

Transcript

Preventing the Recruitment of Child Soldiers

Leila Zerrougui

Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

Chair: Richard Clarke

Director, Child Soldiers International

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10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE T +44 (0)20 7957 5700 F +44 (0)20 7957 5710
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Richard Clarke

Thank you very much indeed for coming this evening. I know I'm very lucky and I know you are too to have with you, and with me, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Children in Armed Conflict, Leila Zerrougui. The SRSG, as we call her in the trade, is over here for the summit on ending sexual violence and conflict and there'll be opportunities for you to ask her about that. I'm also going to do a few scene-setting questions at the beginning, just to give you a sense of the issue. I know some people in the audience already know quite a lot about child soldiers, but there are others – particularly members at Chatham House – who won't, so I thought I'd start with an easy introduction, if I may, into the issue and get you to tell us a little bit about your mandate, how it's developed over time and what you see as the main challenges for it.

Leila Zerrougui

Thank you. Thank you all for joining us today. It's an honour for me to be in this room, in this setting and I appreciate it very much and I'm pleased to have Richard to moderate this session. I'm sorry for those who knew about the mandate, to repeat things that they know already, but I think this mandate maybe we all remember what happened in Africa in the '90s... Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Liberia... and this issue was raised in the General Assembly. It started in the General Assembly and I think that the African Group played a role in that, it tried to have a sense on what is affecting children in conflict and how conflict affects children.

It started, of course, with a study of Graça Machel that identified some of the issues and also for two years working to issue the landmark report of 1996 and she is the one who recommended an SRSG at the UNSG level because she said that this person needs to engage at the highest level, because this issue is not a technical issue. It's a political issue and you need to engage at the highest level and that's why she proposed the establishment of this mandate and the General Assembly responded, so the mandate was created.

The first SRSG was appointed and started working in 1997, Olara Otunnu at that time. For me the most important is when the Security Council in 1999 decided that this issue affects peace and security and requested the Secretary General to report to the Security Council on this issue. The fact that the Security Council was seized of this issue gave the mandate another opportunity and opening to use the tools, the capacity of the Security Council to adopt compelling measures to question states, starting from an interim mandate, it turned to become a country-specific mandate. The Security Council started in 2001, which is one year after the first report. It has decided that they would like the SG to name the parties that are recruiting children. It started in 2001 and I think from that we

started building a whole structure, tools, mechanisms and a legal framework for where we are today and from naming parties, the Security Council also said that not only naming, but those who are on the list cannot be delisted unless they engage with the UN, with an action plan to end and prevent recruitment and use of children.

I would say that the first SRSG, the appointment of Olara Otunnu, who was for two years the Permanent Representative of Uganda in the Security Council, I think helped to bring this issue to the Security Council. From this time, the Security Council building up every year, then we have the decision to put in place, to create mechanisms and tools that allow to implement and to follow-up on what was decided in 2001 and follow-up, which means the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism. Of course, we were reporting before, but with the Resolution 1612, the SC established the task force in every country's situation where you have parties that are listed to document a violation and to report on the violation.

Of course, it was not only recruitment and use of children, because the mandate covers six grave violations: recruitment and use, maiming and killing, sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, abduction and denial of humanitarian access. Because of what happened to children that are recruited, that are associated with armed groups, the mandate also covered the detention of children associated with armed groups.

After the listing of those recruits and after the establishment of the task force, this resolution 1612 also established the subsidiary body, the working group on children in armed conflict, so we are so fortunate to have the listing, to have the task force, to have the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism and to have a subsidiary body with whom we engage regularly and report on this situation. And also the SC from the beginning said, 'We can also use the sanction. We can refer cases to the ICC.' So all this give the mandate the tools that allow also to put pressure on those who are committing the violations against children.

In 2009 the SC decided to add two other triggers for listing, two criteria for listing: sexual violence and maiming and killing and most recently, the attacks on schools and hospitals by resolution 1998 in 2011. We have now also attacks on schools and hospitals as another criteria for listing. So I think that this mandate has such an important space, tools, mechanisms to put pressure. But also to engage with parties that are counting the violations through the action plan, through the task force on the ground and the task force is also shared by the Highest Representative of the UN in the countries concerned, which means the Special Representative if you have a mission, the Residential Coordinator of the country it's in and the Representative of UNICEF.

Also I consider that the mandate is an opportunity because not only you engage, but you have also the opening to engage with other parties. It's not something we do on our own.

