Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Afghanistan

by Vera Chrobok

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“In order to break the decades-old cycle of conflict and ensure sustainable peace, it is imperative to address the factors of despair, alienation and radical indoctrination of youth. This must be the last generation of Afghan children to experience war.”

Omar Otunnu, UN Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict, November 2001

Introduction

Successful DDR of former combatants is one of the key determinants of Afghanistan’s future stability and long-term reconstruction. While the planning and implementation of DDR programs directed at adult soldiers has been - and continues to be - a central matter of concern in post-war peace-building efforts, little special attention has been paid to children who actively participated in the fighting.

Years of conflict have exposed children to unacceptable levels of violence and shaped the perception of Afghanistan’s youth. Two generations of children have grown up under arms, deprived of access to education and facing the daily reality of a highly militarized environment. On October 2, 2001, the New York Times quoted Northern Alliance provisional commander Fazil Ahmad Azimi: “It has been three decades of our people going backwards in terms of education. We have young boys that are more familiar with a gun than with school.” If Afghanistan is ever to settle into peace, these children will have difficulties adjusting to a situation where conflicts will not be solved by the use of a weapon. Children comprise nearly half of the Afghan population, which makes them a vital component within Afghanistan’s post-conflict reconstruction. To prevent a continuing cycle of violence, to produce a lasting peace and to revive the country’s economy, ex-child combatants have to be demobilized and reintegrated into the country’s social and economic structure.

To achieve this goal, a long-term commitment from Afghan political leaders as well as the international community is required. Integrated into the overall DDR policy framework, programs must be designed to specifically respond to the needs of child soldiers. However, progress made on the planning and implementation of such programs has been slow. In conjunction with the Afghan Transitional Authority (ATA), UNICEF developed a comprehensive DDR framework for minors associated with fighting forces. Since September 2001, efforts to locate and integrate child soldiers have been undertaken, but implementation of the first nationwide project started in January 2003, more than one year after the fall of the Taliban. One of the factors that complicate the special

1 Defined under international law as people under 18 years of age
demobilization and reintegration assistance required to facilitate the transition of children back to civilian life is the lack of resources and capacities that would allow a more immediate and targeted response.

This paper illustrates how the ATA, with international support, responds to the needs of former and current child soldiers. An overview of the primary obstacles that might hinder efforts to successfully reintegrate ex-child combatants serves to identify the most urgent aspects to be targeted within youth DDR programs.

**Child recruitment practice and legislation**

A report produced by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers highlights patterns of child recruitment by the Taliban, United Front (Northern Alliance) and other warring factions in Afghanistan during the years of resistance and civil war. A huge number of combatants belong to different factions throughout the country - non-state armed groups with a past record on child recruitment. Today, in an unstable and unpredictable security situation where warlords control militias in various parts of the country and factional clashes between rival Afghan political and military actors persist, children continue to be part of military structures or face the risk of recruitment.

The overthrown Taliban movement has denied using minors under the age of 18 in the military, although reports confirm the opposite. Refugee camps in neighboring states as well as networks of Islamic schools or madrasas in Pakistan, where students received military training as well as religious indoctrination, served as a major source of young recruits. In August 1999, the United Nations estimated that up to 5,000 madrasa students between the age of 15 and 35 left Pakistan to join the Taliban in Afghanistan in the fight of the US-led coalition. According to NGO sources, also the Northern Alliance has a documented record of using children to fight the Taliban. Recruitment drives in November 2000 included children in the Panshir Valley and Badakshan, who served on the front lines and performed military support tasks such as carrying ammunition. So far, there is no definite proof for under 18’s involvement with the Al Qaida network, but reports indicate child participation in training exercises with Al Qaida fighters.

Precise figures of child involvement in the Afghan conflict are difficult to provide. An accurate picture of child soldiering in Afghanistan based on reliable information on the number of children recruited by the various armed forces is not available. Reportedly, child participation in combat has risen during the 1990’s, but unofficial statistics date back to 1999, when a total amount of 108,000 children was estimated to be involved in the fighting. It is unclear however which time span this number comprises.

