

PROTECTING AGAINST ABUSE, EXPLOITATION AND VIOLENCE

[This document, together with other information on the Special Session on Children, is available on the official site:

<http://www.unicef.org/specialsession>]

Numerous supporting events during the Special Session focused on the right of all children to be protected against all forms of violence, discrimination, exploitation and abuse. These events made it clear that complex and politically sensitive protection issues are more solidly on the world's agenda today than they were at the time of the World Summit for Children. Over the past decade, in the framework of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, outrage has grown in tandem with awareness and knowledge about gross violations of the rights of millions of vulnerable children and young people in the shadows of the criminal underworld, in the privacy of homes, in work places, zones of conflict and the streets of cities worldwide. The Special Session side events on protection issues heard from former victims of exploitation and abuse, researchers and activists working to protect children, leaders of well-organized and outspoken networks and government officials committed to change.

This document contains a summary of the following events:

Child Labour – an obstacle to Education for All

Beyond Yokohama: Combating commercial sexual exploitation of children

Countering Child Trafficking: A united response to a global problem

Preventing Discrimination Against Children: Ensuring inclusion for all children Protecting Children from Violence

“I Wish I Could Really Be Home...”: Juvenile justice and children deprived of their liberty/children in residential care

Children affected by Armed Conflict

Security Council meeting on Children and Armed Conflict

Protecting boys and girls during armed conflict

Reclaiming our Children: The UN responds to the situation of child soldiers

Refugee and IDP Children: One day we had to run

◆ CHILD LABOUR – AN OBSTACLE TO EDUCATION FOR ALL

This event highlighted the critical connection between eradicating child labour and achieving ‘Education for All’. Youth and high-level representatives of several UN agencies – including UNESCO (which moderated the session), ILO, UNICEF and the World Bank – as well as

government, trade union and NGO delegates explored the issue guided by questions raised by former child labourers.

According to a recent ILO report, 246 million children today are working around the world, 180 million of them engaged in the worst forms of labour. The vicious cycle of poverty, unemployment, child labour and overpopulation is hard to break; the elimination of child labour is not itself a high priority among donors. Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of UNICEF, noted that it is the last 20 per cent of children out of school – many of them working – who present the greatest challenge to achieving universal education.

“In the last decade, we have moved from denial to awareness,” said Juan Somavía, Director-General of the ILO. “We must now move from consciousness to action.” The elimination of child labour is a question of national dignity. Everyone is responsible for the elimination of child labour, not only governments and United Nations agencies, but every consumer, every voter, every parent and every community. Eveline Herfkens, Netherlands Minister of Development Cooperation, noted that trade unions are key actors in the equation because where they are strong, child labour is less likely to occur.

In Brazil, for example, Professor Paulo Piniero, State Secretary for Human Rights, described a programme that substitutes the income earned by working children through school grants provided to families whose children attend school and after-school activities regularly.

Working children are losing the childhood to which they are entitled. They are losing the chance to develop their potential, to find decent work as adults and to help build decent societies. This was a message repeated by numerous children, many of them former labourers, who attended the session.

Many approaches have been undertaken to combat child labour, but education has emerged as one of the most effective, both in terms of prevention and protection. Good education must be the magnet to pull children into education and out of child labour. We need to expand our focus from “child-friendly schools” to “child-seeking schools” and meet the vocational needs of young people. Ms. Bellamy continued, “We must create better links between the global initiative on girls’ education, launched at Dakar two years ago, and our child protection efforts.” Children withdrawn from the labour market need special classes to bridge the gaps between themselves and their peers before joining their school.

Participants in the event argued that educational investment must move outside the classic structure through the establishment of *Child Labour Free Zones*, initiated at the community level and spread throughout every country. South-South dialogue and collaboration must be promoted to ensure replication of good practices.

Mobilization of resources is required to fill funding gaps, for example, through monitoring commitments to be made at the G8 conference in June 2002 that focused on education.

