

Darfur, July 21, 2010 - The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) today signed a child protection agreement, which includes ending the recruitment of child soldiers, with a major rebel group in the war-torn Sudanese region of Darfur.

Under the memorandum of understanding, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) committed itself to "actively support UNICEF work on the protection and well-being of children affected by the conflict in Darfur."

GA_googleFillSlot("AllAfrica_Story_InsetA"); The agency has called the agreement - which gives UNICEF access to JEM bases - a concrete step towards creating a detailed plan of action.

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The group also agreed to prevent and work to bring an end to the "association, recruitment and use" of child soldiers, including in non-combatant or supportive roles.

JEM pledged to release any child under the age of 18 currently associated with the group and hand them over to UNICEF.

The agreement includes a commitment by JEM to end the killing and maiming of children, as well as sexual violence.

Violence flared anew between Sudanese Government forces and JEM in May, in breach of a cessation of hostilities agreement signed earlier this year.

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The process has also seen the participation of the UN and African Union mediators on Darfur, as well as the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

Mr. Kastberg voiced hope that agreements with other armed movements will be forthcoming "to enhance the protection of children throughout Darfur."

He noted that in Darfur, children are not always proactively recruited to serve as soldiers. They often gravitate towards armed groups' barracks, where they can receive food and water, he said.

The UNICEF official underlined the importance of humanitarian access to deliver much-needed supplies, set up schools and other measures to "provide alternatives [to children] rather than being associated with armed groups." GA_googleFillSlot("AllAfrica_Story_InsetC");

Even if peace negotiations among groups and the Government should break down, "we trying now to establish [signing agreements with UNICEF on child protection] is a normal thing to do," he said.

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Mr. Kastberg said that UNICEF has seen enormous progress on the protection of children since the publication of the landmark 1996 study on the impact of armed conflict on children by Graça Machel, then first lady of Mozambique.

Further, the International Criminal Court (ICC) has issued indictments on the charge of recruiting child soldiers.

"We gradually see that armed movements recognize that involving children has consequences [and that] there can't be impunity," the UNICEF Representative said.

For her part, Radhika Coomaraswamy, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, welcomed today's agreement, calling it a "major step towards an over-arching action plan."

She said that she hopes "for the resumption of the broader peace process," imploring all sides to include child protection clauses in all stages, from ceasefire agreements to peace accords.

"For these commitments to have a real impact for children, they must be honoured, enhanced and fully implemented," Ms. Coomaraswamy stressed.

An estimated 300,000 people have been killed and 2.7 million others have been displaced in the past seven years in Darfur as a result of fighting between rebels and Government forces backed by allied Janjaweed militiamen