

## The impact of conflict on children—the role of small arms

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*My name is Wilmot, from Liberia. I am 16 years old. At age five, I fled from Liberia with my mother to Sierra Leone. I was too young at the time to really understand what was happening. I heard the sounds of guns. I saw people running. I saw people shooting. I saw people being killed. I saw people dying. People as young as I were dying ... I saw families like mine, in the thousands, leave everything behind and run ... The children of Liberia appeal to the Security Council of the United Nations to do everything possible to stop the fighting in Liberia.<sup>1</sup>*

Wilmot Wungko, a Liberian child caught in the crossfire of conflict in his country, spoke on behalf of millions of children around the world who are harmed by wars not of their making. Addressing the United Nations Security Council in a special meeting on children and armed conflict in May 2002, he explicitly described the impact of guns, violence and displacement on children and articulated the need for greater support for children of war. During the last decade more than two million children have been killed and more than six million permanently disabled or seriously injured in armed conflict.<sup>2</sup> Some estimates put civilian casualties of war as high as 80–90%—a large portion are women and children killed by small arms.<sup>3</sup>

This paper examines the impact of armed conflict on children, with a focus on the role of small arms. It also discusses protections afforded to children in situations of armed conflict and the new initiative by non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict—to improve monitoring and reporting on violations against children. Finally, this article calls for improved cooperation across sectors to prioritize the protection of children's rights and security in specific situations of armed conflict.

Children, including adolescents, are the most vulnerable populations in situations of armed conflict. Many are forced from their homes, injured and even killed. Because of war, entire generations of children grow up without ever seeing the inside of a schoolroom, and without receiving proper nutrition or vaccinations. Other children are recruited to be combatants and become witnesses to and forced perpetrators of extreme violence. Children, particularly girls, face increased threats from trafficking, exploitation and gender-based violence. These can result in serious health problems, including the spread of HIV/AIDS. Landmines are also a particular threat to children; more than 50% of landmine victims are children.<sup>4</sup> These and other physical consequences are compounded by the emotional and psychological traumas of war.

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The proliferation of small arms and light weapons in war perpetuates these devastating impacts on children's lives and contributes to the lack of protection for children before, during and after armed conflict. Because small arms are light and can be simple to handle, young children can operate and repair them with little training. As a result, these arms facilitate the use and targeting of children in war, contributing to the environment where children become victims of human rights violations, forced displacement, psychosocial trauma and other serious abuses to which they are particularly vulnerable.<sup>5</sup> The suffering caused by small arms and light weapons is immeasurable. Carol Bellamy, the Executive Director of UNICEF, articulated the impact of these weapons this way: 'More than tanks, missiles and mortars, light weapons have terrorized children during wars and after ... they have probably extinguished more young lives than they have ever protected.'<sup>6</sup>

### *Children and armed conflict: the international agenda*

Because they are among the most vulnerable during times of war, children are given special protections under international law. The Geneva Conventions and its Additional Protocols explicitly provide protection for children in times of war. The Geneva Convention IV (1949) states that the child has the right to protection from all violence to life and to person (art. 3a). This was also the first international document to deal with children's participation in hostilities. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which entered into force in 1990, is applicable at all times and contains some articles specifically designed to protect child victims of war. The CRC's Optional Protocol on Children in Armed Conflict, which prohibits the use of children as combatants, entered into force in February 2002. A number of other international documents also provide protections for children during times of war.

In practice, however, children are often the most neglected by the international community, national governments, aid agencies and others who should be doing their utmost to protect them. In

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regard to the impact of small arms on children during armed conflict, regional initiatives have been among the first to address the issue and build on the growing awareness of the problem. For example, several regional groups have passed political declarations on the use of child soldiers that refer specifically to the damaging consequences of the trade in small arms on children.<sup>7</sup> Yet implementation of such declarations is still uncertain and much work remains to be done.