◆ **BEYOND YOKOHAMA: COMBATING COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN**

This meeting was convened to highlight the outcome of the Second World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, held in the city of Yokohama, Japan in December 2001, and to draw attention to follow-up actions. It also was meant to inspire governments, civil society and donors to do more to combat commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC). The session was hosted jointly by the Government of Japan and UNICEF.

In describing the global dimensions of the problem, it was noted that the child sex industry is today a multi-million dollar business. Trafficking of children for sexual purposes has rapidly increased in several regions of the world. The growth in internet usage has also led to a huge proliferation of child pornography. Ms Carmen Madrinan, the Executive Director of ECPAT International, noted that without demand there would be no need for a supply of children to exploit, and that local demand constitutes the overwhelming share of the market.

The most important commitments came from three civic leaders who attended. The Mayors of Yokohama, Mauritania and Manila acknowledged that municipal governments and mayors have a major role to play in the fight against the problem of sexual exploitation of children. They stated their personal pledge to do all in their power to eradicate CSEC.

These pledges were consistent with the messages conveyed by other members of the panel. H. R. H. Queen Silvia of Sweden, for example, stated, "I am personally convinced that one of our greatest enemies in this work is our reluctance to acknowledge the problem fully." She went on to mention some of the positive initiatives that have followed the Stockholm and Yokohama Congresses: national plans of action had been developed in many countries, legislation designed to increase protection of children has been enacted and increased efforts have been made to strengthen law enforcement; but there are also negative issues to report, most particularly the rapid increase in trafficking of children for sexual purposes. Her Royal Highness also drew attention to the importance of youth participation and the increased involvement of the private sector in the fight against sexual exploitation of children.

In pointing out the future path to be taken, both Makiko Arima, the personal representative of the Prime Minister of Japan, and Naira Khan, on behalf of the NGO Group on the Rights of the Child, noted that progress will not be made without children and young people participating fully and at every stage of programmes to combat CSEC. Cooperation is needed in fact between all stakeholders: governments, religious leaders, researchers, NGOs, police, communities, business etc. Cross-border networking and regional collaboration are also essential to combat CSEC, as children are frequently trafficked across borders and sex 'tourism' is big business. Such collaboration needs to be coherent and strategic.

The event closed with two appeals: to break the silence surrounding CSEC; and to increase leadership in partnership with children in the struggle against sexual exploitation of children.

◆ **COUNTERING CHILD TRAFFICKING: A UNITED RESPONSE TO A GLOBAL PROBLEM**

Panellists representing the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the International Labour Organization, International Organization for Migration, UNICEF and the All-China Women's Federation, as well as a young person from Nepal, described in dreadful detail the situation of

children who had been trafficked. The session also explored rescue, rehabilitation and prevention efforts for children in such danger. All recommended that both principles – preventative and curative – be adopted in this work, since both strategies appear to have had an impact.

Sixteen-year old Sanjog Thakuri from Nepal opened the event by describing his efforts to advocate against child trafficking. Through drama and song, Sanjog's children's club, Hatemalo, seeks to change attitudes that lead to the exploitation of children. Sanjog challenged the international community to wipe out the lucrative business of child trafficking through the involvement of children, "Children are change makers," he said, "We are not crawling insects, but butterflies. We are birds of freedom."

ILO Representative Frans Roselaers stated, "Trafficking is a double violation of human rights: the trafficking itself, and also because it becomes a gateway to other human rights violations when the trafficked children become victims of sexual exploitation or other worst forms of child labour. Mrs. Ndiaye of IOM added "Trafficking is the worst form of illegal migration."

Poverty emerges as a major causal factor for trafficking. This is exacerbated by political and economic instability, the prevalence of armed conflict in some countries, and most importantly, by lack of knowledge of the families, the youth and children of the risks that are involved in trafficking. It is estimated that in Asia alone, over the past 30 years, 30 million women and children have been trafficked for sexual exploitation.

Guidelines and principles on trafficking introduced by Mrs. Mary Robinson, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, seek to tackle the problem as it affects children, "in the most holistic and well-rounded way in the best interests of the child." The guidelines urge special care for young victims of trafficking and stipulate that the definition of trafficking should be loosened when applied to children. She closed by saying, "We haven't begun to tackle this problem. It's time for us to take action."

