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HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL
CONFLICT-RELATED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN
SRSG on Sexual Violence in Conflict: Margot Wallström
Geneva, 10 June 2011

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As one Liberian woman told me: *“The post-conflict phase is a window of opportunity for women. But women don’t need a window through which to view a brighter future; they need a door through which to enter it.”*

On her behalf, and on behalf of all the women I have met in conflict-affected communities, I am grateful for this opportunity to formally address the Human Rights Council for the first time today. Through its work, and the work of its mechanisms, this Council has for many years been opening doors for women during and in the aftermath of conflict.

Efforts to uphold human rights and enhance social justice are also efforts to prevent violence and conflict. Prevention is paramount; but women’s rights do not end when conflict begins. Political emergencies, contested elections, or armed uprisings may threaten our core commitments, but they do not uproot them. Violence against women is no more permissible in times of war than it is in times of peace.

And yet, in contemporary conflicts, women and girls are the primary targets of sexual violence, including as a tactic of war. The Security Council recognized this in Resolution 1820 of June 2008 – the first resolution to identify conflict-related sexual violence as a threat to international peace and security. Security Council Resolution 1888, adopted in September 2009, created my mandate as Special Representative of the Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Conflict. It also established a Team of Experts on the rule of law to assist governments to rebuild institutions and address impunity for sexual violence.

Security Council resolution 1960, adopted in December 2010, aims to enhance accountability. Cosponsored by more than 60 Member States, it sends a powerful political signal that sexual violence, against any victim irrespective of age, sex or affiliation, will not be tolerated. Parties credibly suspected of patterns of sexual violence will be listed in an Annex to the Secretary General’s annual report to the Security Council, and may be subject to sanctions. Resolution 1960 calls for armed

groups to make commitments to prevent and punish sexual violence. It provides a platform for dialogue with parties to armed conflict to leverage the credible threat of sanctions as a deterrent and incentive for behavioral change.

International humanitarian and human rights law provide the legal foundations on which these political commitments have been built. Through its decisive role in advancing the cause of gender justice and authorizing investigations into atrocities, including wartime sexual violence, the Human Rights Council contributes to the Women, Peace and Security agenda.

Libya is a case in point. Yesterday you heard from the Chairman of the Commission of Inquiry, which received reports of rape and other gross human rights violations allegedly committed by Qaddafi's forces. Refugees from Misrata told the Commission that one of the main reasons for fleeing the city was fear of conflict-related violence against women and girls. It is clear that the reports of these rapes have had a devastating psychological and social impact, spreading fear amongst the population. I welcome calls to extend the mandate of the Commission of Inquiry so that it can continue its investigations of these crimes against humanity.

Such violence leaves a lasting imprint on society. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, I met with survivors who are seeking justice for the sexual violence they suffered during a conflict that took place over 15 years ago. The process of pursuing justice has been painfully slow. The UN estimates that there were between 20,000 and 50,000 rapes during the conflict in the early 1990s, yet there have been just 12 convictions by national courts, and 18 prosecutions through the ICTY. In the few cases that have been prosecuted, women describe seeking justice, but getting only law.

In this respect, Bosnia is the rule, rather than the exception. When I was in the DRC, I learnt that not a single victim or community has received reparations for sexual violence, not even the approximately 2000 survivors who have managed to obtain a judgment in their favor. In Liberia, despite 14 years of civil war in which rape was rampant, and despite the reintegration of ex-combatants into society with no psychological counseling, the explanation I heard most frequently for why rape remains the No. 1 reported crime was "*the way women dress*". Although Liberia has a dedicated court for trying crimes of sexual violence, in the court of public opinion, women still bear the blame and shame of rape.

In February this year, I made my third visit to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Here I met with President Kabila, as well as victims of sexual violence who had been attacked by members of the state security forces, and non-state armed groups. I also attended the launch of the City of Joy which will empower groups of Congolese women – most of them rape victims - to become leaders in their communities.

It is inspiring to meet these survivors.. And it is essential to listen closely to what they are asking for as reparations for the violations of their rights. Often it is the chance to send their children to school. A safe path to walk along, without fear of attack or sighting their perpetrators. Opportunities for a normal life free from war and conflict.

Some say the horrors of wartime rape are “unspeakable”. But as leaders we must speak out. Sexual violence thrives on silence and impunity. Women have no rights if those who violate their rights go unpunished. Our challenge is to prevent the cycle of violence and vengeance, as well as discrimination and disempowerment that give rise to rape as a tactic of war. This crime is not inherent to any one culture or continent; few of today’s conflicts are free from these atrocities. Both the United Nations Security Council and the Human Rights Council recognize that sexual violence in conflict is a political, security and human rights issue that demands a political, security and human rights response.

When I took up my position in March 2010, I outlined 5 priorities for my mandate: ending impunity; empowering women; mobilizing political leadership; increasing recognition of sexual violence as a tactic and consequence of conflict; and ensuring a more coherent response from the UN system. The Human Rights Council helps to advance these goals by calling upon governments to cease all acts of conflict-related sexual violence, recommending investigations of specific incidents, requesting relevant expert mechanisms to devote attention to monitoring and reporting sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations, bringing to the attention of the international community emerging patterns of sexual violence, and ensuring accountability including through the Universal Periodic Review mechanism. This Council tells perpetrators, and would-be perpetrators, that the world is watching.

Ultimately, both the Security Council and the Human Rights Council can help to create conditions where armed groups see sexual violence as a liability, rather than a brutally efficient tool in their struggle for power. We have to raise the cost of

committing atrocities to the point where they harm the perpetrators more than the victims. For instance, when a peace process begins, perpetrators should never be permitted to secure or retain positions of military, political or economic influence. Where sexual violence has been part of the fighting, ending it must be part of making peace. And sexual violence should not be used to influence the outcome of elections – a disturbing phenomenon witnessed in Kenya, Guinea and more recently in Côte d’Ivoire.

The challenge now is to ensure that all of these laudable commitments are felt where they matter most ... in the marketplaces where women trade ... at water-points ... along the roads where girls walk to school... and when women are attempting to exercise their political, social and economic rights.

Sexual violence persists long after the guns have fallen silent and the ink has dried on a peace agreement. Though women are on the frontlines of this violence, they are sidelined from the prestige of a seat at the peace-table. A rights-based approach to peacebuilding centered on participation, protection and accountability, bridges human rights obligations with the Women, Peace and Security agenda. It ensures that the dividends of peace and transitional justice flow equally to women. After all, no society can build a whole peace when the door is closed to half its population. I look forward to continued collaboration with this Council and commend its efforts to combat conflict-related violence against women, for the benefit of communities and nations as a whole.

Thank you.

Geneva, 10 June 2011.