The Security Council has said that the protection of children affected by armed conflict is essential for the promotion and maintenance of international peace and security. The Security Council has repeatedly made commitments for the protection of children in armed conflicts. But little has been done to turn these commitments into real protection on the ground. Graça Machel, one of the world's most dedicated advocates for war-affected children, recently warned, 'The implementation of the measures promoted in General Assembly and Security Council resolutions is slow at best, and the improvements we have been pushing for are still only intermittently and dimly reflected in the everyday lives of children.'<sup>8</sup>

The international community first began a coordinated effort to confront the complexities of the relationship between war and children with Graça Machel's groundbreaking 1996 study entitled *The Impact of War on Children*, which was commissioned by the United Nations. Since 1996 many NGOs, United Nations agencies and governments have recognized the extent and severity of the abuses of children in wars and have advocated for better protection of their rights and security. In September 2000, the First International Conference on War-affected Children highlighted a number of priorities

for action regarding children and armed conflict by all sectors of society. Since then, progress has been made in thematic areas such as education in emergencies, small arms and child soldiers, and in strengthening international standards. Children are now on the peace and security agenda, and a focus for humanitarian action. Security Council resolutions 1261, 1314 and 1379 provide a framework for making the security of children a matter of international peace and security.

### ***Focus on monitoring and reporting***

To build on these significant developments, a group of child rights-focused NGOs created the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict to respond to the need for better monitoring and reporting on the situation of war-affected children, and for early warning and substantial follow-up action during and after armed conflict. The Watchlist urges the international community to protect and improve the lives of children in specific situations of armed conflict by providing policy-makers with data compiled by a network of child advocacy groups and with strategic analysis and practical recommendations for action by the Security Council and others. The Watchlist project encompasses the work of other thematic networks focused on specific areas such as small arms, landmines and child soldiers by incorporating their child-specific information into a comprehensive picture of the lives of children in various war zones. Watchlist reports cover a range of thematic issues impacting children's lives, including health, HIV/AIDS, refugees and internally displaced people, education, trafficking and exploitation, gender-based violence, small arms, landmines and child soldiers.

Operating within the framework of universal human rights principles, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Watchlist partner organizations are creating a mechanism for child rights advocates to work together over the long term. This network will facilitate ongoing advocacy and capacity building within civil society organizations by linking local community groups involved in child protection with international networks to provide consistent follow-up on actions to protect the rights of war-affected children and adolescents. To date, the Watchlist has issued comprehensive reports on Afghan, Burundian and Angolan<sup>9</sup> children, an update on Afghanistan and a brief statement on the situation in the Middle East. Reports on Palestinian, Israeli, Sudanese and Congolese children are in development.

Watchlist reports expose a range of rights abuses and physical and emotional traumas to children in war zones. In doing so, each report details a variety of factors related to the impact of armed conflict on children. This includes addressing the particular problems related to the use and proliferation of small arms and light weapons. In compiling information about children's lives it has become evident that data on certain thematic areas is more prevalent than in others. This may be due in part to the fact that information about healthcare, education and refugees is more easily quantifiable, while topics such as gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS are associated with taboos and stigmatization making them less openly discussed in some societies.

Information about the direct impact of small arms on children tends to be less detailed and thorough than data on other threats to children during times of armed conflict. There are several reasons why this may be the case. The effect of small arms on children during conflict is very closely tied to the broader impact of armed conflict on children. This can make it extremely difficult to separate the human suffering caused by small arms in the context of war from the general impact of war. Also, there has never been a systematic analysis of the negative impacts of small arms and light weapons on children in conflict situations, which would act as a guide or impetus for information

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collection vis-à-vis small arms in specific war zones. Similarly, few international efforts directly address the linkages between children, small arms and conflict through reporting and monitoring.<sup>10</sup>

Watchlist reports have worked to fill the gap in monitoring, reporting and follow-up action by compiling all relevant data related to the impact of conflict on children in a specific war zone, thereby creating a holistic picture of the situation of children. These compilations include data about the impact

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of small arms and are contributing to the debate about the effects of small arms on children by calling attention to the need for more systematic and comprehensive data collection in this thematic area. The shortage of details about the direct impact of small arms and light weapons on children indicates the need for improved coordination and cooperation across sectors at the international, regional and national levels. It should also help to garner support for initiatives that link small arms and threats against children in times of armed conflict with the ultimate goal of improving children's lives.

