

Remarks by Ms. Leila Zerrougui

Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

19 September, 2014

Members of Congress, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me first express my sincere appreciation to the co-chairs and members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for their interest in the issue of child recruitment and use and for making this hearing possible.

I would like to thank the Government of the United States for its continued support to my mandate. Your country continues to be a strong ally in our efforts to protect children from conflict. Earlier this month, Samantha Power, your ambassador at the United Nations, demonstrated once again her commitment to children by hosting the presentation of the annual report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in an open debate at the Security Council.

Congressman McGovern, Congressman Wolf, Members of the Commission,

War destroys the lives of millions of children and their families around the globe. The children I meet in conflict zones have one thing in common: they spend years, if not their entire lives, recovering from the trauma of war. Their wounds are physical, psychological, emotional and social.

The Mandate

My mandate was created by the General Assembly following the publication, in 1996, of the report by Graca Machel on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children. Her report provided the world with a comprehensive picture of child soldiers, highlighted the disproportionate impact of war on children and identified them as the primary victims of armed conflict.

Since 1999, the systematic engagement of the Security Council has placed the protection of children affected by armed conflict at the heart of its international **peace and security agenda**.

The Security Council has given us a strong framework to address violations against children.

First, the council defined the six grave violations affecting children in times of conflict:

- recruitment and use of children,
- killing and maiming of children,
- sexual violence against children,
- attacks on schools and hospitals,
- abduction of children and
- denial of humanitarian access.

Then, the Council adopted resolutions to:

- Request the UN to gather and verify information detailing where and how children are affected by armed conflict, and to use this information to prepare an annual report for the Security Council;
- Request the UN to **name** parties to conflict who: recruit and use children, kill and maim children, commit rape and sexual violence on children and attack schools and hospitals;
- Request the UN to engage in dialogue with Governments and armed groups to develop Action Plans with state and not-state parties to conflict to halt and prevent violations against children.

Action plans are designed to end violations against children, release and reunify children with their families, but also to put in place mechanisms to prevent future recruitment and use of children or other grave violations and to promote accountability.

Currently, on my agenda, there are **23 conflict situations**

59 Parties are listed

8 Government security forces

51 Non-state actors

To implement the mandate, my office works with the UN system, civil society partners, regional and sub-regional organizations, with the active support of several countries.

Current crises:

Of the 23 conflict situations on my agenda, at least 6 are major crises.

In the Middle East, the conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Gaza have a devastating impact on children. I am also preoccupied by the situation in Libya and Yemen.

In Africa, children are hugely affected by conflict in South Sudan, the Central African Republic and Nigeria.

There are also serious concerns for the protection of children in protracted conflicts in Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Despite improvements, the situation in Mali remains volatile

In all of these conflicts, children are paying a very high price.

They are recruited by Government forces and non-State armed groups, killed or maimed as combatants or caught in the crossfire, abducted from their homes, and subjected to sexual violence. Their schools and hospitals are under attack and they are too often deprived of humanitarian assistance.

I can address each of the conflict situations on my agenda in greater detail during the Q&A portion of this hearing.

But for now, let's turn to areas of progress:

Children, Not Soldiers

Six months ago, in collaboration with UNICEF, I launched a global campaign called 'Children, not Soldiers'.

The Campaign aims at galvanizing support to end and prevent the recruitment and use of children by **national security forces** in situations of conflict by the end of 2016. Listed forces include: Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Yemen. **Seven** of these countries have committed to make their security forces child-free by signing Action Plans with the United Nations. The action plans identify necessary steps they need to take to make their security forces child free. Key activities include the criminalization of recruitment of children; the age verification of soldiers and their release and the assistance for the reintegration of children released.

I am committed, along with UN agencies such as UNICEF and other partners, to provide support to enable the implementation of the Action Plans.

And there is progress to report:

- With the full support of the United Nations, Chad completed all the requirements under its action plan and its national army was delisted from the Secretary-General's list of those who recruit child soldiers.
- The government of Afghanistan endorsed a road map to accelerate the implementation of its action plan. Myanmar will be moving forward on its action plan and is scheduled to release additional children in the coming days.
- Somalia has put in place mechanisms for the handover to the United Nations of children found in the ranks of its army and established a child protection unit in the Somali armed forces.

But progress in some situations hit setbacks. In South Sudan, most of the progress accomplished to address the issue of child soldiers within the SPLA has been erased and, despite the Government and Opposition's re-commitment to end the recruitment of children, we continue to receive troubling reports of child soldiers recruited throughout the country. I saw some of them myself during a visit to the country in June.

Non-State Actors

As I mentioned earlier, the vast majority of parties listed in the Secretary-General's annual report are non-state actors. To date we have concluded an equal number of action plans with non-state as state actors. These non-state actors continue to approach my Office and our partners on the ground to conclude commitments to end child recruitment and other violations against children. A recent example is the commitment received by my Office by the Syrian National Coalition, and I am hopeful that we can conclude our action plan with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines soonest.

Child Soldier Prevention and Accountability Acts

The U.S. Child Soldier Prevention and Accountability Acts are of great importance and are a model in some ways on how accountability for violations against children can lead to genuine positive change for children. Though an action plan is a contract between a listed armed party and the United Nations, the concerted pressure exercised by states upon those parties is of immense value in our advocacy to both bring them to the table and to see appropriate actions taken. The United States has done this both through listing parties in its CSPA mandated reporting and in the advocacy undertaken and support given to concerned states to come into compliance. I would hope to see similar results under the Child Soldier Accountability Act.

Congressman McGovern, Congressman Wolf, Members of the Commission,

In this time of upheaval when the world is focussed on the repugnant acts of groups who use and sow terror, it is imperative that we pause to consider what is and will happen to innocent children if we do not take specific action to protect those who are in areas under control of these groups or children who have been associated with these groups.

Role of the US

To help us better protect children from conflict – and also to reach the objective of the campaign, I would like to invite you, as members of the United States Congress to maintain your Government's engagement and to assist us by helping us to ensure:

1. Support for the 2016 Campaign and the separation of children from state and non-state actors through advocacy, financial and technical resources to concerned Governments and implementing partners in the field;
2. Expertise and support for security sector reforms and judicial reforms, with a focus on building national institutions to promote accountability;
3. Reintegration assistance to former child soldiers through education, training and youth employment, as well as psycho-social assistance;
4. Continue to support mainstreaming of child protection in regional organizations such as NATO, and ensure the US support attaches minimum criteria for protecting children in peacekeeping operations;
5. Where the US can directly support action plans, such as in Afghanistan, engage with the UN and the Government in support of the action plan process;
6. When possible, pressure non-state actors to end grave violations against children.

In the multiple crises we face today, we often forget that children are the majority of the population. They cannot wait any longer for the protection we have promised.

I thank you again and look forward to your questions.