

War-Affected Children: stop the abuse

Gathering momentum to



Basic Facts

- Most cynical is the recruitment or kidnapping of children as young as 7 or 8 (girls as well as boys) to serve as soldiers. Easily manipulated, they can become ruthless and unquestioning tools of war. They committed some of the worst atrocities in Sierra Leone.
- Sources: Reports of the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, 1998 and 1999
- Today's conflicts are primarily internal, often fought by multiple armed groups. The village has become the battlefield, and civilian populations are the primary target.
- Children are specifically targeted in strategies that seek to eliminate a new generation of potential adversaries. The same strategies encourage widespread sexual abuse of children, especially girls.

The 1980s saw awakening global concern about the situation of children, particularly in areas of conflict; this culminated in 1989, when the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention has been ratified by 191 states, making it the most widely ratified international instrument in history. A key article stipulates that children exposed to armed conflict shall receive special protection, and that no child shall take part in any hostilities.

At the 1990 World Summit for Children, all the leaders attending fully endorsed the Convention. Even so, the situation of children continued to deteriorate in many states. But the Convention at least gave the United Nations and the international community a powerful new tool for drawing attention to war-affected children. The UN specialized agencies, many governments and numerous NGOs started focussing on the issue. In 1994, the growing international momentum led to the appointment of Graça Machel, former Minister of Education and First Lady of Mozambique, to chair a study for the UN on the subject. The conclusions of her report, tabled in 1996, were shocking. As a result, in September 1997, Secretary-General Annan appointed Olara Otunnu his Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict (see pp. 4-5).

Meanwhile, within the United Nations, work began on finding ways to better protect children from war. After six years of difficult negotiations, on January 21, 2000, agreement was reached on an important measure: raising from 15 to 18 the minimum age for conscription and participation in combat. On May 26, the General Assembly adopted the measure, known as the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict. The Protocol seeks to eliminate the use of child soldiers in armed conflict. Canada had worked hard for its adoption and became the first signatory of the Protocol in June and the first country to ratify it on July 7.

Spotlight on Winnipeg

In other ways, Canada is working to mobilize the international community. With Ghana, it co-hosted the West African Conference on War-Affected Children, held last April in Accra; this produced a declaration and a plan of action for the region. Among the initiatives proposed in the plan are: adoption of laws to raise the minimum recruitment age to 18; media awareness and public information campaigns on children's rights; rehabilitation and re-integration programs for children within safe communities; and conflict prevention.

From the regional level, Canada is now placing the issue before a wider forum as it hosts the International Conference on War-Affected Children, from September 10 to 17 in Winnipeg. This is the first global ministerial-level gathering

on issues facing war-affected children; among those attending are representatives of UN agencies, youth from all regions of the world, non-governmental organizations and academics.

The Conference will be divided into three parts: an international meeting of youth; an experts' conference; and the ministerial-level meeting. On the agenda: formulating an international plan of action to address the growing problem of children affected by armed conflict.

UNICEF is co-hosting one part of the Conference: a meeting of experts to propose ways of dealing with the challenges and generating political and moral resolve. The meeting is part of UNICEF's new "Global Partnership for Children" initiative, a world-wide effort to make children a priority for the public and decision makers in all walks of life. Says UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy, "We must make a difference for war-affected children. This is our only option."

Key Conference partners include the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, the Canadian International Development Agency, the Department of National Defence, and UNICEF.

To break the cycle of violence

The task ahead is daunting. For example, for over 40 years, Colombian children have suffered as victims, witnesses and perpetrators of violence. At least 620 000 of them have been displaced by conflict, and 55 percent of the internally displaced are under the age of 18. In Kosovo, over 65 percent of refugees were children. In Rwanda, of the estimated 800 000 people massacred, 300 000 were children; and over 95 per cent of Rwandan children have witnessed killings, often in their own families.

What's more, the cessation of hostilities does not mean that war is over, particularly for children who have been extensively exposed to the culture of violence. A systematic program of healing and re-integration into society is the only way to break the cycle. Olara Otunnu says, "The healing and rehabilitation needs of children should constitute a central theme and not an afterthought of post-conflict peacebuilding programs."

At the Winnipeg Conference, Canada will seek recognition for the reality that children are not only among the victims of war—that they can also be actively involved in helping their families and communities recover from war's aftermath. Given this reality, better understanding is needed of the root causes of children's involvement in war, in order to better identify and implement solutions. Only with the participation of children can the world community develop and implement effective, long-lasting and meaningful responses to the problems of armed conflict.

After the Accra Conference, Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy travelled to Sierra Leone, where he visited the Amputee Camp at Murray Town and met with war-affected children. This gave him a first-hand look at their plight. Along with International Co-operation Minister Maria Minna, he is determined to make the Winnipeg Conference a turning point in international efforts to create a safer world for future generations. ●

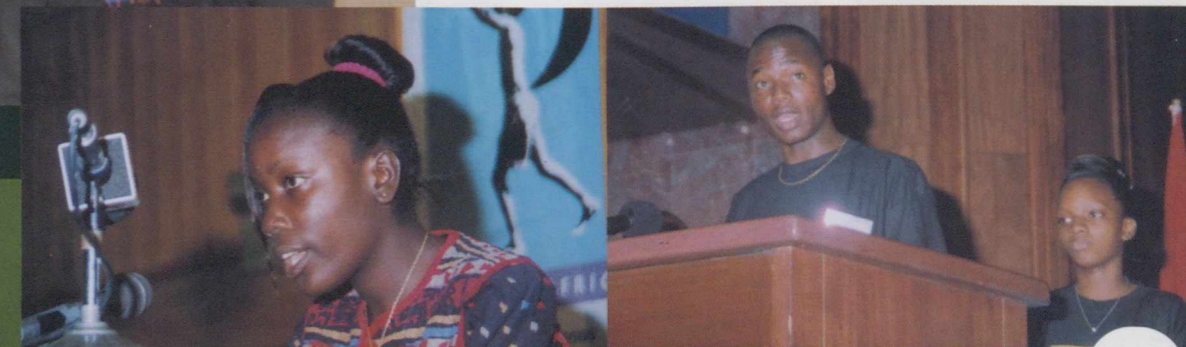


Foreign Affairs Minister Axworthy (far right) with Ghana's President Jerry Rawlings (centre) and Foreign Minister Victor Gbeho (fifth from left) at Accra Conference in April 2000

photos: DEAIT

One of the most basic human instincts is to protect one's child from harm and suffering. Children represent our global future, and the desire to guard them from the many forces that can destroy their hope and innocence is universal. Doing so is an essential part of our broader aspiration to promote human security and to create stable, peaceful societies.

—Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy, Accra, Ghana, April 2000



West African war-affected children at Accra Conference