## AFGHANISTAN

Released in October 2001, the Watchlist report on Afghanistan states that at least ten million small arms are in circulation throughout the country, making it the world's leading centre for unaccounted-for weapons (weapons that are not in the hands of intended users or 'legitimate' government actors). Many of the small arms in circulation have been traced back to the war with the Soviet Union and no effort has been made to collect weapons from that era. As a result, these arms continue to circulate inside the country, in Pakistan and throughout the region. Arms flow easily across porous borders, perhaps deepening and prolonging the consequences of conflict and facilitating violence and conflict within the region.

Children in Afghanistan suffer the direct and indirect consequences of this situation. The ready availability of small arms and light weapons facilitates the use of children as combatants and has resulted in the death and maiming of thousands of children whose homes, families and schools were attacked. As in other conflict areas, the presence and use of the weapons left children with broken-down families and communities, limited access to healthcare and education, and vulnerable to trafficking, exploitation, gender-based violence, HIV/AIDS and other diseases. However, little concrete information is available about the direct impact of small arms and light weapons proliferation on Afghan children.

The Watchlist report makes specific recommendations for action to the United Nations Security Council to protect the rights and security of Afghan children. These include recommendations directly tied to the impact of small arms, for example:

- Urge all Member States to immediately renew support for local and international mine action groups in their efforts at clearance, disarmament and education; take action to initiate the early destruction of small arms stockpiles.
- End all political, financial and material support to armed forces and groups that are complicit in child rights violations, in particular the recruitment and use of children for military purposes.
- Begin early planning for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of child combatants, including assistance for girls who may have been abducted and forced into marriages, prostitution and other sexual activity.

## BURUNDI

Fuelling eight years of war in Burundi, massive amounts of small arms and light weapons have had a devastating humanitarian impact on children and all civilians, including killings, restricted mobility, instability and accidental use. In general, data about the consequences of war on Burundian children is limited, making it particularly difficult to obtain clear, documented information about the weapons' direct effect on youth. As in other conflict areas, the proliferation of these weapons is particularly threatening to children, facilitating their participation in hostilities.

Recommendations for Security Council action on Burundi in regard to small arms include:

- Develop and implement an arms embargo, in keeping with United Nations Security Council resolution 1379 and the 2001 United Nations Programme of Action on Small Arms. This would include identifying the sources of arms coming into Burundi and taking effective measures to stop them.
- Command all parties to immediately stop the use of landmines and the stockpiling of small arms and light weapons, as well as urge the Government of Burundi to sign the Mine Ban Treaty.
- Support efforts by UNICEF, the Government of Burundi and other partners to identify, disarm, demobilize and reintegrate former child combatants and encourage donors to allocate resources to this programme so that it can be effective. Efforts to expand DDR programmes should be encouraged to ensure that implementation and outreach touch all areas of the country and include community-based coordination with programmes for other children impacted by war.

## ANGOLA

Because of a sustained international presence in Angola during the long-running civil war, more information about the proliferation of small arms and light weapons has been available for Angola than for other conflict areas covered by the Watchlist to date. In Angola, both the government armed forces and the opposition UNITA forces were known to have controlled enormous numbers of small arms and light weapons during the civil war. For years, small arms and light weapons have been trafficked from other countries and made easily available in Angola—although exact numbers have never been identified. AK-47 rifles and other arms were so prevalent during the war that they were reportedly exchanged for radios, meals, cooking oil and other food normally smuggled into Angola by Namibian villagers. In fact, the AK-47 was used as a symbol for UNITA. According to human rights groups in Angola, children fighting for UNITA appeared well-trained in the use of small weapons.

