Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Global action to end warzone sexual violence

2013-09-24

Presenting the Declaration, Foreign Secretary William Hague said:

Your excellencies, distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen:

It is an honour to chair this event with the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Zainab Hawa Bangura, and to speak alongside a member of the Survivors Speak OUT network.

I thank the many Governments who have worked with us to develop the Declaration and join me in presenting it to the world today: Australia, Canada, Croatia, Denmark, France, Germany, Guatemala, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Liberia, Malawi, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Senegal, United Arab Emirates and the United States.

And I pay tribute to the Special Envoy of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Angelina Jolie, who cannot be with us today but has campaigned with me every step of the way to make today’s Declaration a reality.

We launched a campaign together in May 2012, calling on governments of the world to confront the use of use of rape as a weapon of war, which has caused unimaginable human suffering for millions of innocent people. The culture of impunity for warzone rape, with all its appalling consequences, is one of the greatest, most persistent and most neglected injustices in history.

At the G8 in London in April this year eight of the world’s leading nations promised to confront this reality, and work together to end rape and sexual violence in conflict.

Today, we have dramatically widened the circle of countries working together on this issue.

106 countries have endorsed this new Declaration so far: a majority of the members of the United Nations, drawn from every continent.

This marks a historic turning point in global awareness of rape and sexual violence in conflict, and the willingness of Governments to tackle it as a priority.

We recognise in the Declaration that vital work done by the UN and civil society organisations in the fight against sexual violence, and the responsibility that national governments have to

provide the leadership and political will to support their efforts.

The Declaration contains four ground-breaking commitments:

First, we have agreed that rape and serious sexual violence in conflict constitute grave breaches of the Geneva Convention and their first Protocol. This means that suspects can be apprehended wherever they are in the world.

Second, we have pledged not to allow amnesties for sexual violence in peace agreements, so that these crimes can no longer be swept under the carpet.

Third, we have promised to adopt a new International Protocol in 2014, to help ensure that evidence collected can stand up in court so more survivors can see justice, and to place the safety and dignity of victims at the heart of investigations into rape and other sexual crimes in conflict zones.

Fourth, we have pledged to support and protect civil society organisations, including women's groups and human rights defenders; to improve the monitoring and documentation of cases of sexual violence without fear of reprisal; and to empower victims to access justice.

This Declaration is a huge step forward, but there is still a long way to go to. We must turn this political commitment into lasting practical action. We must encourage other countries to join us, and do more ourselves.

To that end, I will convene a major global conference in London in the first half of next year, aimed at building on what we have achieved today. The United Kingdom will invite all the Governments that have endorsed this Declaration as well as others we hope will join our efforts, along with representatives from civil society, judiciaries and militaries around the world. We need to widen and deepen the community of nations committed to a world without sexual violence in conflict.

In the United Kingdom, we have also set up a new team of experts to help combat impunity, so that our commitments are backed with practical support. This year alone we have deployed members of the team to the Syria border to train Syrian health professionals in how to respond to sexual violence; to Mali to strengthen the capacity of the Malian armed forces; to the Democratic Republic of Congo to build local capacity to investigate sexual violence crimes; and to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Libya. Over the coming months we will carry out further deployments to the Syrian borders, to Kosovo and to Bosnia-Herzegovina, and we hope to work with Government of Somalia to support their efforts to tackle sexual violence.

I hope other Governments represented here will also increase their own efforts to build national capacity and promote accountability. And I encourage you all to work to rally action in your regions. Across the world we need to see the political will to talk openly about sexual

violence in conflict, to lift the stigma from survivors, to make this issue a priority, as your countries and leaders have done today.

The international community has shown the resolve to confront immense global problems before – acting against landmines, cluster munitions and climate change and adopting an International Arms Trade Treaty. It is time for us to muster the same will and determination to shatter the culture of impunity for rape and sexual violence in conflict once and for all. To have so many countries endorse this Declaration today is a major milestone towards truly global action to end these crimes, and it is a moment of great hope for the future.

Speaking next and addressing the event by videolink, UNHCR Special Envoy Angelina Jolie said:

Presidents, Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers, I am sorry I cannot join you today.

But I strongly welcome what you have accomplished, and I thank you for it.

This Declaration, endorsed by so many countries, marks a true global change in attitudes to warzone rape and sexual violence.

It is the clearest statement we have heard, ever, that the international community must and will confront these crimes.

But this agreement is about much more than words on a paper. It is about people.

As the United Nations your responsibility is to defend not only your own citizens, but the people of other countries whose voices struggle to be heard because of conflict and injustice.

Today, on this issue, you have shown you can live up to that responsibility.

You have taken a stand on behalf of millions of unknown or forgotten survivors of sexual violence: innocent women, children and men who have suffered stigma, received no justice or recognition, and felt abandoned.

You have sent a message to aggressors that there will be no more impunity for those who use rape as a weapon of war.

But most importantly of all, you have a sent a message to survivors that their rights and dignity matter.

I will never forget when I saw images and learned of the story of a little girl who had been raped outside a police station in the Congo. She was five years old.

For me, that little girl represents everything we are fighting for today: for her innocence, her rights, and her future.

This Declaration tells that little girl that she is precious and must be protected.

And it says that we will not accept a world in which those who rape a five-year-old girl can go unpunished.

That is why it is absolutely right that the commitment you have made is to end sexual violence in conflict. We cannot aim for anything less than that.

So this is an important moment.

But the true measure of the Declaration will be whether or not it leads to action on the ground.

Will it make a difference to the life of that little girl and countless others like her?

Will it help vulnerable women and children in communities and refugee camps to feel safer?

Will it lead to more arrests and successful prosecutions?

And can the UN show the unity to address current crises - where thousands or people are suffering and dying now, and where rape and abuse is happening now?

You have it in your power as governments to make these changes happen.

So I urge you to follow with action the important commitments you have made today.

If you do, it will make a difference to the lives of millions of people.

Thank you.

Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) on Sexual Violence in Conflict Zainab Hawa Bangura, said:

Your Excellencies, Heads of State, Mr. Chairman, Honourable Mr. Hague, Honourable Ministers, Distinguished Guests, UN colleagues and NGO partners;

As co-host of this important event on ending sexual violence in conflict, I want to welcome you and thank you for coming here today to show the world that the international community is standing together to say enough is enough - that rape in war will not be tolerated. It is a deep honour and pleasure to co-host this event with Foreign Secretary Hague who has brought personal passion and unrelenting political commitment to this cause, as one of the great global challenges of our time. I salute the representative from Survivors Speak Out Network who has joined us today. We are privileged that she has joined this important event.

In the year since I have been UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, I have heard the heartbreaking stories of survivors of rape, and have

seen their strength and resilience in the face of such horror. I have spoken with women who have experienced the cruellest and most degrading forms of treatment at the hands of combatants, and when they bravely tell their stories, the pain and trauma they feel is tangible. I have looked into the eyes of people who were forced to watch as their family members were assaulted. I have held the children born of rape, who were abandoned because they were a living, breathing reminder of brutality, instead of a symbol of new beginnings. I have sat with male survivors of sexual violence who spoke of the struggle to rebuild their lives in the aftermath of war, and to recover from the indignities they had endured.

These survivors and their stories are why we are here today. In the last ten years, we have made historic advances in the fight to end conflict-related sexual violence. A host of Security Council resolutions have helped to build a global international legal framework to end impunity. Numerous countries have used their political voice and economic resources to ensure that this issue gets the attention it deserves, and the financial support it needs, to make rape a thing of the past. Many more countries have worked to combat this scourge within their own borders, and to address the long lasting repercussions that are the legacies of rape in war.

But, we can do more. Today marks the adoption of a Declaration of Commitment to end sexual violence in conflict, and the initiation of what I call a “circle of champions”, to drive these commitments forward in their respective spheres of influence. My hope is that the circle of champions will continue to expand outwards to include policy-makers and opinion-shapers from all walks of life, who will spread the word that it is time to act to end rape in war – and that, inaction is not an option.

Your presence here today sends a message to vulnerable people in every corner of the globe that the international community will not stand by as their bodies are used as battlefields for political or military advantage. The days when sexual violence in conflict was dismissed as an unfortunate by-product of war are gone. Now that we have changed attitudes we must also change actions to prevent and eradicate this crime.

When a survivor of rape can say with devastating sadness, that “a dead rat is worth more than the body of a woman,” I say to her “You are not alone in this fight. My Office, the Team of Experts on the Rule of Law, and UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict, a network of 13 United Nations Agencies who have joined together to address this heinous crime, work with governments and a broad range of civil society partners, to ensure that the resources and expertise of the world’s only universal multilateral forum, are brought to bear in the battle to end what has been called “history’s greatest silence”. By harnessing our comparative strengths, we help governments build their capacity to prevent and respond to sexual violence. We also ensure the UN delivers services and support to victims that are survivor-centred, multi-faceted and holistic, taking into account the medical, psychosocial, legal, economic and development needs, and inalienable human rights, of those affected.

Rape in war is as old as war itself. But we have a unique opportunity now and today to change the narrative so that when the history books are written they will say that this was the place, the date and the time when the nations of the world stood together to end an historic injustice.

Thank You.

Supporting countries

Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Andorra, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Belgium, Belize, Bolivia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Botswana, Brazil, Bulgaria, Burundi, Cambodia, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dominican Republic, Egypt, El Salvador, Estonia, Ethiopia, Finland, France, Gambia, Georgia, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Hungary, Iceland, Indonesia, Iraq, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Jordan, Kuwait, Latvia, Lebanon, Liberia, Libya, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malawi, Malaysia, Malta, Mexico, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, Mozambique, Namibia, Nepal, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Oman, Palau, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Republic of Congo, Republic of Korea, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Serbia, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, South Sudan, Somalia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tanzania, Thailand, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Timor-Leste, Togo, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, United States of America, Uganda, Ukraine, Uruguay, Vietnam, Yemen

Read more:

Text of Declaration

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