

Nairobi, 4 November 2010 — Armed groups in Somalia have continued recruiting children to fight and engage in piracy, and girls have found themselves facing increasing risk of sexual violence, a senior UN official says.

"In some areas, Al-Shabab leaders are asking parents to give [them] a child. I heard of people hiding their children to escape recruitment," Radhika Coomaraswamy, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General (SRSG) for Children and Armed Conflict, told a news conference on 3 November following a mission to Somalia and the semi-autonomous regions of Puntland and Somaliland.

"Children are expressing the difficulty of living in Mogadishu," she added. "As they walk past checkpoints they are told your ankles are showing, wear something long. Then later they cross the TFG [Transitional Federal Government] checkpoints and are told they are Al-Shabab due to their [clothing]. It is the reason they are going to Puntland."

Sexual- and gender-based violence, Coomaraswamy said, was on the increase, according to child protection partners, with fast, quick marriages, killing and maiming of concern. "These young boys [fighters] are marrying young girls, and then moving on to others - forced marriages are making a comeback," she said.

A nine-year-old girl told Coomaraswamy: "My greatest fear, besides thieves, is that men will come and do violence to women and girls in the night."

Coomaraswamy said she had not had access to the Al-Shabab and Hisbul Islam militia, but urged states with an influence on the parties to call for the release of children in their ranks. She expressed concern over the use of radio and schools to recruit children in militia-controlled regions.

The Special Representative also said children were held alongside adults as pirates in Bosaso Central Prison. "The adults are not separated from the children and there are complaints of abuse," she said. "The frontline [pirate] troops now are increasingly children and youth. The big pirates do not go out, they have become businessmen; it is the young children [15-17-year-olds] who are sent out."

Armed groups, she added, were "exploiting [the fact] that children have a less developed concept of death and tend to be fearless fighters. Children are susceptible due to notions of romantic death."

She said the new Somali Prime Minister, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, had pledged to stop the recruitment of child soldiers.

"The government will work with the TFG and allies towards a UN action plan for the release and verification of the release of child soldiers," Coomaraswamy said, adding that some released children were already in the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) camp in Mogadishu.

She said there were two schools of thought regarding TFG recruitment of child soldiers - one that the TFG-proper was not doing the recruiting but its allies were, while "others say that even the checkpoints are run by the TFG itself.

"In 2008, I said the African child suffers the most but I think the Somali child suffers even more," she said.

Source: AllAfrica.com