Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Protecting children in conflict

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It is a great pleasure to be here to congratulate War Child on its 20th Anniversary and take part in your discussion.

For two decades you have helped to protect and educate over 800,000 vulnerable children in some of the world's most brutal conflicts; and you have ensured that their suffering is not forgotten by the world.

The plight of children in war is particularly heart-rending: because they are entirely innocent, extremely vulnerable and disproportionately affected by conflict, and because no-one can restore to them the childhoods stolen by war.

In Syria today a million child refugees have lost their homes, have been traumatised, have had their education violently disrupted and are facing yet another cold and hungry winter. Their situation is one reason why the United Kingdom is the second largest humanitarian donor to the Syrian conflict and why we are pressing so hard to get unfettered access for aid to the besieged areas of the country where some people are literally starving.

It is shocking that almost half of the world's forcibly displaced people are children, who will probably spend their entire childhood in that condition. They must always be at the forefront of our efforts to end conflict, and the UK has a strong record. But we can always do more and do better, and organisations like War Child often point the way to doing so.

Conflict prevention is one of the top priorities of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office I lead, from the Horn of Africa to the Philippines. We have hosted two global peace-building conferences on Somalia in the last two years for example, and today Somalia has the best chance in twenty years of turning a corner and giving its children a better future.

The sad lesson of history is that there will be other conflicts over the next twenty years, despite our best efforts.

But although we may not be able to prevent them all, we can influence the environment in which conflicts take place, so that their worst consequences are mitigated and the gravest crimes are prevented.

And one of my personal priorities is to try to ensure that rape and sexual violence can no longer be a feature of conflict in the 21st century.

Millions of women, children and men have been raped in conflicts of our lifetimes, in a climate of almost complete impunity, with only a handful of successful prosecutions ever taking place.

This is sexual violence used to advance military and political objectives – to terrorise innocent people, to cause displacement, to change the ethnic composition of communities, or as a means of torture – and it is one of the greatest and most neglected injustices in history.

It is usually directed at the most vulnerable people in society, and sadly that often means children.

In the DRC in April I met a mother whose five-year-old daughter had been raped outside a police station – just one of countless cases where children have been targeted in the most sickening and depraved manner possible, precisely in order to inflict the maximum psychological torture on families and whole communities.

It is only one aspect of the suffering caused by conflict, but its long-term impact on children is impossible to understate. It can cause severe physical injury to growing bodies; infection from life-threatening diseases; psychological trauma that lasts a lifetime; it result in girls often being unable to bear children; causes others to fall pregnant and drop out of school; and leads to many being ostracised or forced to marry their attacker.

Because of taboo and social stigma, we have not talked about it enough as governments and nor have we shouldered our responsibilities as we should.

I am trying to change this, by putting sexual violence in conflict at the top table of international diplomacy in a way that it never has been before.

For just as we have come together as an international community to abolish the use of landmines, to curb the trade in conflict diamonds, to prohibit the use of cluster munitions and to adopt an International Arms Trade Treaty, so I believe we can and must end the use of rape as a weapon of war in our generation.

In May last year I launched my Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative, with the Special Representative for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Angelina Jolie.

At the G8 in London in April this year we secured a historic declaration from the G8 group of leading economies, promising practical action.

In June, we secured a landmark UN Security Council Resolution, which received unprecedented support from UN member states.

And last month, to my immense pride, 134 countries from Afghanistan to Vietnam endorsed a historic Declaration at the UN General Assembly promising to end rape as a weapon of war.

In this Declaration, we recognised rape and serious sexual violence in conflict as grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions and of their first Protocol, so that suspects can be apprehended wherever they are in the world.

We pledged not to allow amnesties for sexual violence in peace agreements, so that these crimes can no longer be swept under the carpet.

We promised to adopt a new International Protocol in 2014, to help ensure that evidence is collected that can stand up in court.

And we pledged to help victims to gain access justice and long-term support, and to protect civil society organisations, including women's groups and human rights defenders.

Children are at the centre of our efforts, with both the G8 and UNGA Declarations recognising that appropriate health, psycho-social, legal and economic support must be provided to children.

Our campaign is also backed with practical action. We have created a UK team of Experts which has been deployed five times this year alone to the Syrian border, the DRC and Mali, where they have trained health professionals, strengthened the capacity of the armed forces, and helped raise local investigation standards; in each case focussing on the specific needs of that country and complementing the work of the UN and other agencies on the ground. Further deployments to the Syrian borders, to Kosovo and to Bosnia-Herzegovina will take place in the coming months.

In little over a year we have laid the basis at least for eroding impunity worldwide, for eradicating safe havens, providing greater protection for civilians, improving the help given to victims and working to increase the number of prosecutions including through setting an example ourselves of what can be done.

The task now is to turn this political commitments and diplomatic progress into lasting practical action – and we need your help to do it.

Next June I will host a conference in London that will bring together the 134 states that have endorsed the Declaration, along with representatives from civil society, judiciaries and militaries from around the world. It will be the biggest summit ever held on this issue and it will be used to launch our new International Protocol and to seek agreement to practical steps that we hope will end the impunity for war zone rape once and for all. Our goal must be to change the entire global attitude to these crimes – and I believe we can.

I hope you and your members can help us expand further the group of countries that have pledged their support for this campaign – we have 2/3 of the United Nations so far, but we want them all to come on board.

And I hope you will work with us to look at how we can improve further the support and care that is given to survivors, particularly children.

Albert Einstein once said that “the world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing.”

Whatever the conflicts to come – and our goal must always be to prevent them all – we have in it on power to prevent millions of lives being destroyed by sexual violence. That is a goal worth fighting for, and I hope we can join forces to achieve it.

Source: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/protecting-children-in-conflict