

AFRICAN UNION

*African Committee of Experts on the Rights  
and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC)*



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*Comité Africain d'Experts sur les Droits et le  
Bien-être de l'Enfant (CAEDBE)*

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*"An Africa Fit for Children"*

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## PRESS STATEMENT

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### ADVOCACY MISSION OF THE AFRICAN COMMITTEE OF EXPERTS ON THE RIGHTS AND WELFARE OF THE CHILD (ACERWC) ON THE SITUATION OF CHILDREN IN SOUTH SUDAN

03-09 August, 2014

**Juba, 08 August 2014.** Following the Resolution on the situation of children in South Sudan and Central African Republic adopted during its 23<sup>rd</sup> Ordinary Session (16 April, 2014), the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) expressed its concerns on the humanitarian challenges hindering the protection and well-being of children in the two countries;

**Recalling** the Statement issued by the African Union Peace and Security Council (AU-PSC) on its 434<sup>th</sup> Session, the ACERWC decided to assess the situation of children in South Sudan with a view of strengthening its efforts to promote the welfare of children in Africa;

**The ACERWC accordingly,** conducted an advocacy mission to assess the situation of children affected by the conflict in South Sudan from 03 - 09 August, 2014, in

accordance to its mandate to promote and protect the rights of children pursuant to the African Charter on the Rights and welfare of the Child (ACRWC).

## **The War on South Sudan's children**

1. The Committee has concluded that the present conflict can be characterised as nothing less than a war on the children of South Sudan. We have been exposed to an array of grave violations of their rights, which are interdependent and cumulative. These assault the very future of childhood in South Sudan. The Committee has heard evidence that the impact of conflict of the last 8 months (since December 15) upon children is greater than in the entire 21 year period during which the war was ongoing. Moreover, the situation is deteriorating as I speak.
2. The following specific concerns have been brought to our attention and, seen together, are perilously close to constituting a crime against humanity that is being perpetrated against the children of South Sudan.

- **Killing of children**

We have received numerous reports of children - even babies – being wantonly killed. In Bor for instance, bodies of children abounded. One report estimates that 490 killed children were identified in the many mass graves in and around Bor. As recently as 17 April, 12 children in the Bor POC were randomly mowed down by marauders, the youngest a mere 3 months old. It is not that these deaths are accidental or unfortunate by-products. We are reliably informed that children are being targeted, deliberately.

- **Killing of parent and care-givers**

The killings have left uncounted numbers of children parentless, orphans and having to take to the streets. Child-headed households proliferate, caused not by unfortunate natural disasters or disease, but by man-made causes, that is war. The crisis has swept child protection and humanitarian agencies into a time consuming, expensive and interminable cycle of FTR (family tracking and reunification), which has to date yielded limited results.

- **Displacement**

One of the reasons for this is the huge displacement of peoples, including children with or without their families, that has occurred and continues to occur. Our Committee has witnessed this massive disruption of people's and children's lives first hand first hand. It is estimated that more than 1,5 million people have been displaced internally and across borders. The effects of this will be felt by affected children, and their parent and families, for years to come. The ACERWC recommends to expand the family tracing network to all affected counties and continue to support follow up to ensure children in foster care and extended family care remain protected and that referrals for family tracing are acted on when possible matches are found.

- **Grave Child Rights Violations:**

Since the eruption of conflict in December in 2013 to end of June, the UN received more reports of grave child rights violations in armed conflict than all of 2013 combined. Grave child rights violations continue to be analyzed, documented and verified. The violations monitored include killing, as mentioned, but also recruitment and use of children by armed forces and groups, sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access, including access to health.

Of mounting concern for our Committee is the escalating recruitment of children into forces associated with the armed conflict. Children associated with armed forces is one of the main protection issues that have to be addressed on a basis of absolute urgency. Unverified reports of an upsurge in the recruitment of children by armed groups have been received by the team for any number of sources. Recent reports include girls in military uniform, reflecting the rapidly changing dynamic of the conflict on the protection of children. The association of children with armed forces and groups is openly visible to all we have spoken to, including here in Juba.

The Committee urges the Government of South Sudan and all associated forces to honour the commitments made to the SGSR on Children in Armed Conflict in June 2014 without delay. The Committee also urges the SPLM-IO to honour the commitment made in Addis Ababa to desist from mobilizing child soldiers, and to demobilize those already affected. A focal point for further liaison in this regard should be immediately identified.

