



# UNMIS

Press Conference

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Near-verbatim transcript of the Press Conference  
by the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Children and  
Armed Conflict

**Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy**  
UNMIS HQ, Khartoum

**UNMIS Spokesperson, Ashraf Eissa:** Today we have with us Ms. Radhika Coomaraswami who is the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict. This is Ms. Coomaraswami's second visit to Sudan after almost two years and she, during that visit, had a number of meetings in Khartoum, Darfur and Juba, focusing on issues pertaining to children and armed conflict.

She is here with us today to give us a background about the visit and her wider role in the protection of children all over the world.

To start with, I would like also to give you a background about Ms. Coomaraswami's long-standing history as a human rights advocate, with a particular focus on advocating for children and women issues. She has a legal training background as a lawyer and she has occupied human rights positions both in Sri Lanka and internationally. She was appointed by the former Secretary-General Koffi Anan as the Under-Secretary for Children, and then the current Secretary-General Mr. Ban Ki-moon appointed her as Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict.

I would also like to mention the presence of UNICEF Representative, Mr. Nils Kastberg, who will also be participating in this conference as and when there is an issue that he needs to deal with as the head of the institution in charge of substantive issues related to children inside Sudan. We would also like to thank our Chief of Staff, Mr. Farid Zarif, who is also the Officer in Charge of the Mission in the absence of the SRSG, and his Deputy. We thank you for your presence with us.

Without further ado, I will refer you to our distinguished guest, Ms. Radhika Coomaraswami, who if going to give you a few thoughts and opening remarks about her visit and then we would proceed with questions from journalists and answers.

Thank you very much.

**SRSG Radhika Coomaraswami:** Thank you all very much for coming today. Let me just say that we will have a Press Release available a little later tonight setting out some of the activities and commitments during this visit.

As you know, I am the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict. I am supposed to be the independent moral voice on that issue. And as you know as part of that work, we work closely with the United Nations Security Council, especially with its Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, monitoring and looking at grave violations against children during war time. My visit is here within the framework of Security Council Resolution 1612 about the situation of children in armed conflict in Sudan that is one of the countries that is looked at by the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict. I will be reporting back both to the Working Group and to the Secretary-General.

I would like to begin by thanking the Government of Sudan for inviting me. I requested to come and they did accept that invitation quite quickly. And I want to thank them for facilitating many of my meetings. I want to thank UNMIS for providing all the logistical support for this visit and members of the Child Protection team in UNMIS that has been very supportive. And I must, especially thank UNICEF for providing me with all the material and data for my work and being by my side. I was accompanied by the person in charge of Child Protection at UNICEF who is in charge of programmes so that we could deliver on some of the commitments.

The purpose of the visit was to have a first-hand assessment of what is going on and to interpret the progress according to Security Council resolutions. I was also hoping to advocate for some of the issues that child protection advocates wanted me to put forward and to have high-level dialogue with Government and non-state actors. I visited Khartoum, North and West Darfur, Juba, Yambio and Bor. I met with Government leaders, NGOs, UN agencies and, of course, some children.

The issues of concern for the United Nations Security Council Working Group, based on the conclusions and recommendations, is firstly the recruitment and use of children as child soldiers. Every year, the Secretary-General makes a list of parties that recruit and use children in conflict and there are many parties in Sudan on that list. Part of my visit was to see how we can enter into action plans to remove parties from that list.

The second issue of concern is rape and sexual violence. The third issue is killing and maiming of children. The fourth is the targeting of humanitarian workers and the denial of humanitarian access. We were also concerned about the protection of children in the recent inter-tribal conflicts in southern Sudan and also issues relating to capital punishment and the death penalty for children.

We managed to get key commitments from parties. The first is that we signed an Action Plan with the SPLA on Friday. The Action Plan calls for the release of children, for the verification of that release by United Nations agencies, and the reintegration of children according to that. We are very happy about that; it was on the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Certain parties – that is the SLA-Free Will, the JEM Peace Wing, the SLM-Abdulgassim – who are signatories to the DPA, have also signalled their agreement to begin discussions to enter into action plans. We have now to sit down and work on the terms.

Finally, the Government of Sudan has begun discussions with us about the de-listing process and, I must say, there are some very positive indications and discussions with them as well.

We are happy about progress made on action plans during my visit and now it remains to see how we reintegrate these children that could be released.

I also want to say that Mr. Minnawi has given us unfettered access to his camps to ensure that there are no children there when we told him that there were still reports of recruitment.

The other commitment we have received is that the religious leaders in North Darfur agreed to have sermons from their mosques about recruitment and the use of child soldiers. There will be a joint campaign and they told me that 800 mosques will be involved in this campaign.

We also got a commitment from the UPDF who, as you know when they are fighting the LRA get many children, to enter into a protocol on how these children should be released – because otherwise they are kept for weeks and we don't know what is happening to them. They will enter into a protocol with UNICEF and the Ministries of Social Welfare in Yambio and other such affected areas.

Finally, we got a commitment today from the Ministry of Justice that there would be no executions of children. I am announcing it because he made it very clear that there would be no executions, especially of the JEM children.