The President of Romania, Ion Iliescu, called for "zero tolerance" as a universal rule for trafficking of children. Government Representatives from Finland, the Philippines and Togo called for increased preventive and coordination efforts nationally, regionally and at the global level.

To fight the phenomenon, panellists recommended a number of concerted actions, calling for those committed to combating child trafficking to:

- 1) promote community mobilization and vigilance;
- 2) strengthen multisectoral alliances across borders;
- 3) undertake time-bound measures linked to national development goals;
- 4) mobilize international cooperation and support;
- 5) strengthen existing laws, including ILO Convention 182 and the Optional Protocols, and their implementation, in order to stop impunity at national and sub-regional levels; and,
- 6) raise awareness, including among children themselves, schools and parents.

◆ **PREVENTING DISCRIMINATION AGAINST CHILDREN: ENSURING INCLUSION
FOR ALL CHILDREN**

This event provided an opportunity for global dialogue on the issue of discrimination against and inclusion for children. It outlined key issues on discrimination with perspectives on disability, gender and ethno-racial diversity and proposed future actions. Representatives of a variety of NGOs and youth groups, as well as delegates from the UN Special Rapporteur on Disability, focused especially on ways to take up the messages on discrimination against children and to draw up specific action plans, especially in the national programmes.

In her opening remarks, Senator Landon Pearson of Canada stressed that addressing the rights of disabled children has been a priority for the Government of Canada and mentioned how pleased she was to see this event finally come to pass. “The UN Special Session has provided a great opportunity to hear the views from diverse groups of people on this very important issue of inclusion of all children,” she added.

A statement, presented on behalf of the UN Special Rapporteur on Disability by Ms. Gerison Lansdown, highlighted the fact that many of the nearly 150 million disabled children in the world suffer violations of basic human rights. Discrimination is perpetuated through a prejudice that sees disability as a curse, a punishment and a calamity. This is compounded by government neglect and inaction and by negative images in the media.

Many speakers used the framework provided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child to highlight the progress achieved and the progress remaining to be made in addressing the rights of children with disabilities.

Jennifer Jadwero, a 14-year-old from Kenya, spoke about discrimination against girl children and told how a youth group she is an active member of has succeeded in promoting gender equality. A key lesson is that when younger boys in the lower classes notice that the older boys in the club respect and cooperate with the girls, then they also change their attitude and start behaving in the same manner.

Another child speaker, Juan Ángel De Gouveia from Venezuela, used his highly expressive sign language to tell how he and his family have suffered societal discrimination because of his deafness. He proposed a seven-point proposal for the improvement of quality of life and equal opportunities for children with disabilities and made an appeal for its implementation in the next 10 years.

Finally, the session identified concrete steps for future action. These include the responsibility that all concerned have to:

- 1) Promote an action-oriented vision for inclusion;
- 2) Ensure that National Plans of Action fulfil the commitments to disabled children;
- 3) Engage in meaningful policy dialogue and legislative reform, and ensure the passage of legislation to protect disabled people from discrimination;
- 4) Create a global knowledge network to advance the inclusion and human rights agenda, and strengthen global civil society in support of inclusion;
- 5) Implement a coherent strategy for monitoring progress and outcomes; and,

- 6) Ensure that the hostility experienced by disabled children is fully addressed in the forthcoming UN study on violence.

◆ **PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM VIOLENCE**

Many organizations have been advocating for a study of all forms of violence against children, one that would be modeled on the landmark survey of the state of children and conflict conducted by Mrs. Graça Machel. In a meeting co-sponsored by the Government of Sweden and Save the Children, Sweden, the topic was further discussed by Mary Robinson, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and other UN and youth delegates.

Moderator Thomas Hammarberg of Sweden opened the event by suggesting that it was the start of a discussion that would lead into the UN Study on Violence against Children. This study will be an important contribution to combating violence against children and advancing our knowledge in the area. He noted that when children are asked their priority issue they often reply 'stop the violence against us'. He went on to call for an informal discussion which was accessible to children.

