

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

Statement by Mr. Quinlan, Permanent Mission of Australia to the United Nations

I would like to thank Luxembourg and you personally, Madam President, for your decisive leadership on the compelling challenge of children in armed conflict. I thank the Secretary-General and Executive Director Lake for their statements, and Special Representative Zerrougui for her tireless exemplary efforts. I would particularly like to thank Alhadji Babah Sawaneh for his personal account. We so often talk in the abstract in this Chamber. We need to hear from individuals like Alhadji — powerful beacons of a better future — much more often.

We know that armed conflict continues to have a horrific impact on children, so many of whom are recruited or used by armed forces and armed groups. There are reportedly some 6,000 child soldiers in the Central African Republic. Thousands of children are killed in deliberate attacks on civilian areas or caught in the crossfire. Over 10,000 have already lost their lives in the Syrian conflict. Many children are abducted and subjected to sexual violence. Attacks on schools and hospitals continue to deny children an education and desperately needed health care. The denial of humanitarian assistance is depriving children of food and basic necessities. That is a terrible stain on our efforts for peace and security.

I would like to touch on three areas where greater efforts are needed to protect children during armed conflict: ending recruitment by Government forces and non-State armed groups, addressing the military use of schools, and ensuring accountability. As Special Representative of the Secretary-General Zerrougui has noted, eight Government armed forces are listed in the Secretary-General's most recent report (see S/2013/245) as having recruited or used children. Six of those Governments have committed, through the signing of action plans, to ending that practice. The aim of ending child recruitment by Government forces therefore appears achievable, and we strongly support the "Children, not soldiers" campaign, launched yesterday, to reach that goal by 2016. We welcome the restatement of commitment to that aim made by the eight States affected yesterday. In our own region, we are pleased to be supporting UNICEF's efforts to help the Myanmar Government implement its action plan to end the recruitment and use of children by the armed forces.

While we welcome efforts to end recruitment by Government forces, we must not lose our focus on violations against children committed by non-State armed groups. In fact, the majority of groups listed in the Secretary-General's report as having recruited or used children — 46 groups out of 55 — are non-State actors. Many of those non-State armed groups have recruited children persistently for more than five years. It is crucial that the Special Representative of the Secretary-General continue her efforts to conclude action plans with non-State armed groups, difficult though that is to achieve. However, in order for her to do so, Governments must allow United Nations access to those groups to address child protection concerns. The Council must keep a very close eye on progress with that.

In many conflict situations around the world, schools are attacked or used for military purposes. In Syria, almost a quarter of all schools have been damaged, occupied or destroyed. It is essential that all parties implement resolution 2139 (2014) on humanitarian access in Syria, which was adopted by the

Council two weeks ago and which demanded that all parties to conflict in Syria demilitarize schools. It was a unanimous and powerful demand by the entire Council.

In so many conflict situations, schools have been used as military barracks, detention facilities, interrogation centres and weapons storage facilities. Using schools for military purposes gravely endangers the lives of children and is contrary to international law. We cannot deny generations of children an education through the destruction or misuse of school premises. We must work decisively on that.

It should be axiomatic, as Alhadji has reminded us today, that those responsible for serious international crimes committed against children during conflict be held to account. Where national authorities are unable or unwilling to investigate and prosecute such crimes, the International Criminal Court can play a key instrumental role. The International Criminal Court's unanimous conviction of Thomas Lubanga for the war crime of enlisting and conscripting children under the age of 15 years and using them to participate actively in hostilities was a landmark decision. Only by ensuring accountability can we deter future crimes.

In conclusion, we must never just accept the risk to children during armed conflict. We know they are the most vulnerable and least able to withstand its ravages. As Ambassador Gasana has just reminded us, they are often the first victims. Their protection must remain central to our efforts in the Council to protect civilians — the primordial core of the Council's work. We cannot do enough to achieve that. As Leila Zerrougui has said this morning, hundreds of thousands of children have their eyes on us.