



ICRC

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## Plan of action concerning children in armed conflict

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has in a number of resolutions committed itself to promote the rights of children. In 1993 the Council of Delegates adopted resolution 4 on Child Soldiers. The resolution requests the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, in cooperation with the Henry Dunant Institute, to draw up and implement a Plan of Action for the Movement aimed at promoting the principle of non-recruitment and non-participation of children below the age of eighteen years in armed conflicts and at taking concrete action to protect and assist child victims of armed conflicts [1].

The Movement has demonstrated that it is strongly committed to *the protection and assistance to child victims of armed conflicts* and to *the promotion of the principle of non-recruitment and non-participation of children below the age of eighteen years in armed conflicts*. The challenge for the Movement is to implement these commitments. To this end the proposed medium term Plan of Action has been developed. A progress report of the implementation of the Plan of Action will be presented to the Council of Delegates in 1999.

### 2. COMMITMENTS, OBJECTIVES AND ACTION

#### COMMITMENT 1: TO PROMOTE THE PRINCIPLE OF NON-RECRUITMENT AND NON-PARTICIPATION IN ARMED CONFLICT OF CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF 18 YEARS.

This first commitment aims to prevent children from being used as soldiers. Three objectives have been identified to fulfil this commitment :

##### Objective 1.1

*Promote national and international legal standards (such as an Optional protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child) prohibiting the military recruitment and use in hostilities of persons younger than 18 years of age, and also the recognition and enforcement of such standards by all armed groups (governmental and non-governmental).*

### **Basis for Action**

The Child Convention and the first additional protocol to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, prohibit the recruitment of children under the age of 15 years into the armed forces and also stipulate that the States Parties shall take all feasible measures to prevent children under that age from participating in the hostilities. Further, in recruiting among children between 15 and 18 years of age, the States Parties shall give priority to those who are oldest. According to the second additional protocol to the Geneva Conventions, applicable in internal armed conflicts, no child under the age of 15 years shall be recruited or allowed to take part in the hostilities.



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International law protecting children is often extended to and developed in domestic laws and regulations. The national and international rules cover most of the areas vital to a child's well-being and developmental process. However, two areas remain to be developed; namely 1) affording the same protection to children in armed conflict as to children in peace, which means a *clear 18 year age limit* for recruitment and participation in armed conflicts, and also 2) the enormous task of ensuring *the implementation and enforcement* of the existing rules.

In order to promote the principle of non-recruitment and non-participation of children under 18 years, there is a need for improvement and reinforcement of international and national legal standards. An Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child is presently being drafted by a working group under the UN Commission on Human Rights.

The Movement should strive to influence all governments to approve and enforce an Optional Protocol prohibiting the military recruitment and use of children younger than 18 years of age, and also to urge all armed groups (governmental and non-governmental) to recognize and enforce the standards of that Optional Protocol. Should such an Optional Protocol be approved during the period covered by this Plan of Action, the Movement should also promote the implementation of that Protocol. Depending on the local situation, National Societies could urge non-governmental armed opposition groups to refrain from using children as soldiers. National Societies might be able to reach these groups through activities such as dissemination and first aid courses.

International legal standards are supplemented by domestic laws enforceable at the national level. National Societies should strive to initiate and influence the process of improving domestic laws establishing the minimum age of recruitment and participation in armed conflict at 18 years. National Societies should also work to ensure the implementation and enforcement of such laws within the armed forces or groups.

### **Action proposed**

#### ***National Societies are asked to :***

- \*approach their government to make RC/RC view on 18 year age limit known,
- \*in cooperation with other organizations as appropriate, persuade governments to adopt the idea of the 18 year age limit; and when and if appropriate, persuade governments to promote this idea internationally and to adopt national legislation, and
- \*raise public awareness of the need for the 18 year age limit, e.g. (depending on local circumstances and relevance) through articles in newspapers and magazines, radio programs, and on buses in the street, etc.

**To support activities of National Societies, the ICRC and the International Federation are asked to :**

- \*supply National Societies with relevant background documents (including draft letters, legal texts, campaign materials, information from other countries, organizations, etc.),
- \*make the Red Cross and Red Crescent view on 18 year age limit known internationally through active participation in UN and regional fora,
- \*lobby government representatives internationally, and participate in international and national efforts to raise public awareness about child soldiers,
- \*participate actively in the UN working group to draft the new Optional Protocol to the Child Convention (if still relevant after the adoption of this Plan of Action), and
- \*collect, analyse and process information from National Societies' programs in order to facilitate reports to donors and the general public.

