

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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ADDRESS TO HIGH-LEVEL MEETING ON THE UNITED NATIONS RESPONSE TO SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

New York, 18 September 2017

[as delivered]

Over the years, I have been haunted by my many encounters with women and children scarred by sexual violence and further stigmatized sometimes by their own communities.

But I have also been inspired by the courage and resilience with which they set about rebuilding their lives.

Sexual exploitation and abuse has no place in our world. It is a global menace and it must end.

We are here to take bold, urgent and much-needed action to root out sexual exploitation and abuse once and for all in the United Nations.

And we are here in solidarity to specifically focus on the behaviour of individuals who exploit their authority to mistreat those who look to the United Nations for protection.

We also cannot allow the unspeakable acts of a few to tarnish the work of thousands of men and women who uphold the values of the United Nations Charter, often at great personal risk and sacrifice.

And here allow me to make two personal comments. First, sexual exploitation and abuse is not a problem of peacekeeping, it is a problem of the entire United Nations. Contrary to the information spreading that this is a question related to our peacekeeping operations, it is necessary to say that the majority of the cases of sexual exploitation and abuse are done by the civilian organizations of the United Nations, and not by in peacekeeping operations.

And second, I think it is absolutely necessary to recognize that independently of the situations that exist that haunt us and that we want clearly to eradicate, peacekeepers represent an extraordinary set, not only of the United Nations, but of the international community. Without our peacekeeping operations, our peacekeeping forces, the military and police, women and men, it would be impossible to do the protection of civilians in dramatic circumstances. Many lives have been saved by them, and on the other hand many peacekeepers have died when protecting other people.

So I think it is very important to, at the same time as we launch this very strong set of initiatives to eradicate sexual exploitation and abuse to pay tribute to the courage of the overwhelming majority of the peacekeepers and to clarify once and for all that we are not dealing with peacekeeping operations, we are dealing with a problem of the UN as a whole,

that we want to eradicate because it is something that is unacceptable for our organization.

Indeed, no country, no institution and no family is immune from sexual exploitation and abuse.

But we as the United Nations have a unique responsibility to set a global standard for preventing, responding to and eradicating this scourge, and addressing its impact effectively, humanely and justly.

Within the United Nations, instances of sexual exploitation and abuse are not confined to one department or area of work.

It pains me to say that this behaviour is perpetrated both by civilians and uniformed personnel, and in settings ranging from humanitarian crises to peace operations to refugee camps -- where people are vulnerable and public safety is largely absent.

In my inaugural speech as Secretary-General, I pledged to work closely with Member States on structural, legal and operational measures to make zero tolerance a reality.

And in my first week in office, I established a High-Level Task Force to develop ambitious new proposals to prevent and respond to sexual exploitation and abuse committed by those serving the UN.

The first major report that I issued addressed this subject and laid out four major commitments.

First, we must elevate the voice of victims; put their rights and dignity at the forefront of our efforts; and address the stigma and discrimination they face.

Second, we must end impunity for those guilty of sexual exploitation and abuse.

Third, we must draw on the wisdom and guidance of all those who have been affected, civil society, local communities and build a solid network of support.

And fourth, we must raise awareness worldwide and increase our own transparency around this issue.

That report also underscores the need to increase the number of women serving in the field – as humanitarian workers, civilians and uniformed personnel in peace operations. Experience has shown that greater participation of women leads to higher reporting of abuses and lower incidents overall.

I count on you to help us all achieve these common goals.

Uphold international obligations to ensure accountability.

Enhance your efforts to act quickly on credible allegations.

Promote greater transparency in legal and administrative processes.

Hold perpetrators to account.

And ensure effective remedies for victims.

I am deeply grateful to those Member States that have contributed to the Victims Trust Fund. I encourage all to support this initiative. Let us back our compassion with the resources victims need.

I also thank the Member States that have contributed to the Office of the Special Coordinator on improving the UN response.

I am very proud to appoint Ms. Jane Connors, a distinguished expert, to serve as the first-ever United Nations Victims' Right Advocate. This role will be critical to providing protection, support and recourse to justice.

The Victims' Rights Advocate will develop system-wide mechanisms and policies to promote reliable gender- and child-sensitive processes for victims and witnesses to file complaints. And we have already also appointed in four of the most dramatic scenarios we face in conflict situations four other victims' advocates.

Several other initiatives are under way.

I am pleased to announce that many Member States have signed a Voluntary Compact with the United Nations on our mutual commitment to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse, and that consultations are continuing. I urge all to engage in those consultations and to join. The Under-Secretary-General for Field Support will provide more information on this.

Second, we have established a Circle of Leadership as a means for Heads of State and Government to demonstrate resolve and commitment at the highest political level to stand with us against this scourge.

Third, I will establish an Advisory Board of external experts and representatives from civil society. Civil society and humanitarian organizations are often on the frontlines of protecting children and providing life-saving assistance to vulnerable communities. They are a critical interface between affected communities and the United Nations system, including around the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse, and we cannot succeed without their partnership.

There is much work for us to do together.

Let us leave here with an unmistakable message: We will not tolerate anyone committing or condoning sexual exploitation and abuse. We will not let anyone cover up these crimes with the UN.

Every victim deserves justice and our full support.

Together, let us make good on that promise.

Thank you very much.