



United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

Strategic Communication and Spokespersons Unit
Kabul - Afghanistan

Tel: 00 39 0831 24 6121 – 00 93 (0) 790 00 6121

Email: spokesperson-unama@un.org

Website: <http://unama.unmissions.org>

PRESS CONFERENCE (near verbatim transcript)

**Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Radhika Coomaraswamy;
Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Robert Watkins; and
UNICEF Representative to Afghanistan, Catherine Mbengue.**

Kabul – 24 February 2010

UNAMA SPOKESPERSON NILAB MOBAREZ: Good morning to everyone and welcome to our special press conference today. Without further delay, I would like to hand over to the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General (DSRSG) Robert Watkins, who will introduce you to our respected guest.

DSRSG WATKINS: Thank you and good morning to you all. It is my pleasure to introduce to you Ms Radhika Coomaraswamy, who is the Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the United Nations for Children and Armed Conflict.

We are especially delighted that she could come here at this time. She is a very important voice in the field of human rights and, especially, human rights for children. She has been advocating for children affected by conflict with many key interlocutors here during this week in Afghanistan. Yesterday, she met with the President of Afghanistan, as well as General McChrystal, the commander of the ISAF forces, as well as a number of key ministers. I understand this is a successful visit with many commitments made by the government.

And while there is a dedicated unit within UNAMA for Children and Armed Conflict issues, I am delighted also that we have sitting besides Ms Coomaraswamy, Catherine Mbengue, the head of UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), who also is working in close collaboration with us on this important issue.

SRSR COOMARASWAMY: Let me begin by thanking UNAMA and UNICEF for having facilitated this visit and for all their support and advice. My visit is a follow up to my visit of a year and a half ago. Since my last trip, the Security Council (SC) which has a special Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict has issued conclusions and recommendations with regard to children and armed conflict in Afghanistan, and I have come to follow up and ensure that their recommendations are implemented.

Finally with the possibility of a Peace Jirga and a Kabul Conference, I wanted to ensure that children's issues are on the agenda of both events.

I have met with government officials, including President Karzai, and the Ministers of Defence, Justice, Interior, and Social Welfare.

I also met with General McChrystal and some ISAF officials. And we have met with NGOs in the field and I will be meeting with some IDP children this afternoon.

The Government of Afghanistan has showed a political will to deal with issues related to children and armed conflict. They have set up a steering committee at the deputy ministerial level in all affected ministries to interact with United Nations officials on issues relating to children and armed conflict.

One of the main concerns of the SC Working Group (SCWG) was the information that children are being recruited and used in combat. Both the Minister of Defence and the Minister of Interior have now appointed a focal point so that we can check on this issue. They have given us unimpeded access to their recruitment centers to ensure that no children are being recruited.

The Minister of Interior will also work on an action plan to implement the recommendations of the SCWG, related to these issues.

With regard to children associated with armed groups, we will engage in discussions with ISAF and the Afghan Army to see what can be done when they encounter children in military operations. We hope to enter into a protocol so that those children will be properly released and reintegrated into their communities.

We are also concerned about children in detention.

The Minister of Justice is giving unimpeded access to prisons and juvenile centers to all child protection actors of the UN.

President Karzai and the Minister of Interior have said they will give unimpeded access to UN child protection actors to the National Security Directorate detention centers.

General McChrystal pointed out that Bagram Airbase detention center is now closed and that there are no children at the DFIP facility in Parwan, and he has also given unimpeded access to UN child protection actors to visit these centers.

I also raised the issue of sexual violence against children. I was particularly concerned, from my last visit, on the issues raised by religious leaders about the practice of 'Bacha bazzi' and the sexual abuse of boys.

The Minister of Interior said a special unit was being set up to investigate violence against girls, boys, and women.

Officers have to be trained in investigation and that responsibility must now be shared by the international community. There have been 615 educational-related incidents in 2009 - double than the previous year. Child protection partners have pointed out to us that schools must be built and sustained with community participation and ownership.

Also, over 100 health-related incidents took place in 2009. The UN is committed to working with communities to ensure that these institutions are protected.

Finally, we must look at the issue of protection of civilians (in conflict): 346 children were killed (as part of the conflict) in 2009: 131 of these were by aerial strikes, 22 by search-and-raid by Special Forces; 128 were killed by anti-Government elements (AGE), including assassinations and suicide bombings. The rest were undetermined perpetrators. We must recognise the efforts of General McChrystal to ensure that the protection of civilians is a part of the military strategy.

