

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Statement by Ms. Hanaa Edwar UN Security Council Open Debate on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflicts 22 May 2018

Mr. President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good Morning.

I would like to thank Poland as President of the Security Council, for inviting me to participate in this debate. I have been working for 50 years as a women and human rights defender across Iraq. For most of this time, I have been working to protect civilians living in conflict and instability, helping them to recover in the aftermath of violence and supporting the next generation of Iraqis to do the same. I co-founded the Iraqi Women's Network in 2004 and the Iraqi Al-Amal Association in 1992, which works to rehabilitate people rather than stone.

I come to you from a country filled with horror, a country that has suffered for more than three decades from the scourge of war and siege. Over the past 15 years, civilians have been plagued by armed conflicts, insecurity and violence. Our people have sacrificed a lot. We endured crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. We suffered mass executions of tens of thousands of people, ethnic and religious cleansing against civilians, in particular against Ezidis, and sexual violence and sexual slavery of women and girls. 10 million of us have been displaced from our homes. Essential services like water and electricity are gone. Our hospitals, health centers, schools and social welfare institutions in Nineveh, Anbar, Salahadeen and Diyala have been destroyed.

The operations to liberate Mosul were extremely fierce and costly. I was in daily contact with families and human rights defenders in the city who were hiding in basements. The fighting took place in densely populated areas, involving explosive weapons with wide-area effects. The bombardments were constant, destroying hundreds of thousands of homes. People hiding had nothing to eat, resorting to eating the dirt around them. Women were forced to give birth alone and without any medical treatment. Injured people could not easily access hospitals and many died because they could not reach treatment in time. The departure of civilians from these areas during the operation was extremely risky. Mosul was turned into rubble and became an open cemetery. There are no data or statistics on the numbers of the dead. Now we hear that bodies are appearing in the river around Mosul.

During these dangerous and tragic conditions, voluntary youth civil society initiatives emerged. Young people sought to collect medical assistance and medicines, and to cooperate with military forces to deliver them to civilians. A team has emerged to collect the bodies from Mosul and save the city from the spread of epidemics. I know one nurse, Serour, whose sister was killed by Da'esh. She turned her grief and anger into leadership of this effort.

In an old house, her team found a room containing 150 stacked bodies - men, women and children - all killed with shots to the head. The team has recovered 1,350 bodies, including the bodies of Da'esh fighters. The mission is dangerous. The bodies may be near unexploded bombs and the smell of bodies is unbearable. They collect the bodies then transfer them to a cemetery without

passing through forensics to be able to identify the dead and missing. To date, there are still 3,000 reports of missing civilians in the old city.

All of these efforts require your support. We must recover the bodies, identify the missing and return them to their families. The missing Ezidi women and children must be liberated and be free to return home. They and many of the people who suffered have deep psychological trauma from their experiences and they need more help - which requires particular capacity building inside Iraq to improve local services, led by local organizations and local people.

Civilians who have suffered must have access to justice and accountability. The Security Council Resolution in 2017 on Da'esh accountability, and the Joint Communique on the Reduction and Response to Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict signed in September 2016, are crucial documents. We welcome them and I urge you to support their implementation.

But, there must be accountability for all harm committed in Iraq by all parties to the conflict. Accountability should not be limited to some people and some types of violations. All civilians deserve redress for their suffering. This must be clearly linked to reconciliation efforts.

The families of many Da'esh fighters have been badly treated and isolated in camps. Many of the children do not have any legal documents. Women's organizations deal with many cases of women forced to marry fighters and who are now widows with children, but who lack marriage and birth certificates. Many are threatened with death on the basis of "honor". Many are at risk of suicide. These women and children bear a huge stigma that must be addressed and they must be involved in rehabilitation and reconciliation.

The national authorities, UN agencies, and international community need to work with local actors to determine and agree on an appropriate minimum package of support and assistance for communities. Humanitarian action, as well as longer-term assistance, must be conflict- and gender-sensitive to facilitate social cohesion, and be actively conflict reductive. This must address longstanding, structural drivers of conflict, which remain issues for communities in return. All of the population – civil society, women, youth, and ethnic and religious minorities – must be involved. This must also include communities affected by extremism. We must build community capacity for protection of civilians, early warning of conflict and address the legacy of violent extremism. It is essential to protect civilians from harm by avoiding it in the first place.

In conclusion, I come to you at a crucial time for the protection of civilians in Iraq. The successful elections, following the liberation of areas under the control of Da'esh, offer us a chance to move forward to build inclusive peace and justice. In this effort, the right of all women to full participation should be respected. We must continue to focus on people, not stones.

As we look towards our future, I remain concerned about many other civilians, and especially in my region. Many live in deep hardship because of the many ongoing wars. They live without protection in places like Syria, Yemen, Libya and Gaza. I stand in solidarity with them and civilians across the world who are suffering, and urge you to do all you can to ensure they are protected in line with your legal obligations under international humanitarian and human right law, and as fellow human beings.

Thank you