A DECLARATION OF COMMITMENT TO END SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONFLICT

The widespread use of rape and other forms of sexual violence in armed conflicts around the world is one of the greatest, most persistent and most neglected injustices. Sexual violence in conflict inflicts unimaginable suffering. It is designed to destroy individuals, families and communities. In so doing it perpetuates conflict and instability, often for generations. But it is not an inevitable consequence of war. We applaud all that the UN, other multilateral organisations and civil society have done to halt this human tragedy. We commit our fullest support to them. But for too long those who commit these crimes, and their superiors who condone them, have gone unpunished. As an international community we can - and must - do more to prevent and respond to these acts of barbarism.

Under international humanitarian law there is a long-standing prohibition of sexual violence in armed conflict. Sexual violence also represents one of the most serious forms of violation or abuse of an individual's human rights. Sexual violence in conflict can significantly exacerbate situations of armed conflict and may impede the restoration of international peace and security, as reflected in many relevant UN Security Council resolutions, including those on Women, Peace and Security, Children and Armed Conflict, and Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict. We express serious and ongoing concern with the role played by illicit weapons in the commission or facilitation of serious acts of gender-based violence or serious acts of violence against women and children. Preventing and responding to sexual violence is vital to resolving conflicts, enabling development and building sustainable peace. We must address the range of factors which contribute to sexual violence in conflict and put in place a comprehensive operational security and justice response, in a manner consistent with applicable international law.

Sexual violence committed in conflict must not be viewed as a lesser crime. The overwhelming majority of victims never see justice for what they have endured nor receive the necessary assistance and support. We must shatter the culture of impunity for those who commit these crimes, by bringing those responsible to justice – as a critical element of our prevention efforts. There should be no safe haven for the perpetrators. We stress the important contribution of the ad hoc and mixed international criminal tribunals, the International Criminal Court and chambers in national tribunals to ending impunity by ensuring accountability and punishing perpetrators of sexual violence in conflict. We recall that rape and other forms of serious sexual violence in armed conflict are war crimes and constitute grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions and their first Protocol.

Ensuring women's and girls' full human rights and fundamental freedoms and women's active, full and equal political, social and economic participation, including in all conflict prevention and resolution, justice and security sector processes, as well as in wider development activities, is critical to ending sexual violence in conflict. But we must also recognise that men and boys are victims of this crime, as are those who are forced to witness or perpetrate this violence against their family or community members. Our efforts must also serve to shift the stigma of shame from the victims of these crimes to those who commit, command and condone them.

We therefore pledge to do more to raise awareness of these crimes, to challenge the impunity that exists and to hold perpetrators to account, to provide better support to victims, and to support both national and international efforts to build the capacity to prevent and respond to sexual violence in conflict. We are determined to:

- Ensure that sexual violence prevention and response efforts are prioritised and adequately funded from the first phase and throughout all responses to conflict and humanitarian emergencies.

- Provide better, more timely and comprehensive assistance and care, including health and psychosocial care that addresses the long-term consequences of sexual violence in conflict, to female, male and child victims and their families, including children born as the result of sexual violence.

- Ensure that all peace, security and conflict mediation processes explicitly recognise the need to prevent, respond to and reduce crimes of sexual violence in conflict and stressed the need to exclude such crimes from amnesty provisions.

- Promote women's full participation in all political, governance and security structures, as well as all decision-making processes, including peace negotiations, peacebuilding, prevention and accountability efforts, recognising the important contribution that National Action Plans on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 can play in this regard, and ensure that such processes also take into full consideration the needs and rights of women and children.

- Strengthen UN efforts to address sexual violence in conflict and provide further support to the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict as chair of UN Action against Sexual Violence in Conflict.

- Strengthen and support the efforts of regional organizations to prevent and respond to sexual violence in conflict in their peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding initiatives.

- Support conflict-affected states in strengthening their capacity to prevent and respond to sexual violence in conflict and to develop and implement national security sector and justice reform programmes that take into full consideration the needs and rights of women and children.

- Support the deployment of national and international expertise at the request of host governments, the UN and other international organisations to build national capacity to hold perpetrators to account and to improve the response and support to victims and their access to justice.

- Ensure our national military and police doctrine and training is in accordance with international law so as to enable a more effective prevention and response to sexual violence in conflict.

- Encourage and improve the safe and ethical collection of data and evidence relating to acts of sexual violence committed in conflict, to inform national and international responses.

- Encourage, support and protect the efforts of civil society organizations, including women's groups and human rights defenders, to improve the monitoring and documentation of cases of sexual violence in conflict without fear of reprisal and empower victims to access justice.

- Support and encourage the development of the International Protocol on the documentation and investigation of sexual violence in conflict at national, regional and international levels, with a view to its conclusion in 2014.

By working together, sharing our knowledge and our experience, mobilising resources and committing our global political will we are determined to end the use of rape and other forms of sexual violence as weapons of war. This crime must not be allowed to continue any further. Now is the time to act.