Press Release on Security Council Meeting on Protection of Civilians

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Concrete Action Critical to Alleviating Human Suffering, Speakers Say, at Security Council Debate on Protection of Civilians. International Community Must Remind Parties to Armed Conflict of Obligations under International Law, Deputy Secretary-General Stresses:

The situation of civilians in armed conflict zones — who were increasingly becoming targets themselves — remained “grim and bleak” even in the twenty-first century, stressed high-level briefers as the Security Council took on the issue of protection of civilians today.

Many of the more than 70 speakers addressing the 15-member body during the debate emphasized that, following a year of reflection on the Organization’s peace operations, 2016 must be a time to turn rhetoric into concrete action to mitigate civilian suffering.

“Even war has rules,” stressed Jan Eliasson, United Nations Deputy Secretary-General, as he addressed the Council at the meeting’s outset. While progress had been made over the past 40 years in establishing international norms to enhance the protection of civilians, large numbers of civilians today were still deliberately or recklessly killed, maimed, tortured or abducted, and sexual violence was rampant.

The world had recently witnessed the horrible reality of the Syrian town of Madaya, where thousands had been denied food and medical treatment for months, he said. However, that was just one town out of many where such tactics — “shamefully” — were being used. The international community, with the Council’s leadership, must remind parties to armed conflict of their obligations to uphold international law to respect and protect all civilians and civilian objects, including humanitarian workers and facilities. More must also be done to prevent conflicts, and there was a need for greater accountability.

The recent report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations, released in 2015, had pointed to a significant gap between expectations and reality when it came to the ability of missions to protect civilians, he went on, adding that a subsequent report of the Secretary-General had announced several measures to close that gap. States should also build on the Kigali Principles on the Protection of Civilians through peacekeeping, which were agreed in 2015.

Christine Beerli, Vice-President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), said the main challenge of protecting civilians centred on greater compliance with international law by all parties to armed conflicts. Violations, including the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, exacerbated the suffering of civilians, and States and non-State armed groups must comply with obligations to meet the basic needs of populations under their control and allow access for impartial humanitarian organizations. Practical recommitments to international humanitarian law on access, protection and assistance would be particularly important in 2016, because of the unprecedented number of internally displaced people, refugees and vulnerable groups fleeing due to armed conflict.

Also briefing the Council, Eveline Rooijmans, a senior humanitarian policy adviser with OXFAM, said the global report card on civilian protection was bleak, with daily examples of failure, from Yemen to South Sudan. World leaders must recommit to upholding international humanitarian law and urge parties to refrain from bombing or shelling populated areas. When civilians faced violence, such as in Burundi, it was crucial that the Council acted upon the early warnings in a timely manner and implemented existing resolutions, including in Syria. While many elements to protect civilians had already been agreed upon, implementation was needed to turn rhetoric into reality.

A number of speakers throughout the debate said that, while States bore the primary responsibility for the protection of civilians, United Nations peace operations must be able to assist them in fulfilling that responsibility and help play a preventive role. Nevertheless, speakers differed on various issues, including the flexibility of protection mandates and the use of force by Blue Helmets.

Sweden’s representative, speaking on behalf of the Nordic countries, said that currently 10 out of 16 United Nations peacekeeping operations had the protection of civilians at the core of their mandates. To reduce risks in the field, cooperation with local and national authorities must be improved and United Nations peacekeepers must be properly trained and equipped, he said, adding that national caveats should be avoided in order to allow missions to operate effectively. “If 2015 was a year of reflection and providing recommendations, 2016 should be the year of implementation and concrete action,” he stressed.

Recalling the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi people in his country, Rwanda’s representative said that, time and again, the United Nations struggled to deliver on the promise to protect. A repetition of 1994 could not take place. He went on to underscore the need for effective and rapid deployment of United Nations peacekeepers, as well as the need to act boldly, strategically and flexibly, applying tailored approaches. The benchmarks set out in the Kigali Principles offered proactive and practical ways to address current challenges in implementing civilian protection mandates.

The representative of the Russian Federation, on the other hand, warned against such “flexible” interpretations of the protection of civilians mandate. Overcoming contemporary migratory challenges caused by conflicts was only possible through political agreements and the improvement of conditions on the ground. Meanwhile, “unflinching compliance” with international law and eschewing politicized approaches to the protection of civilians was critical.

India’s representative stressed that, as civilian protection was primarily a national responsibility, the priority should be on national capacity-building, rather than on intervention. Approaches devised during peacekeeping should build on an appreciation for the “social capital” of host communities to manage their own protection. In addition, frequent and regular consultation among the Council, Secretariat and troop-contributing countries would enhance effectiveness.

Also speaking today were the representatives of Uruguay, United Kingdom, Spain, Ukraine, China, France, Malaysia, United States, New Zealand, Senegal, Egypt, Venezuela, Angola, Japan, Brazil, Thailand, Hungary, Mexico, Israel, Kazakhstan, Iran (on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement), Luxembourg, Switzerland (also on behalf of the Group of Friends of the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict), Germany, Australia, Belgium, Iraq, Kuwait, Liechtenstein, Italy, Pakistan, Romania, Poland, Indonesia, Slovenia (on behalf of the Human Security Network), South Africa, Syria, Croatia, Chile, Latvia, Republic of Korea, Georgia, Canada, Austria, Slovakia, Morocco, Paraguay, Netherlands, Guatemala, Armenia, Argentina, Montenegro, Bangladesh, Lithuania, Gabon, Albania, Turkey, Peru, Qatar and Nigeria.

Observers of the State of Palestine and the Holy See also spoke, as did representatives of the European Union and the African Union.

The representative of Azerbaijan took the floor to respond to remarks by the representative of Armenia.

The representatives of Ukraine, Israel and Armenia took the floor a second time.

The meeting began at 10:08 a.m. and ended at 6:58 p.m.

Briefings

JOSÉ LUIS CANCELA, Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs of Uruguay, opened the meeting which he would preside over, recalling the early days of the Security Council and the creation of its rotating non-permanent membership. Today, it was worth asking to what extent the Council had fulfilled its primary responsibility of maintaining international peace and security, as set forth in the United Nations Charter, he said, recalling that the 15-member body had established some 70 peacekeeping missions and had taken measures under Chapters VI and VII of the Charter to put an end to grave conflicts.

JAN ELIASSON, United Nations Deputy Secretary-General, said that progress had been made over the past 40 years in establishing international norms to enhance the protection of civilians and ensure that perpetrators of violations were brought to justice. Nevertheless, the reality on the ground was “grim and bleak”. In conflicts around the world, large numbers of civilians were deliberately or recklessly killed, maimed, tortured or abducted. Sexual violence was rampant. Stressing that “even war has rules”, he said that, in 2014, 92 per cent of people killed or injured by the use of explosive weapons in populated areas were civilians.

He said the world had just learned that 19,000 civilians had been killed in Iraq between January 2014 and October 2015, and it had seen the “horrible reality” in the Syrian town of Madaya, where thousands had been denied food and medical treatment for months. “Let us remember that Madaya is just one place where this, shamefully, is happening — and this, today, in the twenty-first century,” he stressed. In addition, the barbarity of non-State armed groups such as Da’esh, Boko Haram and others brazenly and brutally murdered thousands, kidnapped girls, destroyed cultural institutions and undermined the peaceful values of religions.

In the face of such violations, he said the international community — with the Council’s leadership — must remind parties to armed conflict of their obligations to uphold international law to respect and protect all civilians and civilian objects, including humanitarian workers and facilities. More must be done to prevent conflicts and situations which placed civilians at risk, which required consideration and action on the part of the Council. Where violations persisted, there must be accountability. Governments should adopt robust criminal legislation and strengthen their judicial systems in order to prosecute perpetrators. Judicial bodies such as the International Criminal Court should be used when national prosecution options were not available. Governments must also do more to protect people displaced by conflict, particularly those groups who were most vulnerable.

The report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations had pointed to a significant gap between expectations and reality when it came to the ability of missions to protect civilians, he said. The Secretary-General’s subsequent report announced several measures to close the gap. Peacekeeping operations must respond with speed and determination in the face of threats to civilians. The opening of mission gates to desperate people in South Sudan was one example of such determination. Missions should support host Governments to protect their people by strengthening human rights, the rule of law and inclusive institutions. Noting that dialogue between troop- and police-contributing countries, the Council and the Secretariat was critical, he went on to say that States should build on the Kigali Principles on the Protection of Civilians through peacekeeping, which were agreed in 2015.