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5 CSUCS, Global Report on Child Soldiers - 2001

6 Ibid.


8 Ibid.

9 Graca Machel, Impact of Armed Conflict on Children, United Nations, August 1996

10 ECPAT International Newsletters, Issue No. 29, A Step Forward, 11/01/1999
Child recruitment into national and foreign armed groups, both within Afghanistan as well as in neighboring states, occurred mostly by force\(^{11}\). Reports have detailed cases of child abductions by the Taliban, who sent *madrasa* students to the front lines without parental consent\(^{12}\). But many children also joined the fighting forces ‘voluntarily’, drawn by the prospects of economic gains as an alternative to a life without perspectives, in search of power and reputation or to defend their ideologies by fighting for ‘the cause’. In a country where conflict drags on for years and even decades, subjected to the militarization of every day life and victims of family killings, children become receptive to violence and ideological propaganda. In the context of child recruitment the term ‘voluntary’ is thus not entirely correct. Forces that lead young people to sign up for military service in a situation of extreme poverty and ongoing conflict are highly complex, as -specifically in the Afghan context- children are subject to many subtle manipulative motivations and pressures and influenced by adults subjective perceptions and values. Excessive militarization of a society can lead to a mental militarization that is all the more difficult to eliminate. In Afghanistan, large numbers of children are orphaned or separated from a protective family environment. They are forced to live on the streets and provide for their own survival. “Hundreds of thousands of these orphans were collected in scores of *madrasas* in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistani cities where they grew up in an environment devoid of women. They don’t know any norm of civilization.” (Pakistani social scientist Kaiser Bengali\(^{13}\)). A UN study suggests that in the 1990’s, approximately 90 per cent of children had no access to schooling\(^{14}\). At the same time, the numbers of street/working children in Kabul increased to an estimated total of 50,000\(^{15}\). Becoming a member of the armed forces thus offers an attractive opportunity for children in impoverished communities to earn an income and to provide for their families.

In the past, national legislation on conscription and voluntary recruitment officially prohibited the recruitment of children. The Constitutions of 1924, 1931, 1964 and 1976 set the age for conscription at 22, but during the 1980’s it has been lowered to the age of 18\(^{16}\). The Constitution of 1990 did not include any standards for compulsory or voluntary military service. Currently, the Afghan Transitional Authority is in the process of developing a national legislation on conscription and voluntary recruitment as well as reforming the national security sector. One of the main pillars of the security reform agenda is the creation of a government force\(^{17}\). Although the selection guidelines for recruitment into the national army have not been clearly stated, so far there have been no reports of minors among the new troops\(^{18}\).

Afghanistan’s record of compliance with international humanitarian and human rights law has not been very encouraging. In September 1956, Afghanistan ratified the Geneva Conventions, but the country has not acceded to the Additional Protocols. In 1994, an Interim Afghan Government signed the Convention of the Right to the Child

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12 Amnesty International, Children in South Asia securing their rights, ASA 04/01/98, April 1998  
13 Bengali, Kaiser, Understanding the Taliban, 2001  
14 Graca Machel, Impact of Armed Conflict on Children, United Nations, August 1996  
17 Sedra, M., Challenging the Warlord Culture, Bonn International Center for Conversion, 2002  
(CRC), which states that no person under the age of 15 should be recruited for use as a soldier, but in a general revocation of all international agreements, the Taliban annulled its validity. However, the CRC has acquired customary law status and is therefore binding on all armed forces and groups in Afghanistan. The Optional Protocol to the CRC, which outlaws the involvement of children under the age of 18 in hostilities, raising the previous standard age of 15, has not been signed or ratified. On several occasions, the issue of child participation has been discussed with the ATA as well as with regional governors and military leaders. As the UN Secretary General’s Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict (SRSG-CAC) Olara Otunnu reports, Afghan political leaders committed to prohibit the enrollment of people below the age of 18 and to move to the ratification of the Optional Protocol on the participation of children in armed conflict.