Mary Robinson began the panel presentations by remarking that, after four years as High Commissioner, she was "still taken aback at the extent and range and types of violence against children." She pointed out that the Committee on the Rights of the Child had held two days of discussion on the subject of violence, and these had brought out the range of environments where children suffer violence. Too often, she remarked, these places are exactly those where children should be entitled to expect protection, such as the home and at school.

Turning to the subject of the forthcoming UN Study on Violence, she noted that at the last session of the UN Commission on Human Rights a resolution was passed requesting that the Secretary-General appoint an independent expert to head the study and that the study be completed by 2004. The High Commissioner saw her office's primary role as ensuring that the study is based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other relevant human rights instruments and mechanisms. She announced an agreement between her office and UNICEF and WHO to jointly support the study to ensure its success.

Minister Ingela Thalén of Sweden shared her country's experience of the legal prohibition of corporal punishment, while UNICEF Deputy Executive Director André Roberfroid stressed that despite the difficulties there are ways to combat violence against children and this creates an obligation for us all to do more.

Abeda Kagee, 13, and Monique Anthony, 12, from the South African NGO Molo Songololo, both pointed to the reality of violence in children's lives, a point Abeda made strongly when she asked "are we living in a world fit for children? The frank answer would be definitely not." Monique went on to explain how children can be empowered to act as advocates against violence.

◆ **"I REALLY WISH I COULD BE HOME...:" JUVENILE JUSTICE AND CHILDREN DEPRIVED OF THEIR LIBERTY/CHILDREN IN RESIDENTIAL CARE**

The issues of children in residential care and children deprived of their liberty were explored in this session, which was supported by the Governments of the Netherlands and Romania. The best practices of different groups and countries were discussed. The gathering was moderated by Professor Jaap Doek, Chair of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, and was attended by the President of Romania, UN officials and various NGO representatives. The format of the session was meant to approximate a juvenile court hearing.

Ion Iliescu, President of Romania, opened the event, noting that “one of the tested methods for moving things forward is learning from each other’s experiences, good or bad, and making samples of best practice available for reasoned adaptation and assimilation.”

Human Rights Watch raised the issues of the death penalty, torture during interrogation, abuse in juvenile facilities, illegal and arbitrary proceedings, incarceration of children with adults and the dreadful conditions prevailing in detention centers, often leading to abuse.

The Netherlands is lobbying against the death penalty for children under 18 and highlighted the important role of the donor community in providing assistance for human rights-based juvenile justice. The Philippines noted that it had introduced juvenile justice reform in accordance with the CRC and other international standards. Romania highlighted the reform of its child protection system, reducing considerably the number of institutionalized children. Many country representatives emphasized the importance of a holistic approach in dealing with juvenile-related issues.

All speakers recognized that too many children worldwide live in residential care, or are deprived of liberty. They agreed on the need for doing a better job of guaranteeing that children can, as much as possible, grow up in a family environment. They noted that the deprivation of liberty should be a measure of last resort and should last for the shortest time possible.

Misbahulaq, a 14-year-old from Afghanistan, spoke most movingly to the assembly when he said, “We children living in orphanages, on the street, in refugee camps, we are too often forgotten, please do not forget us, the future is in our hands.”

A number of objectives were elaborated at the conclusion of the session. Many of the participants agreed on the need to: 1) guarantee that violence and abuse by law enforcement officials...will be fully covered in the Global Study on Violence against Children; 2) initiate a Global Campaign against Children in Prisons; and 3) mobilize all possible efforts, at national, regional and international levels, to achieve a reduction by 50 per cent by 2010 of the number of children in residential care and in detention.

◆ CHILDREN AFFECTED BY ARMED CONFLICT

The renewed energy and seriousness that children and young people brought to the Special Session was particularly evident in their participation related to children and armed conflict.

In their message delivered to the General Assembly, ‘A World Fit for Us’, children voiced their deepest hopes for a world without war. The message said: “We see an end to war: world leaders

resolving conflict through peaceful dialogue instead of force; child refugees and child victims of war protected in every way and having the same opportunities as all other children; disarmament, elimination of the arms trade and an end to the use of child soldiers.”

