



United Nations Office of the Special Representative
of the Secretary-General for

CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

Children in Armed Conflicts: Trends and United Nations Response

Lecture Delivered by:

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INTRODUCTION

I thank Ms. Irmeli Viinanen and the Women's International Forum for this invitation and your interest in the issue of children and armed conflict. Your partners and yourselves are key players in putting an end to violations committed against children in conflict, and it is my pleasure to provide you with information on recent trends and the efforts done to address child protection challenges. I hope that this lecture will inspire you to continue to support our efforts in making the world a safer place for children caught in conflict.

I. How are children affected by armed conflict?

Children and women are the principal victims of conflicts. Children are the majority of the population in countries affected by conflicts. They are disproportionately affected by war. Children are killed and maimed. Their parents die and they become orphans or they are separated from their families. Their schools and hospitals are attacked, used for military purposes, and as a result, they are deprived of education and health care. Sexual violence is increasingly a characteristic of conflict and girls and boys are raped or used as sex slaves. In other cases, children are forced to take part in wars and are recruited and used by armed groups. They may witness killings, lootings, the burning of their communities. The psychological impact is immense – children may be traumatized for years.

Let me address these violations in more details:

Killing and maiming

Example with high-level of casualties: Syria, Iraq, Somalia

Sexual violence

Sexual violence is increasingly a characteristic of conflict and is often perpetrated against girls and boys in a rule of law vacuum. In some instances

sexual violence has been used as a tactic of war designed to humiliate a population or to force displacement.

Attacks on schools and hospitals

There is an increasing trend of schools and hospitals being attacked with detrimental effects on children. Apart from the direct and physical damage to schools and hospitals, conflict can result in the forced closure or the disrupted functioning of these institutions. Schools are also increasingly used as military barracks, weapons storage facilities, command centres, detention and interrogation sites, as well as firing and observation positions.

Denial of humanitarian access

It is estimated that in today's conflicts around the globe, 80 million children are denied humanitarian assistance.

Problems faces by humanitarians include lack or limited access to conflict areas, security concerns such as roadblocks, risks of abductions, carjacking and looting of humanitarian supplies.

Children are also victims because **they are used** by adults who wage war. They are forced to take part in conflicts that are not theirs.

Child recruitment and use of children in wars

- For a long time, the Sierra Leone and Northern Uganda **model of forced recruitment**, where many children were abducted, dragged and then beaten into submission was the archetype on child soldiering. There is no doubt that many groups abduct, intimidate and coerce children to join them.

Example: DRC - FDLR and LRA

- Children **serve multiple roles** in conflicts. Some **take up arms** and are sent to the frontline where they are forced to kill and commit other violations. Others are serving in support roles such as **spies, sex slaves, suicide bombers, to**

- plant explosive devices**, as **porters** and **cooks**, which make them equally vulnerable to violence.
- However, in some situations, child recruitment is not always forced and it seems that children also join armed forces and groups “willingly” for various reasons.
 - **For example, poverty (structural cause)** is a factor that can lead to child soldiering as it lessens options for children. Poverty often means a lack of access to education and other basic resources. For some children, especially orphans, joining armed groups ensures at least one meal a day and some poor parents give their children to the movement in the hope that they will be well fed and housed.
 - **Discrimination/ideological factors:** Perceived or real discrimination is often a key motivating factor for children to join armed groups. It is not unusual that many of the armed groups that recruit child soldiers are drawn from ethnic, class and caste groupings.
 - **Community mobilization:** The recent trend in the formation of self defense groups in communities that are subject to threat from the outside also poses serious challenges. The leaders of the community feel that the children must play their part and help defend their families and their communities.

The nature of conflict is changing.

New technologies, the absence of clear frontlines, of identifiable opponents make children even more vulnerable. Civilian casualties, including children, is a reflection of the changing nature of conflict. It's become harder in some cases to know who is a civilian and who is a combatant. Children are likely to die or get injured in **aerial attacks**, **drone operations** or when **improvised explosive devices** are used. They are also victims when hostilities take place in urban or densely populated areas. With the proliferation of armed groups and the conduct of asymmetric warfare, children have become more vulnerable. They are used as **suicide bombers** and **human shields**, are **detained** on terrorist charges without judicial process.

II. What has the international community done to address these issues?

- Of all the humanitarian issues prevalent in the world today, the theme of children and armed conflict has gotten the attention of the Security Council and the United Nations.

Graca Machel report

- It all started in the 1990s when images of the brutal wars in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Somalia and former Yugoslavia flooded the TV screens and shook the consciousness of the international community. In 1996 Graça Machel presented her in-depth expert study on children and armed conflict to the General Assembly to provide guidance on what was necessary at the international level to protect children in times of conflict.
- As a result of the report, the General Assembly created the post of Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict to become an independent moral voice for the protection of children.
- Mr. Olara Otunnu, Former Ambassador of Uganda to the UN and in his role, former member of the security council, was appointed as the first Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict in 1997. He saw the potential for the Security Council to engage on this issue and was determined to make the Security Council recognize that children and armed conflict is a peace and security issue and he succeeded.
- Since 1999, the Council has been deeply engaged on this issue and adopted 9 resolutions that are the framework of our mandate:
 - A naming and shaming exercise of armed groups violating the rights of children, also known as the list of shame
 - The establishment of a monitoring and reporting mechanism on 6 grave violations committed against children during armed conflicts
 - The creation of the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, and

- The possibility of imposing targeted measures including sanctions against violators.

