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Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development

Minutes

of the hearing on “Protecting children affected by armed conflicts” held in Baku, Azerbaijan, on Thursday, 1 June 2017, from 2.30 pm to 3.30 pm

With **Baroness Massey**, Chairperson of the Sub-Committee on Children, in the Chair, the Committee considered a revised introductory memorandum and held a hearing with the participation of:

- **Ms Christine McCormick**, Child Protection Adviser, Save the Children, London, United Kingdom (UK);
- **Ms Galina Heinzelmann**, Psychologist / Psychotherapist Berlin, Germany;
- **Ms Ceyran Rahmatullayeva**, Chief of Staff, State Committee for Family, Women and Children Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan;
- **Ms Esmira Orucova**, Senior research fellow of the department of Public safety and legal security of the Institute of Law and Human Rights of AAOS (Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences) and founder and chairperson of the NGO "Way of Grief".

Based on the revised introductory memorandum [AS/Soc (2017) 25], a first version of which had been considered by the Committee at its meeting on 30 December 2016 in Florence (Italy), the rapporteur, **Ms Fataliyeva**, briefly introduced the subject matter. New aspects had been incorporated into the text following her colleagues' comments in Florence for which she had been very grateful. Her intention was to show how children were affected in their daily lives by armed conflicts. National parliaments, amongst other stakeholders, needed to act in a way which would generate a true impact on improving children's life situations. Children were affected by conflicts in manifold ways, including as victims or witnesses of violence, as forced fighters or by losing their carers. In her text, she referred to a few examples of ongoing conflicts, such as those in Syria, Ukraine or Nagorno-Karabakh. Direct physical and mental consequences, trauma, fear and anger caused by these conflicts deprived children of the chance of living a normal childhood. Strong political will on all sides was needed to put an end to ongoing conflicts and the numerous human rights violations linked to them; where stakeholders were not in a position to intervene directly into conflict situations, they should at least try to influence their governments to step up peace-building activities.

Ms McCormick of Save the Children, United Kingdom (UK), referred to her extensive field experience in many countries and with regard to UN reporting mechanisms linked to situations of war. Nowadays, the international legal framework aimed at protecting children in war situations, including the UN Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict¹ was quite robust, nevertheless, children were more vulnerable today than they would have been ten years ago. Generally, conflicts had become more international over recent years, would often involve extreme violence from different sides and a shocking non-respect of international law and the institutions controlling it. Fifteen million children in the world were directly caught up in violent conflicts whilst ten million children had fled conflicts and one billion children were living in countries affected by armed conflicts. The consequences for children were dramatic: numerous children died in conflicts or were permanently disabled; up to 80% of sexual

¹ <https://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/mandate/opac/>.

violence victims in conflict countries were children, notably girls; health facilities and schools were attacked in many countries and misused for military purposes; many children could not attend schools, were internally displaced or kept in detention centres.

There was a sort of “normalisation” of violence against children, for example in the occupied Palestinian territories, with a risk of radicalisation as a result, as well as a generational impact of conflict. Some countries in conflict were lacking of services; in some cases, services were totally disrupted and people did not even have the capacity to buy basic goods anymore such as in South Sudan, where the conflict had prevailed over more than 20 years, over 20,000 children had been recruited by armed forces and over 10,000 were unaccompanied after being separated from their families. In Syria, children were concerned to a large extent by forced recruitment, explosive hazards, sexual violence and child labour/exploitation across the country. For many children, violence had become a “normal” experience, and detention rates for children were on the increase. The greatest impact on their lives was through mental health consequences as shown in the Save the Children Report “Invisible Wounds” of March 2017: Bombing and shelling was felt as the first psychological stress in children’s daily lives; subsequently, their behaviour was more fearful and nervous, often more aggressive; many suffered from bedwetting as a symptom of toxic stress and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); many had experienced the loss of a family member; others turned to drug consumption to cope with stress, feelings of grief or extreme sadness; and the loss of education was perceived as having a huge impact on children’s lives.² Responses were needed at various levels to better protect children:

- welfare support to individual children and families needed to be stepped up;
- children themselves needed to be empowered and made more resilient;
- both child protection and educational systems and socio-economic opportunities for families needed to be improved;
- children should be involved in peace-building action;
- staff in the field needed to be sufficiently trained and dispose of sufficient and predictable funding (NB: for the time being, child protection agencies such as Save the Children could not even fulfil their own minimum standards in the field);
- and international human rights law needed to be respected at all times.

However, addressing the issue of children in conflict was a complex one, as often anti-terrorist strategies themselves were not in line with child protection concerns.

NB: The expert’s full Power Point presentation is available on the PACE Extranet linked to this meeting.

Ms Galina Heinzelmann, Psychologist and Psychotherapist from Germany, reported from her daily practice of working with refugee children having fled conflict zones. Her country had welcomed more than 1.2 million refugees over the past two years (of which about one third were children), most of whom had come from Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia, Nigeria, Turkey, the Russian Federation, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. The German government had invested more than €14 billion into accommodation, care and integration of refugees in close collaboration with local and regional authorities, NGOs and numerous volunteers. In particular, women and children arriving in the country were highly traumatised, anxious, insomniac, powerless and lethargic. Psychologists like her were facing a complex task because the needs of children and parents were very different but interconnected: whilst children suffered from the loss of family members or were in fear of it, the psychological state of parents also had an impact on children. Children’s concerns were often neglected against the background of more immediate challenges such as the father’s death, asylum procedures or a lack of decent and safe accommodation. In order to protect children, the whole family therefore needed support in its functioning and cohesion.

Further anxiety amongst families could be generated by long waiting periods in asylum procedures involving registration, hearings and waiting for possible recognition. Many families had to stay in provisional emergency accommodation for a long time, and thus in places which were not safe or child-friendly, could not provide a private sphere and were characterised by tensions between families and ethnic groups. Whilst children had an unconscious protective mechanism by splitting off or segregating different spheres of their lives, they could often find safe and restful places in nursery schools or schools where they were taken care of and could play and forget. However, professionals in contact

² http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/Invisible_Wounds.pdf.

with such children also needed support and training, not least to develop their own resilience, to learn how to avoid speaking about traumatising experiences and breaking the “splitting” mechanism of affected children, and to create some kind of “normality” for these children. The idea was not to forget the terror encountered but to integrate it into children’s daily lives and find forms of expression for it. An encouraging aspect in her work was that children were much more accessible than the adults surrounding them who often felt ashamed or feared prejudice or negative consequences of anything they did or said. It was a fact that up to 70% of trauma patients show signs of depression; a number of them have an increased risk of suicide. Besides medical and psychological intervention, a true “welcoming culture” and more solidarity were needed in European countries as part of a coordinated migration policy.

Ms Rahmatullayeva, Head of staff of the State Committee for Family, Women and Children Affairs, believed that the discussions held today could induce positive steps in favour of child protection. Despite many efforts made in the past years, many children continued to face serious risks for their lives, liberty and security. Many Azerbaijani children had suffered from war and armed conflict, and there were still around 200,000 children amongst internally displaced persons (IDP) living in Azerbaijan. This group regularly suffered from unacceptable living conditions, lack of access to drinking water and adequate sanitation, bad health conditions and higher child mortality. More than 4,200 babies had been born into such conditions in IDP camps between 1992 and 2007. A report prepared by the medical university had shown that only a few of the children having arrived from Nagorno-Karabakh had been in good health (around 8%), whilst many had been assigned to different risk groups (about 70%) and a large group had been diagnosed with chronic illness (about 21%). About half a million children had been in need of trauma treatment and social rehabilitation. New traumata (nervous system diseases, psychological disorders and major depression) had been generated recently by resumed hostilities lasting four days in April 2016 as reported by district child and family support centres, and fears of being killed or losing family members amongst many had also been identified through the regional family and support centres. Reported attacks against the Azerbaijani population had included contamination of drinking water and the dispersal of hazardous substances onto blossoming trees, thus poisoning many women and children.

After the declaration of the ceasefire, refugee and IDP camps had been evacuated over the past 10 to 15 years, and 50,000 families had been settled in accommodation provided to them through State programmes and community projects (under the leadership of the first lady, Ms Aliyeva), also providing them with schools, nursery schools and rehabilitation centres. Although these programmes had visibly had a positive impact on many, the children of the 1988-1994 hostilities nowadays were grown-up parents who still had to live with the psychological and physical injuries of the past. Children and adolescents continued to be specially supported through psychological assistance, social work initiatives and entertaining activities, such as summer schools and camps, theatre plays and other events, such as responding to wish letters written by children through volunteers; all meant to create positive experiences for children and relieve some of their stress. **Ms Rahmatullayeva’s** proposal was to offer joint integration projects to Azerbaijani and Armenian children as a first step towards a peaceful co-existence of future generations.

Ms Esmira Orucova, researcher at the Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences and chairperson of the NGO “Way of Grief”, welcomed the fact that most recently the discussion of the issue of children in conflicts had been stepped up in society at large. Across the world, many children had become victims of war as IDPs, refugees or hostages, despite robust human rights protection systems including UN Conventions and Protocols. The expert provided examples of what she termed Armenian crimes and evident violations of children’s rights perpetrated in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan (documented in detail in the publication “Children are innocent victims of war” co-edited by the State Committee for Family, Women and Children Affairs and the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan). Around 1989, great numbers of Azerbaijani people had been displaced and separated from their families; since then, many family members had no knowledge of each other’s residence or state of health. The past history related to Nagorno-Karabakh showed that efforts to protect children’s rights needed to be made on a continuous basis, and no impunity should be granted to the different parties involved.

The Chairperson, Baroness Massey, then opened the floor for discussion, requesting that all comments be focused on what might be useful for the report and not detailed examples of human rights violations.

Mr Škoberne affirmed that all parents would find it difficult to listen to the examples provided by the last expert. With regard to the current revised introductory memorandum submitted by the rapporteur, he suggested to take out the words “in my own country” in paragraph 6 in order to make the text more balanced, and, to the same purpose, to also add figures showing how Armenian children involved in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict had been affected.

Ms Pruidze, who also had experience in working with IDP children in Georgia, agreed with Ms Heinzemann that integration was a key issue and that for the children concerned “normalisation” had to replace the feeling of “temporariness”. Children with special needs amongst migrants deserved special attention. In the list of conflict regions in paragraph 2, country names should be added where missing.

Ms Mergen saw the need to distinguish the two main points of view involved: (1) the perspective of Western countries who would welcome refugee children and their parents and (2) the perspective of conflict zones themselves where harm was directly inflicted upon children. She also saw the need to make paragraph 6 more neutral by adding figures about Armenia.

Mr Kiral reminded members of the need to examine the root causes of conflicts concerned and to prevent further conflicts in the future wherever possible. The international community, including the Council of Europe, was not yet doing enough against countries instigating armed conflicts. When examining the consequences of armed conflicts further “break-downs” into different categories were needed, first between refugees and IDPs and then into different types of issues involved (e.g. health care, education etc.). Access to occupied territories had to be ensured for international organisations and agencies even when conflicts were not “frozen” but were still very active; many children in institutions were completely shut off from the support of international agencies.

Ms McCormick confirmed that the access question was crucial and problematic; the upcoming report should clearly mention that, both from a policy and a security point of view, NGOs had great difficulties operating in conflict zones. Access was particularly difficult to certain local communities and vulnerable categories of children.

Ms Fataliyeva was grateful for the many useful comments presented by experts and members. She would address the access question raised by the last speakers. The integration of refugee and migrant children in European countries was an aspect that could be partly covered by her report, in particular to point to the issue of current misconceptions, but was such a complex issue that it certainly merited a specific report at a later stage. She agreed to the extent of the problem and range of issues involved for children as presented by the experts, whom she thanked for their contribution; violent practices against children were just not acceptable whatever the national and political context. She agreed that, as in any conflict, children on both sides suffered from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. However, it should not be forgotten that the root cause of this conflict was the occupation of Azerbaijani territories. It had been and was still Azerbaijani children who became victims of intentional violence. A main focus of this report was to examine how to protect children from planned, wilful violence in conflicts, including in their own countries.

Mr Škoberne insisted that all children victims of war carried the same burden and should therefore all be mentioned here without pinpointing individual countries. He personally knew a similar situation from the Balkan war where all sides had suffered from the conflict in the same manner independently of the question of who had started the war.

Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development
Commission des questions sociales, de la santé et du développement durable

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Ms Hicran Huseynova, Chairperson of the State Committee on Family, Women and Children Affairs / Présidente de la Commission d'Etat pour les affaires de la famille, des femmes et des enfants

Mr Elsever Agayev, Deputy Minister of Health / Ministre adjoint de la Santé

Ms Christine McCormick, Child Protection Adviser, Save the Children, London, United Kingdom / Conseillère sur la protection de l'enfance, Save the Children, Londres, Royaume-Uni

Ms Galina Heinzelmann, Psychologist/Psychotherapist, Berlin, Germany / Psychologue / Psychothérapeute, Berlin, Allemagne

Ms Ceyran Rahmatullayeva, Head of Secretariat, State Committee for Family, Women and Child Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan / Cheffe de personnel, Commission d'Etat pour les affaires de la famille, des femmes et des enfants de la République d'Azerbaïdjan

Ms Esmira Orucova, Senior research fellow of the department of Public safety and legal security of the Institute of Law and Human Rights of AAOS (Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences) and founder and chairperson of the NGO "Way of Grief" / Partenaire de recherche senior du département de la sûreté publique et la sécurité légale de l'Institut de la loi et des droits humains de l'AAOS (Académie des Sciences d'Azerbaïdjan) et fondatrice et présidente de l'ONG « Chemins de deuil »

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