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Press Conference (*near verbatim transcript*)

**Radhika Coomaraswamy, United Nations Special Representative for
Children and Armed Conflict**

Aleem Siddique, UNAMA Acting Spokesperson

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UNAMA: Good morning everybody my name is Aleem Siddique from UNAMA Spokesperson's office. We are very pleased to be joined this morning by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) for Children and Armed Conflict, Radhika Coomaraswamy. And also by Louis-Georges Arsenault, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Director for Emergency Programmes. The SRSG has just concluded a five-day visit in country at the invitation of the Government to ascertain first hand the impact of the conflict on children. We will be happy to take your questions after some brief remarks from SRSG Coomaraswamy.

SRSG RADHIKA COOMARASWAMY

Thank you very much.

As you know I am here at the invitation of the Government of Afghanistan and Louis-Georges Arsenault, head of Emergency Operations at UNICEF also accompanied me on this visit.

In May this year the Security Council Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict has put Afghanistan on its agenda. And in October this year there will be a comprehensive report on the situation of children presented to the council.

One of the major objectives of my mission was to set in place the monitoring and reporting process for that report. I have visited Kabul, Jalalabad and Gardez during my visit and met with President Karazi, ministers of government, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) military forces, international agencies, international and Afghan NGOs, religious leaders and of course the children themselves.

I must say that in my conversations with children and their families along with Afghan NGOs and religious leaders I received a very interesting insight into the situation for children in Afghanistan at the moment.

The first concern of everyone is the deteriorating security situation. There was general concern that there will be more insecurity and violence. There is an urgent need to take all appropriate measures including where possible reconciliation measures to ensure that the security problem is overcome.

One of the grave violations against children in armed conflict is killing and maiming. We met many victims of the attacks by the Taliban and other anti-Government elements. We also met with victims of the operations by the international forces. We met children who had been maimed by aerial bombardment, night raids and other such operations. We had discussions with ISAF and OEF commanders on how they should minimize this collateral damage with clear directions and procedures. It is important to put in place measures to prevent the excesses, to have prompt investigations and where necessary to pay adequate compensation.

The second grave violation against children in armed conflict of course is the recruitment and use of children in the fighting forces. We have credible information that in the last few months there has been an increase in the number of children in combat. We also have verified reports of individual cases of suicide bombers. This is a terrible situation and we hope that action will be taken by everyone to help eradicate this.

We want to reiterate that the Taliban itself recognize this and in Rule 19 have stated that *mujahideen* are not allowed to take young boys with no facial hair on to the battlefield or into their private quarters.

So we urge all parties, especially the anti-Government elements, to begin to take action to prevent children from being used on the battlefield.

We also have reports that there are children associated with the Afghan police force in different parts of the country. We have had discussions with the Ministry of Interior and the National Directorate of Security to help eradicate this practice.

We are also concerned about children detained after military operations. ISAF have given us exact figures, but we do not have exact numbers on minors being detained by the Afghan authorities or the American forces. No one seems clear about the guidelines or the standard operating procedures in this regard. We hope that this report will be an opportunity to set these procedures in place.

As we know from other areas in the world, keeping young people in detention often makes them into hardened individuals and only feeds the cycle of violence.

We are also concerned about attacks on schools. These attacks kill children who are completely innocent. And such practice violates all norms of civilized behaviour contained in international law and in the teachings of the great religions. There have been a total of 228 schools that have been attacked with 75 deaths and 111 injured. And that was for 2007. In 2008 there have been 83 schools attacked so far.

We have also been receiving allegations about sexual violence against boys. Afghan civil society is particularly concerned about what has been called the *Bacha-bazi* system or practice for young boys associated with military commanders. This practice has to be eradicated as it is against international humanitarian law.

Finally, like my colleague John Holmes I would like to reiterate that there is a serious humanitarian problem in many conflict areas of Afghanistan. We urge all parties to give access to humanitarian actors. We also feel that military activities cannot be combined with humanitarian activities. This blurs the lines of accepted international humanitarian practice and endangers the lives of humanitarian workers. It is important to expand humanitarian space by reaching out and appealing to all actors to respect humanitarian activity in support of children.

