

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

*Statement by Mr. Ruzicka, Permanent Mission of Slovakia to the United Nations*

Slovakia welcomes and highly appreciates the dedication and tireless effort of Luxembourg in mobilizing efforts to end the abuse of children in war. We salute the presidency for placing this important topic on the Council's agenda. Allow me also to congratulate all organizers and participants for launching the "Children, not soldiers" campaign yesterday.

At the outset, I would like to align myself with the statement delivered earlier by the observer of the European Union, and also to make a few remarks on behalf of Slovakia.

I would like to thank today's briefers for their presentations. In particular, I wish to accentuate the tireless efforts of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Ms. Leila Zerrougui, to work for the benefit of children in conflict-affected areas. We fully support the initiative launched by the Office of the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict towards ending the recruitment of children in Government forces by 2016.

Slovakia has noted with satisfaction an increase in the attention directed to child protection issues when setting up or renewing certain mandates of United Nations missions. Nevertheless, it is only a first step. The prerequisites of improved child protection, as stated in mission mandates, have to be fully implemented in the field. We commend Luxembourg, as Chair of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, for being proactive in ensuring that language on children and armed conflict has been retained and expanded wherever possible in country-specific resolutions. Slovakia sponsored resolution 2143 (2014). At the same time, without the additional effort of all Member States, the Working Group risks losing its momentum, credibility and maybe its relevance.

Just a few weeks ago, the Security Council held an open debate on the protection of civilians in armed conflict (see S/PV.7109). During the debate, I stated that the protection of peace and the prevention of war comprise one of the most important missions of the United Nations, and that in cases where we fail to prevent war or conflict, we must combine efforts, abilities, means and resources to protect those most vulnerable: women, children, elderly persons and persons with disabilities.

A stolen childhood cannot be restored in a lifetime. Armed conflict and violence pose considerable and serious risks to the well-being and welfare of children. Abuse suffered in time of war is the worst form of violation of children's rights. Not only do children suffer from the direct consequences of war and armed violence; they are also affected by displacement, loss of relatives and the trauma associated with witnessing acts of violence. Recovery after having experienced a particularly difficult or challenging situation is always long-term, with a possibility of failure. It requires adequate health care, the involvement of parents and society, education and complex attention in dealing with physical and mainly mental trauma.

Slovakia remains gravely concerned about the continuing practice of child soldier recruitment. The number of child soldiers remains alarming and their personal stories are utterly disturbing. The international community must step up efforts both in rescuing children already recruited as soldiers and in developing solid preventive measures to help to discourage, suppress and, ultimately, totally eliminate that distressing phenomenon. There are two key areas in particular to address: poverty and education.

We call on all States that have not yet done so to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict and to adopt all necessary domestic measures towards its full and effective implementation.

As I stated earlier, access to education both during and after conflict is a key factor in terms of preventing violations of children's rights. Slovakia urges all States, the international community and United Nations institutions to address the matter of education as a priority when adopting policies and programmes with an impact on children and their rights. By providing children with adequate education, we can reduce the risk of their being subjected to abuse.

Slovakia condemns the use of schools for military purposes. The study *Education under attack 2014*, published in February, identifies 70 countries where attacks occurred between 2009 and 2013. In 30 cases, there was a pattern of deliberate attacks. Armed non-State groups and national military and security forces alike have attacked education to advance their own interests. In 24 out of the 30 countries profiled in the study, warring parties took over schools in whole or in part, using them as bases, barracks, firing positions and weapons caches. Buildings that should have provided safe spaces for learning became battlefields when their use for military purposes made them targets for attack. Those figures are extremely alarming.

Early focus on restoring functioning schools and returning young people to classes can represent peace dividends and foster support for peace. Education systems need to collaborate on health, education, safety and security in the schools. Landmine awareness, psycho-social support and reconstruction of education institutions must be aligned with social and economic development planning and public sector and labour market reform.

Slovakia recognizes its share of responsibility in helping children to gain access to education and health care in conflict and post-conflict areas. That is reflected in our development assistance programmes. More than €6 million have been allocated to date for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Slovak research and education institutions in the field of health care and education.

As far as prevention is concerned, those efforts will not be entirely successful without addressing the root causes of conflict, as well as its enabling and facilitating factors. Credible and in-depth security sector reform has been shown to play a crucial and decisive role in reducing or even eliminating conditions that can facilitate the outbreak of conflict, as well as the sustainability of peace in the longer term.

In that context, we reiterate the need to implement vetting mechanisms to ensure that those who have committed crimes against children are not included in army ranks, that the necessary attention is paid to the training of military personnel, including peacekeepers, and that mechanisms to prevent underage recruitment are put in place. If security sector reform could create conditions that would help reintegrate or save even one single child from the horrors of conflict and war, it must become an imperative for each one of us to undertake.

Children need pens and books, not guns and boots. In concluding, I want to stress that the protection of children and their rights, well-being and welfare in any place on the Earth is the moral obligation of each and every citizen of each and every State. We must not abandon those who are the most vulnerable, innocent and defenceless. The international community, States, civil society, humanitarian agencies and NGOs all have the duty and the responsibility to use all means necessary to protect children from

suffering.