

Security Council Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians in Conflict
November 9th 2011, Security Council Chamber

Statement by H.E. Mr. Briz Guetierrez, Representative of Guatemala

We are pleased to participate in this important debate. I would like to thank President Cavaco Silva of Portugal for being here this morning. I would also like to thank the Secretary-General, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Assistant Secretary-General of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Director from the International Committee of the Red Cross.

My delegation associates itself with the statement delivered by the representative of Egypt on behalf of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries. In addition we would like to make the following points in our national capacity.

Guatemala, like other troop-contributing countries, struggles with the dilemma of limiting our presence in a country to keeping the peace, without exposing our troops to offensive actions that place them in harm's way, while at the same time supporting humanitarian efforts to protect the civilian population as part of a broader mandate to restore stability and normality in the daily lives of inhabitants.

From a wider standpoint, we welcome the continued willingness of the Council to address the needs of civilians with regard to their protection in armed conflict. It is crucial to redouble our efforts to overcome the five core challenges identified by the Secretary-General in 2009. The fact is that, despite the numerous reports, resolutions, wealth of experience and lessons learned accumulated in the past decade, civilians still account for the vast majority of casualties, and the risks they bear have only intensified. Moreover, it is the most vulnerable civilians — children and women — who are the most exposed to risks.

There is much more to say on this theme, but today we would like to focus on the challenges to implementation in the field and on the lessons learned.

We encourage more progress with regard to the conceptual and operational aspects of the protection of civilians in the framework of peacekeeping operations. We also acknowledge that much progress has been made in achieving greater consistency in the implementation of mandates, in the identification of problems and existing limitations and in seeking solutions.

The allocation of sufficient resources for protection activities and initiatives is crucial, and enhances the capacity of peacekeeping operations to protect civilians. Similarly, support should also be given to self-protection initiatives by civilian populations, which not only involve the main stakeholders but also solidify the foundations for their long-term recovery and development. Their participation is crucial in helping to salvage what remains of their communities by promoting the reconstruction of the social fabric and by supporting the reintegration of displaced persons. That also includes strengthening the leadership role that women take on during reconciliation processes. Women are agents of change in cases such as that of Guatemala, where they are able to create spaces for conflict prevention, mediation and resolution, as well as for peacebuilding.

We are concerned about the asymmetric nature of existing conflicts, in which there is a steady rise in breaches of international law and non-observance of the principles of distinction and proportionality by the parties to armed conflicts. That situation is exacerbated by the proliferation and fragmentation of non-State armed groups that resort to strategies that flagrantly contravene international law, as well as by the new technology to which such groups have ready access, including long-range artillery and missiles, which leads to wider conflict zones and exposes civilians to even more attacks. It is therefore important to recognize that conventional measures are not sufficient to address core challenges and emerging dangers.

I would like to raise one additional point that has natural links to the protection of civilians and that cannot be left out of today's debate. Our delegation is among those that consider paragraphs 138 and 139 of the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document (General Assembly resolution 60/1) to be one of the singular achievements of that meeting. We believe that the evolution in the doctrine of international humanitarian law in recent years was a major advance.

The primary responsibility to protect civilians falls on States but they, in turn, are obligated to seek international assistance when they are unable to provide it. In other words, sovereignty equals responsibility and responsibility equals accountability. In the coming years, both the Security Council and the General Assembly will have a prominent role to play in making this concept operational, which provides an opportunity to continue to improve the assistance architecture of the United Nations. Together, we must ensure that populations at risk have access at all times to the best possible protection, that perpetrators of abuses face the consequences of their actions, and that the enhancement, monitoring and strengthening of capabilities have tangible results. The Council and the entire international community will be judged according to their capacity to protect the most vulnerable.