



The International
Conference on
War-Affected
Children



From Words to Action:

The Winnipeg Agenda for War-Affected Children

This past September in Winnipeg, over 1000 participants attended the International Conference on War-Affected Children, the largest-ever gathering on the issue. They included government officials, experts, academics, NGO representatives and youth—all wanting their discussions to make a difference.

The result was a 14-point Agenda for War-Affected Children adopted by the Conference. This urges “political, moral, economic and social leadership” to protect the rights of children in conflict. In particular, the Conference called for the following measures:

- Mobilize international opinion and action against the abuse of children’s rights during armed conflicts, and ensure that those who violate them or collude in such violations are identified and brought to justice.
- Pressure parties to armed conflict to unconditionally release all abducted children.
- Put in place practical and comprehensive conflict prevention measures.
- Increase international pressure to cut off the supply of small arms and light weapons.
- Engage youth in peace processes and in their own rehabilitation, reintegration and education.

Experts at the conference spoke of the need for an “era of application.” They declared, “The failure of the international community to take action against those who violate children’s rights is the principal cause of the continuing intolerable situation of millions of war-affected children in the world today. There can be no impunity for those who violate children’s rights.”

Youths demand action

Youth also had strong words. Their message, emanating in part from the 2000 National Forum for Youth on War-Affected Children, was simple and to the point: “Act now: stop war.” Florian Bizindavyi, a teenager who has endured seven years of conflict in Burundi, asked, “How do I explain to you, or make you understand, how hard it is to live in perpetual terror every day? Why should we be the martyrs of these stupid, ridiculous conflicts?” Added Ewar Barzanji, a 17-year-old Kurdish girl who fled northern Iraq, “The grown-ups who are here, the ministers, haven’t seen a quarter of what I’ve seen. . . . I don’t want to hear any more speeches. I want to know what they’re going to do for us, I want to know how they’re going to take action.”

Many governments heeded these words. Some 25 countries announced concrete initiatives to help war-affected children. Canada alone will provide \$122 million over five years for programming to protect children, including those affected by war.



International Co-operation Minister Maria Minna talks with war-affected young people from Africa at the Winnipeg Conference, September 2000.

Next steps

A follow-up committee has been established composed of Canada, Ghana and other countries, plus the UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Olara Otunnu, and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). Its task is to ensure that the commitments made in Winnipeg become reality. These in turn will help develop a more comprehensive international plan of action to be adopted at the UN General Assembly’s Special Session on Children in September 2001. ●



Former Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy with Graça Machel, Honorary Chair of the Winnipeg Conference and author of the 1996 landmark UN report on the situation of war-affected children

photos: Andrew Sikorsky

photos: Michael Frenkel

“It is time for states, institutions and individuals around the world to show leadership in word and in deed. . . . Let us make this century a peaceful one, in which the rights of the child are respected, protected and promoted everywhere.”

Agenda for War-Affected Children
WINNIPEG, SEPTEMBER 17, 2000

For more information on war-affected children, visit:

www.waraffectedchildren.gc.ca
www.unicef.org/children_conflict