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Afghanistan Update

Recommendations to the United Nations Security Council

Recent UN Security Council resolutions on the situation in Afghanistan have not addressed the critical concerns of Afghan children and adolescents. The protection of these children, which transcends ethnic and political divides, should be used as a unifying force in broad social reconstruction efforts. Now that the UN Security Council has unanimously adopted a resolution affirming the central role it will play in setting up a new transitional authority in Afghanistan, we urge the Security Council to call for any UN mandated authority to include the following provisions to protect Afghan children's rights:

- Uninterrupted humanitarian access to all war-affected, refugee and internally displaced Afghan children and adolescents.
- The incorporation of children's concerns into the peace agenda of UN Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi, including the comprehensive assessment of children's needs.
- Child protection advisers reporting at the highest UN levels who will work to protect and promote children's rights, including monitoring and assessing the situation of children, with regular reports provided to the Security Council.
- Resources and programming for the disarmament, demobilization and rehabilitation of child combatants, including assistance for girls who may have been forced into marriages, prostitution or other sexual activity. This includes appropriate counseling, learning and vocational opportunities.
- The establishment of a centralized and coordinated tracking and family reunification program to cope with child separation.

- Awareness training for all peacekeeping and other UN staff on issues of human rights, and children's rights in particular. Mechanisms should be included to deal with alleged violations of human rights, including children rights, by peacekeepers and/or UN staff.
- Peace and recovery programs that take into account the special protection needs of women and girls, ensuring that any transitional and long-term government respects the rights of women and girls and ensures equal access to health and education resources, including reproductive health. Any programs aimed at protecting and promoting women's and children's rights should ensure their direct participation.
- Incentives for efforts to establish local civil society groups and strengthen local groups' capacity to monitor and protect human rights, including children's rights.
- Programs to limit the use of child labor, including increased access to education and appropriate guardian programs to protect orphaned, unaccompanied and street children.
- Education and awareness programs for Afghan children and others regarding the hazards of unexploded ordnances and landmines, including support for clearance and disarmament programs and the destruction of small arms stockpiles.
- Comprehensive educational opportunities, for boys and girls, in coordination with the pre-existing educational efforts of outside agencies.

UPDATE ON AFGHAN CHILDREN

The following update highlights some new and heightened risks for Afghan children and adolescents. This supplements the Watchlist on Afghanistan first issued on October 13.

The escalation of conflict in Afghanistan has had severe repercussions on the situation of Afghan children and adolescents, who have long suffered the consequences of civil war, drought, pervasive poverty and institutionalized discrimination. Recently their security and well-being have been further threatened by massive displacement, the US bombing campaign, the break-down of law and order, a leadership void in Kabul and the onset of winter.

- UNICEF has estimated that approximately 100,000 Afghan children could die this winter unless they receive emergency assistance. The US Fund for UNICEF puts the number of children at risk this winter as high as 400,000.
- Human Rights Watch reported that 23 civilians, primarily children, were killed one night in October when a US bomb hit a remote Afghan village.
- Reports out of Afghanistan indicate that 100 Taliban child soldiers were killed by Northern Alliance troops in Mazar-i-Sharif. Human rights groups have cautioned that it is not certain that the incident constituted a clear violation of international

humanitarian law because it has not yet been determined whether the Taliban fighters were actively engaged in combat.

- The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has raised concerns over civilians caught in looting, executions and other human rights abuses as the Northern Alliance troops, who have a history of human rights violations, advance in Afghanistan.

FAMILY SEPARATION

Separation of children from families can be expected as a consequence of complex emergencies involving displacement and flight, which have reached extreme levels in Afghanistan. According to Save the Children, between 2 and 5 percent of children have been separated from their families in comparable emergencies. Prior to the recent violence, displacement had already left some children separated from their families. Recent reports from local groups in Pakistan indicate that separated and orphaned children have arrived in Pakistan unaccompanied or with neighbors after having lost their relatives in the bombings and ongoing violence. UNHCR reports that many families have become separated during their flight to Pakistan. In some instances weak and disabled relatives were unable to make the trek to Pakistan and were left behind. Save the Children reports that the Taliban have prevented men (possibly including boys under 18) from crossing the Pakistani border with their families. As some Afghan refugees now prepare for the long journey back to Afghanistan, other children might face separation from their families.

CHILD RECRUITMENT

Recruitment of children continues to be reported among Taliban and Northern Alliance forces. Reports from the north of Afghanistan indicate that Northern Alliance military units use young boys to perform tasks ranging from serving on the front lines to carrying ammunition. *The New York Times* found children as young as twelve among Northern Alliance forces, and was told by a commander, “We have young boys that are more familiar with a gun than with school.” In late September the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported on increased recruitment of young men and boys from Islamic schools (madrassas) in Pakistan to join the Taliban ranks. Pakistan’s Human Rights Commission also reported widespread recruitment by the Taliban from madrassas, particularly in Peshawar.

CLUSTER BOMBS

The use of cluster bombs in Afghanistan poses lethal danger to children, adolescents and all civilians. Cluster bombs deliver “submunitions” (a.k.a. grenades or bomblets) to wide surface areas such as air fields and troop concentrations. Because they have a high initial failure rate, they result in a smattering of unexploded devices that pose long-term threats to civilians, particularly when dropped near urban centers. According to Human Rights Watch nearly 5,000 unexploded bomblets from US warplanes are now littered across Afghanistan. These devices are commonly bright yellow in color and are known for attracting children who mistake the weapons for toys. According to the United Nations, experience in Kosovo demonstrates that children and adolescents are particularly

susceptible to the unexploded bomblets. In Afghanistan the situation is exacerbated because the yellow cluster bombs are hard to distinguish from yellow humanitarian packages which have also been dropped.

CHILD LABOR

Child labor is prevalent among Afghan children both in Afghanistan and living as refugees in Pakistan and Iran. This has long been a problem for Afghan youth, now deepened by the recent crisis. The UN reports that the number of children working in the Afghan capital of Kabul has nearly doubled in the past five years, to as many as 50,000. In the Pakistani border town Quetta, home to approximately half a million Afghan refugees, children perform a broad range of labor tasks. More recently, worsening economic circumstances have reportedly forced children as young as seven to work cleaning houses, building bricks, repairing cars and weaving carpets. The UN reports that some industries, such as the Pakistani carpet industry, use child workers as bonded laborers. In Karachi, Pakistan as many as 15,000 orphaned or abandoned Afghan boys collect garbage for daily wages and live in squalid conditions.

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

According to the United Nations Population Fund, Afghan women both inside Afghanistan and fleeing to neighboring countries are at high risk from childbearing due to lack of medical care. Of the 1.5 million Afghans fleeing the conflict, more than half are women and approximately 66,000 are pregnant. Due to anemia, malnutrition and other problems, approximately 10,000 of these are considered to be high-risk pregnancies. Inside Afghanistan more than 300,000 women are pregnant and 50,000 are at high risk. Afghanistan suffers from the world's second highest maternal mortality rate at 17 per 1,000 live births. According to reports, ninety nine percent of births are unattended.

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The Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict is an NGO initiative to improve protection for the rights of children in specific situations of armed conflict.