Their determination, passion and clear thinking about the impact of conflict on children were demonstrated at several panel discussions, including a meeting with the Security Council that addressed the impacts of war on children. The following highlights three of these important events.

◆ SECURITY COUNCIL MEETING ON CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

A day before the opening of the Special Session on Children, three participants from the Children’s Forum made a strong appeal to the UN Security Council to do everything in its power to end wars and to protect children from their consequences.

The war is over in East Timor, a new country that will stand on its own for the first time in over 500 years, said young journalist Jose Cabral, with pride. But he is still worried about the children in his country, “What we need from you”, he said to the members of the UN Security Council “is to help **keep** our peace and unity so that all children in East Timor can get an education and live in a peaceful country”. “I know,” he added, “that only when children’s rights are respected and they can grow up in peace and safety, will they become adults who can live together in peace.”

“As I speak today, the children of Liberia are suffering again from war,” said Wilmot Wango, 16. “We don’t have good education, we are malnourished and we are dying because of war,” she said. “But the cry of Liberian children is for peace.” Wilmot described for the panel the activities of children in her country, working for peace, including child-run television and radio programmes that send out the message of peace across the country. “Please don’t forget Liberia,” she urged the august body.

Since 1998, the Security Council has held four debates on children affected by armed conflict and adopted three resolutions – 1261, 1314 and 1379 – which address all issues relating to children in armed conflict, among them, protection, impunity, abuse, refugees, and promoting a culture of peace. This meeting of the Council on the eve of the Special Session built on its previous work and reaffirmed its commitment to integrating child protection concerns into its work.

UNICEF Executive Director, Carol Bellamy, acknowledged the spirit of this commitment: “The Security Council has again set a high standard for leadership – in this case, by promoting the rights of children to express themselves freely and to participate in matters that affect them,” she said.

The three young people demanded that the Council use its mandate and influence to prevent and end conflicts. Eliza Kantardzija, 17, from Bosnia and Herzegovina, challenged the Security Council’s track record. “The best thing you can do,” she said, “is stop and prevent war,” she said. “That is something that this Council has the power to do. The real question is – is that power used?” she asked.

Speakers called upon the Security Council to explicitly incorporate child protection within their mandates for peacekeeping operations, and provide children an opportunity to voice their concerns and aspirations, and to become advocates on their own behalf. The Security Council was urged to spare no effort to ensure that norms, obligations, resolutions and commitments made to UN actors are translated into realities on the ground.

The Security Council adopted a Presidential Statement, which underlined its commitments to protect children affected by armed conflict as an essential component of its work to promote and maintain international peace and security.

For more information on this event, see the following daily web coverage pages:

Child representatives appeal to the Security Council to use its influence to prevent and end conflicts and protect children : see <http://www.unicef.org/specialsession/activities/sc-summary-report.htm>

Children describe the horrors of war: see <http://www.unicef.org/specialsession/activities/security-council..htm>

UNICEF Executive Director's remarks to the Security Council on children in armed conflict see: <http://www.unicef.org/specialsession/press/02esp08sc.htm>

Graça Machel: A child's best friend
See: <http://www.unicef.org/specialsession/activities/graca-machel-bio.htm>

◆ **PROTECTING BOYS AND GIRLS DURING ARMED CONFLICT**

A highly interactive question and answer event called for immediate country-level implementation of treaties and resolutions to protect children in conflict situations. The panel called for improvements in monitoring and reporting on child rights violations and a long-term commitment to the disarmament, demobilization and especially reintegration of former child soldiers. "Without job opportunities and training, these children become easy targets for re-recruitment," said the Minister of Gender and Development in Liberia.

Government Ministers, NGOs, experts and young people posed challenging and thoughtful questions to a distinguished panel that was moderated by Stephen Lewis, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for HIV/AIDS in Africa.

Panellists agreed that there are signs of progress. These include the coming into force in many countries of the Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, as well as efforts around landmines, and the inclusion of provisions for the protection of children in the mandates of peacekeeping operations. Civil society has been very active, generating support on key issues, including the coalition of NGOs working to stop the use of child soldiers and ban landmines and a new initiative called 'Watchlist'.

