

## Growing number of UN Member States make commitment to stop use of child soldiers



Orphaned and vulnerable children are suffering the most in the ongoing conflict in Somalia

29 September 2009 – Moves to prevent the criminal use and abuse of young boys and girls recruited into armed groups around the world took a step forward today as eight more countries endorsed a United Nations declaration aimed at ending the scourge and bringing to justice those who violate children in armed conflict.

"2009 has been a terrible year for children," said Radhika Coomaraswamy, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, at an event where individual countries formally endorsed the Paris Commitments, which require nations to do all they can to help end the recruitment of children in armed conflicts.

Children continue to be forcibly recruited, abducted, maimed or killed in conflicts around the globe, and conflicts in Gaza, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan have led to high numbers of casualties and large-scale displacements, she said.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), children have been caught in the middle of conflict between Government forces and rebel militia, and in Nepal some 3,000 child soldiers have been detained for two years in detention camps, added the Special Representative.

"Sexual violence, both against girls and boys, remains a grave concern," she told the ministerial forum endorsing the Paris Commitments at UN Headquarters in New York. "Children are raped, gang-raped or used as sexual slaves by armed groups."

Ms. Coomaraswamy stressed that without holding individuals accountable for "such grave violations against children," peace is unobtainable. "Nor can there be any comfort when children are not given the support to deal with the psychological consequences of such crimes."

A group of eight States approved the Paris Commitments at the event, bringing the total number of nations supporting the declaration from 76 to 84. The latest countries to endorse the document were Albania, Guinea, the Central African Republic (CAR), Eritrea, Jamaica, Liechtenstein, Panama and Senegal.

"The Paris Commitments send a powerful political message," said Ms. Coomaraswamy. "The stronger the message, the more children will be saved."

In an interview with the UN News Centre after the event, Ms. Coomaraswamy noted that at present an estimated 250,000 children are associated with armed groups, "sometimes as frontline combatants, as spies or porters. They also are domestic aides, sex-slaves, they fight, etc."

She said that before the Paris Principles – a set of related technical guidelines for running child soldier demobilization and reintegration programmes – children were put into transit camps and taught to sew or trained in motor repairs for six months and sent back home.

"Child protection people said that this didn't work very well. Soon they were re-recruited," she told the UN News Centre.

"Successful programmes are those in which the child is quickly taken back to the family – and if there is still a community – you work with the family and the community," she said. "You provide livelihood training but in his environment."

Ms. Coomaraswamy noted that many of the Member States who have endorsed the Commitments are traditional donor nations. "So we hope they will fund programmes along the lines of the Paris Principles."

Today's event was the second ministerial follow-up Forum to the International Conference entitled "Free Children from War," which was held in Paris in 2007, and it was co-organized by the Permanent Mission of France to the UN, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Ms. Coomaraswamy's office.

UNICEF Executive Director Community Ann M. Veneman said that children are "extremely resilient if they receive adequate care, education and alternative livelihoods to the horror of war."

Ms. Veneman also highlighted the success of community-based long-term reintegration programs. "To be effective, the programmes need to be adequately funded in the long-term and we need more support from the international community for the sake of the children."

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