

## **Panel Discussion**

### **“Addressing Sexual Violence in Liberia: a follow up to the Brussels Symposium”**

**6 December 2009**

Madam Deputy Minister,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Until recently the devastating effects of rape and other forms of gender-based violence on individuals, communities and nations were largely ignored.

But this has begun to change. The media coverage of sexual atrocities committed in conflicts over the past decade and a half, and the dedicated and tireless work of people like yourselves, have helped to raise awareness of the scope and prevalence of the problem.

However, what we often see is that even when people are aware of the problem, and are shocked and saddened by what they see, they don't do enough to act upon it. Sometimes this is because people don't know what they can do. This is why events like this one are so important.

Belgium will be acceding to the Security Council next month, and we believe that sexual violence in conflict is a security issue as well as a human rights and public health issue and we will work accordingly during our mandate.

The Government of Belgium and its partners in the new Government of Liberia and the United Nations believe that sexual violence is not just a sad or inevitable by-product of war. We believe, along with Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and every person in this room, that sexual violence is simply intolerable. We believe it is an extremely serious threat to the fabric of our communities, the security of our nations, and our humanity at large. We believe that we must do all we can to prevent it and to care for its victims. And we believe it is important to share information, as our colleagues from Liberia are doing today, on what is being done at the field level and what is needed from all of us to help them do even more.

Since 2005, Belgium and its partners in the Government of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the UN country team there have been carrying out the most comprehensive multi-sectoral programme yet against sexual violence in a conflict-affected country. It was and still is clear to us and our partners that the ability of the DRC to build peace after one of the most brutal wars of the past half-century was closely tied to its ability to address sexual violence and to bring peace, justice and care to the communities affected by that.

Six months ago, with a view to accelerating the development of similar national action plans in other countries, we – together with the European Commission – convened the “International Symposium on Sexual Violence in Conflict and Beyond” in Brussels. This historic event brought together more than 250 participants – from heads of UN agencies and NGOs to journalists, doctors and parliamentarians. These participants came from all over the world, including delegations from 15 conflict-affected nations, to share strategies

and experiences and to formulate the "Brussels Call to Action," calling on governments, international organizations and civil society to prioritize the issue of sexual violence prevention and response in all humanitarian and development programming in countries affected by conflict.

One of the countries that presented its national action plan at the Brussels symposium was Liberia.

Today's event, which focuses on the development and implementation of the National Action Plan to Address Sexual Violence in Liberia, is only the first in a series of Brussels symposium follow-up events. Every six months, we would like to come together to look at a different country or countries, and their progress in addressing sexual violence and how we can all support them.

The Brussels symposium was a momentous event but it was just a beginning, and not an end. There is no going back. Now the national plans must be drafted and implemented. The perpetrators must be brought to justice and the victims must be taken care of. All of us must remain committed.