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

Radhika Coomaraswamy

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UNMIN Transcript

(note: some questions may have been summarized)

Ian Martin: Namaste. Good afternoon. It is my pleasure to introduce to you Radhika Coomaraswamy, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. It's a post that Secretary-General Kofi Annan appointed her to in April 2006 and Secretary-general Ban Ki-moon reappointed her to in 2007. She is an internationally known human rights advocate. In her own country she was chairperson of the Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission, and internationally, before her present appointment, she was Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women. Her office, the office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, was established by the General Assembly in 1997, with the support of all member states including Nepal, to foster international cooperation to ensure respect of rights for children during and after armed conflict. And, of course, the purpose of her visit to Nepal has been to promote the rights of children in the context of Nepal's peace process. These are issues of great concern to the United Nations as a whole, especially to UNICEF, represented here by Gillian Mellso, the Representative in Nepal of UNICEF, and of course to UNMIN, and Ms. Coomaraswamy has been accompanied at her meetings by UNICEF and UNMIN. A central issue of course, has been the discharge from Maoist army cantonments of those assessed as minors in May 2006 by UNMIN's verification, an issue of very longstanding concern to UNMIN, UNICEF and the UN as a whole. So it's my pleasure now to ask Radhika to address you.

Radhika Coomaraswamy: Thanks you very much, Ian, and it's a pleasure to be here in Nepal and also especially in the context of the peace process. As Ian said, the primary objective of my Mission was to discuss the issue relating to recruitment and use of children, and the discharge of minors from the cantonments. I also discussed other issues, such as the violence in the Terai, the political violence of youth groups, some of the justice mechanisms and the need to move forward on the children's acts. These were some of our objectives when we came here. I have been in Kathmandu. I went to Biratnagar, and also to the cantonment in Chulachuli in Ilam, and spoke there. The people I have met while I have been here have been the Prime Minister, the Home Minister, the Minister of Defence, the Minister of Law, many government officials. I have spoken to political parties. I have also spoken with the UN Country Team and the UN colleagues here and most importantly I spent a lot of time with children, both in the cantonment, speaking to minors, as well as in Biratnagar, with some of the children affected by the conflict. Let me begin with the issue with regard to children. As you know, the Security Council has taken a keen interest in this issue. Every year the Secretary-General files a report with the Security Council with a list where parties are mentioned, who recruit and use children. The CPN(Maoist) have been on that list for now four years. So my hope was that, in the context of the Nepal peace process, we can now begin the process of de-listing them so that these children can be discharged. In addition the Security Council working group, in its recent conclusions and recommendations of November said very clearly that they wanted these children immediately released. So I am very happy to report that the Prime Minister today agreed unequivocally to begin the process of discharge in consultation with the UN Country Team. I also

spoke to the Peace and Reconstruction Minister and he also informed me that we can begin the process of discharge by moving the children from a military environment to where they can be provided with the training and reintegration packages for their eventual reintegration into society. I will call on my UNICEF colleague later to describe to you some of the options we have for their reintegration. As you know, as we've outlined to the Government, there are international standards with regard to reintegration, called the Paris Principles, and we hope that in our consultations on how to move forward we will abide by those international standards. As I said, I discussed other issues with regard to children. We discussed the political violence by the youth wings of many political parties. In fact, when I was in the Terai, many children spoke to me of that violence and their fear of that violence. And I was happy to note that Commander Pasang of the Maoist army as well as the UML Secretary General informed me that they have begun talks on how to reign in these youth wings and to try and work together to control some of their activities. The other questions that came up in the Terai as I spoke to children were questions relating to impunity, the rule of law, children described incidents that had occurred to them in the lawlessness that sometimes prevails in parts of the Terai. And we pressed upon the Prime Minister the need, for example, to take steps to fight impunity. In that event, the case of Maina Sunuwar was of particular interest to the United Nations and we felt that if that case could move forward it would send a strong signal with regard to impunity. And I must say the Prime Minister said that he would make it a priority, especially in the Commission on Disappearances that he hopes to set up. And so we hope that with regard to these issues things will move forwards, both with regard to the Commission on Disappearances and with regard to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. And finally this morning I was at an exhibition where children from all over Nepal who were in the conflict areas had made paintings of their lives and I also spoke, as I said, with the children of the Terai. And you as see these exhibitions and as you speak with the children you realize that it is not only the grave violations of international law, the war crimes, crimes against humanity like recruitment and use of children that affect children but the children are affected by their very basic needs. In fact all rights of children are affected in the conflict. The right to education—many of them had lost schooling. Right to health. We met many who had been affected with regard to their health. Then Right to shelter. We met IDP children who found, who lived from day to day and of course the need for psychosocial support. So the international community led by my colleagues, both at the mission as well as in the UN country team stand ready to move forward from the peace process to the era of peace building and to support Nepal in its peace building efforts and in this regard, UNICEF, the UN's premier agency on children has significant plans that it hopes to work with the government to implement. So I'm going to ask Gillian to somehow describe to you some of the programs that will back, especially, the discharge of the children.