CHRISTINE BEERLI, Vice-President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), said that her organization in 2015 had reached more than 40 million people. That was more civilians than ever before and trends showed a likely continued increase in such needs. While the current legal framework for civilian protection remained relevant, the main challenge centred on greater compliance with international humanitarian law by all parties to armed conflicts. Political action ultimately determined the fate of civilians and without political solutions millions would endure tragedy for years to come.

The protection of civilians was a core obligation of the United Nations, she said, urging the Council to find consensus to build the necessary political strategies that would prevent and end armed conflicts. Violations of international law exacerbated the suffering of civilian populations, including the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. To address that issue, States should make known their policies on the use of such weapons and explain how their use complied with international humanitarian law. The risks faced by millions facing armed conflict in cities should be considered at the upcoming Habitat III summit in order to develop a new urban agenda. States and non-State armed groups must comply with obligations to meet the basic needs of populations under their control and allow access for impartial humanitarian organizations.

Practical recommitments to international humanitarian law on access, protection and assistance would be particularly important in 2016, she said, because of the unprecedented number of internally displaced people, refugees and vulnerable groups fleeing due to armed conflict. Welcoming the United Nations summit on large-scale movements of migrants and refugees to be held in September, she emphasized the need to respect and ensure compliance with international humanitarian law. “The mere existence of obligations and prohibitions is not sufficient to prevent and put a stop to suffering or to deter future violations,” she said, underlining that international laws must be implemented. “This is a multifaceted process which requires that appropriate action be taken by actors at the national, regional and international levels.”

EVELINE ROOIJMANS, a senior humanitarian policy adviser with OXFAM, said the report card on civilian protection was bleak, with daily examples of failure, from Yemen to South Sudan. Yemen had witnessed 8,000 civilian casualties and 14.4 million people were food insecure. Syria had seen 300,000 killed and daily attacks had led to starving people in besieged towns, and in South Sudan fighting had left thousands dead and more than 2 million displaced. “Let us keep those civilians at the front of our minds today as we discuss protection and as we find ways together to bridge the gap between what the international community has already committed to doing and what is actually happening,” she said.

She said world leaders must recommit to upholding international humanitarian law and urge parties to refrain from bombing or shelling populated areas. When civilians faced violence, such as in Burundi, it was crucial that the Council acted upon the early warnings in a timely manner and implemented existing resolutions, including in Syria. The Arms Trade Treaty must also be applied. Failure to protect civilians had forced nearly 60 million people to flee their homes and all countries had commitments under international law to provide assistance and protection to asylum seekers.

So many elements needed to protect civilians had already been agreed upon, yet one critical missing piece was implementation in order to turn rhetoric into reality, she said. In addition, efforts must continue to find opportunities for civilian voices to be heard by those in power at Arria Formula meetings, during Council visits to conflict-affected areas and in the chamber. Citing a message she had received from a Syrian woman who wrote that “there is nothing dignified in what is happening to my family and friends right now, except that we are still here and have not given up”, Ms. Rooijmans said concrete measures were needed and action was essential now more than ever.

Statements

Taking the floor again, to make a statement in his national capacity, Mr. CANCELA said that, despite “courageous efforts and significant advances” in the protection of civilians, “we are still far from doing the best that we can”. Death, torture, recruitment of child soldiers, enforced disappearances, sexual and gender-based violence, and summary and extrajudicial executions were among the dramatic situations that still affected civilians. As a result of the escalation of violence, today the world faced an unprecedented refugee and humanitarian crisis, with more than 60 million refugees, internally displaced persons and asylum-seekers worldwide. To face such challenges, it was essential to ensure the most basic aspects, including the implementation of international humanitarian law — in particular the four Geneva Conventions and the two Additional Protocols — in places where armed conflict existed. Early warning mechanisms were critical to prevention, which was another basic issue. He welcomed the Secretary-General’s Human Rights Up Front Initiative, which centred on the need of a quick response to human rights violations, a preventive plan of action to protect civilians and better organizational readiness.

The primary responsibility of protecting populations lay with States, and the fight against impunity was an obligation for all, he said. Now that the threat was imminent, responses should be timely, decisive and legitimate. It was also necessary to increase efforts to ensure that humanitarian aid reached those who needed it, facilitating quick, safe and unhindered access to affected territories. For more than 15 years, the Council had recognized that deliberate targeting of civilians or other protected persons and systemic, flagrant and widespread violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in armed conflict situations constituted a threat to international peace and security. As a troop-contributing country, Uruguay recognized the significant progress made in recent years. Today, no one questioned whether protection of civilians should be a part of peacekeeping, but instead they talked about “how”. The protection of civilians was a multidimensional activity that involved many actors and “every link in the chain” needed to be strong. However, more remained to be done, as stated in the Independent Panel Report. The General Assembly and all relevant bodies, including the Council, should conduct a thorough discussion on the recommendations contained in the report. Moreover, the subsequent implementation report of the Secretary-General would help to make a “qualitative leap” towards living up to expectations

PETER WILSON (United Kingdom) said the change that had taken place in the last 12 months was a change “in the wrong direction”. Civilians continued to be targeted, and there were new and disturbing trends such as the use of siege and starvation in warfare. It was critical that States and non-State groups respected the law. Many elements to protect civilians had been agreed on, but implementation was needed. He also echoed Mr. Eliasson’s statement that “even wars have rules”. In that context, ending the conflict in Syria through a political solution must be a priority. There must be greater compliance with international law and impunity must be ended. When the Council referred a situation to the International Criminal Court, States must comply with its requests and the 15-member body must follow up all such referrals. Looking ahead to the World Humanitarian Summit, which would set out to address many of those issues, he said that the own tools of the United Nations should be used to the fullest. Those included the recent reviews of peace operations that several speakers had mentioned. In that regard, he looked forward to more frank recommendations to ensure increased transparency and accountability. Protecting civilians in armed conflict was at the core of the United Nations work, yet it was the hardest to make progress on. “We cannot keep holding these debates year on year” without acting, he stressed, adding: “This is the year to take action”.

JESÚS MANUEL GRACIA ALDAZ, Secretary of State for International Cooperation and for Ibero-America of Spain, associating himself with the European Union, said civilians must be protected and aid must be provided to those in need in conflicts. There had been an increasing number of attacks on medical facilities, in contravention of international law. Together with New Zealand, Uruguay and other countries, Spain was working to put an end to such attacks and to ensure that humanitarian personnel were protected. The world was seeing an increasing trend in the use of explosive weapons in heavily populated areas, as had been seen in recent years in Syria. Such attacks were carried out in an atmosphere of impunity. His country had actively supported the initiative of Switzerland and the ICRC to ensure that States complied with international law. In a similar vein, he said that the International Criminal Court was “not being fully utilized”. While the obligation to protect the civilian population fell mainly on States, that responsibility could be shared with the international community and in particular the Security Council. His country strongly supported the Secretary-General’s proposal to set up a senior adviser for the protection of civilians, within the Office of the Special Representative.

SERGIY KYSLYSTYA, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, said his country had adopted political directives on the protection of civilians. The reality on the ground was characterized by a seeming lack of willingness on the part of parties to protect civilians in accordance with international law. All parties to armed conflict needed to fully comply with such obligations. Last Friday, the Council had held a meeting about the desperate humanitarian situation in Syria; in Darfur, Iraq, Afghanistan, Mali and other countries women and children continued to be the targets of violence. Stricter norms were needed to protect civilians from the impact of explosive devices in populated areas. Peacekeeping missions were often judged by their ability to protect civilians, he said, stressing the need for reform in order to respond to evolving threats and new realities. The Council must ensure that peacekeeping missions had the resources they needed and all

mandates must be clear and realistic. In his country, thousands of innocent civilian lives had been lost over the last two years due to the aggression by the Russian Federation. Bombings had killed many people and attacks were being waged against the civilian populations far from the conflict zones, leading to the conclusion that civilians were being deliberately targeted. In addition, “so-called humanitarian convoys” of the Russian Federation were crossing the border without the consent of Ukraine or coordination with the ICRC, and their contents were unknown.