We have a task force in New York also, with all those who are working on children in armed conflict on peace agreements, on peacekeeping. We can engage with them on this issue. This is for me an opportunity and at the same time a challenge. We are a small team in New York and we have 22 conflict situations all over the world, 10-11 of them in Africa and 18 in the Arab world, Asia and also Colombia in Latin America. We have the six violations that we report on, we have now 21... we signed 21 action plans since the listing started and we are engaging with the countries that are on the list, the government forces, but also non-state actors. About 55 parties are listed and we have to follow up to report, so these are the challenges, but also opportunities.

What we are trying to do is to really put the issue of children in armed conflict as a central issue in the conflict setting, because we try to convince those who are working on peace agreements, on security sector reform, on rule of law, on human rights, that in every conflict the population is a young population. You can see that and the children sometimes represent the majority or even more than the majority, so you cannot talk about solutions without addressing this issue, without really building a sustainable peace, so we try to convince our partners that this is something that needs to be mainstreamed in everything we do to settle the peace, to build the peace for the longer term. We engage with the regional organisations, like EU, NATO, African Union, Arab League of States, to also mainstream our mandate in their world. So this is just to give you an overview, but I'm open to respond to more specific questions.

Richard Clarke

I wanted to talk to you about the relationship between your mandate and the summit currently taking place in London because that brings out very clearly what you were saying about the relationships between the child soldiers and the wider conflict issues, as a rich interrelationship, both as the situations on the ground, but also measures taken externally to try and prevent, resolve and reconcile. Children play a part in all of those, but before I do, I just want to take you back over that sort of 18 years or so since the landmark report on child soldiers by Graça Machel.

You've already explained and described the architectural change in New York, the involvement of the SC, the various resolutions, the various measures that are in place, the naming and shaming, but in the broadest terms, how do you see the sort of record? How much progress has been made? What more needs to be done and precisely what needs to be done? I was in NY in March for the launch of your campaign 'Children, not soldiers', and I think it would just be interesting for everyone to get a sense of how far we've got to go, but also where your new campaign fits into that.

Leila Zerrougui

I think that if I return to 2008, when I arrived in DR Congo as SRS in MUNUC, MONUSCO at the time, MUNUC first and then MONUSCO later on, and you think about the issue of child soldiers, sexual violence and you compare with today, you see the tremendous progress, even if we still have a huge challenge, but at least... I always say when I started in Congo and some of you maybe knew the setting there, commanders were... I remember in 2008 and Radhika Coomaraswamy, my predecessor, came to visit in Congo and went to Masisi and we were received by the FRDC and we saw three children with them receiving us, so it was something not even hidden. I know now that those who do it try to hide what they are doing and to deny it and to say, 'It's not me.', so I think that's the progress.

We tried to let everyone know, first of all, because I think that the ICC played a major role with the two... the judgement, the first judgment, the first trial to [indiscernible] child tailor in the Sierra Leone coat are... these people have been sentenced because they were recruiting children. So this was something that was even unthinkable in the past. We have now at the national level, we are for example recording in DR Congo those are who tried and sentenced for the recruitment and use of children.

I remember when I was fighting to have one trial. It was not easy, so I think that we are now aware. There is even a consensus I can say, talking to get member states, that we have kind of a consensus that governments don't want to recruit children. We are not saying governments telling, 'It's not your business. I have the right to recruit children.' They are either in denial or recognize saying, 'We have a problem. We would like to be supported to end it.' And that's why we launched the campaign.

The campaign was not something that we decided with the risk to not be flawed. We thought about it as an opportunity first of all to really bring the consensus, use this consensus that is not really recognized, but to bring it, to open it and to move forward to turn the page of the recruitment and use of children at least in government security forces. And why in government security forces? We started with that because we had when I went through the list eight governments who were listed out of the 55. At the time, when we started thinking about the campaign, we had five countries that had already signed an action plan out of the eight. Today we have seven out of the eight. The latest was Yemen and we pushed very hard to have also all the governments listed to engage with the United Nations to end the recruitment.

When we launched the campaign, you were there, the eight governments were there and they all made statements saying, 'We would like to turn the page.' Even Sudan, who did not sign, they are pushing now to finalize their action plan, because they don't want to

stay behind. I said to our partners that were concerned. ‘Why are you only working on government forces? What will you do with the non-state actors?’ They said that having the governments on board, that means that we’ve put in place the legislation, we’ve put in place the legal framework, the action that could be taken and we have a universal agreement among member states that they don’t want to have children in their army. Then it would be hard then for a non-state actor to say, ‘I would like to have children in my group and I would be integrated in armed forces. I will be part of a process.’

So I think this is for me something very important that allows us when we talk about children in armed conflict is a process, because recruitment or the violations surrounding the recruitment, sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, the abductions, maiming and killing, all these come also in the context of the recruitment, so this is something we would like to achieve. I’m very happy to say that even the Security Council Resolution 2133 endorses our campaign.

