Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

"Protecting civilians in armed conflict is at the core of the United Nations' work."

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Thank you Mr President, and thank you Deputy Secretary-General, the ICRC's Vice-President Beerli and Oxfam's Eveline Rooijmans for your briefings.

It's really good to have you both in the chamber with us today. I think you've shown very clearly, in the last 12 months since we last held this particular debate, that the change that has happened in the last 12 months is change in the wrong direction.

We've seen the tragic continuation and worsening of several trends on the protection of civilians agenda. Barrel bombs continue to fall, human rights and international humanitarian law continue to be violated and abused. Women and children continue to be abducted, trafficked and worse. There are also new, disturbing trends; the targeting of medical staff and facilities, the increasing use of siege and starvation as a method of warfare, and the distressing allegations against UN peacekeepers themselves.

Against this backdrop, the central issue we should all be addressing today is 'what will be different next year?'. And I took three particular things from what you all said, our briefers today.

The first was: respecting the law is the single most impactful choice states and non-state groups can make to avoid civilian suffering. Vice-President Beerli that was what you said. And Eveline what you said: so many elements to protect civilians have already been agreed on, what's missing is implementation. And then the bottom-line, what the Deputy-Secretary-General said to us, which is that even wars have rules.

Mr President, you said to us that nobody discusses anymore whether protection of civilians should be a part of peacekeeping. What we are discussing nowadays is how. And it's that that I want to focus on today.

First of all, 2016 needs to be the year that we end the most challenging protection of civilians issue: the crisis in Syria. And I am not making a political point there, we have to have a list of priorities and that must be at the top of it.

The millions of civilians fleeing their homes, the thousands risking everything to cross the Mediterranean, they are all doing so in search of the protection and security that has been

denied to them for too long. Whether at the hands of Daesh, or more likely, at the hands of Assad, the brutality that they have fled is only being exacerbated by the shortfall in the international response.

We all know that a political solution is the only way to end the fighting. But until one is found, more must be done to protect those still caught up in this crisis. That is why the United Kingdom is co-hosting a conference with Kuwait, Germany, Norway and the United Nations to support Syria and the region in London on the 4th of February.

This conference is not just a moment to address the funding deficit for the United Nations' appeal, although that is very important in itself. It is also the moment to address the longer term needs of those affected by the crisis; by supporting job creation, by providing education, and crucially, by putting even more pressure on all the parties to protect civilians and respect international humanitarian law. We need a comprehensive approach. In doing so, we hope to drive improvements in daily life and to increase the confidence that is needed to underpin the political process. But let me just make one thing clear: respecting international humanitarian law is not in itself a confidence building measure. It is an obligation, and it's an obligation on all of us.

Mr President,

Secondly, let me look beyond Syria, and to the second step that we need to take this year, which is to ensure greater compliance with international humanitarian law and respect for human rights more broadly and to ensure accountability for those who fail to do so. Others have listed other key crises at the top of the Security Council's agenda. And I think they bear repeating, whether it's in Yemen, South Sudan or Burundi. Protecting civilians will improve the prospect of political solutions, not be a substitute for them.

When national authorities refuse to comply with international humanitarian law, when they fail or they are unable to prosecute individuals who commit international crimes, we must ensure accountability, whether it's through domestic, regional or global mechanisms. We should make better use of the International Criminal Court and we call on all states to cooperate fully with it. When the Council has referred a situation and states violate Council resolutions by failing to cooperate, the Council must follow-up. The Council should also consider referring more situations to the International Criminal Court. We have failed on both counts in the past. We cannot continue that failure in 2016.

Thirdly, there are the other tools at our disposal that we must use more fully this year. The United Kingdom is proud to support the ICRC, and we are actively involved in your initiative with the Swiss to strengthen mechanisms of compliance with international humanitarian law. We support a new meeting of states to address this issue and we encourage all states to participate in this initiative. We also look forward to the World Humanitarian Summit as an

opportunity to remind the world of the importance of protecting civilians, ensuring compliance with international humanitarian law and putting humanity at the centre of decision-making.

Closer to home, we should use the United Nations' own tools to protect civilians to the full. This means implementing the recommendations on the protection of civilians from the peacekeeping and peacebuilding reviews that you mentioned Mr President. As Eveline Rooijmans has just stressed, people and the protection of civilians must play a central role in mission planning, resourcing and activities on the ground. The United Kingdom supports the Secretary-General's commitments to inform this Council of escalating risk to civilians and of any incidents where peacekeepers fail to implement their protection of civilians' mandate.

We also look forward to more frank assessments and recommendations on what peace operations can deliver and improved reporting so that transparency and accountability are both increased. At a time when the United Nations is being rightly scrutinised because of the disturbing allegations of abuse against those operating under its mandate, we must demonstrate that we will do even more this year to protect those who are in our care.

Mr President,

Above all, I want to emphasise one point. Protecting civilians in armed conflict is at the core of the United Nations' work. It is the issue that we are judged most on by the world outside this chamber, and yet it is the hardest to make progress on. We know that the challenges we face are huge, but we cannot keep holding these debates year on year without taking concrete steps to stop the suffering. This is the year to take action.

Thank you.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/protecting-civilians-in-armed-conflict-is-at-the-core-of-the-united-nations-work