These tools have proven efficient in protecting war-affected children.

Allow me to describe these revolutionary initiatives in more details.

The Annual Report of the Secretary-General

- The Security Council's engagement with the issue of children and armed conflict began in 1999 when the Council requested the Secretary-General to provide a report on Children and Armed Conflict to the Council.
- The report documents the six grave violations against children committed in conflicts or situations of concern including the recruitment and use of children, killing and maiming, sexual violence, abduction, attacks on schools and hospitals and denial of humanitarian access.
- Every year, the report is presented to the Security Council and has become the basis for ongoing Security Council action on this issue.

Listing and delisting

- The second initiative by the Security Council took place in 2001 when the Council requested the Secretary-General to add annexes to his annual report listing parties recruiting and using children. This is the list of shame that is telling the world who the perpetrators are and where they are located.
- Today, this list includes 55 parties in 14 country situations (including the Lord's Resistance Army active in the Central African Region). Of all the groups listed, 9 are government forces.
- The Security Council also requested parties wishing to get off the list to enter into time-bound action plans with the United Nations to release and reintegrate children in a structured manner and to prevent further recruitment and use of children.

- The action plans usually include activities such as the immediate release and reintegration of children, the criminalization of child recruitment through national legislation as well as unimpeded access for United Nations staff to military installation to verify the presence of children and allow for their immediate separation.
- In 2009 and 2011, sexual violence and the killing and maiming of children in contravention of international law, as well as attacks on schools and hospitals have become new triggers for listing.

Monitoring and reporting mechanism (SC Res 1612)

- The most significant development with regards to children and armed conflict and the Security Council took place in 2005 with the adoption of Security Council resolution 1612. The resolution established a monitoring and reporting mechanism for grave violations and a Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict.
- The objective of the monitoring and reporting mechanism is to collect timely and reliable information and contributes to a better understanding of the scope of the issues and a greater range of appropriate responses in terms of rehabilitation programs for victims, advocacy and accountability of perpetrators.
- In all situations where parties are listed, a monitoring and reporting mechanism is established with a Task Force on the ground. The Task Force members include all relevant UN entities that have information on children, independent national institutions such as human rights commissions, and selected NGOs.
- To date, 14 monitoring and reporting mechanisms are in place in Africa, Asia and South America.

The Security Council Working Group

- The Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict meets every two months to review information coming from the Monitoring and reporting mechanisms to make recommendations on how to address child protection challenges. My office, UNICEF, the Department of Peacekeeping

Operations and other child protection partners use the recommendations of the working group to negotiate commitments from parties to conflicts and design programmes in the country concerned.

Sanctions

- The Security Council recognized early that there was a need for robust action including sanctions against individuals persistently committing violations against children in armed conflict. These targeted measures include arms embargoes, asset freezes, and travel bans.
- Individuals in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Cote d'Ivoire have been sanctioned for recruitment and use of children.

III. Positive results

The engagement of the international community in the area of children and armed conflict has produced concrete results.

- Every year, thousands of children are separated from armed forces and groups, thanks to the intervention of the United Nations.
- Children receive assistance from UNICEF and other partners to be reunified with their families and reintegrated in their communities. They benefit from skills training, schooling, and psychosocial support to bring them back to a normal life.
- So far, ten parties have successfully completed action plans in Cote d'Ivoire, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Uganda. As a result, they were removed from the list of shame. Thirteen parties are currently implementing action plans. In 2012, five new action plans were signed in Myanmar, DRC, South Sudan and Somalia.

IV. Remaining challenges

a. Access to reliable information

- We need quality information on violations to effectively advocate for the protection of children, to respond to their needs and to end impunity. However, in certain country situations, security is a constraint.

b. State versus non-State parties

- The United Nations has leverage on State parties because they do not want to be named on the list of shame. On the other hand, dialogue with armed groups is more challenging.

c. Persistent Perpetrators

Of serious concern is also the growing list of persistent perpetrators of grave violations against children. 29 parties to conflict have been listed for more than five years in the Secretary-General's report of which the majority are non-State actors. We have to work on ways to increase the pressure on these groups to end violations.

d. Fighting against impunity for perpetrators

- Progress has been made to end impunity for perpetrators of grave child rights violations. The landmark ruling of the International Criminal Court against Congolese warlord Thomas Lubanga sent a clear signal that grave violations will not remain unpunished. The transfer of Congolese warlord Bosco Ntaganga to the ICC in March 2013, is another success in the fight against impunity.

e. Addressing the root causes of conflict

- Finally, only an end to the violence will ensure the protection of children. Child protection should be part of every peace process, and mechanisms and programs have to be put in place to ensure the long-term reintegration and rehabilitation of children to prevent re-recruitment and to make them active members of societies.
- We also have to address the root causes of conflict – tackle poverty, create alternatives for children, combat inequalities and discrimination to ensure a sustainable transition to peace and an end to violations.