Linked to this concern about the role of children in the current conflict are unconfirmed reports of the recent escalation of arms in South Sudan. The proliferation of weapons fuels children's exposure to and association with armed conflict, and heightens their vulnerability to violence, injury and death. The Committee calls on the African Union, its member states and the international community to take all necessary measures to reduce the flow of arms into South Sudan in the interests of children, and commends all efforts towards disarmament and demobilization.

- **Abductions and sexual violence**

The extent to which this war is being waged directly upon the children of South Sudan is apparent from the violent abduction of children, and the confirmed incidents

of rape of both girls and boys. The Committee was advised of the high level of sexual violence being experienced, amongst others, in our visit to Tonping POC. It was confirmed in a meeting with the Human Rights Commission. We understand that perpetrators are escaping with impunity.

As a matter of priority, the ACERWC recommends the establishment in all affected areas of clear referral pathway that outlines roles and responsibilities and the processes which are to be followed by all actors to ensure that rape and sexual assault survivors are provided comprehensive support services and assistance with psycho- social recovery.

Abductions objectify and dehumanize children depriving them of their most fundamental rights as human beings. More than 900 children have been abducted in Jonglei state since December 2013. The scale of abductions go a long way towards confirming that this war is aimed at children.

- **Nutrition**

The crisis around nutrition and food insecurity was readily apparent on our mission. Treatments are in short supply, we were advised, and mothers pleaded for us to advocate for food for their starving children. Unicef estimates that four million people (34 per cent of an estimated 11.6 million total population) will experience acute and emergency levels of food insecurity between June and August 2014; this means that 840,000 children under-fives and 328,000 pregnant and lactating women are exposed to unacceptably high levels of food insecurity. In the three conflict-affected states, 462,000 children under 5 years and 180,400 pregnant and lactating women are exposed to unacceptably high levels of food insecurity

50 000 infants and young children face imminent death due to malnutrition, we are lead to believe. The situation is exacerbated by the onset of the rainy season, the conflict generally, and the diminished access of humanitarian aid to conflict sites. The ACERWC praises the strategic and cross-sectoral coordination of humanitarian

programmes with UN agencies and non-governmental actors providing essential humanitarian supplies to IDPs and affected population, but at the same time urges the international community and donor entities to assist scale up the available aid to combat the looming child mortality catastrophe.

- **Education**

All the South Sudanese we have spoken to, including children, are desperate for an education. Yet in many places the education situation has deteriorated to the point where most children are not accessing education. This is the case not only in the crisis states, but throughout the country.

The effect of this is that a whole generation risks being lost altogether to the knowledge economy of the future.

We have learned that many teachers have fled, and that schools have been occupied by armed groups, closed or destroyed. We urge that the South Sudanese and all other actors (including international partners in the education sector) devise urgent strategies to enable the resumption of early childhood development and education for all the children of this country in the interests of securing some future for today's children.

- **Health and sanitation**

The situation we observed in amongst the IDPs and in the POCs is far from adequate, with concomitant risks to children health and wellbeing. The word most used to describe the physical environment that we heard this week is: 'horrible'. We concur, based on our own observations. The rainy season also brings untold

hardship to this situation. The need for peace and the resumption of normalcy so that families can return to their homes could not have been more evident.

Also, there have been 5 times more attacks on hospitals in the last 3 months than in the whole of 2013. This too imperils children's access to medical services.

We do, however, recognise the efforts made by child protection actors in these extremely difficult circumstances and recommend expanding the number of Child Friendly Spaces that are providing psychosocial support for affected children and helping them heal from the trauma associated with displacement and conflict and to build their resilience.

- **Ratification of the African Children's Charter and implementation of the Child Act 2008.**

The Committee has noted the intention of the Government of South Sudan accede to the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. This we believe will provide a solid commitment to improving the fulfilment of the rights of children in this country, as bearers of human rights and not objects of war. We also take note of the Child Act of 2008, and urge that plans be put in place to implement the Children's Commission, as well as to allocate budgetary resources for the progressive implementation of the Act. The child protection mechanisms envisaged in the Act should be established as early as possible.

We also encourage the creation of a Children's Parliament as it is long overdue that the voices of the children in South Sudan are heard.

Children comprise 60% of the inhabitants of South Sudan. The world community has made remarkable steps in attributing to childhood the status of a human being over the last 25 years - this through the 'child rights' approach. South Sudan must come to this position immediately. Children are not objects of war, they are subjects and bearers of rights and members of humankind.

We therefore urge peace to enable the children of South Sudan to survive and thrive.