

Remarks by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General

on Violence against Children

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**Human Rights Council**

**Enhanced Interactive Dialogue on Large Movements of Migrants**

10 March 2017

*“Population movements have a young face and are becoming an escape strategy”*

Over the past several years, we have witnessed **growing numbers of children and adolescents on the move** - alone or with their families, within and across countries.

This could be a positive sign of young people’s successful search for new and promising opportunities: to enhance skills and talents; to widen their horizons by exposure to new cultures, languages and social contexts; or to celebrate the joy of rejoining family members from whom they have been separated.

Unfortunately, however, **children’s decision to leave** has become an **escape strategy**, to reach a safe haven from political instability, violence and exploitation.

**For children on the move, especially those who travel unaccompanied or separated from their families violence is often part of a continuum.**

1. **Country of origin**

**Fear and insecurity are widespread and impunity prevails:** in some countries there are 160 violent deaths every day; 1 every 9 minutes

As stressed by children participating in our most recent study *on armed and gang violence in the community*: “life is unfair and our neighborhood seems a ghetto of hopelessness, lawlessness and fear!”

**Children experience horrific scenes**: the killing of their parents, the rape of their sisters, the forced disappearance of their friends. They are exposed to street crime and community violence, to systematic threats and extortions, and to the harassment of gang members who mobilize support within the school or in their neighborhood.

In some cases children are manipulated by organized crime and forced to take part in criminal activitiy, including as watchers in places where drugs or arms are trafficked, or where smugglers take action. If children refuse to cooperate, they may pay a heavy price and their life may be at risk.

1. **Ready to embark on perilous journey**

Surrounded by this devastating scenario, children feel ready to embark on a perilous journey of uncertainty and confront serious risks in the hope of finding a place of safety and security.

Yet, more often than not these children fail to benefit from the protection they are entitled to; and they can be perceived as intruders rather than victims at risk as they cross borders in the search of a safe destination.

* Children may lack proper documentation and fail to speak the local language. Overall, they are simply too frightened to report incidents of abuse, or to speak about the trauma they have endured; or to seek help, including medical help, by fear of a negative impact on pending proceedings or the decision on their status; or out of fear of arrest or deportation.
* Many children end up placed in crowded facilities, often mixed with unrelated adults; or in hot spots with fast tracking proceedings, and with strong risks of fast return proceedings, where their best interests will be hardly considered!
* They may end up confined in airports, harbour facilities or islands; placed in detention centres, prisons or cells for military personnel, even in containers with no windows, at times placed in complete isolation.
* The risk of deprivation of liberty is high: allegedly for children’s protection (including from the risk of disappearance or trafficking); or for family tracing or for considering options for a return to their countries of origin. Detention is an additional punishment and it is never in their best interests.
* While their fate is being decided children may endure humiliation, physical attacks and sexual abuse. In many cases they lack access to a child protection authority, to an age and gender-sensitive protection determination process, to legal representation, to accessible information about their rights and about ways of seeking redress for the acts of violence they have endured.
* Children experience fear, anxiety, depression, mental health problems, increased risk of self-harm, and an aggravated sense of hopelessness, with a severe impact on their development and well-being.

This may explain why in some countries large numbers **go missing** **from reception centers**.

**These are situations we need to address with a deep sense of urgency!**

**We need to transform the continuum of violence that shapes their life into a continuum of protection of children’s rights!**

This is why we warmly welcome the important set of ***Principles and guidelines on the human rights protection of migrants in vulnerable situations within large and/or mixed movements***. These guidelines build upon international good practice to assist States (and other stakeholders) to develop, strengthen, implement and monitor measures to protect migrants in vulnerable situations, including children.

I am confident today’s meeting will help strengthen the protection of children’s and the prevention of violence against children.