

## **20<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY EVENT OF THE GRACA MACHEL REPORT: WEDNESDAY 08 FEBRUARY 2017**

### **UK STATEMENT**

Thank you

20 years ago, children were on the front lines of conflict. From Sierra Leone to Somalia, Cambodia to Congo, the sight of a 12 year old on a battlefield was far from taboo. And then Graça Machel published a ground-breaking report. That report raised awareness of the impact conflict has on children, whilst asking the international community to come together to address the plight of children effected by war.

We have seen, since 2000, the release of more than 115,000 child soldiers as a result of direct dialogue and the formation of action plans with national armed forces and armed groups. Think of that. 115,000 children who have traded guns on the battlefield for pencils in school. 115,000 children have had a shot at leading the lives that children should. The SRSG's 'Children, not Soldiers' campaign continues to push this message, which has seen the UN engage in action plans with those countries listed for the recruitment and use of children in their national security forces. The UK Government fully supports this initiative and we re-emphasise our message that those groups who have entered into agreements with the UN must ensure they fully comply with the terms of

their action plans.

Engagement with non-state actors also continues to grow. Colombia has been a particular bright spot in this regard. Thanks to the Special Representative for CAAC, the historic peace deal struck by the Government and the FARC includes provisions to release all children recruited by the FARC.

Despite this important progress, emerging and on-going conflicts continue to disrupt the lives of millions of children. Evidence shows that tens of thousands of children continue to be killed, maimed, recruited and used as child soldiers, abducted, and become victims of sexual violence in conflicts around the world.

One need only look to the on-going violence in Syria, to see the immense risk children still face. Continuing attacks on populated areas, and in particular hospitals, is having a devastating impact on children's welfare, their physical and mental health, and ultimately their future.

In Somalia, former child soldiers continue to be detained while they await sentencing. Children recruited into conflict are victims, not criminals. The UK fully endorses the SRSG's message all former child

soldiers should be treated primarily as victims, not perpetrators, with the best interests of the child as guiding principles.

Finally, it is absolutely crucial that respect for children's rights within UN peacekeeping operations is strengthened. Children expect and trust peacekeepers to protect them. Every time a peacekeeper fails to do so, that trust is undermined, and with it, the integrity of the United Nations.

The UK stands firmly behind the zero tolerance approach on the sexual exploitation and abuse of children by UN peacekeepers and personnel and look forward to the new Secretary-General's strategy in his upcoming report on special measures to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse.

So 20 years after Graça Machel's landmark report, we should celebrate the strides we have made. But that celebration is incomplete. So many more vulnerable boys and girls desperately require our help. Let's work to reach them to and let's start today.