Before the April 2002 cease-fire agreement, both sides spent heavily on weaponry using diamonds and oil to fund their purchases. Just before the agreement, Angola was recognized by groups tracking the proliferation of small arms around the world as an area where illicit drug and mineral trafficking converge with the proliferation of small arms. Embargoes to limit the inflow and use of weapons in Angola met with limited success.

While information about the proliferation of small arms and the impact of armed conflict on children is available, information and analysis of the direct linkages between small arms and children remain largely undocumented. Armed conflict and violence have robbed children in Angola of their most basic rights: life, security, healthcare and education. Small arms have surely exacerbated and prolonged their dire circumstances. However, little attention is paid to this convergence—leading to scant efforts to eradicate the roots of the problem. In the context of the recent cease-fire, the Watchlist report makes the following recommendations to the Security Council:

- Lead an international effort to collect and destroy surplus weapons, in a way that contributes to peace building and community-level reconciliation. High priority should be given to youth-focused programming in reconstruction efforts and to local initiatives to bolster the role of civil society, including children and adolescents, in promoting peace.
- Call on the Government of Angola to allocate a greater percentage of revenues from oil sales to services for children, including food, healthcare and education. This includes improving government transparency and accountability over oil accounts and revenues, as well as public release of the national budget. Also, encourage the United Nations General Assembly to establish an internationally binding certification scheme for rough diamonds that would limit the revenues from diamond sales from perpetuating further conflict, encourage transparency in the management of resources, and promote the direction of resources towards programmes to protect children.
- Call on the lead United Nations agency in Angola, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, to facilitate programming for the DDR of child combatants, including special assistance for girls and appropriate counselling, learning and vocational opportunities.
- Urge governmental, United Nations and other donors to support steps towards peace by immediately allocating funds for the establishment of demining programmes and mine awareness programmes, especially targeted at internally displaced women, children and adolescents who are at great risk from landmines as they anticipate returning to their homes.

### *Protections for children in armed conflict*

International law contains both explicit and implicit child protection provisions addressing many of the effects of conflict on children. The following are a few recent examples of international efforts to address violations against children in armed conflict situations and to call for particular protections related to the impact of the use and proliferation of small arms and light weapons.

#### UNITED NATIONS

Security Council resolutions 1261, 1314 and 1379 on children and armed conflict make commitments to address many of the impacts of war on children. This includes specific provisions to focus on the problems that small arms and light weapons inflict on children.

In July 2001, the States participating in the United Nations Conference on Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects agreed on a Programme of Action (A/CONE.192/L.5/rev. 1) to prevent, combat and eradicate the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons (section I, para. 21). In the Programme of Action it is stated: '[We the States are] *gravely concerned* about [the illicit trade of small arms and light weapons] devastating consequences on children, many of whom are victims of armed conflict or are forced to become child soldiers ...' (section I, para. 4).

At the national level the States agreed: 'To address the special needs of children affected by armed conflict, in particular the reunification with their family, their reintegration into civil society, and their appropriate rehabilitation' (section I, para. 24). Moreover, the States recognized 'the primary responsibility for solving the problems associated with the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons ... falls on all States' (section III, para. 1). At that time, the States also undertook to cooperate and to ensure coordination, complementarity and synergy in an effort to confront the problem (section III,

### Select Security Council resolutions on small arms and light weapons

**Resolution 1261 (1999):** ‘Paragraph 14) *Recognizes* the deleterious impact of the proliferation of arms, in particular small arms, on the security of civilians ... particularly children, and, in this regard ... stresses the importance of all Member States, and in particular States involved in manufacturing and marketing of weapons, restricting arms transfers which could provoke or prolong armed conflicts or aggravate existing tensions or armed conflicts, and which urges international collaboration in combating illegal arms flows;’

