

Speech: Preventing the destabilising ability of mercenary groups

Thank you Mr President, and a warm welcome to the Security Council to Equatorial Guinea on assuming the Presidency in the month of February, and I also thank and congratulate the Dominican Republic for their excellent stewardship of this Council in January. I would also like to thank the Secretary-General, His Excellency Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat, and His Excellency Dr Richard Sezibera for their briefings today. Let me also wish a very happy New Year to our Chinese colleagues.

Mr President, the United Kingdom welcomes this debate and the focus on stability, conflict prevention and peacebuilding during Equatorial Guinea's Presidency of this Council. The United Kingdom recognises the deeply negative effect that contemporary forms of mercenary activity can have. That includes the link between their activities and barriers to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 16 on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.

We are committed to supporting our African partners to achieve their vision of a more peaceful and prosperous continent. We are working jointly to tackle a range of shared security challenges and we are working on the provision of capacity building for African Security and Justice institutions and training for African peacekeepers.

We are also committed to aligning our development support with initiatives which will foster Africa's long-term stability. It is clear that there is a mutually reinforcing link between stability and security and prosperity and growth.

That is why we are stimulating high-quality investment into Africa to create wealth, build infrastructure and create jobs. It is why we are supporting Africa's youth to access life-changing education and skills. And it is why we support so strongly the empowerment of women and girls, so that African development is truly inclusive and therefore truly sustainable.

Mr President, the holistic approach we take to supporting Africa's security and stability must also be applied to the modern mercenary phenomenon. We must recognise that it is not just a source of conflict, but a symptom of underlying causes of instability.

Mercenary groups thrive where there are fragile state institutions, a culture of impunity, weak rule of law and extreme poverty. Some have links to serious and organised crime threats, including the trafficking of small arms and light weapons and the illegal exploitation of resources.

Their activities can undercut the rules-based international system which this Council was designed to uphold. Where this occurs, we should bring the full range of mechanisms at the Council's disposal to bear, including sanctions

regimes.

Mr President, as you pointed out, it is important to draw a distinction between mercenaries, a term clearly defined in international humanitarian law, and properly regulated and responsible private security companies. The legitimate global private security industry provides an essential service, supporting diplomatic, commercial and humanitarian activity in complex environments around the world.

The United Kingdom remains committed to raising standards in the private security industry. In this regard we welcome the important work of the Montreux Document Forum and the International Code of Conduct Association (ICOCA). We urge all states, companies and NGOs which employ private security companies to recognise ICOCA membership and certification to relevant standards in their contracting process and to abide by the International Code of Conduct for private security providers.

In this context, the United Kingdom is troubled by reports of the involvement of some private military companies in destabilising activities in a range of countries. This is particularly troubling when those countries are on the Security Council's agenda, such as the Central African Republic, Syria, Ukraine or Venezuela.

We urge all such private sector organisations to ensure that their actions do not cross the line between legitimate security service provision and irresponsible or destabilising activities. There may be a role for the relevant Security Council sub-committees to consider whether there is evidence that any such actors have perpetuated or exacerbated conflict or instability.

Mr President, in closing, I would like to pay tribute to the ongoing efforts of the African Union and African sub-regional organisations to prevent unconstitutional changes of government. This includes preventing the use of mercenaries to destabilise or replace democratically elected governments.

The United Kingdom urges the African Union to continue to strengthen its capacities in this regard by making effective use of information gathered through the Continental Early Warning System, and greater use of preventive diplomacy and mediation practices.

Thank you Mr President.