

Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict
Wednesday, 16th June 2010, Security Council Chamber (GA-TSC-01)

Statement by Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

I wish once again to thank the Government of Mexico for presiding over this important debate on children and armed conflict. Your presence here today, Madame Minister, elevates the discussion and your words provide a framework for the serious deliberations that must follow.

Since the last report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict (S/2009/158), we have had some measurable progress in important areas. The Security Council adopted resolution 1882 (2009), which now makes sexual violence against children and the killing and maiming of children contrary to international law grounds for listing in the annexes of the Secretary-General's report. This naming and shaming exercise, along with the possibility of sanctions against persistent violators, has persuaded parties to cease their reprehensible behaviour and should deter others from future offences. The collective voice of the Council, guided by the common moral compunction of humanity to protect its children, must be used to make outcasts of those who commit unspeakable acts against children in war.

I cannot emphasize enough how important this is. Just two weeks ago, I was in Gulu, Uganda, where I met with a girl named Agnes who had just escaped from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). She fled with a baby born of rape, fearing for her life and that of her infant child as the LRA splintered and regrouped across the region. She could hardly express herself. Years of abuse had broken her spirit. We cannot ignore Agnes or those like her. The Council's decision to make sexual violence and the killing and maiming of children grounds for listing by the Secretary-General is the first step in the right direction.

The Council's decision to expand the triggers requires that we further develop our methodologies and practices to collect reliable information and to guide the field with regard to action plans. For the past few months, my Office has been working with Ms. Patricia Sellers, whose extensive experience with both the International Criminal Tribunals for Yugoslavia and Rwanda has brought new momentum to the discussions on action plans. In close consultation with our United Nations partners, she is developing templates for action plans on the killing and maiming of children and on sexual violence against children. I am glad to say that she is finalizing guidance to the field on resolution 1882 (2009), which will enhance the monitoring and reporting on the two triggers. With regard to sexual violence in particular, I welcome the appointment of Ms. Margot Wallström, the new Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, and I am pleased to report that we are already working very closely and are looking into common strategies. I look forward to a fruitful collaboration.

Parties listed in the Secretary-General's report can be de-listed if they enter into an action plan with the United Nations. We have also had marked successes with regard to the formulation of action plans required by the Security Council. Within the framework of such an action plan, the Maoist party in Nepal released almost 3,000 minors in an extraordinary process in which the whole United Nations worked together as one. My office, the United Nations Mission in Nepal, UNICEF, the United Nations Development Programme and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as their national partners, worked very closely together to secure the agreement and implement the terms of the release.

It was an important moment for the United Nations in Nepal. Children were identified, registered and sent home. At the moment, our child protection partners are tracking these boys and girls in their home villages to ensure that they are included in the reintegration process. Later this morning, the Council will hear from Manju, a Nepali girl who was taken by the Maoist forces at the age of 13 and remained with them for two years. Since her release, she has rebuilt her life and is a model for other children. Manju has travelled a long way to share her story with us so that her experience will not be repeated in any part of the world.

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front from the Philippines has also entered into an action plan with the United Nations. The terms have been agreed and activities outlined. Our main challenge now is to assist in the reintegration of these children. Unless we provide the United Nations in the Philippines with assistance to secure schooling or livelihood training, they will either be re-recruited or tempted by other, less peaceful avenues. It is crucial that the international community step up to the plate and give these children a real future. I appeal to all Member States represented here to support the reintegration process. I also call upon the ceasefire mechanism in place in Mindanao to include the monitoring of child rights violations in its mandated activities.

In the Sudan, there have also been some successes. In the past month, we have moved forward on commitments by the Sudan Liberation Army/Free Will and the Sudan Liberation Army/Abu Gasim from Darfur to release children and to give unhindered access to the United Nations for verification purposes. The ceasefire agreement between the Liberation and Justice Movement and the Government of the Sudan includes specific key provisions for the release of children and is reflective of the priority and commitment to children on the side of the parties. I urge that all subsequent ceasefire or peace agreements include provisions for child protection. The Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army has also entered into an action plan for the release of children associated with their forces this year. Again, child protection partners have the responsibility to make this reintegration a success.