From my last visit, there is a major change in attitude and tactics on the part of the military. But, as recent events have shown, these ideas and directives have now to be implemented.

The SCWG urges a continuous review of tactics to ensure protection of civilians. And it requires a prompt investigation of these incidents. I think it is also important to have clarity on the delineation of civil and military functions so as not to endanger humanitarian assistance and workers.

I must say that General McChrystal said that he will work with the UN in developing procedures and protocols to try and better protect children.

Finally, with regard to the Peace Jirga, we have lobbied with the President and the Minister of Education to ensure there is a special paragraph on children and protecting children in armed conflict. There must be a condemnation of the use of children in combat and acceptance of schools and hospitals as safe zones. There must be precaution with regard to the killing of children.

Finally, with regard to the Kabul Conference, we urge that the issues of youth and children have a central place in the strategies being devised by the government and donors. Thank you.

CATHERINE MBENGUE: We are delighted to have here the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict, who visited here in 2008.

As she said, the purpose of her visit is to make sure that we are doing our part together with our partners to follow up on the recommendations of the SCWG on children and armed conflict. She came to check on what we have done since her last visit, in terms of following up of some of the observations that we made and the discussions we had when she was here and her discussions with the Government.

I am happy to report that, in line with the framework of UNSC Resolution 1612, since the last visit of the SRSG, we have now in place a mechanism co-chaired by UNICEF and UNAMA, for the monitoring and reporting on violations committed against children by parties to the conflict that was set up in Afghanistan in the framework of the UN Security Council Resolution 1612.

These mechanisms aim to inform the national and international community about the status of the violations, which are articulated in the resolution and to promote implementation of concrete time-bound action plans to protect children affected by armed conflict.

The mechanism is at the national level, but we also have arms in some provinces including Herat, Gardez and Jalalabad, beside Kabul.

These task forces are currently engaged in monitoring and reporting violations and engaging with local community members and structures as well as child protection networks, among other protection mechanisms, to develop timely responses when possible.

The SRSG indicated some commitments on the part of the Government, and she indicated that now we also have an inter-ministerial Government of Afghanistan steering committee on children and armed conflict with the objective to develop a national action plan for addressing violations. On top of that we have now a high level focal point within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to be the interface between the work that we are doing within the task force and the Government.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we all agree that monitoring, reporting and responding on these violations are now as important as ever. So I would like to thank the SRSG for coming again here and putting her advocacy at highest level. Thank you

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

RFE/RL: My question is for SRSG Coomaraswamy. There are reports that a large number of children are being used by the armed opposition, especially by the

Taliban. What is your message to them? And for DSRSG Watkins. Recently SRSR Kai Eide told the Daily Telegraph that peace talks should be started directly with leaders of the Taliban, especially with Mullah Omar. So do you think this is possible, since the location of Mullah Omar is unknown?

SRSR COOMARASWAMY: Let me begin by answering, we have reports of children being used by AGE, including the Taliban. We don't have any systematic evidence. We do know that in 2009, seven children were used as suicide bombers.

DSRSG WATKINS: In response to your second question, Kai Eide has said, in this editorial you are referring to, that if we want to have serious discussions about reconciliation, it is important they take place at the highest level. In many statements, he has emphasized that this must be an Afghan-led process, and anything that can contribute towards discussions at that high level, we would very much support.

AP: Do you have figures from 2008 on children being killed in conflict to compare with 2009? If not, is there any evidence that shows whether this is worsening or not?

SRSR COOMARASWAMY: I can try and get those figures for you from 2008 to make the comparison.

SABA TV [translated from Pashto]: My question is regarding child casualties. According to the previous year's report, it was said that AGEs have been responsible for the majority of casualties. But this year your figures show that almost 60 percent of the children have been killed by pro-Government forces and 40 percent by AGE. How can we say there has been progress?

SRSR COOMARASWAMY: There has been progress. First of all, I would say that the best scenario is that the war stops and that no children would be killed. But if there is going to be war, we would like the military on all sides to take measures to protect children. In the last few months, we have seen major changes in the way military operations are being planned and conducted, especially on the part of international forces, including the tactical directives that we have seen.

So we have policy and tactical directives, and now we have to make sure they are being implemented. We hope that next year the numbers will be far less, or zero. But these recent events in the last few months are a cause for concern.

8AM [translated from Dari]: You mentioned the use of children by AGE and also sexual abuse. Do you have any figures about how many children are being used by people within the government, compared to people outside the government?

SRSR COOMARASWAMY: With regard to Bacha Baazi ?

8AM: Yes.