In this regard my colleagues at UNICEF have put forward the idea of what we call “days of tranquillity.” That for four days a year all actors respect a truce so that children can be vaccinated against polio. Last year such a campaign was waged and it was successful. So we hope this will continue and children can be vaccinated and schools will also be respected as zones of peace.

Thank you.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Noorin TV [translated from Dari]: You expressed your concern on a number of areas especially military operations by the coalition forces that have resulted in killing and maiming of children. What is the number of children that have been killed by these operations? Secondly, you expressed concern over the increased recruitment of children as combatants by anti-Government elements. What is the number of these? You also mentioned detention of children; can you give us a figure for that?

SRSF for Children and Armed Conflict: I have the number of civilians killed; I do not have the number of children killed. We can try and get that information to you if we have it. With regard to recruitment of children, it is very difficult to say the numbers. What people are telling us – and this is anecdotal information from sources including NGOs and government authorities – is that the recruitment and use of children was not so much of a problem before, but in the last year and particularly in the last few months they have seen an increase in the number of children as combatants. So this is something we have to investigate further and hopefully by the

October report we will get a clearer picture. And with regard to jail: again we don't have exact figures; only ISAF have given us figures with regard to how many they have arrested and released, but nobody else has given us exact figures. We can give the ISAF figures to you later.

All India Radio: You have talked about collateral damage created by military operations by ISAF and OEF. Such incidents have been happening in this country over the last seven years. Especially last year in Jalalabad, 19 people were killed coalition forces and this year again, about seven days in an aerial bombing, 17 people were killed, some of them militants, some of them civilians, including children, in Nimroz province. This collateral damage keeps on happening, despite suggestions made by international authorities and everybody around. How do you think that this could be rectified? Secondly, you talked about children being recruited by the Afghan police. Do you have a figure for them?

SRSB for Children and Armed Conflict: Let me begin by saying that with regard to collateral damage issues we have had discussions with both ISAF and the OEF. They assure us that they are taking measures. ISAF gave us detailed procedures and guidelines that they have formulated in the last year with regard to this. But of course we still hear from the civilians that this continues. So we feel that there has to be some response where such measures are taken and that, when they do occur, there is prompt investigation and credible investigation and the victims are compensated. So I join the others in appealing for that. With regard to recruitment by the Afghan police, we do not have numbers but we have eyewitness accounts.

Ariana TV [translated from Dari]: The Government of Afghanistan, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and child advocate organizations have always expressed their concern over the situation of children in this country, but these concerns have resulted in nothing. What can the Government of Afghanistan and the UN do to prevent such incidents and damage to children?

SRSB for Children and Armed Conflict: Firstly, in many cases of violence against children there is a sense of impunity. People continue to violate children's rights without any sense of feeling that they will be held accountable. So there is need to some extent to strengthen the justice system so that these cases can be brought to court and the impunity lifted. On the other hand, the statistics with regard to maternal mortality, infant mortality, literacy are some of the lowest, most problematic, in the world. UNICEF, WHO and other agencies all are there ready to help in major campaigns to try and lift the basic services in the country so that those figures can also be improved.

UNICEF: The most fundamental principle is that we have access to poor children everywhere, and that is why the SRSB in her briefing and also in her report to come will be emphasizing the need to address the humanitarian space which is shrinking and what can be done we have access to all children above and beyond the politics involved in this. This is the principle that we are advocating and we are going to advocate it very strongly.

Radio Killid [translated from Dari]: Given the fact that 50 per cent of the population in Afghanistan is under 18 years old, I would like to know, during your visit in the country what the assessment of the visit was. What per cent of the kids are under threats and what kind of threats? My second question is for UNICEF. Saudi Arabia

has deported 13 children in the past and 14 children just recently whose families remain in Saudi Arabia. What can UNICEF do in this regard?

