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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Joint written statement* submitted by the International Organization for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (EAFORD), Arab Organization for Human Rights, Indian Movement "Tupaj Amaru", International-Lawyers.Org, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status, International Educational Development, Inc., World Peace Council, non-governmental organizations on the roster

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Children in Armed Conflict*

Despite the strong recommendations made by all UN agencies, the number of children affected by armed conflict and subjected to different forms of violence remains disturbingly high.

The Middle East and Central Africa remain the most concerning areas: the Syrian Arab Republic and South Sudan are on the verge of collapse, and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have disproportionately affected the civilian population. Children and girls suffer from the direct impact of the fighting, but also from the forced recruitment into armed groups, and from all backlash provoked by the war.

The recent proliferation of actors involved in violent conflicts has further complicated the complex task of protecting children from being targeted and abducted. Indiscriminate aerial bombardments, and attacks on civilian-inhabited areas, hospitals and schools have increased the scope of the failure of international mechanisms to prevent children from being affected and involved in fighting. A concerted effort of all parties involved in armed conflicts is needed to ensure safety and respect of the main international legal standards in place to protect children.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan has been torn apart by years of tireless conflict and bloody attacks led by Taliban, government forces, and international allies. Children and vulnerable groups are particularly affected by the violence and brutality of the fighting. In 2015 and 2016, the intensification of the conflict has provoked a 14% increase in the number of child casualties, and a 100% increase in the number of verified cases of recruitments for combat and suicide attacks committed by Taliban, armed groups, and Afghan Security forces. At the end of 2015, the United Nations counted 2.829 child casualties resulting from 1.306 incidents, with an average of 53 children injured or killed weekly¹. In the first quarter of 2016, 1.943 civilian casualties were documented, and to date, over 70% of the population live in extreme poverty and over 8 million Afghans need humanitarian assistance.

The dire conditions in rural areas are forcing entire populations to move: millions of Afghans are internally displaced or live in besieged areas, and such communities are at higher risk of child recruitment. Moreover, 40% of children have no access to schooling, and half of the education buildings have been destroyed by militants' targeted attacks.

Afghan children are also subjected to sexual violence, exploitation and are often forced into early marriages. According to UNIFEM, 57% of marriages in the country can be classified as child marriages, and almost 80% of these are forced marriages. To escape this practice and violent abuses, women and girls often commit suicide or disfigure themselves through burning².

Iraq

Before 1990s, Iraq was one of the best countries in the region where children could grow, but the outset of the conflict, two decades of sanctions, and the collapse of the state apparatus have dramatically hindered the development and the conditions of children and vulnerable populations.

In Iraq, around 4.5 million children have lost one or both parents, and over 600.000 children live on the streets. Moreover, the worsening of extreme poverty has provoked a 15% increase of child labour, with 800.000 children aged between 5 and 14 who are working. Over 1.5 million children under the age of 5 are undernourished, every year 35.000

¹ <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1611119.pdf>

² <http://childvictimsofwar.org.uk/get-informed/afghanistan/>

children die before reaching one year of age, 2.5 million children do not have access to clean water and 3.5 million lack sanitation facilities. In addition, 2 million children are currently not receiving any education³.

The massive wave of internal displacement puts children at risk of separation from their families, abduction, and forced recruitment for combat. 3.4 million Iraqis are internally displaced and many more have fled the country: such groups are particularly vulnerable to conflict-related violence including maiming, forced labour, killing, trafficking and sexual violence.

Children and girls are under constant threat of sexual violence, forced prostitution, sexual trafficking, “honour killings”, domestic violence, genital mutilation (for girls living in the Iraqi Kurdistan), forced recruitment, and arrest under terrorism charges. UNICEF estimated that over half a million children and their families were trapped in Mosul with food, water and medicine running out during the recent siege.

South Sudan

The civil war started in 2013 has led South Sudan on the verge of collapse. Since the outbreak of the conflict, 2.2 million people fled their home, 1.6 million people – half of which are children – are internally displaced, and over 1.1 million have sought refuge in neighbouring countries. To date, around 4.1 million South Sudanese are in need of humanitarian aid, including those living in overcrowded, poorly equipped refugee camps. 61% of the crowds living in UN-controlled camps are children. Extreme poverty, forced displacement and increasing violence are making children more vulnerable to abductions and forced recruitment for combat. According to UN sources, over 2.500 children have been recruited and over 1.500 abducted since the beginning of the conflict⁴.

