Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) on Sexual Violence in Conflict
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[Keynote speech on the occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW):]

Protecting Women from Sexual Violence in Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations

(Geneva, 18 October 2012)

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Chers Amis: Thank you for inviting me here today – and a special thank you to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, and other key partners involved in the organisation of this important event. It is a true honour to be invited to address you on an issue which is not only dear to me, but one which I know is a priority to you as well – the fight against conflict-related sexual violence.

On this occasion, the 30th anniversary of CEDAW, I think it is important to remember that although there are many different forms of discrimination against women and girls, one of the worst and most evil of them are acts of sexual violence. The consequences of rape and other forms of sexual violence often linger long after the conflict has ended. Mental and physical illness is common. Survivors of rape often face pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS, as well as other crippling repercussions. Depression, anxiety disorders, flashbacks,
First, we believe that there must be an end to impunity for perpetrators and justice for victims. Rape during war must be taken seriously and condemned as a war crime, not written off as an inevitable by-product of war. Ultimately, prosecution is also prevention – because it sends a clear message to perpetrators that there is no hiding place, that wherever you go we will go after you to make sure that you are prosecuted, and it can also serve as a deterrent to would-be perpetrators.

Second, protection and empowerment are twin pillars of the solution to sexual violence. This means that sexual violence must be treated as a serious peace and security issue that warrants a security response, and women must not be seen just as victims but as stakeholders who will be included in all measures taken to combat sexual violence.

Third, we must engage political leaders to strengthen the implementation of the Security Council resolutions that are the foundations of our mandate. To make this a reality, we need active scrutiny from the Security Council to ensure that these resolutions are being implemented by Member States and they are held accountable for their commitments. It is time that rape is treated as a security issue with real consequences, not a second-class crime that happens to second-class citizens.

Fourth, there is a need for consistency and coordination in the response from the international community to this crime. A rape victim doesn’t know – and should not have to know – about Security Council resolutions. She simply knows whether their country and the UN are providing the security they need and the justice they deserve. There also needs to be a holistic response to victims of sexual violence as this crime
counterparts, that they have access to nutrition, that gender discrimination – de facto and de jure – is done away with, that equal opportunity in the workplace exists and that women have full participation in politics. In this respect, I would like to point out that although having more women in leadership positions is an important part of the solution, by all means we should not stop there; the hard work continues once you have made it to the top, because the difficulty is in staying there.

Finally, I would also like to thank you for all the work you are already doing to advance women’s rights and gender equality, including in terms of our combined efforts to stop rape now. With your continued support against all sorts of discrimination against women, comprising sexual violence in conflict, we can make this a thing of the past. And to this end, it is important that we remember our collective strength as leaders. To paraphrase Laura Liswood, who is with the Council of Women World Leaders: “We are like snowflakes. One alone will melt, but together, we can stop traffic.” Thank you.

[Words: 1,780 = approx. 15 minutes]