

Check against delivery

Ms. Hilde F. Johnson, UNICEF Deputy Executive Director
Address to the Ministerial Meeting on October 1st 2007 on Children and Armed Conflict;
Follow-up meeting to the Paris Principles and Paris Commitments of February 2007;
Conference Room 4; 10:00 am.

Your Excellency, Distinguished Delegates and Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen, Minister Rama Yade, Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict, Radhika Coomaraswamy, and Ms Kathleen Hunt, Chair of the Watchlist on Children in Armed Conflict.

Let me introduce you to a girl – let me call her Theresa. She was sixteen years old when I met her in Gulu, Northern Uganda, a few years ago. She told me her story with dark eyes. At twelve, she was abducted by the LRA and was forced not only to use a gun, but also to work as a servant and sex-slave for the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army. She managed to escape, pregnant. At sixteen, she was already an old woman. I hope that she will one day laugh again, and that the smile will reach her eyes.

Violence has many faces - but few voices. That is why we are here today. That is why her experiences and those of other children are regularly reported to the Security Council. That is why France has taken such a strong leadership role in giving a voice to the challenges faced by Theresa and thousands of other children like her.

Indeed, as we were just reminded by Minister Yade, children face terrible threats from the conflicts that we, adults, seem unable to prevent. One of the most odious remains their use by armed forces and armed groups as combatants and in many other roles.

To better prevent this unacceptable violation of their rights, governments committed to uphold new legal instruments. The Paris conference of February 2007 was an important step in defining practical, concrete ways in which these commitments would be honoured. The States present at the conference endorsed the “Paris Commitments”.

These, as also explained by Minister Yade, are an expression of strengthened international resolve to prevent the unlawful recruitment of children and highlight the actions governments can take, indeed should take to protect children involved in conflict. Participants to the conference also expressed support for the work of operational UN agencies, other development organisations and NGOs in drafting the “Paris Principles” to help practitioners support affected children, providing them with the second chance they are entitled to.

This morning, we are bringing this work to the broader audience of the Member States of the United Nations and seeking support beyond those countries present in Paris. We also hope to hear from countries and organisations present in Paris on action taken to implement the Commitments and Principles, since February.

We are not gathered here today to point fingers at countries where unlawful recruitment is taking place. Instead we aim to promote good practice for the fulfillment of the rights of all affected children.

The children count on every one of us in this room for a second chance. We cannot blame them for our own failings.

As Ishmael Beah, himself a former child soldier from Sierra Leone, reminded us in Paris in last February "No one is born violent. I believe that no child in Africa, Latin America or Asia wants to be part of a war, these are choice-less situations that children are put in, they are forced to participate in these things and over time this becomes the only reality they know."

I would like you to keep these words in mind as we reflect on the Paris Principles and the additional efforts UNICEF believes are still necessary.

The “Paris Principles” specifically target practitioners responsible for implementing programmes in support of affected children. They are based on global experiences of preventing recruitment, obtaining the children’s release from armed forces or groups and reintegrating them into civilian life. They acknowledge the complex causes of child recruitment. They express, in very clear terms, our common commitment to work together to overcome these complexities.

Together with the “Paris Commitments”, the “Paris Principles” provide, for all of us, a crucial common framework to plan, implement and evaluate prevention and reintegration programmes. They ensure consistent and predictable support for field activities.

A first priority area is the work on the prevention of recruitment. Children, both girls and boys, become associated with armed forces or groups for numerous reasons. Many are forcibly recruited. Others “volunteer” because of their circumstances. With raging poverty, violence and injustice all around, children may view enlistment as their best option for survival for themselves, their families or communities.

Gender inequalities, discrimination and violence intensify in times of armed conflict. Girls and boys may find recruitment a leveling force, an escape from gender-based violence or discrimination. Prevention programmes, should address the underlying causes of recruitment. They must provide meaningful alternatives to the dangers inherent to the association with armed forces or groups.

A second priority is the application of a rights-based approach to release and demobilisation. The unlawful recruitment and use of children are serious violations of their rights! Their release and reintegration should be driven by the need to redress this abuse rather than by a concern for security in post-conflict societies. In addition, girls and younger children are usually not perceived as a security threat. When security concerns drive the demobilisation process, they are often excluded from support programmes.