Gillian Mellsoy: Good Afternoon! We believe that the protection and the needs of all the children affected by the conflict should be an integral part of government policies at national, regional and community level. In this regard, UNICEF and the CAFAAG—which stands for children associated with armed forces and armed groups, this is a working group of child protection agencies, both international and national, led by UNICEF—are currently supporting the government develop a national plan of action for the reintegration of children affected by armed conflict including the children currently in the cantonments. UNICEF and other members of CAAFAG working group are currently supporting the reintegration of 7500 children who have been associated with armed forces and armed groups in 58 districts across the country. It's a community-based reintegration program, which allows young people to reintegrate back with their families and communities and this support comprises of educational and vocational opportunities, income generating activities and apprenticeships. It also allows these children and young people to participate and engage in peace building and reconciliation opportunities. Building on this existing reintegration program, UNICEF and UNDP together with UNMIN have developed reintegration and discharge plans for orderly release of the 2,975 identified minors from the cantonments. There are currently over 60 existing vocational and micro enterprise options which will be tailored to the specific needs, aspirations and interests of each discharged minor. We very much look forward to working with the government in moving the release and the reintegration process forward. In this regard,

we are delighted that the SRSG has come at this very timely moment to really engage and to help all of us focus again on the importance of releasing the minors from the cantonments. Thank you.

Ujwal Prajapati, Kantipur Television: When are you going to start with the process of discharge?

Radhika Coomaraswamy: Well I think, the process will begin as soon as possible and we have relative expectations. We hope that it will be finished by the end of February. We have some hope in that regard but of course a lot depend upon how it is actually implemented. But that is our hope.

Madan Acharya, Nepal TV: What will be the role of UNICEF and UNDP in taking care of these minors?

Gillian Mellsoy: As I described, we have already plans for orderly discharge, for which we would like to work very closely, obviously, with the PLA and the government. We believe that some of these young people who need psychosocial support. We will be helping them to trace their families, reintegrate back with their families and communities and, as I mentioned, tailor vocational and educational opportunities to their needs and as their aspirations and we will be providing ongoing support. We already already have a network in 58 districts of a range of national NGOs supported by international NGOs who would be providing follow up and social support.

Radhika Coomaraswamy: If I might just say the specifics of this, we worked out with the Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction and we will ensure that international standards are maintained in that implementation.

Ram Humagain, Gorkhapatra: As our previous experience and may be Mr. Martin is quite experienced on that. Our leaders are very much champion in giving big words that we are forming this commission and we are doing this but they are doing delay in everything, to implement their every commitment. Do you think that they will implement this as soon as possible?

