

A GLOBAL EFFORT

The Conference on War-Affected Children in West Africa assembled government delegations, civil society representatives, and academics in Accra from 27-28 April. This cross section of interested groups set out a series of practical, concrete actions to protect and rehabilitate war-affected children.

Shortly after the delegates packed their bags and left the peace and security of Accra, the tenuous peace in Sierra Leone was shattered. The state descended once again into chaos. How then can the resolutions and commitments made in Accra be put to work immediately to protect children in Sierra Leone? Time is running out. In Sierra Leone, children are once again being recruited into rebel forces. Their childhood is being stripped from them.

West African leaders must demonstrate leadership. They must stand up and declare that violence and civil war are no longer acceptable in West Africa. The declarations and protocols, conventions and treaties must be implemented. Strong, decisive action must be taken to correct the injustice of innocent civilians, including women and children, being affected by war.

ECOWAS leaders recently endorsed the Accra Declaration and Plan of Action, at the 25th Anniversary summit of ECOWAS held in Abuja. After 25 years of operation, ECOWAS could do no better than to move swiftly and decisively in Sierra Leone and halt the slaughter of civilians.

ECOWAS Heads of State should take steps immediately to implement the week of truce recommended in the Accra Plan of Action. With concerted international pressure, the week of truce will become a reality. If the war must go on, let it go on without the involvement of children. We must also move forward, as decided in Accra, to set up an ECOWAS desk for children's issues. Every day that we delay, more children are recruited in rebel forces.

In September, Canada will host an International Conference on War-Affected Children. This will be a chance to measure what has been accomplished since the Accra Conference, and to continue building momentum for child protection. No single government, or NGO, or international group can resolve this problem alone. A committed stance by ECOWAS, however, would set an example for other regional organisations to follow in what should become a truly global effort.