

Children and Armed Conflict

12 July 2011, United Nations Security Council Chamber

Statement by Radhika Coomaraswamy, Special Representative to Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict

Ms. Coomaraswamy: Thank you, Sir, for convening this open debate on children and armed conflict. Your presence signals a commitment at the highest level to the protection of children during war. I would also like to commend the dedication of Ambassador Peter Wittig and his staff for their effective engagement as Chair of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. Their dedication must be truly commended and we look forward to continuing to work closely with them.

I also want to thank the Secretary-General for honouring us with his presence and his unwavering support for the cause of women and children. I also want to thank all the ministers who have come from afar to be with us today.

The Security Council has before it the tenth annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict (S/2011/250). In 15 of the 22 situations covered in the report, we found evidence of attacks on schools and hospitals. During my visits to conflict areas, I have personally seen the devastation — schools completely destroyed, bombed or burnt to the ground. I have also seen schools with broken window panes and empty classrooms where children have been recruited as child soldiers. I have met girls whose colleagues stay away from school because, as female students, they may be the victims of acid attacks.

These images stay in my mind and remind me of how important it is to ensure that schools are zones of peace for children. Half of all the children who do not go to primary school in the world live in conflict areas. They do not go to school because their schools have become part of the tragedy of conflict.

Schools are increasingly under physical attack, resulting in either full or partial destruction, oftentimes in violation of international humanitarian law. Schools are also closed as a result of threats and intimidation. Teachers and students are also killed and maimed in targeted attacks. Military use of schools is also a concern, as such use can put children in clear danger. To deprive children of an education is to destroy their future. A future destroyed — a future without hope — will only sow the seeds of further conflict.

Hospitals are also vital to children, especially in war. Attacks on hospitals are two-fold atrocities; not only do they kill and wound girls and boys, but they also leave them without access to treatment. Attacks on hospitals and hospital personnel deprive the community of a much-needed lifeline. In fact, protecting hospitals and its personnel was the founding element of modern humanitarian law.

The Secretary-General has repeatedly called for strengthened attention to and focus on the need to protect schools and hospitals from attack. Germany's initiative to bring today's resolution 1998 (2011) forward demonstrates the Council's resolve to expand the protection of girls and boys. The resolution provides for the listing of parties who attack schools and hospitals and those who use intimidation to force their closure. It also reaffirms the need for the enhanced monitoring and reporting of incidents where there are violations that deprive children of their right to go to school or be treated in hospitals. The resolution gives concrete impetus for action on the ground to protect these facilities.

The promise of the resolution is very real. I know this because we have achieved so much since the adoption of resolution 1612 (2005). What I would like to highlight today are a few successes we have had, and thereby to thank the Council for being steadfast and committed to children. First, in February this year, the Afghan Government signed an action plan for the prevention of underage recruitment into the Afghan security forces, including the police. The United Nations country task force on children and armed conflict, with access to military and police installations, has sent to my Office progress reports about the effective implementation of the plan. Further, the Ulema Shura, the highest religious body, has proclaimed a fatwa on violations committed against children in conflict.

Secondly, last year in Nepal, 2,973 minors were discharged. Despite a few concerns about reintegration, the United Nations country team has risen to the challenge, offering programmes and following up on the children

once they returned to the community. Thirdly, in the Philippines in January 2010, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) signed an action plan with the United Nations with the full support of the Government. Further, MILF issued a supplemental general order warning its commanders of sanctions for recruiting and using children and created child protection units. Children are now being registered and released, and UNICEF and the International Labour Organization (ILO) have stepped up their presence to provide these children with education and vocational skills.

Fourthly, in the Central African Republic during the course of 2010, 525 children were separated from the ranks of the Armée populaire pour la restauration de la démocratie following the commitment made by their commander during my visit to the Central African Republic a few years ago.

Fifthly, in Sri Lanka, 562 children, including 201 identified at the end of the conflict as formerly associated with armed groups, were released after one year of rehabilitation. They were reunited with their families by a magistrate's order. This was done in close cooperation with UNICEF and my Special Envoy.

Lastly, I also visited Chad in June to witness the action plan signed between the Government of Chad and the United Nations for the release of children. Again, they have given the United Nations access to military installations and have requested our assistance in the reintegration of the children into the community.

Moving forward, I am hopeful that I will be able to witness the signing of an action plan with the Government of Myanmar, which acknowledges the key role of the country task force, including UNICEF and ILO, in the coming months. Yet, great challenges remain. Persistent violators of children are on the list of the Secretary-General with little action taken against them. Their impunity remains a blot on justice systems, both national and international. In time, the Council must deal with this issue in a comprehensive manner and find ways and means of dealing with perpetrators. As a testimony to that, a list of persistent violators is attached to my statement. The reintegration of children often left at the doorstep of UNICEF and its partners also requires the commitment of resources and personnel. While we work with these issues of accountability, we must also attempt to understand the root causes of violations against children. Without prevention and understanding, long-term solutions will not be sustainable.

In 1999, the Council began a journey of great promise. There have been important landmarks along the way, including the Council's demand for clear monitoring of violations, the proper implementation of action plans and accountability. Governments and non-State actors have begun to respond to the Council's call for action. When I meet them in the field they display great respect for the power and authority of the Security Council. In addition, the Council's commitment has real and positive effects on the lives of thousands of children. As Council members have just heard from the Secretary-General, only last year 10,000 children were released from armed forces and groups and reintegrated into their communities. Today, at this open debate, I bring the Council their message of thanks.

When I was in Chad recently, I met with many children in a refugee camp. One girl grabbed my hand, curled her fingers around my wrist and whispered, "Madame, I want to go to school." Today, with the Council's adoption of resolution 1998 (2011), we have acknowledged the importance of schools and education to children all over the world, especially in conflict areas. We hope it will usher in an era where children can study, play and learn in an atmosphere of safety and dignity.