

**Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG)  
on Sexual Violence in Conflict  
Zainab Hawa Bangura**

**[Keynote speech on the occasion of the 21<sup>st</sup> Pre-Summit  
Consultative Meeting on Gender Mainstreaming in the  
African Union:]**

***Strengthening the Rights of Women for  
A Stronger Africa***

**(Addis Ababa, 22 January 2013)**

**Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, *Chers Amis*: Thank you for inviting me here today – and a special thank you to *Femmes Africa Solidarité* and other key partners involved in the organization of this important event. It is a true honour to be invited to address you today on mainstreaming the gender agenda in the work of the African Union, because when women are included at all levels of society everyone benefits.**

**As African women we have made many advances in the last 50 years, but we still face various forms of discrimination. Women are disproportionately affected by climate change and environmental degradation, by lack of access to education, by poor healthcare and reproductive rights, and by lack of political participation.**

**One of the worst forms of discrimination faced by women is sexual violence in conflict. The consequences of rape and other forms of sexual violence often linger long after the conflict has ended. Mental and physical illness is common. Survivors of rape often face pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS, as well as other crippling repercussions. Depression, anxiety disorders, flashbacks, difficulties in re-establishing intimate relationships, and fear are among the common long-term psychological impacts of this crime. A rape survivor from Bosnia captured the long-**

**lasting consequences best when she said 'They have taken my life without killing me.'**

**I assumed my role as the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict in September 2012, and one of my key responsibilities is to act as an advocate for this issue worldwide and to raise awareness about the devastating impacts of this violent crime. Mainstreaming women's rights in the work of all national, regional and international institutions is an important first step on the road to eradicating sexual violence in conflict – because if women are seen as second-class citizens in peace time, their rights will not be respected when there is unrest. If they are viewed as unimportant before war breaks out, they will be treated as expendable during conflict.**

**In order to eradicate conflict-related sexual violence my office has developed a six point agenda that includes:**

- 1. Ending impunity for perpetrators and seeking justice for victims;**
- 2. Protecting and empowering civilians who face sexual violence in conflict, in particular women and girls who are targeted disproportionately by this crime;**
- 3. Mobilizing political leadership to address this issue;**
- 4. Strengthening coordination and ensuring a more coherent response from the UN system;**
- 5. Increasing recognition of rape as a tactic of war; and, finally**
- 6. Emphasizing and ensuring national ownership, leadership and responsibility in the fight to put an end to this scourge.**

**The protection and empowerment of women is a key aspect of moving my mandate forward – because women are the backbone of society, and the fabric that holds families and communities together. In our continent of**

**Africa, women make up just over 50 percent of the population. Yet they account for 70 percent of the informal economy, for 80 percent of agricultural production, and they are nearly 100 percent responsible for putting food on the table. Research has shown that higher levels of political participation by women lead to lower levels of corruption in Government and more peaceful and stable societies. From numerous studies we know that putting money in the hands of women is the best way to lessen the plights of families, because women re-invest 90 percent of their income in their families, in their children's well-being, nutrition, education – and in their communities.**

**For these reasons and many more, the Security Council – recognizing the disproportionate effect of armed conflict on women – adopted a series of groundbreaking resolutions, amongst them Security Council Resolution 1325, and the follow-up resolutions 1820, 1888, and 1960. Security Council Resolution 1820 was a landmark resolution in recognizing conflict-related sexual violence as an impediment to international peace and security – requiring a security response to protect women and girls. The resolution, in its spirit, acknowledged that this crime destroys families, tears societies apart, and creates incentives for revenge. The crafters of resolution 1820 and its successor resolutions also understood that if impunity reigns, faith in a country's judicial system is undermined, and the prospect for reconciliation and a sustainable peace and security is jeopardized.**

**These Security Council resolutions have provided the international legal framework for us to begin tearing away at the root causes of sexual violence in conflict, and send a clear message to Governments that they have the primary moral and legal responsibility to protect their citizens and prevent this crime. But they also put perpetrators on notice, that gone are the days when attacking women in conflict was considered an unpreventable and unfortunate by-product of war. Now, the word is out: if you commit this crime, we will investigate you, we will prosecute you, and we will punish you. There is no hiding place, and we will use all the tools**

at our disposal to find you and put a stop to your deeds – including through the application of travel bans, asset freezes and other sanctions. We are also trying to develop smarter sanctions for those who do not travel and do not have international assets.