LIU JIEYI (China) said protecting civilians in armed conflict had become an important element in peacekeeping operations. Practical and effective measures were needed, and all parties to armed conflicts should fulfil their obligations to protect civilians, with the primary responsibility resting with the State concerned. As for violations, countries concerned should investigate and punish such acts according to law. Conflict prevention and resolution must be among the tools to address tensions, including advancing inclusive political dialogue and creating an environment of peace and stability. Preventive diplomacy must be strengthened, with a goal of achieving political settlements to conflicts. Assisting conflict-affected countries was also important. For its part, the Council should consider the situation on the ground when drafting resolutions. Conflict-affected countries should also be consulted to ensure access to humanitarian organizations providing assistance to those in need.

FRANÇOIS DELATTRE (France) said presentations heard today had shown the urgency of the need to protect civilians, as emphasized in the Fourth Geneva Convention. Grim reminders could be seen in the recent siege in Madaya and Da’esh executions and abductions, he said, underlining France’s call to mobilize efforts to address those and other crises. Protecting civilians was an obligation, morally and to ensure sustainable peace and security, he said, citing examples of such efforts in Mali and the Central African Republic. The Council must keep civilian protection at the heart of its agenda, he continued, expressing support for the Secretary-General’s priorities for zero tolerance of sexual abuse and exploitation and for the United Nations to re-evaluate its support for certain armed forces that failed the mission to protect civilians and to step up investigations. With enormous challenges in 2016, the Council must remain resolute in efforts to protect civilians, from its support for a political process in Syria to maintaining dialogue amid tensions in Burundi. The Council must, in 2016, address those and other situations that could not be ignored.

RAMLAN BIN IBRAHIM (Malaysia) said the debate was occurring amid grave concerns about targeted attacks on civilians and medical personnel. Flagrant disregard for international humanitarian norms was seen around the world, with women and children at further risk of sexual and gender based violence. Laws existed, but implementing them was lacking. Challenges outlined in the Secretary-General’s report, he said, underlined the Council’s focus on those and related issues. The United Nations response had reflected mandates that had increasingly included civilian protection and peacekeepers must be ensured the provision of adequate equipment to discharge their functions. On Syria, he said the Council had been seized of the situation for that last five years, including through resolutions, and he supported suggestions for taking action for the protection of medical personnel. Recalling the plight of civilians in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, he said they could not remain the Council’s Achilles’ heel for much longer. Pending the end of the Israeli occupation, the Council must ensure that all States be held accountable for violations of international law.

SAMANTHA POWER (United States) described last week’s entrance of United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) personnel into the besieged Syrian town of Madaya, telling the story of several people who had died of starvation there before assistance could reach them. Aid convoys had finally reached Madaya and other towns, but the daily sieges of all towns and cities must end, she stressed. “Imagine […] watching your child die without the means of helping him or her,” she said, calling for Member States to put themselves “in the shoes of others”. Of 15 besieged areas in Syria, 12 were besieged by a Member State of the United Nations. More than 4 million civilians lived in hard-to-reach areas of Syria. Time and again, the Syrian regime had failed to follow through on its commitments to allow humanitarian aid; in 2015, Damascus had failed to respond to about half of requests for humanitarian convoys. “Where is the sanctity of life?” she asked. In Yemen, Burundi, the Central African Republic and other States, civilians were not only being left unprotected, but were coming under direct attack. She went on to list a number of areas where the civilian protection could be strengthened, including the transmission of information to the Council and peacekeeping performance and accountability. With regard to the latter, she stressed that it was incumbent upon the Council that peacekeeping troops were well-prepared, well-equipped and held accountable if they failed in their mandate. “We need to open up the toolbox and put as many tools in place” as were needed, including the consideration of sanctions against those who attacked civilians or peacekeepers. Member States must also embrace the Secretary-General’s Human Rights Up Front Initiative in order to send an urgent message: no matter how blatant or heinous attacks on civilians were, the United Nations would never accept them as “normal”.

GERARD VAN BOHEMEN (New Zealand) said that after more than 15 years of reports, debates, thematic solutions and presidential statements on the issue, the international community had to acknowledge that the conditions of civilians in conflict zones were still dreadful. To make a meaningful improvement in their protection, the Council must shift its focus from words to actions. On conflict prevention, his country had been calling on the 15-member body to address the growing risk of conflict in Burundi. He was pleased that an agreement had been reached, and a Council mission was departing for Bujumbura the following day. On peace operations, mandates needed to be “clear, realistic and adequately resourced” and had to take into account the views of troop- and police-contributing countries. However, current decision-making lacked situational awareness, high-quality information on emerging risks and ongoing implementation challenges. Regarding international humanitarian law, he expressed concern about recent reports from Madaya, Foua and Kafrayar, which had shown the failures of the Syrian Government and armed opposition groups to fulfil their responsibilities. While he was encouraged that access to humanitarian aid had been allowed over the past week, attacks on health-care personnel, facilities and medical vehicles needed attention.

FODÉ SECK (Senegal) said reality showed that strict compliance with international law was unfortunately far from being translated on the ground. As such, the Council must remain determined to ensure that all parties to armed conflict met their obligations and use their political influence, as necessary, to achieve that. In that light, combatting impunity was critical as a means of deterrence. Conflict prevention and mediation and early-warning systems remained among the critical tools needed to protect civilians. For its part, Senegal’s armed forces protected vulnerable groups as part of its obligations to the Kigali Principles and international humanitarian laws. Indeed, Captain Mbaye Diagne had become an example, with the United Nations having created a medal in his name for exceptional bravery and contributions to protecting vulnerable populations. Captain Diagne could also serve as a model for peacekeepers.

AMR ABDELLATIF ABOULATTA (Egypt) said the protection of civilians in armed conflicts was a concern to the Council and a mandate of United Nations peacekeeping operations. However, it was unfortunate that the optimal way to implement their mandate was still not clear. An example was the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), which had failed to provide sufficient protection to civilians. Protection was the primary responsibility of States and the United Nations must respect the sovereignty of those countries.

RAFAEL RAMIREZ (Venezuela) said, according to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols, civilian populations could not be the object of attacks or violence. Particular attention needed to be given to the elderly, women, children, persons with disabilities and the displaced. The level of brutality committed in armed conflicts was alarming; regardless of who committed such acts, all were grave violations of international law. It was also very concerning that worldwide displacement was at the highest level ever recorded. In 2014 alone, 11 million people had to leave their homes, he underlined. On United Nations peacekeeping operations, he said that they played a key role to protect civilians while staying impartial. The Council and the Secretariat needed to engage in inclusive and sustainable consultations with troop- and police-contributing countries to ensure the appropriate implementation of their mandates.

ISMAEL ABRAÃO GASPAR MARTINS (Angola) said that “protection” was the most effective tool to address potential conflicts, and States had the primary responsibility to protect their citizens. According to recent statistics, the number of refugees and displaced exceeded 60 million. To address such phenomenon, the international community needed to pay attention to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols. He then expressed concern about the limited access to humanitarian assistance, attacks on humanitarian workers and hospitals, and the use of explosive in civilian areas. Such acts constituted a violation of international law and it was important that the international community effectively protected civilians.

MOTOHIDE YOSHIKAWA (Japan), associating himself with the Group of Friends of the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, said ensuring compliance of parties to armed conflict with humanitarian law remained a challenge. It was regrettable that an agreement on the strengthening of the normative framework of international humanitarian law had not been reached. Member States should strive in a more inclusive manner to enhance those mechanisms. When compliance failed, accountability must play its role, as effective accountability deferred non-compliance. The International Criminal Court was an effective mechanism in that respect, he said, recalling that it had recently completed its first case round including a sentence served, which had taken more than eight years. Member States had varying views on the Court; however, with over two thirds of United Nations Member States signed on to the Rome Statute, the Court could effectively hold accountable perpetrators of crimes committed against civilians. He encouraged States who had not yet done so to become members of the Court.

EVGENY T. ZAGAYNOV (Russian Federation) described “horrendous” atrocities committed by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)/Da’esh, which was “running amok” in Iraq, Syria and other countries. His delegation shared the recommendations of the High-level Independent Panel as well as those of the Secretary-General on the use of political dialogue for the settlement of conflict. However, he could not agree with calls for “flexible” interpretations of the protection of civilians mandate, including the use of force by blue helmets. It was necessary to create the conditions conducive to the timely delivery of humanitarian aid. He called on the parties to conflict to unswervingly allow for such access; however, many actors continued to block such access and even targeted attacks at humanitarian personnel. Overcoming contemporary migratory challenges caused by conflicts was only possible through political agreements and the improvement of conditions on the ground. “Unflinching compliance” with international law and eschewing politicized approaches to the protection of civilians were critical. The emotional element of the topic being discussed today made it particularly susceptible to politicization, as had been done this morning against his country. He went on to describe refusals by Ukraine to negotiate with his country, as well as the former’s mass shelling of towns in the east of the country and its continuing economic blockade of the area. Ukrainian authorities must find the political will to implement the Minsk Agreements.

