

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

Statement by Ms. Power, Permanent Mission of the United States of America to the United Nations

I thank Special Representative Ms. Zerrougui for her briefing and her tireless efforts on behalf of the world's young people. I also thank Executive Director Mr. Lake for his remarks and distinguished service. Special thanks go to the Foreign Ministers of Luxembourg and Argentina and the Deputy Foreign Minister of Lithuania for travelling here today and for lending his weight to addressing this critical issue.

I especially welcome Alhaji Babah Sawaneh, whose knowledge of the challenge that we are discussing today is so deeply personal. The events in Sierra Leone in the late 1990s did much to awaken the world to the dimensions of the tragedy of children and armed conflict. As a former child soldier abducted when he was just 10 years old, Alhaji's presence is a reminder that the principles that we refer to here are not abstracts. In fact, their implementation can spell the difference between hope and trauma and between life and death.

My colleague's few issues are of a graver humanitarian concern than the impact of armed conflict on civilians. The horror is especially acute when the victims or the perpetrators are boys and girls. In recent years, the tragic connection between children and war has assumed a prominent place on the global agenda. In 2008, the United States approved the Child Soldiers Protection Act, which curtails United States military assistance, licences and sales to Governments that recruit or use child soldiers and which has given our diplomats leverage to engage constructively with Governments on the additional steps that they need to take.

In 2012, as one example, the United States withheld security assistance that the Democratic Republic of the Congo needed to develop a second light infantry battalion until the Government there signed an action plan with the United Nations to address the use and recruitment of child soldiers. Within just a couple of weeks, the Government signed the action plan and is now working with the United Nations in a sincere effort to address the challenge. In 2012, the International Criminal Court sent a welcome message when it found Thomas Lubanga guilty of forcibly conscripting child soldiers in Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Meanwhile, the United Nations has launched a systematic campaign to help Governments and armed groups develop action plans to end the use of child soldiers, 18 of which have now been signed. Chad and Yemen are among the countries that have recently made a commitment to further progress. To that end, I commend Ambassador Lucas for leading a Security Council working group trip to Burma to review the country's effort to fulfil its action plan.

Rescuing children from armed conflict is not always a simple process, especially when they have experienced the trauma of direct involvement in violence. Reintegration requires careful planning, money and the recognition that some scars, whether of body or mind, will heal slowly, if at all

Yet for all the helpful activity, too many children are still being exploited, and some leaders have not thrown their weight behind eliminating this scourge. No State or armed group has yet been delisted by the Secretary-General and 28 of the 52 listed parties are persistent perpetrators, who have been listed for more than five years. The Sudan is the one listed Government that still has not signed an action plan. But even when plans are developed, they have value only if implemented. Donors can help by sharing resources, and the United Nations must provide assistance and monitoring.

The United States encourages the deployment of child protection advisers in all relevant United Nations missions. Further, we urge the United Nations to develop standardized training on child protection responsibilities so that United Nations peacekeepers who encounter violations respond effectively. These training standards should be shared with Member States, the African Union and other regional organizations involved in peacekeeping activities. All of us must press for the creation of birth registration systems in order to verify that a child is a child. As resolution 2143 (2014) does, we must each urge greater protections for schools, which are too often militarized.

Today, Syria is at ground zero of the most appalling humanitarian catastrophe of our era, and children, Syria's future, are among the principal victims. Since the civil war began, more than 10,000 boys and girls have been killed, more than 1.2 million have become refugees, and more than 3 million are unable to attend school. The United States is part of the United Nations-led "No lost generation" initiative that is striving to shield children from the fighting, reunite broken families and deliver opportunities for education. One four-year-old refugee in Turkey told UNICEF that he wants to become a surgeon so that he will be able to save his brother, who is still in Syria, should he get hurt.

According to the Secretary-General's report of 27 January (S/2014/31), the Government and extremist groups have inflicted direct and unspeakable violence against children, including kidnapping, torture, maiming and murder. Pro-Government forces have detained children as young as 11 for alleged association with the Opposition and subjected them to beatings and other brutal mistreatment in order to extract confessions. Both sides have prevented injured children from receiving medical treatment and both, but especially the Government, have launched indiscriminate attacks in which children and other civilians have been killed. Babies, some killed and others barely breathing, have been pulled from the rubble caused by barrel bombs.

On 22 February, the Council demanded a halt to such attacks and to the sieges that have forced many Syrians to choose between the certainty of starvation and the false promise of safety through surrender. The Al-Assad regime may be sure that our scrutiny of its actions as well as those of any who would recruit or target children will not let up until our demands are met and the savagery is stopped.

In recent months, the Central African Republic has also been the scene of horrific violence. The cycle of vengeance between the Séléka and anti-Balaka militias has been singularly repulsive in that nearly all of the victims on both sides have been unarmed. Children have been attacked, beaten, maimed, raped and killed, some by beheading. An estimated 6,000 young people have been recruited and trained to kill by armed groups, and in some cases girls have been forced into marriage.

In addition, the outlawed Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) remains a threat in the Central African Republic and parts of South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is heartening that, in December, 19 soldiers, including six young boys, defected from the LRA, and that they cited radio broadcasting produced by invisible children as giving them the courage to take that brave step. It is encouraging as well that the LRA has been forced to break up into small groups and that in 2013 the number of their attacks went down. The level of deaths and abductions attributable to those attacks, however, remains far too high. The world must not rest until Joseph Kony and his clique have been held accountable and the LRA has become just a horrible memory.

Finally, in South Sudan, children are once again being made subject to all the ravages of war because the country's leaders have failed to settle their differences peacefully. Scared youngsters are wandering among the thousands of displaced persons, searching for their mommies and daddies. Our hearts go out to Mangok Bol, a former lost boy now living in Boston, who has returned to his home village in South Sudan to try to find his nieces and nephews who have been abducted by militants from a competing ethnic group.

When the 14 year-old Alhaji Babah Sawaneh testified before the Council in 2001, he said "taking my gun from me was a vital step" (*S/PV.4422, p. 8*). In that context, I commend the Special Representative for her "Children, not soldiers" campaign. Boys and girls belong in playgrounds, not battlegrounds. Around their young shoulders, they should have school backpacks, not ammunition belts. Their hearts should be filled with optimism and hope, not terror at what the next day may bring.

To make matters right for all of the world's children is a daunting mission, but none could be more worthy of our resources, our dedication or our time.