But, said Graça Machel, former Minister of Education in Mozambique, “we may have improved international standards, and we may have put children on the international agenda, but locally, at the field level, very little has changed.” There continue to be inadequate protection and assistance for children in war situations. Children bear the brunt of war because governments have not placed enough importance on their needs and rights.

Furthermore, Ms. Machel added, significant resource disparities allotted to humanitarian crises remain. “A child in Sierra Leone is not assisted in the same way as a child in Kosovo.” The UN-administered Province of Kosovo, Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, received 10 times more aid than Sierra Leone.

The Special Representative of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict, Olara Otunnu, suggested practical strategies to “shift the energy” from the global level to the ground and translate international treaties and Security Council resolutions into concrete actions. Better monitoring and reporting on child rights violations is needed. Panellists urged governments to “get their priorities right” in allocating their resources and shift economies from “producing arms to producing books.”

Other key issues were raised during the session including the need for more attention to the psychosocial well being of children in conflict situations, the prevalence of sexual abuse and exploitation of refugee children, and the role of business in perpetuating conflict. “The illicit trade in natural resources, such as diamonds and timber, is fuelling conflicts that recruit children to fight on the front lines,” said Arvind Ganesan of Human Rights Watch, “This practice must be condemned and measures taken to end it. Governments must hold businesses accountable.”

The Minister of Justice in Afghanistan said that a big problem in his country is that former child soldiers have no education and no vocational training to work and feed themselves. He also stressed the impact of small arms on children.

During an animated exchange about the influence of political interests and external actors who do not consider the impact on children, Graça Machel expressed outrage at the number of unresolved and seemingly intractable conflicts that continue to devastate the lives of children while the international community is unable to “move the machineries” of those who allow them to go on.

A youth from the Middle East said to the panel, “You have spoken about so many solutions to help us. What are you waiting for to do something?”

Another youth delegate called on all present to overcome the “barriers of hatred” and to mobilize political will and resources to create peaceful alternatives for children, such as education.

Read more on this event: Protecting girls and boys during armed conflict. See: <http://www.unicef.org/specialsession/activities/armed-conflict.htm>

◆ **RECLAIMING OUR CHILDREN : THE UN RESPONDS TO THE SITUATION OF CHILD SOLDIERS**

In recent years, many conflicts have awakened the world to the exploitation of children as combatants during times of conflict. Notwithstanding this awareness, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan pointed to the indefensible practice of using children as combatants and targeting civilians in times of conflict, and committed the UN to urgent action. “Children are our future,” he said. “To accept the use of child soldiers in conflict is to accept the destruction of our future, and we must fight for this future one child at a time. We must reclaim them, every one of them.”

Olara Ottunu, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict spoke of the use of children by adults to fight adult battles, as did other panellists. Participants said that children are recruited as soldiers because they are more easily controlled and manipulated. “Perhaps the most cynical of all the factors that contribute to child soldiering is the fact that the lords of war will recruit and abduct children precisely because they are innocent and they are impressionable...” said Ottunu.

“[Child soldiers] represent a much broader breakdown of global society to allow children to fall into the situation of so little protection, taken away from their families, either victimized by societies or not protected by societies,” said UNDP Administrator, Mark Malloch Brown. Children may be forcibly abducted or, in some cases, pressured to join because they lack better and more viable opportunities for survival. They are also swayed by radical ideologies, other societal pressures, including a sense of ‘belonging’.

The physical and psychological effects of soldiering on children are long term and devastating. They include the loss of limbs, exposure to HIV infection, emotional damage and reprisal or rejection by their families and communities should they attempt to return. These effects pose a challenge not only to war-affected communities, but to the international community as a whole, in seeking to achieve viable peace and development in post-conflict situations.

China, a youth panellist from Northern Uganda, said being a child combatant is often worse for girls than for boys. “Girls,” she said, “not only fight with a gun, but also fight to keep their souls the leaders try to take away” with sexual abuse and exploitation.

