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The United Nations agency charged with protecting the rights of children on Tuesday welcomed the launch of a programme by the Sudanese Government to end the use of child soldiers by the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA).

The formation of the child protection unit follows an action plan signed by the SPLA committing to release all children in its ranks by November 2010 and to end the exploitation of children as soldiers across southern Sudan.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) hailed the development as a milestone for the rights of children in the country, where the SPLA and the National Congress Party (NCP) signed a peace accord in 2005 to end the long-running north-south civil war.

"The launch is testimony to the commitment of the Government of Southern Sudan and the SPLA to accelerate the establishment of an environment where the rights of all the children are respected," said UNICEF's Catherine Mbengue, speaking at the launch in the town of Juba.

"Concrete measures must now be taken to ensure that all within the SPLA understand and respect their obligations," she added.

The child protection unit is charged with ensuring that no children are in the ranks of the SPLA. It will also work with partners during the verification, registration and demobilization of children still associated with the SPLA.

UNICEF will provide both financial and technical support to carry out sensitization campaigns and raise awareness with the SPLA officers regarding the legal framework on child rights - international and national laws that prohibit recruitment and use of children by armed forces and armed groups.