

Protecting Children during Armed Conflict

Armed conflicts have left populations vulnerable to appalling forms of violence, including systematic rape, abduction, amputation, mutilation, forced displacement, sexual exploitation and genocide.

The wide availability of light, inexpensive small arms has contributed to the use of children as soldiers, as well as to high levels of violence once conflicts have ended. The breakdown of social protection leaves girls vulnerable to unwanted pregnancy and threatens all children with separation from their families, orphaning, increased risk of sexually transmitted infections, disability and serious, long-term psychosocial consequences.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- An estimated 90 per cent of global conflict-related deaths since 1990 have been civilians, and 80 per cent of these have been women and children.¹
- In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, almost 38,000 deaths occur every month above what is considered a 'normal level' for the country, translating into 1,270 excess deaths every day. Most deaths are due to preventable causes like malnutrition and infectious diseases. Young children are disproportionately affected by these illnesses.²
- In Darfur (Sudan), around 2 million people have been forced from their land and live in displacement camps. More than 1 million of them are children under 18, with 320,000 aged five and under.³

BUILDING A PROTECTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR CHILDREN

Government commitment and capacity

To protect children during war, government priorities must include assisting the most vulnerable, recognizing that displaced children have the right to receive the same level of public services as other children, and protecting humanitarian assistance

HUMAN RIGHTS

The principles and provisions to protect children in armed conflict are laid out in the **Geneva Conventions** (1949) and their **Additional Protocols** (1977), the **Convention on the Rights of the Child** (1989) and its **Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict** (2000), and the **Rome Statute** (1998) of the International Criminal Court.

and personnel. State and non-State entities must commit themselves to ending the recruitment and use of children as soldiers or adjuncts to armed groups by signing international legislation. In addition, children need to be protected from the effects of sanctions. As conflicts end, peace-building and peacekeeping efforts need to focus on child protection issues. Governments, for example, can ensure that crimes against children are addressed and that child-friendly procedures are developed for children's involvement in truth and justice-seeking processes.

Legislation and enforcement

International treaties must be respected and enforced by those in charge, including State and non-State entities, and criminal legislation should be reviewed to ensure that grave breaches of international humanitarian law are recognized as crimes. Adequate training for armed forces in the rules of international humanitarian law and human rights, especially those concerning the protection of children, is essential.

Attitudes, customs and practices

Many of the discriminatory attitudes that existed prior to a conflict intensify during violent clashes. Promoting codes of conduct and child-rights training for all military and civilian peacekeeping personnel is essential to eliminating maltreatment and use of children in armed groups.

Open discussion

Media and civil society have tremendous potential for influencing public opinion – and promoting action – through discussion of such crucial issues as sexual violence against children and women, and reducing the availability of small arms and light weapons.

Children's life skills, knowledge and participation

Children's involvement in their own protection is strengthened by the creation of child-friendly spaces, especially in situations of displacement, and by peer-to-peer counselling on such issues as avoiding landmines or protection from HIV.

Capacity of families and communities

Bolstering the capacities of families and communities creates an effective resource for a wide range of activities. With the proper training and materials, they can prevent the separation of children, provide psychosocial support for war-affected children, develop mechanisms to eliminate sexual abuse and exploitation, support landmine awareness and victim assistance, and distribute life-saving information on HIV/AIDS.

Essential services, including prevention, recovery and reintegration

These services include: disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes for children whether or not they have weapons in their possession; tracing and reintegration programmes for children who have been separated from their families; assistance to survivors of sexual vio-

MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Armed conflict depletes physical, economic and human resources and leads to displacement of populations. It can disrupt children's education, lead to their death, and expose them to HIV infection when rape is used as a weapon of war. In the scope and severity of its effects, armed conflict not only devastates child protection, it is a threat to achieving any of the Millennium Development Goals, from eradicating extreme poverty and hunger (MDG 1) to ensuring environmental sustainability (MDG 7).

lence as well as children who have been disabled; education services for children; prevention of HIV infection; and care for children orphaned or made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS.

Monitoring, reporting and oversight

Systematic and comprehensive monitoring, reporting and oversight, as requested by the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1539 and 1612, should cover all violations against children affected by armed conflict and could be performed by governments or non-State parties to the conflict.

EXAMPLES OF UNICEF IN ACTION

In the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, as part of UNICEF's project to assist children, women and families affected by conflict, nearly 1.6 million children were protected from recruitment by armed forces and groups, at least 5,400 children associated with armed forces and groups were reintegrated into their families or communities, and 5,350 women and children survivors of sexual violence were given support and assistance.

In **Liberia**, UNICEF is working to provide skills training courses to 5,000 demobilized children associated with armed forces. The training programme includes options like agriculture, animal husbandry, mechanics, carpentry, cosmetology, masonry, tailoring and baking, in addition to basic literacy and numeracy, psychosocial counselling, and business development. Recently, 116 boys and girls finished the nine-month training course in Buchanan, Grand Bassa County.

Notes

¹ Otunnu, Olara A., 'Special Comment' on Children and Security, *Disarmament Forum*, No. 3, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, Geneva, 2002, pp. 3-4.

² Coghlan, Benjamin et al, "Mortality in the Democratic Republic of Congo: A nationwide survey," *The Lancet*, Vol. 367, 7 January 2006, pp. 44-51.

³ United Nations Children's Fund, *Darfur Child Alert*, UNICEF, December 2005, p. 7. Available in PDF only at <www.unicef.org>.

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