Ending impunity and prosecuting this crime is of the utmost importance, but we must also look at other preventative measures. What can we do to stop these horrible attacks before they ever take place?

My Office, with the support of the Team of Experts on the Rule of Law and our partner agencies in the UN Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict network, have implemented a number of concrete initiatives to stop this crime before it starts. For example, we have developed early warning indicators that police, national security forces and peacekeepers can use to alert them to potential sexual violence attacks. We have also undertaken training of national security personnel and peacekeepers in recognizing and preventing conflict-related sexual violence, as well as having deployed Women Protection Advisers (WPAs) in a number of countries to strengthen efforts at preventing and responding to sexual violence in conflict. We also work to strengthen the capacity of national police and the judiciary to investigate and prosecute these crimes.

These activities can go some way in helping to avert disaster, but we must also effect a change in the hearts and minds of people. Every sector of society must be aware of this issue and committed to changing it – from legislators and religious leaders, to teachers and doctors, journalists and police officers. This is not only a UN problem but also a problem for Member States, and one that has to be tackled at the country level. Conflict-related sexual violence is a global problem. My Office is actively involved in this issue in Europe – in Bosnia and Herzegovina – and in Colombia in South America. We are also engaging with Cambodia in Southeast Asia concerning residual cases from the Khmer Rouge period. And last, but by no means the least, we are also focusing on more recent cases in Syria in the Middle East. What

**this tells us is that conflict-related sexual violence is not unique to Africa, and history has shown us that no part of the world is immune.**

**In order to combat sexual violence in conflict and the host of other discriminations that plague women, we must work to ensure that women's ideas, views, and contributions are taken onboard at every level of society. Women must have equal access to education, women must be fully represented in politics, women have to have access to economic opportunities, women have to be treated equally under the law, women must sit at the table for all peace processes, women must play an active role in all peace building efforts, and women have to be represented in the judiciary and the justice system. Most importantly, the message must be sent loudly and clearly that women's rights are human rights.**

**Mainstreaming gender into our work at every level of society is a tall order, but I do not think it is impossible, just as I think ending sexual violence in conflict is not impossible. You may ask what makes me so confident that we can reach our goal. It is because I stand before you as someone who knows what it means to be vulnerable, to be written off because I was born a girl and to be targeted for being a woman who stood up and spoke out. My mother, a woman who could not read or write, swore that if she had a child, that child would have an education. And she risked everything to make sure that her only child, her daughter, got the education she never received herself because of her gender.**

**I know, first-hand, what it is like to be threatened by rebels who vowed to rape and kill me, to silence me and stop me from working to restore peace and democracy in my country. I know how it feels to look your child in the eye and tell him to run for his life because he may not make it out alive, and what it means to have your home looted and destroyed. I know, first-hand, what it feels like to flee your country with nothing but the clothes on your back in the hopes of making it to safety and seeking asylum in a land not your own.**

The fact that I can stand here today to tell you my story after all I have seen and lived through is what makes me confident that we can make a difference, and that ending sexual violence in conflict is not an unrealistic dream, but an attainable goal and that my daughter will have opportunities that I never had.

The road ahead of us is long and it will not be easy, but those things worth fighting for are rarely easy to attain. I firmly believe that sexual violence is not unfortunate collateral damage, but a crime that can be stamped out through education, empowerment, equality, justice, and security. We have the tools at our disposal, now we need to harness the will to make the end of sexual violence in conflict a reality.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, *Chers Amis*, in closing I would like to ask for your unrelenting help to break what has traditionally been called 'history's greatest silence,' to speak up against this crime, to support women who are working to build peace and security and to promote the rights of women so that it is universally accepted that women's rights are human rights. I would ask you to support one another and show solidarity with your sisters around the world, because an attack on one of us is an attack on all of us.

Finally, I would also like to thank you for all the work you are already doing to advance women's rights and gender equality, including in terms of our combined efforts to stop rape now. With your continued support against all sorts of discrimination against women we can make sexual violence in conflict a thing of the past. In the words of environmentalist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai: 'In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground; a time when we have to shed our fear and give hope to each other. That time is now.'

Thank you.