Despite these successes, many challenges remain. In the report before the Council (S/2010/181), the Secretary-General has highlighted a list of the most persistent violators who have been on the annexes of his reports for a minimum of five years. As the Secretary-General's independent voice for children affected by armed conflict, it is my duty to persuade this body to move forward on taking action against these violators. In this regard, resolution 1882 (2009) calls for closer cooperation among sanctions committees of the Council. The Sanctions Committee on the Democratic Republic of the Congo had the foresight to include crimes against children as grounds for listing, and I urge other sanctions committees to also consider the same. I had the honour of addressing the Democratic Republic of the Congo Committee and to thank its members for the fair hearing they gave to our recommendations. I look forward to deeper engagement with other relevant sanctions committees.

That being said, we would also need to move forward to devise appropriate mechanisms to deal with the large number of parties listed in the Secretary-General's annexes that are not covered by sanctions committees. I hope that the Council will sharpen its focus on this issue so that perpetrators do not sense reluctance on the part of the Council to hold them fully accountable. After all these noble efforts by this body, the Security Council should not be perceived to be part of the cycle of impunity.

Many parties have been listed in the Secretary-General's reports for recruiting and using children, committing sexual violence against children, and killing and maiming children. The vast majority are non-State actors, who need to enter into action plans with the United Nations to be de-listed. We urge Governments to endorse this process in the best interest of the children as a humanitarian imperative towards saving children's lives. Without access to dialogue with non-State actors on action plans, the chances of securing the release of children is very slim. In recent times, new issues have also emerged with regard to children and armed conflict. The first is the ever-increasing pattern of attacks on schools. This has become a very disturbing phenomenon that requires urgent attention. The United Nations system has always argued that children and schools should be zones of peace. Instead, schools themselves are increasingly being targeted. The classroom, once a sacred space, has become a place of fear. It is important that we respond to this crisis effectively, working with local communities so that children, especially girls, are not placed at risk and are not denied their right to education during or after conflict.

We are also discovering that more and more children are being used for military intelligence purposes by different armed forces and groups around the world. Recently, we have been engaged in bilateral advocacy against this practice in a number of situations. Children should be handed over to child protection institutions and partners within 48 hours of their capture. This is extremely important. Placing them at risk or subjecting them to prolonged interrogation will only

make it more difficult for their proper reintegration into their communities.

We are increasingly concerned about the changing nature of warfare in different parts of the world and the difficult challenges it poses for child protection partners. In some wars, we find children being used as suicide bombers; there were seven such cases in Afghanistan and several in Iraq in 2009.

Attacks on schools and denial of humanitarian access, where the neutrality of humanitarian actors is not respected, are also posing major dilemmas. We are just starting to fully explore how we should deal with such phenomena. We do not as yet have the answers. Counterinsurgency also poses its own set of difficulties. The number of children being killed in aerial bombardments and drone strikes is a matter of great concern. I had the opportunity to meet General McChrystal, the commander of the international forces in Afghanistan, who reassured me that the protection of civilians is an important part of military strategy in Afghanistan and explained the measures taken to minimize civilian casualties. Nevertheless, children continue to die, and in 2009 137 Afghan children were killed by aerial bombardment alone. We do commend the steps taken recently in this regard, but would like to impress upon all actors that vigilance is necessary and that the killing of children must be avoided at all cost.

Finally, it is 10 years since the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict was adopted. My office, along with our partners, UNICEF and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, has begun the “Zero Under Eighteen” campaign for the universal ratification of the Protocol. I will be knocking on the doors of those who have not signed and ratified, and encouraging those who have ratified to speak to their neighbours. Universal ratification signifies an international moral consensus — a consensus that is necessary to give further strength to laws and norms protecting children from unlawful recruitment.

In my work with this Council, I have been encouraged by the political will to reach consensus on issues relating to children. It is this consensus that empowers and emboldens us, both in the field and at Headquarters, to work with heart and spirit for the protection of children.