

Security Council Open Debate on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Resolution 1820

Thursday, June 19, 2008

Statement by H.E Ms. Philomene Omatuku, Minister of Gender, Family and Child of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the United Nations

First of all, on behalf of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, I would like to thank the United States of America for having taken the initiative to convene this important thematic Security Council debate on women and peace and security and for having prepared the concept paper before us (S/2008/364, annex).

As a citizen of the country that is suffering under the greatest humanitarian crisis since the Second World War, I am particularly grateful to you, Mr. President. This current meeting, indeed, once again places the question of sexual violence against women at the heart of the concerns of the Security Council. I am convinced that it will show us the way forward to eradicate this detestable phenomenon.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo expresses its appreciation and thanks to the Secretary-General, who has placed the suffering of Congolese women and girls at the centre of his concerns. His presence here in the Chamber today testifies to that.

My gratitude also goes to the members of the Security Council. They recently visited my country, showing once again the great importance that this principal organ of the United Nations, charged with the maintenance of international peace and security, attaches to this thorny question.

I also welcome and am very thankful for the invaluable help that the entire United Nations system gives to my country as it searches for solutions on the ground to the issue of violence against women and girls in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Violence against women in situations of armed conflict is an outrage that requires an appropriate and substantial response from the international community. That is why my country did not hesitate to sponsor the resolution presented to the General Assembly by the delegation of the United States on the elimination of rape and other forms of sexual violence in all its manifestations, particularly in armed conflicts and similar situations (General Assembly resolution 62/134).

Thus, wars and armed conflicts in modern times have made rape an unprecedentedly cruel weapon of war, in order to obliterate the enemy and destroy the family, whole communities and, above all, the dignity of women.

Sexual violence weakens women and girls, as much in terms of their moral, physical and psychological health as in terms of their economic health. Female victims of this type of violence are stigmatized, repudiated as wives and excluded from their community. This violence also promotes the spread of HIV/AIDS. Moreover, 50 per cent of the victims of sexual violence are less than 18 years old: they are children. I am very happy to report that our child protection code will be adopted in the Senate next week after it has gone through the National Assembly, with a view to providing security for girls.

Sexual violence is leading to a feminization of poverty and is adding to the growing problem of food insecurity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Women victims are no longer able to work the land. Women victims are simply no longer able to work.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo, under the leadership of His Excellency President Joseph Kabila Kabange, has been resolutely following a multisectoral approach in fighting violence against women and girls, concentrating on three priority areas: care, compensation and prevention. Care involves psychological and medical care in specialized units. We have the option of renovating existing hospital buildings rather than building new ones for that purpose. Another element is socio-economic help for reintegrating victims into society and providing training on how to become independent. We wish also to provide more legal aid, to encourage victims to bring their cases to court by paying their legal fees, and protecting them from their rapists, who are often extremely threatening. Care also involves the return to school of girls who have been victims of sexual violence, and taking care of the orphans, unwanted children and children who have been abandoned by their parents.

Compensation involves the application of the law and the effective implementation of judicial decisions with a view to compensating victims and ensuring their security. We plan to establish a compensation fund managed in collaboration with public and civil society partners.

Prevention — by no means the least important issue — chiefly concerns the fight against impunity, including the fight against ignorance by disseminating the relevant international legal instruments available and the laws on sexual violence, so that women victims know their rights and so that the judges know what their powers are.

The judicial and penal infrastructure, which have been ravaged by years of war and pillaging, should be improved and better equipped in order to prevent breakouts of the rapists who have been sentenced or are in detention. Another element is strengthening the capacity of judges in this area and training women judges in order to provide legal assistance to victims. Prevention also involves increasing the number of female military, police and civilian officers in order to enhance the collection of information on violence against women. This list is not exhaustive, but it also includes a procedure to prevent rapists from being able to hold positions of responsibility and, if necessary, to relieve them of their functions.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo feels that we must enhance the status of women, because if men do not realize that women are their equals, they will not think that rape is disgraceful. We have to continue to implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Moreover, article 14 of the constitution of the Democratic Republic of the Congo provides for the implementation of gender equality in all institutions. I am happy to report that a draft text from my ministry relating to the implementation of parity has been prepared and is following the necessary procedures.

In resolution 1325 (2000), the Security Council called on all parties to armed conflict to take all measures to protect women and girls against acts of gender-based violence, in particular, rape and other forms of sexual abuse, as well as all other forms of violence in situations of armed conflict.

Thus, we would stress that the implementation of resolution 1325 (2000) will lead to the recognition of the role of women in peacebuilding and peacekeeping. It is important to involve women in the mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflicts so that they can lend to humanity their capacity to create consensus, to resolve conflicts and to build peace.

Internationally, the fight against sexual violence can be supported by strengthening the mandates of peacekeeping operations, with a view to protecting women and children against violence.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo feels the full force of this problem and will spare no effort to fight against the scourge of sexual violence, with its attendant suffering, including the use of women as sexual slaves, held hostage by armed groups in forests. My country makes an impassioned appeal to the international community for a return of sustainable peace. This is a sine qua non condition for the complete eradication of sexual violence.

Indeed, a political consensus is emerging following free, democratic and transparent elections. Thus, the conflicts in eastern the Democratic Republic of the Congo are lamentable. All power in the Democratic Republic of the Congo must go through the ballot box. What are these armed men — these armed groups — the non-regular army — doing in eastern Congo? What is the international community doing?

Congolese women, victims of sexual violence, are also hostages to the natural resources of Congo, which are being exploited illegally.

I remind the Council that women in general, and the women of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in particular, have the right to peace without fear of violence or oppression. They have the right to peace, without which all hope for dignity, well-being and development will be in vain and compromised. I conclude by hoping that Congolese women's appeal for peace — which I echo here — will be heard, because trying to fight against sexual violence without seeking peace is nothing more than a delusion.

I would like to thank all previous speakers who mentioned the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In particular, I reiterate my thanks to the United States of America for having made it possible to have this debate, enabling me to speak — a person from a country that is very affected by this issue.