

Security Council Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict
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Statement by Ms. Hilde Frafjord Johnson, Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund

Children affected by armed conflict deserve protection. Not only that, they have the right to be protected from all violations of their rights. The Security Council has shown courage in leading international efforts to end grave violations against children in armed conflict. We truly appreciate that.

On behalf of UNICEF, I would also like to thank Mexico for its exceptional leadership in driving this agenda forward in the Security Council. Without Mexico's support and dedication and that of the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Radhika Coomaraswamy, progress we have seen in recent years would not have been possible. And with your continued commitment and determination, Madam President, and that of all Council members, we may have the opportunity to end grave violations against children in armed conflict.

We must never forget what is at stake. Last year, I visited a major demobilization centre operated by the armed forces in Chad. The boys were still in combat uniform when I met them. Their stories were horrific — they had witnessed brutal attacks on their homes and families; they had seen their houses burnt, their livelihoods destroyed. The boys had been forced to join rebel groups. When I asked them about their hopes for the future, all ten had one singular, uniform ambition: education. They wanted to go to school. That was the key to their future.

We cannot ignore their stories or deny them the fulfilment of their dreams. That is within our collective reach, but it will require sustained engagement at the highest possible level, stronger partnerships and robust delivery in the field. Together we can report on violations and identify violators. We can take action to ensure compliance with Security Council provisions, and we can protect and assist those that are the most vulnerable: children.

The past year has been marked by notable progress. Action plans to end child recruitment have been signed by parties to conflict in the Philippines, Nepal and the Sudan. Thousands of children have been released from armed groups and armed forces. In 2009, a little over 9,500 children were removed from armed groups and armed forces in countries implementing the monitoring and reporting mechanism. However, that number does not include the almost 3,000 children who were released in Nepal — which the Special Representative of the Secretary-General has just referred to — in January and February this year. It does include 5,900 children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and 1,400 children in the Sudan who have now embarked on the long and challenging process of reintegration with their families and communities.

These numbers tell a compelling story: Security Council resolutions 1539 (2004) and 1612 (2005) work. They are making a real difference in children's lives. Now we need to take our collective efforts one step further — not a small step, but a major one. We need to make change happen in the lives of many more children, as the Special Representative just highlighted in her statement.

Security Council resolution 1882 (2009) was a formidable breakthrough. The vision and courage demonstrated by the Council in passing that resolution cannot be overstated. It expands the triggers for listing parties so that more of the grave violations are associated with the Council's naming and shaming efforts. Such grave violations also merit strong reactions and punitive measures against the perpetrators. We are pleased that the Security Council is willing to take such action.

With resolution 1888 (2009), on sexual violence and rape as a weapon of war, the Council provides a further opportunity to consolidate the framework at our disposal to hold violators accountable. On our side, we stand ready to support the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Margot Wallström, in her important mission.

UNICEF welcomes the two triggers for listing of parties who commit rape and other forms of grave sexual violence and who kill and maim children. Sexual violence is still regularly used as a weapon of war with the strategic intent to humiliate and demoralize individuals, tear apart families and destroy communities. As many of us have experienced during visits to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the stories women and girls tell us are just horrific. They bear the brunt of that violence. The humiliation, stigma, exclusion and deep physical and psychological scars remain with them, in many cases destroying their lives.

Children still account for a considerable number of war-related casualties. When they are not directly targeted or used in war, they often fall victim to the indiscriminate use of force. They are most affected by landmines, cluster munitions and other indiscriminate weapons and explosive remnants of war. It is commendable that the Security Council has decided to address this most basic grave violation against the rights of children.

In total, therefore, three of the six grave violations in conflict are now subject to the Security Council framework. To be able to list, we need adequate monitoring and reporting mechanisms. UNICEF is fully committed to strengthen the monitoring and reporting mechanisms in relation to all three violations in all countries concerned. We also need monitoring and reporting to hold violators accountable. Indeed, our ambition should be to utilize the full potential of this framework, holding perpetrators accountable and bringing them to justice, and to enforce measures against violators through existing sanctions regimes.

We also need to focus on other grave violations against children. The Special Representative has already expressed concern about the trend of attacks on schools. That trend must be reversed. In addition, the continued denial of humanitarian access in situations of armed conflict, such as in Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan, has grave implications for children. Our colleagues in the field in those situations take considerable risk when they engage with parties to conflict, often non-State actors, to reach children in need of assistance, to provide protection where there is no rule of law and to safeguard schools as zones of peace. That is easier said than done. We constantly look for new approaches to deliver on our promise to children in the field. Humanitarian access is imperative, and denying it is unacceptable.

The child protection framework for children and armed conflict supported by the Security Council spells out the accountability of perpetrators. At the same time, it lays out the responsibilities of key stakeholders, including the Security Council and its Working Group, concerned national Governments, the United Nations, Member States, donors and civil society. Thanks to the monitoring and reporting in countries listed by the Council and other situations of concern, we cannot claim ignorance when it comes to the situation of children. The extent of grave violations perpetrated against children is known. Never have we been so well informed. Silence is not an option, nor is inaction. We have a collective duty to act. We all are accountable to the children whose stories we hear.

UNICEF stands ready to assist the Security Council and its Working Group as it utilizes all the tools at its disposal for clear and determined action. We look forward to supporting possible missions to the field to consider the information compiled by our colleagues, assisting in-country advocacy efforts and helping mobilize the required resources to improve the situation of children affected by armed conflict. As indicated in resolution 1882 (2009), donors must also ensure that operational agencies have the necessary capacity to address grave violations and deliver results for children.

Together with our partners, UNICEF and the Office of the Special Representative have taken several key initiatives to strengthen the monitoring of grave violations in follow-up to resolution 1882 (2009), including a global roll-out of a new monitoring and reporting mechanism field manual and training toolkit, as well as the development of practical action plan templates. This will lead to a more systematic and effective implementation of the mechanism, where UNICEF normally is co-chair in the field.

In UNICEF, we have ensured that the protection of children and women in armed conflict and other crises are prioritized in our Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action. We are scaling up initiatives to raise

awareness and develop capacity across the board — among our country offices in all countries listed and situations of concern, in regional offices and headquarters and among key partners — to improve the monitoring and reporting mechanism and our protection programmes. None of that would be possible without strong partnerships. Cooperation with United Nations entities — in particular peacekeeping and the child protection advisers, as my colleague just explained, and special political missions — and with concerned Governments, non-governmental organizations and civil society is essential to all our efforts.

But to be able to take action, the legal framework must be in place. A couple of weeks ago we commemorated the tenth anniversary of the two Optional Protocols of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. UNICEF strongly urges all Member States that have not yet signed, ratified and implemented the Optional Protocols to do so as a matter of priority and urgency. We encourage all Member States to effectively implement the Paris Commitments and Paris Principles on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups.

This is also the year of the twentieth anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Somalia is the only country in the world where an entire generation — the two past decades — has known only violence and conflict and where grave violations are committed against children every day, by all parties.

As children in Somalia deserve a better future, so does the boy whom I met in the Central African Republic a few months back. He was only nine years old and had been demobilized from the rebel group Armée pour la Restauration de la République et la Démocratie. As tears streamed down his cheeks, he told me about the horrible pictures that came before his eyes over and over again. They would never leave his head. His name was Futur. His only wish was to go home. Indeed, for Futur and for those 10 boys in Chad, and for millions of other children, the principles and values of the Convention stand as a beacon of hope for a better future. It is our collective obligation to turn them into reality in their lives.