## **Objective 1.2**

*Prevent children from joining armed forces or groups by offering them alternatives to enlistment.*

### **Basis for action**

To prevent children from becoming soldiers there is also a need for measures directed to the children themselves. Studies imply that many children do not join the armed forces or groups voluntarily. Many child soldiers would have chosen other activities if alternatives to participation in the conflict had been offered.

National Societies could play a critical role in providing alternatives to children at-risk of becoming soldiers. They could initiate assessments to identify such children. Regional assessment criteria should be developed for this purpose. Alternative activities could be offered to these children such as education, vocational training, and the opportunity to fulfil purposeful tasks within the community (for example as Red Cross/Red Crescent volunteers). Care should be taken, however, that the tasks offered are appropriate to the age of the child. If possible, a child-to-child or youth-to-youth approach could be developed.

This is a difficult objective to accomplish since so many children are at-risk of becoming soldiers. Many of the reasons for children joining are born from socio-economic problems that will not be solved in a short period. Although some children become soldiers because they want to be heroes or martyrs, many would rather have attended school given the opportunity. Activities created for and with these children could therefore make a great difference in the choices they make in life.

### **Action proposed**

**National Societies are asked to :**

- \*initiate assessment, in cooperation with other NGOs, IGOs, governments and military as appropriate, to :
  - identify children at risk of becoming soldiers; and
  - identify reasons for them potentially joining ;
- \*decide on what programs/activities to set up to counter these reasons; such activities could include :
  - education;
  - income generation (vocational training or short-term material support);
  - recreational activities, and
  - empowering children to play a positive role in their community (e.g. as youth volunteer, first-aider, ambulance volunteer, or other responsible tasks within National Society).

**To support activities of National Societies *the ICRC and the International Federation* are asked to :**

- \*encourage and support the setting up of programs,
- \*facilitate contacts between National Societies in order to exchange experience (such as organise meetings for exchange of experience and develop existing and new programmes, as well as training for trainer workshops for volunteers and personnel);
- \*collect, analyse, and process information from National Societies' programs in order to facilitate reports to donors and the general public, and develop, in cooperation with National Societies, guidelines, standardised needs-assessment and reporting procedures, etc.

### **Objective 1.3**

*Raise awareness in society of the need not to allow children to join armed forces or groups*



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#### **Basis for action**

Responsibility for using children as soldiers lies with all of the adults who accept or encourage children to participate in armed conflict. These are parents and other adults from the child's community, local commanders accepting children in their ranks, and peer groups glorifying the "free lifestyle" of the soldiers. There is therefore a need to raise public awareness of the long-term effects on the children themselves and on the society in which they live, and to advocate against the use of children as soldiers.

Many of the children recruited have a background as street children and many former child soldiers become street children when they leave the army or the guerrilla group.

Thus, depending on local circumstances, National Societies should raise public awareness about the negative effects on children and society which result from allowing children to participate in armed conflicts. The influential role of religious and community leaders should be utilised whenever possible.

#### **Action proposed**

***National Societies are asked to :***

- \*initiate articles in newspapers and magazines, radio programmes, etc., in cooperation with organizations and authorities and depending on local circumstances and relevance, and
- \*initiate, with support in local traditions, a discussion in society of the long- and short-term disadvantages of children participating in violence; such activities could include :
  - training of teachers and care-givers in children's rights;
  - discussions in mother's and women's clubs;
  - discussing the issue and children's rights with children in schools and through youth organizations (this could especially be done by Red Cross/Red Crescent youth volunteers);
  - establishing a dialogue with the army and, if possible, other armed groups; and
  - pursuing a dialogue with government and relevant structures in the community.

**To support activities of National Societies *the ICRC and the International Federation* are asked to :**

\*supply National societies with relevant background documents (including campaign materials, information from other countries, organizations, etc.),

\*facilitate, coordinate and encourage the work of National Societies, as proposed in the case of Objective 1.2.

## **COMMITMENT 2: TO TAKE CONCRETE ACTION TO PROTECT AND ASSIST CHILD VICTIMS OF ARMED CONFLICT**

### **Objective 2.1**

*Address psychosocial as well as physical needs of children living with families.*

#### **Basis for action**

Few of the children's most basic needs are met in armed conflicts. It is therefore necessary to identify and counter the obstructions hindering children in armed conflict from having their needs fulfilled. Like the situation in which they live, the counter-measures for these children vary in a number of ways. First, the immediate needs of physical and economic security need to be met, often in the form of relief assistance. Second, children have a need for order in life. Schooling and kindergarten can provide this structure and routine which is especially critical during the chaos that accompanies armed conflict.

