

watchlist on children and armed conflict

Working together to protect the security and rights of children.

international steering committee

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Additional support from a network of NGOs

[NOTE: This letter was sent to all members of the UN Security Council]

November 6, 2002

Dear Mr. Ambassador:

As the United Nations Security Council considers action in Iraq, the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict urges you to include humanitarian factors in your deliberations, especially the impact of war on children.

In Iraq, there are 11.1 million children under 18 years old; this group comprises 48.5 percent of the total Iraqi population. There is no doubt that more armed conflict in Iraq would increase the existing threats to the physical and mental well-being of this vulnerable population.

The humanitarian situation in Iraq is extremely poor. According to UNICEF, the infant mortality rate is 105 deaths per 1,000 live births, in comparison to 63 deaths per 1,000 in developing countries and 6 per 1,000 in industrialized nations (2000). The under-five mortality rate is 130 deaths per every 1,000 live births. Twenty-two percent of Iraqi children under 5 suffer from moderate and severe forms of malnutrition and only 70.25 percent of 1-year-olds are fully immunized. These life-threatening circumstances would surely become worse in the event of expanded military action in Iraq.

Humanitarian agencies have estimated that as much as 25 percent of the Iraqi population — including 2,775,000 children — can be expected to become dependent on international humanitarian assistance in the event of a full-scale war.

Iraq has the highest number of internally displaced people (IDPs) in the Middle East — estimates range from 600,000 to 1 million. The majority of the Iraqi IDPs are likely to be women and children. IDPs often lack shelter, clothing, education, healthcare and other basic services. Many organizations with expertise in relief and assistance have been restricted from operating in Iraq, thereby limiting potential support and protection for vulnerable populations. Outbreak of full-scale war in Iraq could cause a large increase in the numbers of displaced people, compounding the need for humanitarian assistance in Iraq and neighboring countries. It would be difficult for humanitarian agencies to adequately meet the protection needs of the existing and new IDPs in weeks or even months, as the humanitarian infrastructure is not in place. The potential for massive population movement as a result of expanded war presents many dangers for children and all civilians. For example, landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) are known to contaminate areas of Iraq, especially border areas.

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Child refugees and IDPs are regularly killed and injured by landmines and UXO as they attempt to cross borders, collect food and water and flee from violence.

Iraq is not a party to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on children and armed conflict, which prohibits participation of children under 18 years old in armed forces. In Iraq, voluntary recruitment into the armed forces is permitted at age 15. We are concerned about the children serving in the Iraqi armed forces who would inevitably become engaged in active combat in the event of a war, as well as the potential for massive recruitment of children under 18 into an Iraqi war effort.

Finally, international humanitarian law entitles all civilians who do not participate in armed conflict to general protections. It also establishes a series of specialized protections for children in armed conflict given their particular vulnerabilities. Before the Security Council authorizes military action in Iraq, it should ensure that the provisions providing protection for civilians and for children and armed conflict, including provisions related to conduct of war and bombing or targeting of children, are upheld. It also is imperative that the UN be ready to respond to the humanitarian crisis that would ensue.

The following are recommendations for the UN Security Council to protect children and adolescents as it considers action in Iraq:

- o Construct any UN action in Iraq so that it is consistent with the protection framework for children and armed conflict adopted by the Security Council in resolutions 1261, 1314 and 1379 and in other international standards;
- o Include improvements in the existing humanitarian conditions for children in negotiations with Iraq, especially the conditions of children in IDP camps;
- o Ensure that the rights and needs of children and adolescents are given a high priority from the outset of any emergency, including healthcare and access to education under difficult circumstances, with special attention to IDP children;
- o Mandate an assessment of protection requirements for children, considering the particular risks they face because of their sex or age. This would include addressing issues such as such as gender-based violence and recruitment of child soldiers;
- o Protect the right of children to access emergency food, medicine and shelter and ensure that child protection staff are deployed by operational agencies;
- o Encourage donor investment in landmine education programs now and removal programs to follow, especially for IDP and refugee children and adolescents;
- o Commit to long-term and full-scale reconstruction efforts for Iraq, and use that period as an opportunity to advance the security and rights of children, as a important contribution to international peace and security.

Thank for your giving this your consideration. We look forward to seeing the inclusion of child protection components in the action plan for Iraq.

Sincerely

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