The main objective of the Optional Protocol is to raise the age for participation in hostilities and the age of recruitment. Another objective is to prevent the recruitment and use of children by non-governmental armed groups.

In the negotiations, there are three principal outstanding issues:

1. the minimum age for participation in hostilities -- the majority of states could support 18;

2. the minimum age for voluntary recruitment -- the current draft text contains options ranging from 16 to 18; and

3. whether there should be any exceptions to the minimum age for recruitment -- the current draft text could provide for exceptions for training.

The Working Group has agreed, *ad referendum*, that the minimum age for compulsory recruitment (conscription) should be 18. There is also broad support for a provision that would require parties to the Optional Protocol to take all feasible measures to prevent the recruitment of persons under the age of 18 by non-governmental armed groups.

Canada has been very involved in the drafting and supported the early conclusion of a strong optional protocol. Canada supports 18 as the minimum age for involvement in hostilities. On the age of recruitment, Canada is currently examining its domestic legislation to ensure that we are in a position to ratify a strong optional protocol once it is adopted at the UN.

The last meeting of the Working Group was abridged to provide additional time for consultation. A NGO coalition has been formed with the objective of getting together a group of countries to support the development of a protocol setting the age of 18 for both participation and recruitment. The Canadian Government has begun to engage other countries in a new "Friends of the Optional Protocol" group which purports to give some political impetus to the Optional Protocol negotiations and to determine how to maximize chances for a successful outcome of the Working Group's next session, with the hope that the text of the Optional Protocol can be finalized and adopted next year.