It is extremely important that peace agreements address children issues. Children should be released even before a formal peace agreement has been signed and a broad demobilisation programme has been established. The lack of a peace agreement and formal demobilisation programme should not become an excuse for not releasing children recruited unlawfully. We know from experience that the longer a child remains in a group, the more difficult it will be for him/her to reintegrate successfully and be constructive member of his/her community, and live the life of a caring father or mother.

A third priority area of focus is ensuring sustainable reintegration of children. Reintegration into civilian life is the ultimate goal of any release or demobilisation process. As obvious as this might sound, this is too often forgotten. Two elements are key to successful reintegration: firstly, that governments overseeing reintegration programmes make sure that children are not further stigmatised when they return to their community and secondly, that donors disburse funds in a timely manner and over the long term.

We know that if reintegration support does not benefit the entire community, returning children are too easily stigmatised. They are perceived to be unfairly rewarded for their behaviour as combatants, while the children who have not been soldiers are left without the support they might require. The “Principles” emphasise that reintegration programmes should provide increased development opportunities, schooling, professional training, protection for all children in communities affected by a conflict rather than isolated support to a child or a family. Implementing such an approach is of course reliant on flexible funding mechanisms. It is vital that funding is available during unstable periods and sustained over the longer term.

A fourth priority area is addressing the specific situation of girls. Very often, we picture child soldiers as boys with guns. But girls are a significant number of children associated with armed forces or armed groups - sometimes representing up to 40% of the children in certain groups. Despite this fact, we know that girls rarely receive the appropriate reintegration support.

While there are commonalities between the circumstances and experiences of girls and boys, girls often joined armed forces or groups for very different reasons; often used as sex slaves, they are less likely to be released early by their commanders. The ordeal they usually go through have a very different effect on their physical, social and emotional well being. Finally, they face very specific challenges in their re-adaptation to civilian life and return to their families and communities after their release. The “Commitments” and “Principles” advocate that special attention should be given in identifying and responding to these specific needs. We know how to do this. We cannot continue failing the girls!

A fifth priority area is building the capacity of national justice mechanisms. Both the “Commitments” and the “Principles” refer extensively to the treatment of children within justice mechanisms, including transitional justice and truth commissions. We need to bring an end to impunity for those responsible for recruiting or using children in armed conflict! Holding such individuals to account will serve as a powerful deterrent against such violations. Legislative bodies, law enforcement and national justice systems need to uphold international instruments. International or hybrid tribunals, which address violations of humanitarian and human rights law, should be supported at all times. All measures should be taken to protect the rights of child witnesses and victims who may be called upon to provide evidence.

Finally, and this is an area of particular importance to UNICEF, children recruited and used should be primarily considered as victims of violations against international law. These children should not be prosecuted or punished solely for their involvement in those forces or groups. And those accused of

crimes under international or national law allegedly committed while associated with armed forces or groups should be treated in accordance with international standards for juvenile justice.

Distinguished delegates, I will close by noting the incorporation of the “Paris Commitments” and “Paris Principles” in at least two new agreements to protect children associated with armed forces in Chad and with armed groups in Darfur since February this year. In both situations, UNICEF is working closely with the parties involved. However, to ensure success, there is a role to play for everyone, the parties to conflict, the government ministries, the broader community, development organisations, the UN and the NGOs. We look forward to reaching more such agreements.

In the past, the debate around ending the recruitment of children has mainly focused on promoting judicial and political accountability, including through the implementation of Security Council Resolution 1612. While this is an important step, it must be accompanied by social protection for the children and the families affected. We will never bring an end to the unacceptable use of children in conflict unless we also address the social factors that lead to their recruitment in the first place.

This is precisely what the Paris Principles are about and this is why we urge you all to support their implementation in any way you can.

As I began my address, I told you the story of this sixteen years old girl I met in Northern Uganda. Through the tireless work of field workers, we now know how to give her, and all the girls and boys who like her have been exploited in the battle fields of the world, a second chance to be young and hopeful. Even more importantly, we know the ways to prevent that so many others go through similar ordeals. What we now need is the unfailing political will and leadership to do so, your will and your leadership.

Thank you.