Ismael, a former child soldier from Sierra Leone, told the participants that the issue of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration goes way beyond their actions as combatants. Although deeply scarred, he said that child soldiers possess an “incredible strength of spirit that the world must recognize.” Not only can they overcome their experiences and become full and active members of their communities, they can also heal and contribute through becoming leaders who speak out against these crimes and demand peace and justice for children in armed conflict.

The Secretary-General called on the international community to join together in putting an end to the recruitment of children. He said that if minimum norms and standards of conduct are to be upheld in times of war those who violate such norms should be held accountable for their actions.

UNICEF Executive Director, Carol Bellamy, called on the international community not to ask, “why should we listen to children?”, but to ask, “why shouldn’t we listen to children?” By listening to children, and through their participation, the international community has an opportunity to promise to stop the horrors of war and its effects on children and to truly commit itself to act on these promises.

Tim Wirth, President of the UN Foundation, also called on governments and civil society to deal with the issue of child soldiers. He asked governments to commit additional resources to the issue of child soldiers and NGOs to carry out the work needed on the ground, using financial partnerships to mobilize the necessary resources.

Read more on this event: Children are the new face of war

See: <http://www.unicef.org/specialsession/activities/child-soldiers.htm>

◆ REFUGEE AND IDP CHILDREN: ONE DAY WE HAD TO RUN

Ten million children under the age of 18 constitute over half of the total refugee population of the world. This was the stark declaration of the panel, organized by UNHCR, the Women’s Commission on Refugee Women and Children and the International Rescue Committee.

The international community has come a long way to establish policies and programmes for refugees over the past 20 years, panellists agreed, but their real safety is still a big question mark. Given the legal framework for their protection contained in the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the status of refugees, there is no such thing as rights that cannot be enforced, said Marie de la Soudière, of the International Rescue Committee. Panellists noted that the two groups of refugee children most vulnerable are unaccompanied children and adolescent boys and girls.

Although the number of unaccompanied child refugees is large, it is virtually impossible to get an accurate count. That is because these children are the most hidden, and those who want to exploit them ensure that they remain so. While tracing and family reunification programmes are in place in most refugee situations, a severe lack of resources means that children are not systematically identified and programmes are often slow to respond. Unaccompanied children in urban settings may also be difficult to reach through humanitarian and protection programmes because they have no access to refugee programmes in formal camp settings. These children are extremely vulnerable to trafficking, abuse and prostitution.

Adolescent boys and girls are also extremely vulnerable. Displacement may expose them to violence during their most formative years, and many lack positive role models. Deprived of supportive communities and lacking education beyond primary school, these adolescents face great obstacles to learning life skills and becoming economically self-sufficient. They may suffer from depression or anxiety and lose hope in the future.

But adolescents also have the potential to act as major forces for change and peace-building in their communities. In almost every refugee community, one can find young people committed to

peace and reconciliation. Lieutenant-General Roméo Dallaire, Special Adviser on War-Affected Children to Canada's Minister for International Cooperation, said "children lead...14-year-olds going on 25 are leaders – they lead in the camps, in the transition points, in the reintegration facilities."

But for their strengths to be harnessed as a force for peace, children need support, guidance and a secure environment which nurtures the building of trusting relationships. Youth must also have access to education and vocational training to gain a sense of purpose and plan for the future.

"Are all humans human, or are some more human than others?" asked General Dallaire, who served as Force Commander of the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda. He called on the international community to take action against the abuse, molestation and exploitation of children in times of war. He noted the advent of a new era, where rapid communications make it possible to make a positive influence on the culture of the world and of humanity. In this new world, he asked, "how is it possible that we still fiddle on the margins regarding the use of children in war, as shields, as killers, as slaves, stealers and mine detectors in mine fields? We are mortgaging humanity, we are mortgaging the future."

The panel ended on a note of optimism. Ganga Adhikari, a young panellist from Nepal, who was forced to flee her home as a refugee, told of her family's struggle during the war and expressed that, despite overwhelming obstacles, she has hopes to be repatriated, "study science and be a great doctor."