

## Children Affected by Armed Conflict in Afghanistan

March 1, 2011

Children bear the brunt of the armed conflict in Afghanistan. They are killed in aerial strikes and search-and-raid operations by international forces as well as by assassinations and suicide bombings by armed opposition groups. Landmines and other explosives have killed or injured hundreds of children, particularly boys who play outside, tend to animals, or collect food, water or wood. Armed groups have also destroyed schools and targeted students, especially girls.

As the conflict continues, civilian casualties will increase. Children are among the most vulnerable members of a community. Caught up in conflict, children are deprived of their most basic human rights: protection, education and assistance. Urgent action must be taken to protect children in Afghanistan from further abuse and assist those who have suffered the consequences of decades of armed conflict.

In June 2010<sup>1</sup>, Watchlist called on world leaders to put children's needs at the forefront of policy and funding decisions on Afghanistan. Yet major opportunities to prioritize the protection of children from conflict-related violence have been missed, with disastrous consequences. According to the Afghanistan Rights Monitor (ARM), over 2,421 civilians were killed in 2010, of which 30 percent were children. This means 739 children lost their lives in 2010, or two children were killed every day by war in Afghanistan<sup>2</sup>.

### Key Concerns and Recommendations:

#### 1. Increased risk of recruitment of children

In its 2010 report, Watchlist warned that the children of Afghanistan would face increased risks of being recruited by armed forces and groups if no precautionary measures were taken. Armed opposition groups would likely intensify their recruitment drives in response to the surge in international armed forces<sup>3</sup>. National security forces also faced a rising demand for police and soldiers, which led to under-age recruitment in a country with poor birth registration systems and inadequate vetting procedures. Finally, we were deeply concerned that self-defense militias, supported by the Afghan and international forces, would increase the risk of recruitment and use of child soldiers due to their lack of accountability<sup>4</sup>.

The Government of Afghanistan signed an Action Plan against the recruitment and use of children in the Afghan National Security Forces on January 31, 2011. While this endorsement presents the international

In Paktiya Province in southern Afghanistan, one human rights worker observed more than 15 children present in a police station who wanted to join the Afghan National Police (February 2011).

<sup>1</sup> Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict. *Setting the Right Priorities: Protecting Children Affected by Armed Conflict in Afghanistan*. June 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Afghanistan Rights Monitor. *Two children killed in war every day in 2010*.

See: [http://www.arm.org.af/index.php?page=en\\_Latest+News+05](http://www.arm.org.af/index.php?page=en_Latest+News+05)

<sup>3</sup> In mid-November 2010, ISAF counted 130,930 troops in Afghanistan, while an estimated 20,000 troops were deployed within the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (numbers for September 2010).

See: Report of the UN Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in Afghanistan. S/2011/55, February 3, 2011, p.4.

<sup>4</sup> Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict. *idem*, p.33.

community with a historic opportunity to reduce child recruitment, it will be crucial to ensure the effective implementation of the Action Plan, including its annexes on the prevention of sexual violence and the killing and maiming of children. The Action Plan does not include commitments about abuse of children by pro-government self-defense militias.

According to the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), three-quarters of all conflict-related civilian casualties in 2010 were linked to armed opposition groups, rather than pro-government forces<sup>5</sup>. Due to the current security situation in Afghanistan, there has been no dialogue initiated with armed opposition groups on child recruitment.

### **Recommendations to the Security Council Working Group:**

- Urge the Government of Afghanistan to work closely with UN agencies to effectively implement the Action Plan and its annexes to prevent the recruitment and use of children in the Afghan National Security Forces.
- Urge the donor community to provide the funding required for the timely and effective implementation of the Action Plan, as well as for the necessary activities to monitor compliance.
- Urge the UN Secretary-General to ensure the immediate deployment of additional child protection advisors throughout the country in an effort to strengthen the child protection component of UNAMA, as recommended by the UN Security Council. Reinforcements to the six regional task forces should be prioritized.
- Urge the UN Country Team to intensify its efforts to enter into dialogue with armed opposition groups to prepare and implement time-bound action plans to prevent future recruitment and use of children in armed conflict in line with UN Security Council Resolutions 1540, 1612 and 1882.
- Urge the Government of Afghanistan and its international allies to immediately end the support and training of community self-defense militias and ensure the disarmament and demobilization of the militias; special attention should be paid to the potential presence of children among the militias.

## **2. Ongoing attacks against education**

Armed opposition groups have damaged and destroyed schools, forced school closures, brutally killed students (particularly girls) and their teachers and threatened anybody seen as supportive of Afghanistan's education system. Between January and August 2010, the UN Secretary-General reported 285 attacks on education and educational facilities<sup>6</sup>. In 2009, 610 incidents were reported. Afghan local communities play a critical role in protecting schools against violence as community members often know the armed group involved and are able to establish a dialogue with them.

During the UN Security Council's Annual Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict<sup>7</sup> on June 16, 2010, the Government of Afghanistan claimed its Ministry of Education had issued the instruction that schools would no longer be used as polling stations in elections. Still, both hospitals and schools were used as polling stations in the December 18 parliamentary elections in the provinces of

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<sup>5</sup> Report of the UN Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict in Afghanistan, p.2.

<sup>6</sup> Idem, p.11.

<sup>7</sup> UN Security Council, Open Debate on Children and Armed Conflict, June 16, 2010, S/PV.6341, p.29.

