United Nations Human Rights Council
34st Session
Agenda item 3
Clustered Interactive Dialogue with the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict and the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children
7 March 2016

Children Affected by Armed Conflict

Joint NGO Oral Statement by the Child Rights Connect Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict

Mr. President,

This statement is made on behalf of the Child Rights Connect Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict.

We welcome the reports of the SRSG on Children and Armed Conflict and the SRSG on Violence against Children. We also welcome the progress of the "Children, Not Soldiers" campaign which is now coming to an end. We would also like to thank Ms. Leila Zerrougui for her continued support in developing and promoting the Safe Schools Declaration and Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict.

1. Mainstreaming children's rights in conflict

According to UNICEF, 250 million children live in countries or territories affected by armed conflict. These children are extremely vulnerable, as they are at risk of and suffer from various forms of violence, exploitation and abuse. Yet, child protection mechanisms and programming are often overlooked as life-saving interventions.

To effectively protect children and stop violence against children in armed conflict, we call on UN Member States and partners to:

(i) Join international efforts to prevent the recruitment of children and their use in hostilities through ratifying the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and setting the minimum voluntary recruitment age to 18;
(ii) Provide coordinated assistance for the recovery and reintegration of all children including to those who have been associated with armed groups. These children must be treated primarily as victims. Former child soldiers accused of recognisable criminal offences under national or international law should be treated in accordance with international juvenile justice standards that primarily aim to ensure the child's psychosocial recovery and reintegration into society, and consider deprivation of liberty as a measure of last resort and for the shortest time possible. These guarantees should apply to all children, including those accused of 'terrorist' offences or acts purported to threaten national security. No child should ever be prosecuted solely for association with an armed group;

(iii) Ensure that, in addition to child protection and education, psychosocial support is provided in all humanitarian responses to conflict, and that funding is commensurate to the level of need in these under-resourced areas.

2. Making schools safe and learning accessible for all children affected by conflict, including girls

Attacks on and military use of schools can have a devastating impact on children. Military use can convert a school into a military target under international law and make students, teachers and learning facilities vulnerable to attacks and other forms of violence by parties to conflict.

We would like to echo the SRSG on Children and Armed Conflict's call to UN Member States to:

(i) Take all feasible measures to protect students, teachers, schools and universities from attack and military use;
(ii) Endorse the Safe Schools Declaration and implement the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict in relevant policy, doctrine and legislation.

The Second International Conference on Safe Schools, taking place in Argentina at the end of this month, will be a key opportunity for additional states to announce their endorsement of the Safe Schools Declaration.

3. Adhere to International Humanitarian Law and provide Humanitarian Aid to Children in Syria

This year marks the 6th year of the Syrian conflict. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic reminds the world that even war has laws. International humanitarian law requires states to always provide civilians with unimpeded access to humanitarian aid. The parties have a legal obligation not to attack civilians or civilian targets.

The international community must act now to provide children in Syria with humanitarian aid. We urge you to stand up for the observance of international humanitarian law and human rights law with a particular focus on the rights of children in war under Article 38 of the UN Children's Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, UN Security Council Resolution 1612 and UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

Thank you.