

[Extract]

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[...]

Protection of civilians in armed conflict

Mr. Ambassador Ricardo Alberto Arias

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Mr. Arias (Panama) (*spoke in Spanish*): At the outset, allow me to thank Mr. Holmes, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, for his clear and precise briefing, which reflected the alarming effects of human violence.

We also wish to acknowledge the outstanding work of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which is responsible for providing assistance to millions of civilians suffering the consequences of armed conflict, particularly children and women.

We cannot speak of the protection of civilians in armed conflict without first referring to the prevention of such conflicts. This Council is obligated under its Charter mandate to take measures to prevent conflicts, which requires us to understand in depth the specific causes that have led to them. Many such causes transcend mere political and military confrontations. Terrorism, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the impact of climate change are important factors to take into account when we consider conflict prevention.

Moreover, the protection of human rights must always be the guiding principle of the Security Council's work, be it in the context of preventing or

of resolving conflicts. In addition to being one of the pillars of this Organization, respect for human rights is the basis for a peaceful society because, where those rights are guaranteed, the principal structural, psychological and cultural causes of conflict cease to exist.

While we assert that preventing conflicts is an important part of our work, solving them is equally so. In undertaking that task, we must above all protect civilians in armed conflict — those who take no part in it, especially women and children. In armed conflicts, civilians fall victim to violent attacks whose physical and psychosocial effects often last longer than the conflict itself. They may also lose their homes, their livelihoods, their right to education and health care, and other fundamental rights. In the worst cases, they may lose their lives and their families.

Thus, international humanitarian law — specifically the Hague and Geneva Conventions and their protocols, other human rights instruments and Security Council resolutions — provide a broad and compelling framework for United Nations action to protect civilians in armed conflict.

Nevertheless, this Organization has often failed to resort to those mechanisms to act, shirking our responsibility to protect civilians in the most atrocious conflicts. The conflicts in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the current conflict in Darfur and the recent events in Lebanon are clear examples of that situation. The failure to act has cost this Organization credibility, but the blow to our reputation is insignificant when weighed against the loss of innocent lives. We must never forget those victims if we wish to avoid falling once again into inertia.

I cannot conclude without stressing the ultimate role of this Organization with respect to international humanitarian law, as reflected in paragraphs 138 and 139 of the Outcome Document of the 2005 World Summit, which refer to the responsibility of States and the international community to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.

It is our understanding that the responsibility to protect implies that, over and above the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in the internal affairs of States, when a State or, to phrase it more aptly, its governmental institutions are unwilling or unable to meet their responsibility to protect the human rights of their citizens, it is up to the international community, and the United Nations in particular, to adopt timely and decisive collective measures to do so.