

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

Statement by Mr. Lake, Executive Director of UNICEF

Let me begin by thanking the Secretary- General, my friend and colleague Leila Zerrougui and you, Sir, for your leadership on this issue. Let me also commend and thank the Security Council for its nine resolutions to help end the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict and for giving voice to those children through this debate. I look forward to hearing from Alhaji Babah Sawaneh, who in 2001, at the age of 14, became the first-ever former child soldier to brief the Council (see S/PV.4422), and who now supports former child soldiers in Sierra Leone. My remarks will be as brief as they are heartfelt.

When children are killed in indiscriminate attacks on schools or hospitals, when a boy is maimed by a landmine, when rape is both a weapon as well as a crime — the world is rightly outraged. But what of the atrocity of a boy being recruited at gun-point into an armed group; of a girl kidnapped from her school, traumatized by abuse and then given a gun and made to fight; or of any armed force sending children to battle to kill and die? In that regard, too, our outrage must be matched by action to end the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict anywhere and to support survivors while giving them the tools they need to rebuild their own lives and the future of their societies.

In recent years, the world has made real progress: better documenting and responding to grave violations against children; holding perpetrators accountable through investigations, prosecutions and disciplinary measures such as those imposed by national authorities in Colombia, Myanmar and Sierra Leone; and developing effective responses, including counselling and vocational training, to help children break the physical and psychological bonds that have imprisoned their lives and threatened their futures. But more must be done. Just as the global community has a responsibility to end grave violations against children, each nation, too, has a responsibility to keep children from entering the ranks of its armed forces in the first place, as does every armed group.

Focused national action is at the heart of our new advocacy effort entitled “Children, not soldiers”, through which United Nations agencies are working in partnership with eight Governments to prevent and end the recruitment and use of children in Government forces. Six of those countries — Afghanistan, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar, Somalia and South Sudan — have signed action plans with concrete, time-bound steps to make that happen. Yemen is finalizing its plan, and the Sudan is now in discussions with the United Nations to develop its plan. But Governments cannot be asked to act alone. To translate those plans into measurable action, the United Nations must continue to provide resources, advice and technical assistance to help Governments identify and release children from their ranks and establish measures to prevent children from ever entering those ranks again.

Verifying the ages of soldiers is an important first step. With United Nations support, Chad accelerated efforts to screen its troops last year, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo has been working closely with United Nations agencies to identify and release children from its security forces. Birth registration, a child’s passport to protection, is also essential. The action plans developed by both Chad

and the Democratic Republic of the Congo include national birth registration campaigns to register every child.

Prevention also requires greater awareness at the community level. The Government of Myanmar joined forces with the United Nations to invest in a television, radio and billboard campaign to inform communities that child recruitment was prohibited, along with a phone number to report cases.

Beyond prevention, we cannot forget the specific needs of child soldiers who are emerging from conflict and need help in reintegrating into society. A country that invests in counselling, educating and training those children is not only investing in their futures, but in its own future as well. That is why UNICEF is working closely with countries to support their efforts to educate and train those children, helping them find a place in their communities.

On a recent visit to the Central African Republic a few weeks ago, I met a young woman who was 14 years old when she joined the Séléka. Without training, she was thrust directly into battle, fighting on the front lines against Government forces and witnessing acts of violence and atrocities no child should ever see. I asked her about her hopes for the future now that she was free. She told me that she wanted to be reunited with her parents, who remained missing. With the support of social workers, that young woman will soon begin professional training, still haunted by the nightmare that she has endured, but dreaming, too, of a better future for herself, her family, when she finds them, and, indeed, her country. Her story personifies horror but also hope: the horrors faced by children associated with armed forces and groups but also the hope that, with support, investment and encouragement, we can help these young men and women rebuild their lives, transform themselves and their societies and help their countries emerge from the shadow of conflicts that have included the horror of children losing their childhoods and even their lives.