Response to the needs of child soldiers and other war-affected youth

The overall situation of children in Afghanistan is precarious. Their mental and physical well-being has been severely damaged through both the decade-long internal war as well as the subsequent international military intervention. To meet the ongoing humanitarian crisis and the continuing needs of one of the most vulnerable groups, both short and long term challenges have have to be addressed. The unstable security environment, drought and food insecurity require extensive national and international action. Since September 2001, UNICEF, with support from the international community, has worked very closely with the Interim Administration and the Afghan Transitional Authority to make substantial progress in a number of areas. In an immediate, urgent response to ensure the protection and survival of children in a post-conflict environment, and, most importantly, to provide access to basic social services, resources have been distributed according to the following priority requirements:

Table 1: Priority requirements as of December 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Beneficiaries/Coverage</th>
<th>Amount Required (US$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purchase and delivery of school supplies for March 2003 school year</td>
<td>3 million school-aged children</td>
<td>7,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe Motherhood Initiative</td>
<td>1.4 million pregnant women</td>
<td>3,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expanded Program on Immunization</td>
<td>6 million children under 5</td>
<td>5,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition</td>
<td>375,000 people</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanitation and hygiene education</td>
<td>1,450 schools</td>
<td>2,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reintegration and protection of child soldiers and other war-affected young people</td>
<td>Child soldiers and other war-affected young people</td>
<td>500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>18,500,000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNICEF Donor Update, 12 December 2002

As a result, 3 million children enrolled in school (30% of whom were girls), over 10 million children received protection against measles, and 6 million were vaccinated against polio between October 2001 and December 2002. Through UNICEF intervention, over one

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UN News, Press Briefing by Secretary General’s Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, 06/08/02
One of the most crucial factors in the DDR process, and targeted by both the preventive as well as the responsive approach, is the establishment of a functioning education system. Children have to be provided with opportunities that enable them to actively participate in recovery and peace-building efforts.
It will take years before formal education and development opportunities for all children and young people in Afghanistan have been fully re-established. Until the Afghan government has expanded its institutional capacities and taken over the primary responsibility for the protection of civilians and vulnerable groups, a 'transition initiative' is essential to ensure that children have access to adequate education and employment opportunities and grow up in a protected environment.

In conjunction with the ATA, UNICEF developed such a transitional DDR program, entitled 'Protection and Reintegration of Street and Working Children, Child Soldiers and Adolescent Girls'. The program, with a duration of 15 months at a cost of US $8 million, started in January 2003, and will be carried out by Afghan authorities as well as national and international NGO's that possess expertise in the field of child protection, skills training and psycho-social rehabilitation21. For the time being, the program aims to reintegrate 150,000 children.

Table 2: Direct Beneficiaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beneficiary Group</th>
<th>Number of Beneficiaries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent street and working children (boys and girls)</td>
<td>30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former child soldiers</td>
<td>20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-school younger street and working children (boys and girls)</td>
<td>80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent girls/Female heads of households</td>
<td>15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income generation support to disadvantaged families</td>
<td>5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total number of beneficiaries</strong></td>
<td><strong>150,000</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Transitional Assistance Program for Afghanistan (TAPA) Appeal 2003

The above table indicates that the direct beneficiaries include all groups of vulnerable and at risk youth, minors who have been directly involved with the fighting forces will benefit as much as other war-affected children. As mentioned before, the needs of child soldiers and other children in a post-conflict situation are closely connected. Nevertheless, as part of the overall reintegration efforts for young children, UNICEF established a separate framework that specifically addresses the DDR of children associated with the fighting forces. UNICEF proposes four principal areas of intervention that clearly reflect the commitment to implement a DDR approach that combines both prevention and response.

21 UNICEF, Program for the Demobilization and Reintegration of child soldiers/minors associated with the fighting forces in Afghanistan and prevention of recruitment, Draft, May 2002
### Table 3: Program Components

| 1. Information, Rights Awareness and Advocacy | • Information (workshops, media) of military personnel and communities about the specific criteria for the DDR of children  
• Training of trainers of child rights  
• Peace and conflict resolution to be part of the information and awareness campaign  
• Advocacy addresses the issue of demobilization of all minors currently associated with armed groups and the adoption of legal provisions prohibiting under-18 recruitment  
• The conclusion of agreements for the demobilization of children with military commanders who still have minors in their ranks |
| 2. Capacity and Support Structure Building | • Community Support Committees linked to the local shura (e.g. in rural areas) or to appropriate government bodies (e.g. in urban areas) are created to support the reintegration process of minors.  
• Establishment of Community Resource Centers to provide counseling and information to orient beneficiaries towards services.  
• Young People's Clubs provide services to returned minors who receive food and other reintegration support in order to contribute to the livelihood of their families. |
| 3. Community Based Services | • Educational opportunities  
• Vocational training  
• Participatory income-generating schemes  
• Mine risk education  
• Psycho-social activities |
| 4. Creation of a legal and normative framework prohibiting the recruitment of minors | • Advocacy |

