



United Nations Office of the Special Representative  
of the Secretary-General for

# CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

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**Statement by Ms. Leila Zerrougui,  
SRSG for Children and Armed Conflict  
Informal meeting of the General Assembly to consider ways to advance a  
comprehensive response to the Global Humanitarian and Refugee Crisis**

**19 November 2015**

Mr. President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the opportunity to address this timely and important informal meeting of the General Assembly.

Today, conflicts across the globe – and resulting civilian casualties, destruction of homes and infrastructure, and disruption of essential services – are driving an ever-increasing flow of civilians seeking refuge in safer places, with a total of 60 million people today forcibly displaced.

We are currently witnessing an acute humanitarian crisis in Syria: half of the population is now displaced – and half of the displaced are children. This is resulting in the largest flow of refugees and asylum seekers in the region and beyond. Hundreds of thousands of people have crossed the Mediterranean Sea this year alone and, as you are all aware, many do not make it across alive. No words describe their despair better than those of the Somali-British poet Warsan Shire: “No one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land”.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child stresses that States must ensure the rights “of each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind”. Much more must be done to uphold this obligation towards children and protect their rights.

Mr. President,

Today, the international community is faced with the consequences of its inability to take effective action. A comprehensive response to the global humanitarian and refugee crisis must tackle the root causes of protracted conflicts and forced displacement.

The response must prioritise political engagement to seek solutions to the protracted conflicts. As a first step, there must be sustained pressure on all parties to conflict to abide by their obligations under international law to protect civilians and end grave violations against children. Violations of international law and the failure to uphold the rights of civilians are both a cause and effect of conflicts.

Mr. President,

For the purpose of this meeting, I would like to suggest the following two key areas where action is needed to guarantee the rights of displaced children, particularly those affected by conflict.

First, protection.

A comprehensive response requires the protection of those who have been forcibly displaced. Monitoring and reporting has demonstrated that the violations do not cease even after children have escaped areas where hostilities are ongoing. Boys and girls continue to be vulnerable and be subjected to recruitment, sexual violence, child labour and trafficking in IDP and refugee settings. In camps, we must ensure a protective environment for children and ensure their safety. The growing numbers of unaccompanied or separated children are particularly vulnerable to violations during displacement. Moreover, those born outside of their home country are at risk of becoming stateless. We must strive to prevent the break-up of families and ensure that children have access to administrative services including proper registration.

Second, preserve the right to education.

Safeguarding the right to education must be an integral part of our response to the crisis. Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals aims to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.’ I would like to emphasise the term ‘for all.’ Refugee and displaced children cannot and must not be excluded.

Returning to the example of Syria, prior to the conflict, primary school enrolment was almost universal. Now an estimated two million internally displaced children and 700,000 refugee children are not attending school. Over a quarter of all schools in Syria have been fully or partially destroyed. We are witnessing a generation at risk of not receiving an education, with serious long-term consequences for these children and Syria.

Education can be a life-saving and life-sustaining tool, both during and post-conflict. Education gives hope to displaced children and their families. It also facilitates reconstruction in a post-conflict state and ensures future economic stability. Failure to invest in education now will only increase the cost of rebuilding a sustainable society later. We must prioritise the provision of education for displaced and refugee children - including by enhanced support to states hosting large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers. To this end, I urge donors to show flexibility in their funding requirements as education in emergencies often falls between development and humanitarian funding.

Mr. President,

Allow me to end by stressing the need for accountability. Ensuring accountability for violations, including grave violations against children, is necessary to prevent their recurrence. Justice must prevail as a preventive measure, but indeed also as a peace building measure. The 60 million people worldwide who have been forcibly displaced by war and persecution must be assured that the international community recognises their plight, and supports the rebuilding of their lives and their societies.