**Resolution 1314 (2000):** ‘Paragraph 8) *Expresses its grave concern* at the linkages between ... the illicit trafficking in small arms and light weapons and armed conflict, which can prolong armed conflict and intensify its impact on children, and in this regard *expresses* its intention to consider taking appropriate steps, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations;’ ‘Paragraph 16(c) [Urges regional and subregional organizations] to undertake initiatives to curb the cross-border activities deleterious to children in times of armed conflict, such as ... the illicit movement of small arms ... ;’

**Resolution 1379 (2001):** ‘Paragraph 6) *Expresses* its intention to consider taking appropriate steps, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, to address the linkages between armed conflict ... [and] small arms and light weapons, ... which can prolong armed conflict or intensify its impact on civilian populations, including children;’ ‘Paragraph 9(d) [Urges Members States to] consider measures against corporate actors, individuals and entities under their jurisdiction that engage in illicit trade in natural resources and small arms ... ;’ ‘Paragraph 13(c) [Urges regional and sub-regional organizations and arrangements to] take steps leading to the elimination of cross-border activities deleterious to children in times of armed conflict, such as the ... illicit trafficking in small arms and light weapons.’

para. 2) and agreed to convene a follow-up meeting to gauge progress on global implementation no later than 2006 (section IV, para. 1a).

The United Nations Security Council and Member States have demonstrated commitment to the protection of children during times of armed conflict and to specifically address the negative consequences of the proliferation, illicit trade and use of small arms and light weapons on children. The Security Council and the entire international community must now focus on implementing these promises to protect children. Improved monitoring and reporting is a key first step towards achieving this goal. Watchlist country reports have repeatedly urged the Security Council to advise United Nations agencies to consistently collect, compile and distribute concrete data on the impact of conflict on children—this should include specific studies on the impact of small arms. This information should be made publicly available and should inform all Security Council deliberations on individual conflict areas and encourage programmes and policies to tackle problems wrought by small arms in each conflict area.

#### NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

The Watchlist project is a response by NGOs to the need to improve monitoring and reporting on children and armed conflict, including the impact of small arms and light weapons. Recommendations for action in Watchlist reports build on past calls to protect children and aim to address specific threats. By raising awareness about the problems children face in particular conflicts and persistently engaging in follow-up action, the Watchlist project helps to identify problems and to work with relevant parties to implement programmes and policies that protect children. NGO partners can now work together

through this mechanism to recommend practical ways for policy makers to take action to address the broad range of security and rights violations of children during times of war, while also highlighting specific problems, such as the proliferation of small arms.

The first Watchlist reports represent progress towards the ultimate goal of positively impacting the lives of children. By providing information that can make a difference in preventing conflicts, protecting children during conflicts and securing opportunities for children to recover after conflicts, the Watchlist project hopes to guide the Security Council and others on practical actions they can take to turn the international agenda to protect children in armed conflicts into specific actions in specific situations. Additional cooperation between child rights advocates and those working to address the threats of small arms in all sectors would significantly contribute to these efforts. Linkages between the use of small arms and the impact of armed conflict on children are multi-fold—efforts to improve children's lives should also be.

## Notes

1. United Nations document S/PV.4528 of 7 May 2002.
2. Graça Machel, 2001, *The Machel Review 1996–2000: A Critical Analysis of Progress Made and Obstacles Encountered in Increasing Protection for War-Affected Children*, Macmillan, p. 5. Also available as United Nations document A/55/749 of 26 January 2001.
3. Rachel Stohl et al., 2001, *Putting Children First: Background Report*, BASIC, International Alert and Saferworld, p. 5, at <<http://www.international-alert.org/pdf/pubsec/Child1st.pdf>> .
4. International Campaign to Ban Landmines, at <<http://www.icbl.org>> .
5. Stohl et al., *op. cit.*
6. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
8. Statement made in an address to the Security Council during its meeting on children and armed conflict, 7 May 2002.
9. The Government of Angola and UNITA signed a cease-fire agreement on 4 April 2002, which offers hope that more attention and resources will be paid to improving the critical situation of Angolan children. The Watchlist report on Angola is to be understood in the context of the decades-long civil war.
10. Stohl et al., *op. cit.*