

Statement to the BMS side event on children and armed conflict

by Sergio Duarte
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Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great honour to welcome you all at this event which is dedicated to one of the most pressing issues on the agenda of the United Nations, that of children and armed conflict. We are all well aware of the horrific crimes perpetrated against children in these conflicts and how some of these children have not only been robbed of their innocence and future but have also been turned into cold-blooded killing machines. Despite recent concerted international efforts to address this issue, the situation on the ground remains worrisome.

Small arms are critically involved in the vast majority of direct conflict deaths worldwide, and civilian populations – increasingly also children – bear the brunt of armed conflict more than ever. These weapons are not only broadly used in inter-state conflict, they are the weapons of choice in civil wars, for terrorism, organized crime and gang warfare.

It is the sovereign right of all states to remain central providers of security. They have the responsible task of securing the *weapons of their armed and police forces*, so that stockpiles do not turn up in the wrong hands. What is more, governments have a

responsibility to ensure public safety and should have a vested interest in providing human security and development to their citizens. Therefore, it must be part of the equation for every government to ensure that *small arms from private ownership* do not enter illicit circuits.

These twin tasks are not easy. Small arms easily leak away; they are cheap, light, and easy to handle, to transport, and to conceal. While a build-up of small arms alone may not create the conflicts in which they are used, their universal availability in often illicit markets tends to aggravate conflicts by increasing the deadliness of violence, and its duration. Governments *must* exercise legitimate authority. They should provide safety, security and development to their citizens. If they do not, their people may seek to guarantee their security through alternative forms of self-protection, retributive justice, or resort to armed violence. In such surroundings, adolescents and children need special attention. The young more than anything else should feel protected. In the home, on the street, in schools and market places, in the countryside.

As long as the human security of affected populations remains unanswered, the negative impact of small arms will continue to exist - and that affects future generations in particular.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Office for Disarmament Affairs increasingly comes together with actors such as UNICEF and the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict to address this issue. One of the ways in which we ourselves contribute to UN efforts in this field is our Disarmament Education Programme. We believe that education, awareness-raising

and training in disarmament and non-proliferation are effective tools to empower new generations to become active citizens that make their views on weapons and human security issues known to decision makers. Please have a look at the “UN Cyberschoolbus” website, where teaching modules on both the issues of small arms and of child soldiers are available.

However, disarmament education is not just about children or students, it is also about raising awareness of these issues to many constituencies, such as diplomats gathered here today, journalists, academics, NGOs as well as civil society. Where there is ignorance or a lack of knowledge, there can be indifference. We cannot afford to be indifferent to the issue of illicit small arms and the effect they have, particularly on defense-less children. It is in this spirit that we have jointly organised today’s event. I appreciate the work of those like Mr. Jal who have made activism and education part of their lives, and of institutions within the UN system and beyond, who play an important role in educating people about the dangers of small arms.

Lastly, I wish to pay tribute to all present here who have been spearheading the international efforts to not only protect children in armed conflict, but also to prohibit their use in such conflicts.

I thank you for your attention.