



REMARKS BY PRESIDENT PAUL KAGAME

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS

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I wish to thank you all for joining us today. For those visiting our country, a very warm welcome to Rwanda. It is a pleasure for me to be here to open these deliberations on the protection of civilians.

This is the right time and place for this conference. And most certainly, this is the right title for it.

The central purpose of peace operations is the protection of civilians. This cannot be said often enough. It is not the protection of peace agreements or U.N. mandates, even peacekeepers for that matter, much less the protection of politicians. The mission is to protect the ordinary people most at risk.

Africa, and Rwanda in particular, is the right place for us to meet and have this discussion.

Africa is now the biggest U.N. troop contributor. But this is nothing to boast about, given that 80 per cent of the world's peacekeepers are also deployed on the continent. So when we talk about the future of peace support operations, we are essentially talking about Africa.



As for Rwanda, the international community's decision to walk away from a genocide in progress in 1994 was not only a disgrace but a disaster that had to be reckoned with. The new norm of a 'responsibility to protect' is the outcome of this soul-searching, putting civilians at the top of the agenda where they belong.

This is also the right time for this discussion, because we are not there yet in terms of implementation and effectiveness. Deployment is too slow. Vague mandates and unclear rules of engagement many times inhibit decisive action to protect civilians. The capabilities of regional organisations need to be further enhanced.

The High-Level Summit that I had the opportunity to co-chair together with other leaders at the United Nations last September focused attention on these and other important issues.

The follow-up summit later this year is an opportunity to see how we can continue to improve and also put solutions into place. The recommendations of the High-Level International Panel on Peace Operations will be of critical importance to these efforts, and Rwanda extends its full support to the panel's mission.

While taking nothing for granted about how far we have come, I would nevertheless like to challenge this group to look beyond to other strategic objectives.



After all, keeping people safe from harm is the minimum standard to expect. There are two other important variables: The number of conflicts prevented, and the number of peacekeeping missions successfully ended.

To make progress towards these more ambitious metrics, we need to enrich our approach in two specific ways.

First, beyond the obvious moral imperative, there is also a practical reason why the protection of civilians is so central to peacebuilding: People need to be able to stay together, and talk to each other, for however long it takes to find lasting solutions to their own problems.

Without security, it is impossible to conduct the inclusive dialogue and consensus-building upon which every sustainable post-conflict transition rests.

This means tackling the hardest challenges first. Peacebuilding cannot be a euphemism for wishful thinking or procrastination in addressing root causes of conflict.

These convictions were the basis for Rwanda's own journey of recovery, and also informed our interpretation of the protection mandate, for example, in the Central African Republic.

Each situation must be examined carefully in its own context. Matters of national cohesion cannot be defined by others, nor can solutions be dictated and implemented from outside.



What we can do as the international community is work to create a secure enabling environment, while ensuring that the necessity to protect civilians does not get lost in ideological debates. Building on that, we can provide other necessary support.

If we don't, there will never be a good moment for the peacekeepers to return home, and the burdens on the international system will definitely continue to grow.

Second, collective action aimed at prevention is entirely compatible with national sovereignty. Sovereignty, after all, is fundamentally about responsibility for the security and well-being of citizens. The best way to protect them is to prevent conflict in the first place.

That responsibility lies first and foremost with the state concerned, but it does not stop there. Of course, military intervention is always the last option. Before that point, other forms of engagement can also be effective, provided we act early enough. We therefore need to keep improving our ability to detect, and share, critical information about threats to civilian life.

We all have a stake in more effective peacebuilding. The effects of bad governance have direct consequences on neighbours, and even the world as a whole, all the more so as the pace of globalisation accelerates.



There is no clash between African and Western norms on this point. The Constitutive Act of the African Union authorises intervention in extreme cases. The strongest voices and quickest action nowadays come from Africa itself. When African institutions are full partners in peace operations, we can address urgent situations with the necessary speed and legitimacy.

What is clear is that the next stages on the journey must be taken by all of us together. The first step is to keep the security and well-being of citizens at the top of our agenda.