EUGENE-RICHARD GASANA (Rwanda) said some troop- and police-contributors believed that they were deployed to protect “by presence”, an idea that suggested a more static approach to the protection of civilians. Others, however, adhered to a more proactive approach to the mandate. Recalling that, in 1994, more than a million people were killed during the genocide against the Tutsi in his country, he said the Organization and the international community was still asking itself why it had not done more to prevent the tragedy. Time and again, the United Nations struggled to deliver on the crucial promise to protect. A repetition of what had happened in 1994 could not take place. On the use of force, he said the international community remained divided over that concept, and stressed the need to clearly and thoroughly confirm what it entailed, particularly when the threat to civilians may arise from groups that claimed to be affiliated with the host Government. Going on to underscore the need for effective and rapid deployment, he stressed the need to avoid “template” approaches that constrained protection of civilian mandates and their respective peacekeeping missions. The international community must be able to act boldly, strategically and flexibly, applying tailored approaches. Finally, the benchmarks set out in the Kigali Principles offered proactive and practical ways to address current challenges in implementing civilian protection mandates.

ANTONIO DE AGUIAR PATRIOTA (Brazil), associating himself with the Group of Friends of the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, said the three ambitious current reviews of international peace and security endorsed the notion that preventing and resolving conflict through peaceful means was the most effective way to shield people from the miseries of war. The lessons of Libya must not be ignored and the basic ethical precept of medicine — do no harm — should be applied as a tenet for civilian protection in times of conflict. The use of force should be applied responsibly using two practical steps: importing from the peacekeeping system the practice of reporting to and briefing delegations and creating monitoring mechanisms by establishing panels of experts modelled after United Nations sanctions committees. To ensure that civilians in situations of conflict remained safe, the legal and political framework to strengthen compliance with international law must be strengthened. Those and related issues should be discussed at the upcoming meetings, including the upcoming World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul.

CHAYAPAN BAMRUNGPHONG (Thailand) said civilian protection was the primary responsibility of host Governments, which must be supported, if necessary, by the international community to build or strengthen capacities in addressing the root causes of conflict. Peacekeeping operations with protection mandates were crucial when a Government had failed in that responsibility. A comprehensive predeployment training and periodic in-mission training was necessary and peacekeepers must be well equipped with knowledge of international law. As such, mission resources must be adequate and predictable. With regard to the changing nature of conflict, the Council must assess the situation on the ground and review the scope of the mission’s mandate on a regular basis. Peacekeeping operations should also include protection for civilian advisers and child and women protection officers. The rise in civilian casualties indicated the non-compliance of international laws and repeated calls to end that trend had been ignored. As such, fact-finding missions and commissions of inquiry would contribute to ending impunity. Concluding, he underlined an urgent need to strengthen coordination among United Nations bodies to protect civilians and to recognize the indispensable role of regional and subregional organizations, local communities and civil society in that regard.

KATALIN ANNAMÁRIA BOGYAY (Hungary) said the international community needed to step up efforts to maintain international peace and protect civilians. Over the years, the line between international and domestic conflicts had blurred and it was significant to have continuous consultations between the Council, Secretariat and the troop- and police-contributing States to adequately respond to the changing nature of conflict. Highlighting the key role of conflict prevention measures and early warning systems in preventing armed conflicts, she said that the United Nations must undertake all necessary measures to eliminate the escalation of hostilities in countries concerned.

SYED AKBARUDDIN (India) condemned violence against civilians, regardless of the perpetrators. As civilian protection was primarily a national responsibility, the priority should be on national capacity-building, rather than on intervention. Approaches devised during peacekeeping should build on an appreciation for the “social capital” of host communities to manage their own protection. Solutions should be sought within the framework of international law, with international responses based on the use of appropriate methods in proportion to perceived threat. Frequent and regular consultation among the Council, Secretariat and troop-contributing countries would enhance the 15-member body’s effectiveness. He urged addressing civilian protection issues through focused peacebuilding activities.

OLOF SKOOG (Sweden), speaking on behalf of the Nordic countries, said that currently 10 out of 16 United Nations peacekeeping operations had the protection of civilians at the core of their mandates. While host States bore the primary responsibility for that task, United Nations peace operations must be able to assist them in fulfilling the responsibility and must help to play a preventive role. Raising a few key issues, he said that women, men, girls and boys all faced different threats during and after a conflict, and protection of civilians must be based on gender analysis. Secondly, as the flow of arms to conflict areas increased human suffering, all countries should join the Arms Trade Treaty to help address that problem. Thirdly, parties to armed conflict must respect their obligations under international humanitarian law as a global responsibility. To reduce risks in the field, cooperation with local and national authorities must be improved and United Nations peacekeepers must be properly trained and equipped. The Nordic countries drew their experience first-hand from their work in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), he said, adding that all actors must provide for the rapid, unimpeded and sustained passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in conflict zones, as stipulated by international law. National caveats should be avoided in order to allow missions to operate effectively. “If 2015 was a year of reflection and providing recommendations, 2016 should be the year of implementation and concrete action,” he concluded.

RICARDO ALDAY GONZÁLEZ (Mexico) said the protection of civilians was the “yardstick” against which the work of the United Nations was measured, as well as a responsibility for all Member States. The effectiveness of the Organization, and the Council in particular, to protect civilians had received a mixed report card. As had been seen in the prolonged conflicts in the Middle East and Africa, civilians were increasingly exposed to violence due to flagrant violations of international law. The presence of a United Nations mission did not reduce a State’s obligation to protect civilians, nor did the responsibility of a State dilute that of the United Nations. On weapons of mass destruction and the transfer of conventional arms, he said that some States put themselves above international law. Finally, he said prevention must be at the core of all efforts to protect civilians. The Council should be more effective in preventing crises from becoming uncontrolled armed conflicts.

DAVID ROET (Israel) said civilians had become pawns in a game in which State and non-State actors used them to gain political leverage. Attacks directed at civilians had become routine, and nowhere was the situation more heart-breaking than in Syria, where President Bashar al-Assad’s “murderous regime” had been attacking and killing civilian by the hundreds of thousands. Hizbullah, the enforcer of Iranian and Syrian orders, the recruiter of children to fight in Syria, was the prime organization terrorizing people in Syrian towns such as Madaya. His country had warned time and time again that letting Hizbullah’s actions go unchecked would only result in more death, pain and suffering. “Deliberately putting the lives of innocent civilians in harm’s way is a war crime,” he stressed in that regard; however, the threats to the lives of both Lebanese and Israeli civilians were rarely mentioned in the Council. It was the responsibility of the organ to identify rising threats to prevent situations such as those from escalating. “The Security Council should send a clear message to Hizbullah and to Lebanon that this cannot be tolerated,” he said.

ALEXANDR KABENTAYEV (Kazakhstan) said the maintenance of peace and protection of civilians was the joint responsibility and effort of the Security Council, Department of Peacekeeping Operations, Department of Field Support, regional organizations and troop- and police-contributing countries. Such responsibility required full cooperation and operational clarity on the formulation and implementation of mandates. To that end, he called for the complete and strict implementation of the Secretary-General’s June 2015 report and recommendations of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations. Civilian protection was complex and there needed to be multidimensional provisions and competencies for vulnerable groups, including women and children, child soldiers and displaced persons. Further, he underlined the key role of the active participation of women at each stage of the process

GHOLAMALI KHOSHROO (Iran), speaking on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement, noted the suffering of civilians caught up in conflict. All parties needed to redouble their efforts to comply with their legal obligations — prohibiting the targeting of civilian populations and property and ensuring general protection against dangers arising from military operations to civilian installations, hospitals and relief materials. He condemned attacks on humanitarian personnel and urged Governments to ensure laws were respected. The principle of non-intervention must be upheld, as well as the consent of a country to grant access to humanitarian assistance and its operations. United Nations peacekeeping operations with civilian protection mandates should be Charter-based. At the same time, civilian protection was the primary responsibility of the host country and thus the successful conduct of Council-mandated tasks required integration at all levels and the timely provision of adequate resources, logistical support and training. Clearly defined and achievable mandates were also required, as was establishing accountability for international humanitarian law violations.