Kandahar, Nangarhar, Kunar, Badghis, Herat, Kabul and Laghman. This decision undoubtedly put the facilities at increased risk of attack.

Watchlist is deeply concerned that the worsening security situation in Afghanistan will further increase the alarming rates of attacks on education and educational facilities. As armed opposition groups target public places, families are afraid to send their children to school, particularly girls. Stress on livelihoods further reduces access to education for families where children are important breadwinners.

Despite these well-documented, worrisome trends, no specific action has been taken to prevent further attacks against education.

In the provinces, where government control is limited, schools are closed and children do not have access to education. *“Security is worsening in distant districts. Panjwaey and Zheray district schools are now closed due to insecurity”*, said one education worker in Kandahar Province.

### **Recommendations to the Security Council Working Group:**

- Urge the Government of Afghanistan to comply with its promise to avoid under all circumstances the use of education and health facilities in elections and for other political purposes.
- Request additional information from the UN Secretary-General on the extent of attacks against education in the next Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) country report on Afghanistan, as well as on strategies for prevention and response by all relevant actors and recommendations for improvements, including in enhancing accountability for attacks on education.
- Urge the Government of Afghanistan to investigate all incidents affecting schools, teachers, staff, students and parents, and prosecute those responsible in accordance with national and international law.
- Call on the donor community to make meaningful community participation a prerequisite for supporting education projects in order to reduce security risks and increase local ownership and sustainability.

### **3. Addressing cross-border violations against children**

In its 2010 report, Watchlist argued that the protection of children’s rights should not stop at Afghanistan’s borders. There is a high occurrence of violations committed against children on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, including child trafficking, child recruitment and the use of children as smugglers. Some of the children recruited in Pakistan are encouraged by the Taliban to perform suicide attacks in Afghanistan. Due to access restrictions and a lack of coordination between UN Country Teams in Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is very difficult to get detailed information on the nature and scope of these violations.

### **Recommendations to the Security Council Working Group:**

- Request the UN Secretary-General to work with the UN Country Teams in Afghanistan and Pakistan to establish a UN regional strategy to contribute actively to the protection of children affected by cross-border violations.
- Urge the Government of Pakistan to invite the Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG-CAC) to conduct a mission in Pakistan to identify potential ways to improve

coordination in ending cross-border violations that impact children affected by armed conflict such as the drug trade, trafficking and small arms trade.

- Encourage the UN Country Team in Pakistan to establish a Working Group on Children affected by Armed Conflict to more effectively address the concerns of Afghan refugee children and cooperate with the in-country MRM Taskforce in Afghanistan to address issues of common concern, including cross-border recruitment of child soldiers and trafficking.
- Urge the respective Country Task Forces to work with protection organizations and local groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan to assess the scope and nature of recruitment of children by armed groups operating in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas. The Country Task Force on the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (CTFMRM) should also develop a set of joint actions to be taken at the local, national and regional levels to facilitate the release and reintegration of children affected by armed groups or forces.

#### **4. Impunity for perpetrators of violence against children**

The number of civilians killed as a result of armed conflict has risen at an unprecedented rate, with 3,268 conflict-related civilian casualties documented by UNAMA between January and June 2010, as compared to 2,412 casualties in 2009. Most of the civilian deaths attributed to pro-government forces were a result of air strikes and, to a lesser extent, night raids involving excessive use of force. Following such an attack, children and their families usually do not receive information about who has committed the crime, the circumstances of the incident or the status and follow-up of investigations.

To date, there has never been an indictment or conviction of Taliban combatants for crimes against humanity or war crimes. Moreover, in February 2010, the Government of Afghanistan put into force the Law on Public Amnesty and National Stability which gives immunity to prosecution for those involved in the current hostilities if they agree to engage with the government on reconciliation.

Finally, few perpetrators of sexual violence are ever brought to justice. Police officers often ignore complaints or refuse to register cases for fear of retaliation or because they receive bribes. Police do not guarantee the protection of survivors and witnesses. Women and children reporting gender-based violence (GBV) cases have at times been placed into “protective custody”, putting them at risk of further violations, including rape, while in prison.

#### **Recommendations to the Security Council Working Group:**

- Urge international military forces, in coordination with the related national mechanism, to devise a uniform strategy for compensating civilian survivors of attacks and ensure that these compensation systems are made easily accessible to victims, including children.
- Urge the Government of Afghanistan and its allies to contact victims and their families to offer official apologies, inform them about the circumstances of the incident and to explain to them how they can raise complaints and have them heard by the government and its allies.
- Urge the Government of Afghanistan to take the necessary steps to repeal the Law on Public Amnesty and National Stability.
- Encourage the Government of Afghanistan to establish a viable victim and witness protection system for GBV cases, including temporary shelters where necessary; and to adequately resource family response units (FRUs) within Afghan National Police stations with qualified female police officers.

### **About Watchlist**

The Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict strives to end violations against children in armed conflicts and to guarantee their rights. As a global network, Watchlist builds partnerships among local, national and international non-governmental organizations, enhancing mutual capacities and strengths. Working together, we strategically collect and disseminate information on violations against children in conflicts in order to influence key decision-makers to create and implement programs and policies that effectively protect children.

[watchlist@watchlist.org](mailto:watchlist@watchlist.org)

[www.watchlist.org](http://www.watchlist.org)

### **About Partnering Organization Save the Children**

Save the Children is the world's leading independent children's rights organization, with members in 29 countries and operational programs in more than 120. We fight for children's rights and deliver lasting improvement to children's lives.

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