

Indeed, the development and proliferation of lightweight automatic weapons has made it possible for very young children to bear and use arms. Many more are being used in indirect ways which are more difficult to measure, such as cooks, messengers and porters. Children have also been used for mine clearance, spying and suicide bombing.

The Special Representative will seek to mobilise public opinion and political pressure against this growing trend. In particular, he will advocate for concerted action against the military recruitment of children under the agreed age limit. In this connection, he supports current efforts to raise the legal age of participation in hostilities to 18 years, through the adoption of an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Similarly, he supports the designation of the recruitment of children under 15 and their participation in hostilities as a war crime in the proposed statute for a permanent International Criminal Court.

The Special Representative will also draw attention to the various political and socio-economic conditions that often facilitate the recruitment and participation of children in armed conflict. He will work to promote more effective response to the needs of child soldiers in post-conflict situations.

(ii) Sexual abuse and gender-based violence

There is growing evidence that rape and sexual abuse have, in many places, become an intrinsic part of armed conflict strategies. The breakdown of social value systems and the disintegration of families and communities in times of war leave women and girls especially vulnerable to sexual violence. The practice of rape as a weapon of armed conflict and ethnic cleansing must be ended and its perpetrators brought to justice. Children affected by gender-based violence also include those who have witnessed the rape of a family member. The Special Representative will work to raise greater awareness of and call for action against these abuses. In this connection, he supports the inclusion of rape and any other forms of sexual violence in international and internal armed conflict as a war crime under the jurisdiction of the permanent International Criminal Court. He will also promote the need for special health and psychological care for victims in the context of post-conflict rehabilitation programmes.

(iii) Mine awareness and rehabilitation of child victims

Civilians, including children, are exposed to the danger of approximately 100 million landmines left buried in more than 68 countries. It is estimated that anti-personnel landmines kill or maim about 26,000 persons a year, a large proportion of them being children. Millions of items of unexploded ordnance also represent additional hazards. The signing in December 1997, by 122 countries in Ottawa, of the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Landmines and on their Destruction is a milestone achievement for the international community. The treaty now must enter into force and be effectively implemented. In the immediate term, the Special Representative will emphasise the need for more rapid progress in mine clearance, greater support for mine awareness programmes for children, and rehabilitation programmes to help child victims. He will work with key partners to address these concerns, especially in post-conflict situations.