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"Ending Violence Against Women in Conflict Situations: A global Challenge of Our Time"

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Mrs. BAN,
Mr. Lockstone,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be with you today. I thank the Women's International Forum [and in particular its President/co-President] for inviting me to speak about one of today's greatest challenges: ending violence against women, in particular in conflict situations.

The violence of men against women and girls is a truly global phenomenon. It occurs in all cultures, regions and countries. It takes many different forms, and is perpetrated by husbands and partners, family members and friends. It is is perpetrated by colleagues and caregivers, strangers and the State or its agents.

Violence against women is committed in the private and public spheres. In peacetime and during conflict and its aftermath, it one of the most pervasive human rights violations of our time.

No day passes without news about horrific acts of violence – women being brutally raped, murdered, maimed or trafficked into sexual exploitation. We hear less -- or nothing at all - - about the beatings, humiliation, intimidation and verbal abuse that countless women suffer in silence throughout their lives.

On average, at least one in three women is subject to some form of violence in her lifetime. Only a fraction of these violations ever get reported, or make the headlines. Few perpetrators are ever brought to justice.

Violence against women, in all situations, has devastating consequences that go far beyond the direct and indirect costs for women, girls and their families.

It undermines efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. It prevents women from engaging in productive employment. It causes and perpetuates women's economic dependence, and thus is an impediment to eradicating poverty and hunger.

Violence, or fear of violence and sexual harassment, is a major obstacle to sending girls to school. It has a disastrous effect on their performance in school.

Violence against women is a significant cause of maternal ill health. It makes women more vulnerable to forced and unprotected sex, which plays a key role in the spread of HIV and AIDS. It limits women's ability to negotiate safe sex practices or gain access to information and testing services.

Violence against women also has significant implications for peace and security.

The experience of women and girls in armed conflict is linked to their status in society. If a culture of violence and discrimination against women and girls exists prior to conflict, it will be exacerbated during conflict. Moreover, women are not only in jeopardy during periods of fighting; They are just as likely to be assaulted when there is calm, by armies, militias, rebels, criminal gangs or even the police.

During conflict, women and girls face a range of security and protection issues. Social attitudes disintegrate, and assumptions that mothers or elderly women will be safe no longer hold true. Fetching water or firewood exposes women to conflict-related dangers such as kidnapping, sexual abuse or exposure to land mines.

State and non-State actors increasingly resort to violence against women as a weapon of warfare. To terrorize, intimidate and destroy communities, to extract information, to take revenge or to achieve other political or military ends. Indeed, sexual violence has become a tactic of choice for many armed groups.

Control of women's sexuality and reproduction through systematic attacks against women has also become a means of ethnic cleansing. I will share with you a few statistics: It is estimated that between 20,000 and 50,000 women were raped in Bosnia during the conflict in the early 1990s. In Sierra Leone, between 50,000 and 64,000 internally displaced women suffered sexual assault at the hands of combatants. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo's troubled North Kivu province, some 350 rape cases are reported every month. And these are the ones that are reported. In certain violent areas of Haiti, fifty per cent of the young women have been raped or sexually assaulted.

Women and adolescent girls have been abducted and forced to serve as sexual slaves, and been given as "wives" to reward fighters. Women and girls have been sold into camps of rebels or soldiers. The trafficking is fostered by women's inequality, the destruction of livelihoods, and the instability that often prevails after a cessation of hostilities. International or regional presences during post-conflict periods have likewise been linked to trafficking of women and girls.

Many survivors never report the violence they have suffered or tell their stories to families or friends. If they do, they are often punished a second time -- stigmatized by their communities, rejected by their husbands and families. At times they are killed to protect what is taken to be the family "honour". Girls and young women are deemed "unmarriageable" if the abuse they have suffered becomes known.

Even when perpetrators are identified, they often go unpunished, especially if they are in the police or military. Impunity prevails.

How can this pandemic be halted?

First, we must tackle the persistent, pervasive inequality between women and men. Unless systemic inequalities and discrimination against women are addressed, violence will continue.

Recent developments suggest a growing momentum for action to address violence against women and girls.

