

## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **CHILDREN IN WAR: THE MANY FACES OF SUFFERING**

#### **Report to the United Nations General Assembly**

#### **By the Special Representative for the Secretary General For Children and Armed Conflict**

*New York, 26 October 1999*

Images of child soldiers in war zones around the globe have shocked the world, yet the forcible recruitment of under-age combatants is just one example of the many ways in which children suffer appalling hardships as a result of armed conflict in their countries.

In his annual report to the United Nations General Assembly, Mr Olara A Otunnu, Special Representative for the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict, sets out the many faces of suffering.

*“In conflicts around the world we see a free-for-all, in which children as well as women and the elderly have become fair game in the single-minded struggle for power, in an attempt not just to prevail but to humiliate, not just to subdue but to annihilate the enemy community altogether,” says Mr Otunnu.*

Two million children killed and six million maimed in conflict situations over the past decade alone represent a chilling statistic. In addition, children in war-zones are subjected to systematic sexual abuse and exploitation. Orphaned in war or separated from their parents, they are profoundly traumatised by the struggle for simple survival. Over 20 million children have been displaced by war, often within their own countries, uprooted from home and community.

In Sierra Leone, 90% of girls seized by rebel forces during the war were raped or sexually abused; children as young as 2 months had their arms and legs amputated by machete. In Colombia, chronic violence has given rise to alarming rates of child prostitution, child abuse and growing numbers of street-children who are often victims of “social cleansing”.

In his report, Mr Otunnu identifies several key actions to protect children from the devastating effects of conflict. Crucial among these initiatives are placing the protection and welfare of children on peace agendas - such as the one currently underway in Colombia – and putting the needs of children squarely at the centre of post-conflict recovery programmes.

*“Even when fighting has stopped, children continue to bear physical and psychological scars, and to suffer the long-term consequences of displacement, family dislocation, poor health care and interrupted education,” Mr Otunnu’s report reads.*

During the past year, the Special Representative has travelled extensively, witnessing at first hand the plight of children in countries ranging from Rwanda to Colombia, from Sierra Leone to the Balkan camps sheltering the children who made up 70% of the refugees fleeing from Kosovo.

On each visit, he has urged all parties to make and adhere to a commitment to the security, rights and welfare of children, both during conflicts and in their aftermath.

He has urged warring parties not to target civilian sites such as schools and hospitals, as well as ceasing the recruitment of children under the age of 18.

In countries recovering from conflict, his recommendations include the promotion and strengthening of local value systems, working to rehabilitate medical and education facilities and formally integrating child protection into every aspect of UN peace operations.

The report to the 1999 General Assembly calls for the launch of an “era of application”, in which the impressive body of existing international treaties and conventions - including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, soon to mark its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary - can be translated into tangible progress on the ground.

At grass-roots level, too, Mr Otunnu has proposed the development of a world-wide “Voice of Children” project, to redress the absence of and hunger for information and entertainment among children in situations of conflict and its aftermath. The Special Representative has called for the establishment of local radio stations, backed by international networks broadcasting in the relevant languages, to produce programmes specifically targeted for children.

**Mr Otunnu is available for interview at UN Headquarters.**

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