Source: UNICEF, Program for the Demobilization and Reintegration of child soldiers/minors associated with the fighting forces in Afghanistan and prevention of recruitment, Draft, May 2002

In addition, UNICEF announced the implementation of several concrete activities during the year 2003. These include the support of 10,000 young people in peace-building and rights promotion throughout the country, the establishment of 2,000 accelerated learning centers for child soldiers, street children and adolescent girls in collaboration with the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), the participation of 20,000 child soldiers, street and working children in community based reintegration programs including non-formal education, vocational skills training, psycho-social support in all parts of the country, and the demobilization of additional 10,000 child soldiers (indicative estimate), starting in three locations as pilot areas: Bamiyan, Kunduz and Ghazani.

The effectiveness of child DDR has to be closely monitored and continuously adapted to current and future requirements. The Afghan government as well as supporting international organizations might be confronted with additional challenges in case more child soldiers will be identified in the future, which would require an expansion of the current DDR program. It is too early to assess whether the strategies and approaches developed by UNICEF and the ATA will be realizable and successful under the current conditions in Afghanistan, especially since the immediate realization of any such programs is often hindered by a variety of factors. Several obstacles that are unique to the Afghan

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22 UNICEF, Program for the Demobilization and Reintegration of child soldiers/minors associated with the fighting forces in Afghanistan and prevention of recruitment, Draft, May 2002
case demonstrate the difficulties in specifically targeting DDR requirements of child soldiers in Afghanistan and might explain why program planning and implementation proceeds slowly.

Primary obstacles to the successful DDR of children

The limits of a targeted DDR approach become apparent in a situation where institutional capacity for rehabilitation and educational and economic alternatives are deficient. The decentralized political structure, the high degree of regionalism and the absence of regulating and program implementing institutions complicate the creation of functioning support structures for the successful DDR of child soldiers in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's disadvantageous geographical characteristics and the involuntary focus on 'urban' areas due to a restricted access to often remote areas explain why many regions throughout the country are still under-served in terms of the provision of basic social services, despite the fact that the number of humanitarian organizations and staff has increased since September 2001. In places with inadequate infrastructure and a limited access to services, the implementation of comprehensive DDR programs is constrained. Even if far off places can be reached, operational program costs are higher than in more accessible regions.

The fact that a huge number of combatants belong to different armed factions throughout Afghanistan, and that most warlords deny the recruitment and use of child soldiers, makes it extremely difficult to trace and locate children that have participated in fighting. A significant number of these children came from Pakistan, which complicates the special demobilization and reintegration assistance that children normally require. Further, a majority of child soldiers in Afghanistan are believed to have returned to their communities. In August 2002, the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict reported that many child soldiers have been demobilized and rejoined their families after the end of the Taliban regime. However, the numbers of children that have been used in combat and those that had been demobilized remain unknown. An acute challenge therefore is to overcome the general lack of basic information on the key characteristics of children to be demobilized and the best means to ensure their reintegration. Accordingly, a crucial step would be to determine the number and location of children that have been active members of armed groups. DDR programs cannot properly proceed unless the extent of the problem has been determined.

One of the most pressing needs for the implementation of DDR programs is the supply of sufficient financial resources by the international community. UNICEF's action plan for Afghanistan addresses a variety of factors that are relevant to the well-being of children. For the year 2003, the organization calculated a financial requirement of US $ 107.6 million (as part of the Transitional Assistance Program for Afghanistan TAPA) for their planned interventions, of which approximately US $ 7.7 million will be used for the demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers and other war affected youth.

\[2^{5}\] UNICEF, Program for the Demobilization and Reintegration of child soldiers/minors associated with the fighting forces in Afghanistan and prevention of recruitment, Draft, May 2002

\[2^{6}\] UN News, Press Briefing by Secretary General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, 06/08/02

