

STATEMENT OF THE DEPUTY SECRETARY-GENERAL SECURITY COUNCIL OPEN DEBATE ON SEXUAL  
VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT

New York, 15 May 2017

[as delivered]

Mr. President, Distinguished Members of the Security Council, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by commending Uruguay and the Deputy Foreign Minister in particular for hosting this important Debate.

I also salute the Security Council for its work to combat sexual violence in conflict, including through the recent adoption of resolution 2331, which highlights the linkages between conflict-related sexual violence, trafficking in armed conflict and violent extremism.

Allow me to also welcome and thank Ms. Mina Jaf of Iraq, here today to give voice to civil society, a key partner and compass of our work at the United Nations.

Excellencies,

Today's Debate takes place at a critical juncture.

On the one hand, the deep silence that has traditionally shrouded crimes of sexual violence crimes is finally breaking.

There is more visibility, more political will, and more momentum.

Global understanding of this scourge is shifting.

Sexual violence in conflict is no longer seen as 'merely a women's issue' or as a 'lesser evil' in a false hierarchy of human rights violations.

Instead, it is rightly viewed as legitimate threat to security and durable peace that requires an operational security and justice response, in addition to ensuring multi-dimensional services for survivors of such crimes.

Secretary-General António Guterres has put a priority on prevention.

The Sexual Violence in Conflict mandate – through the strategic leadership of successive Special Representatives, the engagement of Member States, and partnerships with the UN family and civil society – shows how timely and reliable information and analysis may be leveraged for prevention.

A robust legislative framework now exists, including a series of precise Security Council resolutions that give us new tools to drive change and progress.

We are beginning to see some accountability at the international and national level. There is a gradual shift from a reality in which it is cost-free to rape a woman, child or man in conflict, to one where there

are consequences for anyone who commits, commands or condones such crimes.

We see greater national ownership, leadership and responsibility. More governments are formally committing to take action. Regional organizations are working in concert with the United Nations to add to this effort.

That is all much needed good news.

However, the truth is that we must confront is that the deep roots of conflict-related sexual violence that lie in fundamental inequality and discrimination against women in all contexts. Too many women live with the spectre of violence in their daily lives, in their household and families. Armed conflict only serves to exacerbate these prevailing conditions. These circumstances have created an enabling environment for widespread and systematic sexual violence in conflict situations around the world, including in South Sudan where it is a weapon of choice and a tactic of war being used to terrorize and persecute populations.

As the report of the Secretary-General makes clear, we are also confronted by new challenges. Sexual violence is increasingly used as a tactic of terrorism, employed by extremist groups in places like Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Nigeria and Mali to advance their military, economic and ideological ends.

The same litany of horrors echo across the accounts of the Yezidi captives of Daesh ... Nigerian girls who fled from Boko Haram ... the tales of Somali women liberated from Al-Shabaab ... and depictions of women's lives in northern Mali under the extremist group Ansar Eddine.

These groups are using sexual violence for strategic purposes. They are obscenely incentivizing recruitment of young men through the promise of wives and sex slaves. They are outrageously boasting profiting through the sale, trade and trafficking of women and girls.

It is therefore essential that considerations of the protection and empowerment of women and girls feature in our counter-terrorism and our countering violent extremism architecture.

We face a number of major challenges going forward. Enforcing compliance with international law by non-state armed actors is one of them.

The Secretary-General has devoted specific attention to enhancing the process of gaining concrete protection commitments from parties listed annually in his reports on sexual violence and children in armed conflict.

Of course we face unprecedented political and operational challenges, requiring the concerted efforts and support of Member States and the entire UN system.

The mass migration crisis and massive displacement of populations due to protracted conflicts worldwide, has heightened the risk of sexual violence.

We see the acute vulnerability of refugees and IDPs not only within camps or settlements, but at every stage of displacement, and how sexual violence may be a significant factor driving vulnerable people from their homes and communities.

Let us also acknowledge that the response of the United Nations is undermined by unacceptable allegations and incidents of sexual abuse and exploitation by peacekeepers.

The Secretary-General and all of us are determined to tackle this challenge head-on— as reflected in the recent report on Special Measures for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse and this outlines a strategy for making zero-tolerance a reality.

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

Sexual violence is a uniquely heart-wrenching crime because victims often bear the stigma instead of the perpetrators.

Those who commit these heinous crimes often escape justice. Meanwhile, their victims are often forced to live with the shame of having been raped, rejected by their families and communities. Worst still, children born out of rape experience discrimination, exclusion and stigma.

Mental health issues such as depression, flashbacks, challenges in re-establishing intimate relationships, and fear are some of the long-term psychological consequences of this crime.

Pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS and other health challenges, are common, and survivors often find themselves doubly victimised.

Last week I rejoiced with the people of Nigeria and the world at the news of the release of 82 girls held captive for the past three years by Boko Haram.

The girls were among a group of 270 schoolgirls kidnapped in Chibok, in April 2014.

However, thousands are still missing around the world and we must continue to demand relentlessly for their return.

It is not enough to ‘bring back our girls’, we must bring them back with dignity and respect, to an environment of support, equality and opportunity, and ensure that they are provided with psychosocial counselling, emergency reproductive health care, and other critical assistance.

Victims of conflict-related sexual violence also have a right to comprehensive reparations.

This is a critical element of justice due to survivors, as well as an important avenue for recovery.

Social and economic reintegration is imperative, and must become a more integral part of our reconstruction efforts, transitional justice, and post-conflict development frameworks. This is also one of the core commitments articulated in our Sustainable Development Goals, to empower our women and girls and eliminate all forms of violence against them.

This Council has played a pivotal role in putting us on a path toward accountability and prevention of sexual violence, but more is required of you if we are to eradicate this crime once and for all.

The Secretary-General lays out comprehensive recommendations in his report, including your support for engagement with parties to conflict to gain concrete protection commitments, and accelerated

deployment of specialized personnel such as the Women Protection Advisers to catalyze implementation of this agenda on the ground.

Members of the Security Council,

We have a solemn responsibility to convert a centuries-old culture of impunity into a culture of accountability and deterrence.

We cannot afford to be complacent or lose our focus; we must meet these new challenges on the horizon; and we must keep the international spotlight on this crime that has historically been left in the shadows.

All our words, and laws, and resolutions, will mean absolutely nothing if violations go unpunished in practice, and if we fail in our sacred duty of care to survivors.

In word and deed, let us commit to stand in solidarity with survivors and vulnerable communities, and replace horror with hope.

This is a litmus test of our commitment and responsibility to protect the most vulnerable populations from the most egregious human rights violations.

Thank you.



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