

Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict
18th June 2015, Security Council Chamber

Statement made by Raimonda Murrmokaitė, Representative of Lithuania to the United Nations

I would like to thank Malaysia for holding this open debate. I also thank the briefers for their presentations.

Lithuania aligns itself with the statement to be delivered on behalf of the European Union.

Armed conflicts continue to have a horrific impact on children and, as we heard today from both the Secretary-General and his Special Representative, last year was one of the worst in recent memory. Recruited as child soldiers, stunted by malnourishment and starvation, forced to witness the death of their parents and siblings, abducted and turned into suicide bombers, sold in slave markets like cattle, children in conflict zones are denied the most basic of human rights.

Granted, in recent years there have been some positive steps in the protection of children in armed conflicts, and we would like to express our appreciation for the dedicated and passionate work of Special Representative Secretary-General Leila Zerrougui to that effect. The incorporation of child protection provisions into peacekeeping mandates, the inclusion of crimes against children among sanctions designation criteria, the campaign “Children Not Soldiers”, child protection advisers, national action plans — these have all been important developments. And yet countless children across the Middle East, in Africa and even in the middle of Europe continue to suffer from conflict-related violence.

In eastern Ukraine foreign aggression and the reign of lawlessness imposed by illegal militants have caused massive displacement, primarily impacting the elderly and children. The latter account for more than 161,000, or some 18 per cent, among registered internally displaced persons, while the total number of children affected by this conflict amounts to 1.7 million. The restricted access to medical services and education, life in temporary shelters and basements of damaged buildings and continued psychological trauma are the daily reality for those children in eastern Ukraine. Child soldiers have been recently spotted by the monitors of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe among the ranks of the illegal militants.

In Syria, the worst humanitarian crisis of our time, 7.5 million children are in need of humanitarian aid, 2.6 million are deprived of education opportunities and close to 2 million are living as refugees in neighbouring countries. Across Yemen, 9.5 million children require humanitarian assistance, 3,600 schools, or 76 per cent of the country’s total, have closed due to insecurity and 1.83 million children lost over two months of school. More and more young boys are seen manning checkpoints and involved in armed groups.

Those are but a few cases where conflicts are taking a heavy toll of children’s lives. The list of 24/96 15-18380 S/PV.7466 Children and armed conflict 18/06/2015 such cases, however, is devastatingly long. If we remember yesterday’s statement by the Executive Director of UNICEF on atrocities in Unity state, South Sudan — boys castrated and left to bleed, girls as young as eight gang-raped and murdered, some 13,000 children forced to participate in a conflict not of their own making — it reminds us once again of the darkest depths of inhumanity that we humans can reach.

Abductions of children are being increasingly used by armed groups and terrorists as a tactic of war, to impose their murderous rule and to target particular ethnic or religious groups. The Chibok girls abducted by Boko Haram in Nigeria and the abduction of Kurdish boys and Yezidi children by Daesh are among the best known recent atrocities and crimes against humanity. The Lord’s Resistance Group (LRA), which the Council discussed only last week, is known to have abducted some 30,000 children, boys and girls, some as young as six, over two decades. Abducted children are forced to commit rape and torture and are re forced into regular combat to kill, often blurring the lines between the victim and the perpetrator. Daesh, known for its exceptional wanton brutality, has been widely reported to turn abducted girls, some as young as 10, into sex slaves, sold and resold on slave markets, some as many as 20 times.

It is hard to find the right words to describe the psychological trauma and the impact on children’s minds in such situations. Over time, some of those children turn from victims into victimizers themselves, as was the case of Dominic Ongwen, who was abducted at the age of 14 on his way to school and later became a notorious LRA commander. Former abductees face tremendous challenges of reintegrating into normal life. They are often shunned and rejected by their own families and communities, especially former girl soldiers and repeated rape victims.

A recent article by photojournalist Marc Ellison provides a telling story of several former LRA girl child soldiers, including one called Mary, who was abducted before she was 10 and forced to become a rebel “wife” at the age of 12. No longer a child soldier, she is rejected by her own community. “If she comes back to live, people have said they will burn her alive in our own hut”, says that girl’s mother.

No doubt it is a story common to many former abductees and child soldiers, who suffer ostracism and exclusion because of their past. Some of them even wish for the time they were wielding the gun as child soldiers, missing the false sense of empowerment it provided over the lives of others. Today such worrying signals are beginning to emerge from the Central African Republic where the lack of options and opportunities to reintegrate into civilian life may be pushing some of the released former child soldiers back into the hands of armed groups.

While the release of children is of the utmost importance, it is no less important to acknowledge that release must be accompanied by comprehensive, creative programmes aimed at addressing the profound damage inflicted upon the children, combining measures of reintegration, training, livelihood opportunities, psycho-social assistance and community education. The role of civil society, non-governmental organizations and community leaders, including on tackling the stigma carried by such children, is extremely important.

We must remember to treat children as victims first, not as perpetrators. In that regard, we welcome the steps taken by the Government of Chad in signing the protocol agreement with the United Nations regarding the handover of children associated with armed forces or groups to child protection actors. Such protocols could be a valuable tool for child rehabilitation.

As mentioned in the recent report of the Secretary General (S/2015/409), accountability for violence against children remains far too rare, even in countries that have criminalized the recruitment of children. Protecting children from serious crimes and preventing such crimes from being committed go hand in hand with tackling impunity and ensuring that the perpetrators are held to account. We welcome the transfer of Dominic Ongwen to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for crimes against humanity and war crimes. Yet, as some colleagues said earlier today, more needs to be done to combat impunity. While the perpetrators are many, the cases and judgments against them remain few and far between. The preventive, deterrent effects of such judgments on would-be perpetrators has yet to be felt. As some cases remain pending, we look forward to the continued work of the ICC to this effect, but also to greater national efforts to pursue accountability.

Child recruitment, killings, maimings and attacks against schools are listed as sanctions triggers. In that context, we welcome the adoption of today’s resolution 2225 (2015), which draws attention to abductions as a 15-18380 25/96 18/06/2015 Children and armed conflict S/PV.7466 disturbingly prevalent feature of modern armed conflict and includes abductions as an additional listing trigger.

In conclusion, we have a wide range of instruments to tackle impunity for conflict-related crimes against children. We must close the gap between the existing legislation and their application, in order to put an end to violence against children and restore them the biggest gift they can have: a safe and secure childhood and the right to be who they are — children