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UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL
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Open Debate on Sexual Violence in Conflict

Statement by H.E. Mitch Fifield
Ambassador and Permanent Representative
of Australia to the United Nations

We thank Germany and the Dominican Republic for their strong leadership on this agenda, and for co-organising this important debate on moving from commitments to compliance on sexual violence in conflict. Australia welcomes the Secretary-General's renewed commitment to the eradication of conflict-related sexual violence, and the analysis and recommendations contained in his recent report. We align with the statement delivered by Canada on behalf of a group of member states.

The Women, Peace and Security agenda is central to the eradication of sexual violence in conflict. It recognises that conflict has a disproportionate impact on women, but also that women are powerful mediators, peacebuilders and leaders. However, the rights

of women and girls around the world continue to be compromised, and sexual violence in conflict prevents women from exercising their right to full, equal and meaningful participation in efforts to secure sustainable peace. Furthermore, we are concerned that the COVID-19 crisis is intensifying violence against women and girls, particularly in conflict and humanitarian settings – an emerging shadow pandemic that risks setbacks to the WPS agenda and gender equality.

Australia is deeply concerned by the persistent and widespread occurrence of sexual violence in armed conflict. A climate of impunity discourages reporting, undermines assistance, and abets further violations. Sexual violence in conflict is part of a continuum of violence. It is used as a tactic of war, particularly against women and girls, human rights defenders, or individuals on the basis of perceived political affiliation, sexual orientation or ethnicity.

Gender equality is key to the prevention of sexual violence in conflict. Research clearly shows that gender inequality, including violence against women and girls, harmful norms and inequality structures, is a direct cause of sexual violence in conflict, and is the strongest indicator of a country's risk of conflict.

We must promote and protect women's and girls' rights. Sexual and reproductive health and rights are vital human rights, and are of central importance for all people in conflict situations, particularly survivors of rape and sexual violence. Access to the full range of quality reproductive and sexual health care, services and information is critical for the recovery of survivors and for the restoration of their dignity and bodily autonomy. Respecting and upholding these rights, particularly the right to services and information, can be the difference between life and death.

We need to identify solutions and approaches that are context specific, inclusive, and informed by experience, especially that of survivors. Our actions must be survivor-centred and recognise diversity of experience and need. For example, children born of rape, and their mothers, have particular needs and we must not forget that male survivors, including boys, have their own barriers to accessing services.

Gender advisers are critical in peace operations, the military and police, for advancing prevention and protection, compliance and accountability, and justice for survivors. In this regard, we welcome the recent launch of the Handbook for United Nations Field Missions on Preventing and Responding to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence. We remain committed to preventing sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment; it is our collective

responsibility to act in ethical and transparent ways, building respectful working relationships that reject inappropriate behaviours.

Australia commends the extraordinary work of survivor-advocates, civil society organisations and human rights defenders. We call on member states to listen to their voices and support their work. Women from diverse backgrounds must be involved in all aspects of our efforts to end sexual violence and in the design and implementation of services to survivors of sexual violence in conflict.

At a time in which COVID-19 has the potential to deepen fragility and conflict, Australia stands in solidarity with, and advocates on behalf of, victims, survivors and those working on the frontlines of conflict to advance gender equality and the WPS agenda, and end sexual violence in conflict. We are pleased to continue to fund UN-Women's WPS Global Facility and Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, alongside a large number of other member states, to leverage change.

In 2020, commemorations marking the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action and the 20th anniversary of UNSC Resolution 1325 provide important opportunities to highlight the intersections between these two important agendas. We call on the

UN system and all member states to intensify efforts to eradicate sexual violence in conflict.

Thank you.