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High Commissioner and the Secretary-General**

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The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



The Plight of Child Soldiers in Tindouf Refugee Camps

Introduction

Child soldiering represents one of the most egregious violations of human rights, inflicting profound and enduring harm on the affected children. The Tindouf refugee camps in southwestern Algeria have gained notoriety as a hotspot for this violation, with children being forcibly recruited and used in armed conflict. This practice not only infringes on their fundamental rights but also severely impacts their development, well-being, and future prospects.

The Tindouf refugee camps have been a focal point for the recruitment of child soldiers since their establishment in 1975. Initially set up to accommodate forcibly deported Sahrawis to the Algerian territory, these camps have, over the decades, become notorious for the systematic recruitment of children aged 7 to 14. These children are often taken from their families and subjected to rigorous military training, including the use of firearms and explosives. This practice intensified notably after November 2020, when the Frente Polisario withdrew from the ceasefire agreement, escalating their recruitment efforts under the cover of the Algerian authorities. This long history of exploitation underscores the urgent need for intervention and accountability.

Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers

In the Tindouf refugee camps, the recruitment of child soldiers is involuntary and marked by coercion. Families, already struggling under harsh living conditions, find themselves powerless to resist the Frente Polisario's demands. Children are forcibly taken and subjected to intense military training, designed to indoctrinate them into the Frente Polisario's ideology. The psychological and physical impacts are devastating, exposing these young individuals to severe trauma and violence at a formative stage of their lives.

The conditions in the Tindouf refugee camps are rife with human rights abuses. The recruitment and use of child soldiers are coupled with a prevailing culture of impunity regarding violations committed by Frente Polisario members on Algerian territory. Reports from human rights organizations highlight uninvestigated abuses, with children being deprived of their right to education and a safe environment. The harsh training regimens, physical punishment, and ideological indoctrination these children undergo result in significant physical and emotional harm. The lack of accountability and transparency further compounds these violations, making it imperative to address these abuses urgently.

The recruitment and use of child soldiers in the Tindouf refugee camps are clear violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC) explicitly prohibit the recruitment and use of children under the age of 18 in hostilities. Moreover, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) categorizes the conscription of children under 15 into armed forces or groups as a war crime. Ethically, child soldiering deprives children of their fundamental rights to education, safety, and development. It perpetuates cycles of violence and instability, undermining efforts to achieve lasting peace and development.

Impact on Education and Future Prospects

Education plays a pivotal role in preventing the recruitment of child soldiers and supporting their reintegration. Access to quality education can provide children with the knowledge and skills needed to build a better future, reducing their vulnerability to recruitment. The recruitment of child soldiers severely disrupts their education and future prospects. Schools in the Tindouf refugee camps are not only under-resourced and poorly equipped, as the Frente Polisario continues to divert the humanitarian aids addressed to these camps, but also serve as breeding grounds for the propagation of hatred and extremist ideology.

This environment significantly hinders the provision of quality education, as children are indoctrinated with the Frente Polisario's doctrines instead of being equipped with critical thinking skills and a comprehensive curriculum. The militarization of children diverts them from educational opportunities, trapping them in a cycle of poverty and violence. Without access to education, these children face limited opportunities for personal and professional development, perpetuating the cycle of violence as they see no alternative but to remain involved in armed activity. This has a devastating long-term impact on the camps population, as the absence of educated and skilled individuals hampers efforts toward creating an environment conducive to thriving human freedoms and rights.

Rehabilitation and reintegration of former child soldiers are crucial components of addressing this crisis. These children need comprehensive support to recover from the trauma of their experiences and reintegrate into civilian life. This support includes access to education, vocational training, psychological counseling, and community-based reintegration programs. Successful reintegration also involves addressing broader socio-economic challenges, including ending the militarization of Tindouf refugee camps and holding the perpetrators responsible for these violations. Improving access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, as well as fostering a supportive and inclusive community environment, are essential. However, these reintegration measures necessitate concurrent judicial procedures to avoid impunity and provide sustained responses to the deep-seated insecurity in the camps. By providing former child soldiers with the tools and resources to rebuild their lives, it is possible to break the cycle of violence and create a foundation for lasting protection of the camps population.

International Responses:

The international community has recognized the plight of child soldiers and has made concerted efforts to address this issue. Various United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and civil society groups have been involved in advocacy, awareness-raising, and rehabilitation programs. The UN Security Council has adopted several resolutions condemning the use of child soldiers and calling for their demobilization and reintegration. The International Labour Organization (ILO) and UNICEF have promoted policies and programs aimed at protecting children from recruitment and providing them with education and vocational training. Despite these efforts, significant challenges remain in addressing child soldiering in the Tindouf refugee camps.

Addressing child soldiering in the Tindouf refugee camps is fraught with challenges. The remote and isolated nature of the camps makes it difficult to implement and monitor protective measures effectively. The lack of independent monitoring mechanisms in the camps regarding the situation hinders efforts to develop targeted interventions. Moreover, the militarization of Tindouf refugee camps poses significant barriers to addressing the root causes of child soldiering. Economic deprivation and lack of opportunities often drive families to view military involvement as a viable option for their children. Comprehensive and sustained efforts are required to improve living conditions, education, and economic opportunities to tackle these underlying issues effectively.

The Frente Polisario bears direct responsibility for the recruitment and exploitation of child soldiers in the Tindouf refugee camps, having systematically indoctrinated children and trained them for combat roles, violating their fundamental rights and international humanitarian laws. The reality on the ground indicates a persistent use of children for military purposes, and to address these violations and prevent further impunity, it is imperative that international human rights mechanisms hold the Frente Polisario accountable. This includes rigorous monitoring, transparent reporting, and urging the host country to hold responsible those involved for perpetuating these abuses. Strengthening the role of international bodies, such as the United Nations and the International Criminal Court, is essential to ensure that the rights of Sahrawi children are protected and that those who exploit them face justice. Ending impunity for the Frente Polisario's actions is crucial to breaking the cycle of violence and fostering a safe and nurturing environment for all children in the Tindouf refugee camps.

As the host country, Algeria bears responsibility for the conditions in the Tindouf refugee camps and the perpetuation of child soldiering violations. International law mandates that host countries protect the rights and well-being of refugees within their borders, yet Algeria has allowed the Frente Polisario to operate with impunity, facilitating the recruitment and exploitation of child soldiers. Algeria's deliberate cover-up of these activities and its failure to enforce international human rights standards directly contribute to the ongoing abuse of Sahrawi children. The jurisdictional void and absence of a protective mandate within the camps create an environment of terror, where human rights abuses are rampant and unchecked. This lack of legal oversight and protective measures enables the Frente Polisario to recruit and train child soldiers without fear of accountability. By turning a blind eye to these violations and neglecting its duty to protect vulnerable populations, Algeria is complicit in the systematic breach of international conventions designed to safeguard children's rights. This complicity not only undermines the rule of law but also exacerbates the humanitarian crisis in the Tindouf refugee camps, perpetuating cycles of violence and deprivation that have profound long-term consequences for the affected children and their communities.

AIPECT(African Institute for Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation. (AFORES) AFRICAN FORUM FOR RESEARCH AND STUDIES IN HUMAN RIGHTS. LSDDH (LA LIGUE DU SAHRA POUR LA DEMOCRATIE ET LES DROITS DE L"HOMME) NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.