

Children and Armed Conflict
12 July 2011, United Nations Security Council Chamber

Statement by Mr. Tanin, Representative of Afghanistan

I thank you, Sir, for convening today's debate, which offers us all an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to ensuring the protection of the security, rights and well-being of children in armed conflicts. I also wish to extend my appreciation to Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict, and Mr. Anthony Lake, Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund, for their remarks this morning.

The legacy of war and violence has had a devastating impact on my country. Violence still takes its toll on everyday life. It did so today in Kandahar. As President Karzai stated after the loss of his brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, the head of Kandahar Provincial Council, "This is the life of all Afghan people. I hope the miseries that every Afghan family faces will one day end."

Sadly, such miseries are ongoing and include children. Children continue to bear the brunt of conflict in Afghanistan. They are among the growing number of civilian casualties, and their ability to live safe, healthy and prosperous lives remains in jeopardy. There is no war zone in Afghanistan; there are no front lines. Violent attacks take place in our villages, markets and public streets, and put Afghan children at risk as they attempt to live normal lives. Forty-four per cent of all child casualties are caused by improvised explosive devices and suicide attacks, which are increasingly intended for soft targets such as civilian roads, schools and health clinics. Children, women and other vulnerable groups are the prime victims of such attacks.

The Government of Afghanistan is committed to fulfilling its responsibility to protect the rights of all children and to addressing violations of children's rights. We have initiated a number of important steps, including the launch of an inter-ministerial steering committee mandated to develop and implement our national action plan, which seeks to prevent the recruitment and use of children in our national security forces and to address all forms of violence against children. Our efforts are geared towards meeting our obligations in child protection.

We are working closely with the United Nations country task force on monitoring and reporting and the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict to protect children's rights to security, education and health care. I take this opportunity to welcome the Working Group's visit to Afghanistan, led by Ambassador Wittig, during which important discussions were held with relevant Government entities to enhance progress in the lives of Afghan children.

We all must address the disturbing rise in child suicide bombers employed by extremist militant groups. Recent reports of terrorist networks training and selling children to militant groups for suicide bombings reflect gross violations of children's rights in all countries. The vulnerability of a child who knows nothing outside of a war-torn existence is not up for exploitation in war; a child's innocence is not fair game as a fighting strategy; and most importantly, a child's body is not a weapon of war either under the standards of the Constitution of Afghanistan or under international law. The use of these children in suicide attacks is a heinous crime that must be addressed with firm conviction.

By the same token, we believe it essential to avoid equating the Afghan Government with the terrorists when considering the challenges facing Afghan children. Attacks against children and violations of their fundamental rights are the work of those who are continuing their campaign against peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Violence against children through sexual, physical and domestic abuse is an abomination and against national law. Sexual violence, including pederasty in its local form, which is widely sensationalized in media reports, is a crime that incurs serious punishments under the Afghan legal system. Though such problems are not unique to Afghanistan, we are taking all necessary steps to stop this illegal, un-Islamic and immoral practice.

The widespread poverty afflicting the country is also a threat to the safety and security of Afghanistan's children. Over 7 million children are living under the poverty line. Poverty plunges underage children into the labour force both in Afghanistan's cities and in the countryside. Their struggle to be breadwinners deprives many children of opportunities to pursue an education and to build a brighter future.

In the face of these challenges, we should not lose sight of the progress made thus far. To date, more than 7 million boys and girls are enrolled in schools, investing in their futures. We have constructed more than 4,000 schools across the country; we predict having nine million children enrolled in schools by 2020; and in a country where practically no girls received education just 10 years ago, over 40 per cent of these new students will be girls. Additionally, the great majority of Afghanistan's population has access to basic health care, showing great improvement over the past 10 years.

Nevertheless, we have yet to overcome our challenges. We look forward to our continued partnership with the international community to improve security and ensure prosperity in the lives and futures of Afghan children. Our international partnerships will remain intact throughout the transition as the Afghan Government begins to assume its leadership role. Therefore, we are alone neither in our successes, nor in our failures. We share responsibility for the security of children in Afghanistan, who need and deserve an environment free of indiscriminate violence to pursue their full potential.