

Security Council Open Debate on Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, 12th February, 2014, Security Council Chamber

Statement by Mr. Rishchynski, Permanent Mission of Canada to the United Nations

In too many places, civilians are deliberately targeted and continue to suffer from unspeakable violations. Canada welcomes this open debate on the protection of civilians in armed conflict in order to highlight situations where civilians are in danger and, more important, to identify opportunities where more can be done to ensure their protection in line with legal obligations.

As the 2013 report of the Secretary-General (S/2013/689) points out, parties to conflict, States, the United Nations and other partners all have a responsibility to do more to ensure that civilians enjoy the protection they so rightly deserve under appropriate laws.

Over the years, Canada has sought to encourage and facilitate serious work on improving how the United Nations prevents and responds to situations of armed conflict. We are principally concerned with addressing the protection needs of the most vulnerable in these contexts — including women, religious communities and children.

In conflict situations, women and girls, men and boys, can become victims of abuse. Women and girls in particular continue to face increased risks of sexual violence, including rape and early and forced marriage. Canada remains at the forefront of efforts to prevent and address violence against those most vulnerable, and in promoting their empowerment.

We must continue to work closely to strengthen efforts and coordination to prevent and respond to sexual violence, such as rape as a weapon of war, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced abortion and enforced sterilizations. Even in times of conflict, the promotion of accountability, including by increasing the capacity to prosecute perpetrators of such acts, is important.

Canada remains committed to advocating for the rights of religious communities in situations of armed conflict, who are often persecuted for their beliefs. We are deeply concerned about situations where individuals from religious communities experience difficulty in their ability to practice their faith in peace. In the face of such injustice, including when pilgrims have been killed, churches or mosques attacked and religious leaders taken hostage, Canada has not been silent. And we have not sat idly by. We are speaking out on behalf of religious communities that are under threat. In that regard, we call on United Nations agencies to do more to ensure that the protection needs of vulnerable religious communities are addressed.

We wish to draw special attention today to the urgent need to address the impact of the indiscriminate use of explosive weapons, and in particular their impact on children. As the report of the Secretary-General highlights, in Syria and in far too many other conflicts, tens of thousands of civilians have been targeted or subjected to indiscriminate attacks, including the widespread use of explosive weapons in densely populated areas. Opportunities to strengthen civilian protection in that regard should include creating stronger political barriers to the use of indiscriminate explosive weapons and building recognition among be avoided, particularly in densely populated areas.

We furthermore condemn the intentional targeting of schools, teachers and students as a tactic of war and the practice of using schools for military purposes during armed conflict. That practice has a clear negative impact on children's safety and access to education, and we call on parties to armed conflict to refrain from such military use of schools. We also encourage States that have not yet done so to take appropriate measures to restrict the use of schools for any military operations.

The conflict in Syria continues to have a devastating impact on the civilian population. Canada continues to call on all parties to conflict to adhere to their international obligations, as well as to provide full, safe and unhindered access to humanitarian actors seeking to provide emergency relief to affected populations.

We also demand, in the strongest terms possible, that parties refrain from attacking hospitals, medical facilities and health-care workers, which are protected under international law. *(spoke in English)*

The crisis in Syria is but one of many examples where civilians are not only suffering from the devastating impacts of conflict, but are also being denied access to lifesaving humanitarian assistance and protection. In South Sudan, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali and Afghanistan unacceptable constraints on access are undermining the ability of humanitarian workers to be able to reach those in need. We urgently call on all parties to conflict to ensure that humanitarian workers, relief goods and equipment are able to reach those in need of assistance. That includes the freedom of movement of humanitarian workers and the establishment of simple and effective procedures for administrative and logistical arrangements pertaining to customs, visas and travel authorizations.

You may rest assured, Madam President, that Canada will remain committed to working with the international community to protect the world's most vulnerable and to ensure that those responsible for violations are held accountable for their actions and brought to justice.