

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

Statement by Yoka Brandt, Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF

Let me, at the outset, thank the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Malaysia for organizing this debate, the Secretary-General for his leadership and Ms. Leila Zerrougui, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, for her tireless commitment to keeping children in conflict safe.

In January this year, in Borno state, Nigeria, villages were attacked by armed groups. Houses and schools were burned. Fatima, a young mother, fled with her baby and two young sons. Stopped by gunmen, she was forced to answer questions about her husband and her religious beliefs. Eventually, the gunmen let her go, but ordered her to leave behind her sons, aged three and seven. She walked for weeks with her daughter until she reached a camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs). She has no idea of what has happened to her sons, or whether she will ever see them again. This is frightening, devastating and increasingly common.

The past year, as the Secretary General's report (S/2015/409) documents and as his Special Representative mentioned earlier, was one of the worst ever for children affected by armed conflict, not least because of the alarming rise in abductions, especially mass abductions, of children and adults in Iraq, Nigeria, South Sudan and Syria.

We have seen mass abductions before, and the Secretary-General has just mentioned the Lord's Resistance Army, which abducted children by night, prompting thousands to make the dangerous nightly journey to areas beyond its reach. In fact, we will have the honour to hear more on this from Ms. Eunice Apio later. The scale and nature of abductions is changing, however, and the Secretary-General's report gives several examples of this.

Used to instil fear and terror in populations, abduction is often only the first in a series of grave violations. Sexual assault and rape, indoctrination, recruitment as child soldiers and murder often follow. Each of these offences blights the child concerned, robs her of her childhood and threatens her ability to live a full and productive life. Each offence violates international law. It both shames us for not doing more to prevent atrocities and spurs us to act to prevent all violations of child rights and call for increased accountability. Left unaddressed, each offence can contribute to the recurring cycles of violence and conflict that shatter lives and communities and perpetuate conflict in future generations. We therefore welcome the Security Council's particular attention this morning to abduction as a new trigger for the listing of parties to conflict in the annexes of the Secretary-General's report.

Let us also acknowledge the progress we have made together to release and reintegrate children affected by conflict. The Secretary-General and his Special Representative mentioned the "Children, Not Soldiers" campaign, which has been central to that shared progress. Combined efforts also led to the release earlier this year of more than 2,000 children by non-State armed groups, including in the Central African Republic and South Sudan. I would like to take this opportunity to thank France for organizing a debate specifically focused on child victims of such groups earlier this year (see S/PV.7414). We cannot, and must not, stop at the release of children, however. We must also think about what happens after children are released. How can they resume normal life when they are inevitably burdened by physical wounds and psychological scars? Think of Fatima's young sons. How will they cope when they return to their mother? Think of the trauma endured by the young women and girls who have escaped from Boko Haram. Think of the more than 140 Kurdish boys abducted by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant last year. These children are victims and must be treated as such. When they are released, the best option is to transfer them quickly to child protection services, to trained professionals who can support them as they recover, rebuild and reintegrate, and who can address the needs of girls and children with special needs, including those with disabilities.

We must commit to providing that critical support, because without it children will not get the opportunity to heal, and the risk of re-recruitment is real. While we acknowledge that progress has been made in some areas, we must remain vigilant, because where conflict has re-emerged or escalated, the risks of backsliding are real. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General just spoke about South Sudan and Yemen, 15-18380 **7/96 18/06/2015** Children and armed conflict **S/PV.7466** where the use of children has not only continued but has increased in recent bouts of conflict.

Urgently and collectively, we must turn our attention to prevention. The best way to do that, of course, is to step up efforts to end conflict and to pursue accountability, not just as a means of addressing past wrongs but also of deterring future ones. But we must also engage those who are most affected by, for example, strengthening community protection measures by engaging local leaders and exploring the benefits of unarmed civilian protection,

as well as by supporting the methods that families use to protect their children — including, in some cases, seeking safety and protection as refugees or IDPs.

Even as we tackle such challenges, new threats emerge. Children are at risk for new forms of violence promoted via social media. Aggressive forms of recruitment for extreme violence, such as participation in executions and suicide bombings, are real and reach well beyond conflict zones. And even in places where children should be safe, they are not. Think of the attack on a school in Peshawar, Pakistan, that killed 145 children and teachers. Or Gaza last year, where more than 260 schools were damaged or destroyed. Or the countries where Governments and non-State armed groups use schools to store weapons, detain prisoners and house soldiers. Or the continued use of explosive weapons and indiscriminate weapons, such as landmines and cluster bombs, in populated areas.

UNICEF therefore appreciates all the more Norway's leadership on the Safe Schools Declaration, which advocates for schools to be safe and protected spaces and outlines actions to end the military use of schools. We need more such initiatives, including negotiations to release children held by armed groups, and community-based reintegration programmes to help children not only recover and reintegrate but also learn new skills to build for the future. Such efforts show children and their families that we care, that we are committed to their protection and well-being and that we cannot and will not tolerate grave violations against children in armed conflict by anyone, anywhere.

We have failed Fatima. We can only imagine the heartbreak that she and her children endure daily. And we do not know if they will ever be reunited. We hope so, of course. Fatima told out staff in the IDP camp that she has not given up hope. And neither can we. We must let her courage inspire us to work even harder. Fatima's children, and thousands of others, depend on us.