

## U.N. Skirts Sanctions for Child Soldier Recruiters

Thalif Deen/ Inter-Press Service

**UNITED NATIONS, July 26, 2005 (IPS) - After nearly six months of political dilly-dallying, the U.N. Security Council has taken the first "major" step forward to protect children in armed conflicts -- but stopped short of penalising member states and rebel groups guilty of recruiting and abusing them.**

The 15-member Council unanimously voted Tuesday on a series of measures, including the establishment of "a comprehensive monitoring and reporting mechanism", aimed at preventing the use of child soldiers, the abduction of children, attacks against schools and hospitals, and the denial of humanitarian access to children.

But still, says Jo Becker, advocacy director of the children's rights division at Human Rights Watch, "We are disappointed that the Council has not yet acted to impose targeted measures such as arms bans against governments and groups that are well-known to recruit and use child soldiers."

"However, we hope that the new working group established by the Council will take continuing violations seriously and strongly recommend such measures to the Council," Becker told IPS.

Among the proposed targeted measures before the Council were: travel restrictions on government and rebel leaders guilty of recruiting child soldiers; imposition of arms embargoes; a ban on military assistance; restrictions on the flow of financial resources; and the exclusion of government and insurgent leaders from any governance structures and amnesty provisions.

These measures were first discussed by the Council during an open debate back in February 2005. But since there was a division of opinion, particularly among some of the five permanent members in the Council, namely the United States, China, Britain, France and Russia, the resolution adopted Tuesday skirted the issue of sanctions.

Julia Freedson, director of 'Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict', says the work of the Security Council "does not end with the adoption of this resolution - rather it begins here."

”For the hundreds of thousands of children and their families devastated by armed conflicts raging around the globe, the United Nations must now ensure that this system does not become a rhetorical exercise in information collection,” said Freedson, whose network of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) works for the protection of children's security and rights in situations of armed conflict.

”Rather, the driving force behind this effort to collect information must be the pursuit of justice for crimes committed against children and preventing future atrocities against them,” she added.

Asked if targeted measures would be a reality considering the fact that the Security Council has been reluctant to deploy sanctions as a weapon, Freedson told IPS: ”One starting place could be the possibility of including the criteria of recruitment and use of child soldiers into pre-existing sanctions regimes.”

Olara Otunnu, the U.N. Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, described the adoption of the resolution as ”truly a historical development.”

Otunnu, who has been actively campaigning for ”concrete and targeted measures” against those found guilty of abusing children,” said that with the new resolution ”we have now entered a new era of application.”

”For the first time, the United Nations is establishing a formal, structured and detailed compliance regime of this kind,” he told reporters Tuesday.

He said this brings together ”all the key elements we have been developing, in the last few years, to ensure accountability and compliance on the ground. This is a turning point of great consequence,” Otunnu added.

Under the new mechanism, he explained, U.N.-led task forces will be established in phases in conflict-affected countries, primarily to monitor the conduct of all parties, and to transmit regular reports to a central task force based at U.N. headquarters in New York.

”These reports will serve as triggers for action against the offending parties,” he added.

Otunnu said the Security Council's special Working Group, consisting of all 15 members, will review reports and action plans, and ”consider targeted measures against offending parties, where insufficient or no progress has been made.”

Such measures, he said, might include travel restrictions on leaders, and their exclusion from any government structures and amnesty provisions; a ban on military assistance; and restriction on the flow of financial resources to the parties concerned.

Becker said that children are killed, raped and recruited as soldiers in conflict situations every day. "The Council's action today to establish long-term mechanisms to report and act on such horrific abuses is necessary and welcome."

She also told IPS that both the United Nations and individual governments must "exert stronger pressure against governments and armed groups to end their crimes against children affected by conflict."

"The extent and severity of these abuses are intolerable," Becker added.

In a report to the Security Council last February, Otunnu listed 17 "situations of grave concern" relating to children, and also named 54 offending parties, including governments and rebel groups.

The 54 included either government forces or rebel groups -- or both in some cases -- in countries such as Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Sudan, Colombia, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Uganda.

The list also included non-state armed groups including the Lord's Resistance Army of Northern Uganda, the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka, paramilitary and guerrilla forces in Colombia, as well as government forces in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burma.

Freedson said the resolution adopted by the Security Council sets the stage for the United Nations to take the long-awaited step of systematically monitoring the recruitment and use of child soldiers, as well as other violations against children, such as rape and abduction.

"Most importantly, it calls for the information discovered through this monitoring system to be reported back to the most powerful body in the United Nations -- the Security Council," she added.

To ensure that the resolution's new child protection systems are effectively and efficiently implemented, the 'Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict' has made the following

recommendations:

-- the Council must ensure that the political interests of parties to conflict do not interfere with the Council's review of data submitted them and the action they decide to take. They must quickly establish a Working Group that is able to muster the political will needed to respond to the most egregious violations against children that will be reported to them;

-- the Council must make good on its promises to take "measures" against parties that continue to recruit and use children as soldiers by imposing targeted sanctions against these groups, such as weapon embargoes and travel bans on their leaders.

-- U.N. agencies that will be collecting information in conflict areas must ensure that they are well-organised and coordinated. They must respect and engage local civil society organisations and community leaders as equal partners in this task.

While applauding the adoption of the resolution, Rima Salah, deputy executive director of the U.N. children's agency UNICEF, said: "Countless children in conflicts worldwide have paid the price of inaction by those who are obligated to protect them. This is a critical measure to hold accountable the parties that continue to harm those children."

In the last decade, some two million children have been killed in armed conflicts, while six million children have been disabled or injured, according to the United Nations. Over a quarter of a million child soldiers are being abused and exploited in various situations of armed conflicts worldwide. (END/2005)