best way to protect civilians is to prevent armed conflict in the first place. We believe that the regular horizon-scanning briefings from the Department of Political Affairs can enhance the Council's capacity in this regard. We would also like to add our voice to those who have expressed support for the conflict prevention initiatives of regional organizations, which, given their comparative advantages, can play a unique role in preventing conflicts and their harmful effects on civilians.