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[Extract]

Children and Armed Conflict

H.E. Mr. Samuel Lewis Navarro

First Vice-President and Minister of Foreign Affairs

The President (*spoke in Spanish*): I will now make a statement in my capacity of Vice-President and Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Panama.

At the outset, I would like to thank the Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict, Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, the Executive Director of UNICEF, Ms. Ann Veneman, and Ms. Jo Becker of the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, representative of non-governmental organizations, for their briefings. We are also pleased to welcome here the French Minister for Foreign Affairs, Bernard Kouchner, the Minister for Development Cooperation of Belgium, Mr. Charles Michel, and the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs of Italy, Mr. Vittorio Craxi.

We all recognize the negative impact of armed conflicts on children. Innocent beings are deprived of an education, displaced and uprooted from their homes and haunted by the violence they witness or even commit. Lost generations are created, deprived of opportunities, which could unleash a permanent cycle of violence in their lives. The international community thus has an obligation to undertake efforts to prevent this scourge from continuing to affect children in armed conflict.

The establishment of the Security Council's Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict is evidence that neither the world nor the United Nations will continue to address these issues in a fragmented manner. That concept is clearly reflected in the 2005 World Summit Outcome, which reads:

“We acknowledge that peace and security, development and human rights are the pillars of the United Nations system and the foundations for collective security and well-being. We recognize that development, peace and security and human rights are interlinked and mutually reinforcing.” (*resolution 60/1, para. 9*)

On the basis of that concept, the establishment of the Working Group is worthwhile and appropriate. Nonetheless, protecting children in situations of armed conflict is a task that the Security Council cannot and must not undertake on its own. The General Assembly must increase its efforts in that matter and guarantee that those efforts are carried out in close coordination with the Security Council, to avoid the duplication of efforts and ensure a more effective organizational approach.

In that context, we must add that the Working Group's practice of meeting with parties affected by their decisions should serve as an example for other subsidiary bodies of the Security Council, a practice that Panama has repeatedly endorsed.

With respect to the report of the Secretary- General, we welcome the important advances in the implementation of the relevant norms, standards and international legislation in the criminal field, including the conviction of members of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council by the Special Court for Sierra Leone for recruiting and using children in armed conflict in that country. Along the same lines, the arrest warrants and charges issued by the International Criminal Court against individuals who have forcefully recruited children represent concrete steps taken by the international community to put an end to the culture of impunity that exists among those who systematically violate the rights of children in situations of armed conflict.

Despite those advances, we must express our concern regarding the increasing use of camps for refugees and internally displaced persons as places from which to recruit child soldiers, a practice which aggravates the daily difficulties already faced by those children. Refugee and internally displaced children are more vulnerable to homelessness, malnutrition, lack of education and discrimination. Such difficult conditions have a psychological impact on children, predisposing them to violent behaviours and facilitating their recruitment by the warring parties in a conflict.

We express our concern regarding the proliferation of intentional and systematic attacks against schools, teachers and school buildings, where children do not only go for their education, but where they traditionally find refuge. That space must be respected. In particular, we stress our concern for the trends in the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and the excessive use of force against children. We join all those who reaffirmed their support for the work of the International Criminal Court. We encourage that international tribunal to continue safeguarding the rights of children when investigating war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Finally, we underscore the importance of including child protection advisers in the mandates of future peacekeeping missions and relevant political missions. Likewise, we stress the need for greater concentration on the reintegration of children into society through programmatic responses at the community level, particularly in the form of education and psychosocial support, in order to increase their opportunities for participation in society.

I cannot conclude without congratulating the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and the Executive Director of UNICEF, and the very many non-governmental organizations, all of them, on the work that they have done to put an end to this threat to international peace and security. Similarly, let me also acknowledge the leadership that France has shown in this extremely important area. I thank them all.