At the global level, the international community has put in place a strong and comprehensive legal and policy framework for action against all forms and manifestations of violence against women. International human rights treaties set out States parties' obligations for the protection and promotion of women's rights, including their right to a life free from violence. The General Assembly gives significant visibility to this challenge, and recently provided guidance on good practices to Member States and other stakeholders.

Regional efforts complement the global response. Last June, the Council of Europe concluded a two-year campaign to stop violence against women. The Southern African Development Community Protocol on Gender and Development, adopted in 2008, commits States parties to strengthen by 2015 legal frameworks, provide services, enhance the capacity of service providers and reduce current levels of gender-based violence by half. In Latin America, the Inter-American Court on Human Rights has been called upon to render justice for women victims of violence.

But it is stakeholders at the national level that bear the greatest responsibility for change. Many examples of good and promising practices have been collected. More and more countries are strengthening their legal frameworks and national action plans. Services for survivors of violence are becoming more widely available.

There is also a growing focus on prevention – on changing attitudes and challenging stereotypes and assisting communities that seek to end the silence surrounding violence against women. Leaders from all walks of life – Prime Ministers, heads of companies, village chiefs, religious scholars, next-door neighbours -- are starting to speak up publicly, stressing that any kind of violence against women is always unacceptable.

During the upcoming session of the Commission on the Status of Women in early March, we will launch the Secretary-General's database on violence against women. This will be the first "one-stop shop" for statistics and information on measures undertaken by Member States to address violence against women.

There is also unprecedented commitment to tackling violence against women in conflict situations. The landmark Security Council resolution 1325 called for the protection of women and girls from gender-based violence in armed conflict and an end to impunity for perpetrators. Last June, the Council raised the stakes and unequivocally recognized, in resolution 1820, that sexual violence can be a threat to international peace and security and that durable peace cannot be built on the suffering of women.

The UN system is responding more vigorously to sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations. UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict – a network of 12 UN entities -- is helping to raise awareness and to coordinate the system's response. It has deployed resources to the DRC and is working with countries such as Liberia and Sudan to prevent sexual violence and respond effectively to the needs of survivors.

The UN Mission in Liberia has built a safe house for survivors and victims of sexual and gender-based violence. In Haiti, our peacekeepers are organizing meetings on women's rights for members of the judiciary and police. Our Rule of Law unit in Afghanistan is helping the country draft legislation to eliminate violence against women. This is what is happening within the UN, working with various partners.

UNIFEM's "Say NO to Violence against Women" campaign received more than 5 million signatures from government officials, civil society and individuals around the world by late November 2008. Also last year, donors nearly tripled their contributions to the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women.

The Secretary-General, for his part, is spearheading a global effort to reduce and eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls. Last February, he launched his global campaign, "UNiTE to end violence against women", a multi-year commitment that will be sustained through 2015 and is aimed at highlighting the link between ending violence against women and achieving the Millennium Development Goals. The Secretary-General is using every opportunity to raise the issue with world leaders and to spur national campaigns and action.

The UN system is strongly supporting this effort. A framework for action is in place that focuses on five key outcomes which I would like to share with you: the enforcement of national laws; the adoption of national plans of action; data collection and analysis; social mobilization; and addressing sexual violence in conflict situations.

We will need all stakeholders, at all levels, to step up their efforts if we are to meet these benchmarks by the target date of 2015. Much remains to be done Ladies and Gentlemen. All of us – men and women, soldiers and peacekeepers, citizens and leaders – have a responsibility to help. And all of us can do something. We can offer support to a survivor or volunteer in a service centre.

We can sign petitions for legislation, join a rally, donate money or lobby our lawmakers. We can speak to our sons and daughters, and our spouses, about violence against women and girls. We can be alert to violence and harassment in our workplaces. And we can work directly with men, and impress upon them the utter unacceptability of violence.

The whispering must end; there must be an outcry. Enough is enough. The time to end violence against women and girls is now.

I look forward to your insights and perspectives on what the global community and other stakeholders must do to reach our common goal.

I want to thank you for your commitment and hard work in this vitally important effort and for your great interest in this important subject.