

Children and Armed Conflict
12 July 2011, United Nations Security Council Chamber

Statement by Mr. Anthony Lake, Executive Director of UNICEF

On behalf of UNICEF and the children whom all of us here serve, I thank the Council for convening this debate on a subject of urgency, and especially for adopting this important resolution (resolution 1998 (2011)) this morning.

A few months ago, I met a 16-year-old boy in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. “Years earlier”, he told me, “they came to my village and took me away and, from that day on, I was a soldier”. That was literally true. But looked at another way, on that day he lost his childhood. His childhood was taken from him at the point of a gun.

On the same visit, I met a young girl who had lived through the horror of rape by an armed soldier. She, too, was violently robbed of her childhood, and of so much more. As we have heard today, and as the Secretary-General’s report (S/2011/250) describes in grim detail, their stories are painfully repeated in conflict areas around the world. Millions of children bear the brunt of war. They are killed, maimed, orphaned, forced to flee their homes, sexually assaulted, pressed into the service of armed groups and exposed to unspeakable violence. Those horrific acts are not only violations of international and humanitarian law; they are violations of our common humanity. Today, the Council has affirmed that attacks on schools and hospitals are attacks on children and must be treated as such, for these grave violations are alarmingly common.

As has been described, schools have been burned and bombed, classrooms used to billet soldiers and schoolyards used to bury the dead. Unexploded ammunition and mines litter playgrounds, threatening life and limb. Hospitals have been looted and immunization campaigns interrupted. Children have been taken, literally, from their classrooms to the battlefield.

The human costs of these attacks are beyond statistical calculation. The economic costs are also very high, forcing communities to rebuild schools and replace stolen supplies and equipment when conflicts come to an end — a cost that most can little afford, few budgets provide for and humanitarian aid rarely covers. The costs to society are also staggering. As Radhika Coomaraswamy just noted, almost one half of all children out of primary school in the world today live in conflict areas in countries that are often among the world’s poorest places. Those same children are less likely to see a doctor or visit a health clinic and are more likely to be deprived of their most basic needs.

The great educator Maria Montessori once said that education is the most effective way of opposing war. It is also an indispensable foundation for peace and prosperity. And it is at the very heart of equity. In times of peace, education gives disadvantaged children the chance to break the cycle of poverty and to contribute to their societies. It is no different in times of war, and may be even more important then.

Schools restore a sense of normalcy and teach children the skills they need to survive and thrive, helping them rise above the horrors that they have witnessed. Without those skills, they are more vulnerable to violence. And so the vicious circle of poverty, despair and conflict continues. We must not fail these children. It is up to all of us to take action to protect the schools where they learn and the hospitals where they heal. To do so is to protect their individual futures and the futures of their societies.

We are making progress in meeting this challenge thanks to the commitment of the Secretary-General, the strong resolve of the Council and the ceaseless efforts of so many. In particular, all of us owe so much to the tireless and admirable work of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Radhika Coomaraswamy, as well as to Ambassador Peter Wittig and the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict and, increasingly, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) as more children are swept up in violent conflicts.

Today, the Council has acted on that progress and is building upon it. Adding attacks on schools and hospitals as a trigger for listing parties in the Secretary-General’s annual report will heighten awareness of these grave violations and the terrible impact they have on the lives of children. We hope that this will spur Governments

and groups to do more to prevent attacks on schools and hospitals through defining concrete plans to end those violations. If they do not, creating clearer links to sanctions committees will strengthen the Council's ability to take action. Impunity is as intolerable in a civilized society as justice is indispensable.

Our purpose today is one of principle, but it must also be one of practicality. Monitoring, reporting and listing alone are not enough. Sanctions alone are not silver bullets. While denunciation gives expression to the outrage we all feel, it alone will not move Governments. Those are necessary conditions, but insufficient to achieve lasting change. To do that, we must also find practical new ways to prevent these acts from occurring. Action plans are an important part of this. The United Nations should have access to all Governments and groups that want to pursue them.

Furthermore, today's resolution should lead to necessary discussion on the military use of schools and hospitals, thus encouraging more Governments to follow the lead of Nepal and the Philippines in protecting schools as zones of peace.

Finally, even as we strengthen the legal framework to increase our response to these abuses, we must never lose sight of the children who have been abused and those who are at risk. Too often, I believe, we refer to the children caught in conflict simply as victims to be pitied. But as so many of us have seen, they are remarkably and poignantly resilient, and brave beyond imagining. They deserve our admiration, perhaps even our awe. They have hopes and dreams like children everywhere, even when virtually everything has been taken from them. They do not need our pity. They need practical support and programmes designed to help them make the most of their potential and a positive contribution to their societies.

The young boy whom I met in the Democratic Republic of the Congo had returned to his life as a soldier twice and then been released. He continues to be at risk of recruitment because he lacks the skills and resources to withstand it. He intends to find another community in which to live and he is receiving more training for civilian life. But his future is very uncertain.

On the same trip, I met another young man who was kidnapped at the age of 11 and forced to fight for years before he escaped. Fortunately, he found a way to use his training. Today he operates a carpentry shop, is married and has a child of his own. I will never forget his pride as he told me that he had made the chair I was sitting on, or the hope his example has inspired in others at the training centre where he was trained, who now go to visit him as a symbol of their hope for the future.

In 2009 we commemorated the twentieth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and it has been more than a decade since the adoption of the Optional Protocols, which ban some of the worst forms of exploitation and abuse against children. I urge those Member States that have not done so to sign, ratify and implement those indispensable instruments.

Let us never forget, however, that human rights are not an end in themselves. The lives of people, of children, are our purpose. Rights are a context for upholding human dignity and for creating the conditions for human progress. It is the practical steps we take to protect these rights — and the impact of our actions — that can change the world. Today, we are taking another step forward, and I cannot thank the Council enough for its commitment to children affected by armed conflict and for making this critical issue a priority.