

OpEd for 16 June Day of the African Child

(The AU has declared the theme of the 16 June 2006, the United Nations Day of the African Child as: Right to protection: Stop violence against children)

Stop violence against children

By Macharia Kamau, UNICEF Country Representative

Pretoria, 16 June 2006 ...Thirty years ago, the world witnessed one of the most grotesque acts of violence perpetrated against children, when Soweto exploded with gunfire directed by the police at school children who dared to protest against the language of instruction. Many children, notably young Hector Petersen, who was among the first to fall, were killed.

Today, violent acts against children are far more insidious, occurring in the very spaces where children should feel most safe and secure -- their homes, communities and schools. Worse, many of these crimes of violence against children often go unreported as young victims know their attackers or violators and are thus too afraid to voice their plight.

Only a week ago at a meeting of the Council of Education Ministers, the Western Cape, Gauteng and Mpumalanga were cited as the provinces with the highest incidence of violence in schools involving both child victims and perpetrators. In announcing a plan to identify the most vulnerable schools and to introduce immediate protection measures for the students, the Ministers of Education noted that the safety of children in schools could not be guaranteed.

Add to that startling fact the statistics from the 2004/2005 South African Police Services Annual Report. It depicts a surge in violence against the young and vulnerable. The report showed that in the 2004/2005 financial year, more than 360,000 women and children were murdered, raped, assaulted, sexually molested or abused.

It reports some 55,000 cases of rape against girls and women; approximately 40 per cent or 22,500 of those cases involving children under 18 years old. Further, we note the disturbing figure of some 38,000 South African children known to be currently involved in the sex trade as reported by the Children's Institute.

Undoubtedly, this is a most frightening picture. It is also one that children themselves drew our attention to during last year's regional consultations for the United Nations Secretary General's study on violence against children, a process that has contributed to the proclamation by the Deputy President of 365 days of no violence, and led to the development of a national action plan to end violence against women and children.

The national action plan is being rolled out around the country with specific interventions such as the scaling up of Thuthuzela care centers -- these are integrated judicial, healthcare and social havens for abused children and women, offering rape survivors immediate treatment and psychological support -- from 12 to 18 by the end of 2006 and from 18 to 80 centers by 2010.

Children should not be on the receiving end of acts of violence or abuse, nor should their schools, homes and communities be places where violent acts are committed against them with impunity.

The good news however, is that this is a picture we can change. But all stakeholders must take part in bringing about the change -- no one can be left out. We need strong legislative action coupled with vigilant monitoring and action by all community-based organisations, government

leaders, parliamentarians, law enforcement officials, faith-based organisations, traditional leaders, local government, parents, educators, school committees and healthcare workers to provide the appropriate safety nets to protect children from violence and support their development. The multiplier effect of violence not only destroys lives but also undermines the very fabric of civilized society.

UNICEF believes that urgent action is needed now to bring an end to violence against children and we continue to work with the South African Government and non-governmental partners to mitigate the situation. Children should be children; healthy, safe, motivated and protected. Here are some of the ways we can begin to achieve this:

- Strengthen the legislative foundation for the care and protection of children and prosecution of offenders by adopting the Sexual Offences, Child Justice and Children's Bills. These transformative and, in some ways, visionary pieces of legislation will significantly strengthen and move forward commitments to the rights of the nation's most important resource, its children.
- Make all schools child friendly spaces that provide care and support for learning, growth and development for both boys and girls. Schools must make sure that children learn and play in healthy spaces and provide access to clean water and sanitation. They should also be gender sensitive, have strong links to surrounding communities and have outreach services for orphans and other vulnerable children in their vicinity.
- Identify troubled schools and let children lead the way in telling us what's wrong and help to provide solutions. Children at Amatata School in KwaZulu-Natal mapped the danger zones in their community, showing municipality and community leaders where trouble lurked and what actions would change the picture -- whether it was cutting overhanging bushes or putting up street lights.
- Engage community elders, invest in teacher training, value indigenous knowledge and support parents in providing life skills education for girls with special efforts focused on young boys as strategic partners in preventing and reducing the incidence of violence against girls.
- Deploy law enforcement cadres who are not only combative in their approach to the safety of children and women, but who are also sensitive to their wellbeing.
- Step up community based safe sport and recreation activities and spaces for learners to play, learn, develop and exercise their right to be children. Sport is a unifying and integrating force in communities. It promotes participation and encourages equality and inclusion and builds future leaders.

While there are many interventions that can be proposed to deal with violence against children in schools, homes and communities, the foregoing are what should be acceptable at a minimum. This great democracy can only thrive if violence is not allowed to grow as a way of life for children who are, after all, the future leaders and citizens of this country.

It's the least we can do for our children.

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