SYLVIE LUCAS (Luxembourg), associating herself with the European Union and the Group of Friends, said civilians had not only been deprived of their right to be protected but also were often targeted as a way to force entire populations to leave their homes. The Syrian conflict had shown the violations to which civilians had been subjected, with many trapped between Government forces that bombed schools and hospitals, on the one hand, and groups such as Da’esh that attached no value to human life, on the other. The best way to protect civilians was to do all to prevent conflicts from erupting. The Council must use all prevention tools at its disposal. It should be provided with information by the Secretary-General and others, in line with article 99 of the Charter. She also urged the improvement of peacekeeping operations, as well as pursuing a policy of zero tolerance, praising the Kigali Principles finalized in 2015. Combating impunity should be at the heart of all efforts.

JÜRG LAUBER (Switzerland), speaking on behalf of the Group of Friends of the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, said the world must react vigorously to a growing lack of respect for international humanitarian law. “We cannot be indifferent to the immense human suffering caused by armed conflicts,” he emphasized, adding that more must be done in the face of indiscriminate attacks against civilians. Perpetrators must be brought to justice, he said, noting that the Security Council was uniquely positioned to promote peace and justice. As such, it should make use of its many options to promote and ensure accountability, stand up to reported atrocities and support the fight against impunity.

Furthermore, the Council must demonstrate its leadership and systematically endeavour to uphold the core civilian-protection standards whenever the need arose, he continued. Turning to peace operations, he said the Group of Friends welcomed the Secretary-General’s recommendations with respect to protection of civilians, stressing that the best way to meet that goal was by preventing armed conflict. Welcoming the zero-tolerance policy on sexual exploitation and abuse, he called upon Member States to strengthen their efforts in that regard, while also calling upon them to seize the opportunity to discuss protection of civilians further at the World Humanitarian Summit to be held in May.

HARALD BRAUN (Germany), associating himself with the European Union and the Group of Friends, said the deliberate blocking of aid, indiscriminate attacks on residential areas and starvation of civilians had become a cynical trademark of the conflict. Non-State armed groups continued to violate international humanitarian and human rights law, and States’ awareness of the obligation to uphold them must be strengthened. He urged a redoubling of international efforts to strengthen compliance on the part of parties to the conflict. “The world expects the Council to take action when civilians are slaughtered in conflicts,” especially if other mechanisms failed, he said. Preventing crimes against civilians must remain the priority. He welcomed the “comprehensive and inclusive” approach taken by the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) to better protect civilians, particularly its attention to sexual and gender-based violence.

GILLIAN BIRD (Australia) said that as the human cost for civilians enmeshed in conflict had climbed, every opportunity must be used to achieve stronger action to safeguard them. The United Nations must use all tools at its disposal to protect security, political and aid efforts. Australia was concerned by the blatant lack of compliance by many warring parties to international humanitarian law. Existing mechanisms were insufficient, and he was disappointed at the failure to agree on a stronger mechanism at the recent International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent. Central to civilian protection was the obligation to meet civilian needs. Systematic efforts to impede delivery of life-saving aid by denying access were deplorable. He welcomed the recent provision of essential health and food supplies to Syria; however, full, unconditional and sustained access for all must be granted immediately. Inducing starvation was inhumane and unlawful and must cease. Where necessary, the use of force must be permitted. Robust peace was a crucial tool at the Council’s disposal, which must receive timely conflict trend analysis and real-time analysis of protection needs. Unarmed civilian capacities of peacekeeping operations must be reinforced to support that effort.

PASCAL BUFFIN (Belgium) said his country supported the recommendations on the protection of civilians, including those of the High-level Panel. Belgium also fully supported the Secretary-General’s recommendations, including with regard to humanitarian access and the use of explosive devices in civilian areas. Syria’s civilian population was suffering immensely, he said, emphasizing that full humanitarian access to besieged areas must be a priority for the Council. “Blue Helmets” had a duty to intervene, with force if necessary, to protect civilians. Impunity must end and perpetrators must be held accountable, he said, calling upon all States to ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Belgium also called upon the Council to continue its support for MINUSCA’s efforts and to investigate reports of sexual abuse and exploitation.

MOHAMED ALI ALHAKIM (Iraq) said civilian protection was an ethical and legal obligation for all, a responsibility consisting of not targeting civilian areas. Unfortunately, the targeting of civilian, summary executions, abductions, rape, recruiting child soldiers and desecrating religious sites had turned civilians into human shields. Iraq had joined the fight against terrorism and respected humanitarian law, seeking to open safe corridors for the evacuation of civilians from combat zones, as had taken place recently in Ramadi, he recalled. Military forces had been called upon to target only military targets and to protect civilians, he said, adding that the Government provided care for victims of terrorist attacks. Da’esh had committed heinous crimes against civilians, and Iraq called upon the world to help it fight that threat, facilitate the return of displaced people and rebuild its destroyed infrastructure.

ABDULAZIZ S M A ALJARALLAH (Kuwait) said decisive actions were needed to ensure that humanitarian assistance reached affected populations and that international law was enforced. Perpetrators must be held accountable for acts committed against civilian populations. Despite resolutions adopted for the protection of civilians, the international community had not fulfilled its goal, as evidenced by rising casualties and the growing numbers of people fleeing armed conflicts. The case of the people of Palestine must be remembered in discussions of international humanitarian law, he said, calling for rapid Council action for the protection of unarmed Palestinians. Turning to the situation in Syria, he said attacks against cities had triggered famine and much suffering. Employing siege as a tactic was indeed a war crime, he said, adding that the Council must put an end to that practice. Efforts must be made to end armed conflicts, including in Syria and Yemen, and perpetrators must be held accountable.

STEFAN BARRIGA (Liechtenstein) said that disrespect for the well-being of civilians during armed conflict was reminiscent of the Dark Ages, with families starving in besieged towns and patients being killed by bombs in their hospital beds. Shockingly, some of those acts fell squarely within the responsibility of Member States, he noted. “How can we expect non-State actors to comply with at least the basic tenets of international humanitarian law when States parties to the Geneva Conventions fail to do so?” He expressed regret that the thirty-second International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent had not been able to agree on measures to improve compliance, since proposals on the table were designed to accommodate the concerns of some opposing States. Complementary steps must be considered within and outside the Council, he said. On accountability, he said peace operations could do more to support the International Criminal Court, as could the Council by referring the situations in Syria or the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea to the Court.

RIYAD MANSOUR, Permanent Observer for the State of Palestine, said the tragedy of civilians in armed conflict persisted due to lack of respect for international humanitarian law and failure to hold perpetrators of violations accountable. “We have repeatedly appealed for protection for the Palestinian people,” oppressed for decades by Israel, he noted. Citing resolutions dating back to 1987, by which the Council took the Palestinians’ need for protection into account, he pointed out that the Temporary International Presence in Hebron provided limited protection in that city. Recalling that the report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations described civilian protection as a “moral responsibility” for the United Nations, he pressed the Council to protect civilians in armed conflict situations, adding that for Palestinians, that was more urgent than ever.

SEBASTIANO CARDI (Italy) said that, given the current circumstances, further efforts were needed to prevent the targeting of civilians and public infrastructure. Highlighting points from the Secretary-General’s report, he said the Council must systematically remind parties to conflict of their obligation to uphold international laws and guarantee unimpeded humanitarian access, while condemning any “arbitrary” denial without fail. As for peacekeeping operations, he said non-military tools were available, including political advocacy, credible reporting and liaison with local communities. Pre-deployment training was essential to tackling the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse, he added. Recalling the adoption of the Kigali Principles, he expressed confidence that a greater number of police- and troop-contributing countries would subscribe to and implement them.

MALEEHA LODHI (Pakistan) said that, according to a recent United Nations report, 19,000 civilians had been killed between 2014 and 2015 in Iraq’s ongoing conflict. “The protection of civilians is a system-wide responsibility,” she said, with Governments bearing the primary responsibility. While a normative framework was in place, compliance was sporadic and defiance remained rampant, especially on the part of non-State actors. Pakistan supported efforts to strengthen compliance and accountability, as well as the High-level Panel’s recommendations for better training for peacekeepers and closer trilateral dialogue. Noting that peacekeeping principles did not impede civilian-protection mandates, she said her country’s counter-terrorism operations, which entailed better advanced planning to limit effects on civilians, as the Secretary-General’s report had noted, were law-enforcement actions that did not constitute an armed conflict situation.

