

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

Statement by Sir Mark Lyall Grant, Permanent Mission of the United Kingdom to the United Nations

I thank you, Madam President, for convening today's important open debate to discuss progress towards the full implementation of the children and armed conflict agenda. I also thank Foreign Minister Asselborn for his personal presence in the Council and for Luxembourg's strong and consistent leadership on this issue, including through its chairmanship of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. Let me also warmly thank the Secretary-General, his Special Representative Leila Zerrougui and the other briefers for their statements. I was particularly struck by the testimony of Mr. Sawanah, which brought to life for all of us why this issue is so important.

Fifteen years ago, the Security Council recognized children and armed conflict as an issue of international peace and security with the adoption of resolution 1261 (1999). While we have since seen the release, reintegration and protection of thousands of children, nonetheless violations continue: in Syria, where well over 10,000 children have been killed, 3,000 schools damaged or destroyed and 3 million children are in dire need of humanitarian assistance, and in Africa, where the Lord's Resistance Army has blighted the lives of thousands of children, terrorizing and displacing them from their homes as well as recruiting them to torture and kill. As long as children's lives continue to be torn apart by conflict, our work and commitment must also continue. We therefore welcome the adoption of today's resolution 2143 (2014), which adopts practical steps for combating violations against children. The resolution draws attention to devastating attacks on schools in armed conflict. Schools are protected civilian objects under international humanitarian law, and yet the Council has heard in briefings by Valerie Amos of the continued militarization of schools in conflict, especially in Syria. Schools should be a place of safety, learning and peace, not violence and conflict.

It is high time that Member States upheld their responsibility to protect children. We warmly welcome the campaign "Children, not soldiers", aimed at ending the recruitment and use of children by Government armed forces in conflict by 2016. The United Kingdom recognizes that this is an ambitious undertaking. Special Representative Zerrougui and UNICEF Executive Director Tony Lake have led the campaign, but that is not enough. We ask the Secretary-General to ensure that the campaign is mainstreamed throughout the United Nations work, from peace processes to peacebuilding, including in the work of country teams. We look to Mr. Ladsous and Mr. Feltman to empower child protection advisers in United Nations field missions.

When it comes to children's lives, no effort can be spared. It is also in our hands as Member States to support the implementation of the United Nations framework on children and armed conflict. The United Kingdom is doing its part. Foreign Office Minister Mark Simmonds has personally committed himself to work to release child soldiers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, South Sudan, Chad and Burma. He has urged those Governments to implement their action plans with the United Nations to end the recruitment and use of child soldiers. He has also highlighted the need to prevent and protect children from other grave violations, including sexual violence.

The United Kingdom believes that regional organizations can also make important contributions, as we have just heard from my Nigerian colleague. That is why we are funding a child protection adviser in the African Union (AU), who will help implement the AU-Special Representative joint declaration.

All parties to armed conflict, State and non-State parties alike, must abide by international law. Those who violate international law must be prosecuted. With verified information on violations against children from United Nations country task forces and Ms. Zerrougui's commitment to concluding action plans, compliance with international law can now be measured. We call on all parties to sign action plans, and we call on those that have already signed to honour their commitments in full. We urge the Secretary-General to strengthen monitoring, reporting and response, and the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict to increase pressure on persistent perpetrators.

I want to highlight today the invaluable contribution of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in the fight against impunity for crimes against children. Two years ago, the ICC found Thomas Lubanga guilty of the war crime of using children to participate in hostilities. Today, the ICC found Germain Katanga guilty of war crimes. Although he was acquitted of using child soldiers, the Trial Chamber found that children were used as combatants. No matter who is responsible, that is an appalling violation of those children's rights. The fight against impunity must continue. We also welcome the fact that Bosco Ntaganda will be held to account by the ICC for the alleged recruitment of child soldiers in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.

We have an obligation to the next generation in countries affected by conflict. It is no exaggeration to say that violations of children's rights compromise a country's future prosperity and ability to build lasting peace. We must commit to doing everything we can to prevent abhorrent violations and rise to the challenges to protecting the world's children.