Statement by SRSG Leila Zerrougui
High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on the 25th Anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child
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Twenty-five years of Convention of the Rights of the Child: is the world a better place for children?

Excellencies, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen

As we are here today to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is important to look back and highlight the long way that we have gone together to improve the protection of children. By ratifying the Convention, 194 countries in the world have recognized that children, boys and girls, have rights and that governments bear the primary responsibility for their respect, protection and fulfillment.

As the most ratified human rights treaty in the world, it has resulted in a significant international consensus that the protection and promotion of the rights of the child is a moral, social and legal imperative for all of us. It is particularly encouraging to see that the Convention has inspired a number of positive changes in law and policy to improve the lives of children, by framing children’s basic needs such as education and health as unalienable rights, not a privilege that only a few can enjoy. Enhanced protection of children’s rights has also resulted in tangible improvements for children’s development, ranging from a reduction in infant and child mortality to an increase in school enrollment.

However, progress achieved over the past 25 years remains uneven. In conflict, children continue to be killed, maimed, recruited and used by armed forces and groups, deprived of healthcare and education. Children continue to be the most vulnerable to the impact of armed conflict in different parts of the world.

In my travels to conflict zones, I have met too many children forced to abandon their home, in some cases without their families. Recently, I met a child who at the beginning of the conflict in South Sudan, happened to be at the wrong place, at the wrong time. He was recovering from gunshot wounds and was struggling to walk again. Seven months after he was injured, he still didn’t know where his family was but had been lucky enough to be brought to a center supported by the UN to receive treatments.
Excellencies, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen

May 2015 will mark the fifteenth anniversary of the adoption of the Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict. The Protocol offers a solid basis for building legal, policy and operational frameworks both at the national and international levels. Under the Protocol, States are required to ban compulsory recruitment below the age of 18 and to ensure that any individual in their armed forces under the age of 18 does not take part in hostilities. State parties shall also take all necessary measures to prohibit and prevent the recruitment and use of children under 18 by non-state armed groups.

To date, 158 Member States have ratified this Optional Protocol and I would like to take the opportunity to call on those who have not yet done so, to take steps towards ratification.

Excellencies, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen

As part of my mandate, I continuously advocate for the protection of children in conflict, with governments, as well as with armed groups. To this end, I engage with parties to conflict and all relevant stakeholders to end violations, including the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict.

And there is progress to report. Years of engagement with parties to conflict to end the recruitment and use of children are starting to yield results. Twenty-five years after the adoption of the CRC, and nearly 15 after the adoption of the OPAC, we can now say there is an emerging consensus among the world’s governments that children do not belong in national security forces in conflict.

Building on this consensus, I launched the Campaign Children, Not Soldiers, jointly with UNICEF, to end the recruitment and use of children by government armed forces by 2016.

In the eight months since we launched the campaign, there has been significant progress. The Government of Yemen signed an action plan with the United Nations committing to make their national security forces child free. Chad completed all the requirements under its action plan and was delisted. The Government of South Sudan formally recommitted to its Action Plan to end the recruitment and use of children, while in Somalia the Cabinet adopted the CRC, which is awaiting ratification by the Parliament. The Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo made progress in the implementation of the Action Plan and appointed a Presidential Adviser for sexual violence and child recruitment. In Afghanistan, a roadmap was developed to accelerate the implementation of the Action Plan.

I am encouraged by this progress and by the momentum created by the campaign, but there is still a lot of work ahead of us if we want to reach the objectives of the campaign. I call on all concerned governments, regional and non-governmental organizations to continue to work hand in hand with the United Nations, bilateral partners and donors. Ending child recruitment by government forces in the next two years is possible, but only if we work together, and share our expertise and resources.
Excellencies, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen

Although the CRC has contributed to greater advocacy and awareness of child rights worldwide, our mission is far from complete. Governments’ compliance and full integration of the CRC into national systems remain challenges. The monitoring and reporting of the six grave violations in armed conflict has proved to be an important tool to inform the work of the Committee on the Rights of the Child in monitoring governments’ obligations outlined in the CRC.

One of the gaps that remain of great concern is ensuring individual accountability for child’s rights violations in armed conflict. I am encouraged by the recent entry into force of the third Optional Protocol (OP3) to the CRC in April of this year, allowing the establishment of an international complaints procedure for violations of child’s rights contained in the CRC and protocols. This is a step taken in the right direction to promote child victims’ rights and ensure better access to justice.

Excellencies, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen

Since the onset of my tenure, I have made the protection of education and healthcare a priority, as each day we witness an alarming number of attacks on school infrastructures and hospitals, on students, teachers and medical personnel.

When I met families from Syria who had left everything behind to flee the conflict, the one thing parents said they really wanted was a school their children could go to. They knew that every month that went by with their children out of school would be very difficult to make up for. The parents I met knew that nothing could replace the comfort of going to school every day, even in the midst of chaos, and they wanted to make sure that their children would not miss out on the chance to build a brighter future for themselves and their country.

Excellencies, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen

It is time to turn aspirations into practice in all parts of the globe and put an end to the suffering of children. I count on Member States to honor the commitments that they have made by ratifying the CRC and its Optional Protocols and by endorsing the Children Not Soldiers Campaign. I will continue to seize all possible opportunities to advocate for stronger child protection frameworks and I encourage all of you to support initiatives that are being undertaken to respond to the challenges posed to child protection in conflict situations.

We shall pursue our efforts to recognize and address the shortcomings and challenges that we face in keeping children safe from the harm of conflict by ensuring that we use the tools developed over the past 25 years to protect children to their full potential. Building consensus on the urgency and importance of our collective action to protect children is critical.
Allow me in closing to commend the work, dedication and tireless efforts of the child protection actors, in particular those who are working in complex security environments.

Child victims count on all of us to stand together, to respect, protect and promote their rights. We cannot fail to honor the promise we have made to them 25 years ago.

Thank you.