

Remarks by Foreign Secretary William Hague to the open UN General Assembly side-event 'Preventing sexual and gender-based crimes in conflict and securing justice for survivors'

Source: Foreign and Commonwealth Office, official website.

I am extremely grateful to my co-hosts Michelle Bachelet and Zainab Bangura; to the Nobel Laureates Leymah Gbowee and Jody Williams representing the International Stop Rape in War Campaign; to Major General Patrick Cammaert who commanded the UN Force for the Eastern DRC; and to all of our distinguished guests. A huge amount of expertise is concentrated in this room, and it is an honour to be with you and to have so many people so concerned about this issue gathered here today.

It's our purpose in gathering here this morning to ensure that preventing sexual and gender-based crime in conflict and post-conflict situations is an urgent priority for the international community.

We have to do more to support survivors. We have to demolish any remaining notion that people who use rape as a weapon of war can get away with it. It is this culture of impunity which still exists in many conflict zones around the world that we have to shatter. In particular, in the view of the United Kingdom, this means increasing our ability to identify and prosecute those responsible for such crimes.

Earlier generations shattered similar assumptions about slavery in the 18th and 19th century. We mustered effective international action against use of landmines and cluster munitions. And we are arguing now for the International Arms Trade Treaty. When we act resolutely, we can as an international community tackle issues that go to the heart of human rights in conflict.

And we must do the same now to help eradicate the terror caused by sexual violence against women, children and men.

The scale of the problem is immense, the circumstances are uniquely complex, the potential to do unintended harm is great, and the humiliation and stigma affecting survivors is profound. There are significant obstacles to overcome. But the good news is that we are building on strong foundations.

And I pay tribute to the architects of UN Security Council Resolutions 1325, 1820 and 1888; to the UN Secretary General and his Special Representative, as well as her predecessor;

to all those who have campaigned for many years to bring these issues to world attention; to the many dedicated people supporting survivors in conflict-affected countries; and to the judges and prosecutors of the International Criminal Court and the International Tribunals, and for all they have done to define these crimes and prosecute some of those responsible.

Our Government wants to reinforce all these existing efforts.

We are convinced in the United Kingdom that we can do more to help, without duplicating or trying to reinvent work already in hand: We can do it as a permanent member of the Security council, a leading member of NATO, the European Union and the commonwealth and as a nation with one of the most extensive international development programmes in the world.

In June I announced that we would set up a new UK team of experts devoted to the issue of preventing sexual violence. This team will have the skills and resources to enable it to be deployed into conflict areas in support of UN missions, or on a bilateral basis, to help gather evidence to support future prosecutions, and to provide advice and support to reinforce local efforts. It will draw on the skills of doctors, lawyers, police, psychologists, forensic specialists and experts in the care and protection of victims and witnesses, and it will significantly strengthen the specialist capabilities that we are able to bring to bear on these issues. It will be ready to be deployed for the first time later this year.

And because we want to increase our support existing mechanisms as well as increase our own efforts, I am announcing today that we will contribute £1 million this financial year to support the Office of the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict. And I encourage other countries to do the same. Pledges can be made today. They don't all have to be for a £1 Million, but they can be.

We have also pledged to use the Foreign Ministers' track of the UK's Presidency of the G8 in 2013, to seek specific new commitments from some of the world's most powerful nations to tackling this silent scourge of war.

I am very grateful for the support we have received for this initiative from our friends and allies, and I am also grateful to the many people and organisations who stepped forward with proposals and ideas to develop it.

We are using the crucial months before our G8 Presidency to work to build momentum around this initiative, and to see the advice, support and involvement of our friends and partners around the world. And that is the spirit in which I am co-hosting this event today and that is why I am so pleased to see all of you here.

And I'd like to now to hand over to Michelle Bachelet who is going to, in turn, introduce the expert panel that we have brought here today. I am delighted to be here with her, Executive Director of UN Women, and so, thank you very much.