Radhika Coomaraswamy: Well, I think positively. So I think that they will. I am quite sure they will because it's not only an issue for Nepal. The recruitments and use of children as I said is a war crime and a crime against humanity. It's being monitored by Security Council and I think the new Nepal wants to move, put this all behind and move forward and it has such goodwill from international community, so much desire of the international community to support Nepal. So I think Nepalese leaders will see that it is in their interest to put this issue behind them.

Moderator: So we have a child journalist in this press conference.

Radhika Coomaraswamy: Yes, of course.

Nirmala Marasini: First of all, I want to thank you for coming here and you knew the situation of children here and I have one question, that is the commitment that the government has made you and the public in Nepal. What would you think that the children need to implement this?

Radhika Coomaraswamy: Well, in all democratic societies it is public opinion that often makes governments deliver on their promises. So I would say that one of the things you can do is keep this issue alive and ensure that they deliver on their promises in that sense. So one thing all press can do is to keep the issue alive and to make sure that the promises are actually delivered.

Ramesh Bhusal, Ujyalo Network Radio: What do you mean by community-based programmes? There are thousands of children outside the cantonments as well who are in very vulnerable condition and have complex lifestyle as well. So, what are your plans for those children outside the cantonments?

Radhika Coomaraswamy: I will let UNICEF answer that because they already have a programme for those children.

Gillian Mellsop: Yes, if I can describe the current programme that we are offering for seven-and-a-half thousand of these young people who were associated. For every two children, we are providing support under that package, we also provide support for one other child. So if I can give you an example, I was in Panchthar recently at a school where there were two CAFAAG children and one, the community school management committee had chosen one another child that was very vulnerable. So, we were also able to give that same support. Plus for the schools where CAFAAG children have been accepted back into the schools we've given small amount of support, something like new furniture, some water supplies and toilets. And because we now have, along with all the CAFAAG working group members, quite an amazing child protection system in place supporting the seven and half thousand children, and hopefully very soon the children from the cantonments, we are now looking at upscaling that to many other children who are actually affected by the armed conflict. So, we currently have a proposal, we are currently seeking funding from the international community and we hope that we will be able to overall offer a package to about 15,000 children who have been affected by the armed conflict. But we're well aware that there are many children in Nepal that need the support.

Ramesh Bhusal: Is it a phase-wise programme? Or do you have programme for certain time?

Gillian Mellsop: I think the reality for children that have been affected by armed conflict, it does need to be sustained support. So, we will be looking to continue the programme. As always, regrettably, this relies on funding, but the international community has been very generous in this regard and we hope that this will continue.

Binaj Gurubacharya, Associated Press: You said the process should be complete by February, does that mean all the children in the cantonments will be out by then; is that the target? And when you met with the prime minister was it just a nod or was it a more concrete agreement?

Radhika Coomaraswamy: Let me just say that with regard to the first issue, we are hoping that the children will all leave the cantonments by the end of February; that is our expectation and we will follow it up with the government. And it is our hope and we have to see what process is best after that. Whether they get integrated back into the society or go to the training centre where they are trained. These are some options we are exploring. But they will be taken out of a military environment and taken into the civilian environment. That is what we require and that is what international standards require. Secondly, with regard to the prime minister, it was more than a nod. I asked him specifically, I said can I announce at the press conference that you would want this discharge and that we can begin the process and he said, please announce it. So, it was not just a nod. He specifically gave me permission to announce it here at the press conference.

Renu Kshetry, *The Kathmandu Post*: There was a provision in the CPA (Comprehensive Peace Agreement), that these children should have been discharged immediately. Why didn't that happen, what is the reason behind that?

Radhika Coomaraswamy: Well, I think, the different reasons were given. One being that they were afraid, I think there is a fear that as these children are released, they will be taken up by other armed groups and would generally add to some kind of chaos. And also, I think, there was a sense of discharge with the adults, how the whole process worked. There were other administrative issues. But now, I think, we hope that by pointing out the importance, especially at the international level, and also for the

children, that these children be released, we are now confident now that in December the process will move forward.