

Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict
18 June 2015. Security Council Chamber

Statement by Leila Zerrougui, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

I would first like to take this opportunity to thank the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Malaysia for organizing this debate on children and armed conflict. Today's debate builds on the important **4/96** 15-18380 **S/PV.7466** Children and armed conflict **18/06/2015** discussion we had on 25 March (see S/PV.7414), presided over by France, dedicated to child victims of non-State armed groups.

As the Secretary-General has just stated, 2014 was a devastating year for children living in conflict areas. A number of conflicts intensified in 2015, imposing terrible short- and long-term consequences on many children caught up in the violence.

An estimated 230 million children now live in countries and areas affected by conflict. More than 5 million refugee children have also been forced to flee from countries where the monitoring and reporting mechanism is in place. Appalling impacts on the welfare of children were felt especially in Afghanistan, Iraq, South Sudan, the State of Palestine, Syria and Yemen. The report before the Council (S/2015/409) documents sharp increases in the numbers of children killed in 2014, and an equally shocking number of injured. That should not just shock us, it is a call to action to all of us. I will use the opportunity today to outline the challenges as I see them and ways in which we can address obstacles and assist these children.

First, violent extremist groups and their horrific crimes captured much of the world's attention in 2014. We saw children forced to become suicide bombers and human shields, and we saw the public execution of many others. Others were required to witness and actively participate in public acts of brutality. We note that responses to the threat posed by extreme violence, by both militia groups and in some cases Government forces, have also raised child protection concerns. I am gratified to see that the Council routinely calls on States to ensure that measures taken to counter these groups comply with all their obligations under international law, in particular international human rights law and refugee and humanitarian law.

As the Secretary-General mentions in his report, the abduction of children in large numbers was a growing and prevalent feature of conflict in 2014. The response to abductions needs to be scaled up to address this increasing trend, including through early-warning mechanisms. I echo the Secretary-General's call in his report to expand the tools available to address this important issue, including adding abduction as a trigger violation for listing a party in the annexes of the Secretary-General's annual report. We must also tailor integration programmes for those who undergo the traumatizing experience of abduction and associated violence and ensure that international support is there to fund these programmes.

As discussed extensively at the open debate in March (see S/PV.7414), engagement with non-State armed groups is another vital area of focus to improve the situation of children in conflict. The majority of the parties in the annexes to the Secretary-General's report are non-State armed groups, and I have been working to engage a wide range of these groups to secure commitments to stop violations and protect children. As the Secretary-General's report notes, in the Central African Republic I supported efforts of the United Nations mediation team to include child protection provisions in the Brazzaville ceasefire agreement, signed in July of last year. This progress was further consolidated in the context of the Bangui Forum in May of this year. Following a commitment signed by 10 armed groups on the margins of the Forum, more than 300 children have been released from the anti-Balaka and the ex-Séléka, and thousands more are expected to be released in the coming months. This is another reminder of the significant resources needed to appropriately receive and reintegrate such a large number of children.

More recently, at the invitation of the Government of Colombia, I met in Cuba in May with a delegation of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia — Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP). They were open to discussing international standards and ways in which they could make progress to ensure the protection of children. In that connection, I welcome the announcement made earlier this week regarding the release of children under the age of 15, and I look forward to seeing further progress to ensure the separation of all children.

Later in May, I met with the leaders of three armed groups from Darfur to stress the importance of child protection. I am pleased to report that following this meeting, they issued a joint statement on the situation of children in Darfur, pledging to reinforce efforts to prevent grave violations against children.

This concerted engagement also requires the support of Member States to help facilitate contact with these groups and allow independent access so that discussions can be held. It is in the interests of all involved that these groups

be brought into a process that will expedite the end of violations against children and prevent future ones.15-18380 **5/96 18/06/2015** Children and armed conflict **S/PV.7466** As Council members know, last year we launched the “Children, Not Soldiers” campaign. I am pleased to report that we continue to make progress towards ending and preventing the recruitment and use of children by national security forces by 2016. We saw important steps taken in 2014 in Afghanistan, Myanmar, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. One can see in the Secretary-General’s report that just one case of recruitment by Government forces in the Democratic Republic of the Congo was documented in 2014, and we have not received any reports so far in 2015. That represents tangible progress as compared to the situation just a few years ago. I will soon travel to Myanmar to support the Government and the United Nations country team in their efforts to intensify and implement priorities in their joint action plan.

While progress is indeed being made with several Campaign countries, sadly, the crises in South Sudan and Yemen have severely hampered our efforts in those countries. Solid progress had been made, but has now been largely lost.

From South Sudan, I am receiving testimony that children — some as young as four months old — are being targeted in Unity state based on their ethnicity. Eyewitnesses and survivors said that boys were killed and civilians thrown into burning houses. In one instance, young boys who did not manage to escape an attack on their village were reportedly tied together with one rope and their throats were slit. Girls are also being subjected to rape by both individuals and groups. Those alarming reports were just received, and those acts have occurred within the last six weeks. Such heinous crimes fly in the face of the numerous commitments by all parties in South Sudan to stop violations against children. As the Council knows, the Council’s Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict adopted strong conclusions on South Sudan in May. Unfortunately, these actions seem to have little or no impact on stopping ongoing violations. More must be done, and I call on the international community, especially the African Union and Security Council members, to take concerted action to protect these children, who have grown up surrounded by violence and insecurity.

Yemen is also in our thoughts daily, as we watch the violence in the media and receive reports of children being killed in aerial bombings, and of many others being recruited. Since late March, as UNICEF reported a few weeks ago, at least 135 children have been killed and 260 injured. The fighting has destroyed schools and hospitals. Cases of recruitment of children and their use in conflict have also risen dramatically, with all parties to the conflict on the ground recruiting children in large numbers.

Another issue that has recently been a focus in the field, as the Secretary-General mentioned a moment ago, is the sexual abuse and exploitation of children by peacekeepers or foreign troops. Sexual abuse committed by those entrusted with protecting a population is particularly egregious. It is our collective responsibility to do our utmost to prevent such behaviour and to ensure that the perpetrators are held accountable in all contexts.

The issue of deprivation of liberty is another concern, with security forces detaining children for their actual or alleged association with armed groups. It is equally worrying that children are being treated primarily as security threats rather than as victims. My Office has been working with its partners to ensure that protocols are in place to ensure that detained children are handed over to child protection actors as soon as possible, and these efforts have borne fruit. In 2014, agreements for the handover of children to child protection actors were reached with the Governments of Chad and Somalia. Child-protection provisions were also included in the concept of operations of the Multinational Joint Task Force established to fight Boko Haram. Despite such progress, however, we continue to receive disturbing reports of large numbers of children being detained, particularly in the context of counter-terrorism operations.

The rise in the number and gravity of recent crises has tested both our resolve and our ability to respond. The most important element of our response will be to redouble our efforts and address new challenges with new tools. I would remind the Governments concerned that they continue to bear the primary responsibility for the protection of the children within their borders and that they must actively address the violations outlined in the Secretary-General’s report. The fight against impunity remains one of the key aspects of our efforts not only to react to, but also to prevent grave violations against children. Without credible accountability, the violations will not stop. I call on all States to comply with their international legal obligations and to review their policies and practices to ensure that children are protected and their rights respected.

Lastly, we must all answer this call to action. The stakes are high. An entire generation of children is **6/96 15-18380 S/PV.7466** Children and armed conflict **18/06/2015** depending on us to be their voice, to tell their story and, most of all, to take action. My Office stands ready to engage with any party to conflict that appears in the Secretary-General’s report.