

Resolution 1261 (1999) concerning the protection of war-affected children, and UN Security Council Resolution 1265 (1999) concerning the protection of civilian populations in general in situations of armed conflict.

In addition, it is very much my hope that two other very important international instruments will soon come into force and become part of this list: the recently concluded Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and the Statute of the International Criminal Court (Rome Statute).

- It is important that in the deliberations and in the outcomes of the Conference, these instruments be highlighted as the international normative framework for the protection of war-affected children.
- I call on ECOWAS States to prepare for the early adoption and speedy ratification of the Optional Protocol. And, when ratifying the Optional Protocol, I urge ECOWAS States to consider depositing binding declarations pursuant to article 3, establishing age 18 as the minimum age for voluntary recruitment into their national armed forces; this already exists in most West African countries and is consistent with the African Charter on the Welfare and Rights of the Child.
- I urge all ECOWAS States to ratify the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which is a powerful tool for the protection of children.
- I believe that the time has come for us to launch a specific campaign focussing on the protection of children in situations of armed conflict, to develop various activities—awareness-building, exerting concerted political pressure, tapping into relevant local norms within societies—to ensure the application of these norms on the ground.

2. Promoting and Strengthening Traditional Values and Norms

The most damaging loss any society can suffer is the collapse of its own value system. Societies in West Africa have deeply rooted traditional values, norms, taboos and injunctions proscribing indiscriminate targeting of civilian populations in times of war, especially women and children. Tragically, under pressure of prolonged conflicts, some societies, such as we have witnessed in Sierra Leone and Liberia, have seen their community values radically undermined, if not shattered altogether. We must not cast aside positive local value systems which have traditionally provided ethical bearings and protection to many of our societies.

We must mobilise all our resources and social networks—community leaders, parents, extended family, elders, teachers, schools and religious institutions to reassert the injunctions and taboos that have traditionally provided for the protection of children within our societies. The focus of that effort will be the local community. This local process should be integrated with and