According to UN investigations, from April to September 2015, 1.300 reports of rape were registered in just one of the country’s ten states. Sexual violence is particularly brutal and violent, and none is exempted: children as young as nine years old have been victims of gang rapes. Since the beginning of the conflict, over 700 cases of sexual violence on children have been reported, but the number is likely to represent only a small percentage of the real one.

Syria

The six-year-long conflict has provoked an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic. UNICEF reported that two million children lack regular access to aid, over 200,000 children live under siege, 2.4 million were forced to flee the country, and thousands have been recruited to fight. The 3.7 million children born since 2011 (2.9 inside Syria and over 800.000 in neighbouring countries) have known nothing but war during their entire life. According to the sources, over 10.000 children were killed between 2011 and 2013, and the number has dramatically grown in the last three years. In 2016, 8.4 million children were in need of humanitarian help, nearly 7 million live in poverty and children as young as three years old are working. 2.4 million children have become refugees, and 2.8 million are out of school.

In addition, all parties involved in the war have increased the forced recruitment of children as young as seven years old. Armed groups offer them salaries, and often recruit them to support the first lines in the combat without the consent of their parents. Children undergo military trainings and actively participate in unlawful killings, combats and in the maintenance of weapons and munitions.

The dramatic situation of children is, if possible, even worse for girls who are often forced to marry older men: from the beginning of the conflict, the percentage of child brides has increased from 13% to 32%, but the statistics could be much higher as many marriages are unregistered. In addition, child marriage and sexual violence on boys and girls have become a weapon of war used to spread terror and subjugate entire communities.

³ <http://childvictimsofwar.org.uk/get-informed/iraq/>

⁴ <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/countries-caac/south-sudan/>

Yemen

The poorest country of the Arab region has always faced challenges linked to extreme poverty and food insecurity, but the outbreak of the conflict further worsened the situation. To date, more than four of five Yemenis need some type of humanitarian assistance, and children are overly affected.

According to UNICEF, 28 million people are short of food, 7 million children lack the basic nutrients, 370.000 are severely malnourished, and one of five children is underdeveloped because of chronic malnutrition⁵. Moreover, water and sanitation infrastructures have been destroyed by the conflict, restrictions on imports have caused a water and fuel shortage and dangerously hindered access to health care and functioning hospitals.. Furthermore, 2 million children are currently out of school, and infants' cognitive development is often hindered by malnutrition and stunted growth.

Children also suffer the direct consequences of an escalating conflict. To date, 3.2 million Yemenis are displaced, and the number of children forcibly recruited for combat has dramatically increased. The majority of the 762 verified cases of recruitment were attributed to the Houthis, while the pro-government popular committees and Al-Qaida share the remaining 28% of cases. The number of children killed and maimed by conflict-related violence has grown six times at the beginning of 2016.

Recommendations:

We, NGOs signatories to this statement recommend to the United Nations and all its relevant bodies to:

- Continue to monitor developments in war-torn countries to ensure the promotion and protection of the rights of children, in full compliance with international legal standards
- Exert necessary pressures on Member States and opposition groups to take immediate action to stop current violations and abuses of the rights of children, and prevent their recurrence
- Call on Member States to ensure that their engagement in hostilities, including in efforts to counter violent extremism, are conducted in full compliance with international law.
- Call on Member States to prosecute perpetrators of violations against children, to set up specific child protection provisions, and to allocate the adequate resources to reintegrate children, with a specific attention for psychological support

*Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ), The Arab Lawyers Association- UK, The Brussels Tribunal, The Iraqi Commission for Human Rights (ICHR), Association of Humanitarian Lawyers (AHL), Association of Human Rights Defenders in Iraq (AHRD), General Federation of Iraqi Women (GFIW), Organisation for Justice & Democracy in Iraq (OJDI), Women Will Association (WWA), Alliance to Renew Co-operation among Humankind, The Iraqi Centre for Human Rights, The Perdana Global Peace Foundation, The International League of Iraqi Academics (ILIA), Women Solidarity for an Independent and Unified Iraq, Organization for Widows and Orphans (OWO), International Anti-Occupation Network (IAON), Kuala Lumpur Foundation to Criminalise War, Spanish Campaign against the Occupation and for Iraq Sovereignty- CEOSI, Arab Cause Solidarity Committee, Iraq Solidarity Association in Stockholm, NGOs without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.

⁵ https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/yemen_85651.html