BERNARDITO AUZA, Permanent Observer for the Holy See, recalled that in the early 1900s, civilians had comprised 5 per cent of conflict fatalities, while in the 1990s, more than 90 per cent of the fatalities had been non-combatants. The figures continued to worsen amid huge civilian casualties and massive population displacements. The entire international community was implicated in some way, by its silence and indifference, for example, or the fact that the slaughter of innocents was perpetrated with weapons made and supplied by the world’s industrial engines and sold on the open or black markets. Such barbarity must be denounced, he emphasized. The international community must do its utmost to stop such crimes, including through legitimate use of force to stop mass atrocities and war crimes. The Council must bring perpetrators to justice and States must be ready to use the relevant tools. Those responsible must be held accountable and States must provide civilians affected by mass atrocities and war crimes with all the help they deserved.

ION JINGA (Romania) said protecting civilians in armed conflicts remained a major challenge. Supporting the recommendations made in the Secretary-General’s report, he said working towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly with regard to supporting peaceful societies, would have considerable effect on protecting civilians. It was the primary responsibility of States to protect civilians and mete out justice for perpetrators of violations against international law. Condemning attacks on civilians, he called on all Governments and non-State armed groups to protect populations and find peaceful solutions to disputes. Should a State fail to protect civilians, the international community should intervene. For its part, Romania had adopted a national strategy to apply international humanitarian law, including during the participation in international missions, and worked with regional organizations in that regard.

JOÃO VALE DE ALMEIDA, speaking on behalf of the European Union, said that the regional bloc was committed to promoting the implementation of international humanitarian law, human rights law and refugee law worldwide. The respect for such laws was crucial to ensure the protection of civilians in armed conflicts and provide help to victims in the most efficient manner. In clear violation of international obligations, the Union was concerned about the frequent failure of parties to armed conflicts to comply with their obligations and the increased targeting of medical missions and personnel.

The specific protection needs of women and children required special attention, he continued. The international community must also pay attention to the phenomenon of sexual violence and the use of rape as tactics of warfare, affecting women, children and men. National authorities had the primary responsibility to prove accountability for violations of international humanitarian law and violations and abuses of human rights. However, where countries were unable or unwilling to take necessary steps to ensure accountability, other mechanisms must be used. To that end, the International Criminal Court and the Council had an important role to play.

BOGUSLAW WINID (Poland) said the protection of civilians was more important than ever, with millions suffering as a result of military attacks. Peacekeepers should be equipped with more advanced tools to address the root causes of crises and their consequences. Early-warning and rapid-reaction capacities must be improved, and new capabilities must be explored and new technologies adopted. Calling for a clearer understanding of the protection of civilians, he stressed United Nations peace operations should help host States implement the responsibility to protect, citing the “Human Rights Up Front” initiative in that regard. Poland was committed to promoting the implementation of international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law, he said, deploring the politicization of aid and the polarization of States around humanitarian issues.

MUHAMMAD ANSHOR (Indonesia) expressed hope that today’s debate would send a strong message to all warring parties on the imperative of respecting international humanitarian law. He supported stronger monitoring and civilian casualty tracking and recording, and called for the development of a common system in the United Nations for that purpose. Those mechanisms would be crucial to informing the international community of the level of observance of international humanitarian law, which in turn could underpin improved strategies and policies and help ensure accountability. He supported the Secretary-General’s intention to report on civilian protection yearly rather than every 18 months. Civilian protection issues required sustained action. It was also vital to ensure humanitarian access to conflict zones. To achieve a greater respect for international humanitarian law and access, the Council should provide consistent political and operational support. A common doctrine of civilian protection and practical guides would aid implementation of protection mandates. Missions needed clear, credible and achievable mandates with explicit use-of-force protocols.

ANDREJ LOGAR (Slovenia), speaking for the Human Security Network, said that ensuring respect for human rights and humanitarian law on the part of all parties to conflict was the first step to enhancing civilian protection. States must comply with their obligation to facilitate rapid, unimpeded access to humanitarian relief, he said, adding that political settlements, alongside preventive measures to ensure there was no relapse into conflict, were also needed. Resolution 1325 (2000) should be considered in the context of civilian protection, as well as greater efforts to protect children’s rights, he said. As for accountability, commissions of inquiry and fact-finding missions were useful when investigating alleged violations of international law, but when States were unwilling or unable to bring perpetrators to justice, referral to the International Criminal Court was another way to thwart impunity, he said.

Speaking in his national capacity, he said that safeguarding humanitarian access and respect for humanitarian principles must remain at the core of civilian protection. Parties to conflict must respect their obligation to allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access. The Council must consider providing all peacekeeping missions with civilian-protection mandates, with an emphasis on the protection of children, elderly and the disabled. Special attention must also be paid to preventing and addressing sexual violence in conflict. Peacekeepers should be role models, not perpetrators, of such abuse, he stressed, adding that they must respect the zero-tolerance United Nations policy in that regard.

MAHALTSE MMINELE (South Africa) said that as the international community was increasingly challenged by the changing nature of conflict, today’s debate was useful in evaluating its reaction to those circumstances and whether or not the available tools were effective. It was critical that, in responding and countering extreme violence, responders did not become perpetrators of the suffering and death of the very civilians they were trying to protect. Protecting civilians could best be achieved by the Council’s investing in greater prevention efforts while seeking political solutions to conflict. While States bore the primary responsibility to protect civilians, armed opposition groups must also bear responsibility and the Council must ensure that perpetrators were punished. Peacekeepers should be deployed in support of political or peace processes, but should non-military tools be inadequate, missions with protection mandates must play their part through the use of force, he said, citing the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and its Force Intervention Brigade as an example. Peacekeeping missions must also be adequately resourced to discharge their mandates fully, he added.

MOUNZER MOUNZER (Syria) said the creation of the United Nations had given hope to people around the world. Although it was the Organization’s responsibility to ensure peace and security, as well as to protect civilians, it had not fulfilled the hopes of its founding fathers. Practice had shown that protecting civilians in armed conflict had always been selective and subject to double standards, he said. Furthermore, good offices were the best way to prevent crisis and settle disputes, and States had the primary responsibility to protect their citizens. It was unacceptable that some Member States used “protection” as a pretext to impose their own interests, he said, adding that such practice had undermined the Charter and the Council. Syria asked the Council to shoulder it responsibility to enforce the Charter, he said.

VLADIMIR DROBNJAK (Croatia), associating himself with the European Union, called upon all Syrian parties, especially the regime, to end the sieges, allow immediate and unfettered aid, and ensure adherence to international humanitarian law. Protecting civilians must be the focus. Noting that February would mark the twentieth anniversary of the end of the siege of Sarajevo, he noted that those responsible for the atrocities committed there and in Vukovar were facing justice before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. Accountability should be regarded as “part of the equation” of protecting civilians, the primary responsibility of which lay with the State. Expressing concern over the alleged use of cluster munitions in Yemen and Syria, as well as the implications of armed conflict on women and children, he said the international community must do more to prevent and respond to sexual violence in conflict.

CRISTIÁN BARROS MELET (Chile), associating himself with the Human Security Network and the Non-Aligned Movement, said the code of conduct on the non-use of veto in cases of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes offered “the right way forward”. The revision related to recommending early warning systems and on the role of regional and subregional organizations was important in that regard. “Human rights come first”, he said, urging better coordination among the Council, Secretariat and troop- and police-contributors, which would enhance civilian protection efforts. Peacekeeping missions should have training and gender advisers for the protection of women, and children and human rights should be an “independent category” to meet the special needs of those populations. He also urged implementation of resolutions 2122 (2013), 2242 (2015) and 2143 (2014), the latter of which related to the protection of schools and universities, in line with the Oslo Declaration on safe schools.

