

Watchlist on children and armed conflict

by Julia Freedson

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.

Wilmot Wungko, a former Liberian refugee, spoke on behalf of millions of children around the world caught up in wars not of their making. Addressing the UN Security Council in a special meeting on children and armed conflict in May 2002, he articulated the need for greater support for children of war - and the particular case of refugee and displaced children. Children make up approximately half of the world's estimated 38 million refugees and IDPs.

Children, including adolescents, are the most vulnerable populations in situations of armed conflict. In the past decade over two million children have been killed in wars and another five million have been wounded or disabled.¹ Twenty million children

have been forced from their homes, including seven million who have become refugees in another country. 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 (GBV). These can result in serious health problems, including the spread of HIV/AIDS. More than 50% of landmine victims are children.² They are also disproportionately affected by the proliferation of small arms. These and other physical consequences are compounded by the

emotional and psychological traumas of war.

Children who are forced to flee from their homes in the chaos of conflict can wind up in the most difficult of circumstances. Like Wilmot, these children lose their homes, their communities and many of their basic rights, including the right to be protected from violence. Others lose their parents, grandparents, siblings and friends. They are often left without proper guardianship or as heads of households. While these children are among the most vulnerable, they are often the most neglected by the international community, national governments, aid agencies and others who should be doing their utmost to protect them.

The UN 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. Yet, little has been done to turn these commitments into real protection for children 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."³

Children and armed conflict and the international agenda

Many NGOs, UN agencies and governments have recognised the extent and severity of abuses of children in wars. Graça Machel's groundbreaking UN-commissioned 1996



Ron Gilling/Still Pictures

study entitled *The Impact of War on Children*⁴ was the first international effort to systematically analyse the relationship between war and children and make comprehensive recommendations to improve the situation. Since that time many agencies have joined forces and worked together to implement Machel's recommendations and advocate for better protection of children's rights and security.

Children are now on the peace and security agenda and are a focus for humanitarian action. Coordinated efforts led to the adoption of three UN Security Council resolutions – 1261, 1341 and 1379 – which focus exclusively on the protection of children in armed conflict. In September 1997 the UN Secretary-General appointed Olara Otunnu as his Special Representative on Armed Conflict and Children.⁵ Progress has been made in thematic areas, such as small arms, education in emergencies and child soldiers. Education is now **recognised** as the fourth pillar of humanitarian assistance during emergencies and in February 2002 the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict came into force. Joint efforts also ensured significant attention to the impact of armed conflict on children during the UN Special Session on Children and in the Session's outcome document *A World Fit for Children* which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in May 2002.

Building on these significant developments, a group of child rights-focused NGOs created the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict⁶ to respond to a need for better monitoring and reporting on the situation of war-affected children. Watchlist reports detail all factors related to the impact or threat of armed conflict on children in a specific geographic context. They combine information from a variety of sources with analysis by child rights experts and make recommendations for action.

Watchlist reports inform discussions, raise awareness about children's needs and put forward specific recommendations to protect children. Calling for action, the reports urge the UN Security Council to ensure that children's rights are protected. For example, the Security Council has



been urged to call on relevant governments and non-state actors to allow humanitarian access to vulnerable populations, particularly refugee and IDP children. Watchlist reports are disseminated to the UN Security Council, other UN agencies, relevant national governments and civil society through a growing electronic network and the media.

Operating within the framework of universal human rights principles, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child⁷, the Watchlist partner organisations are creating a mechanism for child rights advocates to work together over the long term. This network will facilitate on-going advocacy and capacity building within civil society organisations 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 children. Reports on Palestinian, Israeli, Sudanese and Congolese children are being developed.

Further information about the Watchlist and country reports are available at www.watchlist.org. Julia Freedson is Watchlist Coordinator. Email: juliaf@womenscommission.org

1. International Bureau for Children's Rights: www.ibcr.org
2. International Campaign to Ban Landmines: www.icbl.org
3. Statement made during address to UN Security Council during meeting on children and armed conflict, 7 May 2002.
4. www.unicef.org/graca/graright.htm
5. www.un.org/special-rep/children-armed-conflict/
6. The Watchlist is housed at the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (www.womenscommission.org) and is managed by a six-member international NGO Steering Committee.
7. www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm