

UN envoy urges protection of children as key to peace-making and conflict prevention

7 March 2017 – The rights of children must also be a cornerstone of conflict prevention, peace-making and peace building efforts, the United Nations focal point on children in armed conflict today told the UN Human Rights Council, expressing deep concern at the scale and severity of grave violations committed against children in the past year.

“In Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen thousands of children were killed and maimed as result of intense conflict,” said the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Leila Zerrougui, said presenting her latest report to the Geneva-based rights body.

Recruitment and use continued at “high levels” in those countries, as well as in the conflicts in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Nigeria, Ms. Zerrougui said.

She also warned of the impact that attacks on schools and hospitals have on children’s education and health, as well as the denial of humanitarian aid for children and even besiegement.

In her address, Ms. Zerrougui called on the Human Rights Council and the UN Member States to take all available measures to prevent violations from reoccurring.

In addition, the senior UN official also urged Member States to protect the rights of children associated with armed groups and to treat them as victims instead of perpetrators, saying Member States “cannot lock up a child for his or her entire life and that prolonged detention will only create and feed grievances.”

She urged Governments to follow Niger’s lead to adopt protocols for the handover of children encountered in military and security operations to child protection officers.

Of particular concern is the safety of girls who are targeted for sexual violence and trafficking, and who are often stigmatized and rejected by their communities when they return after being kidnapped by armed groups.

“Priority should be given to preparing and sensitizing communities to their plight,” Ms. Zerrougui said.

She also detailed a number of successes during the past year – as the mandate of the Office of the Special Representative marked its 20th anniversary – including through the campaign Children, Not Soldiers and the peace process in Colombia.

Today's presentation to the Human Rights Council was the last for Ms. Zerrougui, who steps down this year as the Special Representative.