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NEW REPORT: LRA AND OTHER ARMED GROUPS COMMITTING GRAVE VIOLATIONS AGAINST CHILDREN IN CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, IDMC Demand UN Security Council, Government of CAR, Donors Take Action

May 4, New York City – Children in the Central African Republic (CAR) are being abducted, recruited into armed groups and denied access to humanitarian assistance, according to a report released today by the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict (Watchlist) and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC). These violations, as well as attacks against schools and hospitals, have continued despite the fact that the UN Security Council identified them among the forbidden ‘six grave violations’ committed against children during times of conflict. These six grave violations are the basis of the Council’s protection of children during war.

The report, *An Uncertain Future? Children and Armed Conflict in the Central African Republic*, finds that the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) is still present and active in CAR, where it is abducting children. Abducted children are raped, used as sex slaves and forced to attack villages and kill others, including other children.

In the report, Watchlist and IDMC outline detailed policy recommendations and demand that the government of CAR, the UN Security Council and donors including the US and the EU, take specific actions to help children affected by armed conflict in CAR.

“Children are being abused and their rights are being ignored by the LRA, other rebel groups, and even by the government of CAR. The international humanitarian community at large is also failing them in their inability to monitor and address the situation properly,” says Eva Smets, Director of Watchlist. “We must protect and provide adequate support for these children.”

In January 2011, Watchlist and IDMC conducted a field mission during which a researcher held one-on-one interviews with former child soldiers, internally displaced children and their families, community leaders and teachers, security forces, and members of village self-defense militias.

“This report outlines the situation in CAR from the victims’ perspective,” says Laura Perez, Country Analyst for IDMC and researcher for the report. “We learned directly

from the children and their families what is actually happening and how it's affecting them.”

Specifically, Watchlist and IDMC found the following:

- **Abduction:** Not only is the LRA abducting children, using them as slaves and soldiers, but those children who manage to escape from the LRA experience great difficulties returning to their families. They rarely receive much-needed assistance, such as psychosocial care, to heal from these traumatic events. These children also suffer an arduous journey home that often takes them as long as the time they actually spent in captivity.
- **Recruitment:** The absence of a functioning army has forced local communities to form self-defense militias to protect themselves from criminal gangs and foreign armed groups like the LRA. These self-defense militias admit to recruiting children as young as 12. The rebel group the Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace (CPJP) is also recruiting children.

In addition, there are significant problems in the long-term reintegration of the children recently released by the Popular Army for the Restoration of Democracy (APRD). Without support programs allowing them to earn a living, these children are at risk of returning to armed groups.

- **Denial of Humanitarian Access:** Between restrictions placed on certain areas by the government of CAR, and the activities of the rebel group CPJP and the LRA, humanitarian assistance organizations and UN agencies are unable to access two conflict areas in the country. This means that no assessment of needs is being made and no assistance provided to the children living in these areas.

Smets says that it is a crucial time to work to remedy the situation. “The recent re-election of President Bozizé offers a unique opportunity for the children of CAR to reclaim their future,” says Smets. “If President Bozizé and his government are able to consolidate the peace process and mark a real end to the armed conflict in CAR, there is real potential for socio-economic development and stability. But, in order for this to happen, the international community must respond now and commit the necessary resources to help children affected by armed conflict in CAR.”

An Uncertain Future? lists specific policy recommendations for improving the protection of children in CAR and for strengthening the humanitarian response to their needs, including demanding that:

- **The government of CAR:**
 - Instruct self-defense militias to leave their children at home;
 - Train, equip and deploy troops to communities that have had to rely on self-defense militias to protect themselves;

- Negotiate a cease-fire agreement with the rebel group CPJP in order to restore humanitarian access to displaced communities living in zones controlled by the rebel group
- **The UN Security Council:**
 - Encourage the government of CAR to do all of the above; and
 - Request that the UN Country Team in CAR negotiate an action plan with CPJP to release all children from its ranks.
- **The US government and the European Union:**
 - Urgently release funds to assist children formerly abducted by the LRA who are now in need of psychosocial assistance.

“What we want are more programs in CAR. We want people to respond,” says Perez. “The reason why CAR doesn’t have the same degree of humanitarian assistance as DRC is because CAR doesn’t get the same international attention. We want to raise the profile of the situation in CAR and the horrific conditions children face there.”

For a full list of findings and recommendations, please request an embargoed version of the report.

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Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, established in 2001, is an international network of non-governmental organizations striving 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 NGOs, enhancing mutual capacities and strengths. Working together, we strategically collect and disseminate information on violations against children in conflicts to influence key decision-makers to create and implement programs and policies that effectively protect children.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) (www.internal-displacement.org) was established by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) in 1998, upon the request of the United Nations. It is a leading source of information and analysis on internal displacement caused by conflict and violence worldwide.