Those are the commitments that we received. I must say that I visited Sudan two years ago. Since then there has been a lot of progress on relevant issues but many challenges remain. I think that the greatest progress is that I have seen increasing acceptance of international standards across a large cross-section of people. For the first time, unlike last time, there is a willingness to talk about problems and to find solutions to

problems related to women and children. This is particularly true when it comes to women and children rights. As you know, there is a formation of family and child protection units. With the help of UNICEF I visited one and I find them very useful innovations. I found also the Child Acts in the different states to be major steps forward and a possible national policy on violence against women. Of course problems remain but at least there is now willingness to deal with this. Also within the armed forces, we have the within the armed forces.

But of course a great many challenges, as I said, still exist – there are still a large number of children associated with armed groups. When we met LRA children, we could see that the light has been completely erased from their eyes after years of abuse. It was a terrible experience to see their suffering. We also met with SPLA children; which was a different reality – children who had come to the army camps mainly because the SPLA was the only form of refuge as many of them were orphans. What this really sets for all of us in the aid and development world is to come up with reintegration programmes for these children that suit their needs. That is the real challenge of the hour. I must say that UNICEF is doing its best along with the DDR Commissions with the resources they have but if action plans are going to be implemented we would need much, much more in both resources and programmes. We would be going on a major concerted campaign to try to put these programmes in place.

The other challenge in the LRA areas is that humanitarian workers are very keen that UN development and strengthen its Protection of Civilians mandate in those areas and that the structure, configuration and resources be given to the troops so that they can provide that protection. This is a plea from the humanitarians which I will take back to New York and the need for a regional effort to deal with the LRA.

With regard to inter-tribal conflict, 370 children have been abducted in the last few months. We were told that this is a practice associated with cattle-raiding but, because of the presence of small arms, there has been terrible violence. UNICEF will be conducting a study on the causes of these abductions. We have talked to the Governor of Bor province on the need to disarm those who are engaged in this kind of violence to enter into dialogue with tribal leaders so that these practices do not continue and for all of us to step up with a plan for the reintegration of abducted children.

Finally, with regard to the shrinking of humanitarian space, of course it was a terrible difficulty to tour Darfur knowing that one of my child protection officers has been kidnapped and taken hostage. This is something I need to have raised with the *wali's* of North and West Darfur and I also have urged for the release of these people and for government to do as much as it can to help us secure the release of these hostages.

Let me end here and I will be happy to take your questions.

## Q & A

**Reuters:** Are any children currently on death-row in Sudan? And if there are, what is going to happen to them?

Secondly, is there any ongoing recruitment of children by Sudan Armed Forces, SPLA, JEM or SLA-Abdulwahid as the bigger groups?

**SRSR Coomaraswami.** On death-row, as you know we have I think six children from the JEM attack on death-row. The issue is that the Government claims that the military panel has found that four of them were not children but the assessment of international agencies is that they are children, so there is this issue.

But I was assured today by the Minister of Justice that they will not be executed and I hope that the commitment will be kept.

Secondly, with regards to the recruitment by the Sudan Armed Forces, there is no active recruitment from the top level but there is a presence of child soldiers especially in the regions in Darfur. We have some data showing that there have been children present in the camps in Darfur. That is why we are having dialogue with them with the possibility of an action plan as well. With regard to JEM, we have data that they are

recruiting. In fact, we have data that all are continuing to recruit – maybe not as much as they were doing the time of the war. You will find that this will be reflected in the Annual Report of the Secretary-General.

**Reuters:** Could you be clearer on which groups we are talking about?

**SRSG Coomaraswami:** Let me give you a list of the parties from which we have had statements of recruitment [of children] from September 1<sup>st</sup> 2008 to September 30<sup>th</sup> 2009: Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army (SPLA), Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), SLA-Minnawi, SLA-Abdulwahid, SLA-Abdulgassim, Peoples' Defence Forces (PDF), NPFRD, Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), Janjaweed and other Government-supported militias, Chadian opposition groups, Central Reserve Police and Border Intelligence Forces.

**Sudan Radio Service:** You have not told us anything about the condition of children in the Omdurman prison where there are a number of children imprisoned together with their mothers. Have you visited the prisons in Khartoum and assessed the condition of children? What is their number, for instance?

**SRSG Coomaraswami:** As you know, I am the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict and, generally, prisons are not within my mandate. It is a human rights mandate and there is another Special Representative on violence against children for which that would be a mandate. Where I am interested in is where children are imprisoned because of conflict – because they are perpetrators or victims of conflict. That is why I am interested in the JEM children and the death penalty with regard to them. That is my answer for you.

The Human Rights Division of UNMIS and the High Commissioner for Human Rights are the UN bodies that would look into the issues of prisons for both adults and juveniles.

**Spokesperson Eissa:** If there are no further questions, I would like to abuse the benefit of the Chair. In your speech you touched on the issue of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the recruitment of children. There seems to be a drive from the UN to try to kind of deal with the issue. Have you any views on what the UN could do to encourage the control of the phenomenon of child soldiers being recruited by the LRA?

**Ms. Coomaraswami:** With regard to the LRA, I think there has to be concerted regional action among all the governments and the UN peacekeeping operations. I think there has to be concerted action and protection of civilians with regard to that.

In any way, the Security Council is moving in that direction, as you know.

**Spokesperson Eissa:** If there are no further questions, in that case I think that the opening remarks were very comprehensive that our journalists have got what they have, which is good. I think that goes out very much to the credit of our guest today.

It remains for me to thank you very much, Special Representative, for giving us the time and thank you for the effort and energy you put in your trip here in Khartoum in defending the case of Children in Armed Conflict. Thank you very much.

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