

NEW YORK, 10 February 2011 (IRIN) - The recent UN-negotiated action plan with the Afghanistan government - signed on 30 January and outlawing the use of child soldiers in armed forces - has not yet resulted in demobilization, but it has shifted the focus to the role state actors play in recruiting children.

Relatively few governments in the world currently recruit and use children in their armed forces. The London-based Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (CSUCS) lists Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Somalia and Sudan among the “five real offenders”, according to CSUCS head of international programmes Lucia Withers.

Prior to the Afghan action, Radhika Coomaraswamy, the UN Secretary-General's special representative on children and armed conflict, oversaw the January 2009 signing of a similar action plan with Uganda. Implementation of the plan was “very fast,” Coomaraswamy told IRIN, noting that UN monitoring ascertained that all children were de-listed within 18 months.

Coomaraswamy expects speedy action in Afghanistan.

“States tend to move much quicker - they move with a purpose and usually they want to fall in line with international standards,” Coomaraswamy explained. She expects a similar agreement to be signed with Chad within the next few months and in November, the prime minister of Somalia signalled a willingness to work towards an action plan, as well.

“The UN is dealing with quite difficult governments and not a lot of action plans have been signed,” Withers said. “Actual progress is much slower than we would like to see.”

Negotiations with the government of Myanmar occurred in both 2009 and 2010 and Coomaraswamy says she hopes that this year, post-election, will provide a new opportunity for further progress.

Action plans have been facilitated with a far greater number of non-government military factions in various countries, including in Côte d'Ivoire, Nepal, the Philippines, Sudan, Central African Republic, Burundi and Sri Lanka.

“No teeth”

UN negotiated action plans can be more effective than other measures, like the [Optional Protocol](#) to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a UN General Assembly approved protocol which sets 18 as the minimum age for recruitment into armed forces and participation in hostilities.

Afghanistan is among the 138 countries that has ratified the protocol, but is six years overdue in reporting to the UN's Committee on the Rights of the Child, a regular requirement for all

protocol-abiding countries.

“The problem with the Optional Protocol is there are no consequences for it and it relies on states, NGOs, the UN and others to put pressure on states to abide by its obligations, but there are no sanctions involved, and there is actually no teeth to this kind of human rights treaty,” said Withers.

Violations against the action plan, on the other hand, can result in a government or armed force continuing to be listed in the UN Secretary-General's annual name-and-shame list, as well as the possibility of eventual sanctions.

Afghan conundrum

Child rights workers say the prompt action taken by the Afghanistan government could be considered a recent success story, but that the scale of the problem - judging by photographic evidence and conversations UN officials have had with underage soldiers - was initially less there than it is in other countries.

One aid worker in Afghanistan, who preferred anonymity, said there was no accurate data on the number of children serving in Afghanistan's armed forces or police, or in non-state armed factions.

“I doubt anybody has the numbers,” the aid worker said. “But there are big demands to increase the number of soldiers and policemen in Afghanistan and there is pressure to recruit, and unfortunately, that tends to come from the poorer sectors of society... When you have a big increase in recruitment numbers there will be an increase in the proportion that are underage.”

Coomaraswamy says her office is hoping to establish contact with the non-state actors in Afghanistan, as well.

Source: [IRIN](#)