SRSR COOMARASWAMY: This is such a taboo subject that it is very difficult to get actual figures. Many civil society actors have come across cases and have told us about them. And I have recently seen a film that has not been released yet, but it is quite a detailed film on this practice in Afghanistan, about one young boy and it seemed like a very genuine and legitimate film in that sense. What I am trying to do by constantly talking about it, even with the President, is to make it legitimate to speak about it and enquire about it and fight against it.

ARIANA TV [translated from Dari]: Despite your saying that the number of child casualties have not decreased over the last year, you still see it as a positive step and you're hoping that the number will continue to decline in the coming year. I just want to know whether the UN is just hoping for this or is doing something practical too. My second question: the number that you just presented – of children's casualties – 128 children were killed by the AGE, this seems to be an accurate number. If the UN has access and can get an accurate number from the areas that are controlled by AGE, then why don't UN appeals have any affect on them?

SRSR COOMARASWAMY: First, I think the UN's role, specially our human rights and the UNSC 1612 mechanism, is to monitor and report as accurately as we can about how many children are being killed and the violations against children in armed conflict. Second, we have to work with the international forces in developing certain kinds of procedures and protocols and urge tactical reviews to ensure that on their side these things don't happen. And, maybe appeals to non-state actors to protect children help if they will listen.

You asked about why we can't get accurate figures on the number of children associated with armed groups. When people are killed, it is easy to get information because of hospital records, because of community, etc., so the facts are much clearer. But on the issue of recruitment of children into armed forces, it is very difficult because we don't have access to these groups and we don't know what is actually going on. And some of it is cross-border as well, so those are the difficulties we face.

DSRSG WATKINS: I just want to add something to that response: UNAMA has been working tirelessly to advocate for the avoidance of civilian casualties and I do believe that we have had some impact, in the sense that NATO has changed its view and is taking very rigorous measures to avoid civilian casualties as much as possible. So I would like to believe that UNAMA has been very effective in convincing them to take these necessary steps.

TOLO TV [translated from Dari]: To Ms. Coomaraswamy: How do you assess the situation of children in Afghanistan? Also, you said that the purpose of your visit here is to follow up on the recommendations and the commitments that have been made by the Government of Afghanistan with regard to the protection of children. How many of these commitments have been fulfilled by the Government? As you mentioned, most casualties have been inflicted by AGE. In your view, how strong is the Government of Afghanistan to prevent such attacks?

SRSR COOMARASWAMY: During my discussions with many ministers and the President, I felt there was strong political will to try and implement the recommendations of the Security Council Working Group. I think there was also strong political will on the part of the ISAF commander. But there is a very big difference between political will and intentions and what actually happens. And I think one of the issues with the Afghan Government is its capacity to deliver on its intentions, in terms of resources (financial and human), and in terms of security and other considerations. So I think we have to focus our minds on building capacity, so all these good intentions can be actually implemented.

Regarding your second question, I have always felt that the children in Afghanistan have probably suffered more than anywhere in the world. I came here during the time of the Taliban in 1997 and actually met with ministers of the Taliban government and I have come now twice after that. So I have personally witnessed this continuous

exposure to war and suffering. So I think it is very important that we try and focus attention on children. And to this what we can do to better the situation.

PAJWOK [translated from Dari]: You mentioned the government's commitments towards protection of children. What kinds of commitments has the government of Afghanistan made in this regard and have they been fulfilled?

SRSR COOMARASWAMY: The commitments made during this trip were initially with regard to the recruitment of children in armed forces and the detention of children. They have committed to opening their facilities, inspection and unimpeded access to them.

With regard to sexual violence and other crimes against children, they have agreed to set a very specialized unit to investigate and prosecute cases. The President said that he would make children's issues an important part of both the Peace Jirga and the Kabul Conference. These are steps that have come to mind at the moment.

AL JAZEERA: You were speaking about positive progress regarding the protection of children. With reference to what is taking place currently in Helmand and the killing of innocent people there and in Uruzgan, my question is, whether NATO shares the technical measures they are talking with you? Who is to be blamed for the casualties of civilians, especially children?

SRSR COOMARASWAMY: Let me reiterate again the ideal situation – of course there should be no war. But if there is going to be conflict, then there are rules and procedures of international humanitarian law that we have to judge all military activities by.

The tactical directives that ISAF has issued are available to the public and can be requested perhaps through the legal division. But I think mistakes occur and when they do occur, what we look for is prompt investigation and the holding of people accountable. I must say that UNAMA's Human Rights Unit has been quite indefatigable about both issues.