JĀNIS MAŽEIKS (Latvia), associating himself with the European Union, said that while normative-level progress and Council resolutions played an important role in civilian protection, lack of respect for international humanitarian law and impunity on the ground was growing. He called upon the Secretary-General and the ICRC President to “make every effort” to find political solutions to conflicts, ensure compliance with international humanitarian law, hold perpetrators to account, grant unhindered access and protect humanitarian and medical personnel, and respond to the needs of internally displaced persons and refugees. The Council’s failure to prevent conflict and demand accountability was a disappointment to victims, he said, urging permanent members to refrain from using the veto in situations of atrocity crime.

OH JOON (Republic of Korea) said his delegation appreciated the Secretary-General’s continuing commitment to incorporating the protection of civilians into all United Nations peacekeeping operations. Welcoming the Council’s presidential statement of 25 November 2015, he said the Republic of Korea had been engaged in ongoing discussions on building and sustaining political momentum for implementation of the recommendations of both the Secretary-General and the High-level Panel on Peace Operations. Further, it had joined other delegations in supporting the Code of Conduct on Council actions against genocide, crimes against humanity or war crimes.

KAHA IMNADZE (Georgia), associating himself with the European Union, noted that civilians were being killed in armed conflict from Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya to the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, South Sudan, Sudan and Ukraine. The Council was obliged to take all necessary measures to protect them. International human rights law and humanitarian law should operate without impediments in areas where official authorities could not exercise their sovereign right, or where an occupying Power had taken military control. More than seven years after the Russian Federation’s military invasion of Georgia, he said, 20 per cent of the country’s sovereign territory remained under illegal military occupation, with residents of the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions repeatedly subjected to ill treatment, kidnapping and arbitrary detention. The European Union Monitoring Mission was continually prevented from implementing its mandate, and it was imperative that conflict-affected populations receive aid, he emphasized.

MICHAEL DOUGLAS GRANT (Canada) said that tragedy in Ouagadougou was another reminder of the danger terrorism posed around the world and the need to work with partners to deal with global threats. Concerned by the scale on which civilians were suffering and often being targeted, he said the growing complexity of armed conflicts demonstrated a need for sustained international attention to protection measures. The fundamental issue was not legal or normative gaps, but the alarming rate of failure to fully implement international humanitarian law obligations. It was essential that the international community and the Council re-energized efforts to ensure compliance, enable humanitarian access and protect human rights while preventing and resolving conflicts. While national Governments were responsible for protecting its civilians, the United Nations had an important role and tools to prevent, respond to and resolve conflict.

JAN KICKERT (Austria) said the prevention and peaceful resolution of conflicts remained the most effective method to ensure the safety and well-being of civilians and strengthen human security. His country supported efforts to enhance the effective implementation of the women, peace and security agenda, including the recommendations of the global study on the implementation of resolution 1325 (2000). Turning to civilian sufferings around the world, he called upon Council members to end the persisting climate of impunity and ensure accountability. Further, he invited them to sign the Code of Conduct, which contained a pledge to support timely and decisive Council action in situations involving atrocity crimes. Among other issues, he expressed concern about the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, which was a grave humanitarian problem and severe challenge for the protection of civilians in armed conflicts.

RICHARD GALBAVÝ (Slovakia) said that ongoing conflict had a horrifying impact on civilians, including displacements, reportedly at the highest level since the Second World War. The primary responsibility for civilian protection lay with States. More effective implementation of civilian protection mandates in peace operations were needed, and he commended the Secretary-General’s commitment to inform the Council about situations where escalating risk or shortfalls in mission capacity to fulfil those obligations were endangering civilians. Unfortunately, the protectors sometimes became the perpetrators, he said, voicing Slovakia’s support for zero tolerance of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers. With civilian protection and security sector reform mutually reinforcing, it was important to strengthen the relationship and develop convergences between them in the Council’s decision-making process. Impunity must be ended and those responsible for crimes against humanity must be brought to justice. Where national authorities were unable or unwilling to conduct investigations, the International Criminal Court was indispensable.

ABDERRAZZAK LAASSEL (Morocco) said that despite gains, civilian populations continued to suffer. Condemning targeted attacks, he called on all parties to conflict to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law. While States were primarily responsible for protecting civilians, should they fail to do so, the international community had the responsibility to provide support to help them fulfil their obligations. It was unacceptable that parties to conflict were attacking hospitals, schools, journalists and aid workers, he said, adding that the international community must, among other things, redouble efforts to ensure that aid reached those in need. Expressing support for the High-level Panel’s findings, he said Morocco had contributed to peacekeeping operations for six decades. Troop-contributing countries and peacekeepers must uphold their mandate to protect civilians, and there must be zero tolerance of sexual abuse or exploitation. It was to be hoped that the ideas and proposals raised today would help step up concrete efforts to improve civilian protection on the ground, as millions of people living in conflict situations around the world anxiously awaited action.

FEDERICO A. GONZÁLEZ (Paraguay) said the obligation to protect civilians was underwritten by international law. Today, conflicts had little in common with those of the nineteenth century, in which battles took place between armies of different States. Now, an increasing number of civilians were suffering from the effects of conflict. It was vital that the definition of an armed conflict was properly debated; if a situation was not discussed and called a conflict, it could be mistakenly thought that civilians did not need protection. Political will was one of the main factors to ensure that civilians’ human dignity was safeguarded. Political agreements in conflicts represented the best chance for a lasting and sustainable peace, he said, concluding by reiterating that all civilians had the right to be protected.

PAUL ALEX MENKVELD (Netherlands) said his country was appalled that civilians had become a tool of war. In that regard, it was critical that the international community address civilian protection issues at the highest political level. Responsibility to protect and international humanitarian and human rights law were mutually reinforcing. Compliance with international humanitarian law was crucial, as was monitoring peace operations in consultation with troop-contributing countries and peacekeepers’ training. As previous speakers, he too regretted the inability of the recent Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent to strengthen compliance with international humanitarian law. In support of a State-led compliance mechanism, he said “we owe this to all those civilians in conflict situations that are currently not being protected” The Council should monitor more closely whether peacekeepers fulfilled their mandates and all should report their failure to protect civilians. He noted that his country had been among the first signatories to the Kigali Principles, which provided clear recommendations on how to effectively implement civilian protection mandates in peace operations.

JOSÉ ALBERTO SANDOVAL COJULUN (Guatemala) said the growing number of refugees and internally displaced persons was a grave concern, and the current humanitarian crisis required everyone’s attention. Calling attention to the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the affected populations, he said their protection was a basic principle of international humanitarian law, a fundamental work of the Security Council and a moral responsibility of the United Nations. Women and girls were among the most vulnerable victims in war and conflict situations, yet they were also often the ones who triggered peace mechanisms, he noted.

ZOHRAB MNATSAKANYAN (Armenia) said that while the humanitarian aspects of civilian protection were of high concern, the security of civilians continued to be wracked by “shocking levels of brutality and casual disregard for human life”. The idea of deploying United Nations peacekeeping operations with a mandate to protect civilians under threat of violence must be given thorough consideration. “The reputation of the Organization is judged not by the words of condemnation, but by deliverable protection,” he declared. On prevention, he noted that while it had been recognized as the best means of protection, United Nations field missions remained an important source in detecting deteriorating situations and alerting the Organization to act.

MATEO ESTREME (Argentina) recalled the obligations derived from the general international humanitarian law principles, which represented the “minimum of humanity” applicable at all times, places and circumstances and helped interpret the rules of armed conflict. The Council’s authorization of robust mandates and performance by peacekeeping operations should not compromise the fundamental task of protecting civilians. Mandates should be clear and supported by timely and necessary resources, and the Council should include, in its pronouncements, the useful reminder that United Nations forces and those authorized by it were also bound by international humanitarian law. On the situation in Syria, he said it was urgent that humanitarian assistance reach civilians to avoid starvation. Impeding flows of relief supplies constituted a “method of warfare”, which was a serious international humanitarian law violation and a war crime. Continued debate on new mechanisms to strengthen compliance was a priority for Argentina, which advocated a forum for States to enable exchanges of views on the subject. Impartial accountability mechanisms were essential in investigating international humanitarian law and human rights violations.

ŽELJKO PEROVIĆ (Montenegro), associating himself with the European Union, said people across the world looked to the United Nations and its peacekeepers for reassurance and protection when civilian death and suffering occurred. The Council must do more to address the protection of civilians at the thematic level. Indeed, more importance must be given to the protection of civilians in conflict zones and of refugees who had fled them, he said. “We must do all we can to reduce suffering, open humanitarian access, build trust and protect civilians.” There could be no justification for any country standing in the way of a resolution designed to allow civilians access to food and medical assistance, he emphasized. Early action to prevent conflict and mass human rights abuses was essential, he added, recognizing “valuable progress” in the area of enhancing the implementation of protection mandates by United Nations peacekeeping and other missions.

