



Kingdom of Belgium

Speech by H.E. Mr. Marc Pecsteen de Buytsverve,
Permanent Representative

At the United Nations Security Council

Open debate

"Protection of civilians in armed conflict"

New York, 23 May 2019

Madam President,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Current events remind us of the urgent need to protect civilians: in Idlib province, more than 160 people have been killed in recent days, 180,000 displaced, including 80,000 children, and 83,000 people are trapped in a confined space with trees as their only shelter.

20 years of civilian protection within this Council resulted in significant progress on this issue, yet on the ground, thousands of civilians continue to pay for the consequences of war with their lives, too often in flagrant violation of international humanitarian law. The Secretary-General's report illustrates this: 28,000 victims in 2018 in only 6 theatres on the Council's agenda.

We therefore thank you, Madam President, for your commitment, in the context of your Presidency of the Council, to improving the effectiveness of this protection on the ground. Today, we must move from principles to action: in this regard - we are convinced - we must set out **concrete approaches on which this Council can work together.**

Belgium is aligned with the declaration of the European Union and the Group of Friends on the protection of civilians. For my part, I would like to propose three concrete approaches: (1) what peace operations can learn from the practices of other actors on the ground, (2) the importance of specific data for protection and (3) the responsibility of every State to ensure that the most serious crimes do not go unpunished.

Firstly, the complexity of current conflicts constantly creates new challenges for **peace operations** in terms of protecting civilians. We need to find ways to better address these challenges. For example, can peace operations collaborate more effectively with civil society organisations and learn from their experiences in **community engagement**? In this context, it is positive that the UNMISS mandate recognises the importance of exploring techniques for the **unarmed protection of civilians**, including through community engagement. This could serve as an inspiration for other mandates. Let us not forget **that lasting peace is not built between States, but between peoples and communities.**

As the SG points out, children require special protection measures. Not taking responsibility to **better protect children** not only harms the girls and boys living in insecurity, but also aggravates grievances between combatants and reduces their ability to resolve their conflict peacefully. Peace operations play a key role by deploying child protection advisers, by integrating child protection into the Mission, and by negotiating action plans with armed groups.

Secondly, the Council must be better informed of cases of serious violations of international law, and must use the instruments at its disposal more effectively to document and investigate such violations. As the Secretary-General mentions in his report, the **registration of civilian casualties** deserves more attention. This is essential to back up evidence-based advocacy, to identify the factors that lead to attacks resulting in civilian casualties and to prevent the recurrence of violations. **With the aim of prevention**, Belgium also supports the integration of the "*Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes*", published by the United Nations in 2014, into pre-deployment training for peace operations, in order to improve troops' capacities for rapid alert and assessment of the risks of atrocities.

Finally, we reiterate that respect for international law is first and foremost the **responsibility of every State**. For the most serious crimes, this implies an obligation to prosecute the perpetrators so that they cannot escape justice, wherever they may be. We therefore call on States to join the initiative to develop a multilateral treaty on mutual legal assistance and extradition, to prosecute the most serious crimes in national courts. That being said, if progress at the national level is too slow or even non-existent, the Council must play its role and be more proactive in holding the perpetrators to account, including by referring to the International Criminal Court situations in which the most serious crimes may have been committed.

Madam President,

This Council also has a responsibility to find a response to the serious threat posed to civilians by explosive devices, i.e. landmines, explosive remnants of war and improvised explosive devices. Belgium will proceed on this path in the coming months, with concrete initiatives.

Thank you.