

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990 World Summit for Children, the United Nations has sought to draw international attention to the horrendous plight of children affected by armed conflict. In 1993, following a recommendation by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the General Assembly adopted resolution 48/157 recommending that the Secretary-General appoint an independent expert to study the impact of armed conflict on children. Ms. Graça Machel, former Minister of Education and First Lady of Mozambique, was appointed the Secretary-General's Expert, charged with the task of undertaking the study with the special support of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the Center for Human Rights. In 1996, following two years of extensive research, regional consultations and field visits, Ms. Machel submitted her report, entitled "Impact of Armed Conflict on Children" (document A/51/306 and Add. 1), to the fifty-first session of the General Assembly.

The Machel Report provided the first comprehensive assessment of the multiple ways in which children are abused and brutalized in the context of war. It set out findings and recommendations for action in several areas, including child soldiers, refugees and internally displaced children, sexual exploitation and gender-based violence, landmines and unexploded ordnance, the impact of sanctions on children, health and nutrition, psychological recovery and social reintegration, education, demilitarization and reconstruction.

In response to the Machel Report, the General Assembly adopted resolution 51/77 in which it recommended the appointment of a Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. The resolution also called upon States and institutions concerned to provide voluntary contributions in support of the work of the Special Representative.

In September 1997, the Secretary-General appointed Mr. Olara A. Otunnu as his Special Representative for a term of three years. In announcing this appointment, the Secretary-General underscored the urgent need for a public advocate and moral voice on behalf of children whose rights, protection and welfare have been and are being violated in the context of armed conflict.

This interim report is being submitted to the Commission on Human Rights pursuant to General Assembly resolution 52/107. A full report will be presented to the fifty-third session of the General Assembly later in the year.

II. CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT: THE CONTEXT

As the Preamble of the United Nations Charter underlines in its famous opening words, our first duty is to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war". In this we have failed profoundly. Not only are millions of children still the victims of war, far too often they are its principal targets and even its instruments. At this moment in approximately fifty countries around the world, children are suffering from the effects of conflict and its aftermath.