Psychosocial readaptation [2] presupposes a certain degree of physical security and economic stability before a person is prepared to, or even able to, come to terms with the experiences of armed conflict. Most children who experience violence need special care and attention. The family is the basic and most important ingredient in a child's physical and psychological rehabilitation. In most cases, psychosocial support must be offered to the parents as well as the children if the assistance to the children is going to make a difference. In many cases, the family (in armed conflicts often the mother) needs support to help their children overcome experiences and anxieties.

The Movement works extensively to alleviate human suffering in armed conflict, through assistance to all victims of armed conflict including children. The programs often concentrate on meeting the victims' immediate needs such as food, clean water, shelter, clothing, and medical assistance. But the Movement also engages in more long-term physical and psychological rehabilitation. In refugee camps, camps for displaced persons, and in host countries, the Movement initiates various activities to help the people cope with their situation.

Many National Societies and the Federation have recently taken a growing interest in the psychological and social well-being of the people served by the Movement's programs. Several National Societies have established programs for social counselling or psychosocial support to victims of disasters or other stressful events. In 1991, the Federation established a Psychological Support Programme. The Federation Reference Centre for Psychological Support is situated in the Danish Red Cross.

Many National Societies possess the tools necessary to provide psychosocial support to the children and their families, both in rehabilitation and in re-integration of the children into their communities..

Psychosocial rehabilitation programs should be flexible and adapted to local circumstances. Children with special needs are often difficult to identify, since they at first may show no signs of distress. However, various kinds of play-programs or other activities which encourage children to express memories of the armed conflict might assist in the process of identifying the children in need of psychosocial rehabilitation. In areas where physical and economic security are not certain, the programs will mostly include the establishment of routines and an ordered life, in the form of kindergartens and schools, etc. In more secure areas, parents could be encouraged to talk to their children about their experiences of the armed conflict [3]. Parents, other care-givers, and volunteers will often have similar experiences to those of the children and it will

therefore be important when setting-up programs to include opportunities for the adults to discuss and come to terms with their own experiences.

Caregivers, volunteers, and other adults close to children should be able to identify children who have participated in armed violence and to work with these children. However, former child soldiers should not be singled out, but integrated in programs for other children affected by armed conflict. The purpose of these activities should be to rehabilitate and reintegrate the children into their local communities.

### **Action proposed**

#### ***National Societies are asked to :***

- \*initiate assessment of needs in cooperation with other organizations, local leaders, and government/authorities;

- \*in cooperation with other organizations, decide on what programs/activities to set up to assist the children. Activities could, depending on local circumstances, include :

- schooling and vocational training;
- training courses for teachers, nurses, and other professionals who work with children in order for them better to assist the children;
- training of volunteers (non-professionals) to work with children in their communities (e.g. in play-groups or youth clubs) and also to know their limits;
- training on how to assist children who have participated in the violence;
- setting-up a support network of professionals to assist the volunteers and parents working with the children; and provide practical assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers in their new countries to empower the refugees and facilitate their entry into the new society (including awareness-building in the host-country of the needs and background of the refugees).

#### **To support activities of National Societies *the ICRC and the International Federation* are asked to :**

- \*facilitate, coordinate and encourage the work of National Societies, as proposed in the case of Objective 1.2.

### **Objective 2.2**

*Address psychosocial as well as physical needs of unaccompanied children.*

Children who are not accompanied by a family member or not cared for by any person who would normally be entrusted with that responsibility by law or custom are referred to as "unaccompanied children".

Unaccompanied children have the same basic needs for food, shelter, clothing, and medical care that all children have. But, in addition, they also need to be reunified with their families or to be placed with foster families. Institutionalisation should be avoided as much as possible. The ICRC and National Societies have a long tradition of tracing family members in times of armed conflict, exchanging family messages, and eventually reunifying families. If the family cannot be found (or until the family has been found), measures should be taken to place the child with a family of the same ethnic, religious, and linguistic background, whenever possible. Tracing and reunification activities need to be accompanied by follow-up, support and evaluation, both in the case where a foster-family is found and where the child is reunited with her or his close family. In many cases there will be a need for psychosocial support for the child and the family.

National Societies should try to organise educational and recreational activities and vocational training for unaccompanied children who are in refugee camps, orphanages, or other transitional

settings. Some of the children will be in need of psychosocial rehabilitation. In addition, some of these children will have participated in the conflict and might therefore need special attention to come to terms with the experiences from fighting and living with the soldiers.

