

UN waters down rape resolution to appease US's hardline abortion stance

Measure on sexual violence in conflict passes after Trump administration threatened to veto document over references to reproductive health

By Liz Ford

The Guardian (23.04.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2VY7Hbw>– The UN has backed a resolution on combatting rape in conflict but excluded references in the text to sexual and reproductive health, after vehement opposition from the US.

The resolution passed by the security council on Tuesday after a three-hour debate and a weekend of fierce negotiations on the language among member states that threatened to derail the process.

The vote was carried 13 votes in favour. China and Russia abstained. On Monday, the US had threatened to veto the resolution but it is understood that last minute concessions on Tuesday morning got the US on side.

Other omissions included calls for a working group to review progress on ending sexual violence.

The UK backed the resolution, but expressed regret about the omission on reproductive healthcare. Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon, the UK prime minister's special representative on preventing sexual violence in conflict, said: "We emphasise the need for a survivor-centred approach. Survivor services should cater to all survivors – with no exception."

But he added: "We deeply regret the language on services for survivors of sexual violence, recognising the acute need for those services to include comprehensive reproductive and separate sexual healthcare."

The UK, he said, would continue to "support access to sexual and reproductive healthcare for survivors of sexual violence around the world. This is a priority. If we are to have a survivor-centred approach, we cannot ignore this important priority."

France and Belgium also expressed disappointment at the watered down text. French permanent representative to the UN Francois Delattre said: "We are dismayed by the fact that one state has demanded the removal of the reference to sexual and reproductive health ... going against 25 years of gains for women's rights in situations of armed conflict."

In recent months, the Trump administration has taken a hard line, refusing to agree to any UN documents that refer to sexual or reproductive health, on grounds that such language implies support for abortions. It has also opposed the use of the word "gender", seeing it as a cover for liberal promotion of transgender rights.

Jessica Neuwirth, the director of The Sisterhood Is Global Institute thinktank and former UN special advisor on sexual violence, said: "It's shocking that the United States turned its back on these girls and jeopardised this urgently needed security council resolution."

During the debate, the secretary-general Antonia Guterres called on the council to "work together to reconcile differences" before the vote was cast.

Following the vote, Russia's UN envoy, Vasily Nebenzia, said the resolution overstepped the remit of UN bodies and required excessive reports to be delivered. He added: "Don't try to paint us as opponents of ending sexual violence in conflict. It is a scourge and has to be eliminated."

Nadia Murad, the Yazidi Nobel peace prize laureate who spoke at the debate, said: "I think this resolution is a step in the right direction. But adopting this resolution must be followed by practical steps to achieve reality."

The human rights lawyer Amal Clooney had called on members of the UN security council to stand on the right side of history in supporting the Yazidi survivors of sexual violence. "This is your Nuremberg moment," she said during the debate.

The agreed-upon resolution was a sliver of what the Germans had put forward earlier this month. The zero draft included

progressive text on strengthening laws to protect and support lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people who could be targeted during conflict.

It also made specific mention of the need for women to have access to safe terminations.

But the resolution – number 2467 – did for the first time make specific calls for greater support for children born as a result of rape in conflict, as well as their mothers, who can face a lifetime of stigma. It also gave prominence to the experiences of men and boys.

The resolution is the ninth introduced by the security council that has sought to address women's specific experiences of conflict, and advocate for their involvement in peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction. The first – resolution 1325 – was passed in 2000 after years of lobbying by women's rights campaigners.

Germany has made women, peace and security a priority of its presidency.

However, before the government introduced the resolution, there were concerns that it risked weakening the women, peace and security agenda.

In a statement published last month, 10 organisations, including the Gunder Werner Institut, UN Women and the Centre

for Feminist Foreign Policy and the NGO Care, said: “Given the further hardening of antidemocratic and decidedly misogynistic stances in the UN security council, we believe there is a danger of a weak resolution text ultimately being negotiated and adopted.

“Some powerful members of the security council, such as Russia, China and the USA, are undermining women’s rights and once again questioning, for example, women’s and girls’ right to self-determination. Through such actions, the achievements that have already been made could be shattered and the ‘women, peace and security’ agenda overall decisively weakened.”

In November, ministers, government officials and civil society groups will attend a second global conference on ending sexual violence in conflict in London. The three-day event is part of the UK government’s Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative (PSVI). The first conference was held in June 2014.

The UK is expected to launch the “Murad Code” on sexual violence, named after the Yazidi Nobel peace prize laureate. The code will set out standards of behaviour and care when gathering evidence of sexual violence.

Leaders will also be lobbied to support calls by the actor Angelina Jolie and the former foreign secretary William Hague for the UN to established a permanent, independent body that will gather and assess evidence in cases of alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity.

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