

**Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict, March 7th, 2014, Security Council Chamber**

*Statement by Mr. Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General*

I thank Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn of Luxembourg for organizing this important thematic debate.

I have just returned from Sierra Leone. That country is an important case study in the value of our engagement. Under the guidance of the Security Council, with the solidarity of the international community and the strong engagement of the Sierra Leonean people, we are seeing a remarkable transformation.

The Council took a series of wise and timely decisions to deploy successive peacekeeping and political operations, along with support for long-term development. The United Nations also helped the Government to set up the Special Court for Sierra Leone, which helped the country and contributed to international jurisprudence. The Special Court and our peacekeeping and political missions have closed, but the United Nations country team will continue to support Sierra Leone on the road to peace and development.

Not long ago, Sierra Leone was engulfed in war and synonymous with the tragic plight of children in armed conflict. As the former child soldier Ishmael Beah said,

“Somebody being shot in front of you, or you yourself shooting somebody, became just like drinking a glass of water. Children who refused to fight, kill or showed any weakness were ruthlessly dealt with. Emotions weren’t allowed.”

We have another successful young man, Mr. Alhaji Babah Sawaneh, with us today. The first former child soldier to address the Security Council (see S/PV.4422) is back to address us today.

Those transformative examples attest to the fact that, given a chance, former child soldiers can rebuild their lives and help to build peace in their countries.

Fifteen years have passed since the Security Council adopted resolution 1261 (1999), its first thematic resolution on the plight of children in armed conflict. By means of that resolution, the international community sent a clear signal: the suffering of children in armed conflict is unacceptable, whether they be child soldiers, sex slaves, victims in schools and hospitals or affected in any way. Such attacks violate the most basic human rights. They also threaten the achievement of lasting peace and development.

I thank the Security Council for having taken decisive action in establishing a solid framework to help children affected by armed conflict. The Council has developed practical tools to prevent serious violations against children, combat them and put an end to them. The monitoring and reporting mechanism shows how tragic the situation of children who are victims of armed conflict is.

The special teams working at the country level and supported by United Nations bodies promote

dialogue with the parties to conflict, which is essential. Those teams are monitoring the situation closely and contribute to implementing action plans.

It is also important that child protection be an integral part of the activities of peacekeeping operations and special political missions, which means that members of those contingents must be trained prior to deployment and that the necessary resources be systematically established.

Yesterday, at the launch of the campaign “Children, not soldiers”, which is supported by my Special Representative, UNICEF and other partners, the Member States concerned renewed their commitment to the action plan. I welcome that initiative. I ask the international community to provide assistance to those States and make that a priority. The United Nations system will seek to mobilize other non-State actors to put an end to the recruitment of children.

All children deserve and are entitled to protection, not exploitation. They belong in school, not armies and fighting groups. Children should be armed with pens and textbooks, not guns and grenades.

That brings me to the question of schools and hospitals. Those should be places where children can learn and receive care in safety. That is why our peacekeeping policy prevents any military use of schools by peacekeepers. In too many war zones around the world, schools and hospitals have been targeted or caught in the cross-fire. Those are egregious violations of the rights of the child to education, health and life.

In Syria today, some 40 per cent of public hospitals have stopped functioning. Many more are damaged. In some areas, more than half the doctors have left. More than 2.25 million children are out of school. One in five schools has been damaged or occupied by families made homeless by the conflict.

I am heartened that the draft resolution to be adopted by the Council today seeks to encourage the development of voluntary guidelines to prevent the military use of schools in conflict areas. I urge Member States to commit to greater protection for those essential facilities in conflict zones by all parties.

Let us also intensify efforts to ensure that perpetrators of grave violations against children are brought to justice. That includes assisting affected States to hold perpetrators accountable.

The draft resolution before the Council provides valuable new impetus to the Council’s work to protect children in armed conflict. I count on the Council to use all the tools at its disposal to protect children on the front lines of conflict and to prevent a new generation from having to endure the same privations. Let our children be children — safe and secure, living lives of dignity and opportunity.