

Speech: “Ending sexual violence in conflict is central to peace building, conflict prevention and reconciliation.”

Thank you Minister, Mr President, for convening this important open debate.

And I would like to begin by welcoming both Amina and Adama back to the Council and to thank them for their very important briefings this morning. And I would like to pay particular tribute to Mina Jaf for sharing her powerful testimony with us, and for bringing the unique and valuable perspective of civil society into this Security Council Chamber.

It's a perspective that we need to hear more of, more often. This Council works best when we are informed by the women and men most affected by the issues we discuss in this room. And sexual violence in conflict is no exception to that.

As we've heard today, ending sexual violence in conflict is central to peace building, conflict prevention and reconciliation. This is a message that should not need repeating in this Council. We've heard it many times before on our visits to South Sudan, Lake Chad, most recently Colombia.

We cannot forget the stories we heard in that dusty IDP camp in northern Nigeria. Stories of women whose daughters had been abducted by Boko Haram, likely forced into marriage and sexual slavery.

And yet, as the Secretary-General's report clearly shows, those messages are not getting through. Not enough is being done. Women and girls, men and boys are still being subjected to sexual violence every day. In Mali, where survivors are forced to withdraw complaints so that the perpetrators can escape justice. In Syria, where not a single person has been prosecuted for Da'esh's vile acts. In South Sudan, where we see the continuing abhorrent use of rape as a sickening means of punishing communities.

We know what needs to happen. We need to make ending sexual violence a key part of ceasefire deals. We need fewer women at kitchen tables and more women at negotiating tables. And we need even more women serving in uniform – because for too many survivors a man in uniform is someone to fear, not someone to trust. This is a lesson that needs to be heeded by governments, by armed forces, and yes, by the UN and its peacekeepers too.

We cannot though be deterred. We must all play our part and do everything within our power to ensure these crimes are reported, that survivors are cared for, and that perpetrators, whether terrorists or state actors, are held to account.

And that's why the United Kingdom, in partnership with the UN Team of Experts and Justice Rapid Response, is running a campaign to tackle the stigma that so often surrounds survivors of sexual violence. It's why we worked with over 200 civil society experts to produce the International Protocol that helps document these crimes. And it's why we're now developing the Principles for Global Action to be launched at the General Assembly later this year. This is a new tool, developed again with civil society, but also with UN agencies and member states, to help policy makers and international organisations tackle stigma through their own work.

Ultimately, Mr President, if we want to address the appalling use of sexual violence by terrorists, and indeed by state actors, we need to look bigger; we need to look broader. We need to recognise that terrorists and state actors are enabled to carry out these sick acts when peace and security has broken down, when this Council has failed to uphold our duties enshrined in the UN Charter.

What happens in this Council, whether votes in favour, or vetoes against, has a very real bearing on that insecurity.

So let us make sure that tackling sexual violence is not something we talk about only once a year at this debate, but in every single Security Council item where it is relevant, starting with the upcoming Al-Qaeda sanctions regime review.

Nor can we shy away from the fact that these appalling acts are the direct result of gender discrimination and inequality. Until women are treated equally, paid equally, respected equally, we will have failed, not just to address this issue, but also to deliver the Global Goals that we all agreed less than two years ago.

I'd like to close, Mr President, by paying tribute to the former Special Representative, Zainab Bangura, for all her tireless efforts and exemplary leadership on this important issue. I wish her the best for the future and I look forward to working with her successor, Pramilla Patten.