UNICEF Donor Update, 17 March 2003
Table 4: 2003 TAPA Funding Requirements and Fund as of 16 March 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Target (US$)</th>
<th>Funded (US$)</th>
<th>% Funded</th>
<th>Unfunded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI)</td>
<td>14,221,194</td>
<td>9,740,366</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>4,480,828</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother and Child Health (MCH)</td>
<td>10,475,000</td>
<td>5,892,727</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>4,582,273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutrition</td>
<td>9,020,000</td>
<td>3,556,508</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>5,463,492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to Education</td>
<td>33,580,100</td>
<td>12,879,948</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>20,700,152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Education</td>
<td>5,045,965</td>
<td>3,495,357</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>1,550,608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mine Risk Education</td>
<td>1,641,000</td>
<td>10,600</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1,630,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disarmament/Reintegration of Child Soldiers/War Affected Youth</td>
<td>7,687,000</td>
<td>458,382</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7,228,618</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juvenile Justice</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
<td>50,000</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>950,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and Community Based Protection</td>
<td>4,920,000</td>
<td>59,441</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4,860,559</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe Drinking Water</td>
<td>11,438,300</td>
<td>2,653,641</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>8,784,659</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanitation and Hygiene</td>
<td>8,336,700</td>
<td>1,333,977</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7,202,723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>107,565,259</td>
<td>40,130,947</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>67,434,312</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNICEF Donor Update, 17 March 2003

The above table does not include a US$ 3 million fund which, according to a press release of May 2003, the US Department of Labor announced to contribute as part of their global initiative program. This amount will reportedly be used for a project focusing on education needs of former child soldiers in Afghanistan.

So far, only the insufficiently small amount of US $458,382, only 6 per cent of the total requirement, has been paid by the donor governments of Japan (the country which contributes the largest share), Canada and New Zealand as well as the National Committees for UNICEF of Japan, France, Canada and the UK. Considering the slow disbursement of financial support, the success of a DDR program for child soldiers (as well as all other UNICEF activities that encounter a money shortage must be questioned. To prevent the failure of any such program, the international community urgently needs to fulfill their donor obligations.

Conclusion

Sustainable peace in Afghanistan can only be achieved if the ATA and the international community recognize the well-being of Afghan children as a top priority in all transitional and long-term planning. Child rights in Afghanistan have long been neglected and violated and must now be closely monitored and defended on local, regional and national levels, to ensure that actual practice reflects international humanitarian and customary law.

The demobilization and successful reintegration of children and adolescents into their families and communities has to be a major element of Afghanistan’s overall DDR framework. Programs must be designed to both prevent the involvement of children with armed groups and to respond to the immediate and long-term needs after conflict. There has been a significant progress in the development and implementation of reintegration projects for war affected youth since September 2001, but factors such as insufficient donor contributions and the daunting lack of accurate information pose continuous challenges to Afghan and international actors involved. Further, children continue to be associated with fighting forces. A prerequisite for effective DDR of children is the

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identification and location of children at risk. A crucial component of any DDR scheme therefore is the establishment of a data collection and monitoring system for children involved with armed groups, as well as evaluation mechanisms that assess the situation of children and the implementation process of DDR programs and investigate the effectiveness of existing program models.

The adoption of the principle of non-involvement of children and adolescents in armed groups must be promoted. Through the dissemination of information on the CRC and with the support of child protection advisers, policy and decision makers must recognize the importance of child rights within the Afghan context and must be urged to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention of the Right to the Child. Former non-state groups with a past record on child soldiers, remaining Afghan political factions, tribal groups, Al Qaida fighters as well as the new Afghan army have to be monitored to ensure that no children are recruited and used as soldiers and to create and maintain a protected environment for children. Also madrasas in Pakistan should be observed to prevent military and religious indoctrination and recruitment despite the fact that the Pakistani government signed the Optional Protocol to the CRC in September 2001.

The support of the international community is essential in order to adequately target youth within DDR activities. Donors need to respond more positively to urgent needs and fulfill their financial requirements. Strategies to raise awareness on the situation of children in Afghanistan and to convince governments of the necessity to help creating opportunities for youth include the dissemination of knowledge and information through public relation strategies of national and international organizations.

The creation of a protected environment for children largely depends on the willingness of national and international political leaders, humanitarian organizations and civil society to devote capacities and resources to the cause of the most vulnerable segment of the Afghan population. An effective policy to prevent youth recruitment and to disarm the younger generation’s mind set has to begin with changes in adult perceptions and values.