

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

*Statement by Mr. Gata Mavita wa Lufuta , Permanent Mission of the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the United Nations*

As this is the first time I take floor in the Security Council during your presidency, allow me at the outset of my statement, to congratulate you, Madam President, and to express how pleased I am to see you presiding over the Council during the month of March. My delegation thanks the Security Council and the presidency of Luxembourg for including on its agenda an issue that particularly affects the Democratic Republic of Congo, namely, children and armed conflict. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Secretary-General for his annual report (S/2013/245) on the issue. My thanks also go to Ms. Leila Zerrougui, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, and to Mr. Anthony Lake, Executive Director of UNICEF, for their commitment to the cause of children.

In one of her annual reports, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict writes that thousands of children continue to be killed, maimed or abducted, suffer sexual violence, or are denied access to humanitarian assistance or health care in many countries. In several countries, she continues, they have also been used to commit suicide attacks or to serve as human shields. That description corresponds exactly to the ordeal suffered daily by Congolese children due to the presence of numerous foreign and domestic armed groups that plunder the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Indeed, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a country that has suffered for more than a decade of intermittent armed conflicts with the grimmest of consequences, children are among those civilians whose rights are most frequently violated. What is worse, given their immature psychological makeup, they experience great trauma when they are recruited as soldiers. That is the case, for example, when they are forced to kill an adversary in cold blood or a comrade in arms suspected of collaboration, or when forced to burn villages or to stand by helplessly as comrades suffer. All the armed groups operating in the territory of the Democratic Republic of the Congo recruit boys and girls as soldiers, messengers, spies or traffickers or to transport munitions.

Change has been palpable since the defeat of the Mouvement du 23 mars. However, internal displacements from ongoing acts of violence have not completely ceased, given the armed groups that continue to recruit children, subjecting them to forced labour and the extraction of natural resources. These children are also used to grind rocks into gravel in quarries. Once broken down, coltan is used in electronic devices. The high level of radioactivity of such substances explains the frequent respiratory problems, sometimes lethal, suffered by a great number of Congolese children who have been transporting and breaking down coltan.

Those who survive are traumatized by acts of vandalism and barbarism perpetrated by the armed groups that victimize them. They have had to witness, powerlessly, horrible scenes of violence in which their families and friends have been killed before their eyes. Thousands of child victims of violent attacks by armed groups have suffered considerable material and moral damage. I speak on behalf of those children, whose families, generally in a dire economic situation, would have liked concrete measures of redress and reparation to be made for them. From the viewpoint of education, displaced children living in areas of combat have virtually no access to education, which leaves them even more vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups.

Given the scope of the phenomenon, and pursuant to the recommendations contained in the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict, the Congolese authorities have spared no expense in tackling the challenges. In October 2012, my Government and the United Nations signed an action plan with a series of commitments by both parties, aiming to end the recruitment and use of children by Congolese armed forces and security services in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as sexual violence against children.

Progress has been made since the signing of that action plan. Two directives have been issued by the Congolese authorities. The first was issued by the Ministry of National Defence and Veterans Affairs to the Democratic Republic of the Congo Armed Forces, recalling the various commitments made by the Government in the matter and the obligations arising therefrom. The second was issued by the general administrator of the Congolese National Intelligence Agency. It gives the United Nations task force and child-protection agencies access to intelligence staff, documents, sites and installations, and authorizes the release of all children associated with armed groups into the care of child-protection agencies.

Moreover, two coordination mechanisms have been created to follow up the implementation of the action plan. Results have been encouraging. According to statistics, 2,494 children were removed from armed groups and forces in June 2013, while 2,824 children, of whom 365 were girls, were placed in the care of the transitional support structure. Those numbers fell through 31 December 2013 and perhaps even more by today.

Among the wide-ranging actions undertaken by the Government to address the phenomenon of sexual violence, I note the law of 20 July 2006. Compared to the earlier criminal code of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the law brings meaningful change, including by raising the age limit for those considered to be victims of sexual violence from 14 to 18 years old. Practices that were formerly considered to be lesser crimes — including forced marriage, forced prostitution or the exploitation of children, sexual slavery, bestiality and genital mutilation — are now punished more severely. Moreover, the new law on sexual violence, includes not only those crimes but also 16 additional crimes under the principle of international humanitarian law.

In conclusion, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is resolved to pursue its campaign to eradicate this phenomenon. Along those lines, my delegation takes this opportunity to call upon the foreign and domestic armed groups still active in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo to respond positively to the invitation of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Congolese armed forces to lay down their arms and to surrender to Congolese authorities so that they can be repatriated to their countries, in the case of foreigners, or inscribed in the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme, in the case of Congolese nationals.

My delegation welcomes the commitment of the Security Council to working to protect children against grave violations committed during armed conflict.