

**Statement to the  
Permanent Representatives' Committee of the  
African Union  
by Zainab Hawa Bangura  
United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General  
(SRSR) on Sexual Violence in Conflict  
*23 January 2013***

Excellencies,

I wish to thank you for the opportunity to address you today. My first meeting in my capacity as the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict was with the United Nations Africa Group because I felt it necessary to begin my tenure as Special Representative 'at home'. I am very pleased to be home now and speaking with you about an issue that touches all of us.

The issue of conflict-related sexual violence is one that I know from my personal experience during the war in Sierra Leone. It is my hope to bring this perspective to bear in advancing the mandate that has now been entrusted to me.

At the same time, having served as both a Minister for Foreign Affairs and a Minister for Health, I have an insight into the complexities of Government, and I understand and appreciate the challenges and sensitivities that Member States face in addressing sexual violence. I believe, therefore, that this issue is not only a UN issue. It is an issue that belongs to Member States, who ultimately bear the primary legal, and indeed moral, responsibility to ensure the protection and wellbeing of their citizens. In this regard, the

emphasis on national ownership, leadership and responsibility in addressing sexual violence will be among my central priorities in taking forward this mandate.

I consider the engagement with African countries, as well as Africa's regional and sub-regional organizations, as a critical priority for this mandate. I believe that African countries must play a central role in shaping the policies and direction of the conflict-related sexual violence mandate in the Security Council into the future. To this end, I hope that you will view my Office as one of your main resources – for information, for advocacy and for technical expertise in support of your national efforts and initiatives. I wish to take this opportunity to introduce my Chief of Staff, Nancee Oku Bright from Liberia, a post-conflict country that has itself been challenged by this issue. She will also be at your disposal.

As you are already aware, the UN also established a Team of Experts on Rule of Law/ Sexual Violence following the adoption of Security Council resolution 1888 in 2009. The purpose of this Team is to serve as a resource at the disposal of Member States, to support national institutions to strengthen their response in addressing sexual violence. To date, the Team of Experts is supporting national institutions in Liberia, the DRC, Guinea, South Sudan, Colombia and the Central African Republic. This collaboration spans a number of different technical areas such as support for legislative reform, training and deployment of magistrates to enhance prosecution of sexual violence crimes, capacity strengthening investigation, protection of victims and witnesses, to name a few. I wish to take this opportunity also to introduce Mr. Innocent Zahinda from the DRC, who is the Team Leader of the Team of Experts reporting directly to me. Innocent and his Team are at your disposal.

In my capacity as Special Representative I chair the UN Action Network composed of 13 UN entities working together to address all aspects of conflict-related sexual violence. In this capacity I hope to bring to bear the collective energy of the UN system in support of national stakeholders, as we work on countries as diverse as Libya, the DRC, Colombia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Excellencies,

In March 2011 my predecessor, Margot Wallström, had the honour to address the African Union Peace and Security Council on the occasion of its 269<sup>th</sup> Meeting, devoted to an open session on 'Women and children in armed conflicts.' I believe that the Communiqué issued by the Peace and Security Council following this meeting provides us with guidelines and a mandate to further strengthen Africa's engagement to address conflict-related sexual violence. Among the priorities explicitly expressed in the Communiqué are:

- The development of a joint AU-UN response to eradicate conflict-related sexual violence;
- The need to fully investigate cases of crimes committed against women and children, launch preventive campaigns specifically aimed at the armed forces and the police, and to ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice;
- The development of strategies at the continental and regional levels to enable monitoring of the situation of women and children in conflict;

- The provision of support for the psychological rehabilitation of the survivors of sexual violence;
- The Peace and Security Council also expressed support for the decision of the Chairperson of the AU Commission to appoint a Special Representative on Women, Peace and Security.

It is my intention to engage directly with the African Union and to pick this issue up with Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma and her Commissioners. I am proud and delighted that our sister from South Africa has been elected as the first female head of the African Union Commission and I hope that together we will be able to make further headway.

Similarly, I will pursue direct engagement at sub-regional and national levels to deepen dialogue with African Governments and to discuss areas for strengthened collaboration on this issue. It is not credible, or even possible, to advance the 'development agenda' without providing safety and security for the most vulnerable among us.

My engagement will include country visits, such as the one I made to the Central African Republic recently. I spent over one week there meeting with a wide range of stakeholders, because I wanted to learn first-hand the challenges the Government faces and to engage directly with leaders in all sectors of society, including religious leaders and members of civil society. My visit resulted in the signing of two joint communiqués, which provide the basis for the development and implementation of action plans to address impunity, ensure the protection of civilians from sexual violence, provide greater support for survivors, and secure the release of vulnerable individuals, including women and children, held by political-military groups.

We have to work together also to address some fundamental misconceptions about this issue. One of these is that this is an African problem. On the contrary, it is a global phenomenon. My Office is engaged on this issue in Latin America – in Colombia –, in Europe – in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in Asia – in Cambodia – dealing with residual cases from the Khmer Rouge period. Sadly, history has shown us that no part of the world is immune from this scourge and as such, this mandate will continue to focus on conflict-related sexual violence wherever it may occur.

The other misconception is that conflict-related sexual violence is cultural. It is not. There is no culture in the world that encourages and allows its women to be humiliated and degraded. To say that this crime is cultural is to say that there are cultures based on a disdain for our mothers and sisters and daughters, a disregard for the rule of law, a disrespect for international human rights norms, and indifference to the pain and suffering of others, as well as contempt for peace. We must dispel the myth that there is such a thing as a 'rape culture.' Sexual violence is a crime of international concern, and we must address it as such.

Excellencies,

In spite of some notable progress on this agenda in the past few years, much more needs to be done. Conflict-related sexual violence is a phenomenon that we can eradicate. But, political leadership and political courage will be absolutely crucial. I believe that African leaders must show the way, and 'lead from the front.' National ownership is essential. I look forward to working closely with you and will continue to seek your perspectives and advice along the way. I strongly believe that our joint efforts can yield

tangible results, and create a changed environment on the ground for those affected by this terrible scourge.

Thank you.