

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

Statement by Ms. Frankinet, Permanent Mission of Belgium to the United Nations

Belgium wishes to associate itself with the statement made earlier today by the observer of the European Union and congratulates Luxembourg for its commitment to the issue under discussion.

The past few years have been marked by significant progress in the field of protection of the rights of the child in armed conflict, more specifically in the prevention of and response to violence and abuses committed against them. In that context, we refer in particular to the demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration of thousands of children recruited into armed forces and the signing of national action plans between parties to armed conflict and the United Nations.

Despite such progress, however, huge challenges remain. We stress first of all that although positive achievements have been made in the fight against the recruitment of children into armed forces, it is limited at this stage to governmental forces. It is therefore necessary to pursue dialogue to achieve our goal of eliminating the use of child soldiers by non-governmental armed forces and groups.

Belgium welcomes the attention accorded in resolution 2143 (2014) — which the Security Council has just adopted today and which Belgium co-sponsored — to the problem of military use of schools by governmental and non-governmental armed groups, and to attacks on schools and hospitals. Indeed, the Secretary-General's report on children and armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic (S/2014/31) notes an increase in attacks on schools and hospitals, which should be areas of peace and refuge. The report notes, however, that they are increasingly attacked or used for military purposes.

Resolution 1998 (2011) highlights the impact of such attacks on the security, education and health of children in armed conflict, and calls for increased attention to the issue. Belgium and Luxembourg have therefore undertaken the initiative of organizing an event on the margins of the current Human Rights Council session to raise awareness of that urgent problem and shed light on the challenges and opportunities involved in implementing the resolution.

Belgium has similar concerns about the reintegration of children who were involved in armed conflict, not only as child soldiers but as sexual slaves, scouts, messengers or in any daily life task. The psychological impact of recruitment into armed forces and the significant stigmatization of the children make their return to civilian life especially difficult. Without appropriate, targeted and long-term follow up — as the Council heard in today's testimony — they risk becoming, in turn, perpetrators of violence as a result of limited life experiences focused on the use of weapons. That is why we need to provide them with special assistance and include their opinions and experiences in peace processes.

Moreover, various awareness-raising actions are necessary on the issue of children in armed conflict. On the one hand, there is a need to raise awareness among families and communities to prevent stigmatization of the children; on the other hand, security forces themselves must be informed of the negative consequences, both for children involved as well as for the security forces themselves.

Awareness-raising is also necessary in tackling the issue of sexual violence, especially in cases involving children. In the Sudan and in Syria, for example, children who have suffered sexual abuse tend to remain silent, rather than to complain, because they fear social exclusion and reprisals. It is therefore of the utmost importance to implement specific provisions in order to guarantee access to justice and

appropriate assistance as part of children's reintegration process.

In addition, while reporting such crimes is an important first step for the victims, their voices need to be heard and the perpetrators need to face justice.

Belgium remains highly concerned by the impunity surrounding the perpetrators of violence. In that respect, we welcome in particular the efforts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to implement a national plan aimed at preventing and eliminating the recruitment of children in the national armed forces and preventing sexual violence. However, Belgium notes with concern the impunity enjoyed by the perpetrators of sexual violence. We encourage the Democratic Republic of the Congo to undertake all possible measures to bring to justice those responsible for such crimes.

Under the framework of the fight against sexual violence, my country again calls for the application of the broadest possible definition of sexual violence, as determined by the International Criminal Court.

Finally, Belgium calls upon all of the countries that have not yet ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict to do so as quickly as possible.