Before this meeting I was in Addis with the African Union, with whom we signed also an agreement to work together and to mainstream children in armed conflict in their work and we dedicated for the first time a whole section on children in armed conflict, not children and women, as they usually do. We said we would like to dedicate this section to children in armed conflict and in their statement you can see, they endorsed our campaign and we have at this meeting not only the five African countries concerned, but they came and discussed and we have even an event together, but also with others like Sierra Leone, Liberia, that have experienced this to work and to work together.

This is for me something very positive, but we have to build up. That doesn’t mean that we don’t have challenges. It’s just that we are starting a process where we are not challenged politically. When you put aside the political sensitivity and you are talking about capacity, you are talking about technical assistance, how we can build the implementation of what is agreed politically.

For me this is the beginning, but at the same time this is the work that you do and the Security Council is not anymore fighting on who will be for, who will be against and it was for us also very important to say to the Security Council, ‘The tools that you gave us are relevant, are useful and we are making progress with them.’, because I remember when I arrived, there was a lot of questioning on the listing, on the action plan and it was for us an opportunity to say, ‘Look, we are working with member states, we are working with parties concerned, we are delivering and we would like the Security Council to back this process rather than questioning its efficiency.’

Richard Clarke

I'm sure there will be questions from the floor on non-state armed groups, but rather than going into that, I thought I'd go back to the summit, because that's why you're here in London. It would be very useful to get a sense of the interrelationship between your mandate and the issues that you pursue and this long overdue initiative of the British government.

Leila Zerrougui

I think that first of all, as I said in the beginning, sexual violence is one of the violations that the mandate covers from years ago. Since the beginning it was identified as one of the violations that affect children in conflict, so from the start we were reporting on sexual violence against children. This is also very relevant to what has happened to children on the ground. As I said, they in many settings always said, 'Don't forget. This is the pyramid of age in conflict setting.' Children represent the majority. Those who are affected by sexual violence are not only adult women. It's boys, girls, adult women and men, but children are affected in different conflicts. I can give examples. You can see that sometimes from 18 months to 18 years children are affected by sexual violence.

One, of course, is what's happened when children are recruited, when girls are in an attack, sexual violence is part of the conflict. When girls or boys are recruited and they remember, from what child soldiers told me in Congo, 'Mama', as they said in Congo, 'We are all recruited, we are used as combatants, but we are also used by our commander as sex slaves.' So girls are definitely affected by sexual violence, because they are wives in the bush, they are sexually abused in attack, even if they are used in other activities or other functions. Children are vulnerable to sexual violence because they are the most vulnerable physically and mentally to be abused.

Also you know that conflicts sometimes add to certain customs and certain beliefs in societies and you know there are those who believe that if you rape newborns, babies, they can be strengthened before going to fight or they will find gold or diamonds. In many places we experience that. Also sexual violence is a tactic of war. It is also used in detention, as you know. Many children in Syria, for example. We know about torture through sexual violence or the threat of sexual violence of children detained.

It's also the worst thing that you can do to a parent, so terrorizing the population, forcing them to flee from the area. Sexual violence is a tool and children are affected and I think that if you are a parent, the worst that can happen to you is that your children are raped and we know also the consequences in many places, that what happened to girls then, they are forced to get married to prevent sexual violence, so a lot of things happened.

For me, this is something that is directly linked to the mandate. We consider this summit an unprecedented opportunity, because we are bringing the highest levels of all the governments to talk about this issue, that was always underreported, the victims invisible, because they have to face the stigmatization, they have to stay and face the difficulties, to be reintegrated in their community because of what sexual violence means.

So to have ministers of foreign affairs of such a huge number of countries that come, to have UK involved at the highest level, to have Angelina Jolie involved in this issue, for me it's just an opportunity that we have all of us and that's why we are here, to use it, because it will allow us first of all to be more vocal, to have tools, to have funding for reintegrating those who return, sometimes there are children who return with babies.

We know that. It's always heartbreaking to see a girl who's 13-14 with a baby returning in a community that will never accept the return of the two and it's something for us that is an opportunity. We have to work on that. I see in this summit an opening that allows us to work more structurally and holistically on this issue and I'm glad that I am invited, I'm glad that the issue of children and sexual violence is not forgotten. You remember the first meeting in [indiscernible]. We were pushing to let people understand that this is not a women's issue. This is something that also affects children.

Richard Clarke

Absolutely. That's been an achievement, the way you've been able to broaden up the agenda from where the initiative first began. I think it's time, looking at the clock, for people to ask questions. There's a roving microphone somewhere over there. If you want to ask a question, put up a hand and when you ask the question, stand, say who you are, where you're from and try and keep the questions concise. I'm not sure I've succeeded tonight, but you can do better than I did. That would be a great help.