MASUD BIN MOMEN (Bangladesh) said that, as a leading troop-contributor, his country had usually taken a pragmatic approach to the civilian-protection mandate, both in practice and preparedness. It had incorporated a comprehensive civilian-protection component in its peacekeeping training curricula, with built-in demonstration exercises. On the basis of the country’s first-hand experience, he made a number of observations, including the need for greater emphasis on strategic analysis and assessment of threats to civilians so that the Council could clearly set out its expectations. Secondly, in order to be effective, protection of civilian mandates required continued support from the Council and the main parties to conflict, as well as the commitment of host Governments, in particular. Third, there must be concerted efforts to bring clarity to operational aspects of civilian-protection mandates and to remove confusion over whom to protect, while reducing gaps between mandate design and implementation. Fourth, the ongoing global campaign to end violence against women and children in armed conflict should gather momentum to enlist the support of all State and non-State actors. Commending proposals to establish national international humanitarian law committees, as advocated by the ICRC, he urged full use of existing accountability mechanisms inherent in such laws.

NIDA JAKUBONĖ (Lithuania), associating herself with the European Union, touched upon the areas of early warning, prevention and accountability. With regard to early warning, she said more must be done in alerting the Council to potential crises with the aim of defusing them before they erupted into conflict. Close interaction with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs was essential in the context of early warning. In addition, the current reluctance and taboos around taking up situations before they “explode in the Council’s face” cost too many lives. Stronger mediation capacity, good offices, early engagement and involvement by regional and subregional organizations were of key importance. Prevention on the ground also required a more diverse array of physical tools in the hands of peacekeepers, she said. Turning to accountability, she said impunity for crimes and attacks against civilian populations, humanitarian aid and medical workers, schools and journalists in conflict zones was shocking. As for the situations in Syria, Central African Republic, Yemen, eastern Ukraine and other places, the Council had a critical role to play in bringing perpetrators of civilian abuses to account by taking a strong and more systematic position on ending impunity for war crimes, genocide, crimes against humanity and gross violations of human rights, she stressed.

BAUDELAIRE NDONG ELLA (Gabon) emphasized the importance of civilian-protection mandates in peacekeeping missions, as could be seen in MONUSCO and MINUSCA. The Council must use all available sanctions mechanisms against State as well as non-State actors guilty of attacks on civilian populations. Expressing regret about the rising number of sexual exploitation cases perpetrated by those expected to protect civilians, he voiced support for the zero-tolerance United Nations on sexual exploitation and abuse. Conflict prevention efforts and early-warning systems were also critical in protecting civilian populations, and women should be fully involved in those processes, he stressed.

TÉTÉ ANTÓNIO, Permanent Observer for the African Union, said civilians continued to be among the first victims of armed conflict and were increasingly targeted. The problem was not the lack of an international framework for protecting civilians, but a lack of implementation. That was especially true in the case of terrorist groups such as Boko Haram. The emergence of non-State armed actors and the rise of terrorism and violent extremism made it all the more important to be more flexible in interpreting the principles that had guided United Nations efforts in the area of protecting civilians, he said.

Indeed, there was need to maintain a balance between the traditional pillars of peacekeeping and the use of force, he continued. Noting that the African Union had adopted “non-indifference to human suffering” as a core principle, he said it was adapting quickly and deploying peacekeeping operations in very unstable, hostile environments where no other organizations were ready to go. Such operations had very robust mandates, including the neutralization of armed groups, he said. Emphasizing that political solutions must be at the heart of all strategies seeking to ensure lasting protection of civilians, he said, by way of conclusion, that negotiations and mediation were tools that must be explored and encouraged.

ERVIN NINA (Albania) said neither State nor non-State armed groups had demonstrated adequate respect for their obligations. Consensus had grown around the idea that the protection of civilians was a State responsibility as well as a necessary focus of international collective action. Progress at the normative level made sense only if translated into tangible action, he said, urging the Council to act “swiftly and resolutely” in all situations affecting civilians. When a peace operation was deployed in a country under consideration by the International Criminal Court, it should be authorized to assist the Court, which would mark an important step towards ensuring justice. He called for matching civilian-protection mandates with appropriate resources, as well as training on child protection and sexual exploitation and abuse.

GÜVEN BEGEÇ (Turkey) said as the world was facing the largest humanitarian crisis since the Second World War, the elimination of conflicts remained a challenge that the international community must address. The World Humanitarian Summit to be held in May would represent an opportunity to address related challenges. Turning to current armed conflicts, he noted that the crisis in Syria had caused the world’s largest humanitarian tragedy. While the situation in that country continued to deteriorate with immense bearings on civilians, Turkey had been deeply affected by that tragedy. As the largest refugee-hosting country in the world, his State had been a safe refuge for over 2.5 million Syrians and provided humanitarian assistance to millions of people in dire need in conformity with its international obligations. Drawing attention to recent airstrikes targeting civilians in Syria, he noted that such attacks undermined the prospects of a political solution and worsened the scourge of terrorism in the region.

GUSTAVO MEZA-CUADRA (Peru) said the Council had increasingly discussed the issue of non-State actors and their attacks on civilian populations. United Nations peacekeeping operations needed to have enough capacity and infrastructure to deliver its tasks, and to ensure its success, there must be a greater coordination between the Council, Secretariat and troop- and police-contributing countries. To protect civilians in conflict areas, uniformed personnel should benefit from new technology, increasing the capacity of peacekeeping missions.

The representative of Qatar said civilians bore the brunt of war and conflict. Israeli illegal practices against civilians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories violated international humanitarian law and undermined the two-State solution. She called on the Council to protect civilians, end violations of their rights and implement resolutions on Palestine. Systematic crimes by the Syrian regime and its allies against civilians, including siege, starvation and indiscriminate barrel bombing, were crimes against humanity. The Council needed to take all measures to deliver emergency assistance, including by air and land, to all besieged areas, implementing paragraph 6 of resolution 2238 (2015). Impunity emboldened perpetrators, and collective efforts were needed to protect civilians and hold those responsible accountable.

The representative of Nigeria said women and girls suffered the most in conflict situations, suffering sexual violence, sexual enslavement, trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Resolutions 1325 (2000), 1960 (2010) and 2122 (2013) offered suitable frameworks for the Council to enhance the protection of women in conflict and post-conflict situations. Noting that States bore the primary responsibility to protect civilians in their national jurisdiction, he said Nigeria had no higher priority than defeating Boko Haram and rescuing all kidnapped persons, including the Chibok schoolgirls. Pursuing political resolution to conflict in an inclusive manner would help to protect civilians, and he urged the Council to bring its influence to bear in that regard.

A representative of Azerbaijan, associating herself with the Non-Aligned Movement, responded to comments by her counterpart from Armenia, saying that that country’s practice was to fabricate a pretext to hide its responsibility for its illegal occupation of Azerbaijani territory. By referring to a so-called ceasefire violation, Armenia sought to justify its use of force against Azerbaijan’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. It did not acknowledge that the frontline extended beyond Nagorno-Karabakh. Nor had it acknowledged its attacks against Azerbaijani civilians. It also had targeted civilian infrastructure. Armenia continued to occupy a large part of Azerbaijani territory, the main obstacle to settlement of the conflict. Armenia should withdraw its forces from occupied territories of Azerbaijan, in line with Council resolutions on that matter.

The representative of Ukraine took the floor a second time to say that the Russian Federation continued to occupy his country’s territory. Ukraine’s key goal in 2016 was to restore peace and justice to the international order, he said, emphasizing: “There is no alternative solution.”

The representative of Israel, also taking the floor again, said that over the last months, 29 people had been killed and hundreds injured. Instead of taking responsibility, however, the Palestinian Authority continued to attack Israel. Rather than restoring the rule of law, it had chosen to side with terror, she added.

The representative of Armenia took the floor again to say he regretted the distortion of facts by his counterpart from Azerbaijan. That delegation’s information regarding Nagorno-Karabakh was baseless and fabricated, he said, adding that Azerbaijan continued to reject investigations on its territory while trying to divert attention from the deteriorating situation inside the country.