SRSG for Children and Armed Conflict: My last visit was to a girls' school in Gardez. In the school I asked what their main problems are and they said that many of their friends do not go to school because their families do not allow them. Secondly, they said that Afghan children work very, very hard and they are also studying. Thirdly, the girls said sometimes they find it difficult to study because of traditional practices. Fourthly, all of the girls were concerned about the security situation and they were very frightened. So these are four things that the school girls told me.

UNICEF: Inter-country child trafficking is an issue that has been very high on the UNICEF agenda for this region for many years. We are involved in discussions on it with different Governments. We have been successful in several countries in bringing back children. We are in touch with the Government in order to address this issue. Afghanistan is not a country where it happens in large numbers but definitely it is a very serious concern and we are addressing it with different parties including the Government.

Tamadon TV [translated from Dari]: The human rights commission has said that there are some 13 children detained in Bagram and Guantanamo Bay by coalition forces. What have you done to secure their release?

SRSG for Children and Armed Conflict: We don't know the actual figures of the human rights commission. The State Department talks about ten and the commanders here were not clear and they said they have no one under 15 or 18 years old in detention, so there is some confusion. We hope with the report to the UN Security Council which we will be doing in October, we can systematically gather this information, in particular on children in detention. We will be very clear about first the numbers and secondly the procedures that will be used for these children. We need to clarify because this is a very murky situation.

RFE/IRL [translated from Dari]: When you don't have an exact figure, how do you claim that the number of child combatants in Afghanistan has increased during the last months? If the situation continues like this what would be the consequences?

SRSG for Children and Armed Conflict: Let me say that we may not be able to say exact figures but from our local sources and meetings with some government officials we can sense a trend but even that has to be verified. So hopefully by October we will have a clear picture. I think because it was not a past practice and there is some increase we have to worry about. And maybe be it is linked to cross-border movements so it is something that we will have to address.

Freelance: I would like to know from you specifically that how exactly this monitoring mechanism is going to be administered especially with regard to the access to the monitoring bodies which you referred to. You mentioned the issue of your data on the detention of juveniles, but according to the admission of the US Government itself, there are as you said at least ten held without trial, who don't have any legal recourse, access to families, or educational and recreational facilities. Isn't this a complete antithesis of what you are trying to do as well as setting very bad example for the justice sector that is being built in this country with the help of the international community?

SRSG For Children and Armed Conflict: The monitoring and reporting mechanism mandated by Security Council resolution 1612 sets up a task force at the country level, led by the UN, but including independent NGOs and independent government institutions. At the sub-regional level also there maybe some branches, these task forces will gather information. The information we gather is basically incident-based information, but in situations like detention there would be an attempt to verify the numbers. We have -- on previous occasions where I was in Iraq, and here -- we have raised with the American military authorities that military detention of children is not a good idea in the first place, and even if so that the numbers and the procedures must become transparent. We reiterated that call this time; I must say that we hope that in the process of writing up this report we can have more access to that information to help understand what is going on.

IRIN: Can you elaborate on child sexual abuse and tell us how serious this trend is and what preventive measures are in place?

SRSG for Children and Armed Conflict: As you know this issue of sexual violence is a difficult issue in a traditional society and it is hidden. I must say that we have not heard of many cases against women but we have heard from local Afghan sources of sexual violence against boys. And it came in my domain because some of them are military commanders. We don't know more than that but we just wanted to flag the issue. We hope that we will be able to investigate and verify the scope of that in a time to come.

IRIN follow up: Is that due to a kind of impunity which commanders who are abusing boys benefit from; do you think this is due to impunity?

SRSG for Children and Armed Conflict: It is illegal and it is a criminal activity.

TV Sabah [translated from Darij]: Despite lack of any exact figures about violence against children, could you compare the situation of Afghanistan's children with that in similar countries where there are armed conflicts?

SRSG for Children and Armed Conflict: I can't think of any country in the world in which children suffer more than in Afghanistan. Because you not only have the terrible violations that occur during war but also the terrible poverty and hard work that they have to engage in.

In all our meetings with children it takes a lot of time to make them smile. That to me shows that there is not happiness in their hearts.

Thank you.