

STATEMENT BY HONOURABLE ROBERT DOYA NANIMA, SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON CHILDREN IN CONFLICT SITUATIONS OF THE AFRICAN COMMITTEE OF EXPERTS ON THE RIGHTS AND WELFARE OF THE CHILD (ACERWC)

ON INTERNATIONAL DAY AGAINST THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS

On the occasion of the International Day against the Use of Child Soldiers, on behalf of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the Special Rapporteur on Children in Conflict Situations expresses grave concern over the persistence of armed conflicts and situations of insecurity across parts of Africa and their disproportionate impact on children. Armed conflict continues to expose children to recruitment and use by armed forces and armed groups, a grave violation of children's rights that persists in several parts of the continent. Children are recruited by armed forces and armed groups through a range of practices, including force, coercion, manipulation, inducement, and so-called voluntary association in contexts where conflict, poverty, displacement, and the absence of viable alternatives severely constrain children's choices. Regardless of the manner of recruitment, the recruitment and use of children constitutes a grave violation of their rights, robs them of their childhood, dignity, and future, and exposes them to serious and long-lasting physical, psychological, and social harm.

Whilst AU Member States have made commendable progress in enacting legislation prohibiting the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, the Special Rapporteur notes with concern that recruitment continues due to a range of interrelated structural and contextual factors. These include persistent conflict and political instability, weak governance and impunity, poverty and inequality, limited access to education and basic services, displacement and family separation, weak civil registration systems, community-level grievances, and cross-border dynamics that facilitate the recruitment of children by armed forces and armed groups.

Guided by Article 22 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the ACERWC's General Comment No. 6 on Children in Conflict Situations, and the ACERWC Model Law on Children Affected by Armed Conflict, the Special Rapporteur underscores the obligation of Member States to take all necessary measures to prevent the recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups, and to ensure the protection, rehabilitation, and reintegration of children affected by armed conflict.

Accordingly, the Special Rapporteur calls upon Member States to:

1. Ensure that all children recruited or used by armed forces and armed groups are treated primarily as victims of serious human rights violations, and not as perpetrators or offenders, including by prohibiting the arrest, detention, prosecution, or punishment of children solely based on their association with armed actors and by ensuring the application of child-sensitive justice and protection measures in line with the best interests of the child.
2. Strengthen prevention and protection measures by addressing the root causes of child recruitment, including poverty and inequality, persistent insecurity, limited access to education and basic services, gaps in birth registration and civil documentation, weak community-based child protection mechanisms, cross-border dynamics that facilitate recruitment, and the absence of early warning systems, with particular attention to children in conflict-affected, border, and displacement settings.
3. Ensure effective rehabilitation and reintegration of children affected by armed conflict by facilitating their safe release from armed forces and armed groups and guaranteeing access to appropriate psychosocial support, education, family reunification, and community-based reintegration programmes, in a manner that promotes dignity, non-stigmatisation, and long-term recovery.

In this context, the Special Rapporteur welcomes the appointment of the African Union Special Envoy for Children Affected by Armed Conflict as an important and positive institutional development to strengthen continental leadership, coordination, and advocacy on the protection of children affected by armed conflict. The Special Rapporteur underscores the importance of mutualising and harmonising efforts between the Special Envoy and the ACERWC, in particular through close collaboration with the ACERWC Special Rapporteur on Children in Conflict Situations, in order to enhance coherence between normative standards, policy engagement, and implementation at national, regional, and continental levels.

In conclusion, Agenda 2040, Aspiration 9, envisions an Africa in which every child is free from the impact of armed conflict. Realising this aspiration requires sustained and coordinated efforts by Member States to prevent the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, to protect all children affected by such situations, and to ensure that all measures taken are guided by the best interests of the child, with full respect for the rights enshrined in the African Children's Charter.

Done in Maseru, Kingdom of Lesotho

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