

Children and Armed Conflict
12 July 2011, United Nations Security Council Chamber

Statement by Mr. Brites Pereira, Representative of Portugal

I would like to begin by thanking you, Mr. President, for convening this open debate on children and armed conflict, an issue to which Portugal attaches great importance. I also wish to welcome and thank Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, and Mr. Anthony Lake, Executive Director of UNICEF, for their briefings. I also take this opportunity to commend their work and efforts to ensure the protection of children in situations of armed conflict.

Let me start by reaffirm Portugal's strong commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights and the safeguarding of international humanitarian law. The protection of civilians in armed conflict has been one of the priorities of our action as an elected member of the Council.

Back in 1998, during our last tenure in the Council, we promoted the first debate held here on the issue of children and armed conflict (see S/PV.3896). We were already convinced then, as we are today, that this issue has serious implications for international peace and security. To protect children in armed conflict requires the commitment of the international community as a whole. Portugal is fully committed to this objective.

Since then, the Council has made significant progress and established, step by step, a strong normative framework and mechanism to monitor, report and respond to grave violations against children. The resolution that we have adopted today (resolution 1998 (2011)) expands the causes for listing parties in the annexes of the reports of the Secretary-General to include attacks on schools and hospitals, as well as attacks and threats of attacks against schoolchildren and educational and medical personnel. That will enable the Security Council to act in a consistent and timely manner to further enhance the protection of children and their access to education and health services. The inadequate provision of education and health to children in situations of armed conflict is a serious problem that will have consequences for the long-term development of the countries concerned. According to UNESCO, 28 million children are denied their right to education because of armed conflict. This situation is totally unacceptable and it needs to be urgently redressed.

In that regard, my country has regularly introduced a draft resolution at the Commission on Human Rights and at the Human Rights Council on the realization of the right to education, which was at the origin of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education. This resolution, as well as the resolution on education in emergency situations adopted last year in the General Assembly, which my country co-sponsored (resolution 64/290), is a step in the right direction that will guarantee not only a fundamental human right but also an important tool in the fulfilment of other basic rights.

In this context, let me say a word of appreciation for the important work carried out by civil society in terms of increasing the protection of children's rights, which has significantly helped to pave the way for the work of the Security Council in this very important area.

During the past few years, the Security Council has consistently strengthened accountability for persistent perpetrators of grave violations against children. In the near future, we hope to see all such violations given equal treatment, including the abduction of children and denial of humanitarian access.

This normative framework for the protection of children in situations of armed conflict must be furthered. Portugal believes that the Council must continue to address certain situations of concern while striving to find the best way to promote the protection of children affected by armed conflict. In that regard, action plans are an excellent tool for engaging armed forces and organized armed groups. But we must bear in mind that such plans might not be as efficient in cases involving militias or other non-State armed groups that do not have a firm command structure.

Furthermore, many conflicts have a cross-border impact. That perspective might be lost when adopting a country-by-country approach. Parties like the Lord's Resistance Army act with complete disregard for borders. Children are abducted in one country and taken to another, and sometimes to a third. In that regard, we

welcome the ongoing coordination efforts by the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, UNICEF and the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General. But we believe that more needs to be done in terms of coordination to address cross-border child protection concerns.

The ability to impose targeted measures on persistent perpetrators of grave violations against children is an important tool available to the Security Council in this area. We strongly believe that, as they are being renewed or established, the mandates of existing sanctions committees should include child protection criteria and expertise.

But Portugal also believes that the Council needs to find a solution to consider targeted measures for perpetrators of grave violations against children in situations where a dedicated sanctions committee does not exist. We welcome the discussion that will take place in the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict on options to increase pressure on persistent perpetrators of acts committed against children in situations of armed conflict.

The advocacy and dedication of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and her Office have been crucial in promoting this agenda. Let me welcome the five field trips that she undertook since the last debate (see S/PV.6341) and the commitments reached in each and every place she visited. Portugal supports the renewal of her mandate. That mandate has helped to foster progress on the promotion and protection of the rights of children.

Let me conclude by underlining that much has been done since 1996, when Graça Machel's report (see A/51/306) on the impact of armed conflict on children revealed the suffering of children in situations of armed conflict throughout the world. This study is clearly the foundation for the children in armed conflict agenda, but each resolution adopted by the Security Council has reinforced the children's protection framework. I hope that this open debate and the resolution that we have just adopted will be useful tools in assisting the work of the Council and that of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General in the discharge of her mandate.

The harmful and widespread impact of armed conflict on children and its long-term consequences for durable peace, security and development are nowadays widely recognized. As Graça Machel said in 1996, the impact of armed conflict on children must be everyone's responsibility. It still is.