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## Briefing to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Afghanistan

London 21<sup>st</sup> September 2015

This is a crucial moment to reconsider and reassess the protection of children in Afghanistan. The recent attack on Kunduz has once again exposed the unduly heavy price that children pay in situations of armed conflict. The number of child casualties in the first half of 2015 were the highest recorded since the UN established its Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism in 2009.

Fighting seriously impacts services that affect children: services delivered by female health workers, teachers, activists and humanitarian workers in schools, medical facilities and hospitals.

While it has been impossible to get confirmed figures, there are significant reports which show that children as young as 10 were forcibly recruited by the Taliban during the siege of Kunduz. There is currently no way to ensure that these children are recovered from the Taliban and brought back to their communities and families.

The problem of lack of recovery and reintegration services is not new. The Afghan government has so far failed to implement proactive mechanisms to identify, verify and release children from the ranks of the Afghan National Security Forces and the issue of recovery of children from the Taliban is yet to be addressed. There are some government funded services which provide support to former child soldiers but in the main, psychosocial support, economic reintegration programmes, livelihood assistance and vocational training are lacking. The Afghan government has taken some responsibility for providing services to children whose applications to the Afghan National Police have been rejected, but these measures are very limited.

Neither UNICEF nor the ICRC conduct comprehensive work on providing effective rehabilitation and reintegration services to former child soldiers.

In May, we conducted field research across five provinces in Afghanistan (Kunar, Logar, Zabul, Uruzgan and Kabul) and found serious concerns:

- Recruitment of children by the ANP and the ALP is ongoing, although on a reduced scale.
- Inadequate age verification procedures, low levels of birth registration, and a prevalence of opportunities to falsify identity documents have contributed to on-going underage recruitment and use in the ANSF.
- Children continue to be used as ~~the~~ boys+and guards at distant outposts by commanders. This is despite directives and orders being issued by the Ministry of Interior prohibiting the use of children at ANP and ALP checkpoints, including in support roles, and stating that the perpetrators would be sanctioned.

- Effective safeguards to prevent future recruitment have not been put in place and there has been no progress in producing a standardised training manual for the ANSF.
- The fact that Afghanistan has criminalised underage recruitment and use is notable. But, Article 3 of this Law prohibits the recruitment and use of children in military installations but it does not prohibit the recruitment and use of children by armed groups. Article 6 of the same Law provides that children who are currently part of military installations must be dismissed within a month. It does not specify any actions for the rehabilitation and reintegration of these children, nor does it stipulate measures to grant them full reparations, to which they are entitled as victims of serious human rights violations.

I would like to give you a snapshot of the scale of the problem: We conducted research in ANP check posts outside Tirin Kot city in Uruzgan province in 2015 which showed that five out of ten ANP check posts in that province were staffed with visibly younger officers. On questioning they admitted to being under-18. They had been performing all responsibilities of a police officer, which included securing check points and engaging in combat for the last few years. We interviewed local journalists, community elders and other residents in Kunar, Logar, and Zabul province who collectively told us that 10 per cent of law enforcement officials in these areas are suspected to be underage.

Once associated with armed forces, children inevitably get drawn into hostilities. Most child casualties occur from ground engagement, which continues to increase, between government security forces and insurgents.

Poverty continues to be the main driver behind underage recruitment. Many children join the ALP and ANP to support their families. In addition, a deep sense of filial responsibility and prestige, which comes from joining the national security forces, continue to provide a strong social incentive to enlist. Aside from formal recruitment, informal association of children with the ANP begins with volunteering as support staff, often to support the work of their older male siblings who are official police officers. These children perform a range of functions such as cooking and tea making, before eventually picking up the gun.<sup>1</sup> In most cases, children are provided basic weapons training before being allowed to handle weapons.

Our information shows that these children receive a stipend or a salary for the tasks they deliver. A higher incidence of the use of children is generally reported in areas more impacted by violence. We received anecdotal reports of some commanders in these areas using children as boys or bodyguards during the day and for sexual exploitation at night. However, due to access constraints we lack an analysis of specific patterns of violations against children in particular provinces.

Armed opposition groups have also continued recruiting and using children to manufacture, transport and plant IEDs and conduct suicide attacks. The issue of children being used as suicide bombers is a national problem with the majority of Afghanistan's 34 provinces experiencing attacks by the *Taliban*.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Vinay Bhatia and Mark Sedra, *Afghanistan, Arms and Conflict: Armed Groups, Disarmament and Security in a Post-war Society*, Contemporary Security Studies, 2008.

Sexual violence against children in a climate where reporting remains low due to cultural stigmatisation and fear of reprisals, is pervasive. Accountability mechanisms, which could lead to investigations and prosecutions of offenders, and work as a deterrent for future recruitment, are woefully absent.

Detention of children on national security related charges continues to be widely practiced by authorities in Afghanistan. According to the Ministry of Justice, 258 boys were held in Juvenile Rehabilitation Centres across the country in 2014 on national security-related charges, including association with armed groups.<sup>2</sup> 44 out of 105 child detainees interviewed by the UN between February 2013 and December 2014 reported ill treatment or torture. Once children are arrested, they are dealt with not as victims but as adult offenders. Ill-treatment and torture during interrogations, which are primarily focused on obtaining confessions, is common. UN agencies only have partial access to sites maintained by the National Directorate of Security (NDS).

International pressure and assistance are required to ensure the armed forces and armed groups address child recruitment and use in their ranks. Prevention of the recruitment of children and their use in hostilities should be mainstreamed in the international assistance provided to Afghanistan, including technical assistance to strengthen the armed forces' recruitment procedures, and the necessary age verification, monitoring and accountability mechanisms should be put in place to prevent underage recruitment.

More broadly, there is a need for the international community to ensure through the UN and other initiatives supporting conflict resolution, that any peace processes address the protection needs of child soldiers in line with the UN operational guidelines on addressing children's issues in peace agreements.

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<sup>2</sup> UNGA, *Annual Report of the Secretary General on children and armed conflict*, UN Doc. A/69/926 - S/2015/409, para. 29, 5 June 2015.

