

Security Council Open Debate on Sexual Violence in Council, April 17th 2013, Security Council Chamber

Statement by Ms. Mushikiwabo, Permanent Mission of Rwanda to the United Nations.

It is a great honour for me to be here today and to preside over this important open debate on women and peace and security, and sexual violence in conflict. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Secretary-General and his Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict for joining us today.

I also welcome the presence of the Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Norway, the First Lady and Ministerial Secretary for Social Inclusion of El Salvador, as well as Ms. Saran Keita Diakité, representative of the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security.

Rwanda commends the Secretary-General and his Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict for bringing renewed focus to the fight for the protection of women.

We welcome the Secretary-General's recent report on sexual violence (S/2013/149), as well as the efforts undertaken by the Special Representative, notably during her visits to the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Somalia, to engage leaders and other stakeholders on that most important subject.

We hope that the Secretary-General's report will enhance the coordination and effectiveness of the global response to the problem of sexual violence. Besides addressing specific challenges facing women and girls in conflict zones, such an approach must incorporate broader peace and security imperatives. Critically, we envisage that it will lead to more effective monitoring of the commitments made by Member States to prevent sexual violence, where possible, and to address its consequences, where necessary.

In conflict settings and, more specifically, those driven by genocide ideology, as my country experienced in 1994, rape and sexual assault are used to punish, humiliate and dehumanize victims, their families and communities. Far from being random acts of brutality, the systematic sexual victimization of women and girls in conflict settings is now well understood as a crime against humanity that demands the urgent attention of the world.

Let me touch on the experience of my country with the intent to offer hope to women victimized by conflict. My country's strong stand on violence against women emanates from the high value it places on women and girls, as well as our national resolution to never again see the cruelty directed to Rwandan women during the 1994 genocide. On a national level and beyond our borders, we take this issue extremely seriously.

Just 19 years ago, Rwandan women were forced to endure inhuman and degrading atrocities. Many were raped and left for dead. Among those who survived, many were infected with incurable diseases; some were made pregnant; many suffered the humiliation of having been abused in front of their families. And yet, the women of Rwanda refused to be defined or defeated by their ordeals. They raised their heads, declining to become permanent victims or objects of pity. They sought justice. They demanded dignity. Inasmuch as Rwanda has been able to reconcile and recover from the events of 1994, it is because of that unshakeable spirit of defiance, found foremost among its women and girls.

The use of sexual violence in that fashion was exported from Rwanda to the Democratic Republic of

the Congo when genocidal forces escaped into the eastern part of that country, after July 1994. Tragically, that behaviour has been adopted by a plethora of armed groups that operate in the region. As a result, the incidence of such crimes has grown rapidly in recent years. But we must not accept such atrocities as a fact of life. The international community must redouble its efforts to combat the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda, along with those who fund and support them, wherever they are.

It is a broken society that fails to protect its most vulnerable citizens from sexual violence. The proliferation of such violence is a sure sign of State failure. As such, any society hoping to move beyond crisis and conflict cannot hope to do so until it has corrected its course with respect to the treatment and prevention of sexual violence. Indeed, Rwanda's experience leads us to believe that healing and reconciliation are possible only when women claim their rightful place at the heart of our communities. The Government of Rwanda therefore welcomes this opportunity to express our unequivocal condemnation of all forms of violence against women and girls, particularly in conflict situations.

Impunity breeds and rewards criminality and violence. Only by insisting on justice and by fighting impunity has Rwanda been able to achieve meaningful reconciliation within our borders. The eradication of sexual violence in conflict will not be possible as long as perpetrators are able to escape accountability for their actions. We have come to understand first-hand the importance of strengthening internal justice mechanisms and of building institutions that enhance the accessibility of justice. Rwanda therefore calls upon all Member States to enforce accountability, as well as to desist from harbouring the perpetrators of humanitarian and human rights violations, which shields them from the consequences of their crimes.

Rwanda has adopted a range of policies to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls, and I will touch on only some of those in a moment. First, however, it is important to stress that, as we recoiled from the horrors visited upon our women, the Government and people of Rwanda have worked assiduously to instil a culture of respect within the military and the police force, among boys and girls in the classroom and within families and communities.

That has prompted a profound shift in attitude among Rwandans of all ages and walks of life.

Specific policy responses to the problem of sexual violence include the establishment of one-stop centres, which offer a wide range of services for the victims of gender-based violence. Those centres bring together the relevant Government agencies, as well as community leaders and civil society, to provide integrated support for victims. That approach of offering comprehensive medical, psychosocial, evidence-gathering and judicial services in one place has been met with such success in the past three years since it began that my Government has committed to a significant expansion of the programme over the next seven years.

In response to the Secretary-General's UNiTE to End Violence against Women and Girls campaign, initiated in 2010, Rwanda hosted an international conference on the role of security organs in ending violence against women and girls. The conference endorsed a declaration and subsequently formed a secretariat to monitor its implementation. With a current membership of 16 countries and a permanent secretariat, based in Kigali, members have developed a standardized training manual to implement an all-Africa command post exercise, code-named Africa UNiTE.

In addition, Rwanda is the leading contributor from Africa of female police and correctional officers to United Nations peace support and peacekeeping missions. Among other duties, those officers actively contribute to combating and raising awareness about violence against women. They also serve as advisers on gender-based violence and share best practices with officers and local authorities.

All our peacekeepers undergo specific training on respect for gender and human rights prior to deployment.

Time does not permit me to outline all the initiatives undertaken by my Government, but I note that Rwanda adopted a national action plan on resolution 1325 (2000) in 2010 and is a party to the Kampala Declaration of the First Ladies on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence of the 2011 International Conference on the Great Lakes Region.

As expressed during the discussion on the prevention of conflict in Africa earlier this week (see S/PV.6946), Rwanda takes the firm view that lasting peace and security, and therefore the safety of women and girls, are possible only when nations, supported by regional and international bodies, address the root causes of conflict. The degradation of women and girls as part of conflict is unacceptable in any form under any circumstances. Its eradication must be a first-order priority of the Council.

Rwanda urges all parties to armed conflict to enforce a clear prohibition on sexual violence, expressed through chains of command, via codes of conduct and military field manuals and in constant training. We further call upon those parties to ensure that alleged abuses are investigated swiftly and perpetrators held accountable.

Rwanda reminds civilian and military leaders with command responsibilities that they, too, are accountable for acts of sexual violence committed on their watch. Rwanda will, on a case-by-case basis, support the adoption or extension of targeted sanctions against persistent perpetrators of rape and other forms of sexual violence.

Rwanda supports calls to include provisions in all peacekeeping mandates that specifically address the prevention of and response to sexual violence. That should include, where appropriate, the identification of women's protection advisers, as the Secretary-General urged earlier in his statement, alongside gender advisers and human rights protection units.

Rwanda recommends that the problem of sexual violence be addressed directly as part of any post-conflict or peacebuilding process. That should include United Nations-sponsored peace negotiations and security sector reform processes or be part of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration. Whether through legislative reforms, awareness-raising campaigns and the training of police, prosecutors, judges and magistrates or the recruitment of more women to such positions, we must insist that national authorities take proactive steps to protect women and girls. Due consideration should also be given to the prosecution of sexual violence through transitional justice arrangements. In Rwanda, the destigmatization of sexual violence, which empowered victims and gave them a voice, was a central element of the post-genocide justice.

I cannot end without calling upon the international community, non-governmental organizations, civil society, faith-based organizations and other non-State actors operating in affected areas to support the genuine reporting and investigation of sexual crimes.

That is important to ensure that justice is served and that survivors are able to begin the process of healing. Above all, we call upon all parties to conflict that are responsible for acts of sexual violence to cease such violations.

It is time, in our view, for the world to move beyond expressions of outrage and, instead, to make concrete and measurable progress towards a world where the bodies of women are no longer considered a battlefield.