Since many of the needs of unaccompanied children will be similar to the needs of all children experiencing armed conflict, programs for and together with these children should be developed in a similar way to those for other children, as outlined under Objective 2.1.

### **Action proposed**

#### ***National Societies are asked to :***

\*initiate assessment of needs in cooperation with other organizations, local leaders, and government/authorities,

\*in cooperation with other organizations, decide on what programs/activities to set up to assist the children. Activities could, depending on local circumstances, include :

- relief assistance;
- tracing and family reunification or establishing foster families;
- recreational activities in orphanages, camps, etc.;
- follow-up, support, and evaluations after the child is reunited with the family or if a home is found outside the child's close family;
- psychosocial support to unaccompanied children in camps, orphanages, and fosterhomes;
- schooling and other types of education to restore the child's confidence and identity;
- activities and training in reconciliation and non-violent conflict resolution; and
- protection against abuse, abduction, and revenge including the initiation or implementation of legal frameworks to protect children.

#### **To support activities of National Societies *the ICRC and the International Federation* are asked to :**

\*facilitate, coordinate and encourage the work of National Societies, as proposed in the case of Objective 1.2.

### **Objective 2.3**

*Advocate in favour of children who participated in armed conflict in order to make society and the local community accept these children.*

Children who have participated in armed conflict might not be accepted back by their local communities or even their families. Many of the children are violent and aggressive, and might have committed atrocities well known to the community surrounding them. Parents might not dare to take their children back for fear of reprisals.

When the conflict is over, many children are not formally recognised as former soldiers, and, therefore, will not be included in demobilisation programs. These children risk ending up on the streets, possibly still possessing their weapons and still threatening their societies long after the armed conflict is over.

Thus, there is a need to advocate in favour of these children. Efforts should be made to encourage the communities to recognize these children as the victims they are and to accept them back into

civil society.



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### Action proposed

#### **National Societies are asked to :**

- \*raise awareness in society and initiate discussions with various target groups, as proposed in the case of Objective 1.3.

#### **To support activities of National Societies the ICRC and the International Federation are asked to :**

- \*supply National Societies with relevant background documents, and

- \*facilitate, coordinate and encourage the work of National Societies, as proposed in the case of Objective 1.2.

### **3. MONITORING AND FACILITATING THE IMPLEMENTATION**

It is recommended that an **international coordinating group** be established to monitor the implementation of this Plan of Action. The group should be comprised of representatives from five National Societies implementing or supporting programs for children in armed conflict, the International Federation, and the ICRC. The representatives should have expertise in the field of children in armed conflict. The coordinating group should be appointed by the International Federation and the ICRC in consultation with National Societies.



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The responsibilities of the international coordinating group would be to facilitate and monitor the implementation of this Plan of Action and to continuously evaluate, revise, and develop the Plan. It should report to the Council of Delegates in 1999.

The tasks of the international coordinating group would include :

- a) to follow the implementation of the Plan of Action, including its international aspects,
- b) to support National Societies working with children in armed conflict;
- c) to encourage and support the setting up of new programs for children in armed conflict under the Plan of Action;
- d) to develop or improve methods and materials that would serve the needs of several National Societies (such as how



to use non-professional volunteers in psychosocial programs, or the development of background material for lobbying);  
 e) to prepare joint international action by the Movement in favour of children in armed conflict;  
 f) to organise a review meeting with National Societies in two years time, and;  
 g) to raise funding for the coordinating group and for common activities that benefit several National Societies.

It is also recommended that the International Federation and the ICRC, in cooperation with the coordinating group, designate a National Society as *international focal point* for the implementation of this Plan of Action.

Likewise, a network of National Societies at the sub-regional level should be developed with the intention of facilitating and coordinating the activities of those National Societies, and to encourage and support the setting up of programs.

### Notes

1. For the purpose of this Plan of Action a child is defined as a person under 18 years of age.
2. The expression psychosocial rehabilitation is used to signify measures to assist persons to overcome upsetting or disturbing experiences in the context of their social and cultural surroundings, including their family and community.
3. For an example of such a project, please see the report by Nancy Baron for the Sri Lanka Red Cross Society and the International Federation entitled *Psycho-social Needs Assessment. The Voice of Internally Displaced People in the Non-conflict Area of Sri Lanka,, as well as the book A Little Elephant Finds His Courage by the same author*

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