

exposed to cynical exploitation in situations of armed conflict. While the new consensus does not go as far as I would have liked, it is a most important step towards eliminating the use of children as soldiers and their participation in hostilities. Five elements of the draft optional protocol are especially significant in this context:

- States are to take "all feasible measures" to ensure that members of their armed forces who have not attained the age of 18 years do not take a "direct part" in hostilities;
- States are to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of 18 years are not compulsorily recruited into their armed forces;
- Insurgent armed groups are prohibited, "under any circumstances", from recruiting persons under 18 years or using them in hostilities;
- The new standards apply both to international conflicts and civil wars;
- State parties are called upon to cooperate, through technical cooperation and financial assistance, in the prevention of child recruitment and the use of child soldiers, and in the rehabilitation and social reintegration of ex-child soldiers.

The one aspect in which the agreement falls short of the "straight 18" position that I have advocated is in the area of voluntary enlistment into national armed forces. This is indeed a disappointment. Nevertheless, the raising of the minimum age to at least 16 and the inclusion of specific safeguards, including the provision of reliable proof of age and the informed consent of both volunteer and parents, represents an improvement on existing standards.

With agreement on the optional protocol in place, we must now turn our energies to making a difference on the ground, concentrating on several tasks:

- Exerting concerted international pressure on parties in conflict that abuse children as combatants;
- Addressing the political, social and economic factors that facilitate the exploitation of children as soldiers;
- Building the capacity and mobilizing more resources in order to respond more effectively to the rehabilitation needs of ex-child soldiers; and,
- Broadening our scope of concern to embrace all children affected by conflict.

9. Integrating the Protection and Well-being of Children into ECOWAS Peacekeeping Operations

ECOWAS has been one of the most active regional arrangements in conducting peacekeeping operations, I should like to encourage its member States to consider the incorporation of the following measures. First, the protection and rights of children should be explicitly provided for in the mandates of peacekeeping missions. Second, ECOWAS should consider the idea of attaching child protection advisers explicitly tasked with ensuring coordination of issues related to protection and well-being of children in each of its field