Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Protecting civilians across the globe

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Thank you Madam President.

A century ago when International Humanitarian Law was still in its infancy, civilians represented only 10 to 15% of total casualties in armed conflict. Today civilians account for more than 80% of all casualties. And as we sit here today, civilians are bearing the brunt of conflicts in Syria or South Sudan, in Yemen or Libya, in the Lake Chad Basin or the Democratic Republic of Congo. The international community's failure to prevent mass atrocities such as the Srebrenica massacre in 1995 or the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994 remains a stain on our collective conscience. Anyone witnessing the bombing of schools and hospitals in Idlib or the plight of children starving to death in Yemen might be forgiven for wondering why we have not made more progress since those dark days.

So Madam President, we need to keep strengthening the normative framework- to support robust protection for the needs of specific groups who are particularly at risk in conflict situations. Much progress has been made in recent years on protections of groups such as women and girls, children, internally displaced persons, refugees, journalists and media professionals. But it is important that we continue to examine where further development can be made. And that's why we are very proud of working with Poland on a draft resolution on Persons with Disabilities in armed conflict in this Council. And I very much agree with what the Minister of Germany said on their need for us to be examining the use of high explosives in urban areas.

But our priority should be to redouble our efforts to ensure implementation of established International Humanitarian Law and this Council's resolutions on the Protection of Civilians and to combat impunity. Protection of Civilians should be integrated into this Council's approach to country situations. For example in monitoring the ceasefire around Hodeidah in Yemen. In some cases out of necessity we may need to carve out separate humanitarian tracks from wider conflict resolution efforts, such as cross-border authorisations in Syria. But we must be clear this cannot substitute for supporting efforts to find a viable long term political solution to conflict.

Madam President, eight of the fourteen UN peacekeeping missions operational around the world are mandated to protect civilians. So we need to work to ensure that wider efforts to improve peacekeeping performance in general, include a specific focus on improving

protection of civilians. Better mandating, as we've been asked by the Secretary-General in his Action for Peacekeeping agenda, is of course part of this. But ensuring that protection elements in mandates are translated into a clear task on the ground, will require mission leadership and personnel to understand the practical implementations and implications of their protection duties. There needs to be an integrated approach in our missions and across the United Nations if protection strategies are to come off the page and on to the ground. All troop and police contributing countries also need to ensure their uniform personnel are trained to the required core standards on Protection of Civilians. This is a key part of operational readiness. And peace enforcement operations - mandated or supported by the Council - such as AMISOM or the G5 Sahel must also have strong training and compliance frameworks. And it would be good to make sure that DPO is working with those troop contributing and police contributing countries to understand how such training can be most effective and report back on it, so that member states, both trainers and trainees can improve their performance.

This Council should receive regular reporting on mission performance in relation to Protection of Civilians as part of the wider performance reporting under 2436. Where serious protection failures arise within missions, we will continue to support the Secretariat in holding individuals, contingents and mission leadership accountable and to make sure we all learn lessons.

Now Madam President, I agree very much with you that protection is not only a matter for UN peacekeeping missions. The primary responsibility to protect all civilians on their territory, of course, rests with host states - with Member States of this United Nations. In order for peace to be enduring and sustainable, host state authorities and civil society actors all have a role to play.

And I agree very much with what Federica Borrello had to say on the need for national plans. The UK has a human security policy for our armed forces and we published a voluntary national review of the domestic implementation of International Humanitarian Law and we're very happy to work with anybody else interested in such an approach. So in this context, we welcome the focus on the role of local communities in this open debate, as they not only have an important voice in conflict resolution but are best placed to understand their own environments. And we need to hear more from them.

Madam President, turning to accountability. Whatever progress is made on implementation: strengthening protection of civilians over the next 20 years will also depend on how we collectively address the issue of accountability, including of course in this Council. Combating impunity is partly about establishing robust mechanisms for justice and accountability. And in some cases international mechanisms such as those tribunals set up for the Former Yugoslavia, the International Criminal Court of course, sanctions regimes or the UN investigative team for accountability of Daesh - as we've set up in Iraq - will be the best tools

at our disposal. In other cases accountability can best be delivered through domestic or hybrid mechanisms such as the Special Criminal Court in the Central African Republic or the establishment of a hybrid court as provided for in the South Sudan Peace Agreement. And we can also achieve accountability through national prosecution. I hope very much that those gathering evidence of crimes in Syria or against their Rohingya will one day see that evidence presented in effective tribunals in Syria and in Myanmar. But if not, those responsible should be held to account wherever national law permits. Accountability is about doing what is right by the victims and survivors of atrocities against civilians. But it is also a key condition for building sustainable peace. If post-conflict efforts to establish good governance, security and the Rule of Law - and crucially to maintain peace - are to succeed, then accountability is vital for the rebuilding of trust and confidence between civilian populations and the parties to the conflict.

Madam President, let me conclude by saying that this Council has an important role to play. When we receive reports of attacks on civilians, on schools, on hospitals and medical facilities, we need collectively and individually to be ready to say what we see and to say who is behind it. It can be uncomfortable to do so. It can cut across political priorities or international friendships. But for the sake of all, we must do so. After all Madam President, if we do not speak up for other countries' civilians when they are attacked who will speak for our own?

Thank you Madam President.

Point of Clarification

Mr President, I would like to take the floor in order to clarify the reference to Srebrenica in our statement to the Council this morning. The United Kingdom is clear that the Srebrenica massacre was an act